

Community Psychology under colonial occupation: the case of Palestine.

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These notes are the result of a visit to Palestine in May, 2013, at the invitation of the Community Psychology programme at Birzeit University, near Ramallah². We attended the two day *International Community Psychology Conference: Global Perspectives, Local Practices*, and also visited various urban and rural settings in the occupied West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem.

What is known as Historical Palestine was a British mandate following the defeat of Turkey and break up of the Ottoman empire in 1918. During this period there was immigration by Jewish settlers, many of whom lived peaceably with their Palestinian neighbours. The United Nations had proposed partitioning the territory between a Jewish and an Arab state. At the expiry of the mandate in 1948 the movement of political Zionism seized the initiative, declaring independence. This was opposed by the Arab nations leading to the first of several armed conflicts. Clearances of villages, including a number of massacres, together with the fear this engendered led to the flight of 80 per cent of Palestinians from what became Israel (50% for Palestine as a whole). This event is known by the Palestinians as the Nakba, which means the great catastrophe. They settled for the most part in what were initially temporary camps that now have a more permanent character in what were the territories of Egypt (Gaza), Jordan (the West Bank), Syria and Lebanon. The boundaries of the State of Israel were fixed at the 'Green Line' by the eventual armistice, with Jerusalem / Al Quds itself partitioned. Israel passed legislation formally dispossessing these previous Palestinian residents of their homes, farms and businesses while the Palestinians claim the Right of Return.

The 1967 Six Day War was a military victory for Israel and territories in Jordan, Syria and Egypt were occupied. Following the Camp David agreement the Sinai was returned to Egypt. The subsequent peace agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation led to some limited self government in the West Bank and Gaza.

Under International Law it is not permissible to settle civilians in occupied territories but this is exactly what Israel has done and continues to do both in East Jerusalem and in Eastern Palestine / the West Bank (between the former Green Line and the Jordan river, with the explicit strategy of "changing the facts on the ground".

The Israeli State uses a variety of mechanisms, well documented elsewhere, to

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maintain its domination, all of which have a profound impact on Palestinian communities and community life in both the cities and the countryside, including the following.

- Economic incentives for settlers (including a five year tax break and a generous housing subsidy).
- Construction of infrastructure to support settler communities, including roads, a light rail system in Jerusalem, separate water and electricity supply.
- Control of roads via a series of military checkpoints.
- The re-designation of areas and the expansion of the boundaries of Jerusalem at the expense of the Palestinian Authority's territory.
- Effective prohibition of building work by Palestinians through an almost impossible to negotiate permit system, backed by demolition of illegally built property.
- Denial of access by West Bank Palestinians to Jerusalem, splitting families and fracturing the economy.
- Frequent military incursions.
- Failure to take action against settler provocations, such as assaults on Palestinians, dumping of refuse, destruction of olive trees and other crops.
- Failure to evict settlers who squat in Palestinian houses and on Palestinian land.
- Pollution of watercourses.
- Violent repression of unarmed Palestinian protests using rubber bullets, tear gas, beatings and in some cases live ammunition. Arrest and detention of children.
- Erection of a separation wall that the Israelis call a security barrier (although it passes in some places between Palestinian settlements) and others call the Apartheid Wall. This fortified, 9 metre high wall further restricts Palestinian freedom of movement, for example in the countryside, making cultivation and harvest difficult.
- Regular military incursions into Palestinian areas, especially the refugee camps. In the recent past this has involved full scale occupation and curfew lasting days. In Gaza, shelling and missile strikes has led to many deaths and white phosphorous was used. A large part of the Islamic University was destroyed in 2005.
- Control of borders to the both the State of Israel and the (other) occupied territories.
- Extra-judicial killings of alleged terrorists.

- A sophisticated programme of propaganda, both at home and abroad to silence the Palestinian cause.

The Nakba, in effect continues, yet is poorly reported in the dominant Western media, or indeed elsewhere. In East Jerusalem, for example theft and demolitions of Palestinian houses continue, for example in the suburbs of Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah, often led by armed ultra-Zionists. In Hebron we walked under netting in the old city erected to protect the Palestinians from the refuse dumped by settlers who have occupied upstairs stories. In Beit Ummar we heard about the provocations from no less than 5 separate settlements and the peaceful resistance. In the case of the village of Bil'in, I described our visit like this in my diary of the visit:

"We then went on to where the road has been closed off, preventing travel between adjacent villages – not the separation wall at this point, just a pile of rubble blocking the road. We saw grey material dumped on agricultural land – industrial waste we were told. We continued to Bil'in. This is one of many places where colonizer settlements have been built, contrary to international law (you don't transfer your population to occupied territory) behind the 12 ft separation wall. First though the land was enclosed by a fence. It is nothing more than theft. The land belongs to the villagers who have farmed it for centuries and the Israeli State simply fences it off and gives it to the colonists. In this case though there had been a successful struggle, all the more impressive for being organised by the country people themselves, involving weekly Friday protests (which continue with international and Israeli dissident participation too), and legal process. As a result the fence was moved back a few hundred metres and the Palestinians are again cultivating the land – we ate some 'liberation lettuce'. But there is constant harassment."

These are the conditions affecting the Palestinian people and their daily life. This is a classic 'limit situation'. As noted, there is resistance, and while this has in part been armed, it is overwhelmingly non-violent. Most Palestinians have never handled a gun. The two intifadas (uprisings) used economic boycotts, strikes and civil disobedience as well as the more widely reported violent tactics. However, in certain areas there is a celebration of martyrs of the struggle that emphasises military prowess, for example with photo-montages that add heavy calibre weapons to their photos. At the same time there is a rich use of other imagery, for example the keys that symbolise return, the murals depicting villages from which people were expelled or fled. One consequence is the overwhelming definition of Palestinian identity in terms of the collective struggle. While this has its valuable side, there is also a cost in terms of positive personal narratives, a point that was made to us by some of the more sophisticated local activists.

What might community psychology offer in such a situation of extreme power asymmetry? Is community psychology even possible under such conditions? If so what form would it take?

We got some answers at the conference. A community psychology masters degree programme has been running at Birzeit for four years, in part funded by a Norwegian institution. The conference was an opportunity to show-case some of the work done, mostly by students, and also to engage with some international colleagues. This latter is of great importance. Universities in occupied Palestine are isolated. Staff who are Palestinian nationals cannot travel freely as a result of restrictions imposed by the occupation power. Paradoxically they even suffer isolation from other parts of the Arab world: there was only one non-Palestinian Arab delegate at the conference, a British national. There were no delegates from Gaza either, in this case a result of the Israeli blockade and collective punishment of the population for voting for Hamas. One of the invited international speakers (from Venezuela) was denied a visa by the Israeli authorities.

Despite the isolation, community psychological work was of good quality. It perhaps tended to be more descriptive than intervention-orientated, except at a more individual level (for example with detention survivors). This may be partly a result of the newness of the programme and of local difficulties in integrating with initiatives based in the communities, but also because of the need to document the social psychology of Israeli colonial oppression (its mechanisms and its impacts) in order to understand it. The concepts used were not always the same as in mainstream English speaking community psychology. A symposium on 'psychological sense of community' was more about resistance, identity and solidarity in the face of aspects of the occupation in East Jerusalem (Jerusalem residents can visit the West Bank but not vice-versa). There was also the use of concepts from Palestinian culture, for example that of 'Sumud' derived from the strategies of resistance to interrogation, in place of Western psychology's 'trauma', and Palestinian reflections on the concept of resistance. However the closing symposium was organised on the theme of a "context-bound, yet globally integrative model of critical community psychology for the Arab-Palestinian context", explicitly drawing lessons from liberating psychologies in other contexts, most of which bear the marks of colonialism one way or another.

We were reminded of the difficulties of language too. Arabic apparently does not have a straightforward way of translating 'community' and a choice therefore has to be made between concepts at either the macro or micro scale.

There is fertile ground here to explore and adapt community and liberation psychology approaches that have been helpful in other 'limit situations'. I am on uncomfortable ground here as I do not want to impose a framing on a reality of which I inevitably only have a partial understanding. So I make some suggestions, not as prescriptions but in the form of a contribution to an agenda of inquiry, thinking these both as critical community psychologist and political and community activist.

- How might Palestinian Critical Community Psychology (PCCP) build alliances with other forms of resistance and other decolonising social

movements, at home and internationally?

- How can the positive historical memory of the Palestinian people be used as a resource in the struggle and how can social psychological investigative and transformative methods help?
- How might pain, anger and resistance be utilised in building community-based projects that produce transformation for participants and communities?
- How can the analysis of the mechanisms of oppression be used as a resource for resistance and transformation?
- How might social psychological accounts of other liberation struggles and their transformation processes (e.g. South Africa, Phillipines) be used as a resource to build up a shared national-popular understanding of successful democratic transition?
- How can community psychology help understand and combat the propaganda of the occupier in relation to the evolution of public opinion both in and beyond Palestine?
- How might an understanding of diversity (religion, gender, rural - urban, citizenship status, able-disabled, militant – non-militant, etc.) be used positively to build a unified struggle?

In the last days of our trip (most of which followed the conference) we were lucky enough to briefly visit some inspirational community projects, two in refugee camps in Bethlehem and one in the village of Beit Ummar mentioned above. The projects focussed on sport and other cultural activities, and theatre, respectively in the two camps, and on a variety of modalities of non-violent action, including maintenance of an active presence on the land and documentation, including video at Beit Ummar. While there was no community psychological input, the people running the projects spoke very much the same language as that of critical community psychologists, in terms of strengthening culture, counter-propaganda, positive identity and self respect, as well as the inevitable concern for the more material dimensions of community life.

It left me as convinced as ever that there is no real boundary between political and community psychology. The political is ultimately about community and the community is itself political, both internally and in its external relations that are reflected in the social psychological life of its members. Community psychological praxis is different in different contexts but is always concerned with questions of power, belonging, amelioration and transformation. In this respect we might look at Arabic's difficulty in translating community in a different light.