The Effect of Security-Related Stress on Dyadic Closeness Among Jews and Arabs in Israel: 
A Daily Diary Study

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An important aspect of Israeli life is its continuous state of conflict with the neighboring Palestinian people and Arab countries. Given that security-related stress is so intensely experienced by all Israeli residents, we examined the effects of daily fluctuations in security-related stress on dyadic closeness among Jewish and Arab couples. Time sampling approach was used to study repeated sequences of associations between stress and dyadic closeness. Data were collected from 188 Jewish and 93 Arab couples by means of daily diaries. Hierarchical multivariate linear modeling was used to analyze the data. The findings indicate that stress results in increasing distance between intimate partners, but the effect varies with the level of marital quality and socioethnic affiliation.

Keywords: Daily Diary; Dyadic Closeness; Marital Quality; Security-Related Stress

An important aspect of Israeli life is its continuous state of conflict with the neighboring Palestinian people and Arab countries. Security threats are at the core of existential reality for both Jews and Arabs in Israel. Since September 2000, more than 1,000 people have been killed and over 7,000 injured in hostile activities, including stabbings, shootings, rocket shelling, and suicide and car bombings. The intensification of the conflict has had a profound effect on the daily experiences of Israelis, disrupting the routine life of individuals and families. Within this context, the question arises about how security-related stress affects dyadic relationships.

The Israeli population of about 6.5 million is composed of two main groups: Jews, who make up 77.8%, and Arabs, who make up 18.9%. The rest are primarily non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2004). Although the Arab population in Israel is divided into several religious groups (Muslims, Christians, and others), they all share a similar historical background, speak the same language, and hold similar cultural norms and values (Smooha, 1993).

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The small size of the country must be taken into account to understand that for Israelis, the armed conflict is not something that happens “out there,” but right at home or nearby. This has ramifications at both the personal and collective levels: At the collective level, it makes the number of people who have been killed or injured more meaningful, and at the personal level, it is likely that everyone in Israel knows someone who has been killed or wounded in a terrorist act. Consequently, the emotional highs and lows of the average Israeli tend to be affected by the state of security of the country. The effect on Israeli families is further intensified by the frequent recurrence of traumatic events, which have built up a cumulative sense of threat, and by the high probability of threat realization and the sense of personal vulnerability (Milgram, 1993). Thus, a constant state of vigilance is programmed into the Israeli consciousness.

In a recent survey of a representative sample of 1,000 Israeli residents, both Jews and Arabs, we explored how daily experiences, positive and negative, affect personal well-being and marital and family relationships. We found that security concerns were a major source of stress for Israeli families and that they permeate family life and have an impact on people’s moods and on their family relationships (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2003). In the present study, we build on our previous work to study how fluctuations in daily security-related stress affect perceived dyadic closeness.

How do stressful experiences affect couple relationships? Research on couples under stress has shown that stress may have varying impacts on couple relationships. Most studies have documented a deleterious effect of stress on the relationship, but others have found that stress may have a strengthening effect. Still other studies have shown variations in dyadic closeness and distance at various stages of the coping process (Lavee, 2004). These studies attest to the complexity of dyadic responses in times of stress and suggest a need to examine the interactional patterns of couples to better understand what transpires between spouses, how they affect each other, and how the marital relationship is affected by such events.

One approach to understanding what happens between partners in times of stress is to examine the patterns of emotional transmission. Emotional transmission explains how one spouse’s stress affects the emotional and behavioral reactions of the other. Partners in close relationship tend to express and communicate their emotional states, both verbally and nonverbally, and thereby provide each other with the ability to influence the relationship (Collier, 1985; Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999). Kantor and Lehr (1975) suggested that partners’ emotional and behavioral signals provide distance-regulation information, with intimate partners usually reaching a certain “comfortable zone” of closeness. When people are distressed, however, their need for closeness (or for distance) may change, and the distance-regulation strategies of one spouse can affect those of the other (Pistole, 1994). We therefore assumed that daily security-related stresses and strains experienced by the spouses are manifested in varying degrees of dyadic closeness.

Two primary methodological approaches have dominated this area of study: standard survey methods and time sampling. Survey methods, both cross-sectional and longitudinal, are commonly employed in studies concerned with long-term effects, and time-sampling methodology is used in studies that are concerned with short-term daily fluctuations in stressful experiences and their outcomes.
The Current Study

In the present study, we employed a repeated time sampling approach (i.e., daily diary) to examine the effects of daily fluctuations in security-related stress on changes in dyadic closeness. This method enables close examination of micro-level processes within a person, couple, or family, and in so doing, it enables researchers to tap into the nature of interpersonal phenomena (Laurenceau & Bolger, 2005).

The most valuable feature of the time sampling approach is that it makes possible the analysis of variations within couples’ experiences over time by charting each couple’s day-to-day fluctuations in emotional experiences rather than assessing differences in emotional experiences between couples (Larson & Almeida, 1999). Furthermore, this method enables the analysis of change in the couples’ experiences and of the factors that predict this change.

Although security-related stress has longtime effects, the current study is concerned with daily experiences of security-related events. Data collection was carried out during a period of daily security threats, therefore, we employed a research design and measures that would capture daily fluctuations in stress experiences and their short-term outcomes.

In addition to examining how repeated sequences of dyadic distance regulation are affected by daily changes in security-related stress, we also tested the moderating effect of marital characteristics and of socioethnic affiliation. The quality of the marital relationship creates the context within which emotions are transmitted. The characteristics of marital relationships, such as communication, intimacy, and support, can shape distance regulation under stress (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Schulz, Cowan, Pape-Cowan, & Brennan, 2004). We anticipated that the overall “goodness” of the marital relationship (i.e., a higher level of marital quality) would serve to buffer the effects of security-related stress on mood and dyadic closeness. Specifically, we hypothesized that higher levels of marital quality are associated with increased closeness and that distressed relationships are associated with increased distance when spouses are under stress.

Finally, within the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict, and given that security-related stress is so intensely experienced by all Israeli residents, it seemed important to examine differences between Jewish and Arab couples. Two alternative hypotheses can be formulated. On the one hand, Arab couples may be affected more strongly by security threats because they may intensify conflicts resulting from the sociopolitical affiliation of Israeli Arab citizens. On the other hand, one can assume that Jewish couples would be more distressed than their Arab counterparts because terrorist acts are commonly targeted against Jewish communities in Israel (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2003).

METHOD

Participants

The present study is part of a larger project on emotional transmission in couples. In the first stage of the project, a representative sample of 1,000 Israeli individuals was drawn by means of random computerized telephone dialing, and respondents were interviewed by telephone (see Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2003, for details). From the original sample, a random subsample of 300 respondents (200 Jewish and 100 Arab) were contacted and invited to participate in subsequent stages of the project, which included a session for completing a self-report questionnaires, followed by a weeklong structured daily diary. Participants were included in the second stage only if both
spouses were willing to take part in the research. Participants were paid $50 in vouchers for their participation in the study. The present study is based on data from 281 couples (both husbands and wives) who provided complete data for all variables. Of these, 188 couples (66.9%) were Jewish and 93 Arab (60 Muslim and 33 Christian).

Partners had been living together for an average of 16.18 years ($SD = 10.53$). The number of children per couple ranged from 1 to 12, with an average of 2.71 ($SD = 1.60$) and an average of 2.18 children living at home ($SD = 1.42$). The age of the women ranged from 20 to 63, with an average age of 38.27 ($SD = 9.84$). The age of men ranged from 22 to 69, with an average age of 41.87 ($SD = 10.50$). Average educational level was 14.01 years ($SD = 3.16$) for women and 13.76 years ($SD = 3.46$) for men. Few differences were found between Arab and Jewish respondents. On average, Arab couples had 3.4 children, compared with 2.4 children in Jewish families ($t = 4.99$, $p < .01$). Additionally, Arab women were younger than their Jewish counterparts (35.7 vs. 39.6 years) and were somewhat less educated (12.8 vs. 14.5 years). No significant differences were found between Jewish and Arab couples in marital duration and in the men’s age and educational level. Participants of the two Arab denominations were similar in all demographic variables, with the exception of a smaller number of children in Christian Arab families ($M = 2.6$) as compared with Muslim families ($M = 3.8$).

**Procedure**

Trained Jewish and Arab interviewers conducted the interviews in Hebrew and Arabic. Interviewers visited the couples in their homes and administered questionnaires to each partner separately. The questionnaires included personality measures (e.g., neuroticism, attachment, expressiveness), measures of marital and family relationships, and background data. Only the measure of marital quality was addressed in the present study. Interviewers remained in the home while the questionnaires were being completed to ensure that the spouses answered the questions independently. Following completion of the questionnaires, the interviewers provided instructions for filling out the daily diaries. Participants were instructed to start keeping the daily diaries the following day and to continue for 7 consecutive days. They were further instructed to make their diary entries at the end of the day. Telephone calls were randomly made to participants during the week to check that the diaries were being completed as instructed and to answer any questions. Interviewers visited the participants’ homes again at the end of the week to collect the diaries.

**Instruments**

*The daily diary*

The daily diary included four parts: daily hassles and uplifts, mood, dyadic closeness, and joint couple activities. Daily hassles and uplifts were measured by an adapted version of the Daily Hassles and Uplifts Scale (DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1982). The instrument consisted of a list of 12 items (e.g.,

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1. Researchers affiliated with an Israeli University and studying an Arab population may face some sociopolitical, cultural, and language-related issues. We made an effort to minimize these concerns by including an Arab research coordinator who helped develop, translate, and pretest the questionnaires, and by having all interviews with Arab couples conducted by trained Arab interviewers. We also debriefed interviewers, both Jewish and Arab, to check whether respondents raised language or cultural issues.
children, parents, spouse, work, health) that can constitute sources of stress and uplift. Two other items—social-political events and security-related events—were also included to account for the current geopolitical situation in the Middle East. Respondents were asked to check, on a four-point Likert scale ranging from not at all to very much, the extent to which each item had been a source of stress or uplift for them. In the present study, we analyzed data from the daily reports of security-related stress to examine whether warlike events or terrorist acts constituted a source of stress for them. Because the distribution of responses was highly skewed, responses were coded 1 if events were experienced as stressful, 0 if they were not.

Daily closeness

Daily closeness was measured by four items in which respondents reported the extent to which they wished to be physically and emotionally close to their partners (e.g., “To what extent have you felt today a need for physical closeness to your spouse?”) and the extent to which there actually was physical and emotional closeness on that day (e.g., “To what extent was there an emotional closeness between the two of you?”). Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from not at all to very much. A closeness score for each day was calculated as the mean of the four-item scores. The internal consistency reliability of the scale (Cronbach’s alpha) was .90 for both men and women.

Marital quality was measured before starting the daily diary by a modified version of the short ENRICH scale (Fowers & Olson, 1993). The original instrument is a 10-item Likert-type scale that assesses the respondents’ perceived quality of their marriage based on 10 dimensions of the relationship. Fowers and Olson reported good reliability estimates of the short ENRICH scale, and high concurrent and predictive validity. In the modified version (Lavee, 1995), items and response categories were adapted to decrease the response set. Instead of the original Likert scale, in which items are ranked between fully agree and fully disagree, in the modified version, each item is given two extreme response categories, and the respondent is asked to check a number on a scale ranging between these responses (e.g., “When we have conflicts or disagreements—[1] we always come to an agreement. . . . [7] we seldom are able to bridge our differences”). Scales of this type (see, for example, Antonovsky, 1987) are less affected by social desirability than is the typical Likert scale. Indeed, the modified version was found to correlate only modestly ($r = .16$) with a social desirability scale (Lavee, 1995). The instrument has been extensively used in Israel and was found to be a valid and reliable measure of marital quality among both Jewish and Arab couples (see, for example, Lavee & Katz, 2002). In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha reliability was .82 for husbands and .83 for wives. A paired $t$ test analysis revealed no significant difference between husbands’ and wives’ evaluations of their marital quality ($t = .933$, $p = .32$) and demonstrated high interspouse correlation ($r = .65$, $p < .001$). Therefore, we computed a combined marital quality score for each couple by averaging the husband’s and wife’s scores.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Number of Days with Security-Related Stress

Participants varied in the extent of security-related stress they experienced over the 7 days of the study. As Table 1 shows, 81% of the men and 83% of the women experienced security-related stress on at least one day. About a quarter of men and women
experienced security-related stress during the course of 1 or 2 days, and about 18% reported security-related stress on 3 or 4 days. Twenty-eight percent of the men and 31% of the women experienced stress during most of the week (5–6 days). A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with repeated measures showed that the day of reporting (first, second, and so on, of the diary) did not account for security-related stress for either men or women.

**Gender and Group Differences in Study Variables**

Before testing the associations between daily reports of security-related stress and dyadic closeness, we examined whether differences existed between the two Arab subgroups, Muslims and Christians, in the study variables. Independent t test analyses indicated no significant differences between Muslim and Christian Arab respondents in daily reports of security-related stress and dyadic closeness, or in marital quality. We therefore combined the data of these two subgroups in subsequent analyses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Days</th>
<th>Husbands</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Wives</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1**

*Number of Days Reported by Husbands and Wives as Stressful*

**Table 2**

*Average Scores and Paired-Sample Correlations for Husbands’ and Wives’ Security-Related Stress, Dyadic Closeness, and Marital Quality*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Jews (n = 188)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Arabs (n = 93)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Interspouse Correlation r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Security stressa</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closenessa</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital quality</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aBased on data from 7 diary days. **p < .01.
The mean scores of study variables for husbands and wives in Jewish and Arab couples are presented in Table 2. A mixed-design MANOVA (for group differences and repeated-measure analysis of husband-wife data) was conducted to examine group and gender differences in dyadic closeness, security-related stress, and perceived marital quality. On average, Jews reported significantly more stress than did Arabs across the 7 days of the study, $F(1, 1684) = 2.64, p < .05$, but no gender differences were found, $F(1, 1684) = 2.21$. With respect to dyadic closeness, men reported more closeness across the 7 days than did the women, $F(1, 1684) = 7.11, p < .01$, but no differences were found between Jews and Arabs, $F(1, 1684) = 2.41$. A group × gender interaction was found, $F(1, 1684) = 7.11, p < .01$, with a significant gender difference among Jews but not among Arabs. Neither gender nor group differences were found in perceived marital quality.

Analysis of within-couple paired correlations between spouses (Table 2) shows a relatively high correlation between the spouses’ perceptions of marital quality ($r = .64, p < .01$) and their reports of dyadic closeness over the 7 days of study ($r = .61, p < .01$). A modest but statistically significant correlation ($r = .30$) was found between the spouses’ reports of security-related stress over the diary days.

**Effect of Daily Stress on Dyadic Closeness: A Base Model**

Hierarchical multivariate linear modeling (HMLM) analyses (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2004) were conducted to assess the repeated sequences, over the 7 days of the study, of the extent to which dyadic closeness as reported by each spouse was associated with the respondent’s own and the other spouse’s experience of security-related stress. In a base model, we estimated these effects at level 1 only, that is, regardless of group affiliation and marital quality. The level 1 effect of security stress on the husbands’ and wives’ sense of closeness is estimated as follows:

$$ SCLOSE_{it} = \pi_0 + \pi_{1i}(Sstress_{it}) + \pi_{2i}(Ostress_{it}) + \pi_{3i}(Oclose_{it}) + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1) $$

where the prefixes S and O designate the self and the other spouse, $SCLOSE_{it}$ represents levels of dyadic closeness reported by a respondent of couple $i$ ($i = 1, \ldots 281$) on day $t$ ($t = 1, \ldots 7$); $Sstress_{it}$ and $Ostress_{it}$ indicate whether security-related stress was experienced by the self and the spouse in couple $i$ (coded 1 if yes, 0 if not) on day $t$; and $Oclose_{it}$ is the other spouse’s sense of closeness on that day. Thus, in addition to estimating the effect of daily stress on both spouses’ sense of closeness, we estimated and controlled for the extent to which each spouse’s sense of dyadic closeness was associated with that of the other spouse.

The findings of the base model, presented in Table 3, show that women’s reported closeness was related neither to their own nor to their husbands’ daily stress. It was, however, related to their husbands’ reported closeness. Men’s reported closeness was not related to their own stress, but it was negatively related to their wives’ stress and positively related to their wives’ reported closeness.

Given the high correlation between spouses in their reports of dyadic closeness and perceived security-related stress, the rest of the analyses were based on the couples’ data. Security-related stress was coded 1 if either one or both spouses reported experiencing such stress, 0 otherwise. Dyadic closeness was calculated as the mean of the husband’s and the wife’s scores for each day.
The Moderating Effect of Group Affiliation and Marital Quality

To assess the moderating effect of marital quality and group affiliation on change in closeness, a two-level analysis was conducted. Beginning on the second day of data collection and for the rest of the week, the level 1 effect of security-related stress on the dyadic closeness is estimated as follows:

\[
\text{CLOSE}_{it} = p_0 + p_1 \frac{\text{close}_{it}}{C_0} + p_2 \text{stress}_{it} + e_{it}
\]

where \(\text{CLOSE}_{it}\) is the mean level of dyadic closeness reported by the husband and wife of couple \(i\) \((i = 1, \ldots, 281)\) on day \(t\) \((t = 2, \ldots, 7)\); \(\text{close}_{it-1}\) is the level of closeness on the previous day; and \(\text{stress}_{it}\) indicates whether either spouse of couple \(i\) experienced security-related stress (coded 1 if yes, 0 if not) on day \(t\).

The level 2 model (between couples) was estimated as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\pi_0 &= \beta_{00} + \beta_{01} \text{GROUP}_i + \beta_{02} \text{MQ}_i + r_{0i} \\
\pi_1 &= \beta_{10} + \beta_{11} \text{GROUP}_i + \beta_{12} \text{MQ}_i \\
\pi_2 &= \beta_{20}
\end{align*}
\]

where the intercept \(\beta_{00}\) is the mean level of closeness; \(\text{GROUP}_i\) is the group affiliation of couple \(i\) (coded 0 for Jews, 1 for Arabs); and \(\text{MQ}_i\) is the global measure of marital quality of couple \(i\). MQ was grand centered so that coefficients were based on deviations from the sample mean. Substituting the level 2 model into the level 1 model provides the combined model for the couple’s level of dyadic closeness on each day:

\[
\text{Close}_{it} = \beta_{00} + \beta_{01} \text{GROUP}_i + \beta_{02} \text{MQ}_i + \beta_{10} \text{stress}_{it} + \beta_{11} \text{GROUP}_i \times \text{stress}_{it} + \beta_{12} \text{MQ}_i \times \text{stress}_{it} + \beta_{20} \frac{\text{close}_{it}}{C_0} + e_{it}
\]

In this model, the couple’s closeness on each day is a function of the intercept (\(\beta_{00}\), the mean level of the dependent variable); the level of closeness on the previous day; the couple’s group affiliation and marital quality; security-related stress; and the interaction terms of security-related stress and the couple’s group affiliation and marital quality. Assessed repeatedly for 6 consecutive days, the analysis enables us to estimate the repeated sequences of the effect of security-related stress on dyadic closeness and the direct and moderating effects of group affiliation and marital quality.

The findings, shown in Table 4, indicate that controlling for dyadic closeness on the preceding day, a change in closeness was affected significantly by the occurrence of a security-related event \((t = -2.01, p < .05)\), and by group affiliation and level of marital

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**Table 3**

Hierarchical Multivariate Linear Model Analysis of Daily Interpersonal Closeness as a Function of Security-Related Stress of Self and Spouse: Base Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Husband’s Closeness</th>
<th>Wife’s Closeness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse’s perceived closeness</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband’s stress</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife’s stress</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.
quality. Specifically, on days with security-related events, couples reported greater physical and emotional distance than on stress-free days. On average, Jewish couples reported higher levels of closeness than did Arab couples \((t = -2.46, p < .05)\). In addition, dyadic closeness was significantly associated with the level of marital quality \((t = 6.69, p < .01)\).

The effect of stress on changes in closeness was moderated by group affiliation and by marital quality. As shown in Figure 1, Arab couples reported increased closeness, whereas Jewish couples reported increased distance when they experienced security-related stress. Contrary to our expectation, couples with higher marital quality reported increased distance under stress, whereas lower marital quality was associated with increased closeness on days that were experienced as stressful.

![Figure 1](image-url)

**Figure 1** Daily Dyadic Closeness as a Function of Security-Related Stress, Socioethnic Affiliation, and Marital Quality

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DISCUSSION

In the context of the prolonged Israeli-Arab armed conflict and continual security-related threats, the present study examined the extent to which security-related events are experienced as stressful by Jewish and Arab residents of Israel; the ways in which couple relationship, in particular dyadic closeness, is affected by such occurrences; the extent to which global evaluations of marital relationship shape the effect of daily stress on marital relationship; and whether these effects are similar for Jewish and Arab couples.

Several methodological notes are in order before we discuss and reflect on the findings. To date, most studies on the effect of stress on marital relationships have examined long-term chronic stress and global measures of relationship quality (e.g., marital satisfaction, adjustment, or quality). By contrast, the current study focused on short-term fluctuations in stress and dyadic relationship over 7 days. Although a deficiency of the daily diary methodology is that it relies on self-report data, daily diary data are believed to provide more reliable and valid information about daily stresses and subsequent marital interactions than traditional survey methods because the time interval between the experience of an event and its reporting is shorter (Lau-renceau & Bolger, 2005; Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000).

The data in the current study are based on a global measure of security-related stress rather than on specific events. This can be a limitation because we do not know whether respondents reported on a stressful day owing to objective stressors such as a terrorist act or a specific threat, or because of subjective evaluations of the stressfulness of the situation. We were not concerned, however, with what makes an experience stressful, but with the extent to which daily events were experienced as stressful. A review of the body of knowledge in a related area, the connection between job stress and family (Eckenrode & Gore, 1990), has shown that the event (i.e., the specific stressor) is not as important as how the actors perceive the stressful event.

The outcome measure in the current study (daily changes in dyadic closeness) has not been previously studied in the context of stress transfer. In some respects, this measure provides a bridge between the chronic stress studies (cross-sectional and longitudinal), which focus on marital cohesion, satisfaction, or adjustment, and the time sampling, daily diary approach used to study repeated sequences of dyadic interactions. The present focus on dyadic closeness was guided by theoretical formulations and empirical studies on distance regulation in general (Kantor & Lehr, 1975) and during times of stress in particular (Barbee, Rowatt, & Cunningham, 1998; Pistole, 1994).

The findings of the current study attest to the complexity of dyadic response to daily experiences of stress: In general, stress results in increasing distance between intimate partners, but this effect varies with the level of marital quality and socioethnic affiliation. The complex nature of this phenomenon is reflected in both its pattern and explanations. The findings show that not all couples exhibit the same pattern of interpersonal dynamics in times of stress: Some may move closer and others further apart in response to stressful experiences. Our study shows that such patterns are shaped by couple characteristics (i.e., the quality of the relationship) and by the social context (i.e., sociopolitical affiliation).

The findings indicate that overall, Jews reported more days of security-related stress than did their Arab counterparts. This finding resembles a trend found in our previous work (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2003), indicating that Jews tended to report more
daily hassles than did Arabs and were in particular more concerned than Arabs about security and sociopolitical issues.

The current study has shown some gender differences with respect to the spouses’ reactions to their partner’s stress. Specifically, the findings suggest that men react with increased distance to their wives’ security-related stress, but such a reaction is not found among women. Several explanations may account for this pattern. First, it may be that men tend to express security-related distress less than do women, either because they find it improper to express anxiety resulting from security threats or because they attempt to protect their wives from their sense of threat. Women, in contrast, tend more to express emotions than men do (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; King & Emmons, 1990), which results in their husbands’ withdrawal. Second, the lack of change in the women’s sense of closeness in reaction to both their own and their husbands’ security-related stress may reflect the wives’ efforts not to let daily sources of stress affect the stability of the relationship. This pattern of effects may suggest a possible sequencing in which the wives’ experience of stress affects the men’s perceptions of closeness, which in turn affects the wives’ sense of closeness.

As expected, dyadic closeness was found to be associated with the global evaluation of the marital relationship. Couples with higher marital quality reported more closeness across the 7 days of study than those with lower marital quality. Contrary to our expectation, however, couples with high marital quality became more distant on stressful days, a finding that counters the hypothesis that high marital quality buffers the deleterious effect of stress on the relationship. It may be that couples with high-quality relationships manage stressful experiences by maintaining a “safe zone” in which each spouse’s space and boundaries are protected. This explanation is consistent with Repetti’s (1994) concept of “relationship-oriented coping,” in which couples attempt to block the transmission of negative emotions by maintaining greater interpersonal distance.

Overall, Jewish couples reported more closeness than their Arab counterparts over the 7 days of study. On stressful days, however, Arab couples tended to become closer, whereas Jewish couples moved further apart. This pattern can be explained by both contextual and cultural factors. Contextually, security-related stress, such as a terrorist act or an alert, commonly results in a tendency to remain at home or within close proximity to family members. Furthermore, security-related events tend to intensify the political tension between Jews and Arabs in Israel. Consequently, Arabs—especially men—tend to stay away from public areas, recognizing that they are safer at home. In addition, there may be cultural and linguistic differences between Jews and Arabs in the meanings associated with the construct of closeness. This notion is supported by our qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with a subsample of respondents. This analysis has shown that although both Jews and Arabs referred to dyadic closeness as emotional and physical proximity, Jewish respondents emphasized the emotional components more than Arabs did, and Arab respondents emphasized the physical proximity more than did their Jewish counterparts. That security-related occurrences lead couples to greater physical proximity

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2 Part of the research project included a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with a subsample of 22 couples, both Jewish and Arab. The interviews focused on the couples’ daily experiences, related emotions, patterns of dyadic closeness and distance, and the constructed meanings of these experiences.

Fam. Proc., Vol. 46, September, 2007
may account for the finding that Arab couples reported more closeness on stressful days.

Several practical implications can be suggested based on the findings of this study. In contrast to common wisdom that stress leads spouses to stick together, practitioners need to be aware of the variability in the patterns of couples’ reactions to stress in general, and to stress stemming from security threats in particular. Such a variability in couple dynamics in times of stress suggests that there is no response that is better or more adaptive. The finding that couples who are characterized by higher quality relationships exhibit increased distance under stress suggests that such a response may be just as adaptive to the relationship as is getting closer. Clinicians may want to invite clients to express their needs for closeness or for greater space when they are distressed and to encourage spouses to share such needs.

The findings regarding gender and ethnic differences in the appraisal of stress and reaction to it call for culturally sensitive therapy with respect to what can be perceived as resources and empowering mechanisms. However, while attending to such differences, clinicians should also be aware that variability exists within gender ethnic groups. In other words, clinicians should be cautious not to assume that their clients exhibit a “typical” gender or cultural pattern of response, but rather to adopt an attitude of openness to different forms, experiences, or expressions of interpersonal response in times of stress.

In sum, the current study contributes to the body of knowledge about the effect of stressful experiences on marital relations in Israel, with implications for other countries as well, given that security-related stress is not an exclusively Israeli experience. The findings of the current study also expand our understanding of couple dynamics under stress in general. Although most studies have documented a deleterious effect of stress on the relationship, others have found that stress can have a strengthening effect. Our study testifies to the complexity of dyadic responses in times of stress and calls for further research exploring the ways in which culture, ethnicity, and language shape the experience of stress, construct its meaning, and affect couple relations.

REFERENCES


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