

War Trauma Effects on Civilians: A Content Analysis of Reactions of Civilians with PTSD on YouTube

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the effect of war trauma on Iraqi civilians by examining YouTube videos that contained interviews with civilians, doctors, and military personnel giving their reactions and experience with war trauma and PTSD. This study examined 12 videos of civilians in Iraq and refugee camps, psychiatrists, and veterans who served in the Iraq war, and it identified the following themes: killing or death of family members due to war violence, fear, PTSD, nightmares, and anger. This study identifies the emotional responses to war trauma, and it demonstrates that most civilians have also developed other mental disorders due to exposure to war and life-threatening conditions.

Introduction

Wars have caused damage to countries all around the world and throughout history for a very long time. When a conflict breaks out, people must face the horrifying sight of their homes and family being demolished. Contrary to popular belief, civilians are rarely considered, fundamental human rights are often violated, and soldiers endure the most hardship. Poverty rates rise due to warfare costs, disrupting the currency flow. The civilians are then without a place to live or a safety net. Many families are under high stress because of losing their loved ones, which also increases trauma in younger children. PTSD was first diagnosed in soldiers participating in the Vietnam War; it is a condition caused by being exposed to dangerous and life-threatening situations (Ehlers & Clark, 2000).

Anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders, and substance use disorders are significantly more likely to appear in PTSD patients. Along with mental health issues, PTSD patients are more likely to attempt suicide. Additionally, it suggests that those with PTSD are more likely to experience discomfort, diabetes, obesity, heart disorders, breathing illnesses, and sexual dysfunction. Additionally, PTSD can make it difficult

for a person to retain relationships and a career. Following many traumatic experiences, PTSD has been extensively used in diagnosis and therapy. Its application to non-western civilizations, including refugees who frequently suffer from several significant traumas over extended periods, is debatable and will be covered in more depth later in this paper. PTSD can accrue due to illegal detention and abuse, traumatic loss, and exposure to conflict and social upheaval (Breslau, 1999), and researchers diagnose PTSD based on the behavioural symptoms that are associated with it. They recognize four distinct diagnostic groups: intrusion, avoidance, depressive cognitions and mood changes, and changes in arousal and reactivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Studies explore the effects of post-trauma responses of civilians in countries such as Palestine, Lebanon, and Ukraine. For example, Lebanese civilians have witnessed war with the Israeli occupation of the South for over 20 years (UNIFIL, 2016). This conflict resulted in over 1109 Lebanese civilian casualties, 4399 injuries, and over one million internally displaced persons (Bouckaert & Houry, 2007). Multiple data indicate that the prevalence rates for a psychiatric disorder, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),

among civilian populations in the South range from 17.6 to 33.3% (Farhood & Dimassi, 2012). Studies go further in-depth to explain how women are twice as likely to develop PTSD than men and how Lebanese women are at greater risk due to social, legal, and religious challenges (Farhood & Dimassi, 2012).

Surprisingly there is very little research about Iraqi civilians, although Iraq has been in many wars, to the point where many generations have been born into an unstable and unsafe environment and know nothing but war. Studies argue that there is a significant difference between post-trauma responses to the war on civilians versus soldiers. Veterans receive intense training prior to facing life-threatening situations and have access to therapy and other mental health resources after the fact; civilians, on the other hand, experience less emotional numbing and more intrusive flashbacks regularly (Meichenbaum, 1994), and most civilians who survive war do not have access to the same resources. More than one million Iraqi civilians were killed during the US invasion; the mass media covered the war as “a war of freedom” to free the Iraqi people from dictatorship; therefore, civilians were not prepared to defend themselves, which led to greater trauma and loss. After many years some war crime stories were uncovered, and that is due to the guilt of soldiers who participated in these crimes, such as Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse and the Fallujah killings.

Methods

Sample and Sample Selection

The sample consisted of 12 videos posted on YouTube containing different interviews and opinions of civilians on PTSD and war trauma. YouTube was selected as a data source because it is easily accessible by all users globally, including organizations, news networks, and the public. The present study examines videos found by doing an advanced search in multiple languages regarding PTSD in civilians by using the keywords “Iraqis suffering from PTSD” and “USA Invasion War Trauma” on YouTube. To explore this subject thoroughly, looking at interview videos and first-hand experiences was the most appropriate because it allowed the civilians to clearly describe their experiences by answering questions and having the freedom to tell their stories. YouTube contains many documentaries and videos of civilians, but many of

these videos maintain graphic scenes. The 12 videos selected for the sample all contained the subject of fear and trauma and accurately captured feedback and first-hand experiences from Iraqi civilians.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following videos were selected to conduct a content analysis on the effect of war on Iraqi civilians. The videos were selected based on the number of civilians sharing their stories and how they experienced fear and PTSD after witnessing war. The videos selected contained civilians still in danger, and some had refugee status since many found it hard to leave the country due to threats. The internet contains many videos, but only 12 were selected due to the graphic scenes and abusive language some videos contain. The videos were posted by different resources such as news channels, the UN refugee agency, and personal profiles, but all were posted for public view.

Units of Analysis

The units of analysis in this study were the experiences of individuals; the videos were examined based on their relevance to the subject of war trauma and PTSD in regular civilians with no military experiences. Keywords such as “fear” and “PTSD” were used to conduct this internet research; the research was conducted in English and Arabic using the exact words. Once the videos were reviewed, and all contained civilians expressing the effect of war they had been facing, the sample was finalized.

Materials and Setting

Necessary materials included a laptop and internet access to locate the research papers and units of analysis and an iPhone and a YouTube account for data collection and analysis. Data was collected and analyzed at the principal researcher's area of residence.

Results

In the videos that were analyzed, the results contain themes of 1) killing or death of family members due to war violence, 2) fear, 3) PTSD, 4) nightmares, and 5) anger (see Table 1).

Table 1. Examples of Comments by Each Category

1) Killing or death of family members due to war violence	
Comments by parents and children	"People fall to the ground because they were thirsty... begged for water" "We had to leave our uncles, our grandparents they were all killed" "They slit my cousin Alaa's throat, and I saw them kill two other children" "They killed my father" "They killed my father and three of my uncles" "The militias killed 26 of my family members"
2) Fear	
Comments by parents and children	"I know so many who can't sleep at night from fear..." "There are all kind of animals in the camps, snakes, and scorpions it's not safe" "My son wakes up at night terrified screaming" "He gets scared every time he sees smoke"
3) PTSD	
Comments by parents and children	"She's traumatized, every evening at 7, she starts screaming" "My daughter is traumatized because the explosion was very close" "Blood was everywhere, a river of blood in the street"
Comments by psychiatrists	"2/3 Iraqi children suffer from PTSD and require care" "It's hard since the parents also have PTSD" "The hardest part is working out why the child is traumatized" "They come out of horrific situations, and there will be layers of trauma"
4) Nightmares	
Comments by parents and children	"My children have nightmares every night" "Every night I dream of an armed man coming to kill me"

	"If you come at night, you will see terror" "I have a lot of nightmares. I can't sleep"
5) Anger	
Comments by parents and children	"He hit his sister and even me sometimes" "After seeing my brother step on a land mine, I became easily irritable, and now I beat my kids a lot "
Comments by psychiatrists	"Some of the 50 symptoms of PTSD that children might have, are suicidal thoughts...and aggression"

Other videos posted by YouTube users to the public also contained themes of fear, death, and anger. "The US army shot a 17-year-old boy, and his brother was with him in the car," his brother states. "The death of my brother will not go for nothing; I'm going to kill these Americans." The video explains that "this wasn't the only innocent civilian that was killed, and the Iraqi people started to get angry and fight back, which lead to more death" (MjNoor, 2017). Another video explains that "in a war like this, everyone was a suspect, even the innocent." Many videos were posted by Iraqi civilians themselves, for example, a video posted by the family of a boy who became disabled after the US army bombed his house. Although a news channel filmed the video, it was posted by a family; the father states that "my son could walk if he gets a surgery, but we lost everything with the house, all out of money " (The01aziz12, 2010).

A video posted by another shows the US army arresting civilians from the streets and the person filming asking, "What are you going to do to these people?" A few hours later, civilians stated that "these people were stripped naked, beaten and released to the streets," (bantalarab8776, 2019).

A man explains that "the army was coming into houses killing anything that moves, whole families, where are we supposed to go, where are they supposed to go if they can't even hide in their houses?" Another man states, "They came to Fluja city, and in a week they were killing everyone in the streets, kids in schools, and people in houses, one week took for the whole city to be completely destroyed." A man explains he was one of the paramedics: "I was trying to go save some lives,

the US army bombed a school, and when I got there they started shooting at the ambulance, my co-worker got shot in the head, I don't understand why." He states, "I know a family that lost 35 members, and during the funeral, the army shot a missile and killed everyone that attended. Why would any human do that?" (User-hr8ft1lb5i, 2021, 00:8:20).

A man interviewed by a videography student says, "This cemetery we are standing in had more than 6000 bodies, it was a recreational center for soccer and sports, and the US soldiers go back to their homes showering in love and care and getting treated for what they seen, what did they see? Nothing like what we saw. If they didn't kill all these people, they wouldn't commit suicide now due to guilt" (User-hr8ft1lb5i, 2021, 00:15:09).

In the sample videos of US soldiers examined, these soldiers told stories from their side; the results contained themes of "death, fear, kill and innocent," and some comments were "I killed an innocent man, and it was my first kill... my sergeant congratulated me, and this was the case for everyone after their first kill." The soldier then states, "The person who congratulated me said whoever kills a person with a knife gets four days extension on their vacation."

"We got excited about killing a man, so we started killing even more since the photographer wasn't with us," and "We would kick out doors just to terrorize the families" (User-jm5cl9lq9j, 2021 00:0:20).

Another video of a soldier interviewed explained, "We were kicking doors and terrifying children" and "We started lighting up the city like you wouldn't believe" (A. Patriotic, 2021, 00:5:37).

Discussion

The study aimed to examine YouTube videos of civilians, doctors, and military personnel, given their reactions and experience with war trauma and PTSD. After conducting a sample analysis of 12 videos posted by users on their accounts shared publicly, news channels, and refugee agencies, the following themes and categories were identified: 1) killing or death of family members due to war violence, 2) fear, 3) PTSD, 4) nightmares and 5) anger.

The results indicate that children and parents who have experienced war trauma and have PTSD also develop other mental disorders, which will be carried on for generations. According to the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire in Iraqi refugees, Iraqi refugees with PTSD suffer from chronic depression. Most civilians do not have access to mental health care, and a whole new generation of children since 2003 was born in war-torn countries and will be unaware of everyday living and safety. Aggression is one of the main symptoms of PTSD, and it can be generated for many reasons; many civilians in the interviews showed signs of aggression, such as 7-year-old boy Youssef in a refugee camp where his mom stated, "He hit his sister and even me sometimes." Also, it was shown in the results that parents who have PTSD also physically abuse their children (see Table 1).

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