Commentary on Huesmann et al.

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The Huesmann et al. paper is a unique, longitudinal, multiethnic group project that helps us understand some of the key psychological processes that mediate how exposure to political violence exerts its effects on Israeli and Palestinian children's aggressive behavior toward in-group peers. Now it is critical to put this knowledge into action, developing effective interventions to reduce violence exposure effects. To do this on the Israeli side, we must consider the unique socializing context for Israeli youth.

The Broader Israeli Socializing Context

Constant exposure to security threats

We cannot ignore that Israelis live in a violence-stricken region, which consequently exposes children to explicit (e.g., terrorist attacks and rocket fire) and implicit violence (e.g., being instructed to be careful of suspicious objects, bags being checked at the entrance to public buildings, and practicing security alarm drills). Huesmann et al. have shown that exposure to ethnic–political violence over time affects aggression (the present paper) and posttraumatic stress symptoms (Dubow, Boxer, et al., 2012). Persistent ongoing violence has effects on each generation, further solidifying negative views about the other, and making them harder to change. Therefore, hopes for peace and peaceful relationships between members of different ethnic groups are essential.

Israel as a multiethnic society

Israel is a multicultural–multiethnic society. Its youth population consists of 70.5% Jews (religious and secular), 23.4% Muslims, 1.6% Christians, 1.7% Druze, and 2.8% others (e.g., Circassia; Berman, 2014). Moreover, Israel has also absorbed waves of immigrants. The largest group (35.5%) came from the former Soviet Union; other large groups came from Ethiopia (20.4%) and North America (15%; Berman, 2014).

Although the Jewish and Arab educational systems are separate, the Jewish dominance requires that Arab children learn Hebrew at school, starting in the third or fourth grade. Given that both Hebrew and Arabic are Israel's official languages, Jewish children also study Arabic, but to a much lesser extent and mostly in junior high school (Knesset Education Committee, 2014).

Thus, whether at school, public places (e.g., malls, hospitals, higher education institutions), or in the media, cultural encounters among the multiple ethnic groups are an inevitable aspect of Israeli life. However, these are not enough for promoting a positive attitude toward the cultural and ethnic other (Lev Ari & Laron, 2014). As Huesmann et al. show, exposure to ethnic–political violence promotes normative beliefs justifying aggression against the out-group. We need effective interventions in schools and in the community to promote an understanding of ethnic and cultural differences in this multiethnic society.

Parenting in Israeli families

According to Sagi and Dolev (2001), in bringing up its children, the Israeli Jewish society gives priority to cognitive aspects and not enough sensitivity to children's emotional needs. First, parents' anxiety, stress, and coping with daily security challenges limit parents' ability to express empathy to their children's emotional needs. Second, there is a tendency to pass on responsibility of childcare at an early age. Thus, many Israeli parents leave their babies in daycare centers at the age of 6 months (Sagi & Koren-Karie, 1993). Third, there is the "Sabra ethos" (a term given to an Israeli-born child, based on the prickly fruit wrapped in thorns and sweet inside) by which Israeli children are expected to be tough. Related to this ethos is an adult's tendency to respond to children's emotional distress by demands of overcoming it rather than showing sympathy: "Do not cry like a child." Effective interventions must include parents. Huesmann et al. (Dubow, Huesmann, et al., 2012) have shown that parent mental health and a positive approach to discipline are protective factors for children in this region.

When considering parenting in a cultural context, Arab parenting characteristics tend to be authoritarian in nature (Seginer & Mahajna, 2004), whereas Jewish adolescents perceive their parents as authoritative (Mayseless & Salomon, 2003). Arab parents are highly involved in school, but Jewish parents show more home-based involvement (Kaplan Toren

& Kumar, 2014). These cultural differences among ethnic groups within Israel need to be taken into account when developing parent-targeted interventions.

Characteristics of Israeli youth

One of the central developmental markers of Israeli youth is military service, which, with the exception of the ultraorthodox, is mandatory for all 18-year-old Jewish females and males and Druze males. Thus, although the Israeli Jewish society is guided by individualistic values, on the national level it also emphasizes communal values (Mayseless & Salomon, 2003), and military service is considered a significant period in shaping youth identity (Dar & Kimhi, 2001). How are youth's cognitions about aggression toward the out-group shaped after their military service? What types of intervention, if any, need to be considered at that point?

At the level of personal characteristics, the Israeli Jewish youth profile is complex. On the one hand, Israeli youth describe themselves as having a high sense of efficacy, high levels of self-esteem, and low levels of felt helplessness compared with adolescents in 25 Western nations (Harel, Kanny, & Rahav, 1997). On the other hand, in line with the ongoing ethnic–political conflict context, they report high levels of psychological and physical symptoms of stress and low to moderate levels of happiness (Magen, 1998). Interventions need to take ethnic groups' personal strengths (e.g., self-esteem and self-efficacy) into account as points of leverage to reduce psychological and physical symptoms.

Another important intrapersonal characteristic is adolescents' future orientation. Israeli adolescents, whether they are Arab, Druze, or Jewish, explore and have plans for the future. Their future orientation, like that of youth in other parts of the world, consists of themes of education, career, and married life; and it is related to their sense of self-worth, quality of their interpersonal relationships, and academic achievement (Seginer, 2009). Analysis of Arabs and Jewish adolescents' future perspectives over three time points (1984, 1989, and 1995) found various expressions of hopes of rapprochement, but no hopes (or fears) for actual intergroup interpersonal interactions (Seginer, 1996). Interventions need to promote adolescents' positive future orientation, discuss ethnic and cultural differences in personal values among groups, and explore how future orientations, including expectations of intergroup relationships, might change if ethnic–political violence were to decrease.

Conclusion

Pre-Israeli state history and present reality in Israel imprint their mark on all involved: Palestinian, Israeli Arab, and Jewish children. The present reality includes macrosystemic factors such as ethnic–political violence and the multiethnic characteristics of Israeli society, as well as microsystemic factors such as culture-specific parenting influences. These ecological factors play key roles in shaping intrapersonal characteristics such as youths' social cognitions about the world (Huesmann et al.), values (Benish-Weisman, 2015), and future orientations (Seginer, 2009), which then shape their behavioral and emotional life. The research findings must now move toward the systematic development and evaluation of interventions for youth and families living in the context of persistent ethnic–political conflict, but with a careful eye toward the ethnic and cultural differences in ecological factors and personal characteristics among the groups exposed to the conflict.

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