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Behavioural Characteristics of Iranian Martyrs' Pre-school Children: Preliminary Findings*

M. Kalantari, Ph.D., W. Yule, Ph.D., F. Gardner, D.Phil.,

Department of Psychology, Institute of Psychiatry, London†

Abstract

228 pre-school children whose fathers were killed during the Iran-Iraq war and who attended nurseries run by the Martyrs' Foundation in the central city of Isfahan, were compared with 124 children from intact families on McGuire and Richman's (1986) Pre-school Behaviour Checklist. Results showed that 1) the overall rate of behaviour problems was lower in Martyrs' children than controls; 2) among the bereaved children, this rate was significantly lower when the mothers had remarried; 3) sex differences were found in the rates of behaviour problems reported.

Introduction

The Iran-Iraq war started in September, 1980 and lasted eight years. During that time, many young men were killed and many children were made fatherless. Within the context of the Iranian Islamic culture, the war was regarded as a holy war and the high status of Martyr was bestowed on any soldier known to have died. The Iranian Government provided support to the families of such Martyrs, including the setting up of nursery schools for the children they left behind. There was some concern that maybe these bereaved pre-school children might be showing more conduct and emotional problems as a result of their experiences, and that formed the starting point for this study.

Garmezy¹ suggests that few events are more immediately traumatising for a child than the death of a parent. Raphael² commented that 'the powerful nature of the young child's ties to his parents and his dependence upon them for much of his nurturance and survival had led to many concerns about the effect upon him of the loss of

these bonds'. Different theories place different weights on the child's age at bereavement, the sex of the child, bereavement as a stressor, bereavement as a loss of attachment, and on the inevitable change in family circumstances brought about by bereavement.

Bowlby³ considers that during early ages the loss of the mother will be more traumatic than the loss of the father. Rutter⁴ argues that by the third or fourth year of life, the loss of the parent of the same sex may be more damaging for children.

Wolff⁵ suggested that the harmful effects of bereavement are more often due to its long-term social consequences and the emotional reactions of the surviving parent rather than to the impact of the death itself upon the child. When children lose their fathers, boys are more liable than girls to have difficulties in their own sexual and marital adjustment in later life. When fathers die, it is the widows who are more deeply affected than the children. Generally, Wolff argues that the death of the mother leads to greater disruption of the family than death of the father.

Rutter⁴ draws attention to three distinct aspects of bereavement that must be considered when examining the effects of bereavement on children's development: the reason for the death, the previous relationship between the child and the deceased, and the way the death and its aftermath are handled. In general, children who had a good previous relationship with the dead parent are more likely to show resilience in the face of this adversity^{1, 6}, while those with a poor previous relationship are more likely to be disturbed. Sudden deaths are more difficult to cope with than those where there has been some forewarning. Gar-

mezy¹ also notes that social class and religious belief are important moderating variables related to how children cope with the death of a parent.

In what they describe as 'an exploratory pilot study', Elizur and Kaffman⁷ studied 25 children aged two to ten years whose fathers were killed in the Israeli war of October, 1973. The children came from 15 families and were intensively investigated six, 18 and 42 months after the bereavement using mainly a semi-structured interview format. Whereas manifestations of grief gradually lessened over the first two years, the investigators were surprised to find that nearly half the children showed severe problems, even at the later follow-up point. The rate of problems was some three to four times higher than that found in control groups.

Elizur and Kaffman⁷ reported that among children under six years of age, significantly more boys than girls showed severe problems. Overall, the rate of presenting problems was strongly related to the quality of the mother's mourning response, a finding consistent with Wolff's view⁵. Moreover, they found that 'mothers who remarried described marked improvement in children's behaviour since the step-father's entrance into the family'.

In a related paper contrasting that sample with a group of similarly bereaved children who lived in a city, Kaffman and Elizur⁸ found higher rates of distress among the city children. These they ascribe to the city children's being more exposed to maternal grief reactions than are the kibbutz children, the comparative lack of supportive social networks in the city, and the lower levels of religious affiliation among the city widows. They conclude that bereavement reactions

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and other psychological problems in bereaved children are related to the socio-cultural surrounding influences.

However, much of our understanding of the effects of bereavement on children is based on anecdote and clinical experience. Our understanding of children's reactions to major stressors is very patchy, being based either on retrospective studies or on studies of reactions to lesser stressors such as separation, divorce and hospitalisation⁹. Hence the present study afforded an opportunity to examine the effects of paternal bereavement in children attending nursery schools set up to help the families of those killed in the Iran-Iraq war.

It was decided to translate McGuire and Richman's Pre-school Behaviour Checklist¹⁰ into Persian, after testing it with Persian speakers and undertaking a back-translation. With the close co-operation of the Martyrs' Foundation, staff from its nurseries, the Isfahan Welfare and Education Offices, and staff from state nurseries and nursery schools, the study was started in September, 1987. The present paper focuses on the behavioural characteristics of Iranian pre-school children whose fathers were killed in the war, and compares them with children from intact families. The data provide an opportunity to test some of the theories of the effects of bereavement on children within a different cultural context.

Sample

Table I shows the sex and age distribution of the sample obtained. 228 children from three Martyrs' Nurseries (mean age just under six years) were screened. All had been in the nurseries long enough for teachers to feel comfortable about judging their behaviour. The children had been bereaved three to 76 months before the data was gathered (mean = 52 months; SD = 16 months). In 42 cases, the fathers had been killed before the children were born.

The control group consisted of 68 children from intact families in state nurseries run by the Welfare Office and 56 six-year-olds attending a nursery school run by the Education Office. These facilities predominantly served families with socio-economic deprivation, but the groups were socio-economically close to those children attending the Martyrs' Nurseries. The controls are slightly younger than the bereaved. All the children had attended the nurseries for more than five months.

Group	No.	Sex		Age (month) mean	SD
		girls	boys		
Martyrs' children	228	110 (48%)	118 (52%)	70.5	8.3
Controls	124	47 (38%)	77 (62%)	63.9	14.1

The Measure (PBCL)

The Pre-school Behaviour Checklist (PBCL)¹⁰ is designed to screen behaviour problems in nursery settings. It is a 22-item questionnaire, yielding a maximum score of 44. Scores of 12 and over are used to indicate high risk of having behavioural problems. The questionnaire covers most of the behavioural patterns of young children in nursery settings. Each item is

rated on a three-point scale. The validity and reliability of the PBCL are well established¹⁰ and it has been used in an epidemiological study investigating the prevalence of behavioural problems in British nurseries¹¹.

Following piloting in London with Iranian teachers, the Persian version of the PBCL was found to be well accepted in a survey of 35 Iranian nursery teachers. Data from the Iranian study were subjected to similar data analyses to those performed by the original authors. Scores on the PBCL were found to relate well with scores from a parent form of the scale¹², with home observations and interviews with mothers. Thus the validity and reliability of the Persian PBCL were judged more than adequate for the present study.

Results

Figure 1 shows the results of the bereaved and control groups on the total PBCL. As can be seen, the average PBCL score for the bereaved children is significantly lower than that of the controls. This difference is largely accounted for by the differences in scores between the two groups of boys. In the control group, there is the expected excess of boys scoring above the cut-off point. This difference is not so marked among the bereaved children.

Many of the young widows had remarried. We looked at the differences within the group of bereaved children according to whether their mother had married (Figure 2). Clearly, where mothers have remarried, teachers judge their children to be significantly better adjusted. If anything, this effect is more pronounced in girls than in boys.

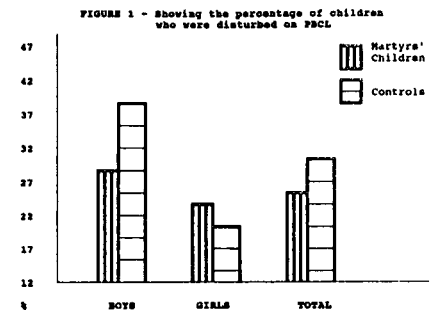
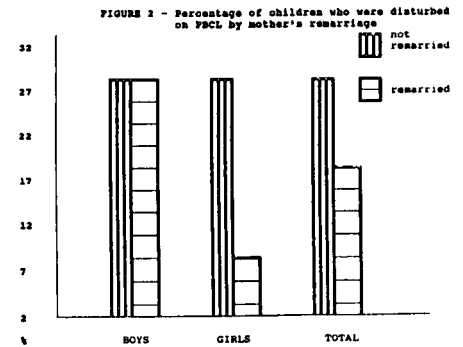
Table II compares those bereaved children whose mothers had not remarried with children from intact families. Even here, the control children score more deviantly on the PBCL than do the bereaved children, although the differences are not as marked as previously.

TABLE II—Mean PBCL Scores and prevalence rates of behaviour problems in Martyrs' children whose mothers were not remarried in comparison with control children from intact families.

	Martyrs' children		Controls		differences
	mother not remarried	n=155	Mean	SD	
Mean PBCL Scores					
Whole group	8.9	6	10.2	5.9	t=1.87 p=06
Girls	8.7	5.9	8.8	5.2	
Boys	9.1	6.1	11.1	6.1	t=2.08 p=04
Prevalence Rates	%	%	%	%	
Whole group	27.7	(43/155)	30.6	(38/124)	
Girls	27.7	(20/72)	19.1	(9/47)	X ² =1.15
Boys	27.7	(23/83)	37.7	(29/77)	X ² =1.8

Discussion

At first sight, the results of this study are unexpected in showing that bereaved children are better adjusted than controls in the pre-school years. However, that expectation is based on what is now considered normal in Western communities in peace time, as well as on the results of Elizur and Kaffman's (1983) pilot study. As noted earlier, when death of the father during war time is inter-



preted religiously as martyrdom, and when the state provides support for the bereaved families, then the significance of the father's death and the subsequent ways the child understands it must be very different. Thus, bereaved children in the present study seem to be protected from the normal effects of bereavement, and mother's remarriage appears to be an additional protective influence.

This latter finding is support for Wolff's view⁵ that the effect of the death of the father on the family circumstances may be more important than the direct effect of the death on the children.

The data also allow comment on the interaction between bereavement and sex of the child. It seems that when the father is killed and family circumstances change, girls are more likely to be affected and they derive more benefit when mothers subsequently remarry. It may be that Iranian girls are more sensitive to their mothers' circumstances and are more likely to adjust to the remarriage, while boys may be more satisfied with the heroic image of their martyred fathers and more resistant to accept stepfathers.

Despite evidence for the validity of the Persian version of the PBCL, it should be remembered that the questionnaire is basically only a screening instrument and not a measure of post-traumatic stress disorder in children. A more detailed and systematic investigation is needed to draw more conclusive results. In particular, we are aware that long-term consequences of parental loss may not surface until late childhood and adolescence⁵. Adolescent boys who lose their

fathers are often among the most severely depressed bereaved children^{4, 13}. It was not possible to examine the effects of bereavement among school-age children in the present study.

Even allowing for the possibility that the teachers completing the questionnaires were less familiar with such devices than British nursery teachers, the results are still very striking in suggesting that the social and religious support provided to the families of those killed in the war have ameliorated the effects of the fathers' deaths on the surviving children. This reminds

us of the need to interpret the effects of important events such as the death of a parent within the social and cultural context of the family.

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Bereavement in Late Adolescence - After a Major Fire Disaster

by Tom Lundin, M.D., Consultant Psychiatrist, University Hospital, Uppsala, Sweden.

Introduction

On 9th June, 1978, the spring term of all Swedish schools ended and around the country thousands of young people between 18 and 22 were celebrating their graduation. This was the case also in Boras, a town of a little more than 100,000 inhabitants in the centre of the textile industry area 60 k.m. east of Gothenburg. That evening one of the main hotels in Boras, The City Hotel, had over 500 young guests in the two restaurants, the nightclub and the disco. In the early morning of 10th June, at 2.35 a.m., during the last dance, a disastrous fire broke out. It started like an explosion on the first floor. Within a few minutes the whole place was like an inferno with black smoke, heat and chaos. When the fire started about 175 people were still in the restaurants. 20 of them were killed in the fire and around 60 were injured, more or less seriously. This is a preliminary communication of some of the findings of our 10-year follow-up study.

Method

It has been shown in an earlier unpublished study (Lundin, MSS) that 53% (n=59) of the survivors had lost a very close friend in the disaster. In this study it was also shown that the bereaved developed severe guilt feelings to a significantly higher degree.

The grief reactions seemed to be crucial in the post traumatic stress disorders.

Among the personally interviewed survivors it was shown in the two-year follow-up that survivors who had lost a very close friend were over-represented

among those with an incomplete crisis solution.

All the survivors were followed up with a new questionnaire during March, 1988, just a few months prior to the 10th anniversary of the fire disaster.

Eighteen families were bereaved in the disaster. A group of the parents were followed up for two years¹, but none of the 26 bereaved siblings were initially interviewed.

Some preliminary results of the 10-year follow-up

We have recently started four follow-up studies of disaster victims directly and indirectly affected.

1. Health care and rescue personnel (questionnaires).
2. Siblings (personal interviews).
3. Somatically injured and uninjured survivors (questionnaires).
4. A group of ten survivors with severe somatic injuries (personal interview).

The siblings

Among the 18 bereaved families there were 14 with a deceased child with siblings. These 14 had 26 siblings: 15 brothers and 11 sisters. The deceased were between 17 and 21 years of age, which means that they should have been between 27 and 31 today. The 26 siblings are today between 20 and 42 years of age. For 50% of the deceased the siblings were older and for the rest they were younger. None of the deceased had both younger and older siblings.

Six of the deceased had only one sibling, the other eight had two to four siblings.

Around 50% of the bereaved siblings were contacted for personal interviews. It turned out to be



surprisingly difficult to find an appropriate time and place for a personal interview. A great many of the siblings have, at a telephone call from the interviewer, talked more about their parents and their long-lasting great difficulties and heavy grief work. Some of the siblings seemed to avoid talking about their own feelings and reactions.

However, as many of the siblings as possible have now been personally interviewed and presented with the Expanded Texas Inventory of Grief complete with 13 new items concerning belief and view-of-life².

The survivors

In the first questionnaire study of the survivors 90% returned their questionnaires. 53% of the 111 respondents had lost a very close friend in the disaster.

68% (n=40) of the initially-studied bereaved survivors have returned the 10-year follow-up questionnaires.

We have not yet analysed the data from the 10-year follow-up questionnaire study, so only some descriptive data are presented here.

The 40 bereaved respondents were between 25 and 35 years of age. There were 24 males and 16