A Psychological Perspective on Security

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Dans cet article, on suggère que les problèmes de sécurité à fondement politique devraient aussi être analysés d'un point de vue psychologique. Puisque les individus évaluent le niveau de sécurité à travers des processus cognitifs, les résultats sont subjectifs. Les représentations concernant la sécurité sont construites à partir d'une menace perçue dans l'environnement, menace que l'individu craint d'avoir du mal à affronter. Deux études poursuivies en Israël, où le problème de la sécurité est aigu, montrent à quel point les individus vivent différemment l'insécurité et indiquent que plusieurs facteurs influencent les représentations relatives à la sécurité. Ces données indiquent que des évènements réels, militaires, politiques, ou économiques, doivent être perçus pour devenir un aspect de la réalité personnelle: les évènements extérieurs sont compris et interprétés subjectivement. Notre approche accorde une importance particulière à la psychologie politique dans l'étude des problèmes de sécurité.

This paper suggests that politically rooted security problems should also be analysed from a psychological perspective. As individuals evaluate the level of security via cognitive processes, the outcomes are subjective. Security beliefs are formed on the basis of the perception of threat in the environment with which the individual perceives a difficulty in coping. Two studies performed in Israel, where the security problem is acute, illustrate how differently individuals experience insecurity, and how different factors influence beliefs about security. These results indicate that while military, political, or economic events are real, they have to be perceived in order to become part of the individual's reality: external events are subjectively interpreted and understood. This approach assigns special importance to political psychology in studying security problems.

INTRODUCTION

Through the years, political research into the security problem in different national and international contexts has focused mainly on the conditions that either strengthen or diminish security (e.g. Caroline, 1987; Handrieder, 1987; Karp, 1992; Klare & Thomas, 1991). Many of these contributions treat security as an objective phenomenon, which can be assessed as such and is influenced by a particular set of factors (e.g. Barrows & Irwin, 1972; Cooper, 1975; Damus, 1977; Hoffman, 1981; Hunter, 1972; Klare & Thomas, 1991; Russett, 1983; Trager & Kronenberg, 1973; Ullman, 1983; Wiberg, 1987).

It should however be recognised that an understanding of the security issue also requires psychological analysis. Security does not exist in separation from individuals' perceptions. Individuals perceive external events and conditions, evaluate them, and subsequently form beliefs about the state of security. Estimation of security is thus a cognitive process based on the repertoire of personal beliefs that make up people's subjective view of reality. We therefore suggest that the problem of security cannot be considered in political, societal, and economical terms only, but should also be analysed as a psychological phenomenon.

The psychological approach does not deny the military or political realities which also serve as a basis for the formation of security beliefs. However, it emphasises that in order for any external event to become a personal reality, it has to be perceived and processed cognitively. This implies that external events are subjectively identified, interpreted, and understood (Bar-Tal & Kruglanski, 1988; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Heider, 1958; Kruglanski, 1989; Markus & Zajonc, 1985). That is, the same external information may differently determine the contents of beliefs that various people form about the situation. These differences arise because security beliefs that people form on the basis of external data are assumed also to depend, in part, on their repertoire of pre-existing beliefs. Individuals differ in their stored beliefs, perceive their reality differently and, therefore, vary both in the way they collect new information as well as in how they interpret it. Even so, people often consider their beliefs as "objective" and treat the absorbed information as "ultimate truth".

Therefore we propose that an understanding of the security problem necessitates an analysis of the formation of security beliefs from a psychological perspective, as these particular beliefs are subjected to the same rules and principles as all other beliefs. To accomplish this goal this paper first discusses the nature, contents, and origins of security beliefs. Then it presents two studies performed in Israel which illustrate the psychological nature of security beliefs. Finally, several conclusions are drawn.

Before turning to the discussion about the nature of security beliefs, it

should be pointed out that military and political leaders, lay individuals as well as social scientists, succumb to the same processes of belief-formation. That is, their beliefs about security are based on the same psychological principles. The present paper thus suggests a general psychological framework for understanding the nature of individuals' beliefs about security.

NATURE OF SECURITY BELIEFS

The present conception of a belief is in line with accepted social psychological approaches (Bar-Tal, 1990; Bem, 1970; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Kruglanski, 1989), and defines a belief as a proposition to which a person attributes at least a minimal degree of confidence. A proposition is a statement about (an) object(s) or relations between objects and/or attributes. Minimal degree of confidence refers to the likelihood of the proposition being "true" from the person's perspective. Accordingly, beliefs are units of knowledge which vary in contents, covering an unlimited scope of topics. They often have affective and behavioural implications by stimulating affective reactions and intentions to act. "Security" then is one category of beliefs covering different contents regarding such topics as sense of security, sources of insecurity, conditions for increasing security, etc. The present conception is based on the appraisal model of Lazarus who studied stress reactions (e.g. Lazarus, 1991a; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Specifically, security, or rather insecurity, as a basic belief, is defined as a cognitive response of appraisal formulation to a perceived danger in the environment by which a person perceives himself/herself to be threatened (Jacobson, 1991a). Two beliefs are thus essential in the formation of beliefs about insecurity. One refers to the appraisal of (an) event(s), condition(s) or situation (s) as an indicator of threat or danger ("primary appraisal") and the other refers to beliefs about available defences and the ability to cope with the perceived threat or danger ("secondary appraisal"). Only when individuals believe they will have difficulty in coping with the threat, are insecurity beliefs formed (Lazarus, 1991a; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). Beliefs of insecurity which have affective implications, being accompanied with feelings of unpleasantness, anger, frustrations, etc., are often labelled as feelings of insecurity.

    Beliefs about security or insecurity are not viewed as the sole product of either intrapsychic processes or environmental factors. They are rather considered as a consequence of the relations between the subject and his/her environment, which change over time and circumstances (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987). That is, beliefs of insecurity can be triggered by one or more events which are perceived as indicators of threat. This perception depends entirely on the individual's interpretations and evaluations of the

diverse information coming from the environment (Jacobson, 1991b), and this process of appraisal, again, depends on the person's repertoire of beliefs (i.e. stored knowledge) concerning different contents such as goals, ideology, or coping capability. To extrapolate from Lazarus (1991b), appraisal thus serves to link insecurity beliefs to environmental events or conditions on the one hand, and to personal (or shared) beliefs, on the other.

Having described the nature of security beliefs, one important point remains to be made. The preoccupation with security reflects the need to maintain safety, which involves longings for protection, surety, and survival (Maslow, 1970). These are basic needs which are prerequisites for normal life. According to Maslow (1970, p.39), individuals strive to satisfy them by "recruiting all the capacities of the organism in their service, and we may then fairly describe the whole organism as a safety-seeking mechanism". Security beliefs, as they originate from psychological needs, carry a special emotional meaning. Individuals, in their attempt to fulfil their wish for safety and minimise dangers, may selectively collect information about security, and avoid information that, in their opinion, endangers it. In other words, the underlying emotional needs for safety may act as a guiding force in information processing (see Kruglanski, 1989). Individuals often freeze their security beliefs by rejecting alternative threatening information and by absorbing whatever is consistent with their held security beliefs. Individuals may therefore not find it easy to change or adjust their security beliefs, even in view of new critical information.

BELIEFS ABOUT SECURITY IN ISRAEL: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

One of the most central problems, which has preoccupied Israeli Jews since the beginning of the Yishuv (pre-state Jewish settlement) through the foundation of the State until today, is that of establishing and ensuring security. This concern is not surprising in view of Israel's intractable violent conflict with the Arab states, and especially with the Palestinian people. From the Israeli perspective, the core of the conflict is directly related to the existence of the State of Israel and the well-being of the Jews who live there. That is, Israeli Jews believe that there is a real threat to the security of Israel as a state and to its Jewish citizens (Stone, 1982). Therefore, "security", as a single word, which is a *raison d'être* for the State of Israel (as a refuge for Jews worldwide), as well as personal safety, have become key concepts in the Hebrew vocabulary. Almost 50 years after the establishment of the State, achieving security is still the main focus of the public agenda (Bar-Tal, 1991; Bar-Tal, Jacobson, & Klieman, in press; Horowitz, 1984; Yaniv, 1993).

In the last 20 years, and especially since the signing of the Declaration of

Principles negotiated in Oslo between the Israeli government and the PLO, on one hand, and the beginning of direct negotiations between Israel and Syria, on the other, "security" has become an emotionally highly charged term which stands for major disagreement in the Israeli society. While the great majority of Israelis concur that the present situation does not provide security, there is bitter polarisation regarding the conditions that may promote it (Arian, Talmud, & Hermann, 1988). Doves and hawks equally capitalise on security to legitimate radically different agendas concerning the Israeli–Arab conflict. That is, while doves believe that security can be achieved as an outcome of the peace process, hawks think that failure to initially guarantee a "reasonable" level of security prevents peace: security must be achieved as a precondition to any peace agreement.

The public discussion and controversy about security in Israel reveal that the term "security" is being used by the Israeli leadership, media, and public without specifications, on the assumption that it is a shared notion. This assumption should be examined because, as indicated, security may mean different things to different people, different factors may influence individuals who may experience as a result a different level of insecurity. Also, beliefs about insecurity may reflect various non-pertinent concerns, as numerous situations and events in personal and collective life have different effects on the formation of insecurity beliefs.

Individuals may express beliefs or feelings about insecurity in various situations. Political and military conditions strongly influence feelings of insecurity. Threats of war, the possibility of terrorism or even just the political isolation of one's country, are examples of situations that affect people's senses of national insecurity. The national state of affairs is one of the determinants of personal beliefs about security. As suggested earlier, individuals base their personal feelings of insecurity not only on issues of national security as they pertain to alien threats. Internal events may generate such feelings as well, as has been dramatically demonstrated most recently in connection with the assassination of Prime Minister Yizhak Rabin and the intensive public discourse on maintaining internal security and stability that followed it. Furthermore, feelings of insecurity can, of course, also be generated by threats to job continuity, personal economical hardship, crime, health problems, and so forth. For example, Jacobson (1987) investigated the common usage of the term "job insecurity". He found four situations that serve as the basis for job insecurity: external threat imposed by forces outside the organisation, unpredictable difficulties within the organisation, role ambiguity, and disruptions in routines.

It follows from both the scientific and the practical (political) points of view, that the mere observation that insecurity feelings are widespread in Israel is of little value unless we establish the meaning attached to "security" and "insecurity" by various segments of the public. In order to answer these

questions, two studies that investigated particular populations are reported here. These studies shed light on the psychological nature of the security problem in general, and in Israel particularly. They investigate when lay individuals, students, and residents of particular settlements do feel insecurity and what conditions do influence this feeling. This line of research can demonstrate the subjective essence of insecurity feelings which are often framed as an objective state of the individuals.

Jacobson and Bar-Tal's (1995) Study

An exploratory study by Jacobson and Bar-Tal (1995) carried out in the summer of 1992 focused on the situational determinants of insecurity feelings by seeking to identify the "real-life" components of insecurity feelings among Israeli university students, and to organise them according to their relative contribution to the insecurity experience.

The answers to the open-ended question about situations that caused insecurity feelings showed that 18% of the students indicated that terrorist attacks and presence of Arabs caused them to feel insecure, about 19.6% mentioned the Persian Gulf War, and about 16.4% wrote about situations of loneliness. More female students noted these three events as causes of feeling insecure than did male students. Male students mentioned more situations of mishap and failure than did female students.

With regard to events affecting the feeling of security (i.e. events in Israel and the world versus events of a personal nature), the responses showed the following: (a) in general, over 25% of the students mentioned that the peace process in the Middle East increased their security feeling; more female than male students reported this, and more doves than hawks did so. The latter tended especially to point out recent developments in the world at large (e.g. dismantling of the USSR, nuclear disarmament, European unification); (b) over 44% of the students reported that terrorist attacks in Israel reduced their feeling of security and about 32.7% mentioned the Persian Gulf War with its Scud missile attacks on Israel; gender differences show that while more females reported terrorist attacks and Gulf War as decreasing their security feelings, more males referred to world events; (c) among personal events that boosted feelings of security, over 30% of the students mentioned success in their studies and over 20% noted successful interpersonal relations; and (d) more or less similar percentages of students (between 15% and 22%) reported that difficulties in studies, interpersonal problems, financial problems, and health problems reduced the feeling of security.

Comparisons of *general insecurity* feelings with Likert-type items, according to major background variables, yielded several significant results. Females reported more insecurity feelings than males. Students with insufficient income reported more insecurity feelings than those with

sufficient incomes. Finally, doves reported more insecurity feelings than hawks.

The answers to the questions confirmed that insecurity-linked appraisals are concerned with anticipated harm–loss interpretations—the degree to which a given situation is seen as causing possible disruption in the future—rather than with damage already sustained. Indeed, in the presently reported study students' responses to the question about stress in situations of insecurity indicate that they are mostly afraid of being physically or psychologically hurt. Other responses refer to fears of uncertainty, sense of failure, other people's reactions, and helplessness. In these situations the majority of students ask for help from others in order to cope with the feeling of insecurity.

A purely psychological model such as developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) doubtless offers considerable leverage for presenting security feelings as an outcome of an individual's cognitive process. But however useful psychological models may be for diagnosing an individual's feelings, they may be inadequate when it comes to explaining why security concerns have become so salient in Israeli society. To the degree that concern with security is a social phenomenon in Israel, it is likely to reflect collective as well as individual processes. In other words, the considerable prominence of insecurity feelings in the Israeli society may indicate more than an aggregation of individual reactions to threatening situations on the purely personal level. The responses to the open-ended questions showed that security concerns are couched, first and foremost, in social reality. They demonstrated that beliefs or feelings of insecurity can be formed on the basis of different conditions which can be classified into those rooted in the collective experience and those related to personal circumstances.

Bar-Tal, Jacobson, and Freund's (1995) Study

In the winter of 1993, Bar-Tal, Jacobson, and Freund (1995) investigated the extent to which the tendency to feel insecurity is determined by life in a community. This research attempted to ascertain whether membership in a small community assumes primacy over demographic and personal factors in structuring security beliefs and the resulting security feelings. This examination is of special interest as a follow-up to the previous study because whereas the former investigation utilised a relatively homogeneous sample of university students, in the present one the drawn sample varied with regard to such personal variables as age, level of income, level of religiousness, level of education, etc. This heterogeneity of the population allowed a more extensive examination of the influence of personal variables on insecurity feelings relative to the impact of the social context.

The study examined feelings of insecurity among representative samples

of residents of three settlements. Two settlements are located in the Israeli-occupied territory of the West Bank and one settlement is just within the "green line" border between the State of Israel and the West Bank. All three are urban-communal settlements, of about 4000–4500 middle- and upper-middle-class residents, and were established in 1983 by private enterprise.

Given the common baseline in terms of size and socioeconomic background, there are also important differences among these towns. The population of Efrat, located near Jerusalem, south of Bethlehem, has an ideologically quite homogeneous population (about 96% hawks), who settled in the occupied territories mostly because of their national–religious convictions. Alfei Menashe, located east of Qualquilia also in the occupied West Bank, is populated mostly by secular residents (about 95%) who were looking for better quality of life. Here too, the majority supported hawkish political parties in the 1992 elections (60% of the votes). The population of the third settlement, Kochav Yair, located east of Kefar Sava in Israel proper, is mostly secular (about 85%). The voting pattern there was more doveish in the 1992 elections with 54.7% of the votes going to the doveish parties and 44.8% to the hawkish parties.

When studying security beliefs in a religious settlement in the occupied territories in contrast with those held in a non-religious settlement in the occupied territories and with another non-religious settlement within Israel proper, we may draw on Durkheim's notion of "doctrinal groups". A doctrinal group forms around a body of core beliefs and its members espouse similar constructions of social reality (Brint & Kelley, 1993). This conception is perhaps important in explaining the formation of personal security or insecurity feelings. It suggests that members of the religious settlements share similar feelings of insecurity. But in Alfei Menashe and Kochav Yair, the effect of the community would probably be reduced, as neither group is under ideological religious pressure. Still, the experience of living in the occupied territories during the Intifada (the Palestinian uprising), and the psychological pressure to develop an ideological attitude about security because of residence in the occupied territories, could contribute to a greater feeling of insecurity among the residents of Alfei Menashe relative to those of Kochav Yair. Thus, according to this analysis differences in security feelings are expected to be found among the three settlements. The basic goal, then, of the Bar-Tal, Jacobson, and Freund study was to find out whether general feelings of insecurity and other related reactions are influenced by the experience of living in a communal settlement, or whether they are shaped exclusively by personal factors.

In general, the findings clearly indicated that contrary to the researchers' expectations, living in the settlement did not, in itself, affect respondents' feelings of insecurity. In order to examine the relative influence of the

personal variables on the dependent variables, regression analyses were conducted. A review of analyses indicates that: (a) *general feeling of insecurity* is related positively to being of Asian-African origin, having insufficient level of income, having a family member who lived through the Holocaust, and being female; (b) *feeling of insecurity in collective situations* is related positively to Asian-African origin, not serving in the army, age, level of hawkishness, having a family member who lived through the Holocaust, and being a female; (c) *feeling of insecurity in personal situations* is related positively to insufficient level of income, and serving in the army.[1]

To explain the relative lack of settlement effect on the extent of insecurity feelings, it was hypothesised that as preoccupation with security problems in Israel, a small country, is intense, in general no differences among settlements can be detected. Israelis are constantly concerned with security problems. The relatively small communication network (e.g. national Israeli newspapers, radio, or TV) reports and comments continuously on the state of security. Israelis are exposed to the same collective information and therefore may not differ in their security feelings as a function of place of residence. A review of poll survey results reveals a broad consensus among Israeli Jews in their evaluation of their country's security. The majority continuously express worries regarding security in face of terrorist attacks and the threatened annihilation of their country (see also Barzilai, 1992). The issues in which deep rifts among Israelis appear concern the steps to be taken to guarantee their country's security.

While a part of the Israeli public (i.e. doves) believes that a prerequisite for security is peace, to be achieved through partial or full withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, another part believes that only by holding on to the occupied territories can security be guaranteed.

The results of this study point to the relative importance of the effect of personal variables, rather than that of the settlement, on the formation of insecurity feelings. They replicated the findings of the Jacobson and Bar-Tal (1995) study, but are more significant, because the former study examined a relatively homogeneous population of students, whereas this study investigated heterogeneous residents of three settlements. Indeed, in comparison to the previous study, which detected an effect of self-evaluation

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[1] *General feeling of insecurity* was constructed on the basis of three items: evaluation of general feelings of insecurity "these days", the extent to which the respondents were concerned with their insecurity at present, and respondents' estimation of insecurity feeling in their town. *Feeling of insecurity in collective situations* was defined by items pertaining to the national economy, unemployment, internal political situation, Israel's relations with the world and with the USA, the conflict with the Arab nations, crime, and the general social situation in the country. *Feeling of insecurity in personal situations* was defined by items pertaining to the respondent's individual circumstances with regard to his/her health, economic situation, employment status, and family relations.

on the hawkish–doveish dimension, level of religiousness, and level of income only, in the present study, effects of additional personal variables were observed.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The present conception and the empirical evidence add a psychological perspective to the understanding of security issues. According to this conception, security cannot be treated solely as an objective and global phenomenon, as political scientists sometimes tend to suggest. Security or insecurity are products of the belief formation process. Beliefs about security are formed individually by leaders and followers and they represent a subjective reflection of their reality. Individuals form beliefs about security or insecurity and therefore they differ in the strength and contents of their security beliefs. The psychological theory of appraisal in the processing of stress suggests that it is a mediating process between individuals' knowledge and dispositions, on the one hand, and environmental conditions, on the other (Lazarus, 1991a,b; Smith & Lazarus, 1993), which determine stress reactions. We suggest similarly that beliefs about insecurity or feelings of insecurity are based on appraisal of threat and coping capability. Appley and Trumbull (1986) noted in this context that insecurity feelings, as products of transactions between the individual and his/her environment, must be understood in their context and over time. They may not necessarily derive from one specific event only. The individual experiencing the unsettling event is, of course, part of the setting. Thus individual beliefs, already held at the outset, form a basis on which the event is interpreted.

In our specific context, and following Smith and Lazarus (1993), we suggest that security beliefs, which in themselves are often the product of extensive prior formative events and influences, represent a core relational theme. As such, security beliefs can be seen as an elicitor of appraisal processes leading to insecurity feelings or anxieties. If so, the extent to which insecurity feelings will be evoked and their strength will be determined by the interaction between these beliefs, the individual's personal circumstances, actual (or potential) threatening events or processes, and the individual's expectations (appraisals) that he or she will be able to cope with those events and, if so, in what manner and how effectively. Specifically, on the basis of the present findings it is possible to say that individuals' experiences as a male or female, as having family members who lived through the Holocaust or not, as being of particular ethnic origin, and as having or not having a sufficient income, all influence their security beliefs.

The reported research provides unequivocal evidence that beliefs about security or feelings of security are psychologically formed on the basis of the interaction between information coming from the environment and

personal circumstances. The results of the two studies elucidate the importance of personal variables in the formation of security feelings. They show that individuals' security feelings are determined by their demographic, socioeconomic characteristics and personal experiences.

The empirical evidence also suggests that strong and unambiguous information serves as a basis for the formation of shared beliefs. Individuals in the presented studies reported feelings of insecurity in view of wars, terrorist attacks, or other clear-cut hostile activities. But situations are often more equivocal and unclear in such cases and other factors play a more important role in the formation of security beliefs than the event itself. Past knowledge, personal dispositions and/or presentation of the event by information sources influence the strength and contents of the security or insecurity beliefs. Indeed, the respondents in the studies reported that sources of information such as political leaders, media commentators, or friends had an influence on the formation of security beliefs.

With regard to a subject's evaluation of the state of security in Israel, on the basis of the present conception, it is possible to suggest that events (i.e. terrorist attacks) serve as an informational basis for the formation of beliefs about the state of security. But as only few individuals had direct experience of such events, the rest of the public form their belief about security on the basis of reports and commentaries. In this case the strength of the information, its content and form, as well as its interpretation by political leaders and media commentators, play a crucial role in the formation of security beliefs. Individuals process the information differently depending on their disposition and past knowledge, but the stronger and more unequivocal the information, the more they are inclined to form similar beliefs about security, especially if they are exposed to similar information and sources.

The contents of security beliefs do not only concern the state of security, but also conditions that may strengthen or diminish security. The analyses by Bar-Tal (1991) suggest that these contents are especially subjective because they depend less on perceived events and more on expectations of future situations. Such expectations are by definition ambiguous and uncertain and therefore depend mostly on other stored beliefs, such as political ideology, implications of past experiences, or collective beliefs, and on information provided by trusted leaders. It is thus not surprising that the Israeli public holds different beliefs with regard to conditions that will ensure security.

In sum, the psychological perspective opens new avenues for studying security problems. It suggests that security cannot be evaluated only in terms of political, military, or economic conditions, and that psychological variables should also be taken into consideration. Individuals perceive events and conditions and on their basis they evaluate the level of security. Thus, it is important to study what kind of factors influence individuals'

evaluations of security, looking at this as a psychological process. This direction of research constitutes an important task for political psychologists.

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