

Comparing psychological responses of internally displaced and non-displaced Turkish Cypriots

Deniz Ergun, MSc, Mehmet Çakici, MD, PhD & Ebru Çakici, MD, PhD*

Abstract

During the 1963-1964 ethnic conflict and 1974 war in Cyprus, many Turkish Cypriots were displaced by Greek Cypriot forces. The psychological condition of Turkish Cypriots after these conflicts has not been studied to the present day. At the time of the Annan Plan Referendum on April 24th 2004, when people on both sides were to decide whether to reunite or not, and when old traumatic events were being discussed in vivid detail, the psychological responses of the internally displaced and non-displaced Turkish Cypriots were investigated.

The sample of this study derived from a sample of a larger household survey study conducted on 408 adult people taken randomly from three different districts. People who settled down in Cyprus after 1974 or who had never experienced a war in Cyprus were not included in the study. 129 Turkish Cypriots who experienced either the 1963-64 conflict or the 1974 war were included in the present study. 86 of these had been displaced. The first part of the questionnaire that was administered to the subjects included demographic characteristics, war-related traumatic experiences, the level of seriousness, and traumatic incidents resulting from other circumstances. In the second part of the questionnaire, the Traumatic Stress

Symptom Checklist (TSSC) and Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) were used to investigate the symptoms of the post-traumatic process.

The outcomes indicate that the internally displaced persons (IDPs) were subjected to traumatic incidents at a higher degree due to killing, displacement, captivity, or killing of family members and relatives. The rate of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) of IDPs is 20%, and is significantly higher than for non-displaced persons. The comparison of BSI subscales show that IDPs had a higher level of depression scores than the non-displaced persons. The somatization subscale scores are higher in non-displaced persons.

The study reveals a higher frequency of war-related traumatic events in IDPs than in non-displaced people, greater suffering from post-traumatic stress and more negative beliefs about future reunion.

Keywords: internal displacement, PTSD, Cyprus conflict

Introduction

The definition of internally displaced persons is given by the Representative of the Secretary General on Internally Displaced Persons as followed: "Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situation of generalized violence, violation of human rights or natural or man-

*) Near East University
Psychology Department
Turkey
ecakici@neu.edu.tr

made disasters; and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.”¹

Although many studies have focused on refugees’ traumatic experiences and the effects of these experiences on their mental condition as well as on their process of adaptation to their new environments, internally displaced people (IDP) have received much less attention. The United States High Commission for Refugees stated that by the end of 2004, approximately 35.5 million of the world’s population had been forced to leave their homes due to organized violence. Nearly 23.6 million people became IDPs and 11.9 million left their countries to become refugees.²

Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, has long suffered from foreign domination and ethnic conflict. The ethnic conflict between the Turkish Cypriot and the Greek Cypriot communities has been continuing for more than 40 years. The displacement of Cypriots can be traced to two important political incidents.

The first of these incidents was the inter-communal violence of 1964. Approximately 20,000 Turkish Cypriots were forced to move to Turkish Cypriot enclaves. Twenty-four Turkish villages and Turkish houses in seventy-two mixed villages were abandoned. Most of these movements seem to have been caused by fear, but in some cases the people involved were forced to leave.³

The second wave of displacement came in July-August 1974. When the military junta of Greece removed the legal president, Turkey intervened in Cyprus in July 1974. It is reported that 180,000 to 200,000 Greek Cypriots fled to the south and approximately 50,000 to 60,000 Turkish Cypriots, many of whom had been displaced before,³ escaped to the north.

In over 30 years, 210,000 ethnic Greek and Turkish Cypriots have been internally displaced, the longest-standing internal

displacement situation in Europe. The internally displaced people (IDPs) are no longer in need of humanitarian aid in Cyprus unlike in the vast majority of protracted displacements in the world. On both sides of the island, the IDPs are helped to integrate into the community by the respective authorities. In the South, IDPs have received much support from the Greek Cypriot government through special programmes that include social and tax benefits. In the North, the Turkish Cypriot government has allocated properties abandoned by the Greek Cypriot owners to the displaced people.⁴

The Annan Plan was a United Nations proposal aimed at settling the Cyprus dispute and uniting the divided island as the United Cyprus Republic.⁵ In the 2004 referendum on the Annan Plan, 75 percent of Greek Cypriots voted “no” because of their perception that the Annan Plan was biased and excessively pro-Turkish. On the other hand, 65 percent of Turkish Cypriots were willing to accept it as they believed it would end their prolonged international isolation and exclusion from the European economy.

The aim of this study is to investigate the psychological responses of the internally displaced and non-displaced Turkish Cypriots in the period when the two communities were voting for and against reunification and when the old traumatic events of the past were high on the agenda. We aim to investigate 1) the prevalence of posttraumatic stress and other psychological symptoms within the IDPs compared with the control group, 2) the attitudes of IDPs for the future and reunification compared with the control group.

Method

Sample: The sample of this study is derived from a sample of a larger household survey study conducted on 408 people taken randomly from three different districts.⁶ A strat-

ified sampling quota was used for the purpose of comparison and to keep the samples from each district as similar as possible. Age (35 and older), gender (male/female), nationality (Turkish Cypriot) and geographical region (Alayköy/Gönyeli/Lapta) were used as strata. Alayköy was a predominantly Greek village where most of the houses belonged to Greek Cypriots before 1974. After the 1974 Turkish military intervention, Turkish Cypriots who were forced to leave their own houses in the South were given these houses by the Turkish Cypriot government. Lapta village had the same history. Gönyeli was a Turkish Cypriot village in the past and the population was not displaced. 129 people who are originally Turkish Cypriots and who had experienced at least one war in Cyprus participated in the present study. 158 people were left out of the study because they had settled down in Cyprus after 1974 and 121 people were eliminated because they had never experienced a war in Cyprus.

Procedure: In this cross-sectional survey, face to face interviews were conducted by volunteer fourth year students studying at the Psychology Department of Near East University in Northern Cyprus. Before conducting the interviews, each student was trained about the content of the questions and how they should apply. The data were collected over a period of two weeks.

Interviewers proceeded in a specific order when selecting households in order to eliminate interviewer bias. First they started from the centre of the villages and went north, east, south and west and covered squares. That is to say, they started at the house with the lowest number on the right-hand side of a street and went to every third house. At the first turning, they would turn right and would continue contacting households on the right-hand side until they covered the whole square. Then they would

proceed to the next square and followed the same procedure.

Instruments: The interview comprised four parts administered in the following sequence:

The first part of the questionnaire was about socio-demographic factors and pertinent background information. The questions were designed to obtain data on sex, age, marital status, level of education, employment details, monthly income, location of the house, the legal status of the house (whether or not their house belonged to a Greek Cypriot), whether or not the district will be given back to the Greek Cypriots according to Annan Plan provisions and also the opinions of the participants about their anticipated sense of security and socio-economic status in the case of Greek Cypriots settling in North Cyprus.

The second part of the questionnaire included questions designed by the researcher to determine any previous trauma history as regards to childhood abuse, natural disaster, fire or explosion, traffic accidents, physical or sexual assault, presence in a war or internal conflict area, torture or similar maltreatment, events like murder or suicide, sudden death of a loved one, sudden separation from a loved one, family violence, sudden loss of a job or severe financial difficulties, workplace accident, or any other stressful events. War-related experiences were also investigated according to the type and severity of traumatic events. Questions were yes/no type and enquired about experiences related to hearing, witnessing and experiencing displacement, injury, imprisonment or death of friends, relatives, family members and self.

The third part of the questionnaire included the Traumatic Stress Symptom Checklist (TSSC) to determine post-traumatic symptoms. The checklist was composed of 17 items related to DSM-IV

Variable	IDP	Non-displaced	p
Age	54.61±11.35	52.14±12.11	t=-1.142 p=0.256
Gender			
Female	43 (50%)	21 (48.8%)	$\chi^2=0.016$ p=0.901
Male	43 (50%)	22 (51.2%)	
Marital Status			
Single	4 (4.7%)	1 (2.3%)	$\chi^2= 2.964$ p=0.397
Married	70 (82.4%)	40 (93%)	
Widowed	8 (9.4%)	1 (2.3%)	
Divorced	3 (3.5%)	1 (2.3%)	
Education Level			
Literate	1 (2.3%)	2 (2.4%)	$\chi^2=2.245$ p=0.691
Primary	23 (53.5%)	42 (49.4%)	
Secondary	2 (4.7%)	11 (12.9%)	
High School	12 (27.9%)	20 (23.5%)	
University	5 (11.6%)	10 (11.8%)	
Monthly Income			
550 YTL or less	16 (18.8%)	1 (2.3%)	$\chi^2=6.783$ p=0.079
551-1000 YTL	31 (36.5%)	19 (44.2%)	
1001-2000YTL	24 (28.2%)	14 (32.6%)	
2001-4000YTL	14 (16.5%)	9 (20.9%)	

Table 1. Comparison of demographic characteristics of IDP and non-displaced persons.

criteria for PTSD and six items for depression. Responses were scored on a 0-3 point scale. Validity study for TSSC showed that it has high internal consistency and satisfactory sensitivity and specificity in predicting the diagnosis of PTSD and major depression when compared with Clinician-Administered PTSD Scale and the Major Depressive Episode module of the Semistructured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV. The cutoff point for PTSD was 25 for the 17 PTSD items and cutoff point for major depression was 38 for the whole scale. The score of the whole scale in predicting major depression diagnosis was higher than that of the six depression items.⁷

The fourth part of the questionnaire contained the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), which is a 53-item reversion of the Symptom Checklist-90 (SCL-90-R), intended to determine mental health problems. The responses were rated on a 0-4 point scale, with higher mean scores indicating greater levels of psychological distress on ten symptom dimensions: somatization,

obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, psychoticism and additional items.⁸

Finally, the fifth part of the questionnaire included open-ended questions on the Annan Plan and its content, as well as decisions of the participants regarding the plan and the referendum.

Statistical analysis

All analysis was performed by using SPSS. 13.0 for Windows. Group differences for continuous variables such as age and test scores were evaluated by means of Student's t-test. Group comparison for categorical variables was calculated by Chi-square test.

Results

Demographic characteristics

There were 64 (49.4%) female and 65 (50.6%) male subjects. The mean age of the subjects was 53.80±11.62 (range: 35-82). 81.5 percent of subjects were married. 86

Variable	IDP	Non-displaced	p
Relatives murdered			
Yes	56 (65.1%)	20 (46.5%)	$\chi^2=4.099$
No	30 (34.9%)	23 (53.5%)	$p=0.043^*$
Family member forced displacement			
Yes	66 (77.6%)	18 (41.9%)	$\chi^2= 16.211$
No	19 (22.4%)	25 (58.1%)	$P=0.000^*$
Imprisonment of family member			
Yes	51 (60.0%)	14 (32.6%)	$\chi^2=8.603$
No	34 (40.0%)	29 (67.4%)	$P=0.003^*$
Family member murdered			
Yes	37 (43.5%)	10 (23.3%)	$\chi^2=5.051$
No	48 (56.5%)	33 (76.7%)	$p=0.025^*$
Imprisonment			
Yes	19 (22.1%)	3 (7.0%)	$\chi^2=4.631$
No	67 (77.9%)	40 (93.0%)	$p=0.031^*$
Torture			
Yes	13 (15.1%)	2 (4.7%)	$\chi^2=3.055$
No	73 (84.9%)	41 (95.3%)	$P=0.080$

*) $p < 0.05$ statistically significant

Table 2. Comparison of war-related trauma between IDP and Non-displaced persons.

(66.7%) of them were displaced persons and 43 (33.3%) of them were non-displaced persons. There were no statistically significant differences between displaced and non-displaced subjects in terms of age, gender, marital status, education level or monthly income (Table 1).

Traumatic Experiences

No significant difference was observed between displaced and non-displaced subjects with respect to effects of traumatic events not related to war during their life time or in the previous six months.

There were however significant differences between displaced and non-displaced persons regarding war-related trauma. Displaced persons experienced and witnessed war-related trauma whereas non-displaced person mostly reported that they heard about war-related trauma. Displaced persons reported significantly higher rates of their relatives being killed (65.1%); family members being forced to displace (77.6%), taken as prisoners and killed (43.5%) (Table 2).

For both female and male subjects, there were statistically significant differences between displaced and non-displaced persons in the mean score of TSSC. Whether female or male, displaced persons' traumatic stress symptom scale-PTSD subscale scores or depression subscale scores were significantly higher than non-displaced persons (Table 3).

There were statistically significant differences between displaced and non-displaced persons in depression and somatization subscales of Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) (Table 4). Displaced persons had higher mean scores of depression symptoms than non-displaced persons ($p=0.022$). Non-displaced persons had higher mean scores of somatization symptoms than displaced persons ($p=0.032$).

45% of displaced persons believed that their security would deteriorate if they lived together with Greek Cypriots. 20.9% of non-displaced persons shared this opinion. Regarding their opinions about their socioeconomic conditions when living with Greek Cypriots, 31.4% of displaced persons

Table 3. Comparison of TSSC score between IDPs and non-displaced persons.

	Displaced persons Mean±SD	Non-Displaced persons Mean±SD	t (p)
Traumatic stress symptoms scale-PTSD subscale			
Female	18.05±11.39 (n=43)	11.28±8.62 (n=21)	-2.400 (0.019)*
Male	10.83±9.68 (n=42)	6.36±4.74 (n=22)	-2.478 (0.016)*
Traumatic stress symptoms scale-depression subscale			
Female	22.58±14.02 (n=43)	14.05±10.96 (n=21)	-2.444 (0.017)*
Male	13.09±12.25 (n=42)	7.36±5.96 (n=22)	-2.035 (0.016)*

*) p<0.05 statistically significant

Table 4. Comparison of mean scores of Brief Symptom Inventory subscales

Subscales	Non-displaced persons Mean±SD	Displaced persons Mean±SD	t (p)
Somatization	5.69±5.35 (n=43)	3.70±4.67 (n=84)	-2.164 (0.032)*
Obsessive-compulsive	3.79±2.63 (n=43)	3.61±2.87 (n=85)	0.342 (0.733)
Interpersonal Sensitivity	1.95±2.25 (n=43)	2.72±2.10 (n=85)	-1.922 (0.057)
Depression	1.95±2.28 (n=43)	3.12±2.89 (n=86)	-2.322 (0.022)*
Anxiety	2.86±2.97 (n=43)	3.87±4.07 (n=83)	-1.452 (0.149)
Hostility	2.88±2.48 (n=43)	2.72±3.30 (n=85)	0.270 (0.787)
Phobic anxiety	1.09±1.37 (n=43)	1.44±2.28 (n=85)	-0.932 (0.353)
Paranoid thought	5.41±3.89 (n=43)	4.70±3.56 (n=85)	1.034 (0.303)
Psychoticism	0.76±1.32 (n=43)	0.98±1.62 (n=86)	-0.771 (0.442)
Additional items	1.67±2.36 (n=43)	1.61±2.11 (n=85)	0.152 (0.879)

*p<0.05 statistically significant

thought that their socioeconomic condition would worsen. Only 11.6% of non-displaced persons expressed the same concern.

Discussion

The findings of the present study indicate that displaced persons had higher PTSD symptom scores than non-displaced persons. In this research, 20% of displaced persons had PTSD. Population-based studies report a prevalence of PTSD ranging from 3.5% to 86% among refugee populations (9, 10).

Even though it has been more than 30 years since the war in 1974, the findings of the study reveal that displaced persons have higher PTSD scores than non-displaced

persons. This is consistent with the findings of other similar studies. High rates of PTSD symptoms many years after the traumatic event are reported in numerous studies.¹¹⁻¹³

PTSD symptoms can also be reactivated by current stressors which remind subjects of a posttraumatic event.¹⁴ In a study about refugees from the former Yugoslavia living in Sweden there was no change in the average symptom levels during the follow up study conducted 3 years later. The author reported that the follow-up ratings were made during the war in Croatia when the mass media carried an abundance of reports on atrocities and that this could well have had a re-traumatizing effect on the subjects, reactivating

symptoms.¹⁵ The present study was made one week before the time of the referendum on the Annan Plan and during that period there were images of the 1963-1964 conflict and 1974 war, and pictures depicting violence toward Turkish Cypriots by Greek Cypriots. This could have had a re-traumatizing effect on displaced persons in North Cyprus.

The present study indicates that displaced persons experienced more war-related traumatic events such as relatives being murdered, family members being forced to displace, being taken as prisoners and murdered than non-displaced persons. Many of the studies on refugees report that the loss of a close relative is a predictor of frequency of PTSD symptoms.¹⁶ Furthermore, the frequency of war-related traumatic events had a dramatic effect on PTSD symptoms.¹⁷

According to the BSI scores, displaced and non-displaced persons did not show any psychopathology. The results indicated that both groups have the ability to cope with stress. In a study comparing displaced and non-displaced persons' coping strategies in Croatia, the researcher found that displaced and non-displaced persons use coping strategies with similar frequency and effectiveness.¹⁸

The present study showed that 8(9.4%) of displaced and 1(2.3%) of non-displaced persons had major depression according to TSSC depression subscale. Displaced persons had higher scores from non-displaced persons also at BSI depression subscale. Most of the population-based studies indicate rates of depression ranging from 15% to 80% amongst refugees.^{9, 19-21}

The studies which investigated the effect of different life events on disorders revealed that people who have experienced loss of a close relative are especially prone to depression.²²⁻²⁴ The present study showed that

among displaced persons, 78.8% have suffered loss of a friend, 65.1% loss of a relative and 43.5% loss of a family member during the war. Displaced persons suffered more losses than non-displaced persons. In addition, the psychological response to loss of property could have similar features to the psychological response to loss of a close person and might cause a high ratio of depression symptoms in displaced persons.²⁵

The present study indicated that non-displaced persons had higher scores from BSI somatization subscale. The findings of a large-scale international study that used data from 14 countries indicated that the overall prevalence rate for somatization was 19.7%.²⁶ There are no studies that have evaluated the prevalence of somatization in a large community of recently displaced persons.

However a limited number of studies have dealt with migrant somatic complaints. Pang and Lee²⁷ reported 7.3% of somatic complaints in Korean migrants.²⁷ Ritsner²⁸ reported 21.9% and a high rate of somatic complaints related to distress in Jewish migrants in the U.S.²⁸ In a study on the psychosocial complaints of people forced into internal displacement in Turkey, it was reported that 10% of displaced persons had somatic complaints.²⁵

Another study on the effects of forced internal displacement in the Southeast of Turkey showed that displaced persons had a higher rate of somatic symptoms than non-displaced persons.¹⁹ In contrast, the present study revealed that non-displaced persons had a higher rate of somatic complaints than displaced persons. The explanation for this surprising finding is very hard to establish and requires some examination. Somatic complaints may appear with current psychosocial stressors, or if there has been a chronic somatization the symptom can be

reactivated.¹³ People who cannot react to stressful situations in life may use somatic complaints as a defense mechanism. However somatic complaints should be evaluated in four major categories, according to whether the person's current presentation is a normal reaction to a stressful circumstance, an adjustment disorder, somatization due to major depression or an anxiety disorder, or a primary form of chronic somatization.²⁹

The present study was carried out close in time to the Annan Plan Referendum and the two communities' responses to the plan would determine whether Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots could live together. This period can be described as a very stressful period for the Turkish Cypriot community. Non-displaced persons reported more positive opinions regarding the future and potentially living with Greek Cypriots, but displaced persons' opinions were more negative. Non-displaced persons who had positive expectations concerning the future revealed somatic complaints regarding the stressful conditions. In contrast, displaced persons who had negative opinions concerning the future might have been expressing their stress through depression symptoms.

Although this study has been conducted more than 30 years after displacement, it is the first scientific examination of the psychological effects of displacement among Turkish Cypriots and it shows that psychological consequences are still being experienced and that further research and psychological support is necessary.

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