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Predictors of aggression among Palestinians in Israel and Gaza: Happiness, need to belong, and self-control☆

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined a strong need for belonging (sensitivity to social rejection) as a risk factor and happiness and self-control skills as protective factors in predicting peer-directed aggression among 292 Israeli Palestinian Arab adolescents and 398 Gazan Palestinian Arab adolescents of similar ages (mean ~14 years). Findings demonstrated that the two Palestinian groups showed similar aggression rates, but Israeli Palestinians revealed higher self-control, higher happiness, and higher need for belonging than their Gazan peers. Moreover, each of the three predictors, separately, was significantly linked to aggression for the Israelis but not for the Gazans. Possible explanations are discussed related to sex, cultural differences, and life conditions.

1. Introduction

Adolescent aggression constitutes a major social problem for families, communities, and nations. Worldwide violence leads to a high percentage of youth hospitalizations and deaths (World Health Organization, 2012). Aggression also comprises one of the most common reasons underlying adolescents' referrals to therapy (Herbert, 2002; Kazdin, 2003; Kazdin & Weisz, 2010; Kendall, 2011; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2003). Indeed, aggressive personality traits – a personal tendency to act aggressively – during adolescence can derive from internal as well as external components. Among the internal components leading to aggression, the most frequently mentioned ones include age and sex as well as the rapid changes, stress, and crises characterizing the adolescent stage (Folkman, 2008; Geckova, Van Dijk, Stewart, Groothofe, & Post, 2003; Ronen, 2008; Vasta, Haith, & Miller, 1995), and sensitivity to rejection by friends (Ayduk, Mischel, & Downey, 2002; Pietrzak, Downey, & Ayduk, 2005). Among external components, the most frequently mentioned ones include crises in the family (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003; Hamama & Ronen-Shenhav, 2012), or environmental crises such as war, trauma, and terror attack (Ronen, Rahav, & Moldavsky, 2007; Ronen, Rahav, & Rosenbaum, 2003).

Aggressive adolescents, as well as their peers who are the victims of aggression, suffer from behavioral as well as emotional problems, such as a decrease in school achievements, higher risk for school dropout, development of antisocial behavior, and juvenile delinquency (Andrade, 2009; Kazdin & Weisz, 2010; Loeber & Farrington, 2000). Highly aggressive adolescents also experience greater peer rejection and suffer more internalizing and externalizing disorders than their less aggressive peers (Coie, Lochman, Terry, & Hyman, 1992).

The present study focused on aggression in the adolescent Arab population of Israel and the Gaza Strip. These two adolescent groups shared the same geographical region, religion, and cultural heritage (traditionally authoritarian and collectivist Palestinian Arab society) but differed in their socioeconomic and security levels and in the extent of their exposure to western, individualistic society (with Gazans facing greater stress, poverty, and physical insecurity and less exposure to the individualistic-minded majority Jewish society). Hence, we were interested in learning whether differences would emerge in these two groups' trait aggression. Also, we sought to pinpoint potential risk and protective variables that may increase or decrease trait aggression, respectively. Specifically, we examined the need to belong as a risk variable as well as two protective variables: happiness and self-control. We assumed that adolescents with a stronger need for belonging, as well as lower rates of happiness and self-control skills, would be more likely to develop aggressive traits. Identification of personal and

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environmental variables that may contribute to an increased or decreased tendency for aggression could be an important addition not only to the explanation of how aggressive traits develop but also to the design of programs for prevention or treatment of aggression among adolescents in general and among Palestinians adolescents in particular.

The conceptualization of aggression has changed over recent decades. In the past, aggression was viewed as an act against society in which overt physical and verbal events are delivered to others (Buss, 1961; Kazdin, Rodgers, Colbus, & Siegel, 1987). Aggression was viewed as a behavior that in large part is determined by genetic factors (Brendgen, Vitaro, Boivin, Dionne, & Perusse, 2006). Rhee and Waldman (2002), who reviewed studies on aggression and antisocial behavior, suggested that genetic effects likely diminish with age and that socialization experiences determine whether individual adolescents will overcome the risk of their genetic heritage (Brendgen et al., 2006). Most youngsters learn to control their aggressive behavior via regular socialization processes such as receiving punishments or negative reinforcements for aggressive acts, watching socially accepted models, and obtaining rewards for socially appropriate behavior.

Nowadays, the view of aggression has been changed and it is considered to be a behavior that results from the wish to be part of society. In light of the emphasize on the need to be part of society, and fear of rejection, the view of aggression is not focus any more on the behavior itself, but rather on the way human beings think and feel (Andrade, 2009).

Thus, Modern view of aggression includes biological factors (e.g., poor executive functions, hyperactivity–impulsivity, and the like; Seguin & Zelazo, 2005) specific social learning history such as social rejection (Blackhart, Baumeister, & Twenge, 2006), thought process such as rejection sensitivity (Ayduk et al., 2002), or disorganized attachment (Lyons-Ruth, 1996; Lyons-Ruth, Alpern, & Repacholi, 1993), and relates to the combination of social and biological factors (i.e., a "mental lag") that could lead to aggressive behavior (Lyons-Ruth, Easterbrooks, & Cibelli, 1997).

Tremblay and Nagin (2005) suggested that aggression is neither a behavior that is socially learned nor a drive that must be satisfied. Rather, it is an internal disposition that children need to learn to control. This view upholds the notion that aggression is and always will be part of humans' behavioral repertoire, although it is under control most of the time by most people (Tremblay & Nagin, 2005). This view also highlights the shift from a focus on aggressive behavioral acts per se to a focus on aggressive traits and on the aggressive child as a whole (Hartup, 2005). Instead of placing emphasis on aggressive events and the situations that instigate them, the focus now lies on individual differences assumed to be related to the expression of aggression in social contexts (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Dodge & Pettit, 2003).

The present study focused on trait aggression based on Buss (1961) and Buss and Perry's (1992) model, which depicts a tendency to respond aggressively when facing difficulties, rejection, or stress. This unitary model of aggression combines emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components: hostile thoughts, angry feelings, and verbally and physically aggressive behaviors. Buss and Perry emphasized that all these subscales interrelate positively, thereby enabling the study of aggression as one integral component.

1.1. Personal risk and protective factors contributing to trait aggression

Orpinas and Horne (2006) noted that, during the past 50 years, studies on child and adolescent aggression have primarily investigated risk factors that predispose a child to behave aggressively, such as lack of support, distress, or sensitivity to rejection, and in line with this trend the present study examined one risk factor: sensitivity to rejection, as manifested in a strong unfulfilled need to belong. Only recently have educators and researchers begun to study the protective factors or the developmental assets that have the "potential to improve the well-being of youth and to reduce aggression" (Orpinas & Horne, 2006, p. 34), and in line with this trend the present study examined two protective factors — happiness and self-control skills.

Positive psychology in general and happiness in particular have not yet been sufficiently linked to adolescent aggression. A few studies exploring the Jewish population in Israel have attempted to link aggression not only to risk factors but also to protective factors, pinpointing the ability of self-control skills to reduce aggression among aggressive Jewish adolescents (Ronen & Rosenbaum, 2010; Rosenbaum & Ronen, in press) and examining the protective role of self-control and social support in decreasing aggression among Jewish adolescents of divorced families in Israel (Hamama & Ronen-Shenhav, 2012). Only few studies have related to aggression in the Arab population, and to possibly protective factors (Agbaria & Hamama, 2012; Haj-Yahia, 1995; Haj-Yahia & Ben-Arieh, 2000; Haj-Yahia, Musleh, & Haj-Yahia, 2002). Hence, the present study attempted to narrow a gap in the literature concerning the risk and protective factors acting as contributors to trait aggression in the adolescent Arab population.

1.1.1. Strong need for belonging as a risk factor that predicts aggression

Adolescence is a stage of developing identity versus role confusion and of gaining the support of the environment (Erikson, 1950). Adolescents wish to become part of society, be appreciated by society, and gain support. Support, acceptance, and belonging are therefore crucial to healthy development and the establishment of growth-oriented life goals (Dumont & Provost, 1999; LeCroy, 2002, 2007; McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997; Ronen & Seeman, 2007; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). While social support is an important resource for children and adolescence, lack of support while there is a strong need to belong, becomes a crucial component in adolescence's reaction to environment. The present study's focus on the need to belong as a risk factor for developing trait aggression assumes that when adolescents' need to belong is unmet and therefore they cannot feel they are being accepted by others, they are more likely to develop aggression.

Not everyone possesses the necessary skills to obtain the desired sense of belonging or support. Although becoming part of society comprises a major coping resource that contributes to coping with various kinds of distress, frustration of this wish and fear of rejection by society can become a risk factor predicting aggression. Husermann and Eron (1989) and Joireman, Anderson, and Strathman (2003), who studied aggression among young adults, pointed out the "aggression paradox:" It seems that when people who wish to be an integral part of society cannot achieve their interpersonal goals and feel rejected, they turn against their peers and act against society.

Bowlby (1973, 1980, 1988) maintained that when children's needs are met sensitively and consistently, they develop secure working models that incorporate the expectation that others will accept and support them. When met with covert or overt rejection, they develop insecure working models that incorporate the expectation that others will not accept and support them. Children's expectations are modified by subsequent experiences of acceptance and rejection (Heatherton & Vohs, 1998). Rejection sensitivity, as a cognitive–affective disposition, might lead to hostility, which, in turn, may lead to anger and then to aggressive behavior. Research demonstrated that adolescents who expected social rejection tended to suspect the good intentions of others and often viewed other people as potentially hostile toward them (Ronen & Rosenbaum, 2010; Rosenbaum, Ronen, Abuelaish, & Qutaiba, submitted for publication).

Mischel and Shoda (1995) stated that individuals differ in how they selectively focus on different features of a situation, how they categorize and encode them cognitively and emotionally, and how this encoding activates and interacts with other cognitions and affects in the personality system. Adolescents who feel insecure are more

sensitive to rejection, and then when they feel a strong unmet need for belonging, they may become aggressive (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Feldman, & Ayduk, 2000; Weisbrod, Rosenbaum, & Ronen, 2007).

1.1.2. Happiness as a protective or coping mechanism

Little research is available on the relationship between aggression and happiness. Happy people appear to have better interpersonal relationships and are more inclined to be kind and charitable (Keyes, 2006a, 2006b; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Inasmuch as peer-directed aggression is the antithesis of prosocial behavior, it is quite likely that happy people are also less aggressive. The current study examined this possible link in light of the view of happiness as a predictor of human behavior — whether as a desired outcome of life choices or as a cause of optimal human functioning and coping that decreases distress (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Within the framework of positive psychology, happiness has been studied as a positive personal resource, a major life goal, and a factor important for the optimal flourishing and functioning of people, groups, and institutions (Carr, 2004; Frederickson, 2009; Gable & Haidt, 2005). Most researchers have conceptualized happiness as enabling good environmental relationships (Keyes et al., 2008; Ryff, 1989). In our understanding, happiness therefore contradicts aggression. Keyes et al. (2008) suggested that happiness incorporates two abilities: achieving subjective well-being by expressing positive emotion, and achieving positive functioning toward oneself and one's environment. Research showed that in order to become happier, people need to gain a sense of mastery, connectedness, and self-acceptance (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007). Being happy does not mean that people do not experience stress, crisis, or problems; rather, happiness encompasses a "secret weapon" in trying to cope with such distress — for example by understanding that although distress exists, happy moments will return and one can work toward achieving more happiness (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007; Keyes, 2006b; Keyes & Ryff, 2000; Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Although research thus far has not yet systematically mapped out changes in happiness over the lifespan, scholars presume that children's happiness decreases at adolescence and then again in early adulthood. Research is not yet available to support this assumption; however, developmental psychologists claim that maturation in adolescence is accompanied by decreases in happiness due to the adolescents' increased family responsibilities, rising academic demands, sense of growing separation and individuation from the family unit, exploration of new stressful experiences with peers and adult activities, as well as dynamic changes in all realms of life — physical, cognitive, emotional, and social (Davies, 1999; Vasta et al., 1995). In the present study, therefore, we sought to identify the link between adolescent aggression and happiness, assuming that happier adolescents would reveal lower trait aggression.

1.1.3. Self-control skills as protective or coping mechanism

Self-control skills are considered essential to control most forms of aggressive behavior (Phil & Benkelflat, 2005). The concepts of happiness on the one hand and aggression on the other are often connected with the notion of control. Human beings come into the world with a passion for control, and if they lose their ability to control things they become unhappy, hopeless, depressed, or aggressive. The desire to control is so powerful, and the feeling of control so rewarding, that people often act as though they can control the uncontrollable (Gilbert, 2005). Self-control skills may therefore be viewed as a coping mechanism or protective factor in the prediction of aggression. Rosenbaum (1998) emphasized self-control as a set of goal-directed skills that enable humans to act upon their aims; overcome difficulties relating to thoughts, emotions, and behaviors; delay gratification; and cope with distress.

A considerable body of research has previously shown that adults, adolescents, and children who were high in self-control behaviors – such as postponing gratification, planning the future, and using cognitions to guide actions – were less likely to behave aggressively, and vice versa (Ayduk, Mendoza-Denon, Mischel, & Downey, 2000; Blair, Denham, Kochanoff, & Whipple, 2004; Gyurak & Ayduk, 2008; Ronen, 2004; Ronen & Rosenbaum, 2010; Ronen et al., 2007; Rosenbaum et al., submitted for publication; Weisbrod et al., 2007). Osterman et al. (1994) reported a correlation between aggression, especially physical aggression, and poor internal self-control skills. Furthermore, imparting children and adolescents with self-control skills in school has emerged as an effective tool for reducing aggressive behavior (Ronen, 2003; Ronen & Rosenbaum, 2010). Research in Israel pinpointing the link between self-control and aggression has focused on the Jewish population (e.g., Ronen & Rosenbaum, 2010); hence, the present study aimed to examine whether the same link exists among the Arab population.

Furthermore, recently some support has also emerged for self-control's link with positive emotions and happiness (Gilbert, 2005; Rosenbaum & Ronen, in press; Rosenbaum et al., submitted for publication; Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2007). People have always wished to control themselves (Gilbert, 2005); thus, it is not surprising that self-control has been linked to people's ability to become happy. Baumeister et al. (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Baumeister, Vohs, Nathan DeWall, & Zhang, 2007), viewed the existence of positive affect as creating solid ground for applying skills to achieve goals. In the present study, therefore, we expected that Arab adolescents who reported higher levels of self-control skills would present not only lower levels of aggression but also higher levels of happiness.

1.2. Environmental factors contributing to trait aggression

The present study also investigated the current risk and protective factors by examining the influence of environmental components such as Arab adolescents' sociocultural differences (e.g., individual versus collective society, socioeconomic conditions). We compared Palestinian Arabs living in Israel versus Palestinian Arabs living in the adjacent Gaza Strip — two groups sharing similar cultural backgrounds but differing in life conditions (Dwairy & Van Sickle, 1996). In a previous study focusing on cultural differences in aggression among Palestinian Arab adolescents in Gaza and Israel as well as Jews in Israel, we found that hostility and anger mediated physical aggression (Rosenbaum et al., submitted for publication). Cultural differences also emerged in adolescents' positive and negative emotions and their self-control.

The Israeli and Gazan Palestinian Arab groups share the same geographical region (Middle East), the same religions (the large majority of both groups are Moslem), and the same traditionally authoritarian and collectivist Palestinian Arab heritage, cultural traditions, and mores (e.g., heightened external control of the family and society, Dwairy, 1998; lower pursuit of individual "self-actualization;" Dwairy & Van Sickle, 1996). Yet, the Israeli Palestinians living in small homogeneous Arab villages in northern Israel are substantially more exposed to western, individualistic society (i.e., to the majority Jewish Israeli society) than the Gazan Palestinians, who live in refugee camps that are physically, economically, politically, and socially isolated from neighboring Israel with its western influences. Other important differences in life conditions beyond differential exposure to modern western society include the higher rates of stress, poverty, and physical insecurity characterizing the Gazan refugee camps.

The two groups' different life conditions may be hypothesized as influencing their rates of aggression, their need for belonging (risk factor), and their happiness and self-control (protective factors). Regarding aggression, we expected higher rates of peer aggression among Israeli Palestinians, who are more, exposed to western society and thus may be more individualist, competitive, and personal in

their aims and less committed to their community than their peers in Gaza. Bergeron and Schneider (2005) explained that members of individualistic societies are more likely to use aggression for achieving personal goals than members of collectivistic societies, such as an Arab society where collectivism is highly valued (Whitaker, 2009). Regarding need for belonging, Gaza's more united collective society (due to its isolation and common sociopolitical goals in coping with their stressful life conditions) may reduce Gazan adolescents' sensitivity to rejection; therefore, we expected them to exhibit a lower need for belonging in comparison to their more individualistically-minded Israeli Arab counterparts. Regarding happiness, Gazan Palestinian adolescents were expected to report lower subjective happiness due to the restraints imposed by collectivist societal norms on the pursuit of personal happiness, compared to Israeli Palestinians. Regarding self-control, in line with Ronen's (2003) assertion that greater skill practice leads to stronger self-control, we expected Palestinians in Gaza to present higher self-control skills due to their difficult life conditions that necessitate more intense daily coping to overcome stress and difficulties, compared to their Israeli peers.

1.3. The current hypotheses

The current hypotheses reflect the main aims of the study. One is to learn the way risk factor (need to belong) and protective mechanisms (happiness and self-control) relate to aggression. The second is to learn about the differences between the two groups of Arab population living in the Middle East relate to aggression.

We hypothesized that:

1. A higher need to belong would contribute to adolescents' higher aggression.
2. A higher rate of happiness would contribute to adolescents' lower aggression.
3. A higher rate of self-control would contribute to adolescents' lower aggression.
4. Israeli Arabs will show higher rate of happiness, self-control, need to belong as well as higher rate of aggression compare with Arabs in Gaza.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 690 adolescents age 13 to 15 years attending six junior high schools, three in Israel and three in Gaza. The group of 292 Israeli Palestinian adolescents (142 males, 150 females) lived in small homogenous Arab villages in northern Israel. The group of 398 Gazan Palestinian adolescents (166 males, 232 females) lived in refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. Comparison of the two subsamples using *t*-tests showed no significant differences between the Israeli and the Gazan groups on age (Israel: $M = 14.18$, $SD = .66$; Gaza: $M = 14.32$, $SD = .59$, *ns*) or sex (49% males in Israel, 42% males in Gaza, *ns*). Regarding religion, 96% in each group were Moslem, and the minority of 4% were Christian, Druze, or Bedouin.

2.2. Procedure

Recruitment strategies and consent procedures consisted of three stages. First, in Israel, we obtained permission to conduct the study from the Head Scientist of the Israeli Ministry of Education and from the Research Committee of Tel-Aviv University; both confirmed that the study was conducted according to the Human Experimentation Review Committee. At the same time in Gaza, our request was approved by the Education Committee. Second, in Israel, the Ministry of Education sent letters to principals of the major schools in the north of Israel, asking them to allow the study to be conducted in their schools. The three largest schools in that area were selected for study. At the same time, in Gaza, the Committee referred us to one UN-operated school and one school in the refugee camps, which we contacted directly. Third, all parents of all adolescents attending these six schools received letters informing them of the study aims and asking for consent to allow their children to participate. Parents were given 14 days to respond in writing or by telephone if they objected to their children's participation. Few parents called to ask for details about the study, and none expressed any objection.

Next, several research assistants visited each of the schools. The study was conducted during school hours, in the presence of the homeroom teachers. All adolescents in the target classes who attended school on the day of the research assistant's visit were asked to complete the questionnaires. Adolescents were told that this study examined adolescents' behavior and subjective well-being. We asked for their agreement to take part in the study and told them that participation was strictly voluntary. All the adolescents who were approached agreed. Completion of the anonymous questionnaire set took about 30 min.

2.3. Measures

This study sought to reveal internal tendencies, thoughts, and emotions; hence, all four main instruments comprised self-report measures (aggression, need to belong, happiness, and self-control). All questionnaires were administered in Arabic. The Arabic versions of the aggression and self-control scales were used in previous studies. The happiness and need to belong scales underwent back-and-forth translation methods, from the original English into Arabic as well as from the translation to Hebrew into Arabic (Cronbach alpha = .77 and .76, respectively), and disagreements were discussed until creating one final Arabic version for each. Prior studies demonstrated the validity and reliability of the Hebrew and/or Arabic versions of these four scales using similar translation methods (e.g., Ronen & Rosenbaum, 2010; Rosenbaum et al., submitted for publication; Walters, Ronen, & Rosenbaum, 2010).

2.3.1. Socio-demographic questionnaire

This self-report questionnaire included questions relating to age, sex, class, school, and religion.

2.3.2. Aggression Questionnaire (AQ; Buss & Perry, 1992)

This 29-item scale measured adolescents' self-reported personal dispositions related to four subscales of aggression: *physical violence* (e.g., "If I'm teased enough I might hit another child"); *verbal violence* (e.g., "When children annoy me I tell them what I think of them"); *anger* (e.g., "Sometimes I feel I'm about to explode"); and *hostility* (e.g., "I know that children talk about me behind my back"). Participants rated the degree to which items characterized them on a 6-point Likert-type scale, ranging from *Definitely do not agree* (1) to *Fully agree* (6). The AQ can be used as a whole scale, as in the current study, or regarding each subscale separately. The AQ has been widely used to measure aggression not only in the USA (e.g., Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2010) but also in Gaza (e.g., Victoroff et al., 2010) and in Israel (e.g., Ronen & Rosenbaum, 2010; Walters et al., 2010). The scale's reliability (Cronbach alpha) was .80 for Buss and Perry (1992). In studies conducted in Israel, reliabilities were .82 (Ronen & Rosenbaum, 2010), and .75 in the current study.

2.3.3. Need to Belong Scale

(Leary, 1997; Leary & Cottrell, 2001; Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2006). This 10-item scale related to one's responses to others' rejection (e.g., "If other people don't seem to accept me, I don't let it bother me" or "I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me" [reversed]). Respondents rated the

degree to which each statement was true or characteristic of them on a 5-point scale from *Not at all* (1) to *Extremely* (5). Cronbach alpha consistently exceeded .80 in prior studies (e.g., Kelly, 1999, 2001; Leary, 1997; Leary & Cottrell, 2001) and was .62 in the current study.

2.3.4. Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999)

On the 4-item subjective happiness scale, participants circled the number that best characterized them on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (characterizing low levels of happiness) to 7 (characterizing high level of happiness); for example, "In general I consider myself not a very happy person (1) to a very happy person (7)" or "Compared to most of my peers I consider myself less happy (1) to very happy (7)." Cronbach alpha of different samples ranged from .79 to .94 (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) and was .61 in the current study.

2.3.5. Adolescent Self-control Scale (A-SCS; Rosenbaum & Ronen, 1991)

This 32-item measure of self-control skills (Rosenbaum, 1980) assessed adolescents' ability to overcome temptation, pain, and disturbing emotions; use self-talk; and use self-reinforcement. Participants rated statements (e.g., "When I have a headache I find it difficult to continue studying," "When I watch a scary movie on television, I keep thinking of it and cannot overcome my fear," or "When I find it difficult to concentrate I tell myself: 'You have to try harder'") on a Likert-type scale from *Not characteristic of me at all* (1) to *Very characteristic of me* (6). Various prior studies (e.g., Ronen & Rosenbaum, 2010) established the scale's validity. Its reliability (Cronbach alpha) was .81 in Ronen and Rosenbaum (2010), .81 in Ronen and Seeman (2007), and .80 in the current study.

3. Results

3.1. Data analysis

First, we conducted analysis for learning about the descriptive characteristics of the sample and psychometric properties of the measures (means, reliability, standard deviations). Second, we conducted Pearson correlation analysis to learn about the way all the variables are related to each other. Third, we conducted stepwise regression analysis with all the study variables for predicting the rate of aggression, and learning about the contribution of the protective and risk mechanisms.

3.2. Findings

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, Pearson intercorrelations, and reliabilities for all the measures for the total sample. All the variables were linked to age, showing that in both groups (Gaza, Israel) boys were more aggressive than girls and had lower rates of self-control than girls, but also revealed higher happiness rates and a lower need to belong. A negative significant link was found between aggression and happiness, and aggression and self-control. No significant link was found between need to belong and aggression or need to belong and happiness.

The first hypothesis related to the contribution of need for belonging to aggression for the whole sample. The Pearson correlation between these two variables was not significant (see Table 1). We also conducted stepwise regression analysis of aggression with all the study variables as predicting variables (sex, group, self-control, happiness and need to belong) (see Table 2). Need to belong did not contributed significantly to predict aggression (Beta = .08, $p > .05$). Thus the first hypothesis was not supported.

The second hypothesis, relating to the contribution of happiness to aggression for the whole sample, was partially supported. A significant negative Pearson correlation ($r = -.08$, $p < .05$) was found between happiness and aggression. However, in stepwise regression analysis (see Table 2), happiness was not found to significantly contribute to the explanation of aggression for the whole sample.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities, and intercorrelations ($N = 690$).

	Sex	Aggression	Need to belong	Happiness	Self-control
M	.56	78.14	−.06	.001	.10
SD	.50	15.17	1.00	.16	. 98
α	–	.75	.60	.69	.81
Intercorrelations					
Sex	–	−.25***	.16***	−.10***	.14***
Aggression	–	–	−.002	−.08*	−.17***
Self-control	–	–	.32***	.23***	–
Happiness	–	–	−.01	–	–

Note. Sex: boys (0) and girls (1).
*** $p < .001$.
* $p < .05$.

The third hypothesis, relating to the contribution of self-control to aggression for the whole sample, was supported. A significant negative Pearson correlation ($r = -.17$, $p < .001$) emerged between these two variables. In addition, in stepwise regression analysis (see Table 2), self-control contributed significantly to the explanation of aggression (Beta = −.10, $p < .05$). Also, as expected, self-control correlated positively with happiness ($r = .23$, $p < .001$), indicating that adolescents with higher self-control skills were happier.

The fourth hypothesis was related to comparisons between Palestinian Arabs in Israel and In Gaza. As can be seen, Table 3 presents a series of *t*-tests conducted to investigate group differences. Contradictory to the hypothesis, no significant gap emerged between the Israeli and Gazan Palestinian groups on aggression. However, in line with the predicted directions, significant group differences did emerge for happiness, the need to belong, and self-control, which were all higher among Israeli Palestinians than Gazan Palestinians.

Table 2 presents a stepwise regression analysis predicting aggression with all the study variables, e.g., sex, need to belong, happiness, self-control, and group (Israel/Gaza). Sex, and group showed main effects (Beta = −.22, $p < .01$; and .18, $p < .01$, respectively). Neither happiness nor self-control or need to belong showed a main effect in predicting aggression.

Table 2
Stepwise regression analysis for aggression, controlling for sex, with need to belong, happiness, self-control, and group (Gaza/Israel) as predictors.

Variables	B	Beta
Step 1		
Sex	−6.77	−.22**
Adjusted R square	.058	
Step 2		
Need to belong	1.14	.08
Happiness	.89	.06
Self-control	−1.51	−.10*
Group	5.28	.17**
Adjusted R square	.10	
Step 3		
Group × happiness	−4.10	−.19**
Adjusted R square	.12	
Step 4		
Group × self-control	−4.81	−.17**
Adjusted R square	.13	
Step 5		
Group × Need to belong	2.66	.11**
Adjusted R square	.14	

** $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$.

Table 3
Means, standard deviations, and *t* values comparing Israeli Palestinian and Gazan Palestinian adolescents.

	Israeli Palestinians			Gazan Palestinians			*t*
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	
Age	292	14.32	.59	298	14.32	.59	−.01
Aggression	292	79.54	17.58	391	77.31	13.78	−1.80
Happiness	286	18.42	4.74	385	16.45	4.28	−5.55***
Need to belong	274	31.95	5.12	384	30.43	5.66	−3.59***
Self-control	291	24.65	18.66	394	9.11	25.87	−9.13***

*** $p<.001$.

As seen in Table 2, three significant interactions emerged for group: with need to belong, with happiness, and with self-control. Thus, for Israeli Palestinian adolescents, a higher need for belonging significantly predicted higher aggression (B = 2.66, Beta = −.11, Adjusted R square = .14), whereas this link between belonging and aggression was not significant for the Gazan Palestinian adolescents (see Fig. 1). Also, for Israeli Palestinian adolescents, higher happiness significantly predicted lower aggression (B = −4.10, Beta = −.19, Adjusted R square = .12), whereas this link between happiness and aggression was not significant for the Gazan Palestinian adolescents (see Fig. 2). Finally, for Israeli Palestinian adolescents, higher self-control significantly predicted lower aggression (B = −4.81, Beta = −.17, Adjusted R square = .13), whereas this link between self-control and aggression was not significant for the Gazan Palestinian adolescents (see Fig. 3).

In addition, we found sex differences in the whole sample in most of the variables (see Table 1). Boys reported higher aggression ($r=-.25$, $p<.001$), a lower need to belong ($r=.16$, $p<.001$), higher happiness ($r=-.10$, $p<.001$), and lower self-control ($r=.14$, $p<.001$) than girls. The same pattern emerged in the regression analysis (see Table 2). Sex contributed a significant amount of variance to the explanation of aggression, where boys contributed more than girls (Beta = −.22, $p<.001$).

4. Discussion

This study examined risk and protecting factors in predicting aggression among adolescence belong to two groups of Palestinians, those living in Israel and those living in the Gaza Strip, who share a similar culture but different life conditions. The main findings were that the two groups did not differ in the rate of aggression, but showed significant differences in the risk and protective mechanism that relate to aggression. E.g., the two groups' levels of need for belonging, happiness, and self-control differed substantially, with lower scores among the Gazans than the Israelis on all three of these measures.

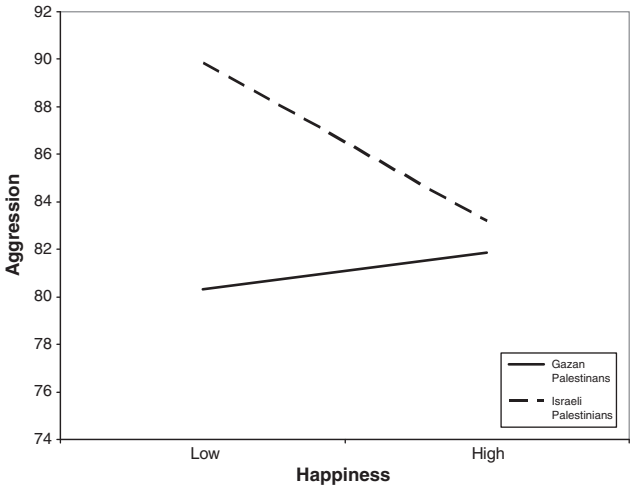

Fig. 2. Two-way interaction between group (Israel Palestinian and Gazan Palestinian adolescents) and happiness in predicting aggression.

4.1. The role of need to belong, happiness, self-control and in the development of aggression

The first part of the study relates to aggression's links with the need to belong, happiness, and self-control skills (Hypotheses 1–3). Based on the view of aggression as resulting from the wish to be part of society (Andrade, 2009), we expected need to belong to be positively related to aggression. Differently than expected we did not find correlation between need to belong and aggression (see Table 1) neither did we find need to belong to contribute to the explained variation of aggression (Table 2). Thus this finding was consistent with previous studies (Ronen & Rosenbaum, 2010; Ronen & Seeman, 2007; Rosenbaum et al., submitted for publication), whereby adolescents with higher need to belong presents higher rate of peer-directed aggression. However, we did find interaction between need to belong and aggression among the group of Palestinian Arabs in Israel. More studies are needed to understand why we did not find this link among the Palestinian Arabs in Gaza. One possibility is that need to belong is not exactly matching to sensitivity to

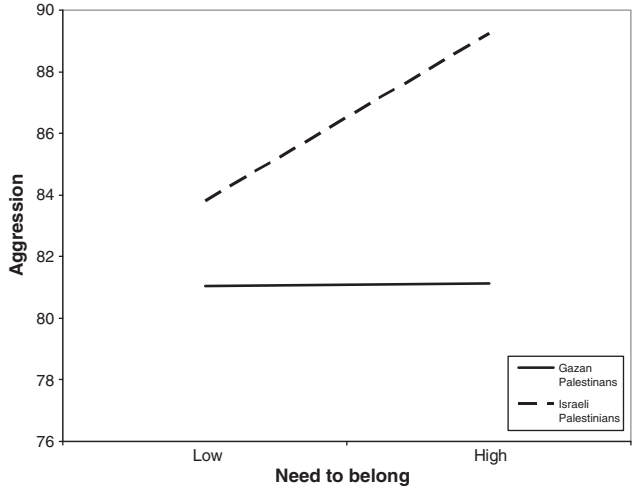

Fig. 1. Two-way interaction between group (Israel Palestinian and Gazan Palestinian adolescents) and need to belong in predicting aggression.

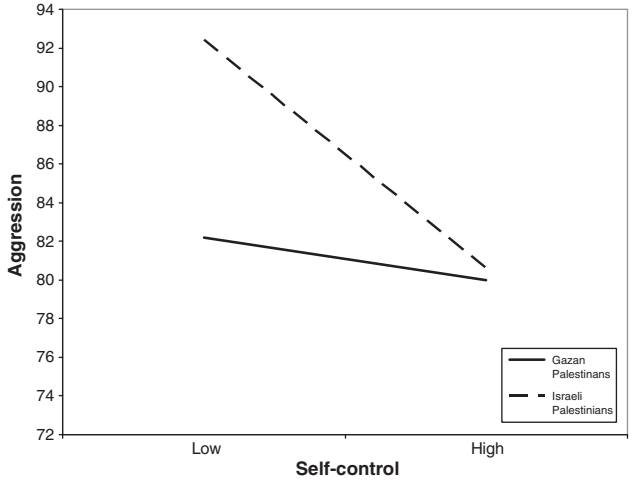

Fig. 3. Two-way interaction between group (Israel Palestinian and Gazan Palestinian adolescents) and self-control in predicting aggression.

rejection and this link would be better while studying directly the sensitivity to rejection. Other possibility relates to the differences between the two groups of Arabs. It might be that in traditional, collective society, adolescence feel more protected and do not develop the fear of rejection the same way it is developed in modern society. This difference between traditional and modern cultures hasn't been studied enough and we are lacking more scientific knowledge to state this.

The most important outcomes of this study were that higher rates of happiness, and higher rates of self-control each significantly predicted lower peer-directed aggression, albeit for Israeli Palestinian adolescents only, not for their Gazan counterparts. These outcomes may reflect the difficult situation to which Gazan Palestinians are exposed, suggesting important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, happiness has long been emphasized as an important facet of the human experience, and in recent years positive psychology has underscored its potential merits (Frederickson, 2009; Gilbert, 2005; Lyubomirsky, 2007). The current study substantiates these contentions, suggesting that happiness is important not only to offer individuals a sense of feeling good, but also as playing a possible role in decreasing problems (Frederickson, 2009; Lyubomirsky, 2007). Happiness appeared to decrease Israeli Arab adolescents' tendency to reveal aggressive behavior toward peers. This suggests the importance of investigating other kinds of problems that happiness may help reduce (Carr, 2004; Gable & Haidt, 2005), as well as the need for future qualitative studies to explore the cognitive and emotional links between higher rates of happiness and lower rates of aggression.

Practically, the current findings suggest the merit of self-control and a sense of belonging as possible effective means for bolstering adolescent happiness. Increasing self-control results in greater happiness; at the same time, increasing self-control may influence also in decreasing the need to belong and helping adolescents to feel they are being part of society, and not feel rejected. Thus, by training adolescents in self-control skills and helping them gain social support we can help them feel happier (Frederickson, 2009; Lyubomirsky, 2007).

4.2. Aggression among the two Palestinian groups

The present study demonstrated similar rates of aggression between the Israeli and Gazan Arab groups (Hypothesis 4), differently than a previous study that found higher rates of aggression among Israeli Palestinians than Gazan Palestinians and even higher aggression among Israeli Jews (Rosenbaum et al., submitted for publication). The present sample was smaller, with a smaller age range, and examined younger adolescents than the Rosenbaum et al. (submitted for publication) study; hence, age and sample size may explain the similarity of the current outcomes for aggression in Israel and Gaza. If verified by future research, this similarity may imply a universal tendency toward increasing aggression in early adolescence, but then as adolescents grow their ability to decrease trait aggression may perhaps be related to the influence of sociocultural components on individual behavior.

Although aggression rates were similar among the two groups, significant group differences emerged for all three predictors of aggression: need to belong, happiness, and self-control. As mentioned before, the two groups share a similar cultural background but differ in quality of life and life conditions. The lower rate of happiness found among Palestinians in Gaza than in Israel may be explained by the Gazans' lack of freedom to pursue their personal wishes, work toward individual actualization, and enjoy life (Keyes, 2006a; Keyes & Ryff, 2000; Lyubomirsky, 2007). Furthermore, the Gazans' lower fear of social rejection may be related to the collectivism, collaborations, and partnerships bred by constant fear of a common enemy and political violence in Gaza. Although the Israeli Palestinians remain a part of traditional society, their greater exposure to individualistic western society may reduce that sense of togetherness or unity (Bergeron & Schneider, 2005), thereby explaining the Israelis' higher sensitivity to rejection — their stronger yearning to belong to the community at large.

Regarding self-control, we expected Gazan Palestinians, who were exposed to more difficult life conditions, to exhibit more self-control than the Israeli Palestinians in line with prior assertions that greater practice of goal-directed self-control behaviors (e.g., to overcome difficulties, stress, and disturbing thoughts) should lead to stronger self-control ability (Ronen, 2003; Rosenbaum, 1998). However, the opposite outcome emerged. Two possible explanations arise. First, inasmuch as self-control is a goal-directed behavior, perhaps the main goals of Palestinian youth in refugee camps are tied to their sociopolitical situation rather than their daily lives. Therefore, in this collectivist or other-oriented society, perhaps adolescents' behaviors at school, with friends, or with themselves are not seen as important goals, in comparison with the communal political and economic struggles. If these are not valued goals, then adolescents do not need to invest effort in practicing self-control for achieving them.

A second possible explanation has roots in Bergeron and Schneider's (2005) writings. Perhaps in a collective society adult authority figures impose greater external controls on young people, demanding obedience and punishing disciplinary infractions, compared to those living under the influence of individualistic western society. These external controls may leave adolescents with fewer opportunities to autonomously practice self-control and less freedom to decide on when and how to overcome temptations like disrupting class or skipping homework.

The major deficiency of this study is its reliance on self-report measures. Thoughts, emotions, and feelings cannot be measured by environmental reports, but future studies may consider using in-depth interviews to learn more about the significance of the current outcomes for adolescents. The advantages of this study lie in its comparison of two groups of Palestinian Arab adolescents living under different life conditions in Israel and Gaza; however, this study defined these two groups based on geographical residence, without precise data on the groups' economic situation or religious and cultural backgrounds. Future studies must be conducted to deepen our understanding of these differences in order to enhance these Palestinian Arab adolescents' opportunities to feel happy and flourish.

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