

Palestinian Refugee Children: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

The current scholarly preoccupation with the Syrian refugee crisis bears significant implications for the future of the millions currently displaced by the conflict. However, for millions of Palestinian refugees, a dearth in research nevertheless still exists. With children and adolescents as the focus, this literature review traces the trajectory of scholarship dedicated to Palestinian refugee children, thereby revealing a noteworthy scarcity in sociological and anthropological studies dedicated to the topic. The interrogative power in revealing this deficiency further highlights the necessity of comprehensive, vital research aimed at the Palestinian refugee situation.

Keywords

Palestinian refugees • Children • Youth • UNRWA • Childhood studies • Adolescents

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As arguably the most contentious region in the world, the Middle East with all the sociopolitical complexities the region represents serves as a frequent topic of scholarly research. With the Syrian refugee crisis, amounting to what United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon confirmed to be “the biggest refugee and migration crisis since World War II,” the necessity of interrogating and analyzing the experiences that refugees live reveals itself amidst an increasingly tumultuous political climate (UN, 2015). In the public sphere, the prevailing sentiment seemingly equates refugees with an uncritical assumption of an overestimated financial and social burden (Ingleby & Watters, 2002). However, internationally, less than 1% of refugees resettle outside their home countries (Hyndman, 2000, p. 178). While the current Syrian refugee crisis would certainly affect the validity of this claim, displacement and resettlement for the Middle East have been a significant part of public discourse since the emergence of refugees as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

In accordance with the public perception of associating refugees with a certain vulnerability or source of grievance, scholarly research has until recently approached the study of refugees with an assumed victimization. Furthermore, much of the research has focused on adults. Within the limited research addressing refugee children, a majority of the studies available are psychologically oriented. However, a recent perspective-shift in scholarly attention towards sociological and anthropological studies has transpired as an outcome of the new paradigm of childhood studies and the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the late 1980s and 1990s (Hart, 2004). Moreover, the available scholarly work is largely devoted to young children at the apparent neglect of research dedicated to older children and adolescents (Chatty, 2005, p. 388).

Within the range of available studies on refugee children, Palestinian children are largely neglected due to their uniqueness among refugee experiences. In order to question the apparent scarcity in research dedicated to Palestinian refugee children, the political and historical dynamics producing the singularity of the Palestinian refugee condition will be discussed, while the progression of the scholarly approach will be analyzed in an attempt to highlight the need for more sociological and anthropological research focused on the experiences that Palestinian refugee children live.

As the only refugee population in the world subject to a generational cycle of displacement, the distinctiveness in analyzing the lives of Palestinian children inherently poses a problem for researchers in that “you cannot draw conclusions from it that would have value in other refugee situations” (Chatty, 2005, p. 388). According to social anthropologist, Dawn Chatty, this belief causes an inability to see the significance in researching Palestinian refugee children. In order to sufficiently analyze the lack of scholarly attention dedicated to this topic, the historical aspects contributing to the Palestinian refugee condition is fundamental to an analysis of the literature.

In debating issues pertaining to the Middle East conflict, some will argue that the root of the conflict dates back to the oppression of Jews in ancient biblical times. The irrationality of this aside, the primary basis for the contemporary predicament of Palestinian refugees stems from the UN's attempt to establish separate Arab and Jewish states through the implementation of the Partition Plan for Palestine in 1947. With the rise of Nazi Germany, asylum-seeking Jews fled to what was then British Palestine. Prior to WWII, the Jewish population in Palestine accounted for 11% of the region's population (UN, 1947). When the UN attempted to enact the Partition Plan for Palestine with utter disregard for historical or demographical specificities, the Arab majority rejected the plan. This attempt, coupled with the end of the British Mandate over Palestine, and the Israeli Declaration of Independence by David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the World Zionist Organization, provided the framework for the beginning of the first intense conflict between Arabs and Jews, eventually giving rise to the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Arguably the most lasting result of the conflict was the emergence of a Palestinian refugee population.

At the end of the conflict, the UN reported a total of 650,000 displaced Palestinians (Gazit, 2001, p. 238). Due to travel and land ownership restrictions imposed by the Jewish state, displaced Palestinians were prohibited from returning to their homes after the conflict. Sixty-eight years after the war, the Palestinian refugee population that is legally registered with the UN alone has increased sevenfold, amounting to a current population of over five million living in exile outside Palestinian and Israeli territories (United Nations Relief and Works Agency, 2015). In addition to this, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 2016) claims a population of around ten million Palestinians living as refugees within Israeli occupied territory and Palestinian owned land. The United Nation's commissioner report claims that roughly half of this population is under the age of 18 (UNRWA, 2015).

In an attempt to manage the population displaced by the First Arab-Israel War, the UN established The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in 1949. Palestinians are the only refugee population with a specific UN agency created to address their needs, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) attending to all other refugee populations around the world. Although UNRWA was established to address the immediate needs of the refugee population, over six decades later the agency is still the leading provider of social services for Palestinian refugee children. The unintended longevity of UNRWA necessitates an analysis of the various factors perpetuating the generational refugee cycle of Palestinians. Scholars have largely attributed the reproduction of Palestinians' refugee status to social marginalization by neighboring Arab states, the UNRWA education system, and Israel's defiance of UN Resolution 194.

Adopted after the initial conflict in 1948 that caused the emergence of a refugee population, the United Nations General Assembly determined that “refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible” (UN, 1948). The UN has “reaffirmed the inalienable right of the Palestinians to return to their homes and property from which they have been displaced” virtually every year since 1948 (UN, 2008). However, due to Israel land ownership legislation restricting the return of Palestinians and travel restrictions enacted to guarantee their permanent exile, the experiences Palestinians live are dictated by and established within the confines of a generational refugee cycle. Because the UNRWA allows refugee status registration for all descendants of the population exiled in 1948, the current third- and fourth-generation refugee children are implicated within the UN humanitarian aid system from birth (UNRWA, 2015).

The UN’s role in shaping the lives of Palestinian refugee children is undeniable. Accordingly, the trajectory of scholarly research devoted to this topic is largely shaped by the UN’s efforts. Specifically, a significant amount of research on Palestinian refugee children has been conducted as a direct result of the publication of the *Machel Report* (1996), a landmark UN-commissioned study analyzing the effects of war on children. Furthermore, Machel’s efforts marked a shift in the focus of scholarship on refugee children. Prior to the Machel Report, much of the research produced was through a psychological approach (Abu-Hein, El-Sarraj, Qouta, & Thabet 1993; Baker, 1990, 1991; Punamäki, 1989, 1990). In addition, the collective effort of psychologists of this era primarily focus on post-conflict trauma (Elbedour, Bastien, & Center, 1997; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996; Punamäki, 1996; Punamäki, Qouta, & Sarraj, 1997; Qouta, Punamaki, & Sarraj, 1995; Thabet & Vostanis, 2000). With the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the end of the First Intifada within the same time period, the aforementioned studies were conducted with the primary aim of revealing the impact of physical violence on children.

In the same vein, scholarship produced after the Second Intifada is largely based on examining the effects of exposure to violence on children’s psychological wellbeing (Elbedour, Onwuegbuzie, Ghannam, Whitcome, & Hein, 2007; Qouta, Punamaki, Montgomery, & El-Sarraj, 2007; Srour & Srour, 2006; Thabet, Tischler, & Vostanis, 2004). As opposed to the First Intifada, the Al-Aqsa Intifada, or Second Uprising, “is markedly distinguished for its severe, prolonged distress and extraordinary increase in the number of injuries and deaths of children and adolescents” (Elbedour et al., 2007, p. 720). Twenty-five percent of casualties of the second Intifada were children (Srour & Srour, 2006, p. 289). In a comprehensive study analyzing the prevalence of post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety among 229 participants aged 15-19, the researchers concluded that 68.9% meet the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis, while 94.9% were classified as having severe anxiety levels (Elbedour et al., 2007, p. 719). The results of this particular study illustrate the severity of violence in the Second Intifada in comparison to the first, as a previous study of the psychological trauma of children from the previous uprising determined a significantly lesser degree of trauma, with 12-18% of Palestinian youth being diagnosed with PTSD (Elbedour et al., 2007). A similar study on the First Intifada concluded the same rates of psychological trauma among youth (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996).

Furthermore, the research produced after specific violent conflicts and political peace attempts are largely conducted within refugee camps, while a lack of research on children living in occupied Palestinian territories is apparent. The main scholars' seemingly exclusive focus on children living outside refugee camps originates from institutions in the West (Boyden & Hart, 2007; Chatty & Hundt, 2005; Elbedour et al., 2007). While studies from scholars in the Arab world are many, with the American University of Beirut, American University of Cairo, and Research Center for the Study of the Contemporary Middle East serving as the main contributors, scholars from these institutions mainly focus on children living outside occupied Palestinian territory. This trend potentially stems from travel restrictions imposed by the Israeli government on citizens of Arab countries. Nevertheless, the focus on children in refugee camps has allowed for more comprehensive research findings.

In accordance with this, a set of studies producing more complex assertions investigated coping strategies and factors prolonging psychological trauma, rather than merely affirming the prevalence of trauma among youth (Khamis, 2012; Loughry et al., 2006; Ricks, 2006; Thabet & Vostanis, 2000). An American University of Beirut study on the influence of various factors (including religion and personal beliefs) on psychological wellbeing argues that for refugee children living in a camp in Gaza, the main predictor of psychological trauma among adolescents is socioeconomic pressure (Khamis, 2012). Considering the pervasiveness of poverty among refugees in camps, with "more than 40% of children below 16 years of age work[ing] under subhuman conditions" (Khashan, 2003, p. 1056), this finding necessitates further research. Furthermore, in focusing on the localized experiences children go through in refugee camps, researchers present significantly more detailed conclusions. As examples, the notion of hopelessness as a mental health outcome (Affi et al., 2013), housing conditions (Abu Helwa & Birch 1993), and artistic expression as a coping mechanism (Elbedour et al., 1997; Salman, Bastien, & Center, 1997; Storsve, Westbye, & Ruud, 2010) all serve as the emphasis of research for children living outside occupied Palestinian territory.

In analyzing these various psychological approaches, social anthropologist Chatty and sociologist Hundt reveal the assumptions underlying the previous trend. The scholars' 2005 landmark publication, *Children of Palestine: Experiencing Forced Migration in the Middle East*, is the first to integrate research from all Palestinian host countries with a theoretical departure from psychology. In the introduction to their work, Chatty and Hundt articulate the partiality inherent to a psychological approach. According to the authors, "Nearly all psychiatric and psychological research amongst forced migrants employs concepts that are based on Western ideas of pathology" (Chatty & Hundt, 2005, p. 5). Scholarly attempts to study refugee children through a psychological lens are largely informed by Erikson's developmental theory (Lustig et al., 2003, p. 25). In a literature review of psychological studies focusing on refugee children between 1990-2003, the era defined by a psychological perspective in research on Palestinian refugee children, authors expressed the inefficiency in researching refugee children through a psychological framework, assuming development, normality, and psychopathology to be culturally embedded (Epstein & DiNicaola, 1997; Lloyd & Penn, 2010; Kinzie, 2016). A critique of development theories is their cultural relativism and reliance upon Western, middle-class constructions of childhood and propriety, with questionable cross-cultural generalizability. Assessments of war-affected youths typically measure loss and adversity (Montgomery 2008; Summerfield, 2002). This pathology-inducing perspective (Summerfield, 2000, 2002; Watters, 2001) may increase access to services or benefits but can downplay child refugees' resilience and strengths (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Lustig et al., 2003; Papadopoulos, 2001; Watters, 2001).

In response to the recognition of the victimization discourse that previously provided the theoretical framework for research, two things emerged in the literature: children's resilience and, to a larger degree, agency. In revealing the shortcomings of undertaking a psychologically oriented approach, scholars contend that focusing on victimization may actually undermine refugee children's capacity to cultivate resilience (Watters, 2008). Due to the correlation between agency and resilience, continuously situating children as victims limits their ability to enact resilience and obstructs the potential for scholarly research that focuses on refugee children's role in shaping their lives (Chatty & Hundt, 2005, p. 7; Watters, 2008, p. 132). In addition, while Palestinian refugee children's agency rarely serves as the focus of scholarly research (Makhoul, Alameddine, & Afifi, 2012), more recent anthropological and sociological studies have included agency as an aspect of research (Boyden & Hart, 2007; Chatty & Hundt, 2005; Hart, 2002; Watters, 2008). Contributing to the increase in scholarly recognition of children's agency, in a study analyzing the notion of uncertainty among Palestinian refugee adolescents, Afifi et al. (2013, p. 502) argue for "further investigation into community and communication-related factors that account for differential degrees of resilience among at-risk youth."

Considering the imposed limitations of refugee camps and UNRWA assistance, Palestinian refugee children's agency is most often located in the way they manage to shape the structural restrictions of everyday life. Nongovernmental organization initiatives and UNRWA practices are most often the aspects of their lives they resist or prove as agentic actors (Chatty & Hundt, 2005; Hart & Forte, 2013; Rosenfeld, 2002; Stel 2015). As such, a child's position within the community is considered a main determinant of their capacity for resilience and agency (Rutter, 1985; Werner, 1995).

Understandably, children's roles in incorporating agency within community-based initiatives as contributors to civic engagement projects or as agents in the formation of sub-groups in refugee camps are the predominant frameworks found within the literature (Hart, 2007, 2008; Makhoul et al., 2012, O'Leary, Hutchinson, & Squire, 2015). Children's agency also seems to be consistently implicated within larger sociopolitical associations. According to Chatty and Hundt (2005, p. 88), "As agents, children have the ability and the right to formulate their political discourses and practices. When refugees are attacked, the whole community is targeted and children and young people are not spared military, political, economic or other forms of repression. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that children respond to those who kill, displace, injure or deny them their rights."

This increase in recognizing children's agency bears significance considering the previous inclination to understand children as "narrowly restricted to their function as passive beneficiaries of UNRWA's assistance" (Hart, 2004, p. 171) and the impression that "for the most part, researchers in the field of refugee studies have tended to share with humanitarian agencies and political leaders a lack of interest in the views expressed by refugee children" (p. 174). Also, this implied passivity in previous years has made way for the inclusion of children's voices through the employment of children's narratives in research (Chatty & Hundt, 2005, p. 97; Fincham 2014; Veronese, Castiglino, Tombolani, & Said, 2012).

Specifically, Chatty and Hundt (p. 97) reveal the significance of children's capacities to re-conceptualize previous discourses of victimhood into emboldening notions of resilience. In a study included in Chatty and Hundt's work, anthropologist Farah emphasizes the impact of children's roles in influencing their environments (p. 118). Farah challenges the Western media depiction of Palestinian refugee children as religiously and culturally indoctrinated passive recipients of Islamic ideologies. The scholar presents her findings within the children's family and community contexts.

Similarly, social anthropologist Hart (2002; 2008) employs notions of agency to illustrate the various ways children negotiate the limitations of camp life. Hart (2008, p. 64) examines the concepts of masculinity enacted in the streets, domestic spaces, and schools. With fieldwork conducted in a Jordanian refugee camp accommodating

approximately 30,000 refugees, Hart employed localized notions of masculinity to illuminate the prevailing nationalist sentiment among Palestinian adolescents (p. 79). Paralleling the way the production of scholarship is largely affected by violent conflicts and attempted peace talks, the anthropologist concludes that this specific impassioned expression of masculinity among youth was fundamentally due to the Israel-Jordan peace treaty.

Moreover, Hart (2008) reveals a certain sense of fulfillment among the research participants as refugees in the camp (p. 72). Hart interprets the youth's usage of the Arabic word *Mukhayyamji*, or as (very) loosely translated by the scholar as "genuinely of the camp," as "a source of pride" (p. 72). This contention is in direct contrast to the plethora of research emphasizing children's disapproval and, to a larger extent, condemnation of camp life (Al-Hroub, 2014; Charles & Denman, 2013; O'Leary et al., 2015). Another focus of Hart's research is the difficulties obtaining an adequate education through the UNRWA's education system.

As the agency's main program, UNRWA spends approximately 55% of its budget on education (Chatty & Hundt, 2005, p. 38). UNRWA has built at least one permanent elementary school in virtually every refugee camp through all five countries it operates in (Rosenfeld, 2002, p. 528). UNRWA schools can be attended by all Palestinian children, even those living outside the camps. The agency's initial objective of enrolling the majority of children in elementary school in all camps was achieved by the mid-1970s, while the target of having at least 80% of all refugees complete nine years of education was achieved by the mid-1980s.

Although "the universalization of basic schooling remains the agency's greatest achievement," UNRWA funding is considerably unpredictable considering the spontaneous necessity of reallocating funding to provide post-conflict relief (Rosenfeld, 2002, p. 529). Moreover, due to limited funding, children attend school in dilapidated, overcrowded buildings (Marshy, 1999). Several studies report an average of 50-60 students per classroom (Chatty & Hundt, 2005; Marshy, 1999; Rosenfeld, 2002). A school day is structured around two shifts due to overcrowding, with classes held in the morning and afternoon (Marshy, 1999). Nevertheless, sociologist Rosenfeld (2002, p. 531) identifies a "relative advantage of camp refugees, particularly of women, over their non-refugee peers, especially villagers, with respect to opportunities to acquire education."

Accordingly, gender consistently plays a role in researching the educational needs and outcomes of Palestinian refugee children (Hammad & Albakri, 2007). Considering the extreme levels of poverty characterizing the experiences Palestinian refugees live, poverty is the most significant determinant in increasing children's likelihood of dropping out of UNRWA schools (Al-Hroub, 2014, p. 63). In a 2008

UNRWA-funded study, the Palestinian dropout rate among children aged 6-18 amounted to 18.3%, of which 21.7% were male and 14.8% were female (p. 53). A similar study conducted in 2007 concluded a dropout rate of 39%, ten times that of Lebanese children (Al-Hroub, 2014, p. 53).

Due to certain gender norms prevalent in the Middle East, girls mostly left school to help their mothers cope with household chores and care for family members (Chatty & Hundt, 2005, p. 53; Marshy, 1999, p. 17). In addition to that, early marriage is increasing among Palestinian girls due to the financial burden girls place on families (Marshy, 1999, p. 17). Because girls are generally not perceived as economically valuable to families, girls' education is not considered beneficial to the family. A study included in Chatty and Hundt's (2005, p. 77) landmark publication echoes the same sentiment towards girls' schooling. Accordingly, the education of boys is also threatened by poverty and the difficult conditions arising out of financial instability. The need for additional income is most often cited as the reason for leaving schools (Al-Hroub, 2014, p. 64; Chatty & Hundt, 2005, p. 79). Although both parents and sons indicated labor as the main determinant for leaving school, a 1999 UNICEF study concluded that half of boys who dropped out of school aged 7-17 did not work (Chatty & Hundt, 2005, p. 79). The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics concluded the same results in a 1998 study. While studies do not analyze the working conditions, or lack thereof, for the children who did not indicate that they were working in these studies, Chatty and Hundt (p. 79) hypothesized that the boys potentially work under illegal or other non-identifiable working conditions.

Another reason for dropping out of school is an apparent lack of motivation due to the children's perceived lack of job prospects. A 2013 study conducted with Palestinian refugee dropouts in Lebanon highlights Lebanese legislation prohibiting Palestinians from working in most professional fields as a factor in students' apathy towards education (Al-Hroub, 2014, p. 59). Although the ban was lifted in 2011, a lack of future employment prospects is frequently cited as a determinant in dropping out of school (Chatty & Hundt, 2005, p. 40; Hart, 2008, p. 2). A joint UNICEF and Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics study of 2,000 Palestinian children aged 13-18 concluded a prevailing sentiment among youth as one marked by "no hope for the future" (Chatty & Hundt, 2005, p. 40).

The hopelessness expressed by youth is most often explored by scholars within the confines of humanitarian aid initiatives (e.g., Afifi et al., 2013; O'Leary et al., 2015) and to a larger extent, as an impediment to educational attainment and social progress (Chatty & Hundt, 2005; Hart, 2002, 2008; Rosenfeld, 2002). Furthermore, these scholars repeatedly attest to the influence of state policies on children's views of the future. In Lebanon, all refugees are prohibited from gaining citizenship, even those

with a Lebanese mother and Palestinian father (Ibrahim, 2008, p. 84). Similarly, all countries in the Middle East, with the sole exception of Jordan, relegate Palestinian refugees to the legal status of foreigners.

As non-nationals, they are denied legal protection and access to social services, as well as prohibited from owning property. An amendment to citizenship rights in the Arab world is made increasingly unlikely due to a series of outcomes to Jordan's labor market and social sphere after the Jordanian monarchy allowed its government to grant citizenship rights to Palestinians. After its annexation of the West Bank in 1950, Jordan permitted all Palestinians to apply for citizenship. Today, the majority of the Jordanian populations are former Palestinian refugees (Chatty & Hundt, 2005, p. 89). The increasing number of Palestinians seeking asylum in Jordan has incited resentment among locals, and to this day statistics disclosing the exact number of former refugees with Jordanian citizenships is unavailable due to governmental fears "that such a revelation might incite ethnic conflict" (Chatty & Hundt, 2005, p. 23). The marginalization of Palestinians in host countries and their collective insistent assertion of the "right to return" discourse affect not only the potential for progress, but fundamentally affect "how children are socialized" (O'Leary et al., 2015, p. 718).

Constrained by a pervasive tenor of social alienation and institutional discrimination, Palestinian children's lives are marked by a sense of desperation or "hopelessness" as articulated by participants in an aforementioned study (Afifi et al., 2013). According to the literature analyzed, dependence on UNRWA social services and post-conflict psychological well-being essentially dictate the experiences that Palestinian refugee children live. Although the previous scholarly tendency to approach the study of refugee children with an assumed victimhood has shifted in recent years, the majority of research available on this topic is through a psychological perspective. While the increased focus on the interaction between structural forces and children's lives sheds new light on this topic, the pioneering work of Chatty, Hundt, and Hart serve as the main contributions in an attempt to understand the lives of Palestinian refugee children. Recognizing this dearth in scholarship highlights the need for future research.

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