THE FORGOTTEN CHILDHOOD OF ALBAQA’A:
CHILDREN’S PLAY IN A PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMP

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the effects of conflicts in the Middle East on the play behaviour of Palestinian refugee children living in Albaqa’a refugee camp outside of Amman, Jordan. Adopting the perspectives of child development theory, sociocultural theory, cognitive theory, communication theory, and theories of human responses to adversity, the study provides a detailed account of the play activities of 30 children, aged 8 to 12. Data were collected using ethnographic techniques such as observation, informal interviewing, and artefact collection. The richness, complexity, and dimensionality of the children’s experiences in this social and cultural context are conveyed through a documentary film entitled The Forgotten Childhood of Albaqa’a. The results of this study highlight the need for a paradigmatic shift towards understanding childhood as a highly diverse life phase shaped by personal and environmental factors, and toward thinking about children as agents of their own development who, even, during times of great adversity, consciously act upon and influence the environment in which they live.
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CHAPTER 1
THE STORY BEGINS

As a non-refugee Palestinian living away from my land in a neighbouring country, it has always been my dream to provide a voice for the Palestinian refugee children who are living in a Diaspora all over the world, particularly the refugee children residing in Amman, Jordan where I live.

Statement of the Problem

Largely as a result of the 1948 and 1967 wars between the Arabs and Israel, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled their homes and had to seek refuge in different countries in the Middle East; most of them ended up living in refugee camps. The persistence of the Palestinian refugee status is most evident in the existence of more than fifty official United Nations Relief Work Agency (UNRWA) refugee camps in the Middle East (Fafo Report 177), which have become homes for nearly one million Palestinians, a number corresponding to a third of the total registered Palestinian refugees in the Middle East. Despite different territorial settings, Palestinians thus share the common historical frame of reference of camp residency with all that it implies; struggling to cope with living an everyday-life that is continuously influenced by external and internal political events in the respective host countries. Albaqa’a camp in Jordan was established in 1968, and lies in a rural area 20 kilometres outside the capital, Amman. The camp is located half-an-hour drive away from the capital Amman. Albaqa’a camp houses 120,000 refugees who arrived after the 1948 and 1967 wars (UNRWA, 1994). According to UNRWA statistics, 85% of the inhabitants in Albaqa’a camp are second-time refugees: that means refugees who had first escaped after 1948, and had to flee again after the 1967 war. Two thirds of the population of Albaqa’a are children.
The political conflict in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has had a major impact on the lives of those residing in the territories as well as on those who live outside. This is most obvious in the play of Palestinian children. The concept of children’s play is of central importance in any discussion of the effects of war and displacement on children. It is widely acknowledged that for children to develop normally, a number of their basic needs must be met. Children who experience war and conflict usually require special care in order to better understand what is happening, to come to terms with feelings of insecurity and to develop a sense of belonging and self worth. Several factors determine how they cope with these ordeals. These include the type, degree and duration of the stressful life events; the child’s subjective understanding of these events and the child’s stage of developmental growth. The social ecology of the child’s life is also important. This includes the parents, extended families, peers, schools, and religious and community-based institutions.

Children’s cognitive and affective processes can be affected by conflicts that inflict emotional and psychological scars. This may lead to behaviour characterized by distrust and hostility, and can prevent a child from developing into a productive and social adult and citizen. However, under the right circumstances, a child’s cognitive and affective processes can also serve as a source of strength, building resiliency and increasing their ability to bounce back from unusual stress. This is usually the case when a child can count on continuous support from parents, family and friends as well as community members and social institutions. In addition, the psychological traumas children experience because of war; they may appear withdrawn, exhibit signs of depression or demonstrate hyper-alertness. Some children acquire behavioural disorders, becoming acutely fearful, extremely restless or aggressive.
Objectives

How refugee children use play to make sense of the political conflict in the occupied territories is the main objective of this study. In play, children expand their understanding of themselves and others, their knowledge of the physical world, and their ability to communicate with peers and adults (Fernie, 1998). Research consistently shows that play is an important context that helps children develop an understanding of their social world. Play is often shared with peers at school or in children's neighbourhoods. Meanings in play often reflect real-world behaviours; they also incorporate children's interpretations and wishes (Garvey, 1984).

The impact of political violence on children is not only a result of direct physical harm to them or their families; the effect is a much more pervasive one, which affects the whole universe of the child and every aspect of his or her development (Freire, 2000). Children may be direct victims, they may witness the victimization of loved ones or others, and they may also hear second-hand accounts about people's traumatic experiences. The psychological effect of the armed conflict on Palestinian children's development has been widely studied. Nevertheless, how they use play to make sense of the current political conflict needs further exploration. The purpose of this study was to investigate the play context of Palestinian refugee children living in Albaqa’a refugee camp.

This study aimed to address the following questions:

1. What are the play activities that children in the refugee camp engage in?
2. What is the relationship between the children's play activities and the current political climate?
3. How do the children define themselves as refugee children with the structure of their play activities and in life?
4. What are the refugee people’s perspectives about gender differences in play?
5. What are refugee people’s goals in life and wishes for the future?

The Researcher

As a specific individual researcher who lives in particular circumstances at a certain time, no one can be free from his or her point of view (i.e., bias). Researchers always bring their personal and professional experiences or subjectivity into their research. Here I will talk about my personal history, cultural background, and particular epistemological stance that influenced the whole process of my research. The choice of my research topic, play and children, reflects my interests, my identity and my cultural background. I enjoy politics and have a strong interest in human rights, thanks to the role my mother played in planting those seeds. When I was a little girl, I used to make political speeches while I stood in front of the mirror and by the time I was twelve, in front of my classmates. This interest in politics inspired me to pursue the field of early childhood education, as children are the most vulnerable human beings and are most affected by the decisions of policy makers. Moreover, I have been studying and working with young children for almost ten years. My interest in the well-being of Palestinian children originated from their plight in the world.

When considering an appropriate research method for this study, I found that my particular epistemological stance was involved. I readily accept the main assumptions of the qualitative research methodology, such as contexts, closeness, process emphasis, and the inductive approach. I assume that the social sciences, different from the natural sciences, are more complicated, more dynamic and more human-centred areas. We cannot deprive a human being of his or her national, regional, and personal histories. I therefore preferred
observation, as the method of knowing (epistemology) in this study. In my opinion, an observation happens in a certain setting or specific context; an observation involves watching, listening, and touching that which is close to the real world. However, many things, such as opinion, cannot be determined from observation alone. Therefore, I conducted several one-on-one informal interviews with four households and one family doctor in addition to two group interviews with the 30 children who participated in this study, in order to generate data on their experiences about their world and the meanings those have for them. I also collected artefacts such as drawings, stories, and poems. I also videotaped children’s play activities and my interviews with them, which provide the core content for the documentary film *The Forgotten Childhood of Albaqa’a* that constitutes a major component of my thesis.

I followed thematic analysis for the data collected and reported my findings. I am convinced that complete objectivity is impossible and that I may have brought numerous biases into my study. However, I must also say that I was aware of the potential bias in this research process and that I tried to minimize it while maximizing the representation and ensuring the reliability and validity of my research findings. On the other hand, I agree that a researcher’s personal experience and empathic insight are relevant data. Social scientists, facing a task of exploring the inner state of human beings, particularly need to use subjective judgement to bring the inner world to light (Palys, 1997). I used my personal and professional experience to understand the participants fully and took a neutral non-judgmental stance toward whatever emerged. I also recorded my thoughts in an introspective journal to keep track of my analysis. In this journal, I reflected on what influenced me in choosing and conducting this research study.
Influences on the Study

My Mother

In 1967, I was seven years old, and I vividly remember the influx of refugees who fled Palestine and were displaced at public and private schools in Amman, Jordan. My mother volunteered in assisting her exiled people by participating in the food and shelter program, which was provided by the United Nation and Relief Agency with the help of the Jordanian Government. She used to take us with her, where a large number of old and young people as well as children were sleeping on the ground; I remember the huge bowls of soup and stews that were prepared for them. Children were playing around their parents; some old sick people, who were laid down on mattresses, were crying in pain; many people were crying for the loss of their homes and from the separation from their relatives. There were such a variety of mixed emotions there, that if I had been old enough and had collected those pieces, I could have written a story consisting of tens of thousands of pages. I remember that my mother used to distribute some lollipops to the children, very tasty ones that I wished I could have had as well, but it never happened. She used to say; “lollipops are for our Palestinian children who lost their home and lands. They were kicked out of Palestine; they own nothing; this is the least they can have. Instead you should give them your toys. You should remember always that we share the same land, the same home; it is our country that we lost, the only difference between us and them, is that we left Palestine earlier to work in Jordan before the war started, if we had been there as this happened, we would have ended up in the same situation they are in now. All of us are refugees but with different addresses.” I have not forgotten her words to this day.

In 1968, my older sister volunteered at Albaqa’a Camp as a first aid assistant in one of the UNRWA clinics that were established there; the many clinics’ tents were spread all
over the camp and patients were queuing up by the hundreds in a long line that seemed to have no end. The people in need of treatment and medicine were very sad, and there were barefoot children playing in the open spaces. It was a mess; those pictures are engraved in my memory forever. I recall those scenes of loss, misery, sadness, hunger and poverty as if they had happened yesterday.

That year, my sister did not pass the government exam because she had worked so many long hours with our displaced refugees. My mother was so preoccupied with helping them as well that she could not pay attention to my sister’s failure. In 1969, my sister left for Spain to study interior design and she has been there ever since. My mother continuously reminded us of the Palestinian struggle against Israel. The story usually started with the conflict at hand, which still exists today in Palestine/Israel. It stems from an earlier conflict that started over 85 years ago with the British being made caretakers of Palestine at the end of the World War I. The British had made promises to both the Arabs, who fought with them against the Turkish Ottoman rulers, and to the Zionists. One such promise saw the light of day when British foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour declared, “The establishment in Palestine as a national home for the Jewish people” in November 1917.

There were excessive demands on my mother’s time, as she had to care for her young children and work in the social and agriculture-counselling field. She was the most important person in our lives; the most influential person who helped interpret the events of the conflict and understand what was happening. She devoted herself to the Palestinian cause and planted the seeds of revolution in our minds. She buried herself in work to avoid her feelings of helplessness toward her scattered people. She watched television for hours, day after day, waiting for news from her homeland, and was concerned about her people’s experiences of exile and their loss of status as a result of losing their homelands. She was completely
absorbed by feelings of sadness while remaining strong and resourceful. She tried to strengthen her social network by participating in the life of the community. She organized the Woman’s Union with the help of other women; their activities centred on social, cultural activities, and helping refugees in need. It had the potential for becoming an extremely important resource for women but unfortunately, the Union lost its concern for the needs of Palestinian refugees and the Woman’s Union failed to fulfill its purpose. My mother did not give up; her strong political ideological commitment to the Palestinian struggle provided her with a sense of meaning and facilitated the integration of difficult and painful experiences into her view of herself and the world; she became more and more actively involved in the conflict. It bolstered and supported her personality and thus increased her capacity to function. It closely connected her with her Palestinian people and their common cause provided them with both a source of support and a sense of solidarity.

She saw the increasing need for assisting Palestinian refugees whose lives were so profoundly affected by the Israeli occupation, and had to face resettlement problems outside their country, such as widespread feelings of despair and hopelessness. She thus became politically affiliated with the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which was established in 1965 and came to effect after the 1967 war. She organized demonstrations against the Israeli occupation and travelled to different Arabic countries collecting donations for the Fidaiin. In 1970, the PLO was forced out of Jordan after the black September events; my mother was removed from her position by a Jordanian military order; this had a great effect on her psychological well-being as she isolated herself from society and was overcome with grief and pain until she passed away in her early fifties, leaving us to continue the mission she could not complete.
My Arabic Teacher

The next person who influenced my interest in Palestinian refugee children was my elementary Arabic teacher. School is where I was provided with a wide range of experiences and where I found a source of moral support. And my Arabic teacher was the person with whom I had the most frequent and the closest contact, apart from my family members. Teachers in that time got to know the families closely as well as the children they taught, and they carried a great deal of authority and respect within the wider community. My Arabic teacher’s presence benefited me as much as my mother did. She provided an example that helped me find my own abilities to exert inner control in the midst of these chaotic and changing circumstances.

During elementary school, I still had an overwhelming sense of loss and shock caused by the occupation of our country. This would have probably been followed by a sense of despair and resignation if I had not quickly taken steps to restore structure and purpose in my life. This is when I started to look at education as an important vehicle to achieve my dream. My Arabic teacher played a vital role by allowing me to discuss my political beliefs in class and in so doing, helped me to develop both an individual and a shared understanding of the meaning of these events. For example, she decided to base the Arabic curriculum on the Jordanian model but to include as a specific topic the history of Palestine. It was, however, important that the teaching of such a subject was undertaken in a way that promoted dialogue and discussion, not merely conveying factual information, in order to enable us to process information and make sense of it in our lives. She also provided us with opportunities for peer-group discussions that were very significant.

My Arabic teacher played a very important role within our school and developed composition writings into the most important subject in class. One of the topics I chose to
write about was “a description of an orange tree,” where I described the feelings of an orange tree that lost her roots when the Israelis uprooted her. I was actually writing about my own feelings of “uprooted ness” from my country. I remember that I got an A+ on that composition and that it was read to the entire school.

My University Professor

I emigrated from Jordan to Canada. Much of my schooling took place in Jordan including my undergraduate studies. Of the three languages I speak fluently, Arabic is the strongest since it is my mother tongue; I read and write it fluently. My knowledge of English was limited because although I learned it at school, I never had the chance to practice it. When I first arrived to Canada I felt overwhelmed by taking care of my four children in a strange country where the culture and values are different from ours. As an English speaker with a different accent, I felt frustrated when people did not understand me because of my poor grammar and my accent. I enrolled in an evening course to study conversational skills, which improved my English a little further. As a mother, I have tried to discipline my children and fretted about their school grades, since their education was the main reason for our immigration to Canada. I have worked hard to provide a strong family and upbringing for my children and I think I have largely succeeded.

In 2000, I enrolled at the University of British Columbia to begin graduate studies in early childhood education. This is where I met Maureen. I came to know her through different courses I took. She has the type of disposition that immediately puts people at ease, by the way she greets, teaches and smiles; she is easy to deal with. She knows how to deal with those who have a different culture and language than her. Following a presentation I made on a cross-cultural study of children’s play in times of armed conflict, more specifically about Palestinian children’s play inside Palestine, she suggested I expand my
research by conducting an ethnographic study on Palestinian children’s play. My intention was to conduct a study on the play of Palestinian children who live under Israeli occupation in the Palestinian territories, but it was hard to do that due to numerous barriers. My solution to this problem was to study a small population of Palestinian children. As a case study, I decided to focus on the children who live in the Albaqa’ā refugee camp in Jordan, outside the occupied territories.

Organization of the Thesis

This study was designed to provide children in the camp with an open opportunity to spontaneously play in the alleys of their neighbourhoods and to freely express their views of the current political climate they are living in. In Chapter 2, I focus on the relevant theoretical and empirical literature on children’s play and the experience of children living in areas of armed conflict. In Chapter 3, I outline methodological procedures and considerations. Chapter 4 is presented as a documentary represents the major findings of this study. Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter, which summarizes the major themes evident in the children’s play and interviews and the interviews with their parents and grandparents.
CHAPTER 2

WAR, PLAY, AND CHILDREN: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Play is a complex but poorly understood phenomenon that is generally misconceived as frivolous. Yet, our knowledge of cultural evolution indicates that play should be taken seriously. Play is a critical aspect of children's lives and is essential to their intellectual, cognitive, spiritual, spatial and emotional development. Play for play's sake, or play as pleasure, is the broadest notion of play. In his book "Man, the player" published in 1938, Johan Huizinga defined play as a vehicle for creating culture. He argued that children play because they enjoy it and that it goes beyond the bounds of all biological activity. Huizinga wrote that: "Play is not ordinary life or "real life." It is rather a stepping out of "real life" into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (1938, pp. 7-9). Whether it is a simple game of catching a ball or an elaborate game of make-believe, the relevance of play is often underestimated. In this chapter, I review historical, political, and contemporary studies of children's play, with a particular focus on child development theory, cognitive theory, sociocultural theory, and communicative theory, which provide the theoretical framework for this study.

Child Development Theory

Play is a key feature of early socialization (Erickson, 1963). Play is a reflection of the child's past musing about the present, or exploration about what is to come. Play has an important role in normal development, as a mechanism in childhood for resolving the pressures a child feels when drives are being curbed by society (Erickson, 1963; Peller, 1954). Development is characterized as a series of specific crises that are to be resolved at various stages; in order to develop satisfactorily, children need assistance to cope with these
crises. Particular emphasis is placed on the key “virtues” of trust, competence, identity, and meaning (Erickson, 1963).

This study considers the development of Palestinian refugee children through the context of the play activities they engage in, and how it has been threatened by the atmosphere and prevalence of violence, which have afflicted the Palestinian territories during the Israeli occupation. Using key terms from Erickson’s approach, the study emphasises the effects of conflict on the children’s sense of trust, on the capacity of the parents and family to protect and nurture them, in the capacity of the community to provide certain resources, and in the society at large to provide both protection and a sense of predictability. A second key term is competence: Conflict situations serve to inhibit the development of cognitive and social competence. Children develop competence through exploring their environment, through play and through experiences such as school and other community resources. Conflict may lead to an over-protection by parents, to an inhibition of play, and to loss of schooling and other social resources. The development of a strong sense of personal identity is especially important during adolescence. Identity is the result of a confident belief in oneself; an undermined self-confidence and self-esteem may lead to uncertainties, especially if there are deep divisions of affiliation within the family and community. Insecurity, especially faced by refugees, and worries about the future may compound the identity problems facing young people. Finally, the term meaning is used to indicate the young person’s framework of beliefs and values, which are important in understanding and making sense of political changes and conflicts.
Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky (1966) proposes that a “Zone of Proximal Development” (ZDP) exists—a range of tasks between those the child can handle independently and those at the highest level she can master through play or with the help of adults or more competent peers; play is a course of development and creates a Zone of Proximal Development. In play the child performs above his usual behaviour, as though he were a “head taller” than himself (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). Vygotsky saw a particular significance in social interactions with other children and emphasized the role of the peer group in promoting a child’s development by offering a particular quality of stimulation. The upper levels of the ZDP are also promoted by social interaction with adults and more competent peers who create situations that challenge or require the child to think and act beyond his independent level. Adults and competent peers can effectively “scaffold” the child’s learning, helping her achieve ever-higher levels of development of thought and action (Vygotsky, 1966).

Vygotsky and his followers saw particular importance in the child’s creative imagination and in the development of imaginative play, reflecting the limitations of language in children; though cognitive development, through a growing capacity for conceptual thinking, becomes increasingly important as the child develops. According to Vygotsky, play is “not simply a recollection of past experience, but a creative reworking that combines impressions and constructs from the new realities addressing the needs of the child” (Richman, 1993, p. 1286).

Vygotsky further proposes that in play the child creates an imaginary situation that is in fact rule-based. In imaginary play, there are rules that govern roles the child will play, so the child feels free but this is an “illusory freedom.” Here, Vygotsky proposes that all games with rules contain imaginary situations, just as all imaginary play contains rules. Play objects
(i.e., toys, or "pivots" in Vygotsky’s language) are one key factor in liberating children from the concrete. At school age, play is connected to pleasure so children subject themselves to rules for they promise greater gratification than does acting on impulses (Chin & Reifel, 2000; Lin & Reifel, 1999; Reifel & Yeatman, 1993). Vygotsky’s concept of “pivots” is particularly relevant to the present study because of the focus on understanding how refugee children use drawings, games, stories, and poems as tools that help them become more aware of themselves and their feelings, and their ability to express themselves and explore whatever issues they themselves choose to examine. Play is their opportunity to spontaneously express emotions in imaginative play, emotions that are particularly significant in light of the emotional stress the children are under.

Cognitive Theory

Jean Piaget (1963) argued that play is the vehicle through which children interact with their environment and construct their knowledge of the world around them. Piaget’s ideas about play have been most influential in the last century. The premise is that children are continuously constructing their knowledge of the environment as they interact with objects and people. Piaget uses elegant concepts, like assimilation and accommodation, to develop a seamless relationship between play and learning, and argues that they have a symbiotic relationship. Assimilation refers to a child’s ability to take material from the environment and incorporate it into his or her way of thinking about the world, while accommodation pertains to how a child’s perception is transformed by stimuli from the environment. The primacy of assimilation over accommodation is play, whereas the primacy of accommodation over assimilation is learning. In this sense, Piaget’s ideas have much in common with Vygotsky’s constructivist perspectives of learning, which will provide insights
into how refugee children use the content of play to construct their understanding of the political conflict in their environment.

Levels of cognitive play in school age children, in Piaget's cognitive theory (1962), characterize the concrete operational period and continue in the formal operational period (Frost, 1992, Piaget, 1962; Rogers & Sawyer, 1988). Piaget's highest category of play is games with set rules, such as marbles and hopscotch, which usually emerge between the ages of 7 and 12. This is also a time when they show interest for competitive games and when children become socialized; this is reflected in their ability to engage in activities in which rules must be followed (Manning, 1998). Smilansky & Shefataya (1990) described games with rules as a type of play that is more elaborate. The child must be able to accept and adjust to prearranged rules. Social interactions are required including the ability to control behaviour and actions within the set rules. Games with rules also continue into adult life.

The current study includes children six to twelve years of age, so Piaget's theory of cognitive development is of considerable relevance. Moreover, because Piaget's theory was based on observations of white, middle-class children in Western contexts, it seemed important to determine the value of his theory in a non-Western context, something which has not been widely studied.

Communication Theory

According to Garvey's communication theory "Play Talk" (Garvey, 1984), meanings in play reflect real-world behaviour and incorporate children's interpretations and wishes. In her 1993 study, Garvey describes transitions into and out of pretend play frames. In 1995, she identified the child's play communication strategies; whereby children may verbally prepare for play ("let's play"), explicitly mention pretend transformations ("you be the baker; I'll be the customer, these toy tires can be our doughnuts"), enact ("I'll take a dozen doughnuts"),
and negate ("I don't wanna play bakery"); children also use nonverbal signals such as laughter and gestures.

In their 1999 study, Lin and Reifel argue that the frames in which children communicate when they play reflect unique cultural meaning. They identify culturally characteristic pretence in their analysis of the influences of physical and social contexts in children's use of play materials, space, time, and their incorporation of experiences from outside the school into play, classroom culture, social relations, and social customs. These authors identify culturally characteristic pretence, such as making sugar cane out of clay and peeling it before pretending to sell it; negation of pretence after the teacher signals the end of play time (e.g., "... then we got married and the end"); and explicit instructions to a playmate about to accept respectfully (within a particular cultural context) an object while pretending to play doctor's office (e.g., "use both hands to receive it").

Garvey's theory reveals the sorts of communicative efforts that Bateson (1979) predicted, with spoken language serving as a vehicle for indicating the play frame and its meaning. When observing and listening to children's play, it is evident that they are signalling one another as Bateson's theory suggests. They frequently invite others to "pretend" and they often indicate exactly what frame is relevant to the play. According to Bateson, the imaginary is a map and reality is the terrain, which can be mapped (Bretherton, 1989; Goffman, 1974; Nelson, 1989). The concept of play frames is used in this study of refugee children's play in order to understand how they communicate meaning in their games.
Play, War, and Refugee Children

The concept of children’s play is of central importance in any discussion on the effects of war and displacement on children. Why is play so important? It is important because it is vital for a child’s development, cognitively, emotionally and socially. Play is a means by which children handle and work on experiences, and tackle difficult problems. Although play, like the concept of childhood itself, is firmly rooted in culture, the importance of play transcends cultural variations. Jan Williamson sums up the importance of play thus: “Play for children is the major vehicle for expression of feelings and integration of difficult life experiences. Despite cultural variations, repetitive play, role modelling, fantasy and re-enactments of daily life, are all integral to the development of children worldwide. They are essential needs of refugee children” (Italics original) (Williamson, 1990, p. 334).

Play often serves as a useful “barometer” of children’s well-being. The contents of play may indicate the issues and problems which preoccupy them, while the style and manner of playing can give an indication of the extent to which children have been impaired by their experiences (Tollfree, 1996, p. 55). “If children are given the possibilities for play together with other children and adults, children then use their own power and thereby get possibilities to grow even during very difficult circumstances (Edenhammar & Wahlund, 1996, p. 17).

The Impact of War on Refugee Children

Research into human suffering in the context of major societal catastrophes commonly adopts a view of the world long promoted by the social sciences as a safe, predictable and nurturing place. Anthropology, in particular, has advanced numerous theories about the homogeneity and continuity of culture and symmetry, reciprocity and exchange in social relations. Society is portrayed as an integrated, self-equilibrating system in which
armed conflict and other such circumstances are exceptions that lie outside the range of normal human experience (Allen 1989; Boyden 1994; Davis 1992; LeVine 1990). The idea that war represents a disjunction between everyday reality and everyday processes has in effect undermined explanations about social causes of, or solutions to, armed conflict. Consequently, in the absence of proper theories of societal transformation, policy and practice commonly prioritize the functioning of affected populations over and above resolution of broader social structural problems.

Violence and greed are adult qualities, and children learn them from their elders. Armed conflicts present circumstances in which children learn all the wrong lessons. As George Eisen says in his article *Coping in Adversity: Children's play in the Holocaust*, "Violence encompassed millions of children who all wanted to play and perhaps played for short moments but who died, and others, who were forced to grow up prematurely in a hostile world" (1985, pp.129-141). Children in Palestine rarely play games like football and cricket, they play war games; they shoot at each other with toy guns. A child who is familiar with real or toy weapons is more likely to be violent than a child who plays innocent games with simple toys such as Barbies or Pacman. This demonstrates what Csikszentmihayli says, "Children's play was not only divorced from reality, but in fact, was reflective of it" (1981, p. 14). Dr. Sarraj, who was trained in hospitals in London and is the chairman of Gaza's community mental health program, explains the terrifying psychology behind Palestinian children's games: "To get rid of fear you engage in it, to get rid of fear of dying you engage death. These children are playing exciting and addictive games with death, and addictive is just what it is" (Britain, 2001). He has recorded how after the first Intifada, which ended in 1993, children played in the streets pretending to be Arabs and Jews trying to kill each other. Dr. Sarraj shows how the Palestinian children portray their life in games: "The children have
switched their identification from their fathers to the Israelis. They prefer to play the Jew in the game because he is the powerful one. They have seen how their own fathers have lost the symbol of power” (Sarraj, 2001). In a survey of 3000 children in the first Intifada, 45% said they had seen their fathers being beaten by the Israelis; Dr. Sarraj shows that it is not only children who dice with death: “There is communal fear and people deal with it by denial. They go up on the rooftops to watch the bombardments, saying, “We don’t care what happens to us. The bombardments are completely terrifying, massive explosions: I thought Gaza would be flattened as I listened to it – just try to imagine the impact on children” (Sarraj, 2001). Vombatkere (2002) in his article Armed Conflicts and Children’s Psyche says:

Older children and those who have some understanding of the world around them may be affected by a craving for revenge, thereby creating a potential terrorist. It is the pent-up frustrations of children that add up to second-generation hatred and desire for revenge. Death from old age or sickness is not quite the same as when it comes suddenly from close quarters, with severed limbs and flying lumps of flesh and blood accompanied by screaming and groaning. It even affects the hardened army man, who is human after all.

This effect is obvious in children’s play in Palestine. Peter Beaumont describes Palestinian children’s play with bombs:

They play without fear as Western children play with toy guns, but the consequences are fatal. The game with the pipe bombs goes like this: at night they creep into the wrecked buildings on the front line close to the Egyptian border and into the no-man’s land beyond. When they are close enough to the Israeli patrols, or the watchtowers that overlook the camp, the petrol soaked fuse it lit with a cigarette. When it is almost burned down, they toss the cylinder. The timing is crucial and
difficult to judge. Unlucky ones can lose a hand... Everyone I talk to insists that throwing bombs is a child’s game: they make an impressive bang, but do little harm. The Israelis don’t often bother firing back at the kids who throw them. It allows the kids trapped in the camp to let off steam, says one local father. The Israelis paint it differently. When it is reported on Israel Army Radio, it is called a “terrorist” attack. (Beaumont, 2003)

There are other dangerous games these children play, Beaumont says:

The Israeli Army believes the Palestinian militants use children to spy on their positions and test settlement security fences to search out weak points. The army has accused them of attacking Israeli soldiers to lure them into ambushes. What the young boys of Rafah tell me hints that some of this is true. Scarf-clad girls walk home from school beneath Israeli observation towers, past walls painted with huge murals of dead Palestinian fighters. Eight-year-olds ferret in the rubble, oblivious to warning shots from Israeli Jeeps. Toddlers, led by their parents, play peek-a-boo with the stationary tanks from behind their father’s legs. In the lanes, the youngest children swarm around armed Palestinian policemen as they smoke their cigarettes out of sight of the Israelis snipers. What is most shocking to outsiders is the physical domination of Rafah by the Israeli army. Both children and adults know by instinct the places to avoid or where to cross at a quicker pace. Most vulnerable of all are boys on the brink of their teenage years. How powerful is the image of the “martyr” for the children of Palestine? It is a teenage fantasy made real in a place where all other dreams are crushed.

Beaumont watched groups of Palestinian children playing near one grave as he reported,
A tiny fresh grave, piled high with sand, it is the grave of Hamid Al Masry, a two-and-a-half year old that lived in Block J on the front line. Hamid had been shot trying to flee with his parents as Israeli troops fired on their area. His mother had been wounded in the stomach.

The Impact of War on Child Development

Play, armed conflict, and children are three terms that are seemingly simple but have critical meaning in early childhood, in society and in human life. The research on the impact of armed conflict on children consists of an extensive literature in several disciplines on the nature of children, childhood and child development. In general, this literature tends to emphasize that childhood is a natural, distinct phase in the human life cycle, extending from birth and beyond adolescence, "Since the advent of the UN convention of the Rights of the Child, the upper age limit of childhood is commonly accepted as 18 years". The understanding is that this life phase has its own dynamics, interests, and rights. In order to understand childhood as a highly diverse life phase shaped not simply by biological or psychological universals but also, and more importantly, by personal and environmental factors. A paradigm shift is needed, one that involves thinking about children as agents of their own development and who, even during times of great adversity, consciously act upon and influence the environments in which they live.

Child development is governed by universal psychological and biological structures and marked by fixed stages (Shahar, 1992). It is suggested that each stage of development includes certain defining features and developmental accomplishments of the previous stage. Development during childhood is also seen to define psychological states and adaptability in adulthood. Adherents of stage theory (especially Piaget, 1962) certainly acknowledge the formative role children play in their own development.
Another feature of child research has been its emphasis on early childhood, identified as a critical period of accelerated growth and change that is central to successful adaptation in later life (Boyden, 1997). The emphasis on the first years of life has reinforced notions about children as vulnerable, immature and dependent, and has also resulted in a shortage of systematic information on development during middle and late childhood. In turn, this bias towards early childhood fuels the idea that children require continuous nurturing and protection by adults in order to flourish. Over the years, development psychology has often stressed a safe, stable family environment—one in which the young are protected from upset and receive love, stimulation and continuous nurture—as an essential prerequisite for children’s well-being and normal development.

In this context, a proper childhood involves being reared by parents within a secure domestic setting and secluded from the dangers of the adult world (Boyden, 1997; Jenks, 1996). In order to secure these conditions, children are to be kept as much as possible within the home and/or at school, away from the workplace, from hardship and misfortune. In effect, according to this conceptualization, childhood should be a time free of social and economic responsibility and marked by learning and play; a child’s happiness and fulfillment are seen to directly depend on these conditions being met.

Children’s responses to armed conflict have been explained largely through a mix of stages, such as cognitive and psychodynamic, as well as with attachment theories (Braken, 1998; LeVine, 1999). A mechanical relationship is often posited between exposure to environmental adversities and mental health disturbance. Attention has increasingly been centred on one particular psychiatric category: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders or “PTSD” (The concept of post-traumatic stress disorder was included in the American Psychiatric Association “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III” (DSM III) in 1980). Despite its profound
cultural origin, many claim this to be the syndrome that most effectively characterizes and embodies the global human response to major traumatic events (Kinzie, 1986; Magwaza, 1993; Nader & Pynoos, 1993)

Assessments of children exposed to armed conflict often show significant pathology and very high rates of prevalence of PTSD in particular. Moreover, since early behaviours and experiences are taken to influence subsequent developmental achievements, children exposed to stressful war events are thought to be prone not merely to traumatic reactions in both the shorter and medium term, but also to long-term developmental impairment.

The psychological effects of war and violence on the development of Palestinian children have been widely studied. In those studies, a distinction is made between children's responses to chronic violence and their reaction to acute war traumas. Maksoud and Aber suggest that, “chronic armed conflicts accompanied by political, social and economic deprivation can have far-reaching effects on children's psychological development” (Maksoud & Aber, 1996, p. 218). They identified the following possible effects: “profound alterations in patterns of behaviour, such as aggressive or depressive behaviour; changes in attitudes and beliefs; personality changes and stunted moral development” (Maksoud & Aber, 1996, p. 218). The authors also maintain that not all developmental outcomes are negative. They raise the possibility that war experiences may even, “strengthen children's altruistic sentiments, empathy for human suffering, and the commitment to serve victims of violence” (Maksoud & Aber, 1996, p. 218). The report of the Secretariat of National Plan of Action for Palestinian Children, suggests that based on interviews with children and parents, Palestinian children, “cannot sleep safely in their own beds, or walk to school, or even play in their backyards without fear that they will be attacked by Israeli soldiers and/or settlers” (Moughrabi, 1996). The report discloses that increasingly, “Children suffer from fear,
anxiety, nightmares, bedwetting and trauma” (Moughrabi, 1996). Palestinian children are under too much stress. According to parent’s reports; our children are fixated on watching news, discussing and participating in events, Even teachers reported that one out of three students suffer from psychosocial problems that has a negative effects on their school work (Moughrabi, 1996).

Vygotsky argued that there is no essential separation between the individual and the social, for one cannot become an individual without becoming social, even in the most primary aspects of a child’s development (Cole, 1992; Wood, 1998). The social construction is a powerful source of differentiation between children globally in terms of behaviour, thinking, adaptation and indeed, responses to armed conflict (Dawes & Donald, 1994; Dawes, 2000; Durkin, 1998; Lave, 1998; Harkness & Super, 1996; Serpell, 1996; Woodhead, 1999). In particular, the objectives of child development, the skills in children that are valued and the ways in which their training is organized are all regarded as contributing fundamentally to the competencies that children in any specific context acquire. Given this kind of diversity, the tendency of policy and practice to decontextualize childhood and treat children generically as a mass of victims is highly problematic.

Currently, there are no studies that focus on how refugee children use the context of play to make sense of the situations in which they live. This research takes into consideration the concept of children’s play as having central importance in the discussion of the effects of war and displacement on children, and of strategies for responding to their needs. The effects of the political violence in the West Bank and Gaza strip have a major effect on the experiences of Palestinian refugee children living both inside and outside the conflict area; these effects are often reflected in children’s play. Play has the potential to provide children with the means to recover from stressful life conditions. It is a vital factor in children’s
development, cognitively, emotionally and socially. Play is an essential need of refugee children, yet we know little about their play contexts.
CHAPTER 3

UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S PLAY IN CONTEXT:

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Qualitative methodology, and in particular ethnographic study, was the research tool best suited to the study of refugee children’s play activities. Since ethnography is an interactive research that requires relatively extensive time in any one location in order to systematically observe, interview, and videotape processes as they naturally occur at the selected location, I spent four months (two months in 2003 and two months in 2004) observing and videotaping children’s play activities, conducting ethnographic interviews, and collecting artefacts such as the children’s drawings, stories, and poems. This ethnographic study, which follows the methods outlined by Goetz and Lecompte (1984) is an exploratory and discovery-oriented endeavour to understand the play context of Palestinian refugee children living in Amman, Jordan. I wanted to present the shared beliefs, practices, artefacts, folk knowledge, and behaviours of these children and their families.

I sought to understand the children’s constructions, thoughts, meanings, feelings, beliefs, and actions as they occurred in their natural contexts inside the Albaqa’a camp, and to do so as an observer. I was in a unique position to understand the elements that influenced the children’s behaviour, to interpret them, and to reconstruct these multiple constructed realities through my data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants and Selection Procedures

The design of the study was to follow children who were current residents of the Albaqa’a camp as well as their parents, who became refugees following the 1948 and 1967 wars between Israel and the Arabs. A random sample of thirty children aged 6-12 volunteered to participate in the study.
Participant selection was designed to correspond with the characteristics of the general population of refugee children living in the camp. The children were selected on a random basis by volunteering to participate in the study; the children who met the requirements were informed of the purpose of the study and were asked if they were willing to participate. In total, 30 children were selected; each provided their informed ascent to participate in the study. The participants constitute a representative sample of children currently residing in the camp. At the parents’ request, the children played in playgroups separated by gender; fifteen children participated per playgroup. Each observed play session lasted approximately two hours.

Four sets of parents were interviewed in order to ascertain their views regarding their departure from Palestine, their experience of becoming refugees, and strategies for helping their children deal with the current political conflict. I approached the children’s parents in June 2003 to seek their informed consent to participate in the study. This involved spending a one-week introducing myself to parents through several visits, discussing the study with them, and answering their questions. Within the week, they welcomed me and offered their full support for my study, which included permission to videotape all play sessions occurring in the alleys. I also interviewed one family doctor who owns a private clinic inside the camp. In addition, I collected children’s artefacts such as drawings, written stories, and poems that I deemed relevant to my study. Occasionally, ideas brought out during my visits with the parents proved instrumental to the success of the study. It was in fact the parents who suggested that I videotape the children while they played in the alleys; this was not part of my original plan.
Research Site: The Albaqa’a Camp

The main site of this study is the Palestinian refugee camp of Albaqa’a, in the alleys that surround the children’s houses. The Albaqa’a refugee camp was established in 1968. It lies in a rural area 20 kilometres outside the capital of Amman. The camp accommodates both refugees (Palestinians who fled in 1948) and displaced people (Palestinians who fled following the 1967 war). Approximately 85% of the inhabitants in Albaqa’a are second-time refugees. The camp’s location, half an hour’s drive from the capital Amman and the arable land on which the camp was established has ensured its inhabitants with diverse modes of employment. Most camp residents belong to the lower or lower-middle social economic strata. One of the main reasons for remaining in the camp is that the cost of housing, whether renting or owning, is considerably cheaper than outside the camp. Refugee camp dwellers are more involved in irregular work, day-labour and employment in the informal sector than the outside population (Fafo Report 177, 1994).

Study Procedures

This ethnographic study included such techniques as participant observation, informal interviewing and artefact analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Kendrick, 2003; Yin, 1994). The combination of these research techniques is known as triangulation. Using triangulation is the most effective way to avoid the influence of my personal biases in this study. Triangulation also allowed me to confirm data collected using one method (observation) by comparing it to data collected using an alternate method (interviewing).

Observation

One of my primary data collection methods was observation (Angrosino & Mays, 2000). Data collection took place during July and August 2003. I spent two months at a time observing children at play in the alleys of Albaqa’a camp. Observation took place once a
week and started at 4:00 pm. I divided my time during each visit into 2 hours in the boys’ alley and 2 hours in the girls’ alley. Field notes, which described in detail the setting, the activities and the participants, were written at the end of each observation session. Conducting observations in alleys was relatively easy. The children were so involved in their play that I could sit and watch them without attracting attention.

Children’s drawings were another important source of data. Children drew expressive scenes and handed them to me. I brought a video camera on site and with the permission and encouragement of the children’s parents, a camera person (my daughter or son) videotaped the play sessions in the alleys, which were analyzed and edited to produce the accompanying documentary film *The Forgotten Childhood of Albaqa’a*.

Informal Interviews

Ethnographic interviewing and observation go hand in hand (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Much of the interview data gathered in this study comes from four of the families of the children who participated in my study. These interviews were conducted in July and August 2003. In 2004, I also conducted an in-depth key interview with one family doctor who owns a private clinic inside the camp. All the interview subjects are Palestinian refugees who share similar experiences of fleeing from Palestine after the 1948 and 1967 wars between Israel and the Arabs, and are still residents of the Albaqa’a camp. In addition, the four households are the parents to some of the children participated in this study. These parents were selected in particular because they have special knowledge (Spradley, 1979) about life in Palestine before 1948; Al Nakba (The Catastrophe), Al Nazha (The Emigration); the camp situation upon arrival in 1967; and camp situation at the present time.

Ethnographic interviews are based on open-ended questions that focus on participants’ experiences and what those experiences mean to them. For example: How do
individuals conceive of their world? How do they explain or make sense of the important events in their lives? Interviewees were asked to comment on certain events that happened during their lives. Interviews were conducted as casual conversations during my visits. Given that I understand the language and culture of the respondents, I believe this helped me in gathering data. I have used the standardized open-ended interviews and each participant was asked the same questions in the same order to reduce the researcher effects and biases (Patton, 2001), since both the researcher and the respondents share the same concerns about Palestinian people.

I took Merriam’s (1998) suggestion that the researcher must seek colleagues’ comments on the findings as they emerge in order to confirm the credibility and reliability of the findings. Inter-rater reliability was established for this study in the following ways: Field notes were written on a weekly basis and were sent to my advisor for her comments. I adjusted my interpretations and focus of data collection according to her feedback. In addition, as a Palestinian researcher, I needed to be aware of my own biases and not allow these to interfere with my interpretation of the data. On one occasion, my two children who assisted with videotaping accused me of “dragging respondents towards the answers I wanted to hear.” I took their comments very seriously and redid two of the interviews to ensure credibility and reliability. I also relied on their feedback following the video taping of additional interviews. Finally, following the completion of the documentary film, the film was shown both to Arabic speakers and non-Arabic speakers to check for accuracy of translation and comprehensibility.

There were seven separate interviews in total; they each lasted one hour and a half and were done one at a time to maintain rapport with the respondents (Schumacher & Esham, 1986). They took place in the interviewees’ homes and, in the case of the doctor,
at his clinic. I used the focus group interviews with the children participants as a strategy for obtaining a better understanding of the refugees’ perspectives. It also was an easier format as there were 30 children divided into two gender-separated groups (15 boys and 15 girls) (Krueger, & Casey, 2000).

Interviews were conducted in a conversational tone to indicate empathy and understanding while conveying acceptance to encourage elaboration of subtle and vital data (Spradley, 1979). Each session was videotaped to assure completeness of the verbal interaction and to provide material for the production of a documentary film as part of my thesis, as well as to provide a reliability check. However, because my son or daughter assisted with videotaping, I was able to give my full attention to the interviewee. Immediately after each interview, I translated the interview from Arabic to English, edited and typed a draft and entered it into the final record with my initial insights and comments; I also noted the date and location. In each interview, I wrote down my own reflections, the interviewee’s reactions, and any additional information and meanings relevant to establish the validity of the data.

Artefact Collection

The third major source of data in my field research was “artefacts.” Many researchers such as Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein (1997) recommend that when researchers enter the field, they need to train themselves to attend to material objects. Because the content and function of written materials used by the children in the context of their play activities are important resources for understanding their play context and consequently the children’s play activities, I gathered the children’s drawings and writings and collected poems, in which they expressed their opinion about the current political situation.
Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used in this study (Chilcott, 1987). Thematic analysis describes the study of specific and distinctive recurring qualities, characteristics, subjects of discourse, or concerns expressed. The researcher selectively analyzed aspects of human actions and events that illustrated recurring themes. The complexity and the interrelationships of the events and human lives are emphasized. The analysis often identifies the themes by individual cases (people or incidents), and then synthesizes the themes across cases. The themes provide an explanation of the situation(s). The analysis of the collected data occurred throughout the study. This allowed additional thematic questions to emerge. I thus adjusted my research direction and process according to the new findings in mid-study, even though I had some guiding research questions at the onset of the study. At the outset of the study, my intention was to address the following questions:

1. What are the play activities that children in the refugee camp engage in?
2. What is the relationship between the children’s play activities and the current political climate?
3. How do the children define themselves as refugee children within the structure of their play activities?

During the course of the research, the following questions emerged from the interviews:

1. What are refugee people’s perspectives about gender differences in play?
2. What are refugee people’s perspectives about conflict solution?
3. What are refugee people’s goals in life and wishes for the future?

I began the analysis process by reviewing my field notes and the videotapes transcripts. I read and compiled the varied data into a coherent whole. This involved coding the data and identifying themes in each session. However, the categories were flexible and
were modified as further data analysis occurred. I acknowledge that my explanation is one interpretation and not the only “valid” interpretation that could be drawn from the data.

This study will contribute to the knowledge of policy makers by providing understanding the direct effects the current political conflict in the Palestinian territories has on Palestinian refugee children’s well-being who are living miles away from the actual physical conflict area. This study will also enable others to anticipate, but not predict, what may occur in similar situations.

Background to the Study

In this section, I use excerpts from my observations and interviews to describe, through the voices and actions of the participants, the context in which the study took place, including the history of the camp.

Life in Palestine Before 1948

In the following narrative, a first generation woman who is the grandmother of two of the participating children in this study, shares her experience of the uprooting, expulsion and refugee relocation. She also describes her feelings of security and happiness in Palestine before 1948:

Our village was called Tal Elbatikh in the land of Sedreh, and the British government took our land; my grandparents and uncles were strong enough to reclaim our land from the British government. But they didn’t get the land deeds; we had land that we cultivated with different groves, apricot, grapes, watermelon, wheat, moloukhieh, green beans, eggplant, turnip, and radish. We used to take the produce to a market in Lid and Ramleh, and Jerusalem, the big cities. We had cows and cattle. Almost every family had at least ten cows to produce milk; ghee, some we consumed at home and some we sold to Lid and Ramleh. Those are cities where people don’t raise cattle. My
aunt’s neighbours were Jews. We used to live with each other peacefully. Our country is like heaven. Swear to God its heaven. (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 1st generation, female)

Al Nakba (1948) – The Catastrophe

Similar themes in each family’s experience of Al Nakba appear in the narratives and life histories of the four interviewed households. The grandparents related their experiences of the fighting and their journeys into exile to their children and grandchildren. These stories they told me were familiar family memories of the third generation. For example:

Before the 1948 war the British troops withdrew, they left the tanks, cannons and guns for the Jews. Troubles started between the Arabs and the Jews; there was loss of control. The Jews killed any Arabic man they encountered; our men could not fight because they were busy with their work. But our women fought, one of them had the strength of ten men. The Jews were living on the opposite side of our village. Women went to sell eggs and chicken to the Jews; one of the women had a chicken or a rooster. She wanted to sell them for 2 Jordanian Dinars (JDS) ($4 CAD). The Jew talked with his friend in Hebrew. He told him “You imbecile, sorry for the expression, tonight we will attack them and slaughter them, by tomorrow we will take everything for free.

My aunt’s neighbours were Jews as I told you before. We used to live with each other peacefully, and she learned the Hebrew language from them. She understood what the Jew told his friend. She went back home and sent the young children to the groves to tell the farmers to pack and return home. That night we packed our things and fled to Ennabeh and Ramleh. Our family stayed in Ennabeh, which is on the east side of Ramleh. We lived in Ennabeh until wintertime and in
summer we built a small house. Then some people from AlNa’any came and asked for
a guide for their camels, but they were spies for the Jews. They were Arabs; Arabs
always are traitors.

My aunt who speaks Hebrew said; those are spies, our men didn’t believe her.
At midnight shooting started on our spot, we were strong and tough, but they wanted
to kill us. Around 40-50 families hid in the mountains; our men had rifles. Our men
fought them until the Jews withdrew; our losses were one camel and one cow. But
none of our men were injured. That night we walked to a village called Kharroubah.
For 4-5 days we were moving from one place to the other. We had carts but there
were no roads. We left them behind in Ennabeh. We didn’t take anything. We had
carts but there were no roads. We left them behind in Ennabeh. We didn’t take
anything but two covers or blankets to keep our children warm. We arrived in Rafidia
near Nablus west of Jerusalem, to a village called Abujkheidem; our family moved to
AlOjah. There were mosquitoes, which caused high fever amongst all of us. Later we
went back to Abujkheidem near Ramallah, a nice place to live, and we build houses
out of rocks. When we arrived there I was nine years old, and I grew up there and got
married. Then we started to come to east Jordan to Ghor to grow watermelon. We
are farmers we cannot live without work. (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 1st generation,
female)

Al Nazha (1967) – The Emigration

There are also more recent events, such as the 1967 war (Al-Nazha) that influenced
people’s perceptions of life in the camp. The war of 1967 took place between the Israelis and
the Arab’a army; it lasted for six days. The Israelis won and hundreds of thousands of
Palestinians became refugees.
The war in 1967 lasted for six days and then they announced that the Arab army had been defeated; The Israeli army occupied the cities and refugee camps. They had loud speakers. I was six years old. They ordered the residents of Palestine to leave within an hour, otherwise their homes would be demolished. Everybody expected that the Israelis were capable of turning their words into action, as they had done it in the past in Deir Yassin and Kebiah. We fled barefoot, not aware that we were supposed to take our belongings. We walked for four to five days until we reached the bridge over the Alsharia’a (known as the Jordanian river), separating Jordan and Palestine, but we found it damaged. I remember that there was a group of unidentified army men lying dead by the side of the road, I thought one of them was my uncle, I stood by his side weeping. One of our groups was carrying his daughter, after a while he realized that she was no longer there, she had slipped off his shoulders and he couldn’t feel her falling, due to the exhaustion of travelling on foot for five days continuously. He never found her to this day. He is still wondering if she is still alive (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 2nd generation, female).

Life in the Camp on Arrival

In the beginning, life in the camp was very difficult. In the Jordanian Albaqa’a camp, most of the families were given tents to live in upon arrival. Some families were given shelter by other families. They talked about the hardship, the overcrowding, and the lack of money and services. There were traumatic experiences in these households owing to the repeated experience of violence and political instability in the Palestinian territories, as elaborated in the following excerpts from four of the participating children’s fathers:

The Jordanian Army started to call by loud speakers that the one who does not go to the camp will not get a portion card and food supply. There was no work at that time.
We ended up in Albaqa’a camp. It is an agricultural muddy land; we used to wear long boots when we walked through the camp. The boots would stick in the mud and we went barefoot. They started to put up tents. A family of five got one tent with a support pole in the middle. The tent’s capacity was of one person. There was no room to place a kerosene stove to cook on. The tent was for all utilities; we used it as a kitchen, washroom, and a bathroom as well as sleeping area. (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 2nd generation, male).

Bread trucks started distributing bread as if the whole process was planned. Water tanks started supplying water for the refugees. The Iraqis established a clinic in the vicinity to aid the ailing refugees with the aid of the Jordanian army; although it was not sufficient for all of us because of the large demand and lack of medical personnel. This program ran for three years. Then we were provided with housing units measuring 3x4 meters made of asbestos or zinc plates, each family of 12-13 members was given one unit. Later they installed unisex public washrooms and public water tabs. Each block was assigned to a particular water tab, which caused great hardships such as unequal distribution that led to social problems. For example: a woman didn’t get her ratio of water, she started a fight with others because she needed water for her children. (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 2nd generation, male)

This situation persisted until 1985, until the ministry of water supply decided to install drainage and water systems. But unfortunately the main water pipe length was 6 meters; it was shared by two families instead of one, each paid 120 JDS ($240
CAD). But they didn’t allow us to build concrete rooms. We didn’t have the choice; it was either zinc roofs or nothing. (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 2nd generation, male)

Electrical supply came into effect 10 years ago. There were private electrical companies that supplied the camp at night with an inconsistent power supply that had a very low voltage. They installed electrical generators in the middle of the camp to supply us with electricity. Car batteries powered televisions. Locals agreed to buy electrical generators at their own expenses and they sold them to us. By 1991 there was electricity in the camp. (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 2nd generation, male)

Life in the Camp Now

The refugees all talked about the hardship, the overcrowding, the lack of money and services. All the households were concerned with the poor living conditions in the camp. Children, women and other members of the family provided sources of labour, service and income in times of distress. Um Mohammad, a 2nd generation female of one of the participating children’s mothers, is one example:

Orayb: Mohammad, are you working?
Um Mohammad: Yes I am.
Orayb: How many children do you have?
Um Mohammad: I have seven boys and two girls.
Orayb: What is the source of your income?
Um Mohammad: I collect green beans from the fields near the camp. I work from 6:00 am till 1:00 pm afternoon, to spend time on the house.
Orayb: How much do you get paid?
Um Mohammad: I make 3 JD ($6 CAD) a day.
Orayb: Does this income cover your expenses?

Um Mohammad: We try to manage.

Orayb: Does your husband work?

Um Mohammad: No he does not, he is sick.

Orayb: What is wrong with him?

Um Mohammad: He has a backache and problems with his leg.

Orayb: What does he do in his free time?

Um Mohammad: He sometimes goes down to the main road, he sits there enjoying the fresh air for a while and then he comes back home.

Orayb: With 3 JDS what can you buy?

Um Mohammad: Some bread, sugar, tea. There is not enough money; I have outstanding electrical bills that I am not able to pay.

Orayb: Are all your children at school?

Um Mohammad: Some are at school and some are not.

Orayb: How many attend schools?

Um Mohammad: Three of them, the rest are not at school; they need books and school supplies.

Orayb: That means school supplies are expensive?

Um Mohammad: Yes.

Orayb: How much do you pay for school?

Um Mohammad: It is half a Jordanian Dinar ($1 CAD).

Orayb: Even a Jordanian Dinar you cannot afford to pay?

Um Mohammad: If you want to calculate how many children I have they need books, clothes, and they need pocket money as well.
Orayb: Can you buy clothes for your children?

Um Mohammad: Not always.

Orayb: Then how do you dress them?

Um Mohammad: From charities.

(Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 2nd generation, female).

Children were also concerned with the poor living conditions in the camp such as small houses that were not big enough for their families or for them:

I am not happy in the camp. Because we sleep in the patio, our home is small. There is no space for us. We are a family of 14, seven girls and seven boys, in addition to my parents. (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 4th generation, female)

The United Nations Relief and Working Agency provides free medical services for the camp. There are also private clinics that offer these services for basic charges. One of the doctors in the camp described some of the existing health concerns:

There are widespread cases of certain diseases among children, such as bacterial infections and diarrhoea, and other illnesses like chicken pox and scabies because of overcrowding, poor ventilation and poverty; some families raise animals inside their homes, such as a cow or a lamb to support themselves financially. This causes certain diseases. There are different categories of patients. Some people are waiting and hoping to return to their place of origin as if they were waiting by the radio for any instruction to go back home. For example, right after the death of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin. I treated different cases of strokes and fainting experienced by old people who could not handle the stress of the tragedy. (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 2nd generation, family doctor, male)
One of the children shared this observation about health issues:

*Some homes are made of zinc roofs that have holes. On rainy days the water leaks from the roof. In summer some people get heart disease, asthma, and heat stroke.*

*(Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 4th generation, female)*

The problem of unemployment was a concern in all of the households.

*Our youth cannot find a job. If they do find a job, it is a low salary, they are demoralized, and if they work, the highest wage is 90 JDS per month, okay, what does 90JDS ($180 CAD) do, it worth nothing nowadays. They hire foreign labours because they are less paid* *(Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 2nd generation, female)*

**Education**

The UNRWA provides the camp residents in Albaqa’a with different funds channelled through 20 installations operated by approximately 600 UNRWA staff members. The organization provides education during the first 10 years, and then children of school age enrol at government schools for their secondary education. There are 16 schools where approximately 15,000 children are enrolled *(Fafo Report 177, 1994)*. In addition, a clinic and social services are available to the most-needy. Camp residents acknowledge UNRWA as their welfare state in exile. The native language of Palestinians in the refugee camp is Arabic. The population density inside the camp is very high, which has resulted in overcrowding and created pressure on the existing infrastructure’s sewage, electricity, and water systems *(Fafo Report 177, 1994)*.

The UNRWA is the main provider of education in the camp, although government schools and private schools are available. Mothers in particular expressed concerns about school fees:
We pay 1JD ($2 CAD) per year at UNRWA schools. As for public schools it depends on the level. From grades 1-5 it is 3.15JD ($6.50 CAD) per year, from grades 6-10 it is 4.15JDS ($8.50 CAD) per year and for high school it is 6.15JDS ($12.50 CAD) per year. As for university it is very expensive. (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 2nd generation, female)

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Nothing is better than education; we are nothing without education. Education gives value to humans especially us the Palestinians, we are without money or support and we have no choice but education. Parents with low income will tighten their expenses to save for their children’s education If my son were to tell me that he is going to quit school, I would rather die than see him do that. (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 2nd generation, female)

Sense of community

Adults spoke of a sense of community and support. Despite the lack of infrastructure, people had learned to live together:

People’s relationships are very good. People are compassionate and cooperative. We should take care of each other. Community cohesion is important to put up with the miserable situation, for example; if my neighbour has a wedding or a condolence, I
will open my house to support him and vice-versa. Overcrowding makes us very close to each other.” (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 2nd generation, female)

Religion as a coping strategy

Many people in the camp rely on their religious beliefs to help them cope with adversity in the camp. One of the mother’s shares her perspective in this example:

People are going back to religion. In the past people were not so committed to religion; the majority of girls now are wearing Hijab (Scarves). Because they believe it avoids them sanity. Twenty years ago you barely heard people go for Omra (Islamic duty for Muslims before Hajj occurs). But nowadays, children aged 12-14 go with their parents to Omra. With poor living conditions and the misery, people find no one to turn to, but God. We were far away from obeying God’s rules, he punished us by causing the suffering at hand now, and we lost our country. Nowadays you find long covered dresses everywhere. At universities, the majority of girls are wearing nice long dresses with scarves, and it is cheap at the same time. For example my son does not like his sister to go out without a scarf; it is odd to go out uncovered in this community. (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 2nd generation, female)

Children also turn to religion as a coping strategy:

I pray to God, I go to the mosque for Friday prayers. The Sheikh teaches us Quran and Hadith, we listen to his speech on Fridays. (Albaqa’a camp, Jordan, 4th generation, male)

At its core, this is a study of childhood in a Palestinian refugee camp. The study specifically addresses how children and parents cope in situations of prolonged conflict and forced migration. It examines, through the lens of play, what happens to children’s lives
when their families are uprooted and forced to move. The children and families who
volunteered to participate in this study are representative of the refugee population in camp in
general. In order to maintain anonymity and privacy of all those who provided information
for this study, I have used pseudonyms. The one exception to this is the camp doctor who
agreed to be identified.
During the data collection for this study, I struggled to find a way to represent the lives and experiences of the children and families in this camp. The task seemed overwhelming. In many ways, the conventional print-based modes of presenting social science data seemed to betray the very nature of this study. Instead, the data demanded a more holistic presentation, one that allowed the reader to grasp 'the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences' (Davis, 1997, p. 30). Early in the study, the families in the camp encouraged me to videotape the children at play because they wanted the world to "see how they live." This became the deciding factor in choosing to represent the major findings of my study as a documentary film, which I have titled *The Forgotten Childhood of Albaqa’a*. This documentary is about the play of Palestinian refugee children in Albaqa’a camp in Amman, Jordan. It emphasises the effect of the Palestinian – Israeli conflict on the children of the camp. It displays the connection between the children’s play context and the events happening in the political world. The documentary also highlights the internal struggle of the people of the camp—their struggle with daily life stress, poverty, and injustice. The children in the camp are the heirs to 53 years of mistreatment, war, and injustice.
CHAPTER 5

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLAY AND CONFLICT:

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN IN THE ALBAQA’A REFUGEE CAMP

The impact of war on children in general, and refugee children in particular, is startling. Children who experience being uprooted and who are forced to face an uncertain future in a very constrained living environment are deprived of the opportunity to play in safe, open spaces equipped with appropriate outdoor playgrounds. Refugees feel a sense of loss of their individuality and personal identity because of the loss of their homes and the experience of displacement, compounded by the lack of privacy and permanence in the refugee camps. Nevertheless, refugee children create their own spaces to find a safe place to play. Play is the tool with which they discover and build on their own personal resources. Media such as drawing, storytelling, performing, movement, and creative expressive games all facilitate refugee children’s expression and exploration of the reality they are in and its emotional significance for them. The conditions within the camp in combination with parents and their religious and political beliefs have a profound influence on the nature and structure of the children’s play and other creative activities.

The Role of Play

- Violence in Palestine is affecting refugee children in Albaqa’a camp by promoting insecurity, aggression, and frustration. Children are inhibited from blossoming in their environment due to poverty and small spaces.

- Refugees have a sense of structure in their lives; they make sense of difficult experiences, as well as accepting and processing the feelings associated with them. They integrate these understandings into their view of themselves and the world to restore a sense of well-being.
Remembering and honouring the martyr was a salient feature in refugee children's play and it provided them with a sense of connection that can help comfort them.

It is not only the daily violent scenes of war on television and in newspapers that impede refugee children's play; poverty and hunger were also factors.

A wide variety of games show that the children find ways of expressing themselves and sharing their experiences, as well as discovering and mobilizing their own resources by compiling and performing stories, drawings and poems as well as using other playful media (dance, drama, songs).

The refugee children tackled difficult issues through their play activities. They used play as a tool with which to express themselves and cope with the reality of the conflict in the Middle East.

The children used traditional forms of play as a means of expressing themselves in a culturally appropriate way, as was evident in their sociodramatic play. In *Wake up Sleepy People*, they practiced a religious Islamic ritual; in their "wedding" play, they practiced social and cultural rituals.

The children used drama and dance to facilitate self expression and to work on the many problems and issues they faced in their changing lives. For example, in their sociodramatic play *Opinion*, they were expressing the effects of the media on middle class Palestinians living away from the conflict area. Performers dramatized in a sarcastic way middle class Palestinians who are busy with their private lives, affected by modern life, and careless about their Palestinian cause. Refugee children are expressing their opinions regarding middle class Palestinian who are living outside refugee camps on how they do not care any more about the core issue of the Palestinian struggle against the occupation of their country.
The children's play and their free drawings indicated a striking preoccupation with war and often an obsession with themes connected with war.

In their drawings, children showed a dramatic use of colour, including symbolic use of colours such as red-green-black, which represent the Palestinian flag. In general, there was a sombre tone to many of the drawings, typically portrayed through the themes of martyr, funerals, tears, and jail.

The refugee children's play contained the vital ingredient of normal play—the elaboration of experience. For example, they elaborated on their religious experiences in their games with rules (e.g., "How are you our old sheikh?") and by classifying winners and losers in "Hell and Heaven".

Their play also demonstrated an increased level of aggression (e.g., arguments over rules in games occurred often and usually ended in fights).

Overwhelmingly, the children perceived the end of the war involving Palestine in terms of the termination of Israel rather than in terms of a reconciliation (i.e., war was the only suggested solution to end the conflict), and this also showed in their games (i.e. war against Israel).

Dance provided the children with an opportunity to express themselves without using words. Dance also provided an opportunity to meet with same-age peers, while providing an outlet for their emotions. Through dance they learn to relax, express themselves spontaneously, and make contacts with adults.

Creative activities helped the refugee children express themselves, facilitated adaptation to new situations, and enabled them to go on living with difficult situations such as displacement, poverty, and war.
In their play, the refugee children displayed, in an obsessive manner, their reactions to war. In their games they re-enacted distressing events such as martyrdom, mourning, loss, and being uprooted. To do so, they used a variety of different methods involving various symbolic objects (e.g., toy guns, fire crackers, Palestinian flag, microphones, scarves). In their games, they reflected on the issues of concern to them in the real-life world of the camp, rather than on issues from an artificial context. For example, in the dramatized play Opinion, they expressed freely their reactions to the carelessness and selfishness of the middle-class Palestinian people.

Sociodramatic play evoked a wide range of emotions and interests. Through play, the children learned to differentiate and recognize different feelings such as sadness, grief, happiness, mourning, and courage.

The children also showed feelings of anger, sadness, revenge and identity in their drawings.

Particular songs and poems made the children think of stories related to Palestine and to their refugee status. For example, in their song Alrabaieh, they expressed their refugee status when they sang “Alarabaieh, Alrabaieh [a traditional Palestinian dance]. Albaqa’a youth are Palestinians forever.” Also, in their poem Prisoner’s Call, they described the situation of a Palestinian child who is deprived of his father’s love because he is away in a prison in a “small, tiny, creepy cell.”

The Role of Parents

Parents are the main source of protection and care for the children.

Experiences of exile, loss of status, and poverty have a profound impact on the dynamic of the family. Parents’ experience feelings of hopelessness about bringing up their children, affording school expenses, toys, nutrition, and education.
• Parents lack economic support. The impact of the economic and political situation on their capacity to parent is obvious.

• Refugees feel a loss of a sense of individuality and personal identity caused by repeated experiences of moving and displacement (many of them fled twice from Palestine) as well as by the loss of their homes. This is compounded by the lack of privacy and permanence (Albaqa’a camp is an emergency camp) and the lack of, and need for, a sense of personal space.

• Despite their limited income, parents facilitate resilience in their children by encouraging them to continue their education. Education is their highest priority for both boys and girls. It gives them hope for the future and confidence in their own survival. It provides structure to their daily lives, a sense of purpose, and the rewards of achievement and the self-esteem that result from it.

• Parents are anxious about their children’s future and they lack confidence about their future ability to find work.

The Role of Society

• These refugee children view the world as unfair, unjust, and callous because they interpret events through the experiences and perspectives of the adults in their family.

• Wider social values also affect refugee children’s interpretation of the world (e.g., closeness of the parent-child relationship, valuing education, land assertion and the right to return to Palestine).

• A real sense of the community exists in the camp, which provides the children with a sense of belonging, communal identity and security.

• Refugee children become more resilient with the social support of their parents, relatives, neighbours, and peers.
The Role of Religious Beliefs

- Religious values also affect refugee children’s interpretations of life through such elements as the fear of God and obeying Islamic rules (praying, praising the martyr, Jihad against Israel as a religious mission).
- Religious beliefs play a major role in assisting this conservative society in mitigating the effects of war through praying, reading the Koran, and regularly visiting mosques.

The Role of Political Beliefs

- Political beliefs also affect refugee children’s interpretations of life. They view the world as being dominated by the two superpowers, Israel and the United States. They already want to be affiliated with certain political groups such as Hamas and Jihad Islami.
- Refugees develop an understanding of the war events by referring to their set of political beliefs, and the meaning is attached to the events not only as they are experienced individually, but also collectively as community experiences.
- Refugees have a sense of meaning in their lives that is formed by their political ideology and religious beliefs, which provide them with a sense of coherence.

Play and War in the Lives of Refugee Children

Children and their families are affected by war in many different ways. Wars have profound indirect effects on the lives of people such as poverty, unemployment, and a widespread sense of anxiety, despair and insecurity. The need to escape, the process of fleeing, the sense of loss, and the experience of becoming ‘displaced persons’ or ‘refugees’ all bring with them a range of new threats and deprivations. These kinds of experiences cause great distress and may have long-term effects on a child’s sense of well-being, particularly on the
ways in which children perceive themselves and the world around them, how they feel, how they behave, and how they relate to other people.

Play and Development

My observations of refugee children's play context confirmed the Piaget's developmental view about play's characteristics in school age children. Through play children construct an understanding of concepts and feelings; play is at the root of children's learning and development. Children play in their own unique ways to make sense of individual experience, which causes them to modify their thinking and take the experience into account. In this way, the content of play evolves and changes as mastery and understanding progress. The development of children is best served when the origins and themes of play come from the children themselves. When they are in control, they are choosing content based on their individual needs and experiences, as well as on their current levels of understanding. The common theme of refugee children's play, that of pretending to shoot or kill, means quite a different thing to a child then to an adult. Refugee children do not fully understand time as a continuum and they do not think about death as a permanent and irreversible condition. They can pretend to shoot an "enemy" dead one moment and then interact with the same "enemy" the next moment. They can take on the role of the "good guy" or "the bad guy," and "kill" people without understanding the meaning or consequences of killing in the real world.

When taking on the role of the powerful character of an Israeli soldier, refugee children are learning how to control their impulses as they struggle to stay within acceptable boundaries and receive feedback from their surrounding. When a player is pretending to be a "bad guy" and pushes a "good guy" player around, he claims he is doing so because he has the power of his toy gun; the sense of reason of the other children and of the adults around
him help him to learn the difference between reality and make believe. In their varied play, refugee children are also struggling to understand the things they hear in the news about their counterparts under occupation in the Palestinian territories. The refugee child sees Israeli soldiers with guns on television and brings this image into play in an effort to understand it and/or make it less frightening.

During my observations of refugee children’s play in the alleys, I found that war games provided them with feelings of satisfaction because it helps them to experience power and control at an age when many of life’s experiences can lead to feelings of helplessness and lack of control; war games embodied simple black and white characteristics which neatly fit in the way children view and interpret the world.

It is thus not surprising that the majority of the refugee children’s games where war games as these accelerate their development through a complex and active process in which the content of play is used to come to grips with the political conflict in reality. However, when this conventionality, lack of variety, meagre content and endless repetition of the same style of games characterize refugee children’s play, optimal development may be impeded. Children’s playing needs are best met when their activities are mainly spontaneous rather than merely imitative and by the degree in which assimilation rather than accommodation predominates. Refugee children are use the media’s and their families’ repetitive stories about the conflict as a base to imitate television images and behaviours. These offer little variation, elaboration or evidence that they are making inner meaning of their own, it is clear that the children’s developmental needs are not being met through war play, especially considering the reality of their plight.
Games with Rules

According to Piaget (1962), games with rules characterize school-age children's play. This aspect of Piaget's theory is consistent with my observations of the refugee children; I found that of the thirty-six games that I recorded, twenty-three of them were games with rules. Johnson (1998) describes how school-age children engage in games with rules by designing and implementing a plan or a strategy, and playing both competitively and cooperatively with other players. In the games with rules played in the refugee camp (e.g., hide and seek), there was clear evidence that players implemented a plan: they choose the number of players, play location, secret words (e.g., banana meant to go out of the hidden place, while cucumber meant not to go out), and the age of players who would participate. Boys always excluded young children. The children played both cooperatively and competitively. In the war game, cooperation occurred within the same group (Palestinians) to defeat the opposite group (Israelis), and competition occurred with one group trying to defeat the other. Winners were more often from the Israeli group.

Players participated in all types of games with consistent and complex rules. For example, in seven stones complex rules were used in the set up of seven irregular shaped stones, which should be set up to make the task harder for players to hit the stones with a ball. If the player succeeds in knocking them down, his group chases the other group and tries to hit them with the ball. The tagged player then goes out. During the chase, one player tries to set up the stones without the opposite team noticing; if he succeeds his group wins and gets a turn to knock down the stones.

Some games are constant such as tag, whereas others are cyclical or seasonal such as marbles or hopscotch (Manning, 1998). In the refugee camp, individual players engaged in different constant tag games in the alleys such as high and low and electricity, and seasonal
games such as marbles (boys) and hopscotch (girls). Tag games, because of the vigorous physical activity, challenge, and risk taking involved, provide players with opportunities to try new skills and to learn what their capabilities and limitations are. Narrow spaces and unavailable appropriate outdoor equipment make it harder for players to explore their environment, exposing them to the possibility of injuries. The children are nonetheless creative in finding places to hide; they climb on roof tops and electrical poles, which demonstrates Factor's (1993) argument that children will struggle to play, even under terrible conditions.

Games with rules typically require players to remain engaged in play for a longer period to time. For example, the war game lasted for fifteen minutes. Players were able to submit to the rules of the game and exercised self control as a player. Nevertheless, arguments over the rules of the games often occurred and ended with fights. Refugee children's games with rules have been incorporated into science, mathematics and reading as well as physical education (Barta & Schaelling; 1998; Damili & DeVries, 1980; Devries & Kohlberg, 1990; Hewit, 1997; Jarrett, 1997; Owens & Sanders, 1998). From my observations I found that refugee children used mental operations (Berk, 1996) in a logical manner. For example, they used subtraction, division, and multiplication in marbles. They used classes and subclasses to classify objects (Berk, 1996) based on familiar experiences. For example, in the colour game they classified winners in heaven and losers in hell). They ordered items according to dimension, length, or diameter, and used special reasoning as they understood that place permits players to give directions on how to get from one point to another. For example, in making paper kites or playing marbles, children combine distance with speed, and understand that the faster the speed, the shorter the time to reach a point or location (Acredolo, Adams, & Schmid, 1984).
All of the games with rules were child-initiated and evolved from practicing with adult siblings who played a vital role in scaffolding their brothers’ and sisters’ level of cognitive development by transferring their own play experiences. Their games with rules also reflected the broader culture and traditions (Schwartzman, 1976). Transformation from simple games to more complex games with rules can be gradual and specific to familiar play activities that are embedded within this culture. For example, in *How are you our old Sheikh?*, the old Sheikh, who is a religious old man, is a common cultural figure that characterizes a respected, religious, honest personality in this conservative society.

**Sociodramatic Play**

In my observations, it was apparent that the children signalled one another in play, as Garvey’s theory suggests. I elaborate on Garvey’s work by applying her theory to the language implied by refugee children in their sociodramatic play, stories, games, poems, and drawings, as it reflects their refugee status, struggle, and perspectives about the current political conflict. For example, in their drawings, most of the children portrayed Palestine in shackles and wrote statements such as “Palestine is cuffed with wires that she cannot even breathe.” Also, in the story *Aya*, the writer talked about feelings of fear from the occupation and anger because the Israeli soldiers arrested her father.

Of the 36 games recorded, 7 were examples of sociodramatic play. Smilansky’s (1962) framework was used for interpreting the refugee children’s pretend play and its relation to their socio-economic status. Smilansky (1968) suggested that low income or poverty can have negative effects on children’s play, causing them to engage in lower forms of play such as exploration and functional play instead of higher forms of play such as constructive and sociodramatic play (Pelligrini & Boyd, 1993; Smilansky, 1990).
School-age children often engage in sociodramatic play outside of school; in many Western societies they build forts and tree houses, and also use miniature figures in fantasy play (Manning, 1998). In the alleys of this camp, however, you barely find a tree that a child can use to practice motor skills such as climbing. Narrow framed spaces in the alleys and housing units do not permit people to even plant a rose as the walls of one unit lean on the walls of another. As a result of these cramped conditions and in spite of them, players played within their home environment for safety reasons, and were monitored by their parents, and created their own miniature toys from junk. For example, in *Wake Up Sleepy People*, performers used a plastic bucket and stick as a replica for a drum.

Play, Language, and Literacy

The pretend play of these children takes on the character of a story line (Gilbert, 1994; Kendrick, 2003). In Saber and Ahmad, for example, two Palestinian farmers dare to break the curfew imposed by Israelis on their village. This act of defiance caused one of the farmers to be killed by the occupiers and become a martyr. Sociodramatic play was planned carefully before its enactment as performers composed and improvised the story line themselves. They distributed roles to each performer, taking into consideration his/her physical features. For instance, in playing war, children with darker skin were assigned the role of Palestinians, whereas blond children played Israelis. Planning the storyline was also proceeded meticulously as they prepared the Palestinian flag to cover the martyr, made polystyrene guns, and used watermelon to represent blood. Performers from both groups used accents and dialects to reflect the culture they represented by re-enacting scenes from television to support the plot (e.g. the performers used the Arabic language with different accents to differentiate between Palestinians and Israelis. In addition, they used double-meanings and metaphors in their pretend play. For example, in *Saber and Ahmad* the children
made reference to blood boiling, and Saber, which is a metaphor for patience in Arabic language, was used to refer to the idea that Palestinian children had been patient during the many years of the conflict.

Smilansky (1968) suggested that low income or poverty can have negative effects on children’s play, causing them to engage in lower forms of play such as exploration and functional play instead of higher forms of play such as constructive and sociodramatic play (Pelligrini & Boyd, 1993; Smilansky, 1990). I found no relation between socioeconomic status and the refugee children’s quality of play. On the contrary, refugee children engaged in a wide variety of creative performances where they improvised and composed scenarios by themselves or with the help and supervision of their adult siblings, who played a vital role in improving their literacy learning and performing capabilities. In this regard, my findings support those of other researchers such as Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey (1999) and Schwartzman (1976) who demonstrated that children who engage in adult work or who grow up in poverty do engage in dramatic play with other children. Their play does not depend on having toys or materials for pretend play, nor are same-age peers a crucial element (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999; Schwartzman, 1976).

I found that the language used by refugee children in their stories, games, poems, and drawings reflects their refugee status, struggle, and perspectives about the current political conflict. My findings are similar to Garvey’s (1984) notion that meanings in play reflect real-world behaviour and incorporate children’s interpretations and wishes.

Refugee children were more subtle in the way they incorporated language into their play activities. In their songs (e.g., Boys of our Alleys) they used metaphors such as blood flood and exaggeration such as drowned everything. They also used similes (e.g., we became refugees, like a bird travelling around the world). Girls in particular incorporated language in their rhyming games
(e.g., *Sleepy Princess* and *Fatima Fatima*). Boys incorporated rhyme with language in the sociodramatic play episode *Wake up Sleepy People*.

Emergent literacy is seen as developing within the child with reading and writing evolving through opportunities to engage in literacy activities (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). As refugee children watched news and read newspapers about the political conflict in Palestine, they explored their reactions and feelings through their play stories. For example, *Aya* is about a girl who wanted to play outside her home but could not because there were Israeli soldiers coming toward her home. They pushed the door and came in and arrested her father; she started calling “father, father.” This effect was also shown in their drawings, which were supported with verbal declarations reflecting their feelings, sad expressions, resilience. For example, they drew pictures of Palestine shackled with barbed wire, unable to breathe. Adult siblings serve as facilitators in setting up play environments and in promoting their brothers and sisters literacy learning abilities by providing them with audiocassettes of patriotic songs and by drawing models during play activities. This scaffolding relationship between older and younger siblings contradicts the notion that it is primarily the teacher who scaffolds or supports language and literacy development by modelling literacy during play activities reported by many researchers (e.g., Chang & Yawkey, 1998; Morrow & Rand, 1001; Pickett, 1998).
The Present and the Future

More than two-thirds of the Palestinian refugee population in Albaqa’ a camp are children under the age of 17. The majority of Palestinian refugees in this camp, therefore, consist of the community’s most vulnerable members. Not only are they in a crucial stage of physical and mental development, but they are also an indirect target of the Israeli occupation. As the fourth generation of Palestinian trauma, moreover, they are the bearers of the accumulated heavy inheritance of national loss, which raises grave concerns about the present and future of the refugee children in this camp.

The plight of the Palestinian refugee children is unknown to most Western people. Media reports typically slander Palestinian children’s character, culture, and even religious principles. The reality of these children’s lives is invisible in international news coverage. Instead, the media portray Palestinian refugee children as unloved by their families, who push them into harm’s way to achieve political gain or use them for economic reasons. Moreover, fertility is treated as an epidemic, and the culture is largely stereotyped as one of violence and hatred. Given that the children in the Albaqa’a camp have become more accustomed to violent scenes, the demolition of houses, sad news from close relatives, and the loss of loved ones than they have to the singing of birds, and given that violent scenes permeate their homes through different media channels or newspapers, it is no wonder that they invent their play from such reality. In fact, the Israeli soldier versus the fidaii (one who risks his life voluntarily) boy is the game played most often in the children’s alleys.

Poverty causes malnutrition and poor living conditions cause chronic diseases. These predispose refugee children to life-threatening diseases, which have profound effects on their development. Refugee children in Albaqa’a camp suffer from increasing rates of poverty. According to camp dwellers, 80 percent of people in the camp live below the poverty line.
Overcrowding in classrooms where there are often 45-50 students per class, and unavailable extra curricula activities affect the quality of instruction and a child's ability to perform well in class. Additional factors such as increasingly stressful home environments exacerbate the difficult situation. Unemployment has risen due to an imported foreign labours force. Consequently, large numbers of children are forced to play an adult role and work to help their families survive. I heard poignant stories of children who worked in the summer from 5.00 in the morning to 6.00 in the evening in different factories due to difficult economic circumstances in their families. Refugee children in Albaqa'a camp are under considerable stress. Many of them have difficulties in school, particularly in reading and writing. Symptoms of aggression in their play style were also evident in difficulty of controlling hostility or quarrelling and fighting with adults and peers.

Despite the adverse circumstances in their lives, however, Palestinian refugee children in Albaqa’a camp also exhibit resilience. Examples include the children’s willingness to volunteer at the refugee’s summer camp, which was organized by the local camp community committee, support each other in social occasions, and continue to attend school despite numerous obstacles.

This study showed that refugee children in Albaqa’a camp believe that the political situation in Palestine is unlikely to improve; their first priority and main way of coping with the current situation was to prepare for the future through personal and academic “self improvement.” Even though our refugee children’s suffering will continue as long as Israel occupies our land, it is essential that in the meantime we provide them with the necessary conditions for healthy development—conditions such as stability, recreation, and nutrition. What is needed more urgently, however, is a public awareness and organized efforts to protect these children from the dangers that surround them. These children need to know that
there are people living outside their framed world who think about them and who are willing to help them.
References


*Soviet Psychology, 12,* 62-76.


