

Book/article reviews

Israel Journal of Psychiatry (Vol. 42, Number 2, 2005) Special Issue on Mental Health Issues in Arab Society

The *Special Issue on Mental Health Issues in Arab Society* is written almost entirely by Palestinian mental health professionals. Significant changes are taking place within the community mental health service in Palestine, which have also attracted the attention of mental health workers in Israel. As editor, Dr Bassam Al-Ashhab, president of the new Palestinian Psychiatric Association, writes in his editorial to this Special Issue; it looks like the time is ripe for both the Palestinian and Israeli psychiatric communities to work together. Alean Al-Krenawi from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, guest editor, believes that the field of mental health is one of the areas that can form a bridge between the Arab and Jewish people in the Middle East.

As many of our readers are involved with the mental health issues of patients and participants from different cultures, minority groups, or living under complicated stress and violence caused by occupation and violent conflict, I think they will value learning about the mental health situation in the Middle East (especially in the West Bank, Gaza strip and Arabs living in Israel).

The first contribution: *Psychiatry and the Palestinian population* (by Harvey Gordon, a British Jew & Ibrahim Murad, a Palestinian Arab) gives a short overview of the existing mental health services, and mentions some of the key issues in Palestinian psychiatry. Its development needs to be seen in the context of

the traditional Arab world, and of modern Israel. Topics such as forensic psychiatry, criminal responsibility, death penalty, suicide and the suicide bomber, are briefly discussed.

Editor Al-Ashhab has written *An update on mental health services in the West Bank*. It is a brief article highlighting the establishment of community mental health services, the programmes launched by the new Palestinian Authority, and the planned reorganization of these mental health services. A similar treatment is given to the Gaza Strip by Abdel Aziz Mousa & Panos Voustanis in an article entitled *Child mental health problems in the Gaza Strip*. This is a brief study describing the mental health characteristics of children referred to services in the Gaza Strip.

The contribution *Children living under a multi-traumatic environment: the Palestinian case*, by Roney W. Srour from the Palestinian Counselling Centre in Jerusalem may be still more interesting for our readership. Srour describes the accumulating stressors for children growing up in a world full of continuous traumatic events. Living under occupation means living in a constant state of uncertainty, and lack of predictability. This causes a high level of stress, often overwhelming, to the average Palestinian child. The case of a 4 year-old boy is described.

Less dramatic, but still of interest is *The psychological effects of Intifada Al Aqsa: acute stress disorder and distress in Palestinian-Israeli students*, by Naieram Musallam, et al. This article focuses on university students from the Arab minority living in Israel. Most of the students report high levels of identification with the

Palestinian people in the occupied lands. It is therefore not a surprise that a study, including a battery of questionnaires, reveals a high level of distress among these students.

Personally, I found the article *The impact of social values on the psychology of gender among Arab couples: a view from psychotherapy* highly informative. The author is Khawla Abu-Baker, from Emek Yezreel College, Israel. It is a profound analysis of the emotional and marital problems occurring among Palestinian women. It is not about the struggle for a national identity, but rather about the position of women within their own society. Major psychosocial conditions, which have an effect on the problems experienced by Palestinian women, are described. This description encompasses, firstly, a gender-dependent assessment of emotions. Females within this society are encouraged to express emotions that elicit support and reflect weakness, such as fear, unhappiness and helplessness. Men are encouraged to express emotions and encourage actions, such as anger, anxiety and revenge.

The discussion continues by highlighting the emotional distress caused by conflicting value demands on women in a society that is, at the same time, both collectivist and paternalistic.

The general feeling is that society is a threatening entity that pursues women and prevents them from fulfilling themselves. Men are not often conscious of the intrapsychic and social pressures on their wives, and therefore also are not aware of their distress.

The third major point is how the notion of suffering in silence is glorified. There is a term

for a woman who suffers in silence without complaining: the *Mastoura* woman. According to the author, the psychological and marital problems of Palestinian women manifest in sexual dysfunction, somatic behaviour and the use of the metaphoric language of psychosomatics. All of this has consequences on the treatment and therapy of married couples.

Ahmed Okasha has also contributed to this issue, with a more general article about *Mental health in Egypt*. The author gives us a birds-eye view on history, dating from Pharaonic times, and 6 pages of the transcultural aspects of a number of classical psychiatric disorders.

Finally, there is a good contribution by guest editor, Alean Al-Krenawi, on *Socio-political aspects of mental health practice with Arabs in the Israeli context*. Mental health care in Israel is embedded in a biomedical system. It may also, therefore, represent the forces of globalization and of a dominant Israeli Western culture. This can in turn lead to an atmosphere of distrust towards assistance and treatment. Not surprisingly, there is a political impact on therapy, which complicates mental health practice.

I hope that the readers of *Intervention* may enjoy this issue of the *Israel Journal of Psychiatry* as much as I did. Apart from its interesting contents, the mere fact of publishing it is an example of respect and peaceful cooperation amidst turmoil and hostilities.

Reviewed by Johan Lansen, member of the Editorial Council of Intervention.

***Promoting the Psychosocial Well Being of Children Following War and Terrorism* (2005). Edited by Matthew J. Friedman and Ancia Mikus-Kos, Amsterdam: IOS Press**

Promoting the Psychosocial Well Being of Children Following War and Terrorism is what the title says: a collection of articles describing interventions to promote the psychosocial well being of children following war and terrorism. The various authors have different perspectives on providing interventions; some of them having a community-based approach, others adhering to a more scientific approach. Therefore, the book will be of interest for a wide variety of readers, from psychologists to health workers and social scientists. The purpose of the book is to show how community-based approaches can benefit from a synthesis of experiential and empirical strategies relating to psychosocial interventions for children. The book is divided into four parts: conceptual models, implementation, program evaluation and research, education and influence.

The section on implementation will probably be most useful for trainers and (psychosocial) health workers in terms of facilitating psychosocial interventions for children. Two chapters of this section discuss psychosocial programs and mental health services for children in Kosovo. Another interesting chapter, also in the light of the current thematic issue of *Intervention*, is the one on former Mozambican child soldiers, written by Neil Boothby and Jason Halprin.

The Former Mozambican Child Soldier Life Outcome Study describes what happened to the former child soldiers who had been admitted to the Lhanguene Center in Mozambique. The study shows that for the former child soldiers it was very important

to learn how to cope with their traumatic experiences and to feel safe and protected. Furthermore, their greatest wish was to be able to build a common life and to be accepted by their families and communities. Even though the former child soldiers that were guided through this project made progress in returning to civilian life, they are all still dealing with the events that happened during the war. After 16 years, many of them have recurrent thoughts or memories of the traumatic events, re-experience traumatic events, and have nightmares and emotional reactions at certain moments.

Most of the young men at the Lhanguene Center described the time they spent with adult caretakers and other former child soldiers positively. However, a centre-based program is not necessarily the most effective way. Leaders, healers and educators within the boys' home communities could also have provided what took place at the centre. Some advantages of community-based programmes included that attachments can continue for longer periods of time, that trust can be regained, and that more former child soldiers can be reached. The main challenges are then related to the maintenance of the quality of training, supervision and support. This is especially important as often, former child soldiers are being haunted by their memories of traumatic events for long periods of time. Traditional cleansing ceremonies for former child soldiers also played a key role in terms of reconciliation. Employment, housing, farming and marriage were further helped the young men to attain a common life again. For former child soldiers, support related to these developments turned out to be of vital importance. Articles like these show that children who have experienced traumatic events are, in general, very much in need of a safe place where there are people they can trust.

Reintegration in society, building a normal life and acceptance by family and community are key elements in the recovery of these children. Community-based interventions marked by supervision and over a long time span are essential in offering these children the opportunity to come to terms with their

past, and to see new possibilities for the future.

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