

# Impact of War on Moral Values in Lebanese Children

During the Lebanese War, 1975-1976, children were heavily exposed to various forms of violence. Starting with the well-known belief that children are greatly influenced by example and easily led to imitate older people, the IWSAW research group, directed by Dr. Julinda Abu-Nasr, decided to undertake a study attempting to determine the influence of war, not on children's behavior, but on their moral judgment or conception of right and wrong.

The idea was based on Piaget's theory that the moral development of the child occurs in stages paralleling the development of cognitive stages, depending on the role of adults in the process of the child's socialization. Other research, by Bandura and associates, states that aggressive behavior is more likely to be imitated than non-aggressive behavior, especially if the model is a male.

**Methodology:** The sample consisted of 72 children of both sexes, whose ages varied between 12 and 14 years, selected from 3 different social classes in Beirut and suburbs, representing different degrees of exposure to war.

The instrument for this study was based on Piaget's method for studying morality, namely: telling the children two stories, one depicting an everyday neutral situation and the other, a war situation. The stories dealt with six moral issues involving killing, stealing, lying, damaging property, cheating and rebelling. The child was asked to judge the behavior of the character of the story by confronting him or her with the conflict that had to be solved. Responses to the stories were classified as moral or immoral; the first was characterized by behavior in accordance with universally accepted norms, while the second was

considered as asocial, or moved by a desire for harmfulness and revenge.

**Results:** The children's responses in general indicated a change in their judgments from a neutral to a war situation. Carefully drawn tables, which space does not allow us to reproduce, showed clearly that the war situation evoked more immoral judgment than the neutral situation. In the children's judgment of killing, for example, 37 out of 72 gave an immoral response in a war situation, while their judgment of killing in the neutral situation was moral. A reverse trend of change from immoral judgment in the neutral situation to moral judgment in the war situation was not apparent.

This pilot study was designed mainly to test the instrument which proved to be effective in detecting change in moral judgment. The subjects studied seemed to tolerate behavior in the war situations which they did not accept in the neutral situation.

The pattern of change is more pronounced in reactions to killing and lying than to the stealing and damaging property. The explanation may be sought in the fact that the killing and lying stories dealt with situations in which parents, brothers and sisters were involved, while the relation between self and others in the other stories was remote.

The implications of these findings must be of great concern to educators and programme planners. War models which have so deeply influenced children should be replaced by models that have moral or universally accepted values, presented to them through living models or through books, films and other media.