



High school students' posttraumatic symptoms, substance abuse and involvement in violence in the aftermath of war

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ABSTRACT

This study examined one-year after effects of exposure to war events on adolescents' Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms (PTS) and risk behaviors (substance use and involvement in school violence). In addition, it addressed two potential vulnerability factors: at the micro level, it examined whether childhood trauma raised the vulnerability of Israeli adolescents to PTS and risk behaviors when exposed to war events. At the macro level, we explored whether ethnicity, i.e., being an Israeli Arab, is a vulnerability factor to PTS and risk behaviors. We used a representative sample of 7th to 11th grade students from the north of Israel that included 4151 students: 1800 Jewish (54.4% boys) and 2351 Arab (41.5% boys). We assessed exposure to war events and childhood traumatic events, PTS and PTSD, substance use (alcohol, cannabis, Ecstasy) and involvement in school violence. The findings revealed extensive exposure to war events among both Jewish and Arab students. A year after the war, its effects on adolescents were still manifested in PTS, and involvement in school violence and substance use. Exposure to child physical abuse was associated with higher levels of PTS symptoms, substance use and involvement in violence. Exposure to other traumatic events was also associated with greater PTS symptoms and involvement in violence but not with greater substance use. Arab students were a more vulnerable population. They reported higher PTS symptoms, more cannabis use and greater involvement in school violence than Jewish students. However, exposure to war events had similar effects on both Arab and Jewish students. We conclude that war effects include a broad range of psychological distress and risk behaviors that last long after the war ends, especially among youth who have experienced childhood trauma and high exposure to war-related stressors.

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Introduction

The detrimental consequences of political violence for children's and adolescents' psychological distress have been documented in the United States (DeVoe, Klein, Bannon, & Miranda-Julian, 2011; Hoven, Duarte, & Mandell, 2003; Hoven et al., 2005; Pfefferbaum, Stuber, Galea, & Fairbrother, 2006) and worldwide (Moscardino, Scrimin, Capello, & Altoe, 2010; Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2009; Peltonen, Qouta, El Sarraj, & Punamaki, 2010; Punamaki, 2008). The most prominent and well-documented effects of exposure to war are Posttraumatic Stress Syndrome (PTS) and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996; Gurwitsch,

Pfefferbaum, & Leftwich, 2002; North & Pfefferbaum, 2002; Pat-Horenczyk, 2005). There is growing evidence that other behavioral dysfunctions, such as aggression (Cummings et al., 2010) and substance use (Boscarino, Adams, & Galea, 2006), are also associated with exposure to political violence. For example, a study with 254 Jewish Israeli adolescents (Even-Chen & Itzhaky, 2007) found that greater exposure to political, domestic, and community violence contributed significantly to self-reports of violent behavior in 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, Graham, & Sehswail, 2007). However, much less is known about the after effects of war on adolescents' psychological distress and risk behavior.

This study was conducted a year after the second Lebanon War of July 2006 among a representative sample of Arab and Jewish

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adolescents residing in the north of Israel. During the war, civilians in the northern part of Israel, including the major city of Haifa, experienced severe rocket attacks from Lebanon. The intense war lasted 34 days, with a total of 4000 rockets falling almost entirely on civilians, who suffered 44 deaths and 2000 wounded. Many Jewish families fled the area and moved to the southern part of Israel or spent long periods in shelters or specially designed protected areas in their homes. Israeli Arab citizens were less likely to have shelters and protected areas in their homes or to move away from the war zone.

This study aimed to examine (a) the after effects of war on psychological distress, substance use and involvement in school violence; (b) potential differences between Israeli Arab and Jewish adolescents in exposure to war and its after effects; (c) two potential vulnerability factors. First, at the micro level, it examined whether childhood abuse and other trauma history raises the vulnerability of Israeli adolescents to PTS, substance use and involvement in school violence when exposed to war events. Second, on the macro level the study focused on ethnicity which, in Israel may intersect with ethnic or national identity and religiosity (Kaufman, Abu-Baker, & Sa'ar, 2012). It examined whether Israeli Arabs are more vulnerable than their Jewish peers to the negative psychological and behavioral consequences of exposure to war events.

Past studies conducted by the authors in large community samples of school students (Pat-Horenczyk, Abramovitz, et al., 2007; Pat-Horenczyk, Peled, et al., 2007; Schiff, 2006; Schiff, Zweig, Benbenishty, & Hasin, 2007) revealed that cumulative exposure to terrorism was associated with greater risk behaviors, including alcohol consumption (Schiff, 2006; Schiff et al., 2006) and cannabis use (Schiff et al., 2007). Adolescents with higher levels of posttraumatic symptoms reported greater levels of risk behavior (e.g., drinking alcohol, using drugs, driving dangerously, unprotected sex) than adolescents with lower levels of posttraumatic symptoms (Pat-Horenczyk, Abramovitz, et al., 2007; Pat-Horenczyk, Peled, et al., 2007). Exposure to terrorism was associated with higher levels of alcohol consumption and cannabis use even when posttraumatic symptoms were statistically controlled (Schiff et al., 2007). However, these studies were conducted during a period of repeated incidents of political violence. A recent study examining the after effects of cumulative exposure to seven years of political violence on adolescents found that greater exposure to cumulative political violence events was associated with greater psychological distress (Slone & Shechner, 2011). Less is known about the after effects of political violence such as war with regard to substance use and involvement in violence, especially among adolescents (Chemtob, Nomura, Josephson, Adams, & Sederer, 2009). Furthermore, little is known about factors that may contribute to vulnerability to the stresses of political violence.

History of child abuse and other traumatic events as a source of vulnerability

Adolescents' exposure to family violence is associated with later maladjustment including involvement in violence (Muller, Goebel-Fabbri, Diamond, & Dinklage, 2000). Other types of childhood adversities including neglect and death of close ones were also related to later maladjustment (Kessler, Davis, & Kendler, 1997). The Stress Sensitization Model (Hammen, Henry, & Daley, 2000) posits that the risk for distress following recent stressful life events is greater among individuals with a history of childhood adversity than those without such a history. Supportive evidence was found recently in the National Epidemiological Survey of Alcohol and Related Conditions ($n = 34,653$) (McLaughlin, Conron, Koenen, & Gilman, 2010). Given that exposure to war events in the past year

is a major recent stressful or even traumatic event, this model implies that adolescents who were exposed to childhood adversity such as child abuse, accidents or sudden death in the family are likely to experience more psychological and behavioral distress, including substance use and involvement in violence, in the aftermath of war than those who did not experience such childhood diversity.

Being Israeli Arab as a source of vulnerability

Israeli Arabs comprise 20% of the population in Israel. Nonetheless, in northern Israel where this study was conducted Arabs are the majority of the population (Israel Central Bureau of statistics, 2008). Arabs and Jews in Israel have different socio-demographic backgrounds, cultures, religions and sources of support (Somer, Maguen, Or-Chen, & Litz, 2009). Arab Israelis' socio-economic status is lower and they have fewer social resources and suffer more discrimination than their Jewish counterparts (Hall et al., 2010; Hobfoll, Canetti-Nisim, & Johnson, 2006). Moreover, they experience a conflict between their Israeli citizenship and their Arab-Palestinian identity, which impacts the way they perceive acts of political violence against Israel (Shamir & Shikaki, 2002). Consequently, their psychological distress resulting from exposure to violence is different from that of Israeli Jews, and most often, greater (Gelkopf, Solomon, Berger, & Bleich, 2008). For example, a recent study that examined the effects of exposure to the seven years of the second Intifada (1998–2004) found that Israeli Arab adolescents reported higher rates of exposure to acts of political violence, and greater impact of this exposure, compared with their Jewish counterparts (Slone & Shechner, 2011). Nonetheless, Islam, which is the religion that the majority (about 80%) of Israeli Arabs hold, prohibits drinking while there is no such a restriction in Judaism (Weiss, 2002). Therefore, we do not expect that Arabs' greater distress will be reflected in higher drinking levels. The second Lebanon war may have deepened the duality that Israeli Arabs feel toward the Israel-Palestinian conflict. On one hand, similarly to Jewish Israelis, they were victims in this war, since most of them live in the north, in areas that were heavily bombarded by rockets fired by Arabs from Lebanon. On the other hand, they may have identified with the attackers, and may have seen these attacks as a legitimate fight against Israel's aggression and occupation (Shamir & Shikaki, 2002). This internal conflict may have intensified the already greater psychological distress that was previously found during the Intifada (Slone & Shechner, 2011). Thus, we hypothesized that Israeli Arab adolescents would experience greater distress and higher levels of risk behaviors (except for alcohol consumption). We further hypothesized that ethnic affiliation would moderate the effects of war exposure on adolescents distress and risk behavior.

In sum, this study examines one-year after effect of exposure to war events on adolescents PTS and risk behavior. Dependent variables are: PTS, substance use and involvement in school violence. Independent variables are exposure to war events, ethnicity (Jewish/Arab), and experiencing childhood abuse. The last two variables were also examined as moderating the relationship between levels of exposure to war and the dependent variables. Specifically, we addressed the following hypotheses and research questions.

(1) Greater exposure to war events is associated with higher levels of PTS and risk behaviors. (2) Arab adolescents experience higher levels of PTS and involvement in school violence and substance use (but no greater alcohol consumption) compared with their Jewish counterparts. (3) Adolescents who experienced childhood abuse and other types of traumatic events experience greater levels of PTS and risk behaviors. We further examined

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