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A Social-Cognitive-Ecological Framework for Understanding the Impact of Exposure to Persistent Ethnic-Political Violence on Children's Psychosocial Adjustment

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Abstract

In this article, we describe a theoretical framework for understanding how persistent and extreme exposure to ethnic-political conflict and violence interacts with cognitive, emotional, and self processes to influence children's psychosocial adjustment. Three recent strands of theorizing guide our approach. First, we focus on how observational and social learning processes combine to influence the development of social-cognitive structures and processes that affect behavior. Second, we focus on the role of developing self and identity processes in shaping the child's interactions with the world and the consequences of those interactions. Third, we build on the complex systems perspective on development and assume that human development can only be understood accurately by examining how the multiple contexts affecting children and the adults in their lives interact to moderate biosocial factors which predispose individuals to develop in certain directions. We review the recent empirical literature on children's exposure to ethnic-political violence and we apply the social-cognitive-ecological framework to the empirical findings in this literature. Finally, we propose future directions for research and clinical implications derived from this framework.

Keywords

Children; War; Social cognitions; Violence exposure

In 1996, Ladd and Cairns observed that "large numbers of children are living in societies where ethnic-political violence is a common occurrence – a fact of life" (Ladd & Cairns, 1996, p. 15). Supporting this assertion, UNICEF (1996) documented that in the prior decade, over 300,000 children had been forcibly recruited to serve as soldiers in war, more than two million children had been killed, over four to six million were injured or disabled, one million were orphaned, and twelve million were made homeless in armed conflicts. Over a decade later, little has changed. Ethnic and political conflicts are raging in many regions around the world, often erupting into extreme acts of violence. This has been the case particularly in Israel and Palestine, where since the beginning of the second Intifada in September 2000 until the end of July 2007, at least 5,848 people have been killed as a consequence of ethnic-political violence (United Nations, August 31, 2007). The recent events in Gaza underscore the unrelenting nature of this intractable conflict (BBC, 2009). The events of September 11, 2001 made it clear that the United States is not immune to extreme ethnic-political violence. Many residents of the

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United States also are refugees or immigrants victimized by ethnic-political violence. According to the 2004 World Refugee Survey, the United States accepted almost a quarter of a million refugees in 2003 alone (U.S. Committee for Refugees, 2004). Given the potential for children's exposure to ethnic-political violence and for their dislocation, their loss of loved ones, and the disintegration of their perceived safety and security, we need to understand how ethnic-political violence psychologically affects children growing up in violence-prone areas. We need to understand how ethnic-political violence might engender emotional and behavioral problems in the children exposed to it and to achieve insight into whether this exposure might stimulate children toward future politically violent acts. At the same time, we need to understand domains of factors that might protect youths exposed to ethnic-political violence from developing emotional and behavioral problems in order to design empirically informed interventions.

In this article, first we summarize empirical research findings on the impact of ethnic-political violence on children. Second, we present an overview of the social-cognitive-ecological model that has been used to study the impact on children of exposure to various domains of violence (although not to ethnic-political violence); the framework focuses on three sets of processes: social learning of enduring social cognitions; development of self and identity structures; and the roles of multiple contextual factors in the child's life. Third, we apply this model to studying the impact on children of exposure to ethnic-political violence. Finally, we propose future directions for research and clinical implications derived from this framework.

Children's Exposure to Ethnic-Political Violence

In our research, we conceptualize ethnic-political violence broadly as comprising exposure to forms of violence *sanctioned by different influential political and social bodies based on a history of conflict between ethnic or religious groups*. This definition is similar to the construct of "religio-political aggression" in which threats of violence or actual violence are perpetrated for political goals, and in which the key ingroup-outgroup distinction is religious in nature (see Atran, 2003; Stern, 2003). We argue that the effects of observing or experiencing *ethnic-political violence* are different from the effects of observing or experiencing violence in other contexts (e.g., family, school, neighborhood). The impact of violence on a child seems to depend on how normative, accepted, and endorsed that violence is by the central figures in a child's life -- the child's parents, peers--as well as the kinds of attributions the child makes about the violence. These cognitions are likely to be quite different for ethnic-political violence than for non-ethnically motivated community/criminal violence, for example, because the conflict often is sanctioned by influential political or religious leaders and based on identity-relevant inter-ethnic and inter-religious group characteristics.

Barber (2008) described the complexities of conceptualizing ethnic-political conflict and violence, including variations in one's degree of exposure to it (e.g., type, duration, frequency, proximity), one's degree of involvement in it (e.g., passive victim, soldier), one's emotional and cognitive processing of the experience, and one's response to it. Indeed, Barber compared youths exposed to political violence in two regions (Bosnia and Palestine) and showed that these two conflicts were experienced quite differently by adolescents. For example, Bosnian youth were more likely to be exposed to destruction of property and life, whereas a more prominent feature of violence exposure for Palestinian adolescents was direct exposure to intrusions by soldiers into their homes and schools. In addition, Palestinian adolescents were much more willing to participate in a future conflict compared to Bosnian adolescents. These results highlight the different forms of ethnic-political conflict/violence and the varying reactions to it, and are consistent with our framework which focuses on individual differences in children's developing social cognitions and self and identity structures as a result of their transactions with the multiple contextual influences in their social systems. We are currently

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engaged in a three-year longitudinal study of three cohorts of youths (ages 8, 11, and 14 at the start of data collection) in Israel and Palestine, where our focus is on the impact of exposure to ethnic-political violence on psychosocial outcomes, and variables that might mediate and moderate those effects. Following Slone et al. (1999), our research focuses on the following specific types of ethnic-political conflict and violence: loss of, or injury to, a friend or family member; non-violent events that disrupt one's life (e.g., spending prolonged periods of time in a security shelter); self or significant others participating in political demonstrations; witnessing actual violence; and witnessing media portrayals of violence.

Several studies have demonstrated the damaging psychosocial effects on youth exposed war, terrorism, and ethnic-political violence (La Greca, Silverman, Vernberg, & Roberts, 2002; Leavitt & Fox, 1996). These effects have been demonstrated among children from a number of different regions of the world including Iraq (Dyregov, Gjestad, & Raundalen, 2002), Palestine (Abdeen, Qasrawi, Nabil, & Shaheen, 2008; Qouta, Punamaki, & El Sarraj, 2008; Thabet, Abed, & Vostanis, 2002), Israel (Sagi-Schwartz, 2008; Punamäki, 1996), Bosnia (Geltman, Augustyn, Barnett, Klass, & Groves, 2000), Lebanon (Macksoud & Aber, 1996), and Rwanda (Dyregov, Gupta, Gjestad, & Mukanoheli, 2000). Such studies have shown that exposure to the extreme forms of violence exhibited during such events, and the constant threat of losing loved ones or being killed, are associated contemporaneously and longitudinally with a variety of indicators of maladjustment, most notably post-traumatic stress and internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression. Some of these studies also have also shown effects on aggression and antisocial behavior.

Qouta et al. (2008) noted that researchers are most often concerned with effects on post-traumatic stress symptoms because exposure to ethnic-political violence interferes with the child's cognitive and emotional processing of those experiences, which can lead to intrusive memories of the events, avoidance of stimuli associated with the events, and hypervigilance. But exposure to ethnic-political conflict and violence also should theoretically be linked to the development of aggressive behavior. As we describe in this article, social-cognitive information processing models (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994; Huesmann, 1998) posit that violence exposure affects aggressive behavior through the development of aggression-supporting scripts and world and self-schemas, complemented by emotion factors such as dysregulated arousal or desensitization. This framework was cited by Kerestes (2006) who found that children who were directly exposed to Bosnian violence were more likely to be aggressive up to three years later. Indeed, Qouta et al. (2008) noted that parents and teachers often approached staff at the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme with concerns about effects of exposure to political violence on children's aggression. Qouta and El Sarraj (1992) found that of the children they studied during the First Intifada in Gaza, 38% developed aggressive behavior. Barber (2008) reported that significant numbers of Palestinian and Bosnian adolescents exposed to political violence agreed with the statement, "I am more violent."

At the same time, other research has indicated the resiliency of children exposed to ethnic-political violence (Cairns & Dawes, 1996). Studies of trauma among refugee children (Miller, 1996; Sack, Clarke, & Seeley, 1996), South African children exposed to township violence (Straker, Mendelsohn, Moosa, & Tudin, 1996), and studies of Palestinian children exposed to violence (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996; Punamaki, Qouta, & El Sarraj, 1997) demonstrated that many children show no obvious psychological symptoms of their ordeal, or are protected by various personal and environmental factors. Those findings have led to a growing awareness of the need to study factors that moderate or mediate the impact of exposure to ethnic-political violence to promote resiliency (Barber, 1999, 2001; Jones, 2002; Punamäki, 1996; Punamäki & Puhakka, 1997; Sagi-Schwartz, 2008; Seginer, 2008; Slone, Adiri, & Arian, 1998; Slone, Lobel, & Gilat, 1999). We use the social-cognitive-ecological framework in our own research

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as a guide to focus on individual-personal factors (e.g., social cognitive, self and identity) as well as ecological factors (e.g., parent, peer) factors that moderate (i.e., increase the risk or provide protective effects) the relation between exposure to ethnic-political violence and children's psychosocial outcomes.

Overview of the Social-Cognitive-Ecological Framework for Understanding the Impact of Exposure to Violence

Using the social-cognitive-ecological framework, there exists already a substantial research base underscoring and illuminating the impact of violence in the social ecology on children's psychosocial functioning, and especially on the development of aggressive behavior. However, the vast majority of studies examining links between exposure to violence and children's psychosocial adjustment have not considered the impact of exposure to ethnic-political violence. Rather, the literature confirms that encounters with violence in families, schools, neighborhoods, and the entertainment media typically are associated with or lead to increased aggressive behavior, including violent behavior. Such studies tend to operationalize *violence* as acts of physical force that can or do cause physical injury, and *exposure* as the experience of witnessing or being victimized in some way directly or vicariously (e.g., family members victimized) by such acts. In this section, we provide an overview of the social-cognitive-ecological framework. In the next section, we apply this model to understanding the impact of ethnic-political conflict and violence on children's adjustment.

Observational, social learning, and social-cognitive processes

Several cognitive/information processing models have emerged in the past 25 years to explain how children's interactions with the environment lead to lasting behavioral and emotional dispositions (e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2003; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1980; Huesmann, 1982, 1988; 1997, 1998; Huesmann & Eron, 1984). Some focus more on the role of cognitive scripts, world and self-schemas, and normative beliefs (e.g., Huesmann, 1998), whereas others focus more on perceptions and attributions (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994). However, all hypothesize a similar core of information processing and draw heavily on the work of cognitive psychologists and information processing theory, in particular from Bandura's (1977; 1986) earlier formulations of cognitive processing in social learning as well as Berkowitz's (1990) neoassociationist thinking. According to Bandura's social-cognitive formulations, social behavior is under the control of internal self-regulating processes. What is important is the cognitive evaluation of events taking place in the child's environment, how the child interprets these events, and how competent the child feels in responding in different ways (Boxer, Goldstein, Musher-Eizenman, Dubow, & Heretick, 2005). These cognitions provide a basis for stability of behavior tendencies across a variety of situations. Internalized standards for behavior are developed from information conveyed by a variety of sources of social influence including the observation of others' behaviors (e.g., parents, peers, characters portrayed in mass media).

This model emphasizing the interaction of observational and enactive learning with existing cognitive and emotional self-structures drives our investigations of the influence of exposure to violence on ethnic attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes and social behavior. We do not dismiss the importance of personal predispositions encoded into the biology of the developing organisms, but we see context as influencing development through these two learning processes and particularly through observation of others. The expanding work in artificial intelligence on "learning by example" (e.g., Dautenhahn & Nehaniv, 2002) has stimulated some developmentalists to think more broadly about the role of imitation and observation in creating the schemas, scripts, beliefs, and emotional dispositions we call the "self." Taken together with the several empirical investigations of observational learning in middle childhood (e.g.,

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Bandura, 1977; Eron, Huesmann, & Zelli, 1991; Guerra, Huesmann, & Spindler, 2003; Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003), this has led to the conclusion that, as children grow older, simple imitation of behaviors is transformed into the acquisition of scripts and the inferential acquisition of schemas (beliefs and attitudes) that have enduring influences on social behavior (Huesmann, 1997, 1998; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007).

It should be emphasized that while social-cognitive models focus on the mediational role of various cognitive structures and processes in linking ecological inputs to behavioral outputs, emotion factors still are meaningful within this general framework. Recent integrative theoretical work has illuminated links between emotion and cognition at various steps of information processing in response to social conflict (e.g., negative arousal priming hostile cognitions; Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Further, emotion socialization models frame the emergence of aggressive or maladaptive emotion management strategies in social learning terms (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002), and scripts for managing intense arousal may be construed in a manner similar to more generalized aggressive behavioral scripts. Perhaps most salient with respect to ethnic-political violence, however, is the extent to which emotional desensitization (i.e., reduced or flattened affective arousal in response to violence; see Carnagey, Anderson, & Bushman, 2007; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007) might act in concert with aggression-supporting cognition to stimulate aggressive behavior. For example, studies have demonstrated that children exposed to very high levels of violence in their communities show elevated aggression in the absence of emotional distress, or "pathologic adaptation" (Ng-Mak, Salzinger, Feldman, & Steuve, 2004). Such reactions might be facilitated by the gradual desensitization to and normalization of violence in the social ecology, particularly in an environment overshadowed by ongoing, extreme ethnic-political conflict and violence.

Self and identity processes

A key cognitive structure in this model is the child's developing self-schema, including his or her emerging self-identity. Early on, the developing self-schema is influenced by transactions with parents and other primary caregivers; later, self-schema development is influenced by transactions with peers, schools, and communities, as well as from mainstream cultural beliefs through various media, such as books, television, and film (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Erikson, 1968). Furthermore, certain individual characteristics, such as membership in social categories (e.g., race, gender, social class, religious affiliation, ethnicity) are likely to predispose individuals to developing particular social or role identities (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Given our interest in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors directed at other ethnic groups, we are interested particularly in the following aspects of self-schemas and identity: ethnic identity (which serves as a filter for perceiving and reacting to ethnic-related events; Phinney, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), values (e.g., ideas about fairness to others and non-discrimination; Tisak, 1995), normative beliefs (notions of what are appropriate behaviors in various situations; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997), and world schemas (hostile or benign) including attributional biases (Dodge, 2006). Molded through environmental interactions, these self-structures seem to crystallize and become resistant to change in middle childhood through early adolescence (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997), and from then on control behavior automatically (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Our view is that, once established, the components of identity tend to narrow the path down which behavior can develop. We believe that these kinds of self-related cognitions influence a variety of behaviors from middle childhood onward, including hostile and prosocial behaviors directed at members of other ethnic groups.

Systems perspective

In our model, the term "ecological" refers to the nested contexts that constitute an individual's developmental environment (e.g., the child is nested within the family, within the peer group, within the classroom, within the school, within the community, within the ethnic group)

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(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As an example of the need to examine multiple interacting ecological factors, researchers have applied this model to understanding the development of aggressive and antisocial behavior and violence, as well as protective factors within contexts that can serve to decrease the development of aggression (e.g., Dahlberg & Krug, 2002; Huesmann, Eron, & Dubow, 2002; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005; Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Wei, Farrington & Wikstrom, 2002; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2003). For example, family risk factors include poor parenting and having aggressive or antisocial parents, whereas family protective factors include a supportive relationship with at least one parent and support from siblings and grandparents (e.g., Dubow & Luster, 1990; Eron et al., 1991; Boxer, Gullan, & Mahoney, 2009; Moffitt, 1987, 1993; Patterson, 1995; Rutter, 1990; Smith & Farrington, 2003; Werner & Smith, 1992). Community-level risk factors include neighborhood structural characteristics and poverty, whereas community-level protective factors include external support from schools, churches, and youth groups (Guerra et al., 2003; Guerra, Huesmann, Tolan, Eron, & Van Acker, 1995; Sampson et al., 2005; Tolan et al., 2003; Werner & Smith, 1992). No one ecological factor by itself explains more than a small portion of individual differences in aggression or antisocial behavior. We would expect the same conclusion to be true of the impact of political violence on children: factors from multiple ecological levels contribute to, i.e., exacerbate or buffer, its impact.

Applying the Social-Cognitive-Ecological Framework to Exposure to Ethnic-Political Violence

Self and identity factors might amplify or attenuate the impact of exposure to ethnic-political violence

Ethnic-political violence differs from other forms of violence in that it is often sanctioned by influential political and social bodies. We view self- and identity-related ethnic schemas as playing the most influential mediating and moderating roles in the relation between exposure to ethnic-political violence and psychosocial/mental health outcomes.

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and consistent with the systems perspective of the influence of multiple nested contexts, an individual has several identities that correspond to his or her membership in social categories at different contextual levels (e.g., personal, family, cultural). Events occurring within these contexts stimulate individuals to interpret those events and act in accordance with their corresponding social identity. Ethnic identity, or the extent to which an individual perceives himself or herself to have adopted the norms, values, and practices of an ethnic group, is a particularly salient aspect of self-identity with regard to beliefs and attitudes about ethnic groups (Phinney, 1990, 1992). Ethnic identity has been operationalized by Phinney (1990) as a threefold construct comprised of feelings of belonging or attachment to the ethnic group, engagement in group-specific behaviors and practices, and exploration of or commitment to one's ethnicity. Thus, one's perceptions and reactions in response to exposure to ethnic-political violence are filtered through his or her ethnic identity. In order to promote a positive ethnic identity, viewers will evaluate events of ambiguous origin, such as those in violent confrontations, in a positive light for the ethnic group with which they identify.

Studies of adolescents have demonstrated that ethnic identity appears to operate protectively such that greater ethnic self-identification is associated with better adjustment and less problem behavior (e.g., Brook, Balka, Brook, Win, & Gursen, 1998; Brook, Whiteman, Balka, Win, & Gursen, 1998; Markstrom, Berman, & Brusch, 1998; Roberts et al., 1999; Scheir, Botvin, Diaz, & Ifill-Williams, 1997). However, ethnic identity also might serve as a risk factor under certain conditions. For example, higher levels of ethnic or racial identity can be linked to greater perceived racial discrimination (Sellers & Shelton, 2003), which can lead to stress and other

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negative health outcomes (Nyborg & Curry, 2003). Ethnic identity also can enhance susceptibility to ethnic-related stressors (Dubow, Pargament, Boxer, & Tarakeshwar, 2000). Kira et al. (2008) surveyed Iraqi refugees in the United States regarding their media exposure to the Iraq-U.S war and their mental health. The authors found that those who were previously oppressed and tortured watched more war news, suggesting that these respondents sought out information that was relevant to their ethnic identity. The authors also found that higher levels of exposure to war news predicted higher levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms and poor health, even after controlling for effects of previous traumas. The authors proposed that the salience of this highly identity-relevant information served as a re-traumatizing stimulus.

Several researchers have elaborated on the importance of identity among youths exposed to chronic and severe ethnic-political violence (Bar Tal, 2007; Barber, 2008). For example, Barber (2008) traced Palestinian youths' identity development to a history of "personal, harsh, and debasing experiences they had with violence" (p. 306). From childhood on, Barber described "compelling meaning systems" that influenced identity development: "history, as it grounded the struggle in its past iterations; politics, as it gave substance to the nationalistic goals of the struggle; culture, as it collected all segments of the society together in a duty-bound resistance to perceived violations of dignity and rights…the Palestinians knew, and valued, who they were because of the abundant information that defined them" (p. 306).

A related self/identity variable that has received theoretical and empirical support as a mediator or moderator of the impact of ethnic-political violence is political ideology. Qouta et al. (2006; cited in Qouta et al., 2008) found a U-relation between exposure to ethnic-political violence and Palestinian children's quality of peer relations. The authors argued that "exposure to trauma in the context of national struggle for independence brings about the social support and admiration that genuinely strengthens children" (p. 311). Punamäki (1996) found that ideological commitment is both a moderating and mediating factor explaining psychosocial outcomes in children exposed to ethnic-political conflict. In a study of 385 Israeli youth, she showed that higher levels of exposure to ethnic-political violence were associated with higher levels of ideological commitment to the Israeli cause. In addition, this study demonstrated that symptoms of anxiety, insecurity, and depression were lower among children with strong ideological commitment. Kostelny and Garbarino (1994) reported analogous results in a study of Palestinian children, where the ability of children to perceive themselves as "freedom fighters" seemed to protect them against the negative effects of trauma as a consequence of exposure. Other investigators also have suggested that ideology can buffer the impact of exposure to ethnic-political violence (Dawes & De Villiers, 1987; Protacio-Marcellino, 1989). It is important to note that adolescents with a strong ethnic identity and political ideology might decide to take an active role in the conflict, and some researchers have reported protective effects of active participation on self-esteem, social competence, and civic involvement following the active conflict (Baker, 1990; Barber, 2008; Qouta et al., 2008). Barber (2008) reported that 72% of Palestinian boys endorsed the statement, "I felt I was helping to make history." Taken together, these studies support the notion that ideological commitment might be a protective factor specifically with regard to internalizing problems.

However, several investigations have found no protective effect for ideology on internalizing problems (Punamäki & Suleiman, 1990; Slone et al., 1999). In a study of child survivors of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, children had fewer internalizing problems when they did not search for meaning or understanding of their experience (Jones, 2002). Relatedly, Cairns and Wilson (1989) reported on a study of coping behavior in adults residing in Northern Ireland. The authors reported that men who scored higher on a distancing scale regarded the violence they were enduring as less serious and that men living in a relatively high violence area scored higher on a distancing scale than men living in areas less prone to violence. Several authors have argued that in times of extreme violence, children tend to cope through avoidance

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(Weisenberg et al., 1993), whereas in times of less extreme conflict, ideological commitment might promote resilience (Ben-Zur & Zeidner, 1996; Jones, 2002; Punamäki & Puhakka, 1997). In general, these studies have examined symptoms of post-traumatic stress as the major outcome of exposure to political violence, but it also is important to examine other outcomes, including externalizing behaviors such as general aggression and aggression directed specifically toward out-group members. For example, we hypothesize that the relation between exposure to ethnic-political violence and support of aggression toward the out-group would be *stronger* for those individuals with a high ideological commitment to their own group. Some research that supports this proposition is reviewed later when we discuss normative beliefs about aggression toward the out-group. There appears to be a clear need for research to determine the role of ideology in promoting resilience to internalizing problems or increased susceptibility to aggressive and violent behaviors in response to ethnic-political conflict, particularly over time.

We argue that one's ethnic identity and political ideology play important roles in determining the degree to which the individual identifies with the perpetrators and victims of the ethnic-political violence. In terms of interpreting observed violent events, modern observational learning theory (Huesmann & Eron, 1986; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007) suggests that children who identify with the aggressor are more likely to acquire the aggressor's scripts, beliefs, and schemas while those who identify with the victim are more likely to acquire the victim's scripts, schemas, and beliefs. We note, however, that although ethnic identity and political ideology play important roles in determining with whom an observer of violence identifies, studies have shown that these are not the only factors (Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007). Children tend to identify with those portrayed as powerful and charismatic independently of their gender or ethnic similarity, for example (Huesmann, 1982). Those who identify with the victim in a violent scene will be affected quite differently from those who identify with the aggressor. Of course, identification also is affected by individual difference characteristics other than ethnicity, ideology, and gender (e.g., emotion regulation, empathic understanding), and some of these variables might play protective roles in the relation between violence exposure and negative outcomes.

Social-cognitive information processing skills and structures might mediate the effects of exposure to ethnic-political violence

Qouta et al. (2008) have shown that chronic exposure to ethnic-political violence has negative effects on children's ability to process new information and recall previous information. The authors described these children's information processing skills as less flexible and more rigid. Severely traumatized children also had lower school grades and problems with attention and concentration. At the same time, Qouta et al. found that children who were able to maintain flexible, accurate, and speedy information processing skills were protected from the negative effects of violence exposure. The authors suggested that "these cognitive capacities are also crucial for optimal awareness and interpretation of the threatening and life-endangering stimuli in military violence" (p. 315).

Much of the research on children's exposure to violence has focused on social cognitive structures, in particular the role of normative beliefs about aggression as a key mediating variable (see Guerra et al., 2003). We view normative beliefs about aggression as playing a critical role in mediating the relation between exposure to ethnic-political violence and aggression toward the out-group. Normative beliefs approving aggression are cognitive structures that can serve to inhibit or disinhibit aggressive responding, as they involve judgments about whether aggression is generally "right" or "wrong" (Huesmann, 1998; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). Following the theoretical propositions advanced by (Huesmann 1988; 1998; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007), normative beliefs are

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seen as response filters that are acquired over time. Normative beliefs therefore are thought to be reflections of an individual's social environment, emerging through socialization as a cognitive representation of what types of behavioral responses are generally acceptable. For example, using a sample of urban youth, Guerra et al. (2003) found that exposure to neighborhood violence stimulated subsequent normative beliefs more approving of aggression, increased fantasizing about aggression, and decreased fantasizing about prosocial behaviors. Furthermore, the researchers showed that those social cognitions in turn predicted subsequent increases in aggressiveness among children. These effects were most notable between the third and sixth grades, leading those authors to suggest that middle childhood is a prime time span for exposure to violence to exert more than transient effects on the child.

Applied to the context of political-violence, we suggest that although ideological commitment might promote coping (as described earlier), in some respects it also might promote aggression-related cognitions (and subsequently, aggressive behavioral styles), especially beliefs supporting aggression toward the out-group. For example, under conditions of ongoing ethnic-political conflict, ideological commitment almost certainly entails the belief that one's side or political affiliation is correct; under conditions of ethnic-political violence, such commitment also is likely to entail support for aggressive actions taken against one's opponents. In this sense, ethnic-political attitudes and beliefs (of which ideological commitment is one form) can resemble a subset of more global beliefs about aggressive behavior. Indeed, Struch and Schwartz (1989) found that an in-group bias among Jews in Jerusalem was related to higher levels of support for aggression against Arabs. More recently, Shechtman and Basheer (2005) found that Israeli Arab children were more likely to endorse normative beliefs about aggression toward Israeli Jewish children than toward Israeli Arab children.

Thus, we propose that exposure to ethnic-political violence might promote, over time, the emergence and strengthening of beliefs approving of mild and severe aggressive behavior specifically targeted to members of the out-group, but also as a more general approach to dealing with social conflicts. In this vein, Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, and Pardo (1998) proposed a concept that is similar to normative beliefs supporting aggression. In samples of children exposed to chronic political and community violence, the authors suggested that children could become fixated at a "vendetta stage" of moral development, whereby they fail to develop skills for emotion regulation and resort to aggression as a dominant response. We also note that cross-cultural research supports the notion that people from different cultural contexts hold different normative beliefs about aggression (e.g., Huesmann, Zelli, Fraczek, & Upmeyer, 1993; Souweidane & Huesmann, 1999). Future research should examine in detail differences in normative beliefs about aggression among children on both sides of inter-ethnic conflict. In this way, we can understand better the impact of cultural contexts saturated with politically spurred and sanctioned violence on children's developing cognitions regarding aggression.

A second type of social cognition that might mediate the effects of exposure to ethnic-political violence is ethnic stereotypes. Ethnic stereotypes are components of general cognitive schemas about the social world, and are fundamental to our research. Although a variety of definitions have been offered in the literature, we prefer Greenwald and Banaji's (1995) definition that a stereotype is a socially shared set of beliefs about traits that are characteristic of members of a social category. From a social-cognitive standpoint, stereotypes are clearly a part of a person's schema about a social category, and awareness of that stereotype might be part of one's self-schema (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Several alternative representations of stereotypes within a social-cognitive framework have been proposed. Within the standard representation of memory as a node-link network in which the meaning of each node is defined by its associated links (Rumelhart, Lindsay, & Norman, 1972), stereotypes can be conceived of as a prototypical node for a social category or a set of highly accessible exemplars sharing attributes (Fiske & Taylor,

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1991). We hypothesize that youth who are exposed to ethnic-political, especially if they identify with one of the ethnic groups, will develop more negative ethnic stereotypes toward the out-group. Our research group (Dubow et al., 2008; Huesmann et al., 2008) has observed findings along these lines in a sample of almost 400 American high school students, 46% of whom were Arab Americans and 23% of whom were Jewish Americans: Youths who were more frequently exposed to media reports of the Middle-East conflict and who had high levels of identification with the Israelis in the media portrayals of the conflict had the highest levels of negative stereotypes toward Arab-American youths. Youths with high exposure to those media reports and who had high levels of identification with Arab actors in the media portrayals had the highest levels of negative stereotypes toward Jewish-American youths..

Another social-cognitive structure that is relevant in terms of youths' responses to environmental stressors is future orientation (e.g., Bandura, 2001; Seginer, 2008). Very much like cognitive scripts for specific situations, future orientation is a set of self-schema individuals have for their future in specific domains, some of which may be universal (e.g., education, career, family), and others more culture-specific (e.g., military). According to Seginer (2008), "future orientation provides the grounds for setting goals, planning, exploring options and making commitments that guide the person's behavior and developmental course" (p. 272). Seginer's model of future orientation includes a motivational component (e.g., one's internal control over the attainment of goals), a cognitive component (e.g., the salience of a domain in terms of hopes and fears), and a behavioral component (e.g., exploring an option by collecting information, and then commiting to it). Seginer drew on the work of coping researchers Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and resilience researchers such as Garmezy and Rutter (1983; Rutter, 1990) to explain how exposure to chronic political violence can be interpreted by the individual as a high threat stressor (one that provides the potential for harm) or a high challenge stressor (i.e., one that provides the potential for personal growth). How the stressor is perceived determines whether the positive emotion of hope is aroused. Seginer proposed that high challenge appraisals arouse hope which in turn facilitates the development of a positive future orientation. The degree to which high challenge situations arouse hope is moderated by several factors, including personality variables and interpersonal relationships across multiple contexts. In this way, some adolescents exposed to chronic ethnic-political violence might perceive the violence as a challenge, develop a strong ethnic and political identity, along with the protective meaning systems described by Barber (2008), all of which are embodied in hope. In turn, hope facilitates the development of a protective positive future orientation.

Multiple social ecosystems factors might have additional risk or protective effects in the context of ethnic-political violence

Factors from multiple ecological levels contribute to the impact of exposure to ethnic-political violence on children's adjustment. Perhaps the most obvious influential context is the family. Research has shown that parenting styles can both moderate and mediate the link between children's exposure to ethnic-political violence and their psychosocial outcomes. In a survey of 7,000 Palestinian youth two years after the cessation of the 1987–1993 rebellion against Israeli rule of the occupied territories, Barber (1999) found that children's reports of their exposure to ethnic-political violence predicted the degree to which they believed that their parents attempted to exert both psychological and behavioral control over them. The same study demonstrated that parenting styles also can serve to mediate the relation between exposure to ethnic-political violence and psychosocial outcomes. Higher levels of child-reported perceived parental support were associated with lower levels of depression, antisocial behavior, and aggression, as well as with higher grades in both boys and girls. In contrast, higher levels of parental control (both behavioral and psychological) tended to be associated with negative outcomes such as depression, antisocial behavior, and aggression. Punamaki et al. (1997) found that warm, supportive, and non-punitive parenting protected children exposed

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to military trauma from developing post-traumatic stress symptoms and aggressive behavior. Perceived parental behavior also has been shown to exert a moderating effect over time. In one of the few known published longitudinal studies conducted with children in Palestine, Punamäki et al. (2001) assessed 86 Palestinian children during and three years after the 1993 Intifada, a violent political uprising of Palestinians against Israeli military forces. Children of about 11 years of age were first assessed during the "last and very violent months of the Intifada" (p. 258), and then re-interviewed at around the age of 14. Using hierarchical regression analyses, the researchers showed that discrepant views of parental support (i.e., viewing mother as supportive and father as rejecting) were associated with elevated risk for post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Notably, Punamäki's study was not able to examine the longitudinal impact of perceived parenting styles during times of extreme conflict. During times of extreme ethnic-political conflict, parents' own trauma, maladaptive coping, and poor adjustment outcomes may inhibit their normal parent-child behaviors or the effect of such behavior. For example, Qouta, Punamaki, and El Sarraj (2005) found that mothers' psychological problems were linked to children's maladjustment. Thus, it is important to examine how *parental* behaviors and adjustment (e.g., child-rearing strategies, psychological distress), self and identity processes (e.g., their own political ideology), and ethnic-related social cognitions (e.g., normative beliefs about aggression, negative stereotypes toward the out-group) might exacerbate the effects of exposure to violence on their children. Additionally, it is important to examine the extent to which parents themselves are affected by ethnic-political violence (e.g., effects on their own mental health), how this might impair their ability to provide positive family environments for their children (e.g., support, discipline), and whether these parenting processes mediate the effects of exposure to violence on their children.

The peer group serves as another key ecological context for children and adolescents. Much has been written about deviancy training, whereby the risk of deviant behavior (e.g., delinquency, substance use) among children and adolescents is enhanced for youths who associate frequently with peers who engage in those behaviors (Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006). Using a developmental-ecological model, Tolan et al. (2003) examined multiple ecological levels of risk factors in predicting youth violence, including the violent behavior of peers. The authors proposed a mediational model predicting self reports of violence at ages 18–22 from risks assessed beginning in late elementary and middle school. The model specified that community structural characteristics (e.g., concentration of poverty, lack of economic investment in the community) would predict lower levels of neighborliness and higher levels of neighborhood problems (e.g., vandalism, burglary, availability of drugs), which in turn would predict poor parenting (e.g., ineffective discipline), which in turn would predict negative peer influence (e.g., gang involvement, peer involvement in violence), which in turn would predict self-reported violence. Barber (2001), using a measure of negative social capital (four items measuring the frequency with which children reported exposure to fights that involved weapons, "youth gang conflicts," police brutality, and violent arguments between neighbors) reported that higher levels of exposure to non-political conflict and violence predicted higher levels of parental psychological control, lower levels of parental monitoring, higher levels of Intifada involvement, depression, and antisocial behavior (mediated by relations with "deviant" peers). For ethnic-political violence, the equivalent important moderators should be having friends who have been involved in the ethnic-political conflict as victims and perpetrators, as well as associating with peers who hold negative stereotypes toward the out-group. We hypothesize that these variables will exacerbate the negative impact of exposure to ethnic-political violence, perhaps by stimulating more aggression-related social cognitions (e.g., higher support for aggression toward the out-group, more negative stereotypes toward the out-group) and stronger ethnic identity and political ideology. Of course, positive peer influence might serve to mitigate aggressiveness in youth who show very high levels of

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aggression relative to their peer group members (Boxer, Guerra, Huesmann, & Morales, 2005), so it is important to examine how youth with relatively extreme attitudes and aggressiveness respond to peers with less hostile attitudes and behavioral tendencies.

The systems perspective suggests that exposure to violence across non-political contexts will exacerbate the effects of exposure to ethnic-political violence. Garbarino and Kastelny (1996) included family-level risk variables (i.e., physical violence directed at the child; marital violence; verbal aggression; maternal depression and perceived incompetence) along with ethnic-politically violent Intifada events in their checklist of cumulative risks for Palestinian children. Those researchers found that clinical levels of behavioral pathology were most likely to be exhibited by children who had experienced both sets of risks. Relatedly, Haj-Yahia and Abdo-Kaloti (2003) observed a significant correlation between family violence (inter-parental as well as parent-to-child) and political stressors (including injuries resulting from politically violent events). It is likely that exposure to multiple contexts of violence affects other processes that contribute to adjustment, as illustrated in the Barber (2001) study described above. Thus, it is important to examine exposure to violence across multiple contexts to understand the processes that might erode potential protective factors. For example, one needs to examine exposure to parent-to-child violence, interparental conflict and violence, and violence in the school and neighborhoods to assess their additive and interactive effects, along with ethnic-political violence, on processes that contribute to children's adjustment.

Our framework suggests that important roles should be played by non-familial networks as well. For example, the effects of child exposure to ethnic-political violence might be moderated by the way ethnic-political violence affects the communities within which the child lives. Communities of people can be thought of as social networks that provide certain goods upon which its members, including its children, can draw. These goods, often called "social capital" (see Coleman, 1990), have been demonstrated to be important in establishing norms that reduce violence and facilitate informal social control (Galea, Karpati, & Kennedy, 2002; Sampson & Wilson, 1995). Several studies have shown that normative measures of social capital such as perceptions of social trust and willingness to intervene to prevent acts of crime are inversely correlated with homicide rates and exposure to neighborhood violence (Galea et al., 2002; Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997). Although communities with higher social capital tend to have lower levels of violence, increased exposure to violence likely has an eroding effect on social capital.

Conclusions and Implications for Research and Intervention

In this paper, we proposed a social-cognitive-ecological framework to explain how children's exposure to ethnic-political violence could impact their psychosocial functioning and mental health. We have reviewed recent studies conducted by academic researchers as well as non-governmental organizations demonstrating that such exposure can have wide-ranging effects on children's psychological and social functioning, and we have shown that most empirical data are consistent with the theory we have described. Based on the social-cognitive-ecological framework, we argue that exposure to ethnic-political violence during childhood might "set the stage" for similarly violent behavior into adolescence and adulthood.

Research on how exposure to ethnic-political violence impacts children's outcomes ideally should have two overarching goals: First, it is essential to obtain a thorough understanding of the pathways through which this sort of violence shapes outcomes. As we have discussed, and consistent with a multilevel social ecosystems view (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), ethnic-political violence often might have significant familial, community, or official governmental support or encouragement. Thus, although in the main exposure to ethnic-political violence might have impacts in line with the tenets of social-cognitive-ecological theory, it might have some

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properties that differ from exposure to other forms of violence (e.g., family or school violence), not least of which might be the multiple channels through which children potentially could experience ethnic-political violence. The notion underscoring our investigation that children in Israel and Palestine are *persistently* exposed to ethnic-political violence derives partly from the fact that children in these areas are likely to view this sort of violence directly as well as through the media, to hear about incidents from family, friends, and neighbors, and to deal daily with undercurrents of the longstanding conflict that has given rise to acts of violence. Researchers increasingly are attending to children's experiences with violence in multiple contexts in studying the impact of violence exposure (e.g., Mrug, Loosier, & Windle, 2008). Thus, it will be important to incorporate ethnic-political violence into this multilevel risk matrix. Further, although exposure to violence might uniformly be construed as "bad" for children, that ethnic-political violence might be couched in broadly based political support manifested in families and peer groups presents an interesting challenge for researchers and theorists. How might encounters with politically or socially sanctioned violence affect moral development – that is, how might children come to reconcile differences between sociopolitically acceptable and unacceptable forms of violence? The research agenda must include longitudinal studies to track exposure effects over time and in different age groups, as well as individual-personal factors (e.g., self schema such as ethnic identity and political ideology; meaning systems; cognitive flexibility and problem solving; emotion regulation; empathy; hope; future orientation) and environmental-contextual factors (e.g., supportive relationships and opportunities for growth at the family, peer, and community levels) that might protect youths from negative outcomes.

Second, this elaborated understanding of how ethnic-political violence affects children's outcomes should form the basis of new approaches to prevention and intervention with children who have been exposed to this form of violence. A strong theoretical foundation is critical for the design of mental health treatments or programs (Boxer & Dubow, 2002; Boxer & Frick, 2008), and an empirically informed understanding of how risk and protective factors lead ultimately to outcomes is requisite for larger scale preventive approaches (Dubow, Roecker, & D'Imperio, 1997; Institute of Medicine, 1994). Slone and Shoshani (2008) recently implemented a school-based psychoeducational curriculum over approximately 18 weeks in three Israeli middle schools to mitigate the effects of exposure to ethnic-political violence. The authors trained teachers to implement educational activities designed to enhance three protective factors: mobilizing social support; enhancing self-efficacy and problem-solving skills in relation to ambiguity and uncertainty; and developing meaning making skills to help children understand events in terms of their ideology. Compared to a control group, the intervention group increased in their mobilization of social support, but not in the other trained skills. The authors speculated that it might be difficult to build self-efficacy in an environment where violence occurred rather sporadically, and that encouraging attribution of meaning making in a secular sample, as opposed to a religious sample, might be more difficult as well. In addition, the intervention group improved more than the control group in several subscales assessing psychological distress. Within the intervention group, however, it was the students who experienced lower levels of violence exposure that improved the most. The authors suggested that it might be more difficult to build resilience through a school-based intervention for students with high levels of traumatic exposure. A systematic program of research examining the interaction of theorized risk and protective factors in the relation over time between experiences with ethnic-political violence and psychosocial difficulties is essential for advancing the knowledge base underpinning the design of effective prevention and intervention strategies aimed at enhancing individual-personal and environmental-contextual protective factors.

Ultimately, then, we hope through our own research and the research of others included in this special section that we can more fully design a process that will lead to the amelioration of

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difficulties experienced by children who must contend with ethnic and political violence in their social environments.

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