

Beyond Post-Traumatic Stress:
Pressing Questions about the Psychological Impact of Political Violence on Children

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Introduction

As reported by the *UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict*, children in approximately 50 countries around the world currently grow up in the midst of armed conflict and its aftermath. In the last decade alone, 6 million children were injured due to war and 2 million were killed. Millions of children have been uprooted as a consequence of armed conflict and human rights violations, seeking safety abroad or within their own borders; indeed, well over half of the world's displaced people are children. Currently, it is estimated that there are about 15 million children refugees worldwide; an additional 13 million children are internally displaced within their own countries. The landmark 1996 Graça Machel report on "The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children," commissioned by the UN General Assembly, documented the gravity of children's suffering both from direct violence and from the structural violence associated with massive displacement, poverty, malnutrition, and lack of education. No precise figures exist distinguishing the number of children growing up under conditions of state-sponsored violence versus violence from non-state-sponsored groups, or terrorism. Moreover, the psychological literature also does not permit distinctions between the psychological effects caused by state-sponsored violence and those that result from terrorism. However, the Graça Machel report did call attention to a subset of children for whom the short- and long-term consequences

may be even more dire, namely the approximately 300,000 children who are drawn directly into political conflicts as child soldiers, serving in various military roles, including participation in terrorist activities, genocide, torture, and suicide bombings. This concern is of such proportions that it is now monitored directly by the UN (Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2006).

One of the most significant developments in more recent times on behalf of children affected by armed conflict has been the intervention of the United Nations Security Council and the passing of resolution 1612 (2005) of 26 July 2005. Based on this resolution the Office of the Special Representative has established a comprehensive monitoring and reporting process relating to grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict, in particular the recruitment and use of children as soldiers. In addition to taking measures for monitoring and reporting violations, the Special Representative has advocated for rigorous post-conflict rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives and programs for children, and has striven to ensure that children's protection, demobilization and reintegration needs are addressed in the initial planning and implementation of peacekeeping and peace-building operations. Finally, and in pursuit of the objectives outlined above, the Office of the Special Representative has also underscored the need for further research focusing on lessons learned and best practices, as well as other emerging areas of concern, including research on child soldiers, their needs and concerns and attitudes to violence, and successful strategies for their reintegration into society (Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict,

2006). While such work has been, and necessarily will be interdisciplinary, psychologists have made, and can make important contributions to this effort (Stepakoff et al., 2006; Wessells & Kostelny, 2002; Wessells & Monteiro, 2006).

In this article we review what is known about the impact that exposure to political violence has on the wellbeing of children (defined under international law as people under the age 18), and call attention to concerns that are less well understood. We focus especially on the impact that active involvement in political violence is likely to have on the long-term development of children and adolescents who participate in terrorist and armed groups. While the distress symptoms of millions of children affected by armed conflict around the world are arguably a matter of most serious concern, we argue that it is imperative that we pursue in depth study of consequences other than emotional distress, including the effects that such experiences may have on children's ability to tell right from wrong, value life, and view themselves as moral agents. Children's moral capacities have tremendous implications not only for their individual sense of identity, dignity, and wellbeing, but also for the possibility of breaking cycles of violence and the ultimate success of humanitarian and political interventions geared toward conflict resolution and social reconstruction. In fact, any relation between ethics and terrorism necessarily takes place within individual minds. From this perspective, it is imperative to understand how the experiences of children with political violence change the relationships they perceive between ethics and values, and violence. As a discipline, it is psychology that has emphasized understanding how those kinds of perceptions develop, and psychologists have unique expertise for asking questions about the impact of political violence on

individual children. Until now, however, psychological work related to the effects of political violence has been clinically focused.

Political Violence and Children's PTSD Symptomatology

Psychologists have long been concerned with the effects that long-term exposure to political violence has on children's psychological well-being. Most research efforts in this regard have used a trauma model and measured the consequences of chronic exposure to violence in terms of mental health outcomes. While findings concerning children's specific patterns of symptoms have varied across studies as a function of the domains of adjustment targeted and the characteristics of the samples studied, in general, children's reactions to long-term exposure to political violence have included anxiety, depression, dissociative symptoms, psychosomatic disturbances, anger and hostility, and other symptoms that have come to be associated with post-traumatic stress (Browne, 2003; Shaw, 2003)

While reports on the PTSD symptomatology of war-affected children have not been uniform, in general it is understood that certain features of the conflict situation tend to increase the likelihood of symptom development while others play a protective role and may facilitate adaptation. In general, the proximity (emotional and physical), intensity, and chronicity of violence make a difference, as does the extent to which the child's normal environment is affected. Thus typically children are minimally affected by isolated or short-term instances of violence, especially if parental support remains available. By contrast, repeated or long-term exposure to political violence, societal disintegration, and displacement have been shown to be major risk factors. As indicated by risk accumulation models, multiple stressors

have synergistic effects (Straker, 1987; Wessells, 1998) that are further amplified when the stressors are chronic.

Research has also indicated that the extent to which children are affected by exposure to and involvement in political violence depends not only on the characteristics of the violence itself, but also on certain characteristics of the children. A child's age, for example, is important as children are differentially vulnerable according to their social, emotional and cognitive capacities (Browne, 2003; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1993). Because of their general inability to comprehend the world around them, younger children are more vulnerable to prolonged separations from adults and to adults' dysfunction than to the violence itself. With age children become more capable of appreciating the significance and magnitude of the surrounding violence. While older children's increased awareness of the situation is likely to increase symptom development, their developing sense of group and political identity provides them (especially adolescents) with a source of identification and support and protects them from the stresses associated with the unavailability of (functioning) adults. As a consequence, however, older children and adolescents tend to become more directly involved in ongoing political conflicts, with many also becoming active participants in violent activities. While this leads to increased risk (both in terms of physical danger and psychological consequences), it has also been suggested that the sorts of interpretations and meanings that children attribute to the violence in which they participate might mitigate symptom development.

Political violence can be given different meaning in different communities and while no public discourse or ideology can fully remove suffering, it can shape what is experienced as meaningful or hopeless. An ideological belief structure is an important element of a group's social capital, especially for groups that experience continuous existential threat (Dawes, 1990). In particular for those who become directly engaged in political struggle and fighting, ideology can bolster their sense of self-worth and integrity by offering a compelling narrative that renders their world comprehensible and their own violent behaviors justifiable. While systematic research relating in-depth assessments of children's ideological beliefs and the effects of political violence is scant, there is some evidence suggesting that ideological commitment may act as a protective factor against at least some of the negative outcomes associated with exposure to political violence. As an example, Palestinian youth, who are assumed to have available to them a wealth of religious and cultural justifications for their engagement in political violence, have been shown to display less psychological distress (e.g., less depression, insecurity, anxiety) than, for example, Bosnian youth, who cannot rely on a similarly coherent belief system for explaining the violence to which they are exposed (Barber, 2005; see also Laor et al., 2006; Punamaki, 1996; Punamaki, Quota, & El-Sarraj, 1997)

This and similar findings relating ideological commitments to decreased symptomatology and increased sense of wellbeing have received quite a lot of attention, in part because they indicate the possibility of resilience in the face of adversity. This potential makes for the kind of story that Americans, above all, like to hear – one in which terrorist acts, hardship, displacement, and loss result in

renewed meaning and strength of character (McAdams, 2006). We think it is important to note, however, that the very ideological belief structures that offer some measure of protection against the symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety) that typically accompany sustained exposure to violence, may at the same time have serious deleterious long-term effects on children's and adolescents' development (Dawes, 1990; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1993; Laor et al., 2006; Posada & Wainryb, 2006; Punamaki, 1996). We return to this issue in the next section.

Psychologists have made clear contributions to documenting the traumatic effects of political violence on children, and have been working on the ground in conflict-torn regions of the world, adapting established treatments to local situations (Stepakoff et al., 2006; Wessells, 2005; Wessells & Kostelny, 2002; Wessells & Monteiro, 2006). However, the tendency to ground questions concerning the effects of political violence on children within a mental health paradigm may be overly narrow for several reasons. One issue is that in situations of chronic stress it may be more adaptive to contain or repress strong feelings than to yield to them. The combination of coping mechanisms such as habituation and repression and children's ability to draw on ideological belief structures makes it so that the impact of violence may not always be overtly apparent and measurable in terms of distress symptoms. In other words, the symptoms already documented may underestimate the scope of the problem. A second issue is that mental health, clinically defined and assessed, does not include aspects of healthy personhood such as the capacity to function as a member of a civil society in a moral sense. These aspects of psychological health are not only important for individuals, but are also critical for collective well-being.

Relatedly, the ideologies that protect mental health have problematic consequences for precisely those capabilities. Based on these reasons we argue that the significant effects that involvement in and exposure to political violence may have for children may be found not so much in the realm of psychopathology and disease, as in the forms that their long-term development takes.

Consider the following. Nearly half of all armed conflicts fought in the last decade have lasted around 10 years, and some much longer (Wessells, 1998). Such protracted conflict situations tend to normalize violence, with entire generations being sucked into a bleak moral vacuum, growing up knowing only violence, rights violations, and social disruption. While we do not mean to suggest that serious psychopathology can be ruled out, especially in contexts in which children face extreme brutalization on a large scale, the sequellae of exposure to political violence are not likely to be limited to emotional distress. Thus the question of real significance is not so much whether children cope emotionally—most do—but what price they (and ultimately all of us) pay, in terms of their long-term development, for their continued coping with and adaptation to such excruciating living conditions in which exigencies of mere survival may oblige them to breach moral values and codes.

Children's moral capacities—their capacity to discern right from wrong, their concepts of justice and rights, their understandings of themselves and others as victims and perpetrators of violence, their ability to sustain relationships in the face of loss, disagreement and disappointment—rank high among the realms of development likely to be profoundly disrupted by chronic exposure to and

participation in violence. This is likely to be especially true for children who have been active participants in political violence—children who themselves have been combatants. Research on the long-term impact of political violence on these children's development, in particular their moral development, is nevertheless scant, not only because this type of in-depth research is difficult to carry out, but also because, understandably, most research undertaken with children affected by armed conflict has tended to accommodate the most pressing needs for immediate intervention (Dawes, 1990; Muldoon, 2004). In spite of the challenges surrounding this type of research, psychologists, among others, need to begin addressing through research crucial questions concerning how long-term exposure to the constellation of experiences associated with political violence influences children's sense of themselves and others as moral agents.

Political Violence and Moral Development

Moral development research conducted over the last 25 years with normative populations has demonstrated that, in contrast to what was previously assumed (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969), even young children develop basic prescriptive moral concepts (i.e., ways of thinking about welfare, justice, and rights), and do so on the basis of their actual social interactions (for reviews of this research, see Smetana, 2006; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). This is to say that while children generally attend to the rules and teachings of adults, it is not the internalization of rules per se that is at the basis of children's moral development, but children's own perceptions and interpretations of the features of social interactions (e.g., their construal of the consequences of an act of aggression or a violation of a promise), including –or

perhaps in particular—those interactions involving conflict, transgressions, injustices, and aggression. Although the lion’s share of this research has been conducted in Western societies, research conducted in other cultures, including our own research in the Middle East and South America, suggests that these processes are largely the same across cultures (for a review of research conducted across cultures, see Wainryb, 2006). Across the world, children tend to reason that it is morally wrong to, for example, hurt or mistreat others, not because they may otherwise be punished, but rather because of their concerns with fairness and the well-being of persons, and they tend to bring these concepts to bear on actual social interactions.

And yet, children do hurt others and are often hurt by others. The concrete instances in which this happens hold in them an inherent tension between what children think and what they sometimes do (Wainryb et al., 2005). One could regard morality as insisting on self-denial, such that the demands of morality are necessarily antagonistic to other interests that an individual may have. From this perspective one would view these instances as evidence that people find it difficult to live up to the demands of morality and are not, in general, very moral. Such a perspective is rooted in a conception of morality as radically “disengaged from the perspective of the individual agent—from the full range of concerns associated with the living of an actual human life” (Scheffler, 1992, p. 18). Scheffler and other contemporary moral philosophers (Hampshire, 1983; Williams, 1985) have suggested, instead, that the discussion of the relations between morality and the interests of the individual requires consideration of the complexity of psychological reality. Importantly, they

have underscored that the idea of morality is fully compatible with a realistic picture of human deliberation, including experiences of ambivalence and regret in the face of situations of moral conflict in which no act is available that is without pain, loss, or harm. This latter view is more closely aligned with our conception. Moral life is not about sainthood, and experiences of mistreating or inflicting harm on other people, as well as experiences of being mistreated or hurt, are part of children's *moral* lives.

Given the inevitability of causing and experiencing harm in an interpersonal world, it is essential that we understand how people integrate such actions and make sense of themselves and others as moral agents. Thus in recent years we (Wainryb, 2004; Wainryb et al., 2005) have moved away from the more typical approach to studying moral development in terms of children's judgments about hypothetical scenarios, toward a focus on how children understand and make sense of their own and other people's *very real* harmful and unjust actions. How do children grasp these situations? What sense do they make of them? What do they think about themselves and others and whatever circumstances lead up to such hurtful interactions? How do they integrate these experiences into their understandings of themselves and others as moral beings? Existing findings point to the role of personal experiences, and of children's construction of meaning out of those experiences from their own unique perspectives, as important forces in the development of a moral self.

Because this perspective on moral development does not exclude the perpetration of aggression from the scope of moral life, it lends itself to asking how children who

are exposed to and are themselves active participants in political violence might develop a sense of morality and a sense of being moral agents. What shape this process might take in the face of such serious adversity is not known. Research conducted in the United States with abused and neglected children and with juvenile delinquents has shown that these children's unique interpersonal experiences tend to skew their understandings of what is right and fair and how they think of themselves as victims and/or perpetrators of harm (Tisak, Tisak, & Goldstein, 2006; Wainryb, Komolova, Coquillon, & Florsheim, 2007). This cannot, however, be merely presumed to be the case for children who participate in political violence, as their situation is unique in that injustice, violence, and aggression are part of their *normative* context.

It is not surprising that living in the midst of social disarray and poverty, having been displaced and often separated from their parents and families, children become easy targets for recruitment into violent organizations. Nowadays, given the availability of lightweight automatic weapons, even young children can become fighters. Globally there are an estimated 300,000 child soldiers (McKay, 2005; Wessells, 2005). Children are recruited by both government forces and non-state groups. In some cases children are coerced into joining armed groups through forced conscription or abduction. Even when not coerced, children's "voluntary" decision to join an armed group is typically informed by the adverse conditions in the midst of which they grow up: children join armed groups to escape abject poverty or family violence, to remain with a family member who had recruited or enlisted, to acquire skills or education that cannot be had elsewhere, or to gain prestige, power, or

excitement. It is also the case that in social contexts characterized by injustice and lack of opportunity, youth may become highly politicized and volunteer to join armed groups out of ideological conviction.

While many of the children who join armed groups engage only in the more peripheral activities, serving in roles such as porters, cooks, or spies (with many girl soldiers serving in the role of “wives” or sexual slaves), a large proportion become fighters, participating in killings, torture, and destruction. There is evidence that, across the world, many armed groups target young children for indoctrination into programs that glorify violence and self sacrifice (Browne, 2003; Cairns, 1996).

One of the consequences of such indoctrination processes and of those ideologies that ascribe meaning to the violence in their lives, is that children in politically violent worlds become identified with an in-group and develop a clear sense of the out-group as *Other*. This process, it should be noted, is part of normal human development. In fact, the tendency to glorify the in-group and to denigrate the *Other* is so robust and compelling that it can be triggered with even trivial laboratory experiments (e.g., Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992). Thus it is not surprising that in the context of political violence, and even without explicit training, children acquire, often from a young age, belief-systems concerning the presumed goodness of the in-group and the badness of the *Other*, as well as collective narratives concerning their group’s mistreatment at the hands of the *Other*.

While these communal ideologies aid children in making sense of their bewildering and distressing lives, they also tend to disallow or dismiss ambiguities and contradictions (e.g., Punamaki, 1996; Wessells, 2005), thereby leading children

to develop polarized understandings of the complex realities within which they operate, dehumanize the *Other*, and ultimately justify violence and revenge. Strongly held ideological beliefs can also lead youth to higher risk taking and acceptance of future loss, or an increased “willingness to sacrifice” (Laor et al., 2006) which, when combined with a distorted image of the *Other*, might contribute to continuing cycles of violence. It has been argued, for example, that the phenomenon of suicide bombers is shaped by such communal beliefs. The target group is portrayed as so evil and threatening that killing its members is seen not as murder but as justified revenge and admirable self defense. As the language of “martyrdom” replaces the language of “suicide”, the larger purpose and nobility of those who carry on the attacks are reframed. Note, indeed, that the distinction between suicide and martyrdom is given in the belief system, as martyrs exist only in the minds of those who confer their status (see Hoffman & McCormick, 2004).

It is also well known that many fighting groups have developed brutal and sophisticated techniques, explicitly calculated to isolate children from their communities, harden and numb them to violence, dehumanize their victims, and prepare them for killing. At first children are often forced to witness violence and subsequently are made to join in and brutally beat and kill others. Sometimes they are compelled to participate in the killing of family members, because it is understood by these groups that there is “no way back home” for children after they have committed such crimes. Many armed groups also employ incentives to reward “bravery” and risk taking (McKay, 2005; Wessells, 2005).

While many children and adolescents participating in terrorist and armed groups are entirely beyond our reach, increasing numbers are, as when they participate, in the aftermath of conflict, in disarmament-demobilization-reintegration (DDR) programs under the auspices of the UN and other child protection agencies. Gargantuan DDR efforts have been tremendously aided by needs-assessment studies carried out by DDR officers and related personnel (e.g., Wessells, 2005; Wessells & Kostelny, 2002; Wessells & Monteiro, 2006). These studies have worked to uncover the many psycho-social needs of this group of children. It has been suggested (e.g., Wessells, 2005) that, of the entire DDR process, the task of reintegrating children into civilian life, whether their communities and families of origin or some newly reconstituted community, presents the most challenges. Indeed, family reunification, when possible, is only the beginning of an ongoing process. Returning child soldiers bring with them the residues of their war experiences. Confrontations that escalate to violence are not uncommon as child soldiers have learned to use violence as a means for achieving goals. Furthermore, because these children have been the instruments of brutality, sometimes committing atrocities in their own communities, reintegration often requires a process of community negotiation and healing. Indeed, concerns often exist in the communities themselves, with many fearing, resenting, and even rejecting former child soldiers. It is at the time of reintegration that a better, more thorough, understanding of children's moral capacities would be useful.

And yet, even as a number of researchers have alluded to the potential importance of understanding the moral development of children exposed to political violence (e.g., Cairns, 1996; Dawes, 1994; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996; Leavitt & Fox, 1993;

Macksoud & Aber, 1996; Punamaki, 1996), systematic research in this area has been very limited. Much of the psychological research about these issues has relied on assessments based on hypothetical moral dilemmas designed to rank order the sophistication of a person's moral reasoning. Such dilemmas have little relevance to the unique types of conflicts and moral realities produced by terrorism, war, displacement, and chronic violence. Thus findings such as that children growing up in a war-torn region reason at a lower (or higher) global stage of moral thinking than children growing up in a nonviolent region tell us little regarding how these children might make sense of their experiences and of themselves and others as moral beings.

The important, and more useful, questions bear on how these children think about the moral complexities and ambiguities within which they function, and how they reconcile themselves with their own experiences of both committing and enduring injustice and violence, and integrate them within a sense of themselves as moral—a sense deemed essential for sustained commitment to moral action (Colby & Damon, 1992; Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Matsuba & Walker, 2005). Our own preliminary studies with Colombian children and adolescents (Posada & Wainryb, 2006, 2007), who had been displaced from their homes and communities and exposed to extreme forms of violence, suggest that children do develop basic moral concepts (for example, that it is wrong to steal from others, that it is wrong to inflict harm on others)—not an insignificant finding given that the circumstances of their lives would not seem to facilitate (explicitly or implicitly) such learning. In fact, we might suggest that this, rather than the protective effects of ideology, is a real source of hopefulness about the long-term potential for these children to develop a healthy

sense of moral agency. That said, our research also indicated that these children weighed and applied these concepts to specific situations in ways that rationalized and excused harm inflicted on those deemed to be outside the scope of justice and justified retaliation and revenge (Opatow, 2001). In fact, participants tended to describe themselves as victims even in situations in which they were the perpetrators of violence. Also troubling was the fact that the majority consistently predicted that they and others would actually steal and inflict physical harm on people in a variety of situations, despite acknowledging that this was wrong. While the distinctions the children and adolescents in these studies drew between moral prohibitions (oughts) and normative expectations can be seen as realistic and sophisticated, they also indicate a construal of the world as one in which nobody follows ethical principles. It is not difficult to imagine that, in such a world, the motivation of a child to do the morally right but difficult thing, may be undermined.

These findings point not to a generalized moral truncation (as might have been the case had we merely assessed, globally, their “moral stage”), but rather to significant gaps in the ways in which these children integrate different aspects of their experience—gaps whose ultimate developmental import is not yet well understood. Children exposed to political violence have conceptions of what is just, right, and good. But those conceptions are divorced from what they expect others, and themselves, to actually do; and they are applied selectively, for some but not others. As noted, children’s conclusion that “no one abides by moral rules anyway” is likely to affect their motivation to draw distinctions between right and wrong and between those people who can be trusted and those who cannot, thereby diminishing their

ability to engage with others in a trusting way and to control their own aggression (Posada & Wainryb, 2006; see also Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996). This type of thinking is also likely to translate into rather thin views of themselves and others as moral agents. Additional risks lie hidden in children's polarized view of themselves and others and their distorted interpretations of their own and other people's actions. While our data are preliminary and based on relatively small samples of children and adolescents in a single war-torn country, they do suggest that there is reason for concern.

Another issue of importance is how these children might negotiate views of themselves and others as moral agents in relation to their specific experiences of victimization and perpetration. The more salient moral concepts are for individuals, the more inclusive their boundaries for the in-group, and the less punitive they are towards out-group members (Reed & Aquino, 2003). Previous work suggests that both past moral experiences, and what people make of those experiences, can further the moral self. This work shows that part of being a moral agent in the real world means to negotiate not only the potential for being a very good person, but also the threat implicated in one's actions, namely that one is, in fact, sometimes a bad person, or at least a self-centered person (Wainryb et al., 2005). How those events in which one could be seen as 'bad' are explained or negotiated is critical for understanding how children come to evaluate themselves and others along moral lines and, even, how they understand their place in the world. It has been suggested that in the case of severe disruptions to the coherence of one's moral narrative—as may be the case for these children—their continued well being might depend upon

their being able to incorporate and accommodate these disturbances and challenges to their prevailing narrative of self understanding (Dwyer, 1999). Dwyer indeed suggests that this process lies at the very basis of the possibility of reconciliation, both at the personal and collective levels. These abilities are thus likely to be essential for reintegrating child soldiers and breaking the cycles of violence.

All this should leave us deeply concerned about the potential that political violence around the world has for undermining children's development as moral agents, and with a set of as-yet-unanswered questions. Those include how political violence influences children's normative beliefs about aggression, their conceptions of the in-group and out-group, their understanding of the conflict, and their construction of their own and others' moral acts. In fact, it is likely that the first three sets of questions can be studied in the context of the latter. We have begun to develop ways of asking how exposure to political violence might change the way we make sense of our own, and others' moral transgressions, using methodologically rigorous techniques including in-depth individual interviews and narrative analyses. Ultimately, of course, the question is how these youths' experiences with victimization and transgression can be reconciled or integrated in ways that help both individuals and groups to heal. The answer to that question will not come easily, and moving from that answer towards a significant positive impact in conflict-torn regions around the globe will be even more complicated. But we believe that the survival of humanity, in the broadest sense of the term, requires it.

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