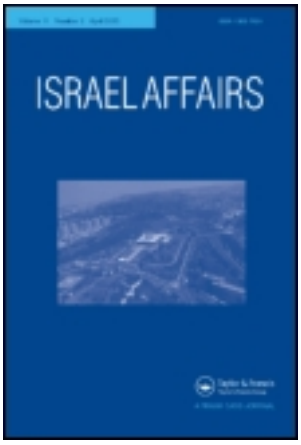

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Combat stress reactions during the 1948 war: a conspiracy of silence?

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This article is based on a series of interviews with 73 individuals who participated in the 1948 war. Though the war had many physical as well as emotional casualties, surprisingly a relatively small portion of individuals were willing to admit the occurrence of combat stress reactions. This finding is quite puzzling in the face of the drastic course of the war. Hence, it is speculated that denial and suppressive processes underlie the interviewees' declarations. Moreover, it is assumed that this denial process is part of the construction of a monolithic social identity. The origins of this process and its implications for Israeli social identity are discussed.

Keywords: combat stress reactions; social identity; 1948 Arab–Israeli War

Over recent decades, scholars have explored processes of transition in Israeli social identity. Some researchers have observed and analysed sociological and historical processes that underlie the formation of a collective identity[1] while others have emphasized psychological perspectives.[2] In general terms, the aim of these studies is to examine the origins of social identity in Israel and the modifications it has undergone. One central process that has captured the interest of some authors is the transition from a monolithic social identity to a non-integrated and diverse one. This process has been analysed in several dimensions, placing a unique emphasis on the Holocaust and its impact.[3] In the present study we wish to advance the knowledge concerning this modification process. Specifically, we explore ways in which combat stress reactions during the 1948 Arab–Israeli War were treated and later on internalized in the Israeli narrative.

The construction of Israeli social identity

The study of Israeli social identity, like any other social identity, is based upon the notion that individual personal identity should be investigated through its collective components.[4] In other words, an individual does not have a 'personal self' but rather several selves that correspond to widening circles of group membership.[5] The basic assumption underlying this theory is that there are reciprocal relationships between self and society,[6] and that social identity is

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actually embedded within a social group or category.[7] As research has developed, the self-identity concept has become even more complex and varied.[8] Some researchers have even suggested that we should replace the term identity with biography.[9] According to this perspective, the identity concept is actually a subjective process that is constantly being rewritten in light of changes in events and perceptions.

Dan Bar-On has identified three points on a continuum of Israeli social identity formation.[10] First, a monolithic identity that was common in Israel's early years. This early identity was homogeneous and intolerant to diversity. It rejected almost all aspects of the Diaspora Jew and gave rise to a new identity of a strong and courageous Israeli. The declared policy was to bring about a cultural uniformity that was supposed to catalyse desired social outcomes.[11] Soon after the 1973 Arab–Israeli War this monolithic identity began to crumble and an alternative social identity emerged. It has become clear that one can no longer construct an 'Israeli self' dissociated from its cultural origins.[12] Hence a more complex and fragmented social identity has evolved, characterized by profound internal contradictions, and it is hard to say if and when this process will ever be concluded. According to Bar-On, a third phase in Israel social identity has begun evolving over the past few years involving an ongoing dialogue between different parts of the assorted social identity. This process recognizes the existence of contradictions as a fundamental attribute of the Israeli collective, and seeks to internalize it in the social self.[13]

In the current study we wish to focus mainly on the first period of Israeli social identity by analysing findings concerning combat stress reactions during the 1948 war. Specifically, we would like to tap into social and psychological mechanisms that fulfilled a significant role in the formation of the war narrative, which in turn help construct Israeli collective identity.

The social context prior to the 1948 war

During the late nineteenth century, a new era was being written in Jewish history with the advent of the Zionist movement and the growing resettlement of the ancient homeland in Palestine. In many respects the process of creating a new, courageous Jew who could cultivate his land and defend himself began at that time, though the evolution of Israeli social identity is far from complete even today as an assortment of internal and external pressures have combined with numerous unresolved issues to challenge the formation of a coherent social identity.[14]

In the creation of the new Israeli social identity, emotional expressions of weakness, fear and helplessness were not tolerated; they were illegitimate. These attributes, which to some extent were an internalization of anti-Semitic perceptions, were adamantly rejected.[15] Thus, one finds a special combination of an intense war, on the one hand, with a continuous development of a new Israeli identity, on the other. In light of these two contradictory, yet complementary

processes, we explore how combat stress reactions – often seen as acts of weakness, fear and escapism[16] – were treated and how they were later internalized in the Israeli narrative.

The current study

The 1948 war is undoubtedly a formative event in Israel's history. The war began with a violent backlash by the Palestinian Arabs to the UN Partition Resolution of 29 November 1947, but expanded to a regional conflict with the pan-Arab attack on the State of Israel within hours of its proclamation on 14 May 1948, an attack that claimed 6000 Jewish lives – about 1% of the nascent state's total population. According to Israeli scholars Eliezer Wiztum and Amichai Levy, the war also claimed numerous mental casualties on all fronts and units despite the absence of emotional casualties in official documents.[17] This alleged contradiction captured our attention and led us to conduct a series of interviews with individuals who participated in that war.

Seventy-three war veterans were interviewed. While 23 of them refused to cooperate, and 15 were unclear with their answers, others revealed a fascinating and complex story of their personal experiences in the battles.

Initially, most of our interviewees claimed that combat stress reactions were very uncommon during the war, a puzzling finding given the total scope of the war. Nevertheless, as the investigation advanced, we began formulating an explanation for this paradox. It appeared that, like other wars in human history, combat stress reactions did actually occur in the 1948 war. However, this phenomenon was denied, suppressed and later negatively labelled. As one of our interviewees stated: 'I don't know of any case of battle shock … there were no such cases. Absolutely not … I do know cases of shirkers; cowards who simply ran away from the fighting … that's all. No battle shock'. Or as another interviewee emphatically stated: 'That's nonsense. There were no battle shocks. It is a fairytale made up by psychologists like you'.

As our interviews expanded we began finding cracks in the narrative of denial. At first, several interviewees admitted seeing rare cases of combat stress reactions, but only among soldiers from the Gahal platoons.[18] In the words of one interviewee: 'I saw no battle shocks … Perhaps I remember one case of a guy, he was in the Gahal. He joined us and I remember not seeing him for many days, and then I heard he went crazy'. It appeared to us that placing combat stress reactions solely among the Gahal group was a very comfortable, but unrealistic resolution.

Indeed, we later found a significant portion of individuals admitting seeing or even personally experiencing combat stress reactions. Explicitly, 17 individuals reported vaguely seeing cases of combat stress reaction, 18 could actually provide detailed descriptions, and four of them reported that they in fact experienced a combat stress reaction during the 1948 war. As a fighter in the battle over Jerusalem said: 'Many of us had battle shock. Even the high-ranking commanders. Many ran away from the battle field, fell asleep for days, or started acting strangely … I know many people who still suffer nightmares since that war'.

These testimonies notwithstanding, we found relatively limited official documentation of formal treatment of combat stress reactions. Moreover, Professor Lipman Halperin, neurologist and psychiatrist, who composed the Hebrew Medical oath and was the editor of the Hebrew *Medical Weekly*, declared that they were surprised by the small number of emotional malfunctions among the soldiers. He explained that the courage of the young soldiers and the storm of the war can account for this phenomenon.[19]

It appears that individuals who suffered from combat stress reaction syndrome had to cope with it by themselves, often being ashamed of their condition. Furthermore, these individuals were frequently, negatively labelled as 'cowards' or 'degenerates'.[20] It appears that the notion of suffering from combat stress reaction in those days was inconceivable. In the words of one interviewee:

> During the battle … suddenly the guy was terrified … I remember him screaming. I couldn't even grasp it. How a strong, healthy man like him … afterward I didn't see him again … The man with battle shock was so ashamed … I think that this subject … it's still a taboo.

Our interviews, together with the historical survey conducted by Wiztum and Levy,[21] led us to the conclusion that combat stress reactions were not a rare phenomenon in the 1948 war but, apparently, occurred in similar numbers as in other wars in modern history. We find it interesting to investigate the social and psychological mechanisms that underlie the denial and almost 'conspiracy of silence' regarding combat stress reactions during this war.

Discussion

Solomon and Mikulincer define combat stress reaction as a mental phenomenon during which soldiers cease to function and start acting in a bizarre manner that usually endangers themselves and/or their surroundings.[22] This phenomenon has been known since the First World War and is now seen as an inevitable part of modern warfare. Knowing this, it was initially confusing for us to discover that even after several decades, individuals who participated in the 1948 war still deny the occurrence of this phenomenon and attempt to reject it.

Keeping in mind the social atmosphere in the years following the establishment of the State of Israel, we did not expect an open and explicit discussion concerning issues of combat stress reactions during the 1948 war. Nevertheless, the level of denial, found in large portions among our interviewees, initially puzzled us. We speculate that socio-psychological processes can partly account for this degree of long-term suppression and denial.

The 1948 war is far from being the first case of evidence of a psychological denial process. This phenomenon, in which individuals verbally deny, ignore or appear unaware of their physical and mental condition, was initially explored a century ago and is often considered an indication of an active process that helps the individual to adapt to a stressful situation.[23] Nevertheless, what separates the

1948 war from other cases is the comprehensive extent of this denial and its longevity that persists to date.

Specifically, we argue that the social self of interviewees who deny the existence of combat stress reactions corresponds to the first phase of Israeli social identity formation, described by Bar-On.[24] In other words, interviewees who determinedly deny the existence of this phenomenon still subscribe to a monolithic identity where no room for diversity can be tolerated. This solid identity apparently was effective in times of war and distress. Yet it seems that these individuals found it hard to abandon this perspective even in times of tranquillity.

On the other hand, interviewees who admitted vaguely seeing incidents of combat stress reactions, and those who provided an even more direct and personal evidence of this phenomenon, represent in our view the wider shift in Israeli identity towards a more complex and heterogeneous social self.

A number of factors may underlie the exclusion of combat stress reactions from the Israeli war narrative. First, the general phenomenon of combat stress reactions, like many other mental malfunctions, has traditionally been negatively perceived and received. Although it is hardly a new phenomenon and medical evidence of its existence dates back to the 1920s, it has commonly been silenced and denied. Even today, this phenomenon is associated with feelings of shame and guilt, as repeatedly demonstrated in clinical studies.[25] Second, the 'new' courageous and heroic Israeli Jew, which was described in many contexts including in relation to combat stress reactions,[26] is intolerant of behavioural manifestations of fear, weakness and confusion, which are common characteristics of combat stress reactions. Third, in the formation of the new Israeli society, there was arguably little room for diversity as the collectivist and homogenous perception was the desired outcome of the hegemonic group. In this social atmosphere there was little tolerance for individualistic expression and needs, not to mention the fearful and anxious behaviour commonly found in combat stress reactions.

In this social atmosphere, an interesting socio-psychological process evolved. Specifically, combat stress reactions were recruited to the guarding of the monolithic social identity. They were viewed as fearful attempts to avoid the civic obligation of defending the young and vulnerable state. For this aim, the new immigrants recruited to the Gahal platoons were a convenient solution. Their image was so different from the 'neo-Israeli' courageous fighter that in fact it helped to define it. In other words, as Henri Tajfel and others have noted, in order to establish a well-defined social identity one needs an effective representation of an out-group.[27] For this goal the new immigrants, and especially those who came from Europe after the Holocaust and joined the Gahal, were perfect.

In consequence, we argue that the denial of combat stress reactions during the 1948 war and its externalization to the new immigrants is actually a part of the construction process of the monolithic social identity. This homogenous Israeli social self is constantly being challenged and transformed. Yet even today parts

of Israeli society are still holding on to this identity. We encourage other researchers to continue investigating this process. Exploration of the building blocks of the monolithic identity can assist in dissembling it. By doing so, a more integrative and coherent social identity can emerge, and a real dialogue between its parts can be conducted.

Notes on contributors

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The late Dan Bar-On was Professor of Psychology at Ben-Gurion University, Beersheba. This article is dedicated to his memory.

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