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### "No safe place": Applying the transactional stress and coping model to active warfare

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## Abstract

**Objective:** The mental health consequences of political violence arise within active, dynamic processes of appraisal and coping. Understanding the psychological sequela of war is an urgent task; yet, we have little on the ground exploration of the quotidian events within and the accompanying psychological responses of the totalizing experience of war. Using a transactional-based model of stress and coping, in this study, we use a novel method - retrospective diaries - to explore the shifting, unpredictable, and traumatic nature of life during a major military operation.

**Methods:** Our sample consisted of 21 Palestinian women recruited via an intervention for teachers in Gaza. Women's retrospective chronological diaries were analyzed using content analysis.

**Results:** Our analysis drew out the cyclical process of coping within political violence, demonstrating five essential temporal dimensions: warning; bombings, with injuries, death, and destruction; reintegrating within flight and resettlement; ongoing political insecurity within precarious truces and rampant loss and destruction; and persevering: restarting life amidst pervasive trauma.

**Conclusion:** Our findings draw attention to vital temporal dimensions and the cyclical nature of stress and coping that underlie the sequela of mental health in a highly charged context. In tracing warfare, its psycho-social consequences, and distinct patterns of emotional and logistical survival, our study contributes to the growing field of psychological epidemiology of war.

**Clinical Impact Statement:** The transactional model of coping is often used to help understand the complex sequelae resulting from stress and trauma. Here, we demonstrate the importance of using that framework while prioritizing the cyclical and collective nature of coping within the

immense and ongoing stress of political violence. Through building on the strengths and strategies women elucidate in our study, we are better able to leverage these protective factors in interventions aimed at ameliorating the psychological effects of war. Furthermore, in demonstrating the complex and lasting mental health issues related to not only acute assaults, but also ongoing stressors related to political and economic siege, our study bolsters the movement to engage in efforts to prevent war and occupation.

In war, people are exposed to assassinations, torture, bombing raids, home invasions, forced separations, and multiple other atrocities (Levy & Sidel, 2008; Wang, Salihu, Rushiti, Bala, & Modvig, 2010). Political violence is also characterized by ongoing control of populations and deliberate destruction of resource and infrastructure for economic independence, education, sanitation, nutrition, and healthcare (Sousa, 2013). Indeed, war is deeply connected with extreme poverty and insecurity (Leaning, Arie, & Stites, 2004). The unrelenting nature of this stress and the profound lack of control and predictability it then engenders makes populations more vulnerable to the psychological effects of war (Akesson & Badawi, 2020; Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Kenneth E. Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Due to its capricious, unremitting nature, stress within political violence is best characterized as chronic stress – ongoing adversity that threatens and constrains people’s choices, opportunities, safety, and access to resources (Wheaton, 1997). Chronic stress fundamentally undermines well-being (i.e., Clark, Bond, & Hecker, 2007; Marin, Martin, Blackwell, Stetler, & Miller, 2007; McEwen, 2000, 2007). Within settings of political violence, up to half of people show symptoms of poor mental health, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, anxiety, and somatization (de Jong, Komproe, & Van Ommeren, 2003; World Health Organization (WHO), 2001).

Despite this grim picture, as with other stressors, in settings of political violence people adjust (Giacaman, 2019) – underscoring that health is best conceptualized as a continuum arising out of ongoing, complex processes of appraisal and coping (Antonovsky, 1996; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Lazarus, 2000). In the appraisal phase of the transactional stress and coping model, people evaluate the nature and danger level of the stressor, assessing its magnitude and duration, information we have about available resources, and background information gathered from past experiences. We are balancing the need to realistically process the event while

maintaining optimism and a sense of power over the situation (Lazarus, 2000) – controllability and predictability determine our psychological reaction to and management of stress (Foa, Zinbarg, & Rothbaum, 1992). Following appraisal is the process of coping: managing stress through resolving problems and regulating emotions (i.e., reframing-or reappraisal) (Lazarus, 2000). There is typically a balance between active coping methods, like instrumental (or problem focused) coping and emotion centered coping methods. Instead of being aimed at obliterating the stressor, actions may be aimed at cognitively or emotionally managing the stressor. Even denial, once consistently pathologized, is now considered constructive in some situations (Lazarus, 2000, p. 203). Simply enduring and integrating the stressor into our current reality is its own coping strategy – particularly if we have little control over the events. We are highly flexible in our coping; using different strategies depending on the stressors and our surrounding resources (Gottlieb, 1997).

Within disasters like wars, meaning-making is a crucial strategy people employ (Park, 2016). The psychological meanings we assign to events reflect our specific socially, historically, and politically constituted realities (Afana, Pedersen, Rønsbo, & Kirmayer, 2010; Giacaman, 2018). People make meaning within political violence by situating events within larger political and historical contexts and drawing on religious or spiritual conviction (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Park, 2007). Situating the trauma within a larger narrative helps people identify historical patterns of violence, as well as cultural survival, dignity, solidarity, and resilience (Barber et al., 2014; Walters & Simoni, 2002). Grappling with the historical nature of the trauma within these larger, collective narratives, assists people in identifying both the pernicious nature of the

violence and historical patterns of dignity, solidarity, and resilience (Barber et al., 2014; Walters & Simoni, 2002). Religion and spirituality help make sense of the stress they grapple with, resulting in better outcomes (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Park, 2007). Social cohesion and mutual help within families and communities are also highly protective in war – although they may also pose additional stress due to burdens surrounding care-giving in these contexts (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Guribye, Sandal, & Oppedal, 2011; Khamis, 2000; K. E. Miller et al., 2002; Sousa, 2020; Steel, Silove, Bird, McGorry, & Mohan, 1999). Political systems for education, health, recreation, work, and safety are vital to practical and psychological survival - their collapse furthers stress (Melton & Sianko, 2010; Sousa, 2013).

To attend to the cyclical and highly specific nature of stress and coping within war, scholars argue for a methodology focused on narrative approaches, as these methods allow for an in-depth, exploratory process of uncovering the daily realities of physical and psychological survival within unremitting conflict and repression (De Haene, Grietens, & Verschueren, 2010; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003). In this study, we use a narrative approach to analyze ongoing reactions and adjustment strategies among 21 women survivors of an acute phase of armed conflict in Gaza. In so doing, we bring to light the complex dynamics of stress and coping among women who face violent conflicts and political violence, particularly the multifaceted and nuanced plethora of protective factors that has been only marginally studied (Veronese, 2019, 2020).

The 2014 attacks on Gaza, known as Operation Protective Edge, was a series of aerial bombardments that killed over 2,000 Palestinians, left almost a half a million displaced, and destroyed over 20,000 homes - one representative study done six months after the 2009 attacks found more than a third of the population had suffered from destruction of their home or

neighborhood (Abu-Rmeileh et al., 2012). (See Table 1 in the supplemental materials for a historical tracing of the war). The military attacks on Gaza are often repeated, with each new attack acting as a “reminder shock,” creating more uncertainty and danger (Finsterwald, Steinmetz, Travaglia, & Alberini, 2015, p. 15904). Furthermore, these attacks are situated within a backdrop of unremitting stress related to the Israeli siege of the area, which includes severe restrictions on movement and a decade long blockade has undermined development as it impedes access to fertile land and clean water; higher education and opportunities for professional growth; and the importation of goods and materials (Roy, 2016). The continuous pile up of stressors of the siege, which results in a 50% unemployment rate in Gaza and food insecurity for 2 out of 5 Gazans (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018), robs people of control and sovereignty (Ziadni, 2011).

## **Methods**

As gathering real-time data of daily life within sudden armed attacks would be burdensome, the use of retrospective diaries holds particular promise within research on war and political violence. For this reason, in our study, we employed a relatively under-utilized method wherein we asked women in Gaza to create a retrospective chronological diary of their life during Operation Protective Edge, and to describe the events, and negative feelings resulting from these experiences. Women were also asked to record the positive events, emotions, relationships or thought patterns that allowed them to survive or resist during this time. The method used is similar to the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM), which is a derivation of experience sampling method (ESM) and time-use studies as it captures both the chronology of a specific time in people’s lives and the

affective responses associated with these experiences (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004, p. 1777). In contrast to ESM, which gathers data in real-time (but poses a high risk of burden for participants), DRM is less onerous for respondents, and provides for reflection of particular time-periods. For events that are rare or traumatic, DRM holds many advantages, as participants can enter and leave their memories based on their level of comfort and willingness to re-experience it. This flexibility provides more autonomy and agency, which is particularly important within research with trauma survivors (De Haene et al., 2010).

The participants in our research project were teachers employed at a private school run by a local NGO in Jabalia, Gaza Strip, the largest of Gaza's eight refugee camps, with 113,990 refugees living within 1.4 square kilometers (UNRWA, n.d.). Women participated in a two-week program held by a local NGO specializing in psycho-social intervention. The activities, run with 34 women, reprocessed potentially traumatic events through experiential and narrative techniques such as live events calendars (LEC) (Morris & Slocum, 2010) and psychodrama techniques like human sculpting (Veronese, 2018). From this larger group of 34, we used a purposive snowball sampling method to recruit for this study. All procedures were approved by the Milano-Bicocca University IRB. To be included in the study, participants were required not to have been diagnosed with psychological syndromes since the war, and to be in good health and serving as teachers in the school at the time of interview. Exposure to multiple extreme war episodes, such as destruction of one's home, witnessing human casualties, or receiving minor injuries during attacks was an additional inclusion criterion. There were no other inclusion criteria (e.g., age, religion, profession were not in our inclusion criteria). Participants were fully informed about the research aims and aware that they could decline to answer interview questions or withdraw from the study at any time. Written informed consent was obtained from



all informants. The interviews were anonymized and informants' names substituted in order to ensure confidentiality. Out of the larger group of 34, 21 women completed the diaries. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 47 years ( $M= 31.1$ ;  $SD= 6.8$ ); 48% were mothers, 9% were divorced, and 43% unmarried. All were of Muslim religion.

We imported data into Dedoose, qualitative data analysis software, where we coded line by line, and analyzed using content analysis, with special attention to the etiology of mental distress within political violence. We used several different coding methods applied to the same blocks of text, beginning with initial coding using descriptive codes and then doing process coding (in which analysts design and assign active, gerund based codes; e.g., bombing, destroying, experiencing chaos, fleeing, resettling) and emotion coding (in which analysts code particularly for emotions expressed by participants) as described by Saldaña (2016). We linked these process and emotion codes to each other, using a feature in Dedoose to analyze code co-occurrence. This allowed us to ensure rigor within our interpretation of causal patterns surrounding how particular temporal events are tied by participants to emotional and psychological consequences. Finally, we used longitudinal coding to organize our process codes along temporal dimensions of war (e.g., warning, bombing, reintegrating, living with ongoing political insecurity, persevering) and to temporal dimensions of coping (e.g., appraisal, immediate coping, ongoing coping). These dimensions are elaborated in our findings section. Coding along these temporal dimensions allowed us to map the stress and trauma women described in their narratives onto the circular nature of stress and coping within active warfare. Our resulting temporal model (Figure 1) helped us to focus our analyses on both aligning with and deepening the transactional model of stress and coping.

## Results

Our analysis drew out the cyclical nature of the ongoing process of coping within political violence, demonstrating how women suffer and strategize along temporal dimensions (see Figure 1). Through a temporal analysis of our data, we were able to identify specific patterns in women's narratives, beginning with memories of the moment they were exposed to warnings by the Israeli military, described as "roof knocking". This was closely followed by their recollections of living through bombings, which resulted in injuries, death, and destruction of vital infrastructure and systems. The next meaningful temporal marker was women's accounts of what we termed reintegrating. In this juncture, women described fleeing from their homes, and, if their houses were destroying, resettling, usually in the home of an extended family member. At this stage, women described the stress of lacking infrastructure as critical resources like sewage or electrical systems, already vulnerable from decades of siege, were even more devastated from the attacks. Women also described the problems with the lack privacy they encountered in the places they were staying. From a sequential perspective, women's diaries then consisted of stories about dealing with the ongoing nature of political insecurity. The most salient sub-theme here was details about what it was like to experience truces – during which most women described being initially hopeful and then devastated as the truces were violated and their communities met new rounds of attacks. The last time-based milestone was the ongoing work of persevering: restarting life, remembering the loss and destruction, steeling themselves against further assaults and stressors.

Women's experiences of stress and trauma - and their coping - revolved around their relationships: to their children, their faith, and their homes. Coping was collective, as

relationships to Palestinian history, communities, and extended families were predominately featured.

### **Warning/roof knocking**

In accordance with the so called ‘roof knocking’ Israeli military strategy (IDF 2014a, 2014b, 2014c), civilian residents in Gaza were warned about the forthcoming shelling either through the dropping of light explosives or shooting of a low explosive warning missile onto the rooftops of the buildings from 15 to 30 minutes before the massive attack (Joronen, 2016). Having become aware of an imminent assault, women maintain constant vigilance and mobilize resources and strategies to try to ensure immediate safety for themselves and their families (particularly their children). 31 year old Nada’s story details the experience of these calls:

“War had just started when our neighbor had received a call, and he told us that our house was going to be bombed. I didn’t know about it. I understood the situation when I started seeing all the women and children run in the street.”

The practice of roof knocking is characterized by a profound sense of loss of control and unpredictability. Resulting from the unpredictable nature of the stressors and the impossibility of women to control the surrounding environment, they experienced panic and despair.

### **Appraisal**

Women swiftly decided how to find safety for themselves and their children. They did so in the midst of much confusion and terror, evident in passages like Maha’s: “as soon as I heard the missiles I didn’t know what to do.” In the midst of panic, quickly appraised the situation and mobilized strategies and survival strategies. Nada’s story, for example, continues:

“The children were screaming, women were crying. I began to scream too, asking what was happening. Our neighbor answered me: your house is going to be bombed, take your

children and run away from your home! I called my husband, and he came suddenly. We took out kids, and we went to my husband's aunt house."

During this Israeli military operation, like so many before (and to come), women's daily lives consisted of basic gestures aimed at surviving and re-adjusting from the shock caused by the extensive Israeli attacks. Even though women possess minimal means with which to protect themselves and their families, they engage in acute processes of appraisal. In this phase, they analyze the stressor in light of their previous experiences and the resources they have available, and attempting to maintain some modicum of control over their environment, though often the only thing they can do in the immediate is to run outside, as Nada tells us:

"My husband told me we have to hurry because there is no time, we have to rush if we want to save ourselves. I tried to control myself and listen to his advice. We left the house. We all left safely."

Multiple women arrived at the conclusion that there was "no safe place." With few resources, their appraisal included recognizing community members, even strangers, as their only hope for refuge and safety within the inevitable bombing. 34 year old Hanaa's narrative detailed that the moment of "pressure and constraint" in "being forced to leave the house" elicited much "suffering and fear, when you leave your own home in the middle of the night, walking on tiptoes." Yet she pointed out that survival was possible in finding refuge, as she "met people unknown to me." Nada, too, spoke of how strangers as the only resource she could identify:

"We ran away from my house, and we got to my cousin's house. There we got a call "your home will be bombed within 10 minutes; you have to leave now". So, I ran with my children to the school, and my cousin went to her husband's relatives. There was not

enough place for us in the school, so I stood outside, in the front of the school's door. Suddenly, a women came with her son, and they brought us to their house, saying “we want to do a good deed.” We agreed because we had no place to go, we had no choice in that circumstances, even if we did not know them and they did not know us.”

## **Bombing**

After the initial warnings, ongoing threat and insecurity characterized the acute phase of the attacks, which lasted from July 8 until the cease-fire on August 26. Civilian spaces were at the core of the battlefield: homes, schools, hospitals. Families were exposed to ongoing, immediate threats for their lives and that of their families. Bombings wrought massive destruction and chaos, as captured in Nada’s narrative:

“After midday prayer, we heard sounds of cannons and bombs from the sky - brief and repetitive. Bombing was everywhere, completely random. There was no safe place.”

The phrase of “no safe place” echoed throughout the narratives, with 18 of the 21 women’s diaries detailing their exposure to bombardments. Women described the bombing as constant and random. Rida, 27, wrote in her retrospective diary:

“Once a missile from an aircraft exploded less than 100 meters from my house. I was sitting in the middle of the house: the electricity went off, and suddenly the house lightened up and started to shake because of the loud noise. I was afraid and worried. The windows began to explode, and the glass pieces went everywhere. I was lucky, nobody got hurt.”

Women’s accounts included their recollections of the sights and sounds of the bombings. Houses shook. Breaking glass and sounds of cannons and missiles were all consuming:

“Before the massacre of Shuja’iya, the second day at 10 am the bombardments began, with cannons and missiles. I could not handle the noise. I could not even go to the bathroom. At 13, the sound had started to become stronger. Bombs were random. At that moment I could not leave the house. At 18.00 I went out with my family. I was frightened and worried because my children were with me. We went to my husband’s relatives.”

Women wrote about waking up to their homes being attacked, confronting terror and chaos. Lina described waking up from deep sleeping to the sound of the dawn prayer and then screaming. With the electricity out, she couldn’t find her children, and went into the street in her pajamas to look for them. Her husband joined her in looking for the children, and then missiles began to fall:

“A missile fell near our home. I screamed. My husband told me: "Do not worry, it was a missile of warning. Our children may have gone towards the end of the road with their cousins". But I was impatient, and I went out running on the street screaming. My husband told me: "Come back crazy! Our children are safe! Come back here right away! After 2 minutes a missile from an F16 plane fell on our neighbors' house and on our house. It completely destroyed the neighbors' house and partially ours. I did not want to wait, and so I went out on the street. The ruins of the house began to fall gradually.”

It took Lina a half hour to find her children, who ended up safe. She described that her oldest daughter, who was 13, helped the little sister escape. After letting the news settle in that her children were safe, Lina wrote, “I was so happy to have my children again. Then I started to ask about the others. I was terrified, I did not want to hear bad or painful news.”

As a result of the experience of bombing, terror, grief, and helplessness were the most common acute reactions. Women expressed they did not know what was happening to their family members or if they were safe, particularly within an exceptionally traumatic occurrence

which multiple women discussed, the deadliest day of the operation for Palestinians, with more than 140 killed in one day, including 70 alone in one village of Shuja'iya (often referred to as the massacre of Shuja'iya (Palestine at the UN, 2014). Maha wrote, "I was terrified because I knew what was happening to my loved ones during the carnage of Shuja'iya."

Women also talked about the suffering and losses of their neighbors, as does Maryam:

"[One of the most terrifying events was] the nighttime bombardments upon the house of our neighbours. It was shocking to us. We prayed to God to save us from this bombardment. It killed five people, who sacrificed themselves to make their families live."

Loss and grief for house and properties destruction is a pattern describing the traumatic storyline during the 50 days of war. Losing home, or their loved one's loss of their homes, increased the sense of panic and loss of control among the Palestinian women. Maha, for instance, wrote that "on the third day of the war, the Israelis bombed the home next to my sister's and my sister's house also suffered damage. When we heard that my sister's house was severely damaged, my whole family and I began to cry because of the fear and worry." Another woman, Mirfat, 37, wrote about her house being bombed, "[We] lost the home of my childhood and all the memories," which she experienced as particular traumatic because of "the destruction of our primary objects." Lina, whose story was detailed above, wrote about after her house was bombed:

"After 1 hour I went back to my house, and I was shocked: nothing was left, just ruins. No windows, no door, no wall. It was harrowing. The whole house was full of fragments, parts of bombs and glass, and the color of the house was black. It was very painful, but then I realized that we were all safe and I thanked God."

## **Immediate coping**

Here, Lina's attempts at immediate coping are apparent. She took stock of her family, became present with her present reality through reminding herself that her family was safe, and reached out to thank God. Like many, Lina's narrative highlighted women's resilient patterns of coping, including simply appreciating "being able to escape death," as well as togetherness and closeness within their families, as they worked together to survive. Women drew on their assessments of family and home to regain a sense of security, as with Maha, who wrote, "Little by little, every day I was feeling safer. We were at home, and we are safe there." Amira, 45, also drew on her relationship to her home, writing, "staying inside my home helped me to feel reassured from the fear of war ." Maha reported as one of the positive memories was "when [her] sister's husband told [her] father that the house had been only partially destroyed."

As Lina's quote above also illustrates, women prayed for protection and drew on their faith to gain a sense of meaning and cope with chaos and pain. Asked to detail any positive aspects of the suffering, Maryam, age 23, detailed, "The growth of faith in our hearts and our religion. We had a strong faith, we understood that our destiny is in the hands of a single creator and nobody can do anything but him." 34 year old Mashail put it so: "My faith increased, as did my closeness to God."

Additional accounts highlighted how they used the strategy of noticing and appreciating their family survival to cope with the immediate aftermath of the bombardments. Maha wrote, "After the bombings, I felt safer because my two children were with me." Another woman, 28 year old Samira, wrote that although the bombings were difficult due to the fear of her daughter with all the bombings, she still identified a positive aspect as her daughter being very attached to her, and the closeness between them; she said, "The strengthened the relationship between us."



Other women's diaries highlighted the psychological benefits of a sense of solidarity within families and neighborhoods. One woman recounted that a protective force was "sitting together for a long time during the suspension of electricity, with neighbors and family, to break the boredom," especially as she felt that "holding hands [gave] us a feeling of quietness."

Women's strategies of psychological survival and normalization centered the strategy of reframing. Multiple accounts demonstrated how hard they worked to appreciate just "being able to escape death." They "appreciated well-being, even if it is not enough."

### **Reintegrating**

After the bombardment, women reported that their daily lives were characterized by a continuous attempt of adjusting and re-adjusting. The experience of fleeing their homes, often multiple times, reflects the climate of extreme insecurity and terror from an hand, and the need to find a more secure place where to stay, being ready to move again when precarious shelters could not guarantee survival anymore. The certainty that no safe place is available in Gaza was reinforced by a multiple experience of re-settlement due to extensive attacks that led to dwellings destruction. Here, women described the exhausting and demoralizing experience of flight, as they were compelled to move in with other families or endure inadequate temporary shelters. Their forced experiences of flight were described as being exhausting and demoralizing, as their temporary shelters lacked their basic needs for sanitation, nutrition, and privacy.

This sense of uncertainty contributes in disrupting and undermining internal psychological and emotional safe spaces. This sense of instability and chaos emerges from Rida's words - "On Friday a truce was signed. We returned to our home. After an hour, the bombing raised again. I was worried, so I went back to my husband's family." Loss of privacy and disruption of domestic spaces are contributing in increasing fear and bereavement in our

interviewees who report a sense of spatial insecurity and ongoing psychological distress, forcing them in reintegrating cumulative experiences of panic with new and unknown temporary spaces of survival. Ranis, on this matter, wrote “my family and I, we did not have a place for us. The location was not clean. [There was a risk of] spreading of the disease among children.” Furthermore, loss of intimacy, mounting “psychological and economic pressure,” and a lack of physical, psychological and emotional safe spaces undermine women’s functioning. Hanna, for instance, expressed that “because we were all in a small house,” “family members could not stand each other.”

### **Ongoing political insecurity and trauma**

The fifty days of continuous attacks created a chronic sense of unsafety. People in Gaza continually cycled through the cycle of warning/ bombing/ reintegrating/ persevering. In women’s accounts of the truces, these events brought little relief. In fact, in some ways they caused a particular form of suffering, for as one woman put it, “[there was a] feeling that the ceasefire is not real and it could start again at any time.” Rida’s story shows how the realization of the absence of a safe place where being protected from the shelling increased the sense of terror and desperation:

“On Wednesday, I was home with my husband's family. I believed we were finally in a safe place. I fell asleep with my children. Suddenly I woke up with the noise of bombs and cannons - splinters going everywhere. I was so scared. I was terrified for my children and myself. I cried. I couldn't reassure or help my children because there was no safe place.”

One woman, 41 year old Hasiba, identified that another meaningful event was the “restarting the life of the society for example, schools and offices” – a juncture that was made all the more difficult given the number of homeless families and the loss of resources and

infrastructure. Women talked about people continuing to stand in line for food, and lasting crises with electricity, sewage, and communication systems. Six women specifically identified interrupted access to water, and the exorbitant cost of drinking water. Fuel was hard to come by.

As women made sense of the most recent war, several tended to do so in a manner that very much reflected the collective Palestinian historical and political contexts. The trauma they endured was described not as lasting 50 days, but as yet another juncture in ongoing cultural loss and suffering. Rida, for example, shared:

“On Friday a truce was signed. We returned to our home. After an hour, the bombing began again. I was worried, so I went back to my husband's family. We left the house, and I saw a scene: all our neighbors, everybody, was walking down in the street, leaving their homes. At that moment, I recalled the stories of my grandparents [forced] migration.”

The women themselves experiencing, or witnessing others fleeing their homes, reinforced precarity and uprooting inherited by parents and grandparents who were made refugees after the establishment of the Israeli State in 1948. In fact, Amira wrote, “This event reminded me of the year of the disaster and the displacement of Palestinians from their land.” Maryam also wrote of the trauma of leaving home, for her because of both immediate family fracturing and “because we saw so many homeless and this is horrible for the Palestinian people.” Women defined the war as a new Palestinian catastrophe (*al' Nakbha*), recalling memories of displacement and dispossession by the hands of Israelis at other historical junctures, like the collective displacements via home evictions experienced by the indigenous Palestinian populations in ‘48 and ‘67.

### **Ongoing emotional responses**

Women's descriptions of immediate emotional responses included acute manifestations of suffering, such as terror and intense sadness. Yet, when women's accounts turned from the immediate experience to the enduring experience, their descriptions of emotional consequences detailed a different set of emotions. In the set of reflections where women summarized the lingering experiences of the 2014 attacks, including the ways these intertwined with the chronic stress of the siege and repression, their descriptions centered more on feelings of exhaustion and lasting grief. One 26 year old woman, Du, recounted that she "was exhausted, and I felt the weight of responsibility at school. I did not have confidence in myself." She was quick to write, however, that while the pressure of keeping up in her course added to her stress, now she feels as they she has recovered from her experiences. Another woman, Lubna, 33, identified that as a result of what she termed "the endless war," she experienced "Losing hope in life and surrendering to death. I was repeating this sentence to myself: no one will suffer from my absence." Yet, she, too, quickly asserted that an outcome of the experience is, "Thinking that we all should have hope in life and hold on. Each life matters, each absence is essential."

When women talked about the lasting pain and sorrow from the 2014 attacks, they often used "us" rather than "me" – analysis of which brought into sharp relief the collective dimension of trauma that often appears in this context rather than individualistic conceptions of suffering. This sense of grief and bereavement in the narratives was connected to women's awareness about the communal and historical trauma that connotes Palestinian social suffering. One woman shared that the grief of the current events was made worse by the discovery of a ship where 400 Gazans drowned trying to escape to Italy - the sadness and anxiety this provoked was also due, in part, to her feeling like nobody has paid any attention to this event.

### **Persevering**

Women gained pride and satisfaction from the political context of resistance among Palestinians surrounding the events and increased global awareness of Israeli actions in Gaza. While she drew forth the pain due to the “complete destruction of dozens of houses in the Shuja’iya area,” along with “the killing of many martyrs and many wounded,” Amira, for instance, also wrote that there was a positive, which was “the resistance of the people in Shuja’iya in the face of the attack.” Maryam, too, wrote that “the existence of a resistance group: they had faith, strength, and desire to stay alive” was a positive aspect of the experience.

Thus, while the events elicited feelings of profound grief, resulting from both the acute experience of the fifty days of war in 2014 and the ongoing suffering of the Palestinian people, the political and historical situatedness of the women gave way to resilience. Besides the political resistance the women above wrote about, women’s narratives also highlighted the ways they attempted to persevere through emotional, cognitive, and relational processes.

### **Ongoing coping**

Despite all of the suffering, women also shared their perspectives on how the suffering has not eclipsed their appreciation for life, stability, or a reclamation of peace and calm. Arey asserted, “I hurt, too, but I have learned to be patient and be sensitive to others.” As with expressions of suffering, women often described ongoing coping in a collectivist sense: “During the war period we were afraid and worried, but after the end of the war we have felt the real sense of stability and tranquility.” Dedication to others, helping each other, compassion and decency all seemed to help women regain a sense of agency and hope. As with immediate coping, women’s relationships to faith played a very influential role in their coping. Alaa, 32, identified as an outshoot of living through the tragedy that “My faith increased, as well as my closeness to God.” Describing both the role of faith and again, the role of collective efforts at coping, Mana wrote that what was helpful

was: “the growth of faith in our hearts,” and the belief “that our destiny is in the hands of a single creator.”

Women’s narratives also brought forth the dynamics of the family and their role within that structure. While witnessing children’s fear and suffering posed a risk for women’s well-being, their abilities to take care of their children and mobilize their love for their children’s benefit seemed to provide some sense of satisfaction. For example, one of Alaa’s meaningful events was “the intense fear of my daughter,” and she identified pivotal occurrences such as how “she began to urinate without control, and sleep disorders.” Yet, Alaa also identified a positive outcome in “the way I tried to deal with her.” Another woman noted that, despite all the suffering, she found meaning in “the attempt to overcome this sadness and give joy to the children.” Other women identified comfort and fulfillment from doing things like playing with children to help them “forget the fear,” “taking care of my children, hugging them,” and watching children visit with and play with extended relatives. Therefore, protecting children and vulnerable family members was both a urgent, mandatory task that brought stress, while also nurturing meaning and joy.

As well, women’s relationships with extended families played a role in their continual coping. Amira, in describing a particular series of bombardments, reported positive memories from “hosting relatives” and the “mercy, pity and sympathy among relatives” gathering in homes. Close family ties built reciprocal protection and psychological relief from ongoing terror and despair. Hanna, who we quote above as expressing that “family members can’t stand each other,” also wrote that the experience of coming together during the war “has intensified relationships, social relations and love between us and left us beautiful memories.”

Relationships with community also served women within their ongoing process of coping. On the one hand, poor connections intensified isolation, fragmentation and disconnection within the community, as was the case with Nada, who wrote, “I had no friends among my neighbors, I did not know them, I felt like an outsider.” On the other hand, women’s narratives highlighted that finding hospitality and protection from neighbors reduced isolation, empowered and comforted them - experienced as “solidarity,” “harmony,” and “support.”

### **Discussion**

Through considering women’s retrospective accounts within a framework that honors the ongoing nature of the political violence in Palestine, we uncovered the cyclical nature of stress and coping in a highly charged context. Our findings, illustrated in our conceptual model (Figure 1), reveal the importance of tracing the events of warfare, its psycho-social consequences, and the distinct patterns of emotional and logistical survival in Gaza. As seen in our figure, through our analysis, we were able to ascertain the particular stressors of specific temporal moments of political violence – both within the two acute junctures of violence we identified as warning/roof knocking and bombing, as well as distinct moments within the aftermath of the bombing, which we referred to as reintegrating; living with ongoing political insecurity; and persevering. Through our analysis and resulting conceptual model, we aligned these distinct moments with both immediate emotional responses of fear, terror and with ongoing emotional responses characterized as a collective, social suffering. Furthermore, we were able to consider how the stress and trauma fell along particular phases of adjustment within the three phases of appraisal and immediate and ongoing coping proposed in the transactional model of stress and coping (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Lazarus, 2000). In so doing, we add to a body of literature that uses in-depth analysis of narratives and cases to uncover the dynamic nature of physical and

psychological suffering and survival within political violence, thus deepening the capacity of our field to understand stress and trauma within a context of war and ongoing oppression (Afana, et al, 2018; Al-Krenawi, Graham, & Sehwail, 2004).

Women's narratives particularly highlighted the role that unpredictability plays in the sequela related to trauma (Foa et al., 1992), as women reported struggling to maintain a sense of control and to nurture survival within massive assaults. Our analysis brought forward how women nurtured immediate physical and psychological survival within constant fear and insecurity through seeking emotional and existential respite. One of the most important strategies seemed to be how women drew on cognitive processes related to the meaning they made from not only the present suffering, but the suffering within historical and cultural context. Thus, their patterns of perseverance and ongoing coping illustrated a great capacity for recovery and even growth in the wake of the trauma and continued stress, as other literature from within Palestine demonstrates (Giacaman, 2019; Veronese, et al. 2019; Veronese, et al. 2017).

Limitations of this study include our limited sample, both in size and diversity. All respondents were teachers, all women and about the same age. Investigations should extend to men, children, and to parenting specifically – particularly because parenting was such a compelling factor in this study, suggesting a need for increased investigation about the specific processes of parenting within political violence for both mothers and fathers (Akesson, 2019; Sousa, 2019). Our method elicited a variety of narratives – some lengthy, others a bit cursory. It could be that the method worked well for some, and not for others. Future research might consider the use of mobile devices to collect real time data, either via paper diaries or via apps (Lindhjem & Harris, 2018). If done electronically, devices and apps would have to be made available prior to an assault and be easily downloadable; this would also depend, of course, on a



regular source of electricity and cellular connection – both of which are hard to come by in Gaza, particularly during times of assaults. Given these limitations, this study should be understood as exploratory and a test of a relatively underutilized method. Results are not generalizable.

Limitations notwithstanding, our study contributes to and extends literature on coping in a few key ways. First, we found that coping - in both the short and long term - depends a great deal on the social and political context, and on how women make meaning of the suffering they encounter (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Giacaman, 2018). Not surprisingly, our results highlighted how, in a collectivistic society, family, community, and religious and/or faith based structures play pivotal roles in shaping the experience of the stress and in fostering coping (Afana, Tremblay, Ghannam, Ronsbo, & Veronese, 2018; Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Guribye et al., 2011; Khamis, 2000; K. E. Miller et al., 2002; Park, 2007; Steel et al., 1999). Second, our findings bolster the notion that destruction of place – especially family homes and infrastructure – undermines well-being. Findings related to the role of place within both vulnerability and resiliency should inform advocacy and treatment of political violence on a systemic level as we understand more deeply the health effects of so-called ‘collateral damage’ (Akeesson, Basso, & Denov, 2016; de Almeida, Sá, Cunha, & Pires, 2013; Sousa, 2013; Sousa, Kep, & el-Zuhairi, 2019).

Finally, our results also demonstrate the centrality of meaning-making to coping within political violence, as the cultural and historical meanings people assign to the stressors hold potential for both traumatization and healing. Palestinians’ commitment to locate their suffering within a greater narrative fosters multi-generational dignity, solidarity, and psychological strength (Afana, et al., 2018; Barber et al., 2014) – our findings further elucidate the dynamics of this collective sense-making, and its relationship to resilience. Our analysis of narrative accounts

of psychological suffering and survival enabled us to more carefully trace the events of warfare, its psycho-social consequences, and distinct patterns of coping that align with specific temporal dimensions of the stress and trauma of war. In so doing, we hope this study helps build a body of literature that takes into account the cyclical nature of stress and coping within warfare – thus helping in the design of individual and collective interventions addressing the ramifications of war and informing our ethical obligations to work for peace and social justice.

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