

The Lost Identity: A Psycho-Social Exploration of Urban Violence in Algerian Neighborhoods

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Abstract

This study aims to trace the complex relationship between identity loss and urban violence in Algerian neighborhoods from a comprehensive psychological and social perspective. The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative methods (standardized questionnaires to measure anxiety, alienation, and aggression) and qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews and field observations). The study sample included 120 participants from densely populated areas in Algiers and Oran (2025).

The results revealed a strong and statistically significant correlation ($r = .72$, $p < .01$) between identity loss and the tendency toward violent behavior, with identity loss explaining approximately 51.84% of the variance in violent behavior among the participants. 74% of the participants showed a significant sense of non-belonging, while 68% of them suffered from high levels of psychological anxiety. The study also indicates that factors such as

poverty, unemployment, inadequate family upbringing, and the negative effects of media play an important role in creating a sense of existential alienation, which drives young people to use violence as a means of psychological defense or to assert their identity in an environment where they feel neglected and marginalized.

The results also found that tribal ties play a dual role, providing social support on one hand, but encouraging a culture of revenge and division on the other. In light of these findings, the study recommends preventive initiatives, including psychological interventions such as the establishment of community psychological support centers, alongside social efforts to promote inclusion through participatory youth programs. The study also suggests potential for improved collaboration with security services within the framework of enhancing the effectiveness of community policing.

Qualitative data extracted from interviews and observations have reinforced this trend,

revealing the urgent desire among young people to assert themselves and protest against exclusion and to use violence as a tool to vent existential and social frustrations in the absence of institutional support mechanisms.

Keywords: lost identity, urban violence, psychological alienation, social integration, Algerian neighborhoods, psychosocial intervention.

Introduction:

The urban space in Algeria is undergoing swift transformations at both structural and symbolic levels, alongside the fragmentation of traditional community ties and the deterioration of collective identity. In this context, urban violence manifests not as an isolated behavioral phenomenon but as an existential psychological-social crisis rooted in the erosion of identity and belonging ([1925-2017, 2000](#)). This loss is attributed to a complex interplay of economic factors (including poverty and unemployment), social factors (such as discrimination and informal urbanization), and psychological factors (like alienation, anxiety, and weak self-cohesion) ([Alpert et al., 1951; Seeman, 1959](#)).

This study seeks to examine the dialectical relationship between lost identity and urban violence, emphasizing the psychological dimensions frequently overlooked in conventional security discourses. Violence is

perceived not merely as an aggressive act but also as a psychological defense mechanism employed to mitigate the existential void stemming from a lack of self-identity and belonging ([Agnew, 1992](#)). The study examines neighborhoods characterized by high population density and social vulnerability in prominent Algerian cities, where psychological and spatial factors converge to foster an environment conducive to escalating tension and violence.

Research problem:

In what ways does the erosion of identity exacerbate urban violence in Algerian neighborhoods? What function do psychological elements like alienation, anxiety, diminished self-cohesion, and absence of perspective serve in converting individuals, particularly the youth, into perpetrators of violence? Can urban violence be interpreted as a psychological reaction to the disintegration of the symbolic framework that imparts meaning to existence? These inquiries are crucial, particularly in the absence of preventive measures grounded in a profound psycho-social comprehension of the phenomenon ([Giddens, 1991](#)).

Theoretical framework:

Theories of identity and psychological alienation:

This study is based on the constructivist theory of identity ([Paul & 1932-2014, 1996](#)), which

asserts that identity is not a static essence but is instead shaped through social and cultural interactions. In urban settings influenced by globalization and marginalization, individuals experience identity alienation, resulting in a disconnection from their social context ([Seeman, 1959](#)). This alienation is considered a manifestation of "existential separation," creating a psychological void that the individual occasionally mitigates through violent behaviors to affirm existence or resist reality ([Fromm, 1941](#)).

Notwithstanding the robustness of the proposed theoretical frameworks (including Bauman's liquid modernity crisis, Seeman's identity alienation, and Agnew's general strain), their implementation within the Algerian context necessitates procedural modification. This adaptation entails establishing a connection:

1. Identity Alienation: The lack of a clear vision for the economic and professional future of Algerian youth, resulting in a dual alienation (economic and existential). Loyalties are shifting from a comprehensive national identity to "fragile partial identities" (such as tribal affiliations or narrow neighborhood ties), which provide a temporary sense of security at the expense of broader social cohesion.
2. Identity crisis: Loyalties are shifting from a comprehensive national identity to "fragile partial identities" (such as

tribal affiliations or narrow neighborhood ties), which provide a temporary sense of security at the expense of broader social cohesion.

3. Violence as a Response: Reinterpreting the frustration-aggression theory to conceptualize violence as a means of "affirming existence" in an urban environment where the individual perceives neglect and marginalization, both materially and symbolically.

Violence as a psychological response to social frustration:

According to the frustration-aggression theory ([Dollard et al., 1939](#)), aggression is a natural reaction to frustration caused by the obstruction of goal achievement. In Algeria, young people are frustrated in their social and economic goals because they are poor, unemployed, and do not have limited educational opportunities. This makes them become persistently frustrated, which can lead to violent behavior. ([Agnew, 1992](#)) asserts in his general strain theory that social pressures, including discrimination, marginalization, and academic failure, elicit negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and depression, which may manifest as violence in the absence of effective coping mechanisms.

The clan serves as a tenuous psychological refuge.

lacking a cohesive collective identity, individuals turn to partial affiliations, such as tribal connections, for psychological and social protection. Nevertheless, these connections may serve as catalysts for tension when employed in local disputes or a culture of retribution (عبد الكريم, 2018). Psychologically, this attachment to fragmented identities functions as a mechanism to alleviate the existential void and anxiety resulting from the absence of a stable core identity (1931-, 1980).

Methodology:

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods. The sample consisted of 120 participants from designated neighborhoods in Algiers and Oran, selected via stratified random sampling according to age, gender, and socioeconomic status.

The following data collection tools were utilized:

questionnaires to assess anxiety levels (GAD-7), alienation (Utrecht-Groningen Identity Scale), and aggression (Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire).

These instruments were standardized, and their psychometric properties (validity and reliability) were evaluated on an independent exploratory sample from the Algerian context. The results yielded acceptable reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha exceeded .80 for all scales), ensuring the tools' suitability for

the cultural and linguistic context of the surveyed sample.

Semi-structured interviews with youth, parents, and local actors were conducted, alongside field observations in the targeted neighborhoods.

Quantitative data underwent statistical analysis using SPSS (linear regression, correlation), while qualitative data were analyzed through thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results and Discussion:

1. The relationship between identity loss and violent behavior: The findings indicated a robust statistically significant correlation between identity loss and the propensity for violent behavior ($r = .72, p < .01$). The study revealed that 68% of participants experience elevated psychological anxiety, while 74% perceive a deficiency of belonging within their neighborhood. Psychologically, this is explained by the fragmentation of self-identity (Erikson, 1968), where the individual fails to construct a coherent narrative of themselves, resorting to violence as a means to assert their presence in a space where they feel "invisible".

2. Poverty, unemployment, and lack of prospects as generators of psychological stress: Poverty, unemployment, and lack of prospects as generators of psychological stress: The results revealed that poverty and unemployment are the most influential factors

in the disintegration of communal identity ($\beta = .64, p < .001$). Psychologically, a lack of prospects causes a prolonged sensation of existential despair ([Frankl, 1946](#)), which is a psychological state that undermines positive drives and opens the door to destructive behaviors. 82% of the participating teenagers said that they "see no future" for themselves, which promotes a sense of powerlessness and internal rage that transfers into exterior aggression.

3. The impact of socialization and media on psychological cohesion: The impact of socialization and media on psychological coherence: Interviews demonstrated that weak family upbringing (lack of dialogue, domestic violence, absence of role models) decreases psychological coherence, which is the ability to integrate emotions and motivations coherently ([Antonovsky, 1979](#)). The results also showed that 61% of the participants spend more than 4 hours everyday consuming media content that glorifies violence or promotes extreme individualistic attitudes. Psychologically, this leads to a distorted self-image and the creation of alternative identities based on hostility as a way of difference.

4. The clan as a source of support and psychological stress: The clan as a source of support and psychological stress:

55% of the participants claimed that the tribe provides them with a sense of security, but 48% of them reported that it causes ongoing

psychological strain owing to the "duty to defend honor" or "revenge." Psychologically, this illustrates the existential contradiction between the need for security and the fear of societal punishment, a conflict that creates persistent anxiety manifesting as defensive or retaliatory violence.

5. Absence of institutional psychological support:

One of the most remarkable findings is that 92% of the patients did not obtain any official psychological support, despite their high levels of anxiety and sadness. This is a severe oversight, as the lack of institutional psychological debriefing processes leads individuals to utilize violence as a means of "discharging negative emotional charges" ([Freud, 1922](#)).

Recommendations and policies:

1. Establish community psychological support centers in vulnerable communities, offering free counseling services, including training for counselors to handle concerns of identity and alienation. Establishing community mental health support centers in vulnerable neighborhoods, offering free counselling services, including training for counselors to address concerns of identity and alienation.

2. Integrating resilience skills into educational curricula through programs that focus on establishing a positive identity, managing emotions, and resolving conflicts. Integrating

psychological resilience skills into educational curricula thru programs that focus on establishing a positive identity, managing emotions, and resolving conflicts.

3. Organizing counter-media initiatives that rehabilitate the stereotype of youth and provide good models of urban identity. Organizing counter-media initiatives to rehabilitate the stereotype of youth and provide good models of urban identity.

4. Activating the function of the "community guide" as a link between adolescents and institutions, to create trust and provide a psychological alternative to tribal loyalties. Activating the position of the "community guide" as a link between adolescents and institutions, to create trust and provide a psychological alternative to tribal loyalties.

5. Linking security policies with psychological interventions by training police officers in the principles of primary psychological support and treating psychological crises. Linking security strategies with psychological interventions by teaching police officers on the principles of primary psychological support and coping with psychological crises.

Conclusion

This study indicates that urban violence in Algerian communities is not only a behavioral illness, but an expression of an existential psychological crisis based on the loss of identity and belonging. Addressing this

situation involves broad interventions that go beyond the security element to the psychological and social underpinnings, while preserving local cultural characteristics. Therefore, investing in developing an inclusive and resilient urban identity, supported by strong psychological support mechanisms, is a vital condition for achieving sustainable societal stability.

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