

Sesame Street in the time of Conflict: Using Children's Media as a tool to Promote Positive Social and Moral Reasoning about Intergroup Relations

The Middle-East has long been plagued by political conflict and violence, often involving civilian populations. Given the impoverished living environments and constant threat of danger, a wealth of research on children in the Middle-East, particularly Palestinian, has focused on the stressful outcomes of living in these conditions along with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptomatology and prevalence rates (Elbedour, Bastien, & Center, 1997; Khamis, 2005) without examining children's evaluations of peer intergroup interactions. Further, the bulk of research with Israeli-Jewish children has focused on their development of negative stereotypes about Arabs (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005) and few studies have attempted to examine the negative stereotypes Arab children hold (for exceptions Cole et al., 2003; Teichman & Zafir, 2003). While the situation is wrought with intergroup conflict and violence, few studies have assessed how children from different cultural groups in this region evaluate intergroup exclusion, and when children give priority to cultural stereotypes or moral concepts when making these judgments. Thus, the aim of this project was to investigate Israeli-Jewish, Israeli-Palestinian, Jordanian, and Palestinian young children's moral judgments and evaluations about peer intergroup exclusions and their stereotypes about the other.

The primary goal of the conducted studies was to investigate social understanding in young children living in a region of the world in which violence in the community was perceived as a danger and the threat of violence was a constant reality. Our investigation focused on children's stereotypes about others (a Jew/ an Arab), cultural knowledge, and children's evaluations of peer situations involving ambiguous intergroup situations or unambiguous intergroup exclusion, in which exclusion occurred for reasons relating to culture, language, and country. In addition, we assessed the influence of a children's media program designed to promote positive intergroup relations on these evaluations. Our findings revealed both positive and negative aspects about young children's intergroup evaluations, and stereotypes but, overall, the findings indicate that Sesame Workshop produced shows are developmentally powerful in that the themes and content are appropriately related to children's social worlds of peer relationships, friendship, autonomy, conflict resolution, and moral judgments.