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The Long-Term Impact of Political Activism on Mental Wellbeing in the Context of Adult Immigrants Who Experienced Childhood Political Trauma

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Abstract

There is limited literature on the long-term impact of political activism on mental wellbeing in the context of childhood political trauma and subsequent forced migration. Such information is important for developing mental health services suitable to this population. This qualitative study contributes to this gap by exploring the experience of an understudied population: adult Jewish Argentinian immigrants to Israel, who as children experienced the military dictatorship in Argentina (1976–1983). Thematic textual analysis of narrative interviews revealed that in the case of participants who escaped with their parents as political exiles to Israel, political activism during childhood and adulthood can be both a risk and protective factor and affect a range of positive and negative long-term mental health outcomes including resilience and symptoms that appear as Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Keywords Childhood trauma · Resilience · Complex PTSD · Refugees · Political activism

Background

The 6th military dictatorship in Argentina (1976–1983), was one of the darkest periods in the history of Argentina. While left-wing underground organizations and their alleged supporters were the target of human rights abuse by the military regime [1, 2], there is evidence that the regime's systematic persecution disproportionately affected Jews, who received "a special treatment" [3]. While the practice of the military regime during the dictatorship resulted in an estimated number of at least 30,000 victims [4–6], Jews made up approximately 10% of the total number of victims, despite only representing only 0.8–1.2% of the general population [7]. While some explain this disproportionate number of Jewish victims by citing anti-Semitism, others argue it was due to the relatively high involvement of the Jews in resistance movements [3]. An estimated 18,600 Argentinian Jews fled to Israel between 1972–1986 with the peak years being 1972–1973 and 1977 [8]. Little is known about those Argentinian Jews who fled to Israel or other countries, and specifically about the possible connections between the long-term impact of their political activism on the present-day mental health of these individuals. The limited existing literature about Argentinian political exiles to Israel explains the failure of their integration to Israel as being related to "anti-Zionist" immigrants' dual attachments to the entities of Israel and Argentina on one hand [9] and by their rejection by Israeli society on the other [10].

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used to guide the study presented here draws upon Beiser and Simich's [11] interactive paradigm, which illustrates the complexity of risk and protective factors for immigrant mental health across pre- and post-migration phases. It also includes the definition of trauma in the political context as per Kirmayer [12], as well as related key concepts such as: forced migration [13], Complex PTSD [14]; resilience [15], and Post-Traumatic Growth [16].

As illustrated in Fig. 1, the study's conceptual framework represents a presumed reciprocal movement between

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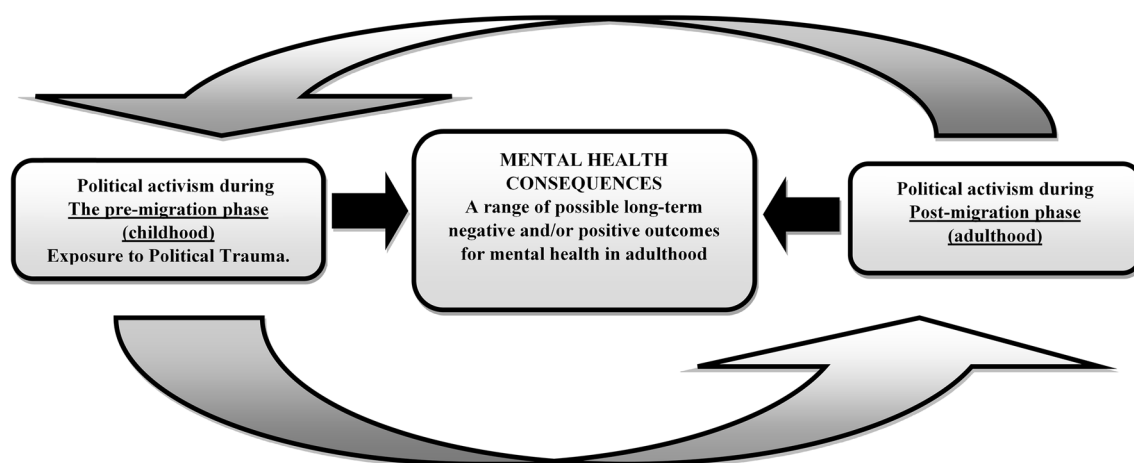
Fig. 1 The impact of political activism in the context of childhood political trauma and adult migration. Adapted from Simich and Beiser's [11] paradigm

political activism as a risk and/or protective factor during participants' childhood (pre-migration phase) and participants' adulthood (post-migration phase). This on-going interaction between the past and the present has an impact on participants' mental health (an assumed range of possible long-term negative and/or positive outcomes).

Methods

Participants

Participant population included 15 adult Argentinian Jews, male and female between the ages of 48–55, who migrated from Argentina to Israel as children, adolescents or during their early 20s after experiencing the military dictatorship in Argentina as children. Their residency in Israel ranges between three and four decades and they are typically middle-class. Individuals who were experiencing acute mental health problems as determined using a distress screening script were excluded.

Data Collection

The principal method of data collection was snowball sampling and the secondary was advertising on social media. After the first author received a formal approval from the Research Ethics Board at McGill University (REB) to conduct this research in the context of her doctoral dissertation, she met with each of the 15 participants in Israel. For the

purpose of data collection, the narrative method [17] was used, specifically, a two-phased narrative interview [18]. Observations before during and after the interview served as a secondary method.

Data Analysis

The Holistic approach [19] was used for data analysis, as it includes both form and content analysis of the narrative, and it is the closest to an intuitive reading of clinical sessions.

Results

The first author's docotoral study on which this article is based, included both participants whose parents were involved in the Argentinian resistance and who were forced to escape to Israel as political exiles due to a concrete threat to their lives, and nine participants whose parents were not politically involved in the resistance. Their contrasting pull and push motivations [20] were related to either ideological reasons (Zionism) or to economic considerations (in the wake of the economic crisis in Argentina 1998–2002); economically and ideologically-motivated migrants had an opportunity to plan well in advance of their immigration to Israel. For the purpose of this article, the authors will focus solely on the experience of political activism by participants whose parents were involved in the resistance during the dictatorship, and specifically through a close examination of four cases: Sofia, Daniela, Francisco and Victor (pseudonyms). We will examine three themes that emerged in relation to political activism: the experience of political involvement as children; a sense of "carrying the torch" of political activism into adulthood in a new context;

and applying the coping strategies learned as children in the context of political activism to their lives as adult immigrants in a new country.

Political Involvement During Childhood

Findings reveal participants' political activities as children took two main forms: active political participation, which includes the initiation and carrying out of activities, and a passive collaboration with their parents' political underground activities. Participants' descriptions illustrate their motivation to take part in these activities, their nature and their impact on participants' mental wellbeing.

"Birthday Parties" and Armed Training

Findings show that the commitment to political activism was transferred to participants by their parents at a very young age; therefore, during that time these activities were perceived by the participants as adventures rather than dangerous or traumatic events. As put by Sofia: "[back then] I was not afraid…you think that everything will be fine even though it may not necessarily be true or realistic" (p. 18, Sofia). Sonia's earliest memory was at age four when her father allowed her to enter the hidden bunker in their family backyard for the first time. This experience of entering a secretive, underground place was the introduction to her years-long political involvement. Sofia then described with much pride and amusement how she was almost caught when distributing forbidden communist flyers at her elementary school, and how later on she and her friends were arrested while painting graffiti. Although she mentioned that her arrest included food and sleep deprivation, she described it as a nostalgic, heroic and romantic experience, during which she had the opportunity to spend time with a boy she had feelings for. Victor had a similar experience: "I was proud to take part in the resistance… even when distributing flyers at school. The fact that I was politically active gave me a lot of strength during the dictatorship" (p. 7, Victor).

Another form of political involvement was participants' involvement in their parents' political activities. Victor, at the age of five, participated alongside his father in a violent demonstration against the dictatorship, an event that he described as exciting, and Francisco, in a similar tone, remembered how he received armed training at the age of eight: "the guerilla men took me to the forest and taught me how to use a gun. They held my hand and we shot in the woods. I remember that I was very impressed!" One of his other memorable activities was when he joined his parents in the raiding of a municipal building. Francisco also described the many "birthday parties" his parents organized for him at their house, which were actually covers for guerilla meetings: "each time a lot of 'aunts and uncles' came to our

'birthday parties,' brought me a lot of presents, and after that, they went to hide in the woods" (p. 25, Francisco). During these "birthday parties" Francisco described how, given his young age, he was not able to fully understand what had been said, but he did understand the gist.

Being aware of potentially dangerous information demanded that participants keep silent. Although findings show that, during the dictatorship, keeping one's silence was a behavioral strategy shared by *all* participants, in the case of participants whose parents were in the resistance, concealing information was a matter of life and death. Sofia describes several occasions where she innocently revealed her home address on the day that the military closed their school and sent all the students back home, and the immense guilt and anxiety that followed: "I was terrified. I should have told my mother: 'Mom, we need to be careful now because I opened my mouth'. Right? But I didn't tell her. I didn't tell her" (p. 14, Sofia).

The need to conceal any personal information also included the need to use "cover stories" and false identities. As explained by Daniela: "all the time you need to play a show that you are someone else, to keep the family cover story… It's a feeling that you can't really be yourself… so you can't really participate" (p. 17, Daniela). Daniela said because of the risky circumstances of her family's escape to Israel, she was unable to say goodbye to her friends: "I went back to school for just one day before leaving, and I had to fake it throughout the day when I really know that I will never see my friends again. It was horrible" (p. 20, Daniela). Sofia described it as "living in two worlds"; at the age of six, when she got her report card carrying her false name, "it clicked" to her that "there is a big danger out there" (pp. 14–15, Sofia).

"Paralyzing Fear", Mourning and Anger

Despite their many positive memories about involvement in political activism, findings show that participants' political involvement during their childhood also had profound negative impacts on their mental wellbeing, mainly due to the on-going possible capture of their parents and other activists that they personally knew. According to Daniela's descriptions, the level of anxiety increased over time due to her increasing comprehension of the meaning of the situation, and due to the frequency of anxiety-inducing events:

> When I was old enough to realize that our lives were in danger, it was when the fear reached a point that it paralyzes you, that you feel it in your body.[…] When I thought the police were coming to our house, I was so scared that I felt paralyzed, I was sure that this is it. This is the end (pp.14–15, Daniela).

In their descriptions, participants often referred to anxiety and loss in relation to activists who were not part of their biological families. As described by Sofia:

> You hear about someone who was killed, and then another one, and then about someone who was found hung on a tree in the town square" (p. 4, Sofia) [...]It is very difficult because these people were the closest people in my life, my siblings and I used to call them 'uncles' ... We were all like a big family (pp. 11–12, Sofia).

In the case of Daniela, the feelings of loss and grieving turned over the years into anger: "I have had so much anger that my uncles disappeared! I was connected to them a lot, and the pain was terrible" (p. 17, Daniela).

Carrying the Torch of Political Resistance as Adult Immigrants

Findings show that what started as political involvement during childhood continued during participants' adolescence with the expectation of becoming members of the Communist Party. In the cases of Daniela, Victor and Francisco, by the time they were eligible to become members, they had already escaped with their parents to Israel. "I felt angry about it" said Daniela "because it was supposed to be my turn! It was supposed to be the next stage in the story!" (p. 17, Daniela).

As adults, participants continued their parents' political activism and have found ways to implement it as immigrants to Israel, whether by fighting for workers' rights (Victor, Sofia), or by joining some of the extreme left parties in Israel (Francisco, Daniela). As put by Victor:

> In Israel, I continued with the struggle when I became very upset about our work conditions in a factory and tried to create a workers' union. I then got fired because of it. Now I want to join one of the political left-wing parties […] After experiencing the dictatorship in Argentina, I can help to make a social change in Israel (p. 4, Victor).

Francisco, who as an adolescent joined a left-wing youth movement in Israel and then the Israeli communist party, explains the reason for his commitment as an adult to political activism:

> All these years I was trying, through my political involvement, to fix what had been broken over there [in Argentina] …to fix the fact that we left, and to continue it over here [in Israel] (#12, 16.c line 667–672, p. 18, Francisco).

In addition to the above, participants explained that their engagement with political activities as adult immigrants provided them with a community and a sense of belonging. As put by Francisco:

> My political involvement in the extreme left-wing anti-Zionist parties in Israel has helped my adaptation process... it was only there that I could have found my place... it gave me a place to belong to, a space to express myself, and a community (pp. 18–22, Francisco)

Participants explained that one of the long-term benefits of activism during their childhood was the establishment of close relationships with their childhood friends. The other significant benefit was the inner strength their childhood experiences gave them, and an ability to cope with the challenges they had to face as immigrants to Israel, a country in prolonged political conflict. Sofia described how this strength helped her later on as an immigrant to Israel: "I came to Israel when I already knew that I can deal with difficult things and, as you know, it is not so easy living in Israel" (p. 26, Sofia).

Using The Same Defence Strategies That Were Used During The Dictatorship

Finally, findings also show that some of these participants still use the same defence strategies they used as children during the dictatorship, including lack of trust toward other Argentinian immigrants in Israel, their own family members, and governmental institutions in Israel.

Participants with a political activist background explained their suspicion towards Zionist Argentinian immigrants. The ways of coping with this ideological gap within the community was either by avoiding social interaction with them or by using a "cover story" strategy. As put by Daniela: "I would lie that I was in a Zionist youth movement like they were" (p. 22, Daniela).

Participants' extensive mistrust toward Argentinian immigrants also occurred with other political exiles. Francisco described how his parents forbade him to speak with some "collaborators" at the immigration centre in Israel and that at one point he even suspected his father of being "a collaborator".

Participants' extensive mistrust was also directed toward Israeli government. For example, Daniela described how, during her left-wing activities in Israel as adult, she was afraid to be included in photos, fearing that these images would be used against her in the future by "the government, whoever will pursue me later" (p. 10, Daniela).

Another identified behavioral defensive strategy was participants' readiness to escape at any time. Aside from general political violence in the region of the Middle East, their wish to flee was specifically related to the victory of the Israeli right-wing party (*the Likud*) in recent elections in

Israel. As put by Daniela: "I keep asking myself if we should escape from Israel, because maybe it is not safe for the kids" (p. 10, Daniela).

In addition to the above, participants expressed guilt, anger and a belief that they are permanently damaged. For example, Sofia still feels guilty that, as a child, she may have put her family members at risk after she innocently disclosed information, while Daniela perceived herself as a traitor, who "betrayed" her friends and family by abandoning them and escaping to Israel.

During the interviews, participants also expressed anger in relation to the personal and the collective suffering during and after the dictatorship, and their awareness of the profound long-term negative impact that their childhood experience has had on them as adults. "Maybe I am going to collapse one day" said Sofia in relation to the loss of the people she loved, (p. 10, Sofia), while Daniela is aware of her persistent anxiety as an adult: "[this story] is always there" (p. 26, Daniela).

Discussion

Aligned with Simich and Beiser's [11] paradigm and with the conceptual framework of this study, findings illustrate the complex interplay of political activism both as a risk factor and as a protective factor.

In correlation with Simich and Beiser's [11] argument about the "flip" side of a factor that could be both risk and protective, findings show that despite participants' direct and extensive exposure to political violence, paradoxically, their political activism as children was also a protective factor that provided them with a sense of empowerment, meaning, community, solidarity and, to some extent, control. Furthermore, findings show that their childhood experience even mediated the long-term potential risk of their exposure to political violence by the manifestations of resilience and Post-Traumatic Growth. Specifically, findings illustrated how participants' political activism during their childhood provided them with "survival skills" and emotional stamina to face difficulties as immigrants, particularly in the context of the complex political instability in Israel.

These findings provide evidence which confirms existing empirical, longitudinal and retrospective studies that argue that engagement in political activity at a young age has a positive long-term outcome for one's mental health in adulthood, and as such is a protective factor in general [21] and within the context of the lives of adult refugees in particular [22].

The "flip" side and the elasticity of political activism was also identified in participants' experiences as adult immigrants. Findings show that being engaged with political activities as adults, provided participants with a sense of community, belonging and meaning. This is not something that should be taken lightly, especially given that due to participants' anti-Zionist family background, they have experienced great difficulties in socially integrating within Israeli society.

In some cases, their political activities were perceived as corrective experiences [23], as a way to "fix" the past by "completing" their parents' unfinished or failed political missions in Argentina. As such, it could be seen as a healing experience. At the same time, participants' persistent attempts to "fix" their parents' failure could also be interpreted as a pathological fixation [24] relating to their traumatic childhood experiences, and which in some cases may cause them significant damage. Therefore, in this aspect, participants' engagement as adults with political activism could be seen as a risk factor.

Furthermore, the analysis of participants' narratives, as well as the observations of their behavioral and emotional reactions before, during and after the interviews revealed that the negative impact on their mental wellbeing as children has had a long-term impact on their mental wellbeing as adults. As adults, participants use same protective strategies they used as children, even though the need to use them in the present day is unlikely. This shows that participants may still feel threatened and are acting as if childhood traumatic events are recurring in the present. This behavior is consistent with one of the symptoms of Complex PTSD [25–27], as are the additional behavioral and emotional reactions. The analysis of interviews identified feelings of anger, shame, guilt, self-blame, somatization, distrust and feelings of being permanently damaged and hypervigilance related to their childhood exposure to political violence as continuing to be present in participants' adult lives as immigrants. It is important to note, though, that not all the participants exhibited all C-PTSD or PTSD symptoms, (therefore not qualified for a diagnosis), and that these reactions were also manifested by participants who were not politically active.

Although the purpose of this research was not to obtain clinical diagnoses for the participants, the findings confirm the arguments put forth by other studies done on the coexistence of both positive and negative mental health consequences, such as in the case of child Holocaust survivors [28].

New Contribution to the Literature

Despite the growing awareness of the topic of mental health issues in the context of forced migration, there are a limited number of retrospective and longitudinal studies about the experience of childhood political trauma and its subsequent impact on forced migration as a stressor, and the intersection

of these two stressors. Most studies are focused either on the experience of refugee children or adult refugees [29, 30].

In addition, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study ever done about factors contributing to long-term mental health outcomes among adult Jewish Argentinian immigrants to Israel who experienced the military dictatorship in Argentina as children, and specifically about the interplay of political activity as a factor within this context.

Understanding the interplay and elasticity of political activism across the migration trajectory in the context of childhood political trauma and subsequent adult migration can potentially help health care professionals, mental health practitioners and policy makers to further understand the complexity of the immigrant population's experience, to help create and improve existing trauma-informed services, therapies and interventions that are given to this population, while taking into consideration not only the specific vulnerability of this population, but also its strengths and resilience.

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