Israel and Palestinian Families in the Peace Process: Sources of Stress and Response Patterns

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The Israeli-Palestinian peace process is characterized by its unknown outcomes and consequences for the families involved. The purpose of this study was to identify family processes under conditions of prolonged uncertainty. Data were collected from both Israeli and Palestinian families in the West Bank by means of semi-structured interviews. Qualitative and quantitative analyses showed cross-cultural differences in the perception of the situation; different kinds of concerns and sources of stress; different coping responses; and differences in dyadic interaction patterns and intrafamily processes. The findings are discussed in social-contextual terms, particularly the ways in which political and cultural contexts shape the perception of the situation and family processes under prolonged stressful conditions.

INTRODUCTION

On September 13, 1993, an Agreement of Principles was signed to begin a process that would hopefully culminate in peace for the whole Middle-East region. The initial stage was to begin with the Gaza Strip and Jericho areas, as forerunners of a self-ruling regime, and to establish a Palestinian government in those areas. The pact, also called the "Gaza and Jericho First Agreement," set provisions for Palestinian autonomy to be implemented first in the Gaza Strip and Jericho areas, and later throughout the entire Palestinian population. The agreement left many open questions and issues to be settled in further negotiations (Shlaim, 1994). Not only did leaders of the two sides face fierce resistance and doubts among both peoples, they also needed to see how the initial steps would actually work out in this complex political situation.

This peace process has significant consequences for Israeli people and Palestinian people in general, but it affects first and foremost those Israeli and Palestinian families living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Despite the positive value attached to peace in general, the emerging peace process between Israel and the Palestinians is fraught with conflicting political ideologies among both peoples, and marked by continuous violent acts. But more than anything else, it is characterized by its unknown outcomes and consequences for the families involved. This situational ambiguity, which appears to be a major component of the current situation, is characterized by feelings of lack of control, unpredictability, and related difficulties in selecting appropriate coping strategies (Boss, 1988). Thus, for the families living in these areas, the peace process entails a continuous and prolonged stressful situation. The primary purpose of this article is to examine the meaning of the peace process for those who are most directly affected by it—Israeli and Palestinian families in the West Bank.

Family Stress: Theory and Research

What are the mechanisms that families use in order to cope with ongoing, prolonged stressful situations? Family stress theories attempt to explain and predict the factors that account for family crisis under stress (Burr, 1973; Hill, 1949), to explain the family's adjustment and adaptation over time (Boss, 1988; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), and to describe the processes that take place within the family as it deals with internal or environmental stressors (Burr & Klein, 1994; Reiss & Oliveri, 1980). The emphasis in these models, as in research on families under stress, concerns the question of how families cope as collective entities, and what the consequences of stressful events are on the family as a system.

Several general processes of family response to stress have been described in these theoretical models and have stimulated a lot of empirical research. These include Hill's (1949) three-factorial determinants of family crisis under stress (the event, the perception of the situation, and the family's resources) and McCubbin and Patterson's (1983) model of family adjustment and adaptation. In their model, McCubbin and Patterson suggest that: (a) families cope with stressful events over time, during which they go through periods of disruption and readjustment, and (b) families react to a pile-up of demands, not to a single, discrete stressor. These two processes are particularly important for understanding families in a prolonged stressful situation that is marked by multiple sources of stress.

Most previous research has attempted to analyze different aspects of the coping process in families under stress, based on linear models that are characteristic of the positivistic school of thought. Burr & Klein (1994), however, contend that the...
search for general rules of input-outcome, in the positivistic school of thought, is inappropriate for understanding interactional, recursive family process. Effective family research, they note, needs to (a) consider mental processes, such as meanings, values and goals; (b) think in systemic terms in order to capture interactions between people as well as between people and their environment; and (c) search for patterns of family processes. Such research should identify the general strategies that families use in times of stress, and the contextual factors that are related to when and how the various strategies are and are not helpful.

Culture and Social Context

A somewhat neglected variable in the empirical research on families under stress is the social context (for example, historical, political, cultural) in which the coping process takes place. Clearly, the social context in which the family lives shapes its members’ perceptions, values, and goals, as well as the family’s coping responses (Boss, 1987; Reiss & Oliveri, 1991; Walker, 1985).

The social context of the Palestinian and Israeli families living in the West Bank is markedly different between the two groups. It is determined not only by economic and living conditions, but also by history, political reality, religion, culture, and language, all of which shape the experience of everyday life and overall world-view. An extensive review of the cultural differences between the two peoples is beyond the scope of this article, but a few characteristics need to be described in order to begin to understand some of the issues faced by Israeli and Palestinian residents of the West Bank.

The Palestinian people in the West bank are part of the larger Arab society; yet, they perceive themselves as a different nation, with a long history of oppression by various conquerors, the last of whom are the Israelis. Part of the Palestinian population lives in cities (for example, East Jerusalem, Nablus, Hebron, Bethlehem, Jericho), and the rest reside in towns and smaller villages spread throughout the region. The majority of these people trace their roots in this region hundreds of years back, while others are refugees who fled their homes during the 1948 war, immediately following the establishment of the state of Israel.

Many Palestinian families, especially those in rural areas and in refugee camps, live in poor living conditions and densely-populated homes (Heiberg, Ovensen, Brunborg, et al., 1993). Since 1967, many Palestinian men have been working (mostly in temporary, low-paying jobs) in Israel, and their families’ income depends on their ability to move freely within the West Bank as well as to cross the "Green Line" (the pre-1967 Jordanian-Israeli border) in order to work in Israel. In the past few years, as a result of the Intifaddah (the Palestinian uprising) and an increase in the incidence of terrorist attacks within Israel, this movement has been limited at times by border blocking and curfews. Such restrictions have worsened the already poor economic situation of many families.

Israeli residents of the West Bank, also known as Judea and Samaria region, have been living in this area anywhere from a few months to 29 years, shortly after the 1967 war. This population may be categorized into three groups. First, there are the settlers who came to live in the region primarily for nationalist and religious causes, with the belief that the West Bank is part of Israel and belongs to the Jewish people since it was inherited by the Jewish Fathers. They have established numerous small settlements built on unpopulated lands throughout the region, some within mostly Arab populated areas. A small number of families also moved to live within or next to cities in the West Bank (for example, Hebron, Kiryat Arba). The majority of this group of settlers are Orthodox Jews, but there is also a small minority of secular Jews with a strong nationalist world-view. The second group is comprised of settlers in the Jordan Rift, whose main reason for moving into this region was farming. Their settlement in this area was, at that time, strongly encouraged by the Israeli government, in the belief that this area would be essential for Israel’s security. The third group consists of residents of new towns (for example, Ariel) and villages built in the West Bank not far from the "Green Line" and from major cities in Israel. Many of the settlers in these towns and villages are young families who regarded moving to this region as an opportunity to obtain cheaper and larger houses, combined with the convenience of keeping their jobs inside the "Green Line." These residents largely define themselves as secular residents: they came to live in this area not for nationalist or religious reasons, but for the opportunity and the convenience of it.

Expectably, the experience of the Israeli and Palestinian people who live in the West Bank will be quite different, despite the fact that they are seemingly undergoing a common environmental change via the peace process. In this study, we attempt to assess the social realm of families in a prolonged, stressful situation by examining the family processes within the two cultural groups. More specifically, the purpose of this article is to compare the experiences of the families in these two populations with respect to three domains: 1) sources of stress and strain, 2) dyadic processes and coping patterns, and 3) effect of the stressful situation on the family.

METHOD

Participants
The participants in the present study are part of a larger prospective study that attempts to follow Israeli and Palestinian families during the Middle Eastern peace process. In the first phase of the study, upon which this article is based, data were collected from Israeli residents of the Golan Heights and the West Bank, as well as from Palestinian residents of the West Bank. The only criterion for inclusion was that the respondents be married or living permanently with another person.

Israeli families were sampled from 22 settlements in the Golan Heights (20.8% of the sample) and the West Bank. Of those interviewed from the West Bank, about one-half were sampled from nine settlements scattered around mostly Arab-populated areas, and the rest were sampled from the area surrounding Jerusalem, the Hebron area (Kiryat Arba), the town of Ariel, and four farm villages (moshavim) in the Jordan Rift. In each of these areas, families were selected by means of a random telephone number sampling procedure. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with either the husband or the wife, depending on which adult family member first answered the phone.

Palestinian families (N = 96) were sampled by a purposive sampling procedure from the Jericho, Nablus, and Jerusalem/Bethlehem areas, including a range of larger towns, smaller villages, and refugee camps in each area. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with either the wife or the husband in the respondents’ homes by trained Palestinian social workers.

In order to compare Palestinian families with those Israeli families who live in the same area, the 52 respondents from the Golan Heights (where no Palestinian families reside) were excluded from the analyses. Also excluded were 2 Israeli and 4 Palestinian respondents for whom data were incomplete. The remaining sample was composed of 92 Palestinians (53 males, 39 females) and 196 Israelis (58 males, 138 females). Because the number of female Israeli respondents was disproportionately high, as compared to Israeli men and both Palestinian women and men, a subsample of 41 Israeli women was randomly selected from that sample, using SPSSx Weight procedure.

The mean age of the remaining Israeli sample was 41.5 years for men and 36.1 for women, while the mean age of the Palestinian sample was 42.2 for men and 32.5 for women. The mean number of children in the family was 3.8 in Israeli families (SD = 1.9) and 5.1 (SD = 9.3) in Palestinian families (t = 1.35, p > .10). The mean age of the oldest child was 14.1 and 14.7 in the Israeli and Palestinian families, respectively, and the mean age of the youngest child was 6.4 and 7.5 for these two groups. Twenty percent of the Palestinian sample defined themselves as orthodox, about two-thirds as mildly religious, and 10% as nonreligious. In the Israeli sample, one-third perceived themselves as being nonreligious, about 50% as religious, and the rest as “traditional” (mildly religious).

**Interview Procedures**

Two different procedures were used for interviewing the Israeli and the Palestinian samples. Telephone interviews were conducted with the Israeli respondents. The sample was selected by a random telephone dialing procedure, and the interviewer requested permission to interview the adult family member who first answered the phone. In order to insure equal opportunity for male and female respondents, telephone calls were made during evening hours (as was noted earlier, however, we reached twice as many women respondents as men). Interviewers introduced themselves as calling from the Center for Research and Study of the Family and described the purpose of the interview: “Due to the changes going on in your region lately, we'd like to ask you a few questions regarding your family and yourself.” The interviewer then proceeded with the first question: “First of all, how do you feel these days?” Interviews lasted between 20 to 45 minutes, depending upon the respondent’s elaboration in open-ended questions.

Palestinian respondents were interviewed in a face-to-face manner. This was necessary for two reasons: 1) telephones are not as commonly found in Palestinian homes as they are in Israeli homes, especially in rural areas; 2) the Palestinian population is considerably less accustomed than Israelis to research interviews, and there are no data available on the utility of telephone interviews among this population. The interviewers were Palestinian social workers and social work students who live in the West Bank, and who were trained by one of the authors. The interviewers were furnished with the purposive sampling plan (by area and by type of settlement) and were instructed to introduce themselves and the purpose of their visit to the person who opened the door. Interviews lasted between 25 to 45 minutes.

**Interview and Measures**

The interview was a semi-structured, 38-item questionnaire that explored respondents’ attitudes, emotional reactions, and perceptions of the situation; their specific hardships and strains; and their coping efforts. In addition, respondents were asked about their perceptions of their spouses, relational issues, extent of agreement on various issues, and recent changes in the relationship. More specifically, the interview included the following aspects:

1. Questions that dealt with personal attitudes and perceptions: emotional reactions and perceptions of the situation, sense of hope and control of the situation, world-view and attitudes toward the peace process in general.
2. Questions dealing with stresses and strains in the lives of the respondents’ families: ongoing stresses and strains, hardships, and other related events.
3. Questions dealing with coping patterns: how the family deals with their everyday stresses, if any; what the respondents think should be done to cope in the future; and how they perceive their spouse's coping patterns.

4. Questions that dealt with dyadic processes: communication regarding the situation, interpersonal agreement regarding issues related to the peace process and possible coping reactions, discrepancies in sense of mastery and hope, and changes that may have taken place in the couple's relationship since the beginning of the peace process.

5. Demographic data, including age and education of respondents and their spouses, number and ages of children, and level of religiosity.

In the present article, analyses were conducted of three open-ended questions and a set of Likert-type items concerning dyadic relationships, emotional reactions, and world-view.

**Stresses and Strains** were evaluated by a series of questions, starting with "What concerns, if any, do you have regarding the situation?" Following the respondent's answer, a second question was asked in order to elicit a more detailed account of difficulties the family may be experiencing. More specifically, the respondent was asked, "What are some specific difficulties (hardships) your family experiences these days?" We refer to responses to this question as **Family Hardships**. Finally, **Coping Patterns** were assessed by response to an open-ended question, "What do you think your family should do to deal with the difficulties [mentioned earlier in the interview]?"

**Emotional Reactions** were measured by six Likert-type items 1) **Morale** ("How do you feel these days?"); 2) **Concern** ("How concerned are you by the situation?"); 3) **Children's Reaction** "To what extent do your children express anxiety?"; 4) **Family Atmosphere** ("How would you define the overall atmosphere in your family?"); 5) **Sense of Control** ("To what degree do you feel you have a control over what will happen to your family?"); and 6) **Hope** ("How will things turn out to be?"). Similar questions were also asked about the spouse's reactions, as perceived by the respondent, but these data were not analyzed in the present study. Finally, a **Family Distress Index** was constructed as a mean level of responses to seven items: respondent's morale, respondent's perception of his or her spouse's morale, level of concern, children's distress, family atmosphere, sense of hope, and respondent's perception of the spouse's sense of hope. This index seems to reflect the overall effect of the situation on the family, as perceived by the respondent. The Cronbach alpha reliability of this measure was .78.

**Dyadic Interactions** were measured by three Likert-type items: 1) **Couple Discussion** ("To what extent do you and your spouse talk about the situation?"); 2) **Consensus** ("To what extent do you and your spouse agree or disagree about . . . ?" [range of topics listed]); and 3) **Relationship Change** ("Would you say that recently, since the beginning of the peace talks, you and your spouse got closer to each other or got more distant?").

**RESULTS**

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in analyzing the data. Responses to open-ended items were first analyzed by qualitative methods, whereby categories were established and grouped into larger categories (response domains). Quantitative analyses were then conducted by comparing the two groups' (Palestinian and Israeli) response categories, as well as gender differences. In addition, analyses of variance were conducted to examine differences in the various measures of emotional responses.

**Stresses and Strains**

Respondents were asked what their concerns were in regard to the peace process. Only a small minority of the respondents (5% of the Israelis and 1% of the Palestinians) replied that they had no concerns. Verbal responses were content analyzed and categorized into four domains: Security concerns, political concerns, concerns related to children and family well-being, and uncertainty.

**Security concerns** refer primarily to fear of violent acts. Israeli respondents alluded to the fear of being attacked on the roads, that once control is given to Palestinian police forces, they will not be protected. They referred to examples of violent attacks on passenger cars and school buses and expressed the concern that things will become worse as the peace process progresses because of extremist groups' acts or the strengthening of the Arabs. Palestinian respondents alluded to the fear of actions taken by Israeli soldiers in their neighborhoods, the fear that they or their spouses would be imprisoned while en route to work in Israel, and the fear of constraints on their freedom because of roadblocks, border closings, or curfews.

**Political concerns** refer to more global perspectives of the peace process. Israeli respondents alluded to the land as "Land of the Jewish Fathers" and expressed the concern that the peace process might lead to the government's giving up this land in exchange for peace. Responses targeted the Israeli government (for example, its weakness in negotiations) and the overall situation—the peace process—as a political struggle over who has rights to the land. Palestinian respondents also raised the issue regarding land rights. They voiced the concern that the existence of Jewish settlements in the West Bank would interfere with the peace process and that their leaders, the Palestinian Authority, would give up the hope for a Palestinian State. The responses of the Palestinians, much like those of the Israelis, targeted their government, the overall...
peace process, and its prospects.

*Family well-being concerns* refer to present and potential future effects of the situation on the family. This includes living conditions, employment difficulties and economic strains, the effect of security constraints on family lifestyle, and children’s emotional distress. We deal with this domain in more detail later in the article.

*Uncertainty* refers to concerns related to the ambiguity of the situation as a whole. Respondents expressed their inability to plan for the future or to make decisions because they do not yet know what this process might mean to them or to their families.

Data of the categorized responses were submitted to two types of comparative analysis. First, we compared the responses to the question "What concerns you *most*?"; then group and gender comparisons were made of the multiple responses given by respondents. The results of the analysis by gender and by group (Israelis vs. Palestinians) is shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of Greatest Concern for Israeli and Palestinian Men and Women</th>
<th>Israelis</th>
<th>Palestineans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concerns</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Well-Being</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Between Groups $\chi^2(4) = 61.08***$; Between Genders $\chi^2(4) = 5.04$; Between Groups-Males $\chi^2(4) = 17.00**$; Between Groups-Females $\chi^2(4) = 49.47***$. **p < .01; ***p < .001

Chi-square analyses indicated no gender differences either overall (across groups) or within each group. Significant differences were found between Israelis and Palestinians, for both male and female respondents, regarding their primary source of concern. As the data in Table 1 show, Israeli respondents were most concerned about security issues, whereas Palestinian respondents (64% of the women and 50% of the men) were most concerned with their family well-being. Political concerns were expressed by Israeli men and women, as well as by Palestinian men. Uncertainty was expressed more often by Israeli than by Palestinian respondents.

The second analysis relating to concerns was conducted by means of a multiple response procedure. Here, respondents’ multiple concerns were taken into account. The data are presented in Figure 1. Although the main findings prevail, Figure 1 graphically depicts differences between the two groups. When all their concerns are considered, Israelis are more concerned about security issues, whereas Palestinians are more concerned about consequences for their family well-being. Furthermore, Israeli respondents are more concerned about the uncertainty of the situation. It is also worthy of note that, among the Palestinians, men are more concerned about security issues than women, and women are more concerned with family well-being than men, whereas the opposite trend exists among Israeli men and women.
Family Hardships

Responses to the open-ended question regarding specific family hardships were again content analyzed and a variety of
categories were established. A summary of the multiple response findings is depicted in Figure 2.

The most marked difference between Israeli and Palestinian respondents appears to be about security and uncertainty, on
the one hand, and living conditions and economic strains, on the other. In talking about their security-related difficulties,
Israeli respondents (especially women) alluded to two primary issues: 1) that they felt “imprisoned” or “stuck at home,” not being able to go freely to a theater or to visit friends and family because of travel limitations at night, and 2) that friends and members of the extended family refrained from coming to visit them.

Palestinian respondents referred to much the same experience, but from a different angle. They alluded more often to military constraints on travel, the fear of their children being hurt, and the fear of being arrested by Israeli forces while en route to work.

Economic strains were most often mentioned by Palestinian respondents (more than 36% of the responses). This refers to both current and future prospects for jobs. Since the Intifaddah and terrorist attacks began within Israel, severe constraints have been put on Palestinians’ traveling to work in Israel and their freedom to stay in Israel overnight. During the time of the Palestinian-Israeli negotiation, and shortly after the signing of the Treaty, these constraints were tightened, resulting in loss of income for many Palestinian families. A large number of the respondents also referred to future loss of job opportunities when peace is established. As Figure 2 shows, relatively few Israeli respondents reported economic hardships related to the situation. Those who did allude to economic strains referred primarily to constraints on work hours. In addition, more than 10% of the Palestinians, but none of the Israelis, complained about living conditions as a major source of family strain.

Finally, in relation to family strains and hardships, some Israeli respondents, but none of the Palestinians, said that uncertainty was their most pressing problem. What seemed to be of major concern was not knowing whether the peace process would eventually lead to their relocation. For them, the ambiguity of the situation in terms of the unknown future represented a major difficulty.

Coping Responses

Respondents were asked what they thought their family should do to deal with the situation and with the specific difficulties they had mentioned earlier in the interview. Their responses were again subjected to content analysis and response categories established. The frequencies of responses for males and females of both groups are shown in Table 2, along with analyses for differences between male and female respondents, between groups, and between groups for each gender separately.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Views Regarding What Should Be Done to Cope (by Group and Gender)</th>
<th>Israelis</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Palestinians</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses % % % % % %</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep routine life</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen personal hardiness</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be patient, keep faith</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activism</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care for family/children</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relocate</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Between Groups $\chi^2(6) = 147.88$***; Between Gender $\chi^2(6) = 5.83$; Between Groups—Males $\chi^2(6) = 43.40$***; Between Groups—Females $\chi^2(6) = 118.70$***

*** $p < .001$.

As Table 2 shows, no gender differences were found ($\chi^2 = 5.83$, $p > .10$), but significant differences were found between Palestinians and Israelis ($\chi^2 = 147.88$, $p < .001$) in their coping patterns. Group differences were found both among men ($\chi^2 = 43.4$, $p < .001$) and women ($\chi^2 = 118.7$, $p < .001$). Examination of the data in Table 2 reveal the following trends:

1. Nearly 30% of both Palestinian and Israeli respondents believed that their most appropriate coping strategy would be to continue on in their routine life. Another 5-10% of the respondents believed that they should strengthen their own personal hardiness to withstand the difficulties.

2. Palestinian respondents tended to prefer passive coping responses (be patient, keep the faith, wait to see what happens), whereas Israelis tended to take active steps (be involved in political struggle, demonstrate, fight for their rights).
3. A substantial number of Palestinians, especially women, saw caring for their children and family as the most appropriate way of responding.
4. A small minority of the Israelis indicated that they might consider moving away from the disputed area and relocating somewhere else in Israel.

Cognitive-Emotional Reactions

Next, an analysis was conducted of a set of responses to the structured interview questions depicting personal and family members' attitudes and emotional reactions. The findings, shown in Table 3, are grouped into two sections: personal and family reactions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Cognitive-Emotional Reactions of Family Members: Means, Standard Deviations (in Parentheses), and Analysis of Variance by Group and Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Israelis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Reaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morale</td>
<td>2.74 (1.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Concern</td>
<td>2.17 (1.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Control</td>
<td>2.47 (1.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>3.57 (0.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Reaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's Fear</td>
<td>2.20 (1.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Atmosphere</td>
<td>3.37 (0.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distress Index</td>
<td>3.00 (0.91)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; **p < .001

Personal reactions refer to respondents' reports of their own cognitive-emotional reactions: general morale (in response to a question, "How do you feel these days?"); level of concern (worrying), sense of control over the situation, and sense of hope regarding the future of the peace process and its effects on the family. A two-way analysis of variance (group × gender) indicated no difference between the groups and/or between male and female respondents in their general morale, level of concern, or sense of hope. However, a significant group difference was found in sense of control: Palestinian respondents, both men and women, expressed a significantly higher sense of control (mastery) than did the Israelis.

Family-related variables refer to respondents' reports of their family members' reactions. Palestinian respondents reported a higher level of children's distress than did the Israelis \((F = 3.91, \ p < .05)\). Accordingly, Israeli respondents reported a more positive family atmosphere than did the Palestinians \((F = 4.39, \ p < .05)\), with this being more pronounced in men's than in women's perceptions (significant group × gender interaction, \(F = 4.32, \ p < .05)\). Finally, analysis of variance revealed no gender differences in the Family Distress Index, but a slightly higher distress was reported by the Palestinians as compared to the Israelis \((F = 3.01, \ p < .10)\).

Dyadic Interactions

Our final analysis is in regard to dyadic interactions related to the peace process. Respondents were asked how often or how much they and their spouses talk about the situation, what they talk about, to what degree they agree on major issues,
and how living through these times has affected their relationship. The findings are shown in Table 4 and Table 5.

### Table 4
**Couple’s Communication and Consensus Related to the Peace Process: Means, Standard Deviations (in Parentheses), and Analysis of Variance by Group and Gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Israelis</th>
<th>Palestinians</th>
<th>ANOVA (F)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Couple Discussion</strong></td>
<td>3.69 (1.04)</td>
<td>3.78 (1.21)</td>
<td>3.73 (1.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consensus</strong></td>
<td>2.74 (0.50)</td>
<td>2.72 (0.54)</td>
<td>2.73 (0.52)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; *** p < .001

### Table 5
**Topics of Dyadic Communication Regarding Consequences of the Peace Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Israelis (%)</th>
<th>Palestinians (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family consequences</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic consequences</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local security issues</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global security issues</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political issues</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between Groups $\chi^2(5) = 73.03, p < .001$

As shown in Table 4, Israeli respondents reported a greater amount of couple interaction (communication) in regard to the peace process ($F = 4.04, p < .05$) than did the Palestinians, and the data in Table 5 indicate that the two populations differ in the topic of their discussions. Specifically, Palestinian couples talked more frequently than Israelis about consequences of the situation for their family life and the economic consequences. Israeli couples talked more often about political and security issues. These responses clearly reflect the sources of stress and hardships reported earlier. The data (see Table 4) also show that Israeli couples reported agreeing on most or all issues ($F = 43.69, p < .001$), significantly more than Palestinian couples. However, no differences were found between the two populations in terms of the effect that the peace process was having on their relationship.

### DISCUSSION

Despite the recognition that culture and context shape the way in which people perceive, react to, and cope with stressful situations (Boss, 1987; Reiss & Oliveri, 1991; Walker, 1985), little empirical research has been conducted to compare and contrast the coping processes of two or more cultural groups. In this study, we attempted to examine how families in two distinct cultural groups perceive and respond to the same "event."

Perhaps the most important finding of this study—although not a surprising one—is that the sociopolitical process of peace-making, which is shared by the two peoples, has a markedly different effect on the families involved. In fact, it appears that the peace process has a totally different meaning to the two peoples, thereby affecting how they react to it and which issues emerge as most pressing. These different meanings, perceptions, and reactions may be explained by two interrelated factors: cultural differences and differences in the social reality.

### Contextual Determinants of Stress

The results indicate that Israeli respondents were most concerned by security and political issues, whereas Palestinians were more concerned by family-related and economic issues. It should be noted that these same findings were repeated in various forms in the data, which strengthens our confidence in their reliability.

These findings may be explained in more than one way. First, it is important to realize that the basic living conditions of the two peoples are different and, accordingly, so is their basic-needs pyramid. Israeli residents of the West Bank live in
modern, newly built settlements, and their living conditions are basically good. Their concerns are, therefore, with their security and emotional needs, including their political views about the "greater Israel," and their worries about the destruction of Israel, bringing with it prospects of another Holocaust. Palestinians live in basically poor conditions, many of them living in refugee camps that were not changed because of the immutable political conditions (Heiberg et al., 1993).

More importantly, however, the findings may be explained by the different meanings attached by the two peoples to the peace process, giving support once again to a social constructivist view (Gergen, 1985) and to a social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). For Palestinians, on the one hand, the peace process marks a new beginning, a hope for a self-ruling state and a dream come true. For Israeli families in the West Bank, on the other hand, it signals the end of a dream, a betrayal of strong religious beliefs, and the threat of losing their homes and their lifestyle. Thus, for Israelis living in the West Bank, the emphasis in their perception of the peace process is more on the war-like state of the situation than it is on peace: The peace process is seen as a war for their own and their nation's survival. For Palestinians, the opposite is true: the peace process signifies the change from a struggle against external forces to a struggle with the internal pressures of everyday life. This change seems to bring into focus basic needs that may have previously remained in the background, such as economic concerns, quality of housing, living density, environmental conditions, children's education, and other issues related to family well-being.

Israelis and Palestinians also differed in the relative significance of political concerns and uncertainty as sources of stress. Given the fact that important political issues are embedded in the peace process and that the process also entails a prolonged period of uncertainty (Roy, 1994), why were these issues not raised more by the Palestinian respondents?

Similarly, all religions are usually wary of dealing with uncertainty. Israelis, however, are more accustomed to dealing with politics as a secular matter and are therefore more inclined to express doubt, discuss ambiguity, and bring unresolved issues out into the open. For the Palestinians, politics is still tied in with religion (Barakat, 1985); therefore, even if it exists, uncertainty involves issues that are not immediate or concrete, and not appropriately dealt with by lay persons. Instead, uncertainty and ambiguity are considered as being beyond human control, something that will be resolved by fate (Haj-Yahia, 1985). Thus, the two peoples deal differently with ambiguity issues in light of their cultural and traditional world-views.

Coping Patterns

These cultural differences are also evident in the respondents' coping patterns and the steps that they believe need to be taken. Arab researchers (for example, Barakat, 1985; Haj-Yahia, 1994; Shukri, 1988; Soliman, 1986) have addressed the Arabs' orientation of self-control, passive coping in times of distress, and patient acceptance of adversity. Indeed, in this study, Palestinian respondents have clearly shown more passive coping strategies (take care of family issues, be patient, keep faith, continue life routines) than Israeli respondents, who expressed the view that they should take active measures to control their future (strike, demonstrate, struggle for their rights, take political actions).
It is also evident that, among Palestinians, women tended to focus on family integration and well-being more often than the men who—significantly more than the women—thought they should adopt active coping strategies. These gender differences clearly fit cultural role differentiation within Palestinian families. Men are expected to take instrumental roles, to be the family's breadwinner and physical protector, whereas women are responsible for child care and for keeping the family's functioning as a cohesive unit (Haj-Yahia, 1994).

**Family and Dyadic Processes**

Finally, cultural factors seem to account for differences in family processes between the two groups. Israeli couples, significantly more than Palestinian couples, discuss issues related to the peace process and its consequences for them. Furthermore, Israeli respondents reported a much higher level of dyadic consensus over these issues. Within Palestinian culture, political issues are more often discussed among men, and family issues are more often discussed among women than they are discussed between husbands and wives. Within Israeli culture, these issues are more commonly discussed between spouses. Also, it appears that conflicting opinions tend to exist more among Palestinian couples, whereas they tend to be resolved among Israeli couples. Analysis of open-ended responses of Palestinian respondents indicated that differences of opinion often revolve around men's involvement in struggles against Israeli soldiers, employment in Israel (traveling into and back from Israel), and children's behavior vis-à-vis the Israeli forces.

The level of consensus among Israeli couples may primarily reflect world-view similarities among religious settlers. In another article (Ben-David & Lavee, 1996), we have documented differences in the degree of consensus between types of Israeli settlers, namely higher levels of consensus among those with religious-political ideology than among those who have settled in the West Bank for other reasons (for example, farmers).

**Implications**

Although much of the theory on family stress and coping has stemmed from war-related research (Boss, 1987; Figley & McCubbin, 1983; Hill, 1949; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), little attention has been given to families who jointly experience stresses of war (Ben-David & Lavee, 1992; Lavee & Ben-David, 1993). Research on the effect of peace on the family is almost nonexistent, despite the fact that it is a life situation affecting the family as a whole. A noted exception are studies on personal and couple adjustment to geographical relocation following the Israeli-Egyptian peace accord (Kliot, 1987; Sagy & Antonovsky, 1986; Steinglass & Kaplan De-Nour, 1988; Steinglass, Kaplan De-Nour, & Shye, 1985; Steinglass, Weissstaub, & Kaplan De-Nour, 1988; Wamboldt, Steinglass & Kaplan De-Nour, 1991). While these studies focused on a specific stressful event (relocation) that resulted from the peace accord, the present study has attempted to explore stresses and strains experienced by families during the peace process itself. The findings have demonstrated that although peace is generally perceived in positive terms, the process of peace-making creates a period of stress for the families involved.

This should come as no surprise. Theoreticians of individual as well as family stress and coping have long recognized that it is not the event itself, but rather the way it is perceived that makes it a stressor event. For the families in the West Bank—both Israelis and Palestinians—the peace process entails a change in their established lifestyle. This change brings into focus a plethora of fears and concerns: family security, economic hardships, children's well-being, as well as the unknown future. Hence, for the families involved, it is not peace that is being evaluated but, rather, the perceived change in their lives. An interesting question yet to be examined is how this perception and how coping strategies change over time as the process continues and as change actually evolves.

This study also lends support to the notion of cultural and contextual determinants of stress and coping. As was noted earlier, a great deal of theoretical attention has been given during the last decade to the importance of context and culture in shaping how people perceive and interpret situations, and what strategies they employ to meet environmental demands (Boss, 1987). There has been, however, little empirical support for this view. Therefore, this study presented a somewhat unique opportunity to assess the effects of cultural and contextual variables in coping with a common, socially induced "event." In this article, we have limited our analyses to comparing Israeli and Palestinian families, but there is reason to believe that contextual and cultural differences may also exist within the Israeli population in the West Bank (Lavee & Ben-David, 1994; Ben-David & Lavee, 1996), as well as within the Palestinian population in this region (Azaiza, Lavee, & Ben-David, under review). Further research on the perceptions, coping strategies, and reactions of people from various cultural groups to a common or similar stressful situation will shed more light on these issues.

**REFERENCES**


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