

**Title:** Memory and Subjectivity among Kuwaiti Youths: Child Witnesses of the 1990 Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait

**Status:** Published in AUK Occasional Papers

### **Abstract**

The 1990 Iraqi invasion and seven-month occupation of Kuwait led to dramatic changes in the health and mental health of Kuwaitis, with 20% higher rates of mortality and increased post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among Kuwaitis who remained in Kuwait during the occupation (Public Health Impacts of Iraq's 1990 Invasion and Occupation of Kuwait, Harvard School of Public Health, June 29, 2005). In the aftermath of the occupation, numerous studies of children, based on the diagnostic criteria for PTSD—exposure to a traumatic event and symptoms from each of three groups: intrusive recollections of the trauma event, avoidance of reminders of the event and emotional numbing, and hyperarousal—established strong correlations between the Iraqi invasion, PTSD and depression, with higher prevalence rates for children than for adults (Abdel-Khalek 1997; Abdullatif 1995; Al-Naser et al. 2000; Hadi and Llabre 1998; HSRPH 2005; KISR 2005; Llabre and Hadi 1997; Nader et al. 1993). Yet, as Kirmayer, Lemelson and Barad (2007: 7) remind us, “What distinguishes PTSD from other psychiatric disorders is the attribution of causality and the role that memory plays in its symptomatology”. The diagnosis of PTSD represents one strand in complex memory processes that are biological and personal, but also social, cultural and political. The concept of trauma draws upon culturally variable idioms of distress, linked to social divides within Kuwait and access to resources, mental health and otherwise. Trauma, as a primary “wounding” may direct our attention away from the amplification of past traumas by subsequent events and interactions (Hinton 2007: 447). Moreover, adults and children adopt certain feelings, ideas and ways of acting and remembering through direct interaction, and by indirectly “attending to how persons around them are representing and constructing their world through language” (Capps and Ochs 1995: 10). Adults and children use cultural knowledge to make sense of and to narrate their own experiences of suffering. The effects of trauma on our Kuwaiti child witnesses of the 1990 Iraqi invasion reflect a convergence of veridical recall, socialization and enculturation practices of memory, emotion and subjectivity, and the transgenerational transmission of trauma through Kuwaiti parent-child interactions, reconstructions based on family members’ accounts of trauma.