Agency and life satisfaction in Bedouin children in occupied Palestinian territory: a cross-lagged longitudinal study

Guido Veronese, Alessandro Pepe, Federica Cavazzoni, Hala Kittaneh, Hania Obaid, Mawa Abdelbagi Osman Mohamed, Jesús Manuel Pérez Viejo

Abstract

Background Bedouin children living in occupied Palestinian territory are at risk of developing trauma-related pathologies because of chronic exposure to political and military violence. Little is known about psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction in this group of children, or their coping skills and survival skills in adjusting to these conditions.

Methods Our longitudinal study aimed to assess the function of agency in predicting life satisfaction as a moderator for traumatic stress. We reasoned that the more that children show agency over time in activating domains of life satisfaction, the more they can be satisfied with their life and the less they will present signs of trauma. A cross-lagged path model (CLPM) was used to assess 143 children living in Bedouin communities located northeast of Jerusalem (area E1, Al Khan Al-Ahmar). The CLPM, a discrete time structural equation model to analyse panel data in which two or more variables are repeatedly measured at different timepoints, was run in January, 2019 (Time 1) and after 6 months (Time 2). We used the Children's Hope Scale (CHS) as a measure of agency, the Multidimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS), and the Children's Revised Impact of Event Scale (CRIES).

Findings The mean age of participants was 12·02 years (SD 2·05); 65 (46%) were male and 78 (55%) were female. Agency scores had a medium total positive standardised effect on life satisfaction (β=0·25 [95% CI 0·149 to 0·449]; p=0·004) and a small direct standardized effect on trauma symptoms (β=0·08 [0·139 to 0·450]; p=0·023). The indirect effect of agency on trauma was –0·04 (95% CI –0·119 to –0·101]; p=0·044). Life satisfaction had a small statistically significant effect on trauma (β=–0·17 [–0·484 to –0·191]; p=0·037). Statistically significant total standardised effects were found between agency, life satisfaction (β=0·25 [0·161 to 0·476]; p=0·010), and trauma symptoms (β=–0·13 [–0·317 to 0·203]; p=0·044) at Time 1. Similarly, agentic competencies were found to be more related to life satisfaction (β=0·14 [0·025 to 0·338]; p=0·047;) than to trauma symptoms (β=–0·10 [–0·543 to 0·036]; p=0·145) at Time 2. The inclusion of the cross-lagged paths increased the fit of the model significantly.

Interpretation Children are acting for their wellbeing, mobilising personal and contextual resources. Such agentic attitudes contribute to easing their lives under occupation and minimising negative effects on their mental health despite the prevailing chronic traumatic conditions. Children implement skills of resilience rather than yield to the negative effects of political and military violence. The more that children perceive themselves as agentic in activating life satisfaction, the more effectively they deploy their survival skills and resilience.

Funding None.