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Attitudes toward war and peace and their relations with anxiety reactions among adolescents living in a conflictual area

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The present study examined attitudes toward war and peace during a violent conflict and their relationships with anxiety reactions. We aimed to find out if attitudes toward the conflict in general or attitudes toward the specific operation are linked to anxiety reactions during a stressful situation and if a personal coping resource mediates the relationships between these attitudes and anxiety. Data were gathered on November 2012 from 78 Jewish adolescents living in southern Israel who were exposed to missile attacks during a military operation. Adolescents filled out self-report questionnaires which included socio-demographic characteristics; attitudes toward the military operation; ways to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; and sense of coherence and state anxiety. Results showed that most of the adolescents believed that a military operation would diminish the missile attacks to some extent or totally. Overall, adolescents who believed that a military operation would resolve the situation for a limited time were more anxious, while those who believed that it would open the opportunity for negotiation with the enemy, socialization, education, and mutual interest were less anxious. Results are discussed against the background of the meanings of growing up in the shadow of intractable violent conflict.

Keywords: politics; attitudes; mental health; coping resources

The goal of the present study was to examine the attitudes toward war and peace during a violent conflict and their relationships with anxiety reactions. Moreover, we aimed at examining the role of sense of coherence (SOC) as a coping resource in mediating these relationships. The study was carried out during a military operation during which hundreds of missiles were fired from Gaza Strip to large areas throughout Israel. More specifically, we examined Israeli-Jewish adolescents' attitudes toward the specific military operation (*Pillar of Clouds*) and toward the Israeli–Palestinian (I-P) conflict in general as well as SOC and stress reactions of anxiety during the stressful situation.

Attitudes toward war and peace

Unfortunately, millions of children and adolescents around the world experience war in their daily lives (UN, General Assembly 2005). War and violence are part of their social world and social knowledge about interactions and relationships between people, groups, and nations (Jagodic 2000). For adolescents living in war zones and experiencing war

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situations, such violent situations become part of their political socialization through the years. Their political attitudes develop as part of their socio-political context and nationhood (Flanagan 2004). Research is not consistent with regard to the influences of the political context on perceptions of war and peace. On the one hand, some researchers claim that in times of national conflict and wars people are more skeptical toward peace and are more supportive of war (Carnagey and Anderson 2007; Lavi and Solomon 2005), while in times of ceasefire or negotiations for peace, the change in political atmosphere influences these attitudes (McGlynn et al. 2004; Sagy, Ayalon, and Diab 2011). However, other findings indicate that exposure to and experiences of wars and violence may lead to the development of negative attitudes toward wars, favoring forgiveness and reconciliation (Liddell, Kemp, and Moeman 1993; Pham, Vinck, and Weinstein 2010).

Socio-demographic factors also tend to influence attitudes toward war and peace. For example, girls and women of all ages are less supportive and knowledgeable about wars, but they grasp the concept of peace earlier and with more sophistication than do boys (Eichenberg 2003; Punamaki 1996). Overall, men are reported to be more favorable for war-related policies while women support more social and peaceful ways for resolutions (Pratto, Stallworth, and Sidanius 1997). Furthermore, lower-class individuals tend to be associated with more pro-war attitudes (Lewis 1971).

Attitudes toward the I-P conflict

Studies from the last decade indicate a decline in the belief that peace will be reached in the Middle East and in the importance that the Israeli public grants to the value of 'peace' (Halperin, Oren, and Bar-Tal 2010). This erosion is also prevalent among Israeli youth (Yaar and Alkelay 2010; Shayndelin 2010; Sagy and Adwan 2006). Consistent with some data from around the world (Shaw 2006), in periods of negotiation for peace Israeli adolescents tended to be more faithful in resolving the conflict in peaceful ways (Sagy 2002). However, recently Tzehmach (2010) concluded that only a minority of Israeli adolescents believe that I-P negotiations will lead to peace, although most adolescents support such negotiations. Overall, although Israelis support a solution of two countries for two nations (Ben Meir 2009; Smootha 2010), most of the Jewish public do not trust the Palestinian leadership and believe that they will not uphold their commitments (Yaar and Herman 2011).

When comparing Jewish Israeli youths and Palestinian youths from the national territories, they both report lower hopes for peace with no differences among the groups (Sagy and Adwan 2006).

To the best of our knowledge, only a few studies have examined attitudes toward war and peace and their relationships with stress reactions. In the present research we sought to examine the link between such attitudes and stress reactions during an acute time of suffering from violent action. In addition, the personal coping resource of SOC was examined as a buffering factor.

War and peace perceptions, SOC, and stress reactions

Beck in his theory argued that the notion of risk¹ becomes central in the global world, and societies are becoming uninsured while threats are increasing (Beck 1991, 1999). Consequently, risks become political issue and depend on decisions and rational control

(1997). Thus, it seems important to evaluate the relationships between political attitudes and stress reactions.

Political attitudes and stress reactions

Stress encompasses cognitive, emotional, and social variables (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Thus, in order to deepen knowledge and understanding of stress reactions, it seems important to examine political perceptions regarding the conflictual situation which 'creates' the stressful situation. However, studies on the link between attitudes toward war and political conflicts and their relationships with stress reactions are scarce (Shamai and Kimhi 2006), and findings are ambiguous. For example, a study related to the option of withdrawing from the Golan Heights in the event of a peace treaty with Syria showed rigidity and opposition to concessions for peace to be linked to more anxiety reactions (Sagy 1998). Moreover, several studies have shown that lower beliefs in the chance for peace and less openness to reconciliation, or attitudes of revenge, were associated with more severe post-traumatic symptoms (Bayer, Klasen, and Adam 2007; Laor, Wolmer, and Cohen 2004; Lavi and Solomon 2005). However, strong ideology, even pro-war ideology, was a protector from stress symptoms (Laor et al. 2006).

SOC and stress reactions

Resilience resources play an important role in the way one perceives challenges throughout life. The ability to use these resources has been termed 'sense of coherence' and it differs among people, resulting in more or less successful coping (Antonovsky 1987). SOC is a global orientation, an enduring tendency to see the world as more or less comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful. Individuals with a strong SOC will perceive themselves as having both internal and external resources to deal with different situations (Hogh and Gemzoe-Mikkelsen 2005). Therefore, they will be less likely to react with anxiety and distress during stressful events. Studies have indicated that during adolescence SOC may contribute to the explanation of stress experiences and may also play a protective role even at a young age, similar to that of the mature adult (e.g., Ristkari et al. 2008; Simonsson et al. 2008).

The relationship between attitudes toward peace, war, and SOC has rarely been studied. A recent study examined the relationships of SOC and perception of the 'other' and found no relations between SOC and openness toward the 'other' (Mana, Sagy, and Srour *in preparation*). Based on their studies, Pham, Vinck, and Weinstein (2010) suggested that peace is a form of stability, and thus people with peaceful ideas could have stronger SOC.

In sum, in our study we will hypothesize that stronger attitudes toward peace will be associated with stronger SOC, and SOC will mediate the relationships between these attitudes and anxiety reactions.

The present study will also seek to evaluate the role of socio-demographic factors of gender and age in explaining anxiety reactions during politically violent events. While gender differences are prevalent, with girls usually reporting more anxious reactions, age differences are less conclusive (Braun-Lewensohn et al. 2009).

Research background

This research was conducted among Israeli adolescents during a military escalation which led to 'Operation Pillar of Clouds' (November, 2012). Intensive missile attacks were

launched on very large regions in Israel while the Israeli army hit large areas in the Gaza Strip. The missile strikes in November were a dramatic common stressful situation for Israeli citizens, adults, and adolescents. This was not the first time that Israeli citizens in southern Israel had been exposed to intensive missile attacks. Since 2001 communities close to the border of Gaza are continuously exposed to episodes of missile attacks; since 2009 a broader range of citizens up to 40 km from the border with Gaza have been exposed to such events of political violence.

The following are our research hypotheses:

- (1) We first hypothesized that during a violent action in a political conflict situation attitudes favoring war would be more prevalent compared to attitudes favoring peaceful resolution. Specifically, adolescents would also believe that a military operation would resolve the rocket strikes totally or to a certain extent (Carnagey and Anderson 2007; Lavi and Solomon 2005).
- (2) We also hypothesized that attitudes in support of a military operation, as well as general attitudes favoring war as a way of dealing with the I-P conflict, would be linked to more anxiety than attitudes in support of peaceful resolution and negotiation with the enemy (Shamai and Kimhi 2006).
- (3) Finally, we hypothesized that demographic variables, attitudes, and SOC serve as explanatory factors of state anxiety. Following the literature we expected gender but not age to serve as an explanatory factor of stress (Braun-Lewensohn et al. 2009); attitudes toward peace would serve as protectors against stress while attitudes favoring more violent conflict and war would enhance stress (Laor, Wolmer, and Cohen 2004; Sagy 1998); SOC would serve as a protective factor that could decrease stress reactions and mediate the relationships between pro-peace attitudes and anxiety (e.g., Braun-Lewensohn and Sagy 2011).

Method

Participants

Seventy-eight teenagers living in an area exposed to missiles participated in the study. No inclusion or exclusion criteria were used apart from age (14–18). The mean age was $M = 16.76$ $SD = 1.13$, and girls accounted for 55.1%; 91% of the sample were born in Israel. Regarding their socio-economic status, 43% reported their family income was below average, 31.4% average, and 25.7% above average.

Procedures

Data were collected using questionnaires during November 2012, when hundreds of missiles were fired on cities and sites around Israel. Since during this time schools were off and people usually stayed at home, it was difficult to approach people face-to-face. Moreover, during military operations when adolescents are at home all day long, the way to connect with the world is via the Internet which exists almost in every home in Israel. Additionally, during such times it is difficult to know when the operation ends, thus ensuring reduced response time via internet approach is very important. The above reasons led us to approach adolescents via the Internet (midgam.com) where they filled out the questionnaires online. Participation was anonymous and voluntary, and all

participants were informed that the researchers were interested in their experiences, attitudes, and feelings.

Measurements

Adolescents filled out a *demographic* questionnaire which included questions regarding their gender, age, and socio-economic status of their family.

Attitudes toward the military operation (Pillar of Clouds)

We formulated four items for the present study: 'the military operation will not resolve anything and the situation will continue as it was before it started'; 'the operation will resolve the missile problem only for a certain time and degree'; 'the operation will totally resolve the missile problem'; and 'the military operation will open an opportunity for negotiation with the Hamas movement'. Each item was answered on 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – do not agree at all – to 5 – totally agree. The items represent different attitudes; thus, the statistical analyses treated each item separately.

Attitudes toward the I-P conflict

The open statement for this questionnaire is: the resolution of the I-P conflict will be... (Sagy, Adwan, and Kaplan 2002). Based on previous studies we included only the two main categories which emerged from the factor analyses in these previous studies (Ben-Ami (Shapski) 2005; Cafri 2002). The categories are: (1) resolution in peaceful ways, such as socialization, education, mutual interests (i.e., economic, environmental) etc. (FIVE items) and (2) there will not be peaceful resolution, so there will be more wars and violent conflicts (three items). Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .87 for 'peaceful resolution' and .69 for 'more violent conflicts and wars'.

Sense of coherence

SOC (Antonovsky 1987) was measured using a series of semantic differential items on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with anchoring phrases at each end. High scores indicate a strong SOC. An account of the development of the SOC scale and its psychometric properties, showing it to be reliable and reasonably valid, appears in Antonovsky's writings (1987, 1993). In this study, the SOC was measured by the short-form scale consisting of 13 items, which was found highly correlated to the original long version (Antonovsky 1993). The scale includes such items as: 'Doing the things you do every day is' – answers ranging from (1) 'a source of pain and boredom' to (7) 'a source of deep pleasure and satisfaction'. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha was .83.

State anxiety

State anxiety (Spielberger, Gorsuch, and Lushene 1970, Hebrew translation: Teichman 1978) was used in order to assess adolescents' anxiety. The Hebrew translation has proved to be reliable, valid and equivalent to the English State Anxiety Inventory (Teichman 1978). This scale consists of 11 items on a 4-point Likert scale. Examples of questions are: I feel peaceful, I am afraid of disasters, I am worried, etc. The mean score was used, and Cronbach's alpha reliability was .89.

Results

Our first hypothesis was explored by means and standard deviations of the study's variables (Table 1). Regarding the attitudes toward the military operation *Pillar of Clouds*, the most prevalent attitude was that *the operation will resolve the missile problems to a certain extent* followed by the attitude that *the operation will totally solve the missiles problem*. As for a more general perception about the way the I-P will be resolved, adolescents believed there would be more wars and violent conflicts. Regarding the coping resource of SOC, adolescents reported strong SOC (above mean score), and anxiety was quite high as well (above mean score).

The second hypothesis (Table 1) was related to the links between the study's variables. Pearson correlations were run, and results showed that adolescents who supported the notion that a military operation would not resolve the missile problem or those who believed it would resolve it to a certain extent were more anxious. Moreover, those who believed that a military operation would resolve the missile problem or would open an opportunity for negotiations with the enemy were less anxious. Regarding links with more general attitudes toward the I-P conflict, those who supported resolution in peaceful ways had a stronger SOC and were less anxious. On the other hand, no such relationships were

Table 1. Means and SDs of the study's variables and Pearson correlations between the study's variables ($N = 78$).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. The military operation will not resolve anything and the situation will continue as it was before it started	1	.21	-.26*	.09	-.01	.06	-.01	.19
2. The operation will resolve the missile problem only to a certain time and degree		1	-.51***	-.32**	-.16	.20	-.24*	.42***
3. The operation will totally resolve the missile problem			1	.32**	.16	-.02	.19	-.26*
4. The military operation will open an opportunity to negotiation with the Hamas movement				1	.31**	-.21*	.20	-.37**
5. Resolution in peaceful ways					1	-.31**	.35***	-.28**
6. No resolution, more wars, and violent conflicts						1	-.18	.11
7. Sense of coherence							1	-.49***
8. State anxiety								1
<i>M</i>	2.05	3.28	2.85	2.06	2.65	3.30	4.37	2.28
<i>SD</i>	1.26	1.23	1.16	1.19	1.14	1.03	.98	.67
<i>Range</i>	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-7	1-4

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p > .001$.

observed with the attitude of 'more violent conflicts and wars'. The relationships described above mean that the preliminary assumption regarding the role of SOC as a mediator between peace and war attitudes and anxiety was accepted only for peaceful attitudes.

In order to examine the third hypothesis, the process program was used for running regression where state anxiety was entered as the dependent variable. Gender and age were entered as covariates, and each time each attitude toward the I-P conflict was entered as independent where SOC was entered as mediator (Table 2).

As expected, gender but not age explained anxiety. In line with our hypothesis attitudes favoring 'resolution in peaceful ways' explained stress with marginal significance, meaning that the more you are a 'peaceful person' the less anxious you are. However, the other side of the equation and contrary to the hypothesis, a solution with more violent conflicts and wars did not contribute to explaining anxiety. Furthermore, as hypothesized, SOC contributed to the explanation of anxiety and served as a protective factor.

Finally, understanding the problems associated with the Sobel test (Baron and Kenny 1986) when working with small samples, we used the bootstrapping method with confidence estimates to test our mediational hypotheses (Preacher and Hayes 2004). The analyses and bootstrap estimates that follow are based on 5000 bootstrap samples (Preacher and Hayes 2008). Results are presented in Table 3 and in Figure 1 and show that SOC mediates the relationships between peaceful attitudes and anxiety but not between attitudes of more violent conflict and war and anxiety.

Discussion

In this study, we examined attitudes of adolescents toward a specific military operation as well as toward war and peace during a violent action. Our aim was to explore the relationships between political attitudes, personal coping resource and anxiety reactions. We further examined a model in which demographics, attitudes toward the I-P conflict and SOC explained anxiety.

Our first hypothesis was confirmed and, during the period of the violent political conflict, in accord with previous studies (Carnagey and Anderson 2007), adolescents expressed more militant attitudes than peaceful ones. Most of them supported a military operation and thought that it would lead to the resolution of the missile problems. Additionally, with regard to the wider context of the I-P conflict, most of them believed that there would not be a peaceful resolution in the near future but rather expected more violence and wars. It seems that the environmental and social atmosphere during this period shaped adolescents' political views toward militancy rather than toward peaceful solution.

Table 2. Analysis for demographics, attitudes, and SOC predicting state anxiety.

Variables	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>P</i>
Sense of coherence	-.26	.07	.00
Resolution in peaceful ways	-.10	.06	.08
More wars and violent conflicts	.08	.06	.23
Gender	.50	.13	.00
Age	.03	.13	.59

Total $R^2 = .40$.

Table 3. Indirect effects of attitudes toward war and peace on anxiety via sense of coherence.

Indirect path	Effect	SE	Sobel test	Bootstrapping
Resolution in peaceful ways	-.08	.03	-2.44*	-.17 : -.02
More wars and violent conflicts	.05	.03	1.51	0 : .14

* $p = .01$.

The second hypothesis was mainly confirmed with positive attitudes toward the specific military operation being linked positively to attitudes toward future wars and violence in the I-P conflict. Both of these attitudes were connected to a higher level of anxiety. On the other hand, the attitude that the operation would open an opportunity for negotiations with the enemy (Hamas) was linked to attitudes toward peaceful resolution of I-P conflict, and both of them were linked to lower anxiety. After so many years of violent conflict, Israeli adolescents who have grown up with this conflict can see that more cycles of violence and escalation do not resolve anything, but rather give some calmness for a period of time. Thus, the notion that this is only another violent act in a series could result in higher levels of anxiety. It seems that reality dictates adolescents' 'war attitudes' and perceptions that 'there is no way to achieve peace'. These perceptions could be a result of anxiety, but in turn they may also increase anxiety.

Another important link was observed between the belief in peaceful resolution of the I-P conflict and the personal resource of SOC. This result supports Pham, Vinck, and Weinstein's (2010) suggestion that peace reflects stability which, in turn, is reflected by a stronger SOC. It could be that those adolescents who believe in peace resolution and view the I-P conflict as another life challenge to deal with, perceiving the conflict as manageable and meaningful and sensing that they can cope with it have a stronger SOC. The result of this perception could be lower levels of anxiety.

Our third hypothesis examined an integrated model which includes demographics, attitudes toward the I-P conflict, and the coping resource of SOC as explanatory factors of state anxiety. Indeed, gender, peaceful resolution, and SOC played significant role in the explanation of the reactions. Gender as well as SOC are known from previous research (e.g., Braun-Lewensohn et al. 2009; Braun-Lewensohn and Sagy 2011) as factors which are associated with stress reactions. Thus, the present study continues this line of research

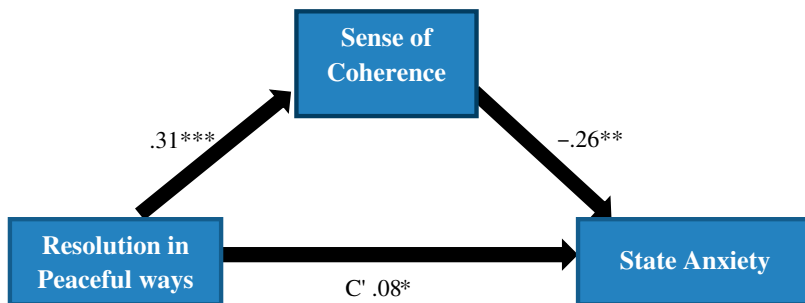


Figure 1. Sense of coherence as a mediator between resolution in peaceful ways and anxiety. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

and support the notion that girls are more vulnerable than boys, and stronger SOC is a significant coping resource protecting from stress when facing acute stressful situation.

However, our main interest was related to attitudes toward peace and war, which have only rarely been examined in the context of coping resources and stress reactions during crisis (Shamai and Kimhi 2006). Our study indicates that peaceful attitudes are negatively linked to anxious reactions. The more one has peaceful attitudes the less anxious his/her response to the situation will be. Moreover, only peaceful attitudes – but not those favoring ‘violent conflicts’ – were mediated by the coping resource of SOC in their relationships with anxiety. It could be that only those who perceive the world as more comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful could be more peace believers in their attitudes toward the political conflict. This cognitive perception also protects them against the development of anxiety reactions during crisis.

Study limitation

Information about their experiences during the operation *Pillar of Cloud* was provided only by the adolescents themselves, and therefore the collected data are subjective. In addition, because we lack base rate information about the rates of stress reactions in the adolescents prior to the study period, we cannot with certainty ascribe the mental health outcomes solely to the impact of the examined stressful situation. Lastly, this is a primary study with a relatively small sample. Future studies should consider larger samples.

In spite of these limitations, the importance of this study is in its field research carried out during the stressful situation of missile attacks. The unfortunate conflictual violent situation in the area serves as a ‘natural laboratory’ for investigation which is essential for studying human behavior (Lazarus 1982).

To conclude, this study aimed to explore attitudes toward a military armed operation as well as attitudes toward the I-P conflict and their relationships with stress reactions of anxiety as mediated by the coping resource of SOC. We found that the most prevalent attitudes toward a military operation were that it would resolve the missile attacks to a certain extent or totally. Moreover, most of the Israeli youth believed that there would be more violence to come and supported this attitude more than ‘peaceful’ attitudes.

The uniqueness of this study is in its examination of these attitudes in the context of coping resources and stress reaction. Thus, this study can shed some light on the relationships between attitudes toward a violent conflict and toward the intractable conflict and stress reactions. It seems that in addition to the established notion that SOC is a valuable protective factor against developing stress when facing missile attacks, in this study, ‘peaceful’ attitudes also seem to be linked to well-being. Future research should deepen our understanding of this interesting connection and should try to explore further cognitive attitudes toward conflicts and their relationships with emotional reactions.

Note

1. ‘Risks’, writes Beck (1997, 30), ‘always depend on decisions – that is, they presuppose decisions’. The idea of ‘risk society’ is thus bound up with the development of instrumental rational control, which the process of modernization promotes in all spheres of life – from individual risk of accidents and illnesses to export risks and risks of war.

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