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Psychological responses to blood vengeance among Arab adolescents

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Abstract

Objective: The goal of this study was to investigate the well being of Arab adolescents who live under the threat of ongoing blood vengeance, and to assess the impact of socio-demographic characteristics, cultural context, and family functioning as a mediators factors.

Method: The sample consisted of 100 adolescents in grades 6–8. Self-reported standardized measures were used to assess the participants' level of self-esteem (Rosenberg's scale), mental health (the Brief Symptom Inventory BSI), and perceived family functioning (the McMaster Family Assessment Device FAD).

Results: The participants of this study demonstrated higher levels of distress and symptomatic behavior as compared to the Israeli norms. In a series of multiple regression, General Family Functioning emerged as the major predictor associated with mental health. Female participants reported a higher anxiety level than their male counterparts. Male participants, on the other hand, were more willing to continue the feud of blood vengeance.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that there are similarities among children and adolescents who live in war zones and those who live under a threatening blood vengeance. Family functioning appears as the major mediator of well being. Implications for practice are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Arab adolescent; Blood vengeance; Family functioning; Mental health; Self-esteem

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Introduction

The deleterious psychological impact of exposure to violence has been well documented (Macksoud & Aber, 1996; Minkowski, Morisseau, Marciano, & Hurau-Rendu, 1993; Punamaki & Suleiman, 1989). Most of the documentation pertains to adults, especially soldiers (Sack, Clarke, & Seeley, 1995; Sack et al., 1993), and civilians in war (Jensen & Shaw, 1993; Pruiner, 1995; Shaw & Jesse, 1994), but victims of rape (e.g., Ferguson & Cairns, 1996; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999), assault (Cairns, 1996), terrorism (Melville & Lykes, 1992; Terr, 1983), and a large variety of violent events (Dawes & Donald, 1994; Schwarzwald, Wisenberg, Waysman, Solomon, & Klingman, 1993) have also been shown to suffer a range of psychological, functional, and social impairments (Cliff & Noormahomed, 1993).

Children's responses to violence have been studied too, though less so. Here the focus has been on the impact of child abuse (Jahoda & Harrison, 1975; Zivcic, 1993) and urban violence (Baker, 1990; Boothby, 1994) on the one hand, and, on the other hand, on the effects of the political violence and frontless wars of the last few decades, in which children have been increasingly involved both as passive victims and active participants (Baker, 1990; Geltman & Stover, 1997; Macksoud & Aber, 1996).

Findings have shown that, much like their elders, children who are exposed to war suffer from a large variety of symptoms. These include both PTSD symptoms, such as flashbacks, nightmares and sleep disturbances, concentration problems, heightened alertness, and avoidance of people and situations that evoke memories of the traumatic event (Friedman & Marsella, 1996; Qouta, Punamaki, & El-Sarraj, 1995; Macksoud & Aber, 1996; Reichenberg & Friedman, 1996), which have been found to follow traumatic events, and more general symptoms such as aggression (Baker, 1990), depression (Macksoud & Aber, 1996), anxiety (Zivcic, 1993), regressive behaviors (Jensen & Shaw, 1993), truncated moral development (Ferguson & Cairns, 1996), poor school performance (Sack et al., 1993), changes in attitudes, beliefs, and personality (Terr, 1983), and diminished hope for the future (Cairns, 1996).

This paper explores the responses of Arab adolescents to a type of violence that has never been studied before. Namely, it examines the impact of exposure to an ongoing blood feud on Arab youngsters living in an Arab neighborhood in Israel. Such a study is important because, as will be shown more clearly, blood vengeance is a highly specific phenomenon in Arab societies. It differs from other acts of ongoing violence. It is more rooted in the mainstream culture of the people involved than gang wars (Garbarino, 1995). Yet it is not state-organized, and not enacted to gain land or material resources. Thus, it cannot be assumed that the responses will be the same as to those types of violence. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that children in all cultures and situations respond in the same way to violence. It has already been shown that children's responses vary considerably in accord not only with a host of personal factors, but also with the nature of the violence and the context in which it occurs (Cairns, 1996; Dawes & Donald, 1994; Wessells, 1996).

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