Opinion Article

The Negative Impact of Political Stigma on Children's Mental Health

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Abstract

Children of parents with different political beliefs may experience bullying, social isolation, and discrimination at school or in their community. This article examines the impact of political stigma on children's mental health, including anxiety, depression, somatic symptoms, post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD and low self-esteem. It also provides practical strategies for parents and caregivers to support children and help them cope with the challenges of political stigma.

Keywords: children; parents; political beliefs; political stigma; mental health

Political Stigma

Political stigma refers to the negative consequences that result from labeling individuals or groups as deviant, immoral, or illegitimate due to their political beliefs or activities. This stigmatization can manifest in a variety of forms, including discrimination, exclusion, and violence [1]. The political stigma can lead to a range of negative outcomes, such as reduced political participation and increased polarization, and can even undermine democratic norms and values. Similarly, political stigmatization can be used by those in power to marginalize and silence dissenting voices, with serious consequences for the health of democratic institutions. Understanding the ways in which political stigma operates is crucial to building more inclusive and democratic societies. By recognizing and challenging stigmatization, individuals and groups can work towards creating spaces where political diversity is respected and where marginalized voices are heard.

Overall, the concept of political stigma highlights the importance of attending to the social and political contexts in which political beliefs and activities are expressed. By examining how stigma operates in these contexts, we can better understand the challenges facing democracy and work towards creating more just and inclusive societies [2].

Example of the effect of political stigma on children's mental health

Any form of stigma can have negative consequences on the mental health of children, as they may experience discrimination or social exclusion due to their political beliefs or affiliations. In Greece, where political polarization is high, children may be particularly vulnerable to these effects [1,3-5]. During the 1960s and 1970s, Greece experienced significant political instability, including the military junta that ruled the country from 1967 to 1974 [6]. This period was marked by widespread political violence, censorship, and human rights abuses. The effects of political stigma during this time were particularly pronounced, with many children experiencing discrimination, violence, and social exclusion based on their political beliefs or affiliations [7]. One of the most visible ways that children were marginalized was through their education.

The regime sought to control the curriculum and textbooks in schools to ensure that they were ideologically aligned with the regime's views. Students were taught propaganda and political indoctrination, and any form of critical thinking was discouraged. Teachers who were suspected of having leftist sympathies were purged from the educational system, and those who remained were closely monitored and forced to conform to the regime's directives [5]. Children whose parents were known to be opposed to the regime were often subjected to discrimination and isolation in school. They were labeled as "traitors" or "enemies of the state" and were ostracized by their peers, teachers, and even school administrators [8]. Some were even punished or expelled from school, while others were forced to change schools or hide their family background to avoid harassment and persecution. This had a devastating impact on their academic and social development, as they were denied equal opportunities and were deprived of a supportive and inclusive learning environment [5,9,10].

Furthermore, children were also affected by the pervasive human rights abuses committed by the regime, including the arbitrary arrests, imprisonment, and torture of political dissidents. Many children had family members who were arrested, tortured, or went missing during the junta, and the trauma of this experience had a lasting impact on their mental health and well-being [5]. The fear and anxiety of living in an oppressive regime, coupled with the uncertainty and grief of not knowing what had happened to their loved ones, created a climate of fear and insecurity that affected all aspects of their lives, including their education.

Below are testimonies of individuals who were persecuted as children for their political beliefs

1st testimony by Antonis Kalyvianakis: "I was born in 1936 in Chamospita, Karavola, Heraklion, into a poor family and grew up in poverty. At the age of 13, I was exiled due to my political beliefs. I am one of the oldest and first Chefs in Heraklion, Crete. I am an honorary member of the Chef's Club and have made a significant contribution to the field." [10].

2nd testimony by Giorgos Mesaritakis: "I started working at the age of 16, when my mother was in prison and my father was in exile. I knew very little about reading and writing because I was expelled from school in the 3rd year of high school, because I wrote an essay titled 'Communism and the Misfortunes it brought to humanity and especially to our country.' It was a real piece of literature because I loved letters. It was my love for letters that led me to finish high school at the age of 38 and complete my university studies" [5].

3rd testimony by Mironas Manios: Maria Maniou, the daughter of Myronas Manios, is sharing with us a personal testimony about her father, who has passed away. She will be providing us with a detailed and vivid account of his life, experiences, and personality. Maria hopes that by sharing her father's story, she can honor his memory and inspire others to cherish their loved ones. According to personal communication with my father on 15th April 1993, he reported that when he was 17 years old, he was expelled from the Night Vocational Commercial School of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Heraklion, Crete in 1962 because of his political beliefs while attending the 4th Class. A year later, he served in the military as a member of the elite "Black Caps" corps in Aulona. The military service during that time and later, from 1973 to 1974, was a great torment for those with left-leaning beliefs and for the unrepentant, a real hell. He endured numerous assaults and innumerable threats, called "kapsonia," which caused him both physical and psychological distress. He requested a deferment of his military service with the intention of returning to serve the remainder of his service when things calmed down. He was admitted to a military hospital to receive medical care and recover, with the intention of eventually returning to his hometown in Crete. However, many years passed without any improvement in the situation, and he never returned. He never denied his political beliefs to receive better treatment compared to other soldiers. The memories of these events always haunted him, as not being able to complete his studies in Economics was a traumatic event for him. He struggled to find employment afterwards and worked in unsatisfactory positions, such as a blacksmith in his father's shop, as a peddler, and as a manager of a night tavern. He felt that these two traumatic events made his life difficult, and he believed that his life would have been better if they had never happened. Football and music were ways for him to ease his emotional pain and find solace. He was a man who loved his family and his country deeply, and he was willing to do whatever it took to fight for what he believed in. As a child, I didn't fully understand the magnitude of his experiences, but I knew that he was a brave man who fought for what he believed in. Later in life, as I learned more about the political climate of the time, I began to understand the risks my father took and the danger he faced. Despite the challenges, my father remained committed to his beliefs and continued to fight for them throughout his life. He may have been a hero to some, but to me, he was simply my father, and I am grateful for the lessons he taught me about courage, determination, and the importance of standing up for what you believe [11].

4th testimony by Alkyoni Papadaki: "My father may have been a hero of Albania and his country sent him medals, but one day a truck came and took them all, my mother, father, grandparents, and they were sent to prison because of my uncle. I was a three-year-old child left in the courtyard, fainting, with a dog licking me. My uncle was hunted down and beheaded." Alkyoni had the misfortune of experiencing the entire post-war climate of her time as a child and her life was filled with difficulties [12]. Similarly, studies show that political beliefs were associated with poorer mental health outcomes among students. Students who experienced political stigma had higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation than those who did not report such experiences [13-20].

The Greek Civil War was a civil war fought in Greece between the governing Hellenic Army and the rebel forces of the Democratic Army of Greece. The political polarization of that period was a significant source of stress for children in Greece. Children reported anxiety, fear and uncertainty about the future as a result of political tensions and violence. Their fathers were often dead, in prison or in exile behind the iron Curtain where many raised where

many raised new families in places like Prague and Tashkent. The children themselves were either in prison with their mothers or in orphanages [21]. All the above shows that political stigma can have a significant impact on the mental health of children and adolescents in Greece. It is important for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers to be aware of these effects and to work towards creating safe and inclusive environments for all children, regardless of their political beliefs or affiliations.

Suggestions for mitigating the Negative Impact of Political Stigma on children's mental health

Political stigma can have a significant negative impact on children's mental health. Children who are exposed to political stigmatization, such as discrimination based on their political beliefs or the beliefs of their parents, can experience anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder. Therefore, it is crucial to mitigate the negative impact of political stigma on children's mental health. One effective way to mitigate the impact of political stigma is to provide social support to children. Social support from parents, peers, and teachers can buffer the negative effects of political stigma on children's mental health. Parents can provide emotional support to their children and help them understand the complex issues involved in politics. Peers can offer a sense of belonging and validation, which can increase resilience and self-esteem. Teachers can provide a safe and supportive learning environment where children can express their political views without fear of discrimination.

Another way to mitigate the impact of political stigma is to promote positive coping strategies. Children who have effective coping strategies, such as problem-solving and emotion regulation, are less likely to experience negative mental health outcomes due to political stigma. Parents, teachers, and mental health professionals can teach children these coping strategies and help them apply them in their daily lives. Finally, it is essential to promote political tolerance and respect for diversity. Political stigma arises when people have a lack of tolerance for different political beliefs and ideologies. Promoting political tolerance and respect for diversity can reduce political stigma and promote positive mental health outcomes for children.

Conclusion

In conclusion, mitigating the negative impact of political stigma on children's mental health requires a multi-faceted approach that includes social support, positive coping strategies, and promoting political tolerance and respect for diversity. By implementing these strategies, we can ensure that children are not negatively affected by political stigmatization and can develop into mentally healthy and resilient adults.

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Conflict of Interest

No Conflict of interest.

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