The psychological effects of perceived threat, national identity and self-esteem on the well-being of Qatari youth during the blockade

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Abstract

Background

In 2017, the unprecedented blockade of Qatar by neighboring Gulf states caused a plethora of effects on the country at a psychological, socio-political, and identity level. This paper sought to examine the resulting psychological effects of this blockade in Qatar but with a focus on the younger population.

Methods

Using self-report questionnaire data from Qatari secondary school students ($n = 1410$), a multiple regression model investigated the predictive effects of youth self-esteem, national identity, and perceived threat on the well-being of students.

Results

The model predicted 23.9% of the variance in the overall dataset. The results indicated that the model was a significant predictor of well-being, $F(3, 1406) = 148.35, p = .000$. While self-esteem significantly contributed to the model ($B = .473, p = .000$), as did perceived threat ($B = -.058, p = 0.013$); Qatari identity did not display a significant predictive effect ($B = .040, p = .089$).

Conclusions

In the context of the conflict, perceived threat and self-esteem play a crucial role in predicting youth wellbeing.

Introduction

Background

In 1981, the six Arab countries of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kingdom of Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Oman signed an agreement to establish the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Since the Charter has been formed, the GCC region has been considered the most stable entity of the Middle East region (Bianco & Stansfield, 2018). The fundamental principle of constructing this entity is to promote economic, financial, and cultural cooperation; and to enhance social ties between people and foster political stability and security within the region (Nakhleh, 1986).

From a social identity perspective, several key factors helped to facilitate an integrated entity among Gulf states. It enabled people to strengthen a shared identity known as “Khaleeji” identity” (Al-Misned, 2016) that had been formed before the national identity of Gulf citizens (Allam & Karolak, 2020). In relation to social ties, there was recognition that intermarriage across GCC countries is common. As a result, the existence of extended families across these six countries produced similarities in many aspects of life spanning culture, identity, music, and poetry. In addition, GCC citizens have travel privileges to facilitate free movement between member states without visa requirements (Alshihaby, 2015). Therefore, these factors indicate that, before the Qatari blockade, GCC citizens perceived themselves as relatively united and with a common identity sharing many key characteristics (Al-Khouri, 2010).

Aside from the geopolitical importance of the landscape, the Gulf region is undergoing considerable political and social transformations caused by several key trends in recent times, including the Arab Spring, economic transitions and shifting demographics. The state of Qatar - a small peninsula within the Arabian Gulf - is a traditional Muslim collectivist society with established gender segregation norms (Bahry & Marr, 2005); but with state commitments to harmoniously modernize the country with ambitious development strategies at national and international levels, such as the hosting of the FIFA World Cup 2022. High levels of social security, extensive public and private investments, openness to globalization and rapid industrialization have typified the nature of Qatar's development in recent decades (Dogan Akkas & Camden, 2020). Such developments have also seen regional competitiveness emerge, with Qatar and UAE regularly competing with each other to promote their active contributions to international society (Ennis, 2018). As a result, it has been suggested that the success of Qatar in different fields such as sport can foster jealousy (Gulf Times, 2017).

Although the GCC entity has maintained stability and cohesion since its inception, the political relationships have encountered some tensions among the allied countries. For example, there was a sovereignty dispute between Bahrain, Qatar and the Hawar Islands in 1936, and it was peacefully resolved in 2001 via the International Court of Justice (Wiegand, 2012). Similarly, political tension resulted in a border dispute between Qatar and Saudi Arabia that emerged in 1992 and 1994 (Okruhlik, 1999). Nonetheless, the GCC overcame these disputes and maintained the strong ties among the Gulf states.

However, on 5th June 2017, to much regional and international shock, the Gulf States of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates; and Egypt severed all diplomatic relations with Qatar. Given the cooperation of the Gulf region in the past, this blockade was regarded as unprecedented; and brought with it a cascade of effects across many levels of society. Sophisticated cyberattacks on Qatari state media implicated Qatari stakeholders across a range of politically sensitive allegations. Following this, a 13-point list of maximalist demands were put to Qatar (Ulrichsen, 2020) - itself underpinned by a narrative of Qatari involvement in terrorist activity and corruption (Milton-Edwards, 2020). For example, the demands included: closing of Qatari-run media such as Al Jazeera, ceasing military cooperation with Turkey, severing alleged ties with terrorist organizations and the hosting of their representatives within Qatar, and paying compensation to the blockading Gulf states.

Despite a willingness to find a resolution, Qatar did not wish to accept the accusations nor the demands of the blockade. Owing to considerable dependence on importations of key goods and services, in addition to the social and familial interconnectedness of Gulf states, immeasurable challenges emerged for the

Qatari population. The Qatari National Human Rights Committee (QNHRC) in 2017 reported that the blockade had instilled a sense of fear due to the fragmentation of families (due to border closures); created risks of adverse psychological outcomes; and caused irreparable damage between once-intertwined Gulf cultures and societies. The psychological consequences of intergroup conflicts within the Gulf region remain poorly understood within the literature. The particular characteristics of this blockade present a unique opportunity to understand intergroup conflict within an understudied region.

Theoretical background - social identity and perceived threat

This paper adopts a theoretical background initially framed by social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1979) which posits that an individual's sense of identity is based on their group membership(s), and can thus heavily influence other key psychological factors (including self-esteem and group pride). Social identity theory places the origins of social identity within the domains of both cognitive and motivational factors - this can influence group members to support or detach from their group. Indeed, one of the key contributions of social identity theory is the replicated finding of in-group favoritism across different conditions (Brewer, 1979). However, it has been argued that social identity theory has not been as impactful as expected in political psychology due to a focus on the effects of social identity across group memberships; but a lack of attention on the development of such identities in real-world contexts (Huddy, 2001).

It is important to note the challenges to social identity theory, as outlined by Huddy (2001), such as: acquired versus ascribed identities; the potential role of individual differences; group differences in the freedom to acquire identities; boundaries versus meaning for group identities; and the overall strength and stability of identity. These challenges also reflect some of the original theorizing by Tajfel et al. (1971) who emphasized the importance of understanding the role of context when applying the theory to different groups and to not make the assumption of universality. Nonetheless, a recent cross-cultural meta-analysis ($n = 21,266$) found in-group bias to be a relatively universal phenomenon (Fischer & Derham, 2016), but with systematic variance found for countries with differing levels of individualism or collectivism, and uncertainty avoidant contexts. Importantly, and reflecting limitations found in much of the literature, no data on Muslim-majority countries were included thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings. Relatedly, while there is extensive research on the effects of political violence (Muldoon, 2013; Palmieri et al., 2008), less is known about the complex relationship between the perception of threat in socio-political tensions, and its subsequent effect on identity, and mental health variables such as self-esteem. This is especially the case for younger populations.

Research on (perceived) intergroup conflict have typically focused on effects relating to stressors that may exacerbate conflict, physicality, territory, power; in addition to restrictions for civil liberties and human rights (Carriere et al., 2020). There is a distinct lack of research on the potential role of perceived threat for wellbeing and identity in young adults where such individuals do not have prior experience of conflicts, as is the case in the Qatari blockade. Although some research from a Northern Ireland context has found that perceived threat was associated both directly (negatively) and indirectly (positively) via social identification with wellbeing, this was only for those who had prior experience of political conflict and violence (Schmid & Muldoon, 2015). The distinctive factors within the Qatari blockade are difficult to situate within the current perceived intergroup threat literature. This is due to a number of factors, chiefly the absence of violence, and the uniquely impactful role of social media in communicating some of the psychological effects of the blockade in young adults - living in an increasingly globalized Qatar - who have no direct experience of political conflict or violence (Alkaabi & Soliman, 2017; El-Masri et al., 2020). Moreover, over 50,000 citizens from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom of Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates lived in Qatar prior to the blockade, and significant overlapping familial, sporting, commercial and political ties existed across the Gulf (Zahlan, 2016).

The largely unforeseen and immediate severing of these ties has never been experienced by the so-called generation Z of Qatari citizens (born from 1996 onwards). Given the overlapping ties held by young Qatari adults across Gulf groups, it is unclear how the functionality of the perceived threats from the blockade would potentially affect individual wellbeing, identity and self-esteem. It should be noted that perceived threats of any kinds may not adversely impact wellbeing in all contexts. There is a body of research that has demonstrated the important positive relationship between one's social identity and perceived threats. In the context of social identity theory, this therefore means that some individuals may more readily identify with their perceived in-group in an attempt to cope with the stressors from the perceived out-group threats (Haslam et al., 2005). Indeed, recent experimental evidence illustrating the widespread trend of coethnic voting within the Middle East has been posited as a reflection of actual preferences for members of social in-groups; but this does not mean that there is a simultaneously negative qualitative prejudice against perceived non-coethnics (Shockley & Gengler, 2020).

Extant literature - what do we know about the psychology of Qataris?

Compared to studies involving Western samples, there is a lack of high-quality large-scale datasets concerning populations from Gulf States such as Qatar. Within psychology and the social sciences more broadly, the dependence on samples typically from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic populations (WEIRD) have limited the cross-cultural generalizability of key conceptualizations of the self, motivation, and behavior (Henrich et al., 2010). Nonetheless, there has been an emergence of some empirical research on youth well-being from Gulf countries in international psychology literature (Ahmed M. Abdel-Khalek, 2013; A. M. Abdel-Khalek, 2011; Al-Attayah & Nasser, 2016; Bedair et al., 2020).

Previous research has demonstrated that mental health problems in Qatari young adults are comparatively frequent (Schoenbach et al., 2018), with some data indicating that females (mean age = 13.5 years) report higher life satisfaction than males (Al-Attayah & Nasser, 2016). Other data from undergraduate samples have reported higher self-rated levels of mental health for men, and in keeping with regional trends, an overall significant positive correlation between subjective wellbeing, health and religiosity has been identified (Ahmed M. Abdel-Khalek, 2013). However, a recent cross-cultural telephone survey of non-migrant Qataris and migrants found that the former had lower levels of depression that was comparable to Western epidemiology (between 4.2% and 6.6%) (Khaled, 2019; Khaled & Gray, 2019). Within Qatari primary healthcare, it is estimated that approximately one-quarter of attendees had at least one psychiatric diagnosis (Ghuloum et al., 2011; Bener et al., 2015). However, much of this data is using smaller samples from college-aged participants or older adults in timeframes that predated the Qatari blockade. A further challenge relates to the role of mental health stigma in Qatar regarding self-reporting, help-seeking behaviors, and national dialogue (Ciftci et al., 2013; Zolezzi et al., 2017).

To date, there exists no high-quality definitive dataset regarding the mental health, self-esteem, identity or perception of threat among young adult citizens in Qatar, and no research regarding the effects of the blockade on these psychological variables. Nonetheless, the *National Mental Health Strategy for Qatar, Changing Minds, Changing Lives 2013–18* has identified a need for transformational change in mental health services in Qatar. Within this policy, destigmatization and evidence-building have been identified within an overarching implementation plan (Sharkey, 2017). This has now been extended into the Qatari National Health Strategy 2018–2022 which aims to take a population health approach using an integrated system of care, with mental health and wellbeing named as a priority area.

Research objectives

The project has the following series of objectives:

1. To assess the effects of the Qatari blockade on the national identity of Qatari youth;
2. Identify the scale of the transformations affected by the blockade and how they are reflected in the self-esteem of young Qataris;
3. To measure the levels of perceived threat in Qatari youth as a consequence of the blockade;
4. To investigate the relationship between perceived threat and national identity among Qatari youth.
5. To evaluate if the combined variables of Qatari identity, self-esteem and perceived threat predict the wellbeing of Qatari youth.

This project is a part of a broader investigation into Qatari national identity in the context of the blockade. The analysis is devised to inform future policies of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to assist with the cultivation of an education system oriented towards the promotion of national identity and citizenship. The outcomes will provide scope to inform educational content that can be leveraged to positively shape Qatari identity and solidarity amidst increasingly uncertain conditions for their young citizens who are already in a developmentally-transitional stage.

Method

Sample size and participants

According to the annual statistics of education in the State of Qatar (2018), the total number of secondary schools is 62 (33 are secondary schools for boys), and the total number of Qatari students in the secondary schools is 13,946 (7,305 are females). Given that there are eight municipalities in Qatar, the authors listed the secondary schools located in each municipality and randomly selected the schools. The results were a total of twenty-six schools (13 of which were for boys). Following that, the targeted number of the participants of each school was 60 students (20 participants represent each grade 10, 11, and 12).

Data were collected via a self-report paper questionnaire between November 2019 and February 2020. Eligible participants had to be Qatari citizens from public secondary schools in Qatar. A representative sample of 1500 participants were recruited using convenience sampling and 50 incomplete responses and 40 non-Qatari respondents were excluded. The final sample included 1410 participants, of which 40% were males ($M_{age} = 16.98$, $SD = .86$).

After receiving a signed consent form parents, respondents were presented with a clear description of the study and they provided written informed assent prior to completing the survey. Participation was voluntary and respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire at the school under the supervision of the school teachers and the recruited research assistants for the study.

Measures

National Identity: The authors have selected four items from the Arabic version of the national identity scale developed by Al Rabaani (2017). Such a scale was developed and used for the Omani secondary school of the same education stage as their Qatari counterparts. Moreover, since Qatar and Oman have a shared culture, the authors decided to use the same scale with adaptation where the word "Omani" was replaced with "Qatari." Besides, the scale indicated a very good internal consistency in the Omani sample ($\alpha = .94$). Participants were asked to rate the items on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree (for example, "I am proud of being Qatari"). A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) showed the suitability of the scale, where RMSEA = .001; SRMR = .001; CFI = .99; NFI = .99; GFI = 0.99; and TLI = .99. The internal consistency of the scale was very strong (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

Self-esteem: A 10-item scale of Rosenberg (1965) was used. Items included questions such as "At times I think I am no good at all" and "I take a positive attitude toward myself" Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The authors used the Arabic version of Gradat (2006). The internal consistency was acceptable where Cronbach Alpha coefficient was .71.

Well-being: A 15-item PERMA-Profilier that was used. The scale was developed by Butler and Kern (2016). The scale was translated by a bilingual mental health specialist and back translated by a certified translator to avoid ambiguity of the items. Participants were asked to report their answers on a 7-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The items included "How often do you feel joyful" and "To what extent you have been feeling loved". A CFA was carried out and showed an acceptable model fit of the scale, where RMSEA = .040; SRMR = .003; CFI = .97; NFI = .97; GFI = 0.98; and TLI = .97. The internal consistency of the scale was very strong (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

Perceived threat: The authors developed a 5-items scale to assess the extent to which Qatari citizens feel threat as a result of blockade. The items used were such as "I feel anxious when I think of the blockade crisis" and "I feel fearful when I think of the blockade crisis". The participants were asked to rate their responses on a 7-point Likert scale ranges from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. A CFA showed the suitability of the scale, where RMSEA = .022; SRMR = .006; CFI = .99; NFI = .99; GFI = 0.99; and TLI = .98. The internal consistency shows a good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

Statistical analysis

To investigate the relationships among variables, SPSS Version 26 software was used. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to explore the relationships among the variables. Multiple linear regression analysis assumptions were examined and normality tests were satisfied prior to the final analysis.

Ethical approval and funding

Full ethical approval has been provided for this study by the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for all variables

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Wellbeing	7.90	1.44	1410
Qatar Identity	6.94	.26	1410
Self-Esteem	5.02	.75	1410
Perceived Threat	2.88	1.51	1410

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation data for each of the variables in the model. At the outset, wellbeing using the PERMA measure shows high overall levels of wellbeing within the sample; likewise Qatari identity and self-esteem. The mean score for perceived threat - a 7-point Likert scale - was considerably lower. Furthermore, there is no significant relationship between perceived threat and national identity. A breakdown of Pearson correlations for all model variables is provided in table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Pearson correlations for all model variables

Variable	Wellbeing	Self-esteem	Qatar Identity	Threat
1- Wellbeing	-			
2- Self-esteem	.485**	-		
3- Qatar Identity	.095**	.119**	-	
4- Threat	-.119**	-.130**	.020	-

** $p < .001$

Predicting Qatari youth wellbeing

To examine the extent to which identity, self-esteem and perceived threat influence Qatari youth wellbeing, a multiple linear regression model was run. Mean replacement was applied for any missing data and outliers were removed (no significant differences were found between these models). The predictor variables were: Qatari identity, self-esteem and perceived threat; with wellbeing as the outcome variable. The regression results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Linear model of predictors for Qatar youth wellbeing (95% confidence intervals reported in parentheses)

Variable				sig
	B	SE	β	
(Constant)	1.949 [.15, 3.75]	.917		.034*
Qatar Identity	.224 [-.03, .48]	.132	.040	.089
Self-esteem	.909 [.82, 1]	.045	.473	.000**
Threat	-.055 [-.10, -.01]	.022	-.058	.013*
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$				

Overall, the results showed that the model was a significant predictor of wellbeing, $R^2 = .24$, $adjR^2 = .239$, $F(3, 1406) = 148.35$, $p = .000$, $d = .32$. While self-esteem significantly contributed to the model ($B = .473$, $p = .000$), as did perceived threat ($B = -.058$, $p = 0.013$); Qatari identity did not display a significant predictive effect ($B = .040$, $p = .089$).

Discussion

The potential role of the Qatari blockade and its influence on youth national identity, self-esteem, and perceived threats presents a dilemma for political psychology conceptualizations of intergroup conflict. The combined effects of these variables and their potential association with wellbeing in Qatari youth is poorly understood. This paper investigated the predictive relationship of youth national identity, self-esteem, and perceived threats on the wellbeing of Qatari youth. Results produced a significant overall regression model that predicted 23.9% of the variance. Self-esteem significantly contributed to the model ($B = .473$, $p = .000$), as did perceived threat ($B = -.058$, $p = 0.013$); but no significant predictive effect was evident for Qatari identity ($B = .040$, $p = .089$). On average, the descriptive data indicates strong levels of wellbeing, self-esteem and Qatari identity among Qatari youth, with low levels of perceived threat.

These results present a number of interesting findings in the context of the unique challenges brought about by the Qatari blockade for Qatari youth. Firstly, it is clear that despite these challenges, young Qataris who perceived lower levels of threat and had higher levels of self-esteem were more likely to report stronger levels of overall wellbeing. Unlike much of the theoretical background to similar research, this study did not find a predictive relationship for national identity and wellbeing. This may be due to the relatively untested psychometric properties of the measure used, but this may also be attributed to the potential for young Qataris to have had already high levels of national identity prior to the blockade. Given the absence of valid and reliable representative data for the mental health of Qatari youth prior to the blockade, it is not possible to infer direct causal effects of the blockade at present.

However, the statistically significant predictive effect of perceived threat within the overall regression model ($B = -.058$, $p = 0.013$) provides insight into the functionality of the blockade on the individual psychology of Qatari youth. Although much of the political psychology and intergroup conflict literature has focused on group-level measures (Carriere et al., 2020), this paper suggests that perceived threat in Qatari youth impacts wellbeing. In contrast to prior literature suggesting that social or national identification increases due to perceived threat (Haslam et al., 2005), this model provides no evidence that this was directly the case within the Qatari blockade.

There was much anecdotal reports and media coverage regarding the Qatari resilience in response to the blockade, however it was only perceived threat that negatively predicted wellbeing in this study, with no effect for Qatari identity observed. This finding may be related to the web of identities fused between Qatari citizens and their fellow GCC countries, and the potentially complex depths of the Khaleeji identity (which itself predates GCC identities) (Al-Misned, 2016; Allam & Karolak, 2020) which could prevent the emergence distinct ingroup-outgroup dynamics. Similarly, experimental coethnic voting evidence from Qatar indicates that Qataris have low political salience of ethnic divisions, and do not exhibit negative prejudice against perceived out-group members (Shockley & Gengler, 2020). Taken together, these nuanced and interlinking identity features could impact the identification of cause-and-effect relationships between the Blockade and different levels of identity, mental health, and wellbeing. This may partly explain why the perceived threat of blockade was more influential than the Qatari identity variables. The interconnected nature of Qatari identity within the GCC means that the shared descent of all stakeholders could be separable to the perceived threat of the blockade in with respect to other factors (i.e., economic problems). It is also possible that Qatari youth were able to set apart their shared identity with the blockading GCC countries from the socio-political conflicts underpinning the blockade.

Implications for education

The Qatari National Human Rights Committee (QNHR) in 2017 very clearly highlighted the adverse impact of the blockade on all aspects of society, including youth mental health. Coupled with a comparatively high prevalence of mental health problems (Khaled, 2019; Schoenbach et al., 2018), in addition to the enduring role of stigma in the region (Ciftci et al., 2013; Zolezzi et al., 2017), there are several educational lessons from which to strengthen societal understanding of the connections between Qatari youth identity, perceived threats in the present or future, self-esteem, and wellbeing. Given the salient effects of threat and uncertainty on youth mental health, awareness-raising campaigns and the psychoeducation of how humans react to (perceived) threat can assist in helping young Qataris understand their reaction to the blockade, and indeed any future changes. Further initiatives that can solidify and support youth identity and wellbeing in the face of (perceived) threats of the blockade is likely to positively impact outcomes for Qatari youth, but more formal evaluations of such interventions are nonetheless advisable. Indeed, educational psychologists in Qatar may be appropriately placed to facilitate new awareness and psychoeducational campaigns to help young Qataris understand the functionality of identity in the face of perceived threats and uncertainty, in order to offset or minimize any potentially adverse mental health consequences.

Limitations

There are a number of methodological considerations in this study. It is important to note that the time of data collection for this study was in mid-2020. Owing to the considerable gap in time between the initial shock of the blockade and the 2020 pandemic, it is conceivable that this time lag effect may have impacted that quality of the data. Given the developmental changes of the young Qatari population from the time of the blockade up until this study's data collection, it is likely that respondents could have had different responses during the blockade. It is also possible that Qatari youth consolidated and enhanced their national sense of identity within this time period, but this was not possible to retrospectively demonstrate within the methodology of this study. Furthermore, given the nature of the research questions, it would have been useful to compare data before and after the blockade; but no such data presently exists for the population of interest. Furthermore, the psychometric properties of the national identity measure and also the perceived threat require further validation and reliability testing on Gulf populations before concrete interpretations can occur. Lastly, the role of socially desirable responses must be considered when interpreting the overall dataset.

Conclusion

In the context of the conflict, perceived threat and self-esteem play a crucial role in predicting youth wellbeing. Given the new forms of intergroup conflict that are evolving - such as cyberwarfare, or sanctions and restrictions due to pandemic and/or geopolitical factors - researchers should examine the real-time development of perceived threat among different age cohorts, in addition to embedding variables that can capture the potential role of individual differences. Additionally, future research should endeavor to collect representative samples from across the Gulf region to ensure greater comparability across the collective literature. This will aid the advancement of a more globally representative political psychology where the GCC region can be appropriately situated.

Declarations

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Competing interests:

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Availability of the data and materials:

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Authors Contributions:

AA reviewed the analyzed data and supported the writing of the manuscript. DM performed data analysis and supported the drafting and editing of the manuscript. MA analyzed the data and drafted the manuscript. DA conducted the data collection. YH reviewed the analysis and supported the writing of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

The authors were solely responsible for the entire work, including the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis, and writing the manuscript.

Ethical approval:

This work is original and is sent only to the Current Psychology Journal and is not under consideration by another journal. The IRB was obtained from the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies.

Consent for publication:

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