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Exposure to threat of war and terror, political attitudes, stress, and life satisfaction among teenagers in Israel[☆]

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Abstract

The study examines the pattern of relations between level of threat, political attitude (willingness for political compromise), and well-being (level of stress and life satisfaction) among Israeli teenagers in reaction to Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon. Participants were 419 teenagers from two residential areas: the Northern area (close to the Israeli–Lebanese border) and the Central area (distant from the border). The results show: (a) significant differences between the two groups on: political attitude (Center scored higher), on level of stress (North scored higher), and on life satisfaction (North scored lower); (b) a significant negative correlation between exposure to threat and political attitude; (c) significant negative correlations between political attitude and measures of stress, and a significant positive correlation with life satisfaction; (d) political attitude mediates between level of threat and well-being. Political and educational implications, and mental health policy are discussed.

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Introduction

The withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon in May 2000, created political uncertainty that was a source of both hope and of fear, affecting individuals' level of stress as well as their overall well-being. The withdrawal was a unilateral Israeli move, taken without attaining a formal agreement with either Lebanon or Syria.

Being exposed to political violence has generally been an idiosyncratic local phenomenon, known mainly to the people living in specific areas where war or terror was taking place, such as Israel, Ireland, South America, or Bosnia. However, in the past few years political terror has become a much wider phenomenon.

This paper focuses on the relationship between teenagers' willingness for political compromise, and reactions to the threat created by the new political situation. The uniqueness of the current research lies in the specific context in which the relationships between political attitudes and the reactions to threat of war and terror are studied. The participants are teenagers who were born into the existing conflict between Israel and Lebanon and who have experienced political hardship throughout their entire lives.

The possibility that willingness to compromise, which is part of the democratic tradition, might be associated with levels of stress and life satisfaction might be a relevant issue that should be of concern to mental health policy makers, educators, social science researchers, and political leaders alike in various areas around the globe (Punamaeki, Qouta, & Sarraj, 1997).

Impact of war and terror

The reflection of uncertainty created by war and terror on children and teenagers has been studied extensively (Cairns, 1996; Danieli, 1996; Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996; Jensen, 1996; Osofsky, 1997). Children are perceived in the literature as being affected by war and terror not only if they are killed or wounded, but also if they suffer from psychosocial distress. Exposure to uncertainty, militaristic socialization, or inhumane behaviour affects their psychosocial development and their ability to love, to care, or to feel solidarity (Jensen, 1996).

Research shows that the level of psychosocial damage depends on the level of exposure to the traumatic events (Cicchetti & Toth, 1992; Punamaeki et al., 1997). It has been found that being exposed to traumatic events of war and terror reduces the ability of adult support systems to be attuned and available to children. In turn, children's level of stress rises, while their self-esteem and school performance decline (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996; Punamaeki et al., 1997). The intensity of exposure to traumatic events affects not only specific areas of life, but also the general well-being of children and teenagers (Garbarino et al., 1991; Osofsky, 1997; Slone & Hallis, 1999).

Individual differences in level of stress and well-being are attributed to personality as well as social variables. Lazarus (1996) introduced the concept of appraisal as the cognitive mediation of stress reactions. Appraisal determines the impact of the events on level of stress, as well as on personal well-being. Thus, when studying the effect of political uncertainty, it is important to understand not only the severity, but also the appraisal of the specific event. One main aspect of such appraisal might be related to the political orientation of the individual, which may or may not account for difficulties created as the result of a political event.

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