Serious physical violence among Arab-Palestinian adolescents: The role of exposure to neighborhood violence, perceived ethnic discrimination, normative beliefs, and, parental communication

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ABSTRACT

This study adopted a social-ecological perspective to exploring perpetration of serious physical violence against others among Arab-Palestinian adolescents. A total of 3178 adolescents (aged 13–18) completed anonymous, structured, self-report questionnaire, which included selected items from several instruments that measured variables relating to the constructs examined in the study. We explored the association of individual characteristics (age, gender, normative beliefs about violence, and perceived ethnic discrimination), familial characteristics (parent-adolescent communication and socioeconomic status), and contextual characteristics (exposure to community violence in the neighborhood) with perpetration of serious physical violence against others. A moderation-mediation model was tested, and 28.4% of the adolescents reported that they had perpetrated serious physical violence against others at least once during the month preceding the study. The findings also show that exposure of youth to violence in their neighborhood correlated significantly and positively with their perpetration of serious physical violence against others. A similar trend was revealed with respect to personal perceptions of ethnic discrimination. These correlations were mediated by the adolescents' normative beliefs about violence. Furthermore, the correlation of direct exposure to violence in the neighborhood and normative beliefs about violence with perpetration of serious physical violence against others was stronger among adolescents who have poor communication with their parents than among those who have strong parental communication.

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1. Introduction

Involvement of children and youth in serious physical violence poses a risk to their well-being, and is a significant health concern (Slavin et al., 2013). Adolescents who perpetrate physical violence against others experience negative outcomes such as internalizing symptoms, lower aspiration to pursue a college education (Foshee et al., 2016), more likelihood of substance use (Espelage, Low, Rao, Hong, & Little, 2014). Therefore, it is important to explore the factors that underlie adolescent's perpetration of violent acts. The current study examined factors at the individual level (gender, age, normative beliefs, and perceived ethnic discrimination), the familial level (parent-child communication, family SES) and the contextual

level (exposure to violence in the neighborhood) that predict Arab-Palestinian adolescent perpetration of serious physical violence against others.

Benbenishty and Astor (2005) defined serious physical violence as a type of violence in which serious harm occurs through direct physical damage or threat of physical damage to another person. It includes behaviors such as physical attacks, seriously beating others, use of weapons, use of restraints or one's body size or strength against another person (see also Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2007). The current study examined the perpetration of serious physical violence among the Arab-Palestinian adolescents in their environment (e.g., at school, in the neighborhood, and at home). It should be noted, however, that the study explored violent behaviors against Arabs only, and did not explore violent behaviors of Arabs against Jews, which is beyond the scope of this paper (see Khoury-Kassabri, Khoury, & Ali, 2015). In order to properly contextualize the study, we will first briefly describe the socio-cultural context of Arab-Palestinian adolescents in Israel.

1.1. Arab-Palestinian adolescents in Israel

Today, the Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel comprises 20% of the total Israeli population (Gharrah, 2015), and is characterized by a significantly lower socioeconomic status and fewer social resources than the Jewish majority (Hammack, 2010). The Arab minority is also largely characterized by traditional, patriarchal, and authoritarian family values (Kaufman, Abu-Baker, & Sa'ar, 2012). In recent decades, however, Arab-Palestinian society in Israel has undergone a number of modernizing economic, political, and social changes (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000; Gharrah, 2015). The rapid modernization process in Arab-Palestinian society has inevitably had an effect on parent-child relationships, although this change has not occurred at an equal pace among children and their parents. Some adolescents have adapted faster than their parents, or are more willing to adopt Western values. This has resulted in a generation gap (Sherer, 2009), which can lead to parent-child conflict, lack of supervision, and reduced harmony (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). These factors can place children at higher risk for involvement in violence (Lee and Stockdale, 2008).

In a similar vein, previous studies conducted in Israel have shown that Arab-Palestinian adolescents report more victimization by serious physical violence and threats than do Jewish adolescents (Khoury-Kassabri, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2009; Knafo, Daniel, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2008; Ronen, Abuelaish, Rosenbaum, Agbaria, & Hamama, 2013). For instance, the findings of the National authority for measurement and evaluation in education (2016) show that the percentage of Arab students who reported perpetrating serious physical violence in the school was much higher than the percentage of Jewish students (15% vs. 7%, respectively). The results of that study indicated that this gap was consistent across different age groups (elementary, secondary, and high school students). Furthermore, based on the Israeli National Police reports, the percentage of Arab adolescents (aged 12–17) was accused of violent crimes is 54%, compared to 46.6% among the Jewish adolescents (Berman, 2015).

These differences have been attributed to the many socioeconomic and cultural differences between Jews and Arabs in Israel (Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2009; Knafo et al., 2008). The current study aimed to expand knowledge in that field by testing a mediation-moderation model that includes factors at different levels of the ecological system which may explain the perpetration of serious physical violence against others among Arab-Palestinian youth (e.g., the child's individual characteristics, familial and contextual factors).

1.2. Individual factors and violence

The current study examined the correlation of gender, age, perceived ethnic discrimination, and normative beliefs about violence with adolescents' perpetration of serious physical violence against others. Regarding *gender* differences, studies have revealed that males have higher scores than females on perpetration of general physical violence (Cleverley, Peter, Vaillancourt, Boyle, & Lipman, 2012; Kawabata, Tseng, Murray-Close, & Crick, 2012; Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2009; Lansford et al., 2012; Tapper & Boulton, 2004; Tseng, Banny, Kawabata, Crick, & Gua, 2013) as well as on involvement in severe violence in general and carrying weapons in particular (Khoury-Kassabri, Benbenishty, Astor, & Zeira, 2004; Malecki & Demaray, 2003). As for *age* differences in perpetration of violence, the findings are inconsistent. Several studies have indicated that the tendency toward aggression increases with age (Pepler & Craig, 2005; Xie, Swift, Carins, & Carins, 2002), whereas others suggest the opposite, i.e., that perpetration of physical violence decreases with age (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Normative beliefs about violence refer to an individual's perceptions about whether illegal actions constitute acceptable or unacceptable behavior (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Huesmann, 1998; Pardini, Loeber, & Stoouthamer-Loeber, 2005). Many previous studies have shown that one's attitudes and beliefs about the acceptability and legitimacy of violence have a direct effect on violent behaviors ((Guerra, Huesmann, & Spindler, 2003; Henry et al., 2000; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Lim & Ang, 2009; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). For instance, in a study of 249 elementary school students, Lim and Ang (2009) found that general normative beliefs about violence contributed significantly to predicting physical, verbal, and indirect violence.

Another individual level factor explored in this study was perceived ethnic discrimination, which is defined as negative attitudes and judgments, or unfair behavior toward members of particular group (Williams, Spencer, & Jacklon, 1999). Research findings have revealed a negative correlation between perceived ethnic discrimination and the mental health of immigrant and minority youth. It has been argued that perceived discrimination is a negative life event which is a source of chronic stress (Agnew, 1992; Kaduvettoor-Davidson & Inman, 2012), especially when discrimination occurs frequently