

Mental health of activists in Iraq

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Abstract:

Background: Iraq witnessed a new phenomenon, thousands of young demonstrators were flooding streets of Baghdad, chanting their poignant trademark slogan "nureedwatan". In Iraq, a little research was focusing on mental health. No published data on mental health of protestors.

Objective: to comment on mental health of protestors.

Methods: A total of 460 protestors from Tahrir square (center of Baghdad). Their age range 20-40 years giving male to female ratio of 2.28:1. The personnel team was at corners of the square. The variables of interest were emotional, social, psychological well-being in addition to demographic information.

Results: Out of the total, 98 (21.3%) were flourishing. No significant association between age and the flourishing ($p=0.4$). Sex was not associated with flourishing ($p=0.08$). The flourishing increased significantly with educational level ($p=0.0001$).

Conclusion: Protesting as a collective action enhanced flourishing among Iraqi youths.

Keywords: mental health, flourishing, protesting, collective action

Introduction:

Until recently, mental health was undefined, unmeasured, and unrecognized. US surgeon-general-executive established a conception of mental health in 1999.¹ WHO published a report on mental health in 2004.² Complete mental health was called flourishing.³ It was suggested that working toward something bigger than the self (collective activity) is a basic motive promotes mental wellbeing.⁴

Iraq witnessed a new phenomenon, thousands of young demonstrators were flooding the streets of Baghdad, chanting their poignant trademark slogan "Nureedwatan" i.e., we want a homeland. The protesters quickly fighting pitched battles with the police. It is a collective activity. It is look like collective actions occurred in the world e.g., riots in London 2011 and 2017.⁴ Also, it is like that in Spain (Indignados) as a reaction to global economic crisis.⁵

Research in a number of disciplines reported that 19 types of psychological changes occurred through participation in collective actions.⁴

Adolescents engaged in activism were found to have fewer personal worries and grater happiness later in life. Participants were noticed changes in their traits such as dominance, self-acceptance, empathy, and independence.⁶

In Iraq, a little research was focusing on mental health of adolescents.⁷No published data on the new phenomenon of protesting which was the impetus to carry out this study to comment on the changes developed among activists.

Material and methods:

A total of 460 protesters from Al-Tahrir square (center of Baghdad, Iraq) was included in this study. Their age ranged 20 to 40 years giving male to female ratio of 2.28:1. They were recruited from the field in the Tahrir square by walking and stationary sampling.⁷ (it is a specific protest fieldwork sampling method). Interview was on spot first, then a questionnaire was filled in a tent in the field (Al-Tahrir square). The research team with trained personnel at corners of the Tahrir square to gather the information. A verbal consent of each protester selected to participate in the research.

Data were obtained by direct interview. The research team visited the Tahrir square several times (day and night) to carry out collection of data. The variables of interest were emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being. Demographic variables were of interest.

Measurement of variables of interest of emotional well-being (positive affect and avowed quality of life), psychological well-being (self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others) and social well-being (social acceptance, social actualization, social contribution, social coherence, and contribution). The three scales served as indicators of mental health.⁹

Summed scale of emotional well-being (single item of satisfaction plus scale of positive affect), summed scale of psychological well-being (6 scales summed together) and summed social well-being (5 scales summed together) showed flourishing if the output all the virtual marks.

Student's t test was used to examine the difference in age between flourished protestors and non-flourished ones (languishing). Chi square was carried out to examine the effect of sex and educational level with flourishing. P value of < 0.05 was considered significant.

Results:

Out of the total, 98 (21.3%) were flourishing. The age of flourishing protestors was 19 ± 10.5 years, and in those languished ones was 18 ± 10.9 years. No significant difference in age between those flourishing and those languished ($t = 0.8$, $d.f. = 458$, $p = 0.4$). Sixty-six (20.6%) of males and 32 (22.8%) of females were flourishing. Sex was not significantly associated with flourishing ($\chi^2 = 0.28$, $d.f. = 1$, $p = 0.08$). Seventy- one (21.3%) of those undergraduates and 27 (20.9%) of graduates were flourishing. Education level was not significantly affecting the flourishing state ($\chi^2 = 0.01$, $d.f. = 1$, $p = 0.9$). These findings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of flourishing among protestors

Variable	Age (year)		
	total	mean	SD
Flourishing	98	19	10.5
Languishing	362	18	10.9
	$t = 0.8$, $d.f. = 458$, $p = 0.4$		
	Total	Flourishing	
		No.	%
Sex			
Male	320	66	20.6
Female	140	32	22.8
	$\chi^2 = 0.28$, $d.f. = 1$, $p = 0.08$		
Educational level			
< university graduation	331	71	21.3
University graduation	129	27	20.9
	$\chi^2 = 0.01$, $d.f. = 1$, $p = 0.9$		

Discussion:

Flourishing means the complete mental health i.e.the flourished individual showed lowest level of perceived helplessness (low perceived control in life), the highest level of functional goals (e.g., knowing what they want from life), the highest level of self-reported resilience (e.g., learning from adversities) and highest level of intimacy (e.g., feeling very close with family and friends).^{3,7,9}

This study showed that the rate of flourishing among activists (protesters) was 21.3%. It is much higher than that reported in Iraq previously (5.6%).⁷ The difference might be attributed to the involvement in protesting. Participation in protesting and social movement are

collective activity. Literature reported that participation in collective activity lead to psychological changes.^{4,5} A growing body of research suggested that engaging in activism promotes well-being and many psychologists and sociologists stated that working toward something bigger than self is a basic motive promotes well-being.^{11,12} Recently, it was found that actions directed toward the welfare of one's community facilitate personal well-being.¹³ It was mentioned that within-group processes and appraisal of collective actions might induce psychological changes toward empowerment of new efficacy perception.¹⁴ The collective action offer participants a place to reassess their perception. The changes might affect relationships, work-life, extended involvement, consumer behavior, radicalization/politicization, legitimacy, self-assessment / self-confidence, well-being, knowledge, level of activity ...etc., which in turn affect mental health.

The observed figure of flourishing (21.3%) is much lower than that in United States (40%)¹⁵. The difference demonstrated the gap between developed and the developing countries. Al-Diwan et al⁷ explained in detail the determinants of this gap e.g., exposure to national trauma, malnutrition, maternal and fetal perinatal risks ...etc. In developed world, collective actions among students are promoted e.g., climate change protest, bullying prevention, dress code policies ...etc., which in turn reflect a positive effect on mental health. In developing countries, the collective actions are inhibited unless supporting a political or religious leader. In contrast with that reported in Iraq previously,⁷ no significant impact for age on flourishing ($p = 0.4$). The difference might be explained by fact that previous finding was a decade ago. There were no collective actions at that time i.e., protesting.

In the line with previous finding,⁷ sex was not affecting flourishing ($p=0.08$).

It was observed that flourishing after participation in collective actions was not affected by education level of participants ($p=0.9$). Literature¹⁶, shows that participation in collective actions is creating positive change in mental health. Recently, it was referred that riot in case of George Floyd in US reshaped the moral leader in country.¹⁷

Conclusion:

Protesting as a collective action enhanced flourishing (complete mental health) of Iraqi youths.

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