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Children and adolescents facing a continuous security threat: Aggressive behavior and post-traumatic stress symptoms



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ABSTRACT

There is extensive research evidence indicating that children and youth are the most vulnerable population for developing psychological symptoms relating to war and terror. Although studies have documented a wide range of detrimental emotional and behavioral effects of such exposure, much less is known about the effects of exposure to a continuous security threat for children and adolescents. Against this background, the current article examined the implications of continuous exposure to missile attacks among 1096 children and adolescents enrolled in public schools near the Israeli border with Gaza. Participants filled out quantitative questionnaires, which relate to the pathological consequences of continuous exposure to security threats, and to the role of the school and the community as a protective environment against disruptive behavior resulting from such exposure. The findings revealed that PTSS responses were mainly related to the security threat, whereas interpersonal aggression resulted from other types of traumatic events. Significant differences were found between aggression and posttraumatic symptoms, by age and gender. PTSS was found to be lower for older participants and higher for girls, whereas aggression was higher for boys and higher for older participants. Furthermore, the sense of belonging to the place of residence was negatively associated with PTSS as well as with aggressive behavior: the higher the participants' sense of belonging, the lower their levels of PTSS and aggressive responses. In contrast, the sense of belonging to the school was negatively associated only with aggressive behavior: the higher the participants' sense of belonging to the school, the lower their aggressive responses. The findings are discussed in the light of trauma theories and in light of the results of previous research. The study contributed to knowledge about the differential consequences of exposure to a security threat, and highlighted the importance of differential interventions with children who show post-traumatic symptoms versus those who show aggressive behavior. Accordingly, the security situation should not overshadow social issues that need to be addressed, such as family violence and aggression among school children.

1. Introduction

There is a great deal of research indicating that children and adolescents are the most vulnerable population for developing a range of psychological symptoms relating to trauma and distress, the most prominent of which are Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms (PTSS) and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; [North & Pfefferbaum, 2002](#)). A growing body of evidence also suggests that other behavioral dysfunctions such as aggressive behavior in school ([Al-Krenawi, Graham, & Sehwill, 2007](#)) and substance use ([Boscarino, Adams, & Galea, 2006](#)) are frequent among adolescents who have been exposed to traumatic events. However, much less is known

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about the effects of exposure to a *continuous security threat* on posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) among children and adolescents and on their behavior. In such situations, it is necessary not only to address the immediate physical and emotional damage resulting from one event, but also to examine the implications of the ever-present threat that is always looming: the fear of a potential future event (Kline & Mone, 2003; Kline and Mone, 2003), the need to go on with daily life in the danger zone for an unknown period of time, and the stress of living under conditions that have been coined an “emergency routine” (Baum, 2012).

Research findings indicate that such exposure has far-reaching implications for long-term emotional, behavioral, and cognitive adjustment beyond PTSD (Pat-Horenczyk, 2005; Sagy & Braun-Lewensohn, 2009; Terr, 1991). Notably, experiencing such exposure has been associated with developmental conflicts (Elbedour, Onwnegbuzie, Ghannman, Whitcome, & Abu Hein, 2007), depression (e.g. Shahar et al., 2009), risk for suicide (Pelkonen, Marttunen, & Aro, 2003), and fear and anxiety, which play an important role especially in continuous traumatic situations (Henrich & Shahar, 2013). Other researchers have found behavioral and cognitive effects such as violent and aggressive behavior (Brookmeyer, Henrich, Cohen, & Shahar, 2011; Busby, Lambert, & Ialongo, 2013), delinquent behavior (Merrilees et al., 2013), and even disruptions in the adolescents' social network (Barile, Grogan, Henrich, Brookmeyer, & Shahar, 2012).

However, in addition to the above-mentioned findings, many studies conducted in conflict areas have indicated that children and adolescents who have been exposed to political violence do *not* necessarily experience serious psychological consequences (Braun-Lewensohn, Celestin-Westreich, Celestin, Verté, & Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, 2010; Zeidner, 2005). Moreover, a large body of research has found that only a small fraction of people who have been exposed to political violence will develop long-term stress reactions, whereas most of them will become accustomed to living in the shadow of political violence and danger (Ronen, Rahav, & Appel, 2003), and will even succeed in being resilient (e.g., Braun-Lewensohn, Sagy, & Roth, 2011).

In light of this range of findings, and considering that there are children and adolescents who are still exposed to ongoing political violence, it is important to continue investigating the emotional and behavioral consequences of such exposure. Other aspects of this situation that have not been addressed sufficiently are involvement in violence at school, which has become a common concern, especially among children and adolescents (Chemtob, Nomura, Josephson, Adams, & Sederer, 2009), and the role of the school as a protective environment against disruptive behavior resulting from continuous exposure to security threats and political violence.

1.1. Trauma and aggression

Whereas the literature provides extensive support for the correlations between exposure to trauma and community violence and aggressive behavior (Purugganan, Stein, Silver, & Benenson, 2003), less is known about the correlation between exposure to ongoing war and terror (or political violence) and adolescents' aggressive behavior and posttraumatic symptoms. Solomon, Even-Chen, and Itzhaky (2007) found that greater exposure to political, domestic, and community violence contributed significantly to self-reports of aggressive behavior at school. Similarly, a survey of 2328 Palestinian high school students in the West Bank found that exposure to political violence was strongly associated with involvement in school violence (Al-Krenawi et al., 2007).

The theoretical literature is backed by empirical evidence indicating that exposure to political, community, or family violence predicts future violent behavior (Brookmeyer, Henrich, & Schwab-Stone, 2005; Widom & Czaja, 2012). For example, Schiff et al. (2012) found that war effects include a broad range of psychological stress symptoms and risk behaviors such as involvement in school violence, which persist long after the war ends – especially among youth who have experienced childhood trauma and high exposure to war-related stressors. In the same vein, Henrich and Shahar (2013) conducted a longitudinal study which revealed that exposure to terrorism may have chronic, long-term effects on violence among youth, and highlighted the importance of continuing to investigate this issue. However, to the best of our knowledge, these studies did not look at age differences, type of aggression (being a victim versus being an aggressor), or the contribution of contextual factors such as the school or place of residence. In addition, many children and adolescents do not experience stress symptoms even in the face of sustained terror attacks, and for many of those who do the experience of distress might be short-lived (Henrich & Shahar, 2013). Nonetheless, in situations of continuous exposure to threat, fear of the next adverse event was found to be a prominent factor (Diamond, Lipsitz, Fajerman, & Rozenblat, 2010; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2014). Those reactions, which include posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS), violence, and victimization, were found to be gender-based (e.g., Barile et al., 2012). In light of previous findings regarding gender differences in the effects of exposure to terrorism, we examined whether the direct and indirect effects of gender, age, and exposure to violence on PTSS and/or aggressive behavior through several mediators (fear, being a victim, and sense of belonging to the place and to the school) contribute to explaining the additional variance in PTSS or aggressive behavior in the face of continuous exposure to a security threat.

1.2. Trauma and community resources

Our research was based on the tenets of social ecological theory (Harvey, 1996; Ungar, 2008, 2013) and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (e.g., Hobfoll, Dunahoo, & Monnier, 1995), which are integrative stress theories that consider both environmental and internal processes. According to these theories, family, friends, schools, and neighborhoods can serve as a powerful protective factor in the context of exposure to political violence (Cummings & Davies, 1996; Dubow et al., 2009). Based on this theoretical framework, our study aimed to explore whether the ability to cope and to continue with a routine at times of stress is related not only to personal resources but also to contextual and community resources such as subjective perceptions of one's place of residence and one's sense of belonging to the community (Dekel & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2009; Ungar, 2013). In addition, we explored the interaction between personal and contextual resources (Harvey, 1996). Specifically, we examined whether the school, which is a natural environment for children and adolescents, might serve as a protective environment or as an environment that is conducive to

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