The Association Between Right-Wing Political Ideology and Youth Distress

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Abstract The study examines the association between ideological worldviews among youth and the sense of distress resulting from political events. It examines two hypotheses: the first is that events that contradict ideological worldviews are associated with greater distress levels and the second is that the higher the level of ideological commitment, the higher the distress level will be, regardless of the type of stressor. Therefore this study examines distress levels among right-wing adolescents exposed to two different political stressors: (a) Palestinian terror—which matches their right-wing ideology that regards the Palestinians as an enemy, and (b) the evacuation of settlements—which contradicts their right-wing ideology. As expected, higher distress levels were found during evacuation of settlements, compared to the response to Palestinian terror. It was also found that ideological commitment was positively associated with levels of distress with regard to both stressors.

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In recent years Israeli adolescents have dealt with two significant political stressors.
The first is the wave of terror that has raged through Israel since September 2000,
and the second is the evacuation of settlements in Gush Katif and Northern Samaria
during August–September 2005.

Political events such as terror and war (Ronen et al. 2003; Garbarino et al. 1991;
Garbarino and Kostelny 1996), the assassination of political leaders (Klingman
2001; Raviv et al. 1998), internal displacement and resettlement (Erol et al. 2005;
Shacham and Lahad 2004), and a range of other violent politically related events
(Slone et al. 2000; Slone et al. 1998) were all found to have a negative effect on the
well being of adolescents. The negative reactions that were found included
symptoms of anxiety and depression, feelings of pain and anger, vulnerability,
helplessness, somatic complaints and behavioral problems.

The association between political events and the feelings of distress experienced
by adolescents depends on numerous factors, one of them may be the political
ideological worldviews of the youth. However, only a small body of research has
examined the effect of political ideology on children's coping abilities and mental
health resulting from political stressors. Yet, there is some evidence to suggest that
political ideological commitment is positively associated with well-being among
children and youth in wartime. For example, Garbarino et al. (1991) maintain that
there is evidence that ideologically committed children (e.g., militant Black
Muslims in Chicago, militant Hamas supporters on the West Bank, and extreme
Zionists in Israel) suffer less than non-ideologically committed youth from the
stresses arising from armed conflict. Similar associations were found in other studies
(Kostelny and Garbarino 1994; Punamaki et al. 2001; Punamaki 1996). According
to these studies, ideologically committed youth are more resilient than their
counterparts, since their ideology serves as a coping mechanism that enables them
to have a better understanding of the political stressor. According to this notion,
political ideology gives meaning to a meaningless event, thereby making it more
comprehensive and less threatening (Bettelheim 1961; Overcash et al. 1996).

However, not all researchers agree that political ideology may function as a
positive buffer. Stein (2001), for example, examined the psychological coping
abilities of children living in areas bordering on the Palestinian Authority during the
Oslo Agreement period and the possibility of evacuation of settlements. She found
that youth with a stronger ideological commitment suffered more distress due to the
peace process and the possible evacuation of settlements than youth with a weaker
ideological commitment. Similar results were found in a study by Sagy (1998),
which also indicated that children with strong ideological commitment living near
the border suffered from higher levels of anxiety due to the peace process and
international agreements that might require the evacuation of settlements.

These studies, however, did not examine the influence of political ideological
commitment in general, but rather the influence of the commitment to right-wing,
hawkish and patriotic worldviews. This being the case, they were only able to teach

us about the association between right-wing political ideology and the adolescents' feelings of distress. They indicate that a right-wing political ideology is negatively associated with adolescent distress levels in light of war threats, but is connected to much higher levels of distress related to peace agreements. The findings testify to the fact that the sense of distress among adolescents is probably somewhat dependent on the extent of the correlation between the stressor and political ideological worldviews. Stressors that contradict political ideological worldviews are experienced with greater intensity.

On the whole, political ideology is a complex variable that includes several dimensions. Greenberg and Jonas (2003), following Eysenck (1954), proposed differentiating between content- laden dimensions (left versus right) and content-free ideology dimensions (e.g., the strength of the commitment). This differentiation has not been previously examined among adolescents. Therefore it is not possible to know if the previously found associations between ideological commitment and distress levels among adolescents indicate that the content dimension of the ideological worldviews is important or is it the intensity of the ideological commitment which affects the distress level.

The importance of differentiating between the content and the intensity of a belief is particularly significant when examining patriotic right-wing positions. According to an extensive meta-analysis done by Jost et al. (2003a, b), the authors claim that right-wing ideology is positively related to dogmatism, close mindedness, intolerance of ambiguity, uncertainty avoidance; and negatively related to openness to experience and integrative complexity. According to them, right-wing ideological commitment is associated with an inability to adapt to changes. This being the case, this might be a factor that impedes the individual's ability to cope with changes in the political reality. Therefore a higher commitment to a right-wing position contains an added problematic dimension of greater distress when compared to a lower commitment to the same position. It might be that while maintaining a low level of right-wing ideology may moderate the effects of wartime events, a high level of right-wing ideological commitment would not be effective and will be associated with a far higher level of distress. This possibility calls into question the previous findings that regarded the maintenance of right-wing ideological beliefs as a moderating factor during wartime.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the association between a right-wing worldview and distress levels among adolescents in light of stress-inducing political events by differentiating between content and content-free dimensions. The association between the content of the right-wing position and distress levels will be examined by comparing the coping levels of right-wing adolescents facing two contradictory political stressors—Palestinian terror and the evacuation of settlements. If the content dimension of political position is significant, we expect to find higher levels of distress among adolescents with right-wing attitudes after the evacuation of settlements, which is an event that contradicts their right-wing ideological themes, than after exposure to Palestinian terrorist attacks, which matches their ideological themes.

The present study also examined the association between the sense of distress and the ideological content-free dimension, which is the strength of the commitment to the right-wing ideology. Our hypothesis is that high levels of ideological

commitment to extreme right-wing ideologies will be positively associated with distress with regard to both stressors, since right-wing rigidity is maladaptive in itself (Tetlock 1984; Tetlock et al. 1985).

Subjects and Procedure

The present study includes two samples examined during two different periods. The first study was conducted in May–June 2001, at the height of the wave of terrorist attacks that were part of the Palestinian uprising known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada.

The sample included 528 adolescents in grades 7–10, from settlements in Judea and Samaria. After receiving the necessary authorizations and permits from the Ministry of Education and the pupils' parents, the questionnaires were administered to the pupils in their classrooms. Four religious schools were included in this sample: two boys' schools, one in a settlement in Judea, and another in a settlement in Samaria. Two girls' schools were included, one in a settlement in Judea and the other in Samaria.

The second sample was conducted in August–September 2005, during the evacuation of settlements in Gush Katif and Northern Samaria (which was called "the Disengagement plan").

The sample, which included 292 adolescents in grades 9–12, is a targeted sample whereby research assistants visited entertainment, leisure and other places and events (youth movement meetings, rallies) where adolescents residing in Judea and Samaria gather. There, research assistants asked adolescents in the relevant age groups to participate in the study. As the participants are adolescents, they were given an information page, for them and for their parents, requesting their participation and emphasizing that the questionnaires are for research purposes only. Some 20 adolescents refused to participate in the study, suspecting that the purpose of the study was to serve the requirements of Israel's security services (ISS).

Subjects in both samples identified themselves as having a right-wing political stand. Political stand was measured by a single item. "In your opinion, are your political views considered as: right, center or left?"

Only youth that identified themselves as adhering to right-wing ideologies were included.

Differences in the demographic variables between the two samples can be seen in Table 1. The table indicates that apart from age differences, the two samples are comparable in other demographic variables. They reside in the same geographic area, most of them are religious and 80% of the mothers and 90% of the fathers work.

Measures

Personal Data

Data was gathered on gender, grade, religiosity, political position, parents' occupation and political identification.

Table 1 Demographic differences between the sample groups

	Intifada ($N = 528$)	Disengagement ($N = 292$)
Gender		
Boys	38.5% (193)	36.6% (105)
Girls	61.5% (308)	63.4% (182)
Grade		
Grade 7	28.6% (143)	–
Grade 8	29.0% (145)	–
Grade 9	36.4% (182)	14.2% (41)
Grade 10	6.0% (30)	31.3% (90)
Grade 11	–	28.5% (82)
Grade 12	–	26.0% (75)
Religiosity		
Secular	.6% (3)	4.9% (14)
Tradition	6.3% (33)	7.1% (20)
Religious	92.3% (480)	83.7% (237)
Ultra-Religious	.8% (4)	4.2% (12)
Mother's work		
Work	85.7% (414)	81.1% (232)
Do not work	14.3% (114)	18.9% (54)
Father's work		
Work	94.3% (444)	90.5% (256)
Do not work	5.7% (84)	9.5% (27)

Ideological Commitment

The two samples were asked regarding their ideological commitment. This questionnaire was specifically constructed for this study to measure level of ideological commitment. Respondents were asked to rate how many of 20 statements reflected their positions, on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = "not at all" to 5 = "very much" (e.g., "I'm willing to participate in demonstrations", "I'm willing to try to persuade other people to believe in my political views", "It bothers me that some people hold political views opposite to mine") $\alpha = .87$ for the terror sample and .86 for the disengagement sample. The score was the mean of the subject's responses.

Psychiatric Symptomatology

Psychiatric symptomatology was examined using the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) by Derogatis and Spencer (1982). This is a self-report questionnaire that measures general symptoms of psychological distress. It is a short version of the SCL-90 (a psychological self-report symptom scale) consisting of 53 items, each of which is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely).

The responses to the BSI can be analyzed both globally and with symptom specificity. The General Severity Index (GSI) was the global distress index used to calculate the mean score of all 53 items. Ten symptom subscales were also

examined: psychoticism, hostility, anxiety, somatization, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, depression, obsession–compulsion, interpersonal sensitivity and additional symptoms.

Internal consistencies as measured by Cronbach's alphas were .96 and .94 (terror sample versus disengagement sample) for the GSI and as follows for each of the subscales: psychotism—.77 and .66; hostility—.80 and .68; anxiety—.81 and .75; somatization—.85 and .80; phobia—.75 and .62; paranoia—.74 and .60; depression—.79 and .74; obsession–compulsion—.82 and .71; interpersonal relationships—.81 and .74; and additional symptoms—.65 and .55.

Results

Ideological Commitment

A three-way ANOVA including sample group, gender and grade on the mean level of ideological commitment was conducted. Means and standard deviations of ideological commitment according to sample groups, gender and grades are presented in Table 2. Results indicated a significant difference between groups ($F(1,797) = 31.02$, $p < .001$), between grades ($F(5,797) = 4.45$, $p < .001$) but not between gender ($F(1,797) = .02$). The interaction between sample group and grade was found to be significant ($F(1,797) = 6.23$, $p < .05$) as well as between grade and gender ($F(5,797) = 5.73$, $p < .001$), but not between sample group and gender ($F(1,797) = 3.62$). Ideological commitment was higher among youth during the disengagement compared to during the terror among youth in grades 12–10 compared to youth in grade 9, who had higher ideology levels compared to youth in grades 7 and 8. Ideology tended to sustain its level among boys while increased as girls grew older.

Psychological Distress

A series of *t*-tests to examine differences in the level of distress among the two sample groups was conducted (see Table 3). Results indicated that those in the

Table 2 Means and standard deviations of ideological commitment according to sample group, grade and gender

Mean (SD)	Intifada		Disengagement	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Grade 7	3.25 (.71)	2.55 (.84)		
Grade 8	2.94 (.69)	2.94 (.77)		
Grade 9	3.27 (.66)	3.03 (.60)	3.90 (.57)	4.12 (.37)
Grade 10	3.28 (.72)		3.29 (.64)	3.94 (61)
Grade 11			3.49 (.70)	3.91 (.60)
Grade 12			3.82 (.57)	3.71 (.60)

Table 3 *T*-test, means and standard deviations of groups symptomatology

Mean (S.D.)	Intifada	Disengagement	*T*
GSI	.67 (.67)	.90 (.56)	−4.76 (788)
			$p < .001$
Psycho	.58 (.80)	.89 (.74)	−5.17 (784)
			$p < .001$
Hostil	.75 (.82)	1.00 (.75)	−4.15 (781)
			$p < .001$
Anx	.82 (.83)	.99 (.74)	−2.93 (786)
			$p < .01$
Soma	.41 (.67)	.63 (.69)	−4.30 (786)
			$p < .001$
Phobia	.73 (.82)	.52 (.57)	3.78 (780)
			$p < .001$
Para	.81 (.86)	1.16 (.75)	−5.69 (783)
			$p < .001$
Dep	.66 (.81)	1.03 (.74)	−6.22 (782)
			$p < .001$
OCD	.61 (.78)	1.07 (.76)	−7.98 (782)
			$p < .001$
Interp	.65 (.91)	.86 (.73)	−3.24 (771)
			$p < .01$
Add	.69 (.79)	.81 (.76)	−1.84 (803)
			n.s.

disengagement sample had higher distress levels in all the measures, except for phobia, compared to those in the terror sample. The terror sample had a higher level of phobia compared to the disengagement sample.

A three-way ANOVA including sample group, gender and grade was conducted on the mean level of symptoms (GSI). Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 4. Results indicated a significant difference between groups $(F(1,779) = 4.23, p < .05)$ between grades $(F(5,779) = 2.25, p < .05)$ and between gender $(F(1,779) = 32.90, p < .001)$. There were no significant interactions. Distress levels were higher among the disengagement group compared to the terror group, among youth in grades 12 and 11 compared to younger youth, and among girls compared to boys.

Ideology and Distress

In order to assess the correlation between ideology and distress, a series of zero-order correlations were examined separately for each of the sample groups (Table 5).

In the terror sample ideological commitment was positively associated with hostility, anxiety and additional symptoms. In the disengagement sample, ideological commitment was positively associated with the mean level of symptoms (GSI), paranoid ideation, and obsession–compulsion.

Table 4 Means and standard deviations of GSI according to sample group, grade and gender

Mean (SD)	Intifada		Disengagement	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Grade 7	.42 (.55)	.75 (.70)		
Grade 8	.76 (.67)	.76 (.68)		
Grade 9	.47 (.55)	.70 (.71)	.69 (.39)	1.10 (.73)
Grade 10	.58 (.69)		.54 (.34)	.92 (.54)
Grade 11			.75 (.39)	1.25 (.65)
Grade 12			.64 (.48)	.91 (.46)

A linear regression analysis with group sample, gender, grade and ideological commitment on the mean level of symptoms (GSI) was conducted (Table 6) in order to assess the association between ideological commitment and distress over and above other variables. Results indicated that ideology was positively associated with distress, as well as gender and sample group.

Discussion

The main purpose of the present study was to examine the associations between ideological commitment and level of distress among youth confronted with political stressors. Therefore, the study examined right-wing youth following exposure to two opposing political stressors: Palestinian terror and the evacuation of settlements (the disengagement plan). As mentioned before, Palestinian terror matches their right-wing ideology that views Palestinians as the enemy. The evacuation of settlements, on the other hand, contradicts their ideological belief, which espouses settlement in all of Greater Israel.

Table 5 Zero-order correlations between ideological commitment and distress according to sample group

	Ideological commitment	
	Intifada	Disengagement
GSI	.06	.13*
Psycho	.05	.10
Hostil	.11**	.09
Anx	.09*	.10
Soma	−.00	.09
Phobia	.01	.09
Para	.06	.20***
Dep	.04	.09
OCD	.03	.16**
Interp	−.01	−.00
Add	.12**	.05

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 6 Regression analyses of GSI with sample group, gender, grade and ideological commitment

	B	SEB	β
Sample group (disengagement)	.17	.07	.13*
Grade	−.00	.02	−.02
Gender (boys)	−.27	.04	−.20**
Ideological commitment	.09	.03	.11***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$; *** $p < .01$

$R^2 = .07$; $F(4,774) = 16.33$, $p < .001$

Confirming our hypothesis, the results of the current study indicated that adolescents examined during the disengagement plan expressed higher psychological symptoms of distress compared to similar adolescents exposed to terror during the Intifada. This difference was found in all measures except for phobia—which measured the fear of using public transportation such as buses and trains and of being in crowded public places, fears that are naturally higher during waves of terror attacks.

These findings therefore support the research hypothesis that higher distress levels among adolescents during the disengagement period resulted from the fact that disengagement contradicted their ideological worldview, which regards Jewish settlement as a religious obligation and a political necessity. In other words, although terror constitutes a concrete threat to the lives and physical well being of adolescents and their families, it is in fact the ideological threat that is associated with higher distress. The evacuation—which above all threatens the legitimacy of their worldview—forces them to face a shattered ideological platform and exposes them to far higher emotional distress. In this way the role of ideology as imbuing difficult situations with meaning and making coping with stressors easier (Overcash et al. 1996; Bettelheim 1961) becomes non-existent. Moreover, not only does the political event become incomprehensible in the context of the ideological worldview, the political stressor in fact challenges the very foundations and meaning of the worldview held by the adolescents (Laufer and Shechory forthcoming). The gap between political reality and ideological belief of itself therefore constitutes an additional stressor with which the adolescents are required to cope.

Support for this hypothesis also appears in a study conducted on settlers in Judea and Samaria (Shamai 2002). The study found that distress levels were more expressed and intense during the period of the Oslo Agreement and when the left wing Israeli government was in power than during the terror attacks that occurred when the right-wing government was in power prior to that time. The researcher attributes this to the fact that peace agreements were perceived by adults with right-wing stances as far more stressful as exposure to terror. Moreover, the lack of social support by the Israeli public that the settlers experienced during the Oslo Agreement period also constituted an additional threat to their ideological worldview as well as an additional stress factor.

The notion that stressors that contradict ideological assumptions have a more negative effect is also supported by Pines (1994). In her study Pines found that feelings of burnout resulting from the first Intifada (the Palestinian uprising during 1987–1991) were significantly higher among Jewish Israeli left wing activists compared to right-wing activists. According to the author, the Intifada contradicted the left wing ideology and hence was perceived as more negative, thereby constituting a more intense stress factor. In other words, these findings support the hypothesis that feelings of distress experienced as a result of political stressors are stronger when the political reality is not compatible with ideological assumptions. This is apparently true for both adults and adolescents and explains the different results obtained in previous studies that examined the association between ideology and distress (Garbarino et al. 1991; Punamaki et al. 2001; Stein 2001; Sagy 1998).

The second goal of the present study was to examine the association between the intensity of ideological belief and the level of symptoms among adolescents. In accordance with the research hypothesis, it was found that subjects with extreme right-wing ideologies experienced higher distress level, regardless of the type of stressor they were exposed to. This finding confirms that a stronger ideological commitment may be problematic. This is probably due to the fact that stronger right-wing ideological commitment is associated with higher levels of cognitive rigidity (Jost 2003a). This inflexibility does not allow for adaptation to political changes, both with regard to stressors that contradict ideological beliefs and those that match the ideological belief. In other words, the intensity of the ideological commitment is as significant for examining stress levels as is the compatibility between ideological assumptions and political stressors. A high level of commitment is not a helpful factor.

In this way, the findings of the present study indicate that caution should be applied when relating to previous studies that indicate that right-wing position is associated with coping better in war time (e.g., Garbarino et al. 1991; Kostelny and Garbarino 1994; Punamaki et al. 2001). These studies compared between right-wing and non-right-wing adolescents, and may indeed testify to the fact that holding right-wing ideologies may be effective when compared to having no ideological beliefs. Nevertheless, the findings of the present study show that this association is more complex and that strong right-wing belief can be problematic and associated with distress even in wartime.

Since the present study is a correlative one, one cannot rule out the possibility that the association between extreme rightwing ideology and distress is reversed. In other words, adolescents who experience higher distress levels, more than their peers, tend to turn to political ideology for support and to attribute meaning to their distress. In fact, according to the Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Greenberg et al. 1990) cultural worldviews or systems of meaning, such as political ideologies, provide the world with order, meaning and value. By doing so, they help us to control the paralyzing terror resulting from our human awareness of the inevitability of death. When threatened and distressed, one tends to turn to ideology, strongly cling to it. Therefore, it may be that distressed adolescents turn to ideology, hence their ideological commitment is higher than that of non distress adolescents. This hypothesis requires further investigation in future studies.

In addition to the research findings that point to the importance of examining content and content-free ideological dimensions, differences were also found in relation to gender. Girls reported higher levels of distress compared to boys, and older youth had more symptoms compared to younger ones. The higher levels of distress found among girls were expected, since former studies have indicated that girls tend to be more vulnerable to stressful political events (Klingman 1992; Kuterovac et al. 1994; Vizek-Vidovic et al. 2000; Durakovic-Belko et al. 2003). This may be the result of greater social approval for girls to reveal and admit weaknesses and distress (Gavranidou and Rosner 2003; Dindia and Allen 1992). Alternatively, it may also be that girls perceive certain events as more threatening than boys do (Bar-Tal et al. 1994; Brody et al. 1995; Muldoon 2003), which may result in higher vulnerability to the same events.

Overall, the results of the study indicate that right-wing youngsters experienced higher levels of distress when dealing with stressors that contradicted their ideological worldviews. It was also found that adolescents with more extreme right-wing ideological commitment suffered higher levels of distress, regardless of the nature of the political stressor. These findings indicate the complexity involved in understanding the importance of ideological commitment to the emotional well being of the adolescent as well as the need to differentiate between the various ideological dimensions.

Study Limitations

The findings of the present study examined the correlation between extreme ideological worldviews and distress among right-wing adolescents. It would be appropriate to examine these findings, which indicate a correlation between ideological extremism and distress, also among other extreme ideological groups. This may enable us to understand whether this association is due to the characteristic of right-wing attitudes in accordance with the "rigidity of the right hypothesis" (Jost et al. 2003a), or characteristic of extreme belief per se, according to the "ideological extremity hypothesis" (Greenberg and Jonas 2003). Although many studies tend to support the first hypothesis (for a comprehensive review see: Jost et al. 2003b, it is nevertheless appropriate to examine ideological rigidity among left wing youth and its possible connection with political stressors and distress.

Moreover, it should be taken into account that the two stress-inducing events that were examined are fundamentally different. This difference allows for additional explanations for the differences in sense of distress during terror compared to during the disengagement. Nevertheless, the need for understanding the components of right-wing political ideology and its associations with feelings of distress requires references to both these very different stressors, which also have two contradictory ideological meanings, regardless of the difficulty entailed in comparing them.

In addition, this study is based on a cross-sectional design, and therefore its findings are relevant only to a specific point in time and to a specific sample. However, the findings improve our understanding about the associations between

ideological worldviews of adolescents and the sense of distress they experience, together with the information on the effect of political events on the emotional well being of adolescents. In a world replete with political turbulence, these findings are particularly significant. Even so, future studies should employ a longitudinal design, so as to shed additional light on the course of the interrelations of distress and political ideology.

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