

Learned Helplessness and Hopelessness Following the Beirut Blast

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Abstract

The Beirut port explosion that took place on August 4th 2020 was one of the biggest explosions in history. It was a very traumatic event for the people who experienced it and lived through it.

The proposed study is designed to discuss the correlation between learned helplessness and hopelessness and the Beirut port explosion (trauma). The study includes 134 participants who are above the age of 18 and were in Lebanon at the time of the explosion. Data was collected using a survey that was sent out and filled by a randomly selected sample. The survey used the learned helplessness scale, and the hopelessness scale. Additionally, Spearman Correlation was used to analyze the data. The expected outcome is a positive correlation between trauma – the port explosion in this case – and learned helplessness and hopelessness. The results will help us become more aware of the implications of trauma and its effects on the Lebanese populous.

Keywords: Trauma, Learned Helplessness, Hopelessness

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The Beirut port explosion that took place on August 4th 2020 was one of the biggest explosions in history. It caused at least 203 deaths, 6500 injuries, and made 300,000 people homeless. It was the most traumatizing experience for the Lebanese populous since the civil war.

This study was made to see whether trauma (in this case, the Beirut explosion) is correlated with learned helplessness and hopelessness. If such correlation exists, this data can be used to understand the implications of traumatic experiences and therefore allocate more resources to help improve the quality of life of those who were affected by the explosion.

Peterson and Seligman defined learned helplessness as “the emotional numbing and maladaptive passivity sometimes following victimization” (Peterson & Seligman, 1983). It was first used to describe the failure of laboratory dogs to escape shock, even though they were given the opportunity to do so after being previously exposed to unavoidable shocks (Nuvvula, 2016).

Hopelessness on the other hand, is described as a negative emotional state known for its association with a negative view of one’s self specifically regarding the future, and the inability to solve one’s problems and find their solutions (Balsamo, Carlucci, Innamorati, Lester, & Pompili, 2020).

In general, the literature present about these two psychological constructs and trauma shows a significant positive correlation between learned helplessness (Seligman & Maier, 1976) and hopelessness (Landis, et al., 2007) and traumatic events (abuse, chronic stressors, victimization...).

However, taking all that into consideration, there are some gaps and missing information in the literature. There are little to no studies done in the Middle East, especially Lebanon.

Additionally, there aren't any research papers that take into account both learned helplessness and hopelessness simultaneously, and most of the ones present are a little out dated and only a few of the studies are recent.

Learned helplessness is the belief that a person's actions have no influence on the outcome of an event (Hooker, 1976). It is the change in behavior that follows inescapable aversive events (Seligman & Hiroto, Generality of learned helplessness in man, 1975). The experiments this theory is based on were done to test the response of dogs to electrical shocks. Some of the dogs did not have any shocks administered to them (group 1), some were given unpredictable escapable shocks (group 2), and the rest were given unpredictable inescapable shocks (group 3). As a result, the dogs from the third group did not try to escape when they were given shocks that they could avoid. From their previous experiences, they concluded that there was nothing they could do to avoid the outcome(shocks) (Seligman & Groves, 1970).

A meta – analysis of the literature on the effects of exposing organisms to aversive, uncontrollable events was conducted; and it showed that when events can't be controlled, organisms learn that behavior and outcomes are independent, and they develop learned helplessness (Seligman & Maier, 1976).

Moreover, a study done on victims showed that episodes of victimization lead to the person learning that responding is futile, and that response and outcome are independent (Peterson & Seligman, Learned Helplessness and Victimization, 1983). Another study done on 25 adult children of alcoholics showed that they are victims of psychological trauma who developed learned helplessness (Flannery, 1986). Additionally, in a study done on family members of ICU patients, most of them experienced learned helplessness, and the results found that stressful events are a risk factor for learned helplessness (Sullivan, et al., 2012). Also, according to

research, uncontrollable stressful events lead to learned helplessness in a lot of animals; and in a study done on *Drosophila*, learned helplessness stemmed from expected unavoidable consequences (Yang, Bertolucci, Wolf, & Heisenberg, 2013). To add to that, a study was done on 75 parents to examine how poverty related stressors effect their children. It showed that daily poverty-related stressors result in learned helplessness in the children (Brown, Seyler, Knor, Garnett, & Laurenceau, 2016).

Furthermore, some studies were done on animals. In a study done on rats, rats that were exposed to inescapable tail shock stress showed learned helplessness in the subsequent shuttle box avoidance task (Petty, Chae, Kramer, Jordan, & Wilson, 1994). Another four experiments were done on 159 male albino Sprague-Dawley rats. The results showed that the rats developed learned helplessness and failed to escape shocks after they were exposed to inescapable ones (Seligman & Beagley, 1975).

Hopelessness on the other hand, was defined as “the feeling that any effort aimed at constructive change ... is doomed before it is even attempted” (Shea & Hurley, 1964). They also defined it as “the conviction that everything that can be done has been done, which results in an inability to mobilize energy and effort” (Shea & Hurley, 1964).

Multiple studies were done about the correlation between traumatic events and hopelessness. Some of them targeted children as participants. A study was done on 448 children in grades four and five where they were assessed two times 6 months apart to examine whether verbal victimization would affect their hopelessness levels. The results show that verbal victimization is significantly and positively associated with levels of hopelessness in children in grades four and five (Gibb & Hanley, 2011). Additionally, in another study, data was collected by surveying 419 Turkish middle school students (216 boys and 203 girls) about their levels of hopelessness and

their experiences with bullying. It concluded that levels of hopelessness are higher in victims of bullying (verbal and physical) than in students who were not victims (Siyahhan, Aricak, & Cayirdag-Acar, 2012).

Some of the studies on the other hand were done on youths and adolescents. A longitudinal study was done on 5895 youths who live in improvised inner – city neighborhoods in Alabama to explore predictors of hopelessness. The results showed that trauma and traumatic stress (variables associated with disruption) are positively correlated with increased feelings of hopelessness in inner – city teenagers (Bolland, Lian, & Formichella, 2005). In another study, data was taken from 438 teenagers in 67 American Indian tribes. It concluded that American Indian teenagers who are proficient in both White and Indian cultures have significantly lower levels of hopelessness than those who are proficient in one culture only or no culture at all (LaFromboise, Albright, & Harris, 2010). To add to that, a study done on low – income urban teenagers found that uncontrollable chronic stressors are positively correlated to hopelessness (Landis, et al., 2007). Another study was done on incarcerated youth. Data collected from 110 adolescents showed a correlation between cumulative childhood maltreatment and hopelessness (Wanklyn, Day, Hart, & Girard, 2012). Moreover, a study was done on 800 South Korean teenagers attending 10 different middle schools. The results indicate a positive correlation between child stress and hopelessness (Shin, Lee, Yu, & Ham, 2016).

Other studies manly focused on females. One study was done on people who went through adverse childhood experiences. The results indicated clusters of such experiences lead to an increased risk of helplessness in adulthood, more specifically in women (Haatainen, et al., 2003).In another study, the participants were 202 female survivors of interpersonal violence. Its

results showed that hopelessness is related to self – reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Scher & Resick, 2006).

The rest of the studies did not focus on a specific age group. One study found that victims who experienced severe violence became increasingly hopeless and expected to stay in poverty for the long run, unlike those who were exposed to less severe violence (Moya & Carter, 2014).

Another study showed that hopelessness in police officers was significantly correlated to stressful experiences and a lack of support (Violanti, et al., 2016). Data was also taken from 91 people who have previously experienced a traumatic event and have had post – traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. The results indicate a positive correlation between nightmares about the traumatic event and hopelessness. People who have nightmares have higher levels of hopelessness than those who do not (Littlewood, Gooding, Panagioti, & Kyle, 2016).

Furthermore, a study was done on internally displaced people who lived in Colombia. The results show that the more violence a person experiences the more they believe that they will be living in extreme poverty the upcoming year. They indicate that violence and psychological trauma are positively associated with helpless beliefs (Moya & Carter, Violence and the Formation of Hopelessness: Evidence from Internally Displaced Persons in Colombia, 2019). To add to that, a study was done on 1000 participants in the Czech Republic during the beginning of the corona virus outbreak. The results indicate that intense traumatic feelings are correlated with hopelessness (Trnka & Lorencova, 2020).

Following the previously reviewed literature, and taking the gaps and missing information into consideration, the following hypothesis is proposed: trauma and traumatic events are significantly and positively correlated to learned helplessness and hopelessness.

Method

Participants

In the following study, the aim is to collect scores on learned helplessness and hopelessness in adults who experienced the Beirut explosion on the 4th of August 2020. Data collected includes learned helplessness and hopelessness measures in addition to age, sex, location (what area in Lebanon), and mental health.

The sample consists of randomly selected adults (males and females that are older than 18) who were living in Lebanon at the time of the explosion. Those under 18, or who weren't in Lebanon at the time of the explosion will not be included in the final data set.

Moreover, a 95% confidence level, 5% precision, and an effect size of 0.3, yielded a sample size of 134 participants – using G Power.

An informed consent form will be placed in the beginning of the survey that includes what the survey entails and what it aims to accomplish. After reading it, participants either choose to stop or continue on. Additionally, all the questions are optional, and participants will not be forced to answer any questions. They can also stop at any time during the survey.

To add to that, the data collected will contain no information that can be used to identify the participants in any way (no names, address, phone number, ...).

Procedure

The following study utilizes a correlational design. 134 adults (18 years old and above) – both males and females – who lived in Lebanon at the time of the explosion were randomly selected to participate in this study. Each participant filled out the survey that was sent to them through either email or WhatsApp.

The survey takes around 5 minutes to complete, it consists of a total of 59 questions, and it will cause no harm or risk to the participants involved.

It starts with an informed consent form, and the participants can not move to the next section unless they agree to participate in the survey. The next section consists of 11 questions about the participant (age, sex, location, ...), followed by 8 questions about the Beirut explosion (where they were when it happened, if they were injured, ...). After that, there are 20 questions that measure learned helplessness (learned helplessness scale), and finally, it ends with another 20 questions that measure hopelessness (hopelessness scale).

After participants fill the survey, data will be collected and transferred to SPSS, where it will be analyzed. Additionally, there will be no attempts to de-identify the data obtained.

Assessments and Measures

The following measures will be used in the proposed study to assess the 2 psychological constructs – learned helplessness and hopelessness.

Learned helplessness Scale (LHS) (Quinless & Nelson, 1988)(Appendix A) is a 20 – item scale that was created by Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale to study why "organisms exposed to aversive events in one situation 'often fail to escape that event in a different situation'" (Quinless & Nelson, 1988). It was derived from reviewing the literature, and each item uses a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 – strongly agree to 4 – strongly disagree). A Varimax-rotated factor analysis of the measure produced 5 factors. The first factor was categorized as internality – externality and consists of 5 items. The second one was categorized as globality – specific and it also consists of 5 items. The third factor contains 6 items and it was categorized as stability – instability. The last two factors – 4 and 5 – each consist of 2 factors and they were categorized as ability – inability to control and individual's choice of situations respectively (Quinless &

Nelson, 1988). The final score ranges between 20 and 80 or between low learned helplessness and high learned helplessness respectively. The higher the total score is, the higher the degree of learned helplessness is in the participant (Quinless & Nelson, 1988). This scale gave reliable results for a sample of 178 university students (McKean, 1994), and 241 healthy adults (Quinless & Nelson, 1988). The learned helplessness scale (LHS) showed adequate internal consistency when its results were compared with other associated measure.

Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS) (Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974) (Appendix B) is a 20 – item self – report inventory for adults and the questions have a true or false format (Rabon & Hirsc, 2017). The Beck Hopelessness Scale had an internal consistency coefficient of 0.93 and it correlated with the Stuart Future Test and the pessimism item of the Beck Depression Inventory when it was given to 356 hospitalized suicide attempters, 23 general medical outpatients, and 59 depressed psychiatric patients (Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974). A principal-components factor analysis yielded 3 factors: emotional, cognitive, and motivational characteristics of hopelessness (Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974). It was shown to be a valid measure of hopelessness in multiple groups (Kliem, Anna , Mößle , & Brähler , 2018). Additionally, the scale showed internal consistency among 544 university students (Steed, 2001), and a strong item – construct relationship (Young, Halper, Clark, Scheftner , & Fawcett , 1992).

Results

The proposed study was done to find whether a correlation exists between learned helplessness, hopelessness, and trauma. There are multiple independent variables (location during the explosion, death of a loved one ...) relating to the traumatic Beirut explosion and two dependent variables: learned helplessness (LH) and hopelessness. To analyze this data, SPSS was first used to determine normality. The Shapiro – Wilk normality test showed that the data obtained from

the Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS) is normally distributed, while the data obtained from the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS) wasn't. This is why, Pearson correlation was used to analyze the data from the LHS, while Spearman correlation was used to analyze those from the BHS.

The results of this study showed that the average score on the LHS was 44.314, and it was 13.634 on the BHS. This shows that on average, individuals in the sample population don't have learned helplessness, but they do have moderate levels of hopelessness. Additionally, 58% of the sample have severe hopelessness, while only 29% of them have learned helplessness. Moreover, there seems to be a significant negative correlation between the total scores of the LHS and those of the BHS (p – value < 0.001 and spearman's correlation coefficient is -0.717).

When it comes to Learned helplessness, there is a significant negative correlation between the scores of the LHS and marital status (p – value = 0.013 and Pearson's $r = -0.263$). Those who are single, or are married with children have the highest scores, while those who are married but don't have kids yet have the lowest scores. Additionally, there is a significant positive correlation between having been previously diagnosed with a mental illness and learned helplessness (p – value: 0.016 and Pearson's $r = 0.254$). However, gender, age, location during the explosion, experience of the explosion, danger felt and experiences, and knowing people who were killed or injured had no significant correlation with the scores from the LHS.

On the other hand, the scores from the BHS are significantly correlated with how the explosion was experienced (whether directly, seen it on tv, ...) (p – value = 0.005 and Spearman's correlation coefficient = 0.302). Those who witnessed it on Tv had the highest score average (13.8), while those who witnessed it live from their homes or balconies (but where not directly affected) had the lowest score means (10.3). However, gender, age, location during the

explosion, danger felt, knowing people who were killed or injured, previous psychological diagnosis, and marital status are not significantly correlated to the BHS scores.

Discussion

Taking all that was discussed into consideration, my results in some ways confirm what was found in the previous literature, and in some ways contradict it. In my sample, trauma led to higher hopelessness scores than those found in the general population (the average in the general population is 4.45 (Greene, 1981) compared to 13.6 in my sample population). This result confirms what the previous literature has found. However, in my sample learned helplessness scores were low (70.78% of the sample don't have learned helplessness) as opposed to the high scores found in the literature.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the following study found high levels of hopelessness in a sample population of people who were living in Lebanon during the Beirut port explosion. However, the same can't be said about learned helplessness, as this study showed that more than half of the sample scored low on the LHS . Additionally, the study found a significant negative correlation between hopelessness scores and learned helplessness scores. This means that despite their hopelessness, the sample population still believe that their actions can have an effect on event outcomes (low scores on the LHS).

All in all, such results are very important and of great significance. Hopelessness is positively correlated with suicide ideation (Wolfe, et al., 2019). This shows the importance of early identification and intervention for hopelessness. Furthermore, it implies that more resources

should be allocated to the mental health services in Lebanon so that they can better deal with the implications of the explosion.

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Appendix

Appendix A: The Learned Helplessness Scale

Statement Item		Response Options			
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
LHI 1	1. No matter how much energy I put into a task, I feel I have no control over the outcome.	4	3	2	1
LHI 2	2. I feel that my ability to solve problems is the cause of my success.	1	2	3	4
LHI 3	3. I can find solutions to difficult problems.	1	2	3	4
LHI 4	4. I don't place myself in situations in which I cannot predict the outcome.	4	3	2	1
LHI 5	5. If I complete a task successfully, it is probably because of my ability.	1	2	3	4
LHI 6	6. I have the ability to solve most of life's problems.	1	2	3	4
LHI 7	7. When I do not succeed at a task, I do not attempt any similar tasks because I feel that I would fail them also.	4	3	2	1
LHI 8	8. When something doesn't turn out the way I planned, I know it is because I didn't have the ability to start with.	4	3	2	1
LHI 9	9. Other people have more control over their success and/or failure than I do.	4	3	2	1
LHI 10	10. I try new tasks if I have failed similar ones in the past.	1	2	3	4
LHI 11	11. When I perform poorly, it is because I don't have the ability to perform better.	4	3	2	1
LHI 12	12. I accept tasks even if I am not sure that I will succeed at them.	1	2	3	4
LHI 13	13. I feel that I have little control over the outcomes of my work.	4	3	2	1
LHI 14	14. I am successful at most tasks I try.	1	2	3	4
LHI 15	15. I feel that anyone else could be better than me in most tasks.	4	3	2	1
LHI 16	16. I am able to reach my goals in life.	1	2	3	4
LHI 17	17. When I don't succeed at a task, I find myself blaming my own stupidity for my failure.	4	3	2	1
LHI 18	18. No matter how hard I try, things never seem to work out the way I want them to.	4	3	2	1
LHI 19	19. I feel that my success reflects my ability, not chance.	1	2	3	4
LHI 20	20. My behavior seems to influence the success of a work group.	1	2	3	4

Appendix B: Beck Hopelessness Scale

	Statement	Response Choices	
		True	False
HS 1	1. I look forward to the future with hope and enthusiasm.	1	2
HS 2	2. I might as well give up because I can't make things better for myself.	2	1
HS 3	3. When things are going badly, I am helped by knowing that they can't stay that way forever.	1	2
HS 4	4. I can't imagine what my life would be like in ten years.	2	1
HS 5	5. I have enough time to accomplish the things I most want to do.	1	2
HS 6	6. In the future, I expect to succeed in what concerns me most.	1	2
HS 7	7. My future seems dark to me.	2	1
HS 8	8. I expect to get more of the good things in life than the average person.	1	2
HS 9	9. I just don't get the breaks, and there's no reason to believe I will in the future.	2	1
HS10	10. My past experiences have prepared me well for my future.	1	2
HS11	11. All I can see ahead of me is unpleasantness rather than pleasantness.	2	1
HS12	12. I don't expect to get what I really want.	2	1
HS13	13. When I look ahead to the future, I expect I will be happier than I am now.	1	2
HS14	14. Things just don't work out the way I want them to.	2	1
HS15	15. I have great faith in the future.	1	2
HS16	16. I never get what I want so it's foolish to want anything.	2	1
HS17	17. It is very unlikely that I will get any real satisfaction in the future.	2	1
HS18	18. The future seems vague and uncertain to me.	2	1
HS19	19. I can look forward to more good times than bad times.	1	2
HS20	20. There's no use in really trying to get something I want because I probably won't get it.	2	1