

The Psychological Impact of Political Violence on Children

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

We, developmental psychologists, have learned that starting at the age of 2-3 children are consistently bothered by injustice and are concerned with people being hurt, physically or psychologically (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 1998; Wainryb et al, 2005). This seems to be true around the world. Studies have been conducted in South American countries (such Brazil and Colombia), in China, Japan, India, In African countries such as Zambia and Benin, and in Middle Eastern countries. In spite of the considerable diversity in cultural beliefs and in religious beliefs, children across the world tend to be concerned with the welfare of others and feel it is wrong to hurt or mistreat people (Wainryb, 2006). Of course this is not to say that children never hurt others or that they never behave unfairly towards others. They certainly do. But we know that in those instances children struggle to make sense of their own actions, and in so doing further their sense of themselves as moral beings. Being a moral person does not mean being a saint. Being a moral person implies the need to negotiate not only the potential for being a very good person, but also the threats implicated in one's actions, one's potential for also, sometimes, being a bad person or doing the wrong thing.

One of the ways in which we learn about these processes in our research is by observing and analyzing how children talk about situations in which they have caused harm to others. Our research (e.g., Wainryb et al., 2005) has shown that children consider their own needs and their own reasons for having acted the way they did, and they also consider the needs and feelings of the people they hurt. They think about how their actions affect others, and they think about how to repair relationships. And children, we have learned, find ways to integrate their own acts of perpetration — when they hurt others — within a sense of who they are, what kind of people they are and what kind of people they want to become. Children, even young children, can typically acknowledge the

consequences of their actions without being completely devastated by what they did. There is a sense in which they take this 'bad' part of themselves and integrate it into an understanding of themselves, and also rely on these experiences to draw conclusions about their future behavior — their future self. That is the gist of what we want to see in a healthy, developing, young person.

But what happens to this process through which children develop a sense of themselves as moral beings when children are chronically exposed to political violence? We're talking about a problem of very serious proportions. As reported by the *UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict*, children in approximately 50 countries grow up in the midst of armed conflict and its aftermath. In the last decade alone, wars injured 6 million children, killed 2 million, and displaced nearly 30 million. A landmark U.N. report called special attention to the approximately 300,000 child soldiers forced to serve in various military roles, including participation in killings and torture (U.N., 2006).

Psychologists naturally have been concerned with the impact of political violence on children, but most research has used a trauma model. The focus of psychologists' work has been on measuring the consequences of chronic exposure to violence in terms of symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress (Browne, 2003; Shaw, 2003). While assessing children's level of distress is important, the tendency to ground questions about the effects of exposure to violence exclusively within a mental health paradigm is overly narrow, because clinical definitions of mental health (i.e., as lack of symptoms) do not include aspects of healthy personhood, such as children's ability to tell right from wrong and to view themselves as moral agents, or their capacity to function as members of a civil society in a moral sense.

The moral self is necessary for sustained commitment to moral actions, and is also likely to be crucial for the capacity for forgiveness and for participation in civil

society (Matsuba & Walker, 2005). Thus, these aspects of psychological health are not only important for individuals, but are also critical for collective well-being. In fact, given the protracted nature of contemporary political conflicts, where violence (injustice, violation of rights) is normalized, children's moral capacities are most vulnerable. In particular we are concerned about how children might develop ideologies and psychological mechanisms that promote and perpetuate communal violence.

In the last few years, we (Posada & Wainryb, 2006, 2007; Wainryb & Posada, 2007) have been studying displaced children in Colombia — children who had been forcibly displaced from their communities due to violence perpetrated by militia groups and guerrilla groups. Many of these children had been separated from their parents or lost their parents; most live in abject poverty and are continuously exposed to many different kinds of violence in their daily lives.

In general, we found that in spite of their truly horrifying experiences, these children nevertheless develop basic moral concepts (for example, that it is wrong to steal from others, that it is wrong to inflict harm on others). This is not an insignificant finding, given that the circumstances of their lives would not seem to facilitate (explicitly or implicitly) such learning. In fact, we think that this may be a real source of hopefulness about the long-term potential for these children to develop a healthy sense of moral agency.

But while these children have conceptions of what is just, right, and good, the majority also expects that most people (themselves included) would actually steal and get into physical fights, in spite of their acknowledging that these actions would be wrong. In other words, these children tend to construe their world as one in which people do not follow ethical principles. It is not difficult to imagine that, in such a world, the motivation to do the morally right thing may be undermined. It is also not difficult to imagine that in such a world, it is hard to

trust others, and indeed, oneself, to honor commitments and control aggressive impulses.

This expectation, that no one abides by moral rules, is also likely to translate into fairly “thin” views of themselves and others as moral agents—something that is clearly evident in how these children talk about situations in which they had been the perpetrators of violence. In our research, we asked displaced Colombian children to tell us about a time when they hurt someone they knew.

What follows is an excerpt from a story that a displaced teenage boy told us about a time when he hurt someone:

“I remember a time when we were in the classroom and the teacher left. Then I tried to hurt one of my best friends with a rope that was hanging from the roof. I put it around his neck. I don’t know why I did it. Everybody saw that, and they called the principal ... and she began to scold me and she told me that she might expel me from school. And then she told me that I was useless, and after that everybody avoided me and they made me feel like I don’t belong in there. And so I felt really bad, I cried.”

This narrative, which is fairly representative of the narratives given by this group of children, has two noteworthy features. First, as this teenage boy tells us about a time when he hurt his best friend (he put a rope around his neck—not a small infraction!), he devotes just three sentences to describing what he did to his friend, and devotes the rest of the narrative to describing how he himself had been victimized: he was scolded, he was told he’d be expelled, he was told he was useless, everyone avoided him, and he felt sad. This pattern was true of about 70% of the narrative accounts produced by displaced children. Indeed, one of the essential features of these children’s perpetration stories was their focus on the idea that their perpetration had turned *them* into victims. This

pattern, which was pervasive among displaced children, was never found in normative samples in the United States (Wainryb et al, 2005).

The other important feature of this narrative is the prevailing emphasis on observable events and behaviors, and the near total absence of references to the meanings that these behaviors may carry. There is almost no inferential content in this account – no references to non-observable information, the type of information that requires the communication of internal states, desires, wants, feelings, thoughts. It is even devoid of emotional language, especially in the portion that is linked to this child's perpetration. Notably, the only reference to internality and emotions appears when he switches to describing how he had felt victimized: "I felt really bad, I cried". This feature, too, is entirely inconsistent with the ways in which children and adolescents in normative samples speak about and think about times in which they had hurt others (Wainryb et al., 2005).

Should we be concerned about this? Yes.

By talking about mental states, emotions, interpretations, intentions—people make sense, more or less coherently, of complex situations. It is through this type of language that people connect a sequence of actions in a comprehensible way, by relating the actions to a sense of themselves as agents with beliefs, desires, and feelings. It is also through this kind of language that children (and adults) connect specific events they experience to a more continuous sense of the type of person they think they are.

When this type of language is missing from a narrative, actions are rendered incoherent; the actions simply stand in for internal character. This teenager's narrative suggests avoidance and lack of integration. It is as though this child cannot integrate a sense of himself as a wrong-doer, but is fully aware of himself as a powerless weeping victim. In this narrative, the impoverished language leaves his behavior incomprehensible even to himself – the only clarity in this

story involves the pain of his own exclusion after having attempted to hurt his friend.

This child's inability to make sense of his own behavior, and the juxtaposition of that senselessness with his much more coherent pain of victimization, is deeply problematic. It is deeply problematic for this individual's future welfare. But it is also deeply problematic for us to live in a world populated by hurting adolescents who cannot make coherent sense of their own dangerous behavior, but who can see themselves very clearly as victims.

These data thus suggest that there is reason for concern. In fact, 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. The disruption in the development of moral capacities is likely to be even more severe for child-soldiers, who at an early age were forced to become instruments of killing and torture.

This is indeed the case with hundreds of thousands of children around the world who are recruited into guerrillas, militias, and terrorist groups (U.N., 2006). Given the availability of lightweight automatic weapons, even young children can become fighters. Sometimes children volunteer out of identification with a political or ideological cause, many times they are forcibly abducted. While some of these children engage only in the more peripheral activities, the majority become fighters, participating in killings, torture, and destruction. In fact, many armed groups target young children for indoctrination into programs that glorify violence, bravery and self sacrifice (Browne, 2003; Cairns, 1996; McKay, 2005; Wessells, 2005). One of the consequences of such indoctrination processes is that children acquire belief-systems concerning the presumed goodness of their own group and the badness of the *Other*. While these communal ideologies help children make sense of their bewildering lives, they also lead children to develop polarized understandings of the complex realities within which they operate,

thereby perpetuating violence and revenge (e.g., Punamaki, 1996; Wessells, 2005). It is also well known that many fighting groups have developed brutal techniques, explicitly calculated to isolate children from their communities, harden and numb them to violence, dehumanize their victims, and prepare them for killing. Often children are first forced to witness violence and subsequently are made to join in and brutally beat and kill others (McKay, 2005; Wessells, 2005).

The following excerpt from the book *Beasts of No Nation*, by Uzodinma Iweala, an American writer from Nigerian descent, conveys the voice of Agu, a child soldier in an unnamed West African country, as he describes killing a man for the first time:

“Commandant is shouting, come here Agu. Come here right now...I am standing in my place and I am just fearing. I am not wanting to be killing anybody today. I am not ever wanting to be killing anybody. Bloody fool, he is saying to me. Come here and bring that machete. But I am still not moving. Commandant is stepping to me and grabbing my neck. You idiot, he is shouting...you want to be a soldier? Well—kill him. KILL HIM NOW! I am starting to crying and I am starting to shaking. And in my head I am shouting NO! NO! NO! but my mouth is not moving. [...]

Kill him, Commandant is saying in my ear, and lifting my hand with the machete. Kill him. The enemy is saying to me, please don't kill me. Then he is starting to piss and he cannot even be stopping himself. See this man, Commandant is saying, look at him. He is not even man. He is just going to toilet like sheep or goat or dog...Kill him now because I am not having the time...If you are not killing him I will be thinking you are spy...He is squeezing my hand around the handle of the machete and I am feeling the wood in my finger. It is just like killing goat, just bring this hand up and knock him well well. He is taking my hand and bringing it down so hard on top of the enemy's head ...the man is screaming

AYEEEEIIII, louder than the sound of bullet and then he is bringing his hand to his head but it is not helping because his head is cracking and the blood is spilling out like milk from coconut. I am hearing laughing all around me as I am watching him trying to hold his head together. He is annoying me and I am bringing the machete up and down and up and down ... Then I am hitting his shoulder and then his chest, and looking at how Commandant is smiling each time my knife is hitting the man.

As was the case with displaced children in Colombia, here too there we hear, in the background, a sense of normative morality: it is wrong to kill, I shouldn't kill. But the description itself, which is movingly portrayed, focuses on sensory-perceptual experience, not on interpretation and meaning. Agu's actions are rendered incoherent and disjointed. In addition, and much more clearly than in the case of the narratives given by displaced children, this narrative illustrates the process by which the enemy is dehumanized. And in the process of moving away from normative morality there is a moving towards the values of the only available authority figure -- a figure that derives its authority from terror.

The central questions for these children thus are, how they reconcile themselves with their own experiences of both committing and enduring injustice and violence, and how they integrate these experiences within a sense of themselves as moral—a sense that is deemed essential for sustained commitment to moral action. Listen, again, to Agu's voice:

I am not bad boy. I am not bad boy. I am soldier and soldier is not bad if he is killing. I am telling this to myself because soldier is supposed to be killing, killing, killing. So if I am killing then I am only doing what is right. I am singing song to myself because I am hearing too many voice in my head telling me I am bad boy...so I am singing,

Soldier Soldier

Kill Kill Kill.

That is how you live.

That is how you die.

This is my song and I am singing all of the time, wherever we are going, to be reminding myself that I am only doing what soldier is supposed to be doing. But it is never working because I am always feeling like bad boy.

For child soldiers, the task of reconciling themselves with their experiences is a difficult task, because they must integrate their experiences without denying their own moral agency and without adopting a sense of themselves as amoral or immoral. That is, they need to end up with a sense that they *are* moral agents (including those times when they engage in violence), and also that they are capable of *also* doing the right thing. Both are necessary for them to be able to make different choices in the future.

Not surprisingly, it is common for those who come into contact with returning child soldiers, to want to exonerate them. What follows is an excerpt from the book *A long way gone: Memoirs of a boy soldier*, by Ishamel Beah, who as a 12-year-old in Sierra Leone was abducted by the Revolutionary United Front. Here he speaks about his experiences 3 years later, when he was chosen to give up his weapon and enter a rehabilitation camp for returning child soldiers:

“When I finished telling Esther the story, she had tears in her eyes, and she couldn’t decide whether to rub my head, a traditional gesture indicating that things would be well, or hug me. In the end she did neither but said: ‘None of what happened was your fault. You were just a little boy’ ... I became angry and regretted that I had told someone, a civilian, about my experience. I hated the ‘*It is not your fault*’ line that all the staff members said every time anyone spoke about the war.”

Such anger may seem puzzling. But consider that the statement “*it was not your fault*”, while heartfelt and well-intentioned, acts so as to deny Ishmael’s sense of

agency. This type of statement also denies whatever positive consequences Ishmael perceives may have resulted from his participation in a political/military movement – in his book Ishmael Beah tells about having become committed to the ideology of his group, believing strongly in the validity of what they did. References to this type of commitment and allegiance appear in the accounts of other former child soldiers.

Having raised the alarm about the implications of collective violence in general and participation as soldiers in particular for children's moral development, one might ask whether there is any hope at all. In closing, we want to focus on two areas where there may be reservoirs to call on for rehabilitating children's sense of moral agency.

One of those ways involves the fact that these children retain what we might call reservoirs of moral sentiment – relationships to others. Indeed, one common thread in very diverse accounts given by child soldiers, is the depiction of strong friendships developing among child soldiers. In the book *Beasts of No Nation*, for example, Agu maintains a friendship with another boy; they comfort and aid one another throughout their ordeal. Similar experiences involving interpersonal trust and caring among child soldiers are described by Ishmael Beah. These relationships maintain the kinds of sentiments of care and concern that can be used to remind child soldiers that they also acted as positive agents, and that they can do so again.

A second route involves helping former child soldiers, as well as the communities from which they come, to make sense of their own actions with regard to the larger political and historical conflict. Children and communities naturally attempt at making sense of their actions and of the events endured. Unfortunately, this often happens by calling upon entrenched ideologies and in-group/out-group dynamics. There is little doubt that the presence of a truly evil enemy makes

one's own killing sensible and right. Sadly, this kind of ideology also makes one more likely to pursue violence again.

But there are ways to place one's own and other people's unthinkable actions within the context of a more complex understanding of the political and historical conflict, one that acknowledges the culpability and atrocities on all sides. This type of context can help to make sense of a child soldier's actions without relying on a polarized view of self and *other* that justifies the killing. In some sense, this is the ideal pursued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa – the notion that a sufficiently comprehensive understanding of the blood on everyone's hands will reduce the potential for renewed conflict.

Many children participating in terrorist and armed groups are entirely beyond our reach. But increasing numbers can be helped, as when they participate, in the aftermath of conflict, in programs of disarmament-demobilization-reintegration (DDR) under the auspices of the U.N. and various child protection agencies. Whereas the tasks of disarmament and demobilization are well structured and tend to proceed fairly smoothly, the task of reintegrating children into civilian life, whether their communities and families of origin or some newly reconstituted community, presents the most challenges (Wessells, 2005).

This is because returning child soldiers bring with them the residues of their war experiences. On the one hand, they have learned to use violence as a means for achieving goals. Also, because they have been the instruments of brutality, often forced to commit atrocities in their own communities, many communities fear, resent, and reject former child soldiers. So reintegration often requires community negotiation and healing as well as help for the individuals.

Ultimately, of course, the question is how to help these kids reconcile or integrate their experiences with victimization and transgression in ways that help both individuals and groups to heal. The answers to these questions will not come

easily, and moving from these answers towards a significant positive impact in conflict-torn regions around the globe will be even more complicated.

We believe that these children's stories and narratives are not only a key to seeing what is going wrong with children exposed to violence, but they are also likely to be a way to put things right. But not all stories will put things right in a sustainable way. The more sustaining stories will be those that embrace everything about these children and their place in the world – the good, and the bad. The best stories will be the complicated, full ones, those that encompass where the children started, and where they have been. Agu ends with a foreshadowing of that kind of story:

And every day I am talking to Amy. She is white woman from America who is coming here to be helping people like me...she is telling me to speak speak speak... I am not saying many thing because I am knowing too many terrible thing to be saying to you. I am seeing more terrible thing than ten thousand men and I am doing more terrible thing than twenty thousand men. ... So I am saying to her, if I am telling his to you it will be making you to think that I am beast or devil. Amy is never saying anything when I am saying this...*and I am saying to her, fine. I am all of this thing, but I am also having a mother once, and she is loving me.*

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