Paper

Human Development

'And So They Ordered Me to Kill a Person': Conceptualizing the Impacts of Child Soldiering on the Development of Moral Agency

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Child soldiering · Moral development · Violence perpetration

Abstract
Approximately 300,000 child soldiers serve in various armed groups around the world, and become directly implicated in the perpetration of kidnappings, killings, and torture. Considering that children construct moral concepts and a sense of themselves as moral beings in the context of their everyday interactions with others, the concern with how their harrowing experiences of violence may affect their moral development is particularly compelling. To date, however, no research has been conducted examining how these youths grapple with the violence they have perpetrated and how they reconcile their own actions with a view of themselves as moral people. In this paper, I review the limitations of constructs relying on moral disengagement and post-traumatic stress, which are typically used for examining the aftermaths of violence perpetration, and outline a new framework grounded on the normative developmental process whereby children grapple with their experiences of wrongdoing.

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Much has been written over the years about the effects of war and violence exposure on children's moral capacities [e.g., Cairns, 1996; Dawes, 1994; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1993; Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Rafman, 2004; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2008, 2010]. Presently, it seems that the concern with the effects of *exposure* to war and violence is no longer sufficient, as it has become increasingly apparent that children, many as young as 7 or 8 years, are themselves actively engaged in armed conflict. Estimates indicate that approximately 300,000 child soldiers (specifically, children under the age of 18, as defined by the United Nations Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed

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Conflict) currently serve in various armies and armed groups, being implicated in over two thirds of current sociopolitical conflicts across the world [Machel, 2001; United Nations, 2006]. And although some of these youths serve in noncombatant roles, such as cooks, porters or spies, many are directly implicated in the perpetration of serious violence against other people, including participating in kidnappings, killings, and torture.

In spite of the growing concern among humanitarian and psychological communities about the well-being and long-term adjustment of child soldiers and, especially, about their potential for becoming reintegrated into civil society in the aftermath of conflict [Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Betancourt et al., 2010; Klasen et al., 2010], no relevant developmental research has been conducted to date examining these youths' moral development. Considering that children construct moral concepts and a sense of themselves as moral beings in the context of their everyday interactions with others [Turiel, 1998; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005], the concern with how the harrowing backdrop of violence and aggression in their lives may affect their moral development seems particularly relevant.

In what follows, I first consider the dearth of knowledge surrounding the moral development of child soldiers. Next, I discuss the limitations of two conceptual models typically used for thinking about how perpetrating violence may impact future development – one relying on the construct of moral disengagement and the other on the clinical notion of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Finally, I articulate an alternative perspective grounded on the normative developmental process whereby children grapple with their experiences of wrongdoing [Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a; Wainryb et al., 2005; Wainryb, Komolova, & Brehl, 2011; Wainryb, Komolova, & Florsheim, 2010; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010]. This latter framework, which marries moral development theory [e.g., Turiel, 1998, 2006; Wainryb, 2006; Wainryb & Brehl, 2006] with the narrative construction of experience [e.g., McAdams, 1993, 2006; Pals, 2006; Pasupathi, 2001], makes it possible to investigate the multiple forms that youths' grapplings might take in the aftermath of perpetration of severe violence and suggests a number of potential directions for future research, while also serving as a springboard for scaffolding further development.

The Dearth of Data on Child Soldiers' Moral Experiences

Psychologists have long discussed the possibility that war and political violence may negatively affect children's moral development [e.g., Cairns, 1996; Dawes, 1994; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1993; Punamäki, 1996], but systematic research about these issues has been relatively limited. Extant research has focused narrowly on determining whether children growing up amidst political violence reason at lower, less mature stages than children in nonviolent communities, with little attention given to how war-exposed children make sense of their experiences with violence in light of their moral concepts. More recently, research has begun to show that even when living in the midst of continuous violence, war-exposed children develop moral concepts [Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Rafman, 2004]. This research also shows, however, that these youths' moral concepts of what is just and right are often divorced from what they expect themselves and others to actually do, and are applied selectively to some people but not others. For example, children and adolescents who had been

displaced by civil war in Colombia reported expecting that they and others would steal and hurt people despite acknowledging that it would be morally wrong to do so, and many of them, especially adolescents, judged that taking revenge against some groups was justifiable [Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2008]. Overall, these findings point to significant gaps between what children who have been exposed to war and violence know about right and wrong and what they expect they, and others, might do – findings that make sense given that these youths' everyday lives abundantly illustrate the very behaviors their moral concepts decry.

Although in the last few years psychologists have also begun documenting the varied experiences of youths who take active part in armed struggles [e.g., Barber, 2009; Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Boothby, Crawford, & Mamade, 2009; Wessells, 2006], to this date there has been no systematic research asking how – or even whether – youths in such combatant roles make moral judgments about their experiences in the armed groups, or about the possible long-term implications of these experiences for their future moral capacities. The dearth of systematic research into the long-term implications of child soldiering for moral development is not surprising given competing priorities such as conducting concrete assessments of their needs [e.g., Williamson & Robinson, 2006] or assessing PTSD levels [e.g., Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Betancourt et al., 2010; Klasen et al., 2010], both of which can directly assist agencies that are charged with rehabilitating and reintegrating these youths into civil society.

And yet, in spite of the shortage of systematic empirical research, depictions of child soldiers as morally stunted and relentless killers are quite common and are often uncritically propagated by the media. These views are reflected in, and perhaps in part also fueled by, the well-documented fears and anxieties about child combatants' proclivity for violence reportedly expressed by adults living in diverse societies affected by conflict such as Cambodia [Boyden, 2003], northern Uganda [Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2006], Sierra Leone [Betancourt et al., 2008] and El Salvador [Santacruz & Arana, 2002], who distrust former child soldiers and often portray them as damaged, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. Regrettably, even well-intentioned, protective agendas have given rise to unrestrained comments about the amoral nature of child soldiers, unwittingly disseminating these overgeneralizing assumptions. As an example, during former President Clinton's trip to Africa in 1998, First Lady Hillary Clinton spoke out against the use of child soldiers, saying 'War … deforms their sense of right and wrong, turning 12-year-olds into coldblooded killers' [Auster, Whitelaw, Roberts, & Shapiro, 2000].

Psychologists who have directly examined child soldiers' experiences challenge their portrayal as pathological or irredeemable killers, both for being inaccurate and for promoting cynicism and discouraging investment in these youths' rehabilitation and future. In direct counterpoint to this view and its potentially perilous policy-related implications, researchers have striven to underscore child soldiers' resilient moral potential by noting, for example, that these youths often refer to justice-related reasons when explaining why they participated in armed struggle and typically develop very close friendships and loyalties within their groups – all of which is said to suggest that child soldiers are not entirely lacking in moral concerns, capacities, and sensibilities [Boyden, 2003; Wessells, 2006]. Nevertheless, even these researchers, along with many others, both acknowledge that these youths often engage in unspeakable acts of violence against others, and bemoan the dearth of the sort of

empirical data that could help clarify how this violence might affect these youths' moral development [Barenbaum et al., 2004; Boyden, 2003; Jones, 2002; Rafman, 2004; Wessells, 2006].

What remains unclear, however, is what kind of conceptual framework might best serve the empirical investigation of this question. As suggested by the gaps observed in the reasoning of youths who had been exposed to war and political violence [e.g., Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010] – gaps pointing to their difficulty integrating their moral concepts with their actual experiences with violence and injustice – it would appear that standard moral reasoning approaches which assess whether child soldiers develop moral concepts or make judgments of right and wrong would not be sufficient. This is because the more critical questions are likely to be how – or even whether – these youths grapple with the killings and violence that they had themselves perpetrated and reconcile these actions with their moral concepts and with some sort of a view of themselves as moral people. Frameworks that bring to the fore notions of moral disengagement and post-traumatic stress are better suited for addressing these questions but present specific limitations; I discuss each framework in turn and then articulate an alternative approach that expands on the normative process of moral agency construction.

Why Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement May Not Capture Youths' Grappling with the Aftermath of Their Wrongdoing

Moral disengagement [Bandura, 1990, 2002] offers a distinct explanation for how people come to commit violence against others and also for how these actions ultimately affect, prospectively, their moral development. In short, the construct of moral disengagement directly ties the perpetration of violence to the lifting of moral censures. The twin assumptions behind moral disengagement are that people refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards because such behaviors bring self-censure through self-regulatory sanctions, and that these self-regulatory functions may be selectively disengaged by various strategies.

One set of disengagement strategies, relying largely on motivated cognitive reconstrual and rationalization is said to operate by cognitively restructuring either the meaning of the behavior or the nature of the target of that behavior. The restructuring of the meaning of a harmful behavior can be accomplished by presenting the behavior as serving socially worthy or moral purposes, by relying on euphemistic language that labels harmful conduct as harmless or respectable, or by disregarding or minimizing the effects of the behavior. The targets of harm can be reconstrued in ways that divest them of human qualities or assign them bestial qualities – a process that has also been described in terms of delegitimization [Bar-Tal, 2011; Bar-Tal & Hammack, in press] and moral exclusion [Opotow, 2005]. The cognitive restructuring of harmful conduct and the dehumanizing of victims are thought to be the most powerful set of mechanisms for disengaging moral controls because they not only eliminate self-deterrents, but also engage self-approval in the service of harmful exploits [Bandura, 1990, 2002; see also Bar-Tal & Hammack, in press; Batson, Thompson, Seuferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999; Bersoff, 1999; Tsang, 2002].

The other set of mechanisms posited to serve the disengagement of self-censoring sanctions is said to operate by minimizing or distorting the relation between

agent and behavior so that people might see their actions as springing from authority dictates rather than as something *they* are responsible for. Presumably, once people think of themselves as obligated to obey someone's orders, they see themselves more as extensions of the authority figure rather than agents, and are thus spared self-censuring constraints [Bandura, 1990, 2002; see also Kelman & Hamilton, 1989].

Importantly, these strategies are thought to persuade individuals that what they are doing is either not wrong or not really their doing. Thus, although moral disengagement is often taken to be synonymous with numbness or dissociation and a generally diminished agency (a confusion made plausible by the colloquial meaning of the term 'disengaged'; see, e.g., Jones [2002]), morally disengaged individuals are not numb or dissociated but rather capable of behaving in harmful ways while sustaining a view of themselves as moral. Or, as Bandura [2002] put it: 'People have little reason to be troubled by guilt or to feel any need to make amends for inhumane conduct if they reconstrue it as serving worthy purposes or if they disown personal agency for it.' Moreover, the further assumption is that moral disengagement practices interrupt moral development, thereby leading to further disengagement and, in a sort of moral slippery slope, to moral deterioration [Bandura, 1990, 2002; see also Moshman, 2004, 2005; Opotow, 2007; Staub, 1989, 2005].

Although no research has been conducted directly testing its hypotheses among groups that perpetrated large-scale violence against others, the construct of moral disengagement is quite readily offered as an explanation for why people engage in genocides [Moshman, 2005; Staub, 2005], military and political atrocities [Kelman & Hamilton, 1989], and child soldiering [Wessells, 2006], as well as for the psychological aftermath of committing such large-scale violence. In spite of its widespread acceptance, however, the construct of moral disengagement is not without challenges.

First, though it is possible that people might, at times, convince themselves that they did nothing wrong or that whatever they did was not their responsibility, this conceptual model provides no criteria for distinguishing unequivocally between instances when such conviction ensues from motivated rationalizations and those that may reflect genuinely held divergent interpretations of complex social and psychological facts [Bersoff, 1999; Turiel, 2006; Wainryb, 2000]. Therefore it is unfeasible to merely assume that any instance in which perpetrators of harmful behavior present themselves as blameless is evidence for their moral disengagement.

Furthermore, and perhaps more critically, clinical research suggests that, except for a minority of 'facile moral disengagers' who are true psychopaths, disengagement strategies among other groups of perpetrators do not work so completely as to rid these individuals of their conscience [Kerig & Becker, 2010]. Instead, people's reliance on strategies such as rationalization and diffusion of responsibility leaves behind a lingering sense of agency as well as inner whisperings of conflict, confusion, ambivalence, and distress about what they had done. Other research further reinforces this view by suggesting that strategies involving cognitive reconstrual and diffusion of responsibility may not in fact eradicate the perpetrators' sense of agency and the possibility of internal moral conflict or lingering distress as fully and permanently as the construct of moral disengagement requires. For example, research on social-cognitive processes raises some doubt about the extent to which motivated cognitive reconstrual produces disengagement. Analyses of motivated cognition [Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Kunda, 1990; Tsang, 2002] suggest that there is no

evidence that rationalizations can fully do away with the knowledge or judgment that triggers the rationalization in the first place, thus suggesting that rationalizations might not permanently eradicate moral conflict. Similarly, findings from social psychology research suggest that instances involving diffusion of responsibility may be less straightforward than it is typically assumed, for even in situations of obedience to authority, people do not merely transfer all of their sense of responsibility to another person in an unproblematic fashion. For example, most participants in Milgram's [1974] study who believed they were inflicting harm on the victim by continuing to administer electric shocks, also struggled with the decision to obey and displayed apprehension, unease, hesitation, and reluctance, and when asked at the conclusion of the experiment who was responsible for what happened, they assigned substantial (though not all) responsibility to themselves. Analyses conducted on real-life events confirm such findings. As an example, reports concerning the infamous May Lai incident indicate that even those men who obeyed Sgt. Calley's order to execute civilians reportedly 'showed great stress' (p. 8), with some arguing with him and some crying even as they followed his orders [Kelman & Hamilton, 1989].

The possibility that disengagement strategies may not completely and permanently eradicate moral agency, moral conflict, or all lingering sense of ambivalence or distress does not, in and of itself, disqualify or invalidate the idea of disengagement. In fact, the measures typically used to assess disengagement implicitly recognize that disengagement is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon, as these measures allow us to locate individuals along a continuum from less to more disengagement [Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001; Hymel, Rocke Henderson, & Bonanno, 2005; Jackson & Gaertner, 2010; McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2006]. But *conceptually*, the construct of moral disengagement overlooks the limitations of disengagement strategies and therefore cannot explain how some people may come to be 'a little disengaged', or what it might even mean to be a little, or less than fully, disengaged. As a consequence, this model fails to provide guidance for examining the forms that such conflict, ambivalence, or distress might take in the immediate or long-term aftermath of perpetrating violence, or the ways in which individuals might grapple, perhaps at some later time, with the aftermath of their wrongdoing. Instead, we are left with an expectation of individuals who become inexorably more and more able to harm others without feeling guilt or distress.

The PTSD Construct: Why It May Not Capture Agency and the Interpretive Processes Underlying Symptoms and Maladjustment

Whereas individuals who kill others are not often deemed deserving of sympathy or of research efforts devoted to understanding how their actions may affect their own sense of well-being and future development, soldiers and war veterans are one notable exception. And the construct of PTSD has long been the main organizing model for both research and clinical efforts designed to document, diagnose, and ultimately treat the pervasive short-term and long-term adjustment difficulties afflicting this population. Unlike the construct of moral disengagement that minimizes the likelihood that those engaged in violence suffer from internal conflict or distress, the PTSD model not only acknowledges the lingering distress associated with the experience of extreme violence, but makes it its focus of study. In spite of its

conceptual and clinical value, however, the PTSD model may not be sufficient for capturing the extent to which people's sense of themselves as moral agents may become implicated in their distress or suffering in the aftermath of having hurt another person. This is so for two distinct, though related, reasons.

Typically, the medical model underlying the PTSD construct conceptualizes soldiers and veterans not as perpetrators of violence but as victims of trauma, with the prevailing assumption being that the reasons for suffering among this group of people are primarily related to their exposure to violent conditions, the risks they face in combat, their fear concerning the dangers of being shot, and the stresses and grief of seeing friends being killed [MacNair, 2002]. This exclusive focus on victimization and fear as the main sources of trauma has not gone unchallenged, however. An army officer and psychologist, Lt. Col. David Grossman [1995], called into question the widespread assumption that 'battle fatigue' (as PTSD-like symptoms were known) results from fear of injury or death, and argued that even under situations of self-preservation, individuals' resistance to killing is strong. He noted that '... looking another human being in the eye, making an independent decision to kill him, and watching as he dies due to your action combine to form the single most basic, important, primal, and potentially traumatic occurrence of war' [Grossman, 1995, p. 31] – an observation that is especially significant inasmuch as it suggests that the act of killing is likely to have problematic aftereffects not only when the killing is done in the context of committing atrocities, but also when it is engaged in as ordinarily required in combat.

Evidence supporting the proposition that killing may be a distinct source of trauma and PTSD emerged in the context of research conducted with large stratified random samples drawn from US government data about Vietnam veterans [Fontana & Rosenheck, 1999; MacNair, 2002] and Iraq veterans [Maguen et al., 2010], showing that killing and injuring others are stronger predictors of chronic PTSD symptoms than other indices of combat, even when controlling for general combat exposure. And more recently, in the midst of a growing body of data showing that former child soldiers present with moderately-high to high levels of PTSD symptoms [e.g., Derluyn, Broekaert, Schuyten, & De Temmerman, 2004; Klasen et al., 2010; Kohrt et al., 2008], two studies conducted in northern Uganda [Annan et al., 2006] and Sierra Leone [Betancourt et al., 2010] indicated that when compared to youths in the armed groups who had been *exposed* to even very severe forms of violence, those youths who had *perpetrated* violence against others reported the most negative symptoms and long-term psychosocial outcomes.

In spite of increasing calls [e.g., Litz et al., 2009; MacNair, 2002] to consider killing and the perpetration of violence as unique etiological sources of trauma (calls prompted in part by the ongoing challenges faced by the PTSD community in addressing some of the mental health needs of soldiers and veterans of recent wars), it is unclear that PTSD provides the best model for addressing these issues. A main problem in this regard is that the PTSD model relies on a conceptualization of trauma as a fear stimulus, with evidence-based treatments designed to extinguish fear memories. Addressing the sorts of cognitions and emotions that are more likely to arise subsequent to the *perpetration* of violence, such as shame, guilt, and remorse, may require a different model or approach [Litz et al., 2009]. It is too early to tell, for example, whether extinguishing guilt, shame, or remorse is feasible from a clinical perspective [MacNair, 2002]; it is also unclear whether to do so would, indeed, be

desirable – at least as far as it relates to the potential prospective effects that such a move may have on moral development.

A distinct though related limitation of this model is that the medical framework underlying the PTSD construct may be too narrow for addressing these issues, as it emphasizes symptoms and outcomes but gives relatively short shrift to people's agency and to the centrality of meaning making [see also Rousseau & Measham, 2007]. But if acts such as killing and injuring others affect people's mental health, well-being, and adjustment, it is likely that such acts do not exert their problematic effects *directly* but rather do so as people grapple with the meaning of their actions, or as they avoid or fail to fully grapple with these meanings. Typically, it is the ways in which people interpret their experiences that shed light on how such experiences translate into specific outcomes – including, for example, how the experience of fear and victimization translates into specific PTSD symptoms and associated outcomes. But people's interpretations of their own actions are likely to be uniquely important for understanding the effects of perpetrating violence because perpetration directly and uniquely implicates agency. Therefore, the extent to which individuals do or do not construct themselves as agents in those events, and the form of agency they attribute to themselves, may be key to understanding their relative distress, guilt, shame, depression, or whatever it is they experience subsequent to their having done violence on others.

The above discussion concerning the limitations of the PTSD construct is not to be taken to mean that PTSD symptoms are insignificant. In fact, it is essential that such symptoms do not go unattended, as PTSD (especially among children and adolescents) is known to be associated with significant long-term developmental impairments, including the initiation of pathways of violence and antisocial behavior [Kerig & Becker, 2010]. Rather, what the above discussion suggests is that, even as the PTSD construct may help shed light on distress symptoms and difficulties in psychosocial adjustment, it does not provide a road map for understanding the interpretive and meaning-making processes that may connect the act of perpetrating violence to those negative outcomes, much less tell us whether there is a range of possible interpretations of perpetration that may be differentially associated with more and less severe outcomes.

The Possibility that Child Soldiers Do Not Eschew Moral Agency but Construct It in Problematic Ways

The notion of moral disengagement assumes that people render themselves capable of harming others either by rationalizing their actions and converting them into harmless, justified, or even morally desirable actions, or by minimizing their sense of responsibility for any harmful deeds they have carried out. Notably, this conceptual model overlooks the temporal course of these processes or the possibility that disengagement practices may leave a lingering sense of agency, conflict, or distress. Thus, morally disengaged people are thought to engage in harmdoing while remaining convinced that they are moral people and being free of lasting distress or conflict. By contrast, the PTSD model, being essentially a medical model, predicts that people who perpetrate harm on others will experience considerable and lasting distress, but does not inquire into how the felt distress may be related to people's

sense of their own agency vis-à-vis those actions. Ultimately, from each perspective, perpetrating violence is thought to negatively affect moral development and conduct: the construct of moral disengagement explicitly predicts inexorable moral decline and deterioration; the PTSD construct predicts long-term developmental impairments including involvement in violence and aggression.

I propose that the implications of perpetrating killings and serious violence may be understood differently if, rather than considering this phenomenon either as implicating a complete breakdown or disengagement of the moral system or as an instance of illness or pathology, we think of it in light of how people in their everyday lives make sense of their more mundane experiences of wrongdoing. Research has amply documented that starting at a young age children develop an understanding that hurting others is wrong [e.g., Turiel, 1998; Wainryb, 2006]. Nevertheless, it is also the case that most children (and adults) sometimes engage in acts that result in harm to others [e.g., Bersoff, 1999; Wainryb et al., 2005].

Typically, people do not necessarily refrain from doing harm until or unless they have convinced themselves that such actions are justified; in other words, moral disengagement is not a prerequisite for acting in ways that hurt others. Rather, hurting others in small and not so small ways is an inextricable feature of social life and normal human interactions. People, including children, sometimes engage in acts *knowing* (or suspecting) that such acts will be experienced as hurtful or unfair by others, but do so as they navigate, more or less deliberately and with more or less awareness, the trade-offs that real life presents between their own needs and desires and those of others; at other times, they come to recognize that their actions were hurtful only after the fact [Wainryb et al., 2005]. In either case, moral misbehavior does not necessarily act as a catalyst for further moral disengagement and moral deterioration. In fact, research suggests that experiences of moral transgression are laden with significant implications for people's views of themselves as moral beings [Baumeister, Stilman, & Wotman, 1990; Benke & Wodak, 2003; Krettenauer & Eichler, 2006; Wainryb et al., 2005, 2010, 2011]. Thus, rather than being a catalyst for moral disengagement and deterioration, moral misbehavior often catalyzes people's grappling – in more or less adequate ways – with their own conduct. And it is thus, as people grapple and try to come to terms with the harm they have committed, that they may develop increasingly complex, rich, and mature [Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a, b] or relatively problematic [Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010; Wainryb et al., 2010] understandings of themselves as moral agents.

Moral agency refers to people's understandings and experience of themselves (and others) as agents, that is, as people whose morally relevant actions are grounded on their own mental states, such as goals, beliefs, and emotions. In previous writings, I have offered a detailed account of how moral agency develops in normative contexts [Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a; Wainryb et al., 2005, 2010, 2011]. In short, in normative conditions, when the harms children engage in are relatively mundane – when they tell lies, exclude others from a game, spread rumors, or even shove or rough-handle someone in the midst of a confrontation – children are typically prompted to grapple with their wrongdoing either by the grievances and protests of those they harmed or by the questioning and probing of intervening adults. This sense-making process can be reliably observed in the types of accounts that youths make of their own experiences of wrongdoing [Wainryb et al., 2005, 2010, 2011]. As children talk about and explain how they came to hurt others in spite of knowing

that hurting others is wrong, they typically construct accounts that communicate not only what they did, but also what they wanted, thought, and felt in that situation. And it is by including these more psychological contents in their accounts that children come to see their own wrongdoing as arising from their own desires, beliefs, and emotions, and construct a sense of themselves as moral *agents*. Normally, children also incorporate in their accounts references to what they assume or infer the other people implicated in the event wanted, thought, and felt, thereby also constructing a sense of the other's moral agency. And so by representing in their accounts aspects of their own and others' psychological experiences, children construct a world in which agents, with distinct internal experiences, interact with one another in ways that result in misunderstanding, disagreements, conflicts, and hurts.

Importantly, this constructive process of accounting for their wrongdoing does not necessarily undo the negative consequences of their harmful behavior, transform it into acceptable behavior, or dilute their responsibility for it, as moral disengagement strategies would. Rather, as this constructive process gets played out across multiple experiences of harming others and struggling to make sense of those experiences, children often come to realize that wrong and harmful behavior stems from the difficult and sometimes bad choices they make between their own needs and those of others, as well as from the imperfection with which most people grasp their own and others' desires, goals, and beliefs. Though these accounts are not necessarily factually accurate, they are also not merely self-protective distortions, but often reflect what children believe to have happened [Wainryb, 2000; Wainryb et al., 2005, 2011].

This is important because children's capacity to restore their sense of being reasonably good people, or people who can make better choices in the future, is vital for their ability to function in a social world where the doing of harm is inevitable [Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a]. This process also makes it possible for children to bracket specific instances of wrongdoing in time and place, thus containing the negative impact of these events and reducing their intrusiveness, and to draw lessons about reparative actions and future behaviors, thereby transforming what might have been solely a negative experience into a source of growth. Ultimately, therefore, in normative conditions this constructive process allows children to acknowledge their capacity for wrongdoing while at the same time becoming more forgiving of themselves and others, capable of repairing and maintaining relationships in the face of occasional hurtful actions, and – importantly – also capable of thinking of themselves as imperfect though fundamentally moral people.

Viewing the problem in these terms offers a distinct framework for understanding the experiences of youths who perpetrate serious violence against others, and the impact that such perpetration may have on their moral development, in that we may think about former child combatants not as ill or morally disengaged, but as grappling with the meanings of their wrongdoing. And yet, this grappling may be uniquely problematic when the nature of the harmdoing is so severe that it presents critical challenges to the construction of moral agency. Instances of perpetration of extreme violence, especially the kind that seems irreparable, such as killing and maiming others, may be harder to reconcile with a view of oneself as moral than are relatively more mundane transgressions such as pushing and shoving, telling lies, or betraying secrets. As suggested by Grossman [1995] and others [King & King, 1999; MacNair,

2002], this might be so even in war contexts, where violence and killing are pre-
scribed or occur in self-defense, for even actions that are, or are thought to be, rea-
sonable and adaptive when under threat can nevertheless come to be profoundly
loathed. Thus, it is likely that child soldiers might experience unique difficulties in-
tegrating their wrongdoing with a sense of themselves as moral beings – difficulties
that might translate into accounts reflecting a fragmented sense of moral agency.

It bears noting here that these difficulties are not likely to affect only children
who serve in combatant roles. The grappling with one's harmful actions and wrong-
doings is an ongoing process, and even adult combatants are likely to experience dif-
ficulties integrating their experiences of having killed or seriously injured another
person within a view of themselves as moral beings. Indeed, it is likely that these dif-
ficulties lie at the basis of the severe and often intractable distress and disturbances
experienced by many war veterans [Grossman, 1995; King & King, 1999; MacNair,
2002]. Nevertheless, I posit that children and adolescents who perpetrate severe vio-
lence towards others in war contexts are likely to be at greater risk for developing
problematic forms of moral agency than are adult combatants, for a number of rea-
sons. Inevitably, the younger the child, the more limited her/his cognitive and social-
cognitive capacities, both for making sense of what she/he observes and for articu-
lating her/his agency vis-à-vis specific events; even adolescents require some scaf-
folding for coherently articulating how they were implicated in complex interactions
and what their own behaviors mean about the kind of person they are [Habermas &
de Silveira, 2008; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b; Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi,
2011]. Furthermore, it is well documented that youths are differently and uniquely
affected by trauma. Prolonged exposure to overwhelming stress and violence affect
the development of children's basic regulatory processes in the brain as well as the
establishing of integrative functioning across systems in the central nervous system.
The resulting impairments in self-regulatory processes severely impact children's
cognitive, social, interpersonal, emotional, and physical development, and render
them less capable of regulating their own emotions and aggressive impulses and
making sense of their own and others' behaviors [Perry, 2001; Perry, Pollard, Blakley,
& Vigilante, 1995] – all of which should negatively affect their ability to construct
moral agency about violent events. And finally, it is also likely that childhood and
adolescence are uniquely important periods for developing more general conclusions
about the self and about the social and interpersonal world. So while adults too con-
tinue to revise their views of the world and of themselves, they have a larger and
richer repertoire of experiences of themselves, and of others, as moral agents to help
them sort through, interpret, and accommodate complicated or threatening agency-
laden experiences; children and adolescents faced with similar experiences are like-
ly to experience heightened vulnerabilities as they try to construct a sense of their
own moral agency.

Altogether, while we cannot discount the possibility that models of illness or
psychopathology may be needed for addressing some aspects of the aftermaths of
violence perpetration for children and adolescents, a 'moral agency' framework al-
lows us to consider the difficulties or distortions child combatants may experience
as they grapple with their own severe wrongdoing in light of what is known about
the ways their peers deal with more mundane forms of wrongdoing. And because
there is likely to be more than one way to grapple with and account for even the most
violent and hurtful behaviors, a conceptual framework that examines moral agency

construction allows us to observe the diverse ways in which child soldiers might make sense of (or avoid making sense of) their violent actions, rather than limit us to the expectation that engaging in such behaviors results in generalized moral deterioration.

Some Problematic Ways of Narrating Instances of Severe Harmdoing

Difficulties grappling with their own severely violent behaviors may give rise to problematic or distorted constructions of moral agency that may be evident in how child soldiers narrate instances of their own wrongdoing. To illustrate this, I rely on a corpus of narrative accounts produced by 53 former child soldiers in Colombia, 30 males and 23 females between the ages of 13 and 17 years, who had been recruited into various Colombian armed groups at the average age of 11 (range of age at the time of recruitment was between 6 and 16 years) and had served in these groups for an average of 3 years (range 6 months to 10 years); their accounts were produced in the course of in-depth interviews tapping into different aspects of their experiences prior to and during their participation in the armed groups. In what follows I describe 3 problematic types of moral agency construction that were commonly observed in these accounts.

Numb Constructions of Moral Agency

One manifestation of problematic moral agency construction can be observed in *numb* accounts that fail to articulate a sense in which a person's actions arise from psychological experience; these accounts are thus devoid of references to desires, beliefs, or emotional responses. As an example, consider the following account narrated by a 14-year-old girl in response to the standard probe: 'Think back about a time when you did or said something and another person ended up being hurt or mistreated. Tell me everything you remember about that time' (the interviewer's questions are presented in capital letters):

> Well, that time, we were in – well, there were some young *guerrilleros*, maybe they were running away, and they got caught near Bolivar. And so my *comandante* got a hold of one of these *guerrilleros* and he took him, and he did – he extracted lots of information out of him, and then he tied him up like this, tied his feet up with a rope, a polyester rope, and then he tortured him. He cut off his fingers really really fast, and he destroyed his hands, and he – he did hundreds of things to him. AND YOU …? I was there, I was the one who gave the *comandante* the knives, I sharpened the knives and handed them over to him. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE THAT YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THAT TIME? That's what we did over there, that's how we participated. (F-29; age 14)

Though in her story F-29 provides the basic facts of what happened, including details such as the name of the town where the guerrilleros were caught and the material of which the rope was made, as well as the shocking particulars of the ensuing torture, she adds nothing in the form of psychological experience. This adolescent does not tell us what she thought about what her commanding officer was doing or what she would have liked to do, what she felt or believed at the time of the event, or what she feels or believes at the time of the telling – all of that is muted in her story.

It is important to note here that the probe used to elicit this account, as well as all other narrative accounts presented below, was framed in the passive form ('... a time when you did or said something and another person ended up being hurt'). Nevertheless, this is the standard probe that we have used with hundreds of children and adolescents drawn from normative samples [Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b; Recchia et al., 2011; Wainryb et al., 2005, 2010, 2011]. In spite of the passive voice elicitation, youths of all ages consistently provide accounts in which they are the agents of harm or unfairness, that is, stories in which they represent themselves as the doers of acts that result in harm or unfairness, and furthermore connect these acts to their own beliefs, goals, and desires. Hence the fact that this narrator does not even place herself in her own narrative until prompted by the interviewer should be seen as a meaningful omission, made perhaps even more striking by her stating, in response to the direct probe, 'that's how we participated'.

This form of numb agency construction is reminiscent of findings from research indicating that, especially among children, the capacities to think, organize, and integrate experience often collapse in the face of threat or trauma and, in their stead, dissociative mechanisms, including numbing, become activated [Fonagy, 2003; Perry et al., 1995]. In general, numbing may be uniquely protective and adaptive for child combatants in the short term, as the events are taking place or shortly after they have occurred while youths are still in the armed groups, because it serves to push away or avoid recognizing the implications of their actions. In this way, numbing is likely to minimize distress – something that might be particularly helpful in the stressful and harrowing circumstances in which these youths must operate. Whether numb agency has the same protective effects in the long term is a matter of debate, with some arguing for the continued adaptiveness of such strategies [e.g., Boothby et al., 2009] and others warning that continued numbing tends to initiate and perpetuate cycles of interpersonal violence [e.g., Fonagy, 2003; Kerig & Becker, 2010; Lansford et al., 2006]. The relation between numbing and moral thinking has not yet been examined directly. Nevertheless, because numb narration does not allow narrators to even begin to reconcile their own violent actions with their own moral concepts and beliefs, it is plausible that if maintained over the long term (e.g., after youths have exited the armed groups and as they ready to reenter civilian life, or even years after they have exited the groups), this way of constructing their own moral agency might result in youths developing a view of the world in which they cease to notice the ways in which their own actions, and perhaps also other people's actions, have moral relevance [Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Wainryb et al., 2010].

Constrained and Split Constructions of Moral Agency

A different way to grapple with severe wrongdoing is by constructing one's moral agency vis-à-vis the event as being somewhat diminished or fragmented. This may be accomplished via external constraints or internal splits. In narratives featuring external constraints, narrators construct events in ways that depict their own actions as arising from, or as being constrained by, external circumstances. In narratives featuring internal splits, narrators construct themselves as being of two minds or as feeling torn between conflicted goals or impulses. The resulting sense of *constrained agency* and *split agency*, respectively, can be observed in the next two examples:

Well – once the *comandante* he ordered, he ordered me and another guy – to go kill a man in a plantation – because he had cows, all of that, he had cattle, so he ordered us to kill him because he didn't, he didn't give away any of the cows he had – so he ordered us to kill him. And we killed him, and we had to take him, we took him and buried him. We tied him up and we – and we killed him over there where all our *compañeros* were. WHAT ELSE DO YOU REMEMBER? The *comandante* like – he ordered me to kill him and I was afraid and – he said to me that if I didn't kill him that – that they will kill me and so I had to do it – so I was all – all scared – thinking that they would kill me too. AND HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN THAT HAPPENED? I was – I was about 9 years old. (M-6; age 16)

So when I was pregnant, I was 3 months along, uh – my *comandante*, he asked if I had already taken something like a test, to enter, I mean, I was already inside [the armed group], but to know if I – and so they ordered me to kill a person. I remember it well, that – that kid, I knew him, he was 17 years old, he went to the same school I went to, but I never imagined that he was in the militias, that he belonged to the *AUC*. And so they sent me to kill him and – and I couldn't, two days I tried, and I couldn't, and at the end they told me that I had to do it already, and so I did it – I killed him, and I got – I came back to the house where I lived, not my aunt's house but the place where I lived with the armed group, and I told them that I had done it, and they sent for his body, and then then gave me a glass that had – blood – and – I had to drink the blood. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THAT TIME? That's it, really. (F-11; age 14)

Both of these stories are organized around a sense of coercion, as each youth received a similar command: to kill a person. Unlike F-29, who produces a numb account devoid of references to her psychological experience, each of these two narrators explicitly represents certain aspects of his or her psychological experience. M-6 speaks both about his *fear* and about what he *thought* would happen to him if he disobeyed. F-11 describes both what she *knew* about her intended victim, what she did not *imagine* about him, and what she still now *remembers*. In representing their own psychological experience, each of these narrators creates a sense of agency, albeit a not very elaborated one – so much so that we might think about these examples as illustrating what elsewhere we have termed sparse or narrow agency (see Wainryb & Pasupathi [2010]). And yet, what appears to be more meaningful in each of these accounts is the sense in which these youths experience their own sense of agency – however dimly represented – as somewhat fragmented or not whole.

M-6's account reflects a diminished sense of control and possibility. M-6 constructs his experience as such that the commanding officer's order and threat, and the subsequent fear he experienced, jointly robbed him of a sense of control, overwhelmed his grasp of himself as a choice-making being, and left him experiencing his sense of agency as being controlled or constrained, if reluctantly, by outside forces. He appears fragmented between a scared, reluctant agent and the threatening circumstances that dictate his actions; further, because he does not sufficiently represent his psychological experience, we are left to wonder about the source and meaning of his reluctance. Does his fear speak about a moral objection or about a belief that he is incapable of carrying out the order? Or perhaps he is merely afraid of thinking through what it might mean to carry out such an order?

F-11 tells us 'I couldn't, two days I tried, and I couldn't'. F-11 does not sufficiently elaborate on the psychological experience behind the 'trying'. Did she want to comply with the order? What did she think about it? How did she feel when she was trying to carry it out? Similarly, she does not much elaborate on the psychological experience behind the 'couldn't'. Although we cannot be certain, we get the sense

that her impediment to kill was not instrumental or pragmatic (it does not sound as though the problem was that her rifle was not working properly). Rather, we are meant to understand that the impediment was psychological. However, F-11 does not tell us whether this was because she felt afraid to kill, or because she did not know how to do it, or did not want to do it, or because she believed doing so would be wrong. These issues remain unclear because F-11 does not give full voice to her own psychological experience, she does not fully represent or articulate her internality. What her story does suggest is a sense in which her experience was split.

In some respects one might think of the two narrative accounts above as conveying or suggesting the experience of conflict. Under normative conditions most people can recall circumstances when they felt constrained by external factors and not fully in control of their choices or torn between competing goals or impulses, and thus acted in ways that felt inconsistent or incongruent with their moral principles (I didn't want to hurt her feelings but I really wanted to tell her how mad I was at her; I didn't want to leave him in the lurch, but I had to go back to work). Under such circumstances, however, most people might articulate a sense of being conflicted or at least give voice to a lingering sense of unease, puzzlement, or regret – so that a sense of agency is constructed that includes and 'owns' the experience of conflict. If the conflict entailed hurting others, most people (even young children) tend to also speak about the reasons or details that mitigate the harm, the actions they took or they intend to take to repair the damage, or the lessons they have learned about themselves from the experience that might guide their future behavior. In fact, researchers have speculated that the chance to construct narratives that acknowledge conflict as an aspect of human experience may be important for people to develop more flexible and forgiving understandings of their own and others' behaviors [Pasupathi & Smith, 2010]. In the accounts produced by M-6 and F-11, however, the narrators construct themselves not so much as conflicted but fragmented. Inasmuch as conflict is alluded to in these accounts, it is not fully articulated or 'owned'. Thus, the tension and lack of closure implied in or created by each story linger rather than are resolved or contained within an experience of 'conflict' [see also Rousseau & Measham, 2007].

In comparison to numb accounts of agency, it is likely that constrained and split accounts might be associated with only a temporary relief from distress in the short term. Research suggests that the fragmentation of agency is associated, in the longer term, with diminished mental health and subjective well-being [Robjant & Fazel, 2010; Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007]. Though it is harder to predict with precision the long-term effects of fragmented constructions of moral agency for moral development, it is possible that the continued and systematic eroding of their own sense of agency via external constraints or internal splits may lead youths to think that their control over morally relevant behaviors is limited. External constraints might locate the lack of control outside the individual, whereas internal splits might associate the lack of control with internal failures.

In considering the three illustrative accounts depicted above, the reader might wonder whether the diminished way in which agency is constructed in each account does not, after all, add up to moral disengagement. Thus, it is crucial to note at this point the ways in which numb, constrained, and split constructions of moral agency, such as those exemplified by the tellings of F-29, M-6, and F-11, are distinct in meaningful ways from moral disengagement.

First and foremost, unlike what is implicated in the notion of moral disengagement, numb, externally constrained, and split constructions of moral agency do not involve the narrator transforming his or her actions into morally acceptable or desirable actions. Consider the telling of F-29; nothing in her account suggests that she views her own actions or those undertaken by her commanding officer as morally justified. Even as numbing may act so as to temporarily insulate F-29 from distress, her dissociated beliefs and feelings are likely to remain largely undigested and encapsulated – rattling at the doorway, as it were [Kerig & Becker, 2010; Perry et al., 1995]. Similarly, whereas both M-6 and F-11 depict their own actions as being carried out under duress, with their narratives including explicit references to authority mandates involving substantial threat and coercive reach, and even as each of these youths obeyed these orders and diminished their sense of themselves as agents via the construction of external constraints or internal splits, their accounts, like F-29's numb account, did not articulate any sense in which their actions were morally desirable or acceptable. (Indeed, upon subsequent direct probing, each narrator judged his or her own actions to have been morally wrong.)

Furthermore, these youths' accounts also do not suggest individuals who feel justified because they do not view themselves as responsible for their actions – as might have been expected from moral disengagement via diffusion of responsibility – but rather of individuals who felt torn and reluctant. Interestingly, the narrators in the stories featuring constrained or split agency are reminiscent of the many participants in Milgram's studies who obeyed the authority's mandates while at the same time expressing distress and/or attempting (even if vainly) to resist. So their accounts reflect not individuals who are morally disengaged in the sense of being convinced that their doings are not their responsibility, but rather individuals who are grappling, in problematic ways, with their actions and their sense of themselves as moral agents and for whom these issues appear to remain, at the time of the telling, not fully articulated and largely unresolved.

Notable also is the fact that none of these diminished or fragmented constructions produced dehumanized versions of the 'other' – the sorts of distorted constructions of targets or victims as evil, dangerous, or lacking feelings or human qualities [Bandura, 1990]. Rather, F-29, M-6, and F-11 represented their victims in extremely sparse ways, their identity only minimally articulated and their psychological experience almost entirely absent. Though undoubtedly potentially very problematic, this type of narrowing of attention that allows a person to overlook another's presence is nevertheless different in important ways from the dehumanizing transformation of victims into deserving targets of maltreatment presumed to underlie processes of moral disengagement, as it cannot serve to rationalize or justify the harm inflicted upon them, thereby contributing to the sense of lack of resolution and perhaps distress. Altogether, then, these accounts are best understood not as instances of moral disengagement but as problematic ways in which youths come to terms with, or avoid fully coming to terms with, having done what they think are harmful acts.

Essentialized Constructions of Moral Agency

Interestingly, the problem with *numb, constrained,* and *split* forms of moral agency construction arose in each case from the youths' failure to fully represent

themselves as 'agents' with goals, beliefs, and feelings in a way that would allow them to own and integrate their actions with a sense of themselves as moral people. But problems can also arise when agency is more fully constructed. Such is the case when narrators do represent their own psychological agency but fail to integrate their past actions with a viable future. As a result, these youths construct their own sense of moral agency as *essentialized* – a rigidified or frozen understanding of themselves, one for which change or redemption appear impossible or unlikely. Consider the following example:

> So the day that I hurt a person was the day that they killed my cousins. We were fighting the *Autodefensas Campesinas*, and in the battle three of my cousins died. That day we captured – we killed 25 *paracos* [members of the paramilitary], we captured 10, and the *comandante*'s order was to dismember them and to send the pieces to each of their families. And that day was when – from the rage of having seen my cousins killed by those same people we had caught – I was so enraged that I started out by removing the fingers off a person with a power-saw, I cut the fingers off both hands, then an arm, I cut off the arm all around until I got to the shoulders, then I started out with the feet, I removed everything until I cut off his head, I took off his tongue, and I cut off the eyes, and I sent it all to his mom. That day I will never forget and I always carry this burden. Being here I remember it and sometimes I feel like crying for having done this to a person. And a few days later I thought about it and said to myself – how will be my death, will it be like that or how. (M-30, age 16)

Whereas the previous accounts suggested a muted or fragmented sense of agency, M-30's account is psychologically rich both in the way he depicts his past actions and the way he represents his present self. He depicts his internality – his rage – as being deeply implicated in his past behaviors. Like others, this youth too received an order to engage in violence against others. As he describes his ensuing actions, however, he does not construct his agency as numb, constrained, or split. Instead, he explains how his rage and his desire for revenge – that is, his own internal states – powerfully drove his behavior. As a result, though deeply horrifying, his actions are rendered comprehensible, presumably not just to us readers, but to himself as well. The present-time narrator ('Being here I remember it …') has a perspective and an emotional response different from those he had as the protagonist in the event, and yet there is a continuity between past-person and present-person inasmuch as the present narrator recalls the rage he felt and understands that this rage moved him to do what he did – however horrified, sorrowful, remorseful, or afraid he feels about it in the aftermath. In these respects, this youth seems to have constructed a sense of his own moral agency vis-à-vis these horrifying actions. Precisely because of this, essentialized constructions of moral agency may be somewhat less protective in the short term, when compared with numb and fragmented agency constructions, inasmuch as distress is likely to be experienced.

Essentialized constructions of moral agency may also become problematic if sustained unchanged over the long term, though in ways different from those associated with constructions of moral agency as relatively diminished. Normally, people grapple with their wrongdoing and consider the goals, beliefs, and feelings that underlie their harmful actions in ways that allow them to integrate those actions with a sense of themselves as imperfect but nonetheless moral agents. This process helps to bracket the wrongdoing within a certain time and space so that its negative effects are contained and the potential for future, more positive, actions is ushered in [Pa-

supathi & Wainryb, 2010a]. By contrast, in the account above, M-30 appears to be haunted by his actions, as though these actions, or their consequences and implications for the sense of who he is or who he has become, and who he can be, are inescapable. This youth thus constructs his experience of wrongdoing as having a pervasive and enduring negative causal meaning in relation to his future self. Indeed, he projects himself into an unbearable future ('I will never forget …'; 'I always carry this burden …'; 'how will be my death …').

Research has shown that accounts that construct a sense of agency that is rigidified or frozen, trapped by, or shackled to, past events, may be maladaptive in the long term because such accounts tend to perpetuate the unresolved events and limit growth, becoming associated with both lower well-being and maturity [McAdams, 1993; Pals, 2006]. The profound shame and self-condemnation likely to surround this type of essentialized construction of moral agency may also become deeply problematic not only because they perpetuate the grip of unresolved meanings and emotions, but also because they may lead to withdrawal, thereby decreasing the chances for corrective and reparative experiences [Litz et al., 2009]. This is not to say that people must find or create redemptive meanings of all negative experiences; indeed, such an expectation is not only implausible, but may hamper our understanding of the very notion of trauma [Pals, 2006; Rousseau & Measham, 2007]. Nevertheless, it is possible to conceive of a telling of a similarly horrifying, perhaps irredeemably horrifying, event as that recounted by M-30, in which the child complements statements that contribute to the construction of moral agency vis-à-vis the event itself, such as 'I will never forget …' or 'I always carry this burden …', with future-oriented projections of moral agency, such as 'I will make sure things like this don't happen in our country anymore', or even 'I will never ever do something like this in the future'. Such statements may preserve the sense of horror while at the same time articulating a bigger life within which this horror sits, and opening the door to the possibility of being a moral person in spite of it.

Directions for Future Research and Intervention

The main purpose of this paper was to articulate a conceptual model for examining the implications of severe violence perpetration for the moral development of child soldiers. In all, the narrative examples discussed above cannot be taken to mean that these youths do not suffer from PTSD. Indeed, a growing body of research suggests that child soldiers present with moderately-high to high levels of PTSD [Derluyn et al., 2004; Klasen et al., 2010; Kohrt et al., 2008], and that these symptoms are more severe for those youths who were directly implicated in the perpetration of violence [Annan et al., 2006; Betancourt et al., 2010]. Rather, what these accounts suggest is that considering child soldiers' experiences solely in terms of PTSD symptomatology might not be sufficient for capturing the ways in which these youths' interpretations of such experiences may be related to, and perhaps even give rise to, the observed psychopathology. Notably, furthermore, those very interpretations and meanings may be particularly important when the time comes for designing and implementing clinical treatments and interventions; I return to this issue later.

The accounts discussed above cannot be taken as proof that youths who have perpetrated serious violence against others *never* rationalize or justify their actions

or minimize their responsibility either. Indeed, it is possible that in eliciting accounts by asking youths about '... a time when you did or said something and another person ended up being hurt or mistreated', we do not capture instances of wrongdoing that they construct, spuriously or even genuinely, as morally acceptable or blameless. I have nevertheless argued that inasmuch as these youths may at times rely on moral disengagement strategies that lead them to view their actions as legitimate, such strategies are not likely to protect them from a lingering sense of confusion, ambivalence, or distress about their wrongdoing. Moreover, as suggested by the narrative excerpts discussed, it is quite apparent that, at least in regard to a subset of their experiences in the armed groups, these youths wrestle with their past wrongdoings and grapple with their sense of themselves as moral agents.

In fact, a close examination of the narrative excerpts discussed in the previous section suggests that what is needed is a conceptual framework that attends not only to the aftereffects of these youths' participation in violence (whether measured in terms of PTSD symptomatology or moral disengagement), but also to how these youths made sense of these events and of their own participation in these events. In these respects, a discussion in terms of moral agency construction, and in terms of the various distortions that may befall the process of moral agency construction, is likely to be useful both for grasping the complexity and heterogeneity of these youths' experiences and for scaffolding ways for them to move forward. Indeed, a perspective that focuses on youths' grappling with the aftermaths of their own violent wrongdoing opens the door to consider the sequelae of violence perpetration in terms less broad and global than do frameworks relying on PTSD or moral disengagement, and allows us to make a number of observations that cannot be articulated within the other, more commonly used, frameworks.

To begin with, the PTSD and moral disengagement constructs expect the perpetration of violence to catalyze a broad and generalized move towards psychological decline and moral deterioration. By comparison, the proposition that youth might grapple, albeit in problematic ways, with the aftermaths of their wrongdoing permits us to distinguish among the distinct ways in which youths wrestle with their past actions. Thus, for example, rather than being all of one kind, in the corpus of 53 accounts of transgressions generated by Colombian child soldiers, moral agency was variously constructed as numb (28%), constrained (32%), split (10%), and essentialized (12%); in many cases (26%), youths constructed their agency differently in relation to specific subepisodes within one larger event. Thinking about this phenomenon in terms of diverse forms of moral agency construction makes it possible for future research to ask about the relative prevalence of each type of moral agency disruption as well as about the specific short-term and long-term outcomes associated with each.

Furthermore, intrinsic to the notion of moral agency construction is the expectation that grappling with the meanings of one's actions is not something that happens at a single point in time and then stops. Rather, the storying of an experience can be – and often is – done over and over again. Therefore, the moral agency framework explicitly recognizes that people often revisit and rethink, or can be led to revisit and rethink, the meanings and implications of events in their lives at different times. In this respect, each of the narrative examples discussed above can be thought of as the way in which a youth constructed her or his sense of moral agency vis-à-vis a certain event at a given point in time. And although, in general, the ways in which

people initially narrate an event shapes and constrains how they will remember and understand that event, and what they will come to believe about themselves in relation to it, the retelling of experiences can also become an avenue for change [McAdams, 1993; Pasupathi, 2001; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2010; Weeks & Pasupathi, 2011]. Different instances of talking about a certain event have the power to make people rethink themselves, and not merely for defensive or presentational purposes, but rather because this is the way that people construct, reflect on, refine, and reconstruct a sense of their own moral agency in relation to complicated events. Thus, when utilizing a framework that examines youths' construction of moral agency vis-à-vis their past violence, future research might ask questions about the relative stability of these constructions, that is, the extent to which any one of the problematic ways of constructing moral agency persists relatively unchanged over time or gives way to other ways of thinking. Importantly, this question applies to youths' construction of both their own moral agency and their victims' agency. Put more concretely, from this perspective it becomes possible to assess whether youths who construct their own moral agency in relation to a specific event involving killing or torturing another person as, for example, numb or constrained, will think and speak about themselves in the same terms weeks, months, or years later, or whether perhaps future accounts of the same events give way to different – perhaps more fully agentic – ways of thinking about themselves and their role. Similarly, this framework permits future research to ask whether the dearth of representation of a victim's agency in the early storying of an event remains thus in the long term, or whether youths begin at later times to reflect on, and further elaborate on, their victims' internal experience.

An additional and distinct, though related, question that can be asked from this perspective bears on the extent to which the various problematic ways in which youths construct moral agency are circumscribed to their thinking about themselves and others around severely violent experiences, or become more generalized. Although the concept of moral agency is not synonymous with constructs such as moral identity [for a more complete discussion, see Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a], it is plausible that as youths observe or infer regularities while constructing moral agency around specific instances, they may come to draw identity-laden conclusions. Thus, future research may ask whether the same problematic ways in which youths think about themselves in relation to violent transgressions can also be observed in these youths' accounts of experiences that do not implicate the perpetration of extreme violence, such as incidents in which their own actions resulted in relatively minor or repairable harm against others. One might speculate that inasmuch as youths can construct a fuller and better integrated sense of their own agency (as well as a more fleshed out and elaborated sense of other people's agency) in relation to more mundane morally laden interactions, these pockets of relatively intact moral agency may help challenge the stability of the more problematic forms of agency and perhaps serve as the basis on which other, more adaptive forms of moral agency can be scaffolded in the longer term. Though this is less well understood, it is also plausible that less problematic constructions of moral agency around prosocial events (such as when a youth has helped another person) may also be relied on as reservoirs for scaffolding future development [Recchia et al., 2011].

Questions related to the extent to which youths' constructions of moral agency are stable versus changing and generalized versus context-specific bring to the fore

the tension inherent in our proposition, namely that events involving killing and other forms of severe violence can be viewed as being on a continuum with more mundane and normative forms of harmdoing, but also that such events are qualitatively different [Grossman, 1995; MacNair, 2002]. Asking how researchers might resolve this tension conceptually may be less important than asking how youths who have been directly implicated in such forms of violence do so – implicitly – in their experience. We speculate that some might be able to find ways of accommodating different views of themselves and might thus move relatively freely or flexibly between the more problematic constructions of themselves vis-à-vis violent events, and other more morally agentic ways of thinking of themselves; such flexibility is generally associated with better outcomes overall [Rousseau & Measham, 2007]. For these youths, the harrowing and the mundane become somewhat bridged. For others, the ways in which they have constructed their own agency in relation to killing or torture may occlude other possible landscapes of themselves both concurrently and over time. For these youths, the experience of having perpetrated serious violence against others remains rather discontinuous. Although such discontinuity implies a break from normative experience and may reasonably bring medical or clinical models rushing forward, even those cases may benefit from being examined in light of how youths generally grapple with their wrongdoing and construct a sense of their own moral agency.

But my argument goes even further. For I suggest that the narrative accounts that youths produce about their own experiences of perpetration can become not only a key to understanding what may have gone awry with them, but also a context for putting things right again, precisely because it is in the process of constructing and reconstructing accounts of their experiences that a new, or different, sense of moral agency may emerge. In this respect too, there is a significant difference between considering the sequelae of violence perpetration in terms of diminished or compromised moral agency, rather than in terms of moral disengagement. Given the assumption that reliance on disengagement strategies results in moral decline [Bandura, 1990, 2002], the conclusion that former child soldiers are morally disengaged might call for shoring up and buttressing their moral concepts and principles or finding ways to reinstate in them the belief that what they did was morally wrong. By contrast, the view of these youths as wrestling with their own moral agency vis-à-vis instances of wrongdoing calls attention not so much to their concepts of right and wrong, but to the ways in which they construct the details of their experiences, including their own and their victims' internality, and the specific difficulties they may experience integrating those details into a sense of their own imperfect moral agency.

This process might be best accomplished via the creation of narrative accounts in conjunction with others, as it is through such joint narration that young people, especially, can garner new perspectives on actions and events, create different meanings, and change their initial understandings. In normative contexts, children and adolescents tend to recount their hurtful behaviors to parents, other adults, and peers, and the ensuing conversations operate as the context within which youths make sense of their transgressions in ways that can help them integrate their own harmful potential with a continued sense of themselves as people who make, or are capable of making, moral decisions and regulating their aggression [Recchia et al., 2011]. But the psychosocial context in which child combatants operate is not likely

to offer such supports, as commandants and comrades in the armed groups are unlikely to be available for eliciting or listening to their accounts of perpetration experiences or offering much containment for their aggressive impulses. Thus, the assistance these youths will require to successfully navigate this task may need to come as part of the broader psychosocial interventions provided to them in the aftermath of conflict.

The idea that people's construction and reconstruction of their own stories may become a source of healing and development is not new [Pennebaker, 1997]. In fact, the telling and retelling of stories about traumatic events in people's lives has been frequently used for therapeutic purposes with PTSD victims, including war veterans and more recently with adult and child victims of war [e.g., Neuner, Schauer, Elbert, & Roth, 2002; Neuner, Schauer, Klaschik, Karunakara, & Elbert, 2004; Schauer, Neuner, & Elbert, 2005]. Typically in contexts where the goal is PTSD treatment, people are encouraged to repeatedly talk about the traumatic events in detail while reexperiencing all emotions associated with these events. The assumption is that, in the process of doing so, most people undergo a habituation of the emotional response to the traumatic memories, which consequently leads to a reduction or remission of PTSD symptoms. Recall, however, that thinking about this phenomenon solely in terms of PTSD may obscure the dimension of perpetration and the role of agency. The PTSD framework does not attend to the ways in which youths' own sense-making processes may be implicated in their distress or whatever symptoms they may experience, or how such sense-making processes may be used and redirected to ameliorate the distress and promote development. Thus, if narratives are to be used not solely for reducing PTSD symptoms and improving emotional well-being, but also for furthering the construction of moral agency among youths who have perpetrated violence, considerations other than encouraging emotional expressivity will be essential.

As a first step, it might be important to encourage youths to recount their own experiences of perpetration in ways that help them reconstruct, or reconstitute, the details of the events and elaborate on their own and others' agency. This might necessitate that youths include in their stories both factual elements (i.e., who did what, when, and where), as well as references to their own emotions, goals, intentions, and thoughts – including instances of doubt, uncertainty, and conflict – and their inferences about the psychological experience of others involved in the events. The elaboration of the details and nuances of the psychological landscape of events can work against numbing as well as help them make a different sense of experiences initially recalled as internal splits or external constraints, so that they can construct more integrated accounts of their own – and others' – agency in the midst of wrongdoing.

In this context, it may be important for adults assisting in the process to be sensitive to the subtle but critical differences between psychological contents that may be self-protective, self-restorative, and serve to further the development of moral agency, and those that may be protective but also diminish or undermine moral agency. When faced with complex and harrowing situations, such as those of former child soldiers, adults are often too eager to extinguish the upsetting memories or feelings, and relieve youths of their guilt and remorse by pointing to outside forces, coercion, or lack of choice. Statements such as 'you were the victim', 'you had no choice', or 'it was not your fault' are part of a natural caring response. But, paradoxically, they might also act so as to undermine agency and promote moral disengage-

ment. If these youths are going to be capable of making moral choices in the future, and if they are going to see themselves as capable of doing so, they need to retain, restore, or construct a sense of moral agency. And constructing a sense of moral agency includes acknowledging that they did do things in the past that were hurtful and wrong. Therefore, it will be important for adults assisting in the process not to deny the wrongness or the badness of these youths' actions, or their responsibility for these actions, as we do not want these youths to give up what they know is good and what they know is wrong; doing so undermines their need to feel remorseful and their ability to construct a sense of their own, complex agency.

However, adults should also be vigilant about the other extreme, as there will be youths for whom a certain incident of perpetration becomes a sort of litmus test for who they are or who they can be, and precipitates an experience of themselves that they cannot tolerate. Such rigidified constructions may severely limit opportunities for well-being, repair, and growth. Thus, these youths may need help examining what they did and acknowledging the reality of the event and its significance, without being defined exclusively in terms of their past deeds. While adults should not excuse them, they should encourage them to remain open to reinterpreting the meaning of past experiences over time, so that they can retell their stories in a way that ultimately helps them to contemplate and appreciate the complexity of the context, and work towards accepting themselves as complex moral agents, capable of bad *and* good.

In thinking about the telling and retelling of stories as a means for furthering development, it is also important to recognize the limits of redemptive storytelling. Indeed, ideas such as redemption, resilience, and the conquering of adversity are sometimes uncritically accepted in ways that can deform or constrain our understanding of what it might mean to narrate traumatic events [McAdams, 2006; Pals & McAdams, 2004]. Encouraging youths to recount their experiences of perpetration in ways that result in less rigidified and more growth-promoting resolutions does not entail encouraging them to transform their horrifying, gruesome, and deeply hurtful actions into positive or redeeming actions; indeed, some events may never get completely 'resolved' and their effects may forever linger. The goal is to help youths retell their stories in ways that release them from the grip of these events and allow them to integrate their past experiences with some broader possibilities for future action. Rather than leaving them rigidly defined by and shackled to the past, the goal is to help these youths to learn about themselves, others, and the world in which they function from their past actions; inasmuch as righting the wrongs is not possible, new commitments can be made that include making amends and reparations to individuals and communities. Like youths who construct their moral agency in numb, split, or externally constrained ways, these youths too need help working towards constructing and accepting themselves as imperfect moral agents.

In many respects, the propositions outlined in this paper are in line with recent scholarship that challenges the one-sided view of war-affected youths, including those in the role of combatants, as helpless victims, replacing it with a view of young people as active participants in their sociopolitical realities and as continuously engaged in making sense of these realities and of the roles they themselves play [e.g., Barber, 2009; Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006; Daiute, 2010; Franks, 2011; Hammack, 2011; Wessells, 2006]. Critically, however, it is important to recognize that youths' capacity to make sense of their own experiences is not necessarily associated,

exclusively and in an uncomplicated fashion, with optimal growth, competence, and resilience [Recchia & Wainryb, 2011; Wainryb, 2010]. The analyses outlined in this paper suggest that not all ways of drawing meanings out of one's experiences promote resilience and growth; some constrain development and may even undermine it in the long run [see also Hammack, 2011; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010].

And yet, a common argument made by those charged with delivering psychosocial services to these youths is that with proper economic and educational support most of these youths would successfully transition back into their former lives, but emphasizing and magnifying their vulnerabilities takes attention and resources away from meeting their economic and educational needs [e.g., McKay & Wessells, 2004; Wessells, 2006; Williamson & Robinson, 2006]; such arguments are often accompanied by a favorable consideration of avoidance and suppression as long-term coping strategies [e.g., Boothby et al., 2009; Wessells, 2006]. This paper calls these arguments into question. While much more research is needed to fully understand the potentially long-lasting effects that perpetrating violence may have on youths' moral development and devise ways to mitigate the impact of such experiences on these youths' developmental pathways, the present paper outlined a conceptual framework that may guide such explorations. Beyond the most critical concerns with youths' individual developmental needs and welfare, it is abundantly clear that, at the societal level, successful post-conflict resolution might depend on these youths being able to recall their own acts of perpetration in ways that preserve their sense of themselves as moral agents – flawed and human, but moral nonetheless – and be able to acknowledge the same about other aggressors, as these twin tasks may be essential for individuals and collectives to move beyond past wrongs.

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