Editorial Statement

Towards Social Justice in Neuropsychology

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Neuropsychology’s early beginnings were associated with understanding how brain injuries, along with neurological and mental disorders, affect brain structure and functionality (Benton & Adams 2000). However, the scope has broadened to include other factors, falling under the umbrella of “social inequality” that may have a similar effect. Studies by Burneo-Garcés et al. (2019), Daugherty et al. (2019), De Bellis et al. (2009), Fostinelli et al. (2023), Kirolos et al. (2022), and Lin et al. (2017) have underscored how malnutrition, poverty, deprivation, violence, and discrimination are closely linked to diminished neuropsychological performance. These social determinants are considered risk factors contributing to the onset of disorders like intellectual disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and other neurodevelopmental disorders. The effectiveness of prevention and early intervention programs for these disorders hinges on heightened awareness of these risk factors and efforts to mitigate their effects.

Undoubtedly, prevention programs for these disorders or early interventions rely on raising awareness of the seriousness of these factors and trying to reduce their impact. The limited number of neuropsychologists, and the scarcity of developmental and neuropsychological instruments necessary for assessment and diagnosis in many countries of the Global South may hinder the possibility of conducting these interventions on time. Perhaps the common incentive for conducting most studies in cultural neuropsychology embodies the concept of “social justice” for different ethnic groups, immigrants, refugees, marginalized groups, and people of the Global South. This emphasizes the social responsibility and the important role that the neuropsychologist/researcher can play in social change and achieving social equality (Diaz-Santos et al., 2022).
The ongoing violations of the Israeli occupation in Palestine and the traumatic events experienced by many Palestinians constitute a source of toxic stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Samara et al., 2020). Studies in other contexts have proven their impact on the brain and its functions (Lupien et al., 2009; Sherin & Nemeroff, 2011). Moreover, the genocidal war in Gaza, which has been going on for more than six months, has resulted in the martyrdom of approximately thirty-three (33) thousand people and about seventy-five (75) thousand wounded (Palestinian Ministry of Health, 2024), coupled with food and medicine shortages and an increase in the rate of health problems among Palestinian newborns (World Health Organization, 2024). This situation leads to the expectation that the prevalence of neurodevelopmental disorders in Palestine will become the highest in the world in the next few years. Such practices necessitate a thorough examination of the current situation, compelling us to develop suitable strategies and interventions that address both individual and community needs.

The decision to dedicate a special issue of the *Bethlehem University Journal* to “Neuropsychology” reflects the keen interest to explore some of the global experiences and practices in this field. Such international practices serve as research paradigms in neuropsychology that can be developed and adapted to fit the Palestinian and Arab contexts. This issue features four contributions from researchers across Spain, France, Guatemala, Colombia, and the United States.

In the first study, Ibáñez-Casas et al. present a comprehensive protocol and clear procedures for developing a computerized test battery for neuropsychological assessment that takes into account cultural factors. In addition to emphasizing the impact of cultural factors on neuropsychological performance, the developers of this test battery, “EMBRACED Battery” make it possible to use and standardize this tool in different cultural contexts as part of their ethical and social responsibility to develop neuropsychological assessment services around the world, especially in the Global South.

The second and third studies in this issue address the topic of gender-based violence from a neuropsychological perspective, given the global prevalence of this phenomenon (Sardinha et al., 2022). Both studies emphasize the importance of conducting neuropsychological assessments for women who have experienced intimate partner violence. On the one hand, Fernández Fillol et al.’s study found that women in Spain who had experienced intimate partner violence scored lower on working memory, verbal memory, and attention tests compared to women who had not experienced such violence. On the other, Castro et al.’s
study, conducted on two groups of women in Guatemala, found that symptoms of anxiety were more prevalent in women who had experienced intimate partner violence. The study also found a correlation between lower scores on a mental health scale and long-term memory, working memory, attention, and abstract thinking.

Both studies emphasize the need to build therapeutic interventions in a holistic way that includes psychological and cognitive aspects. In the last study of this special issue is another example of how psychological factors impact neurodevelopment.

The study by Puertas-Gonzalez et al. investigated the relationship between maternal personal growth (an indicator of psychological well-being) and neuropsychological development in newborns through a longitudinal study of a group of mothers during pregnancy and their children after birth. The results showed that personal growth in women during pregnancy predicts better neuropsychological development in infants, as well as better fine motor skills at six months of age. Environmental conditions play an important role in the level of maternal mental health during pregnancy, which affects the neuropsychological development of children after birth.

The four previous studies in this special issue share a common goal of shedding light on the impact of “external” environmental factors on neuropsychological performance and neurodevelopment. They represent a modern approach to neuropsychological research that complements the research approach based on studying neuropsychological performance in cases of brain injuries, neurological and psychiatric diseases. More importantly, their major contributions is that they highlight the need to expand the research and applied interests of neuropsychology to include humanitarian and social issues.

Driven by its professional and social responsibility, Bethlehem University continues to work in establishing a specialization in neuropsychology in Palestine, as well as contributing to the development of this specialization across the Arab world. Bethlehem University’s efforts during the past years in this regard can be summarized as follows:

First, launching the first Master’s program in neuropsychology for children and neurodevelopmental disorders in the Arab world, the program is in partnership with Hebron University-Palestine and in cooperation with the University of Granada-Spain, along with other Arab and European universities, and supported by the European Union. This joint effort contributed to the establishment of the Neuropsychology Lab at the university, which provide graduate students with the opportunity to develop practical skills, especially in the field of neuropsychological assessment and interventions. In addition to the above, a new Bachelor’s program in Child and Adolescent Psychology
has been developed, incorporating various courses on neuropsychology, clinical psychology, and developmental disorders.

Second, establishing a research unit that aims to develop neuropsychology in Palestine by designing and conducting more field studies, developing and standardizing a set of neuropsychological tools and tests that can be utilized in research and clinical settings. This unit will also contribute to the development of cultural neuropsychology research through the study of new cultural factors.

In conclusion, neuropsychology is an emerging discipline in the Arab world and requires the concerted efforts of researchers and clinical practitioners to establish its foundations and keep pace with global advancements in the field. The dedication of this issue of Bethlehem University Journal to neuropsychology aims to underscore the importance of building bridges of cooperation between Arab and international researchers to work together to develop neuropsychology globally and locally.

References


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