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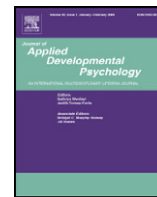
Book review

Resilience and risk: How teens experience their violent world, and what they learn–and lose–in the process

Brian K. Barber (Ed.), Adolescents and war: How youth deal with political violence. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, ISBN: 978-0-19-534335-9 (cloth), 332 pp., $45

It would be a very bad idea to think of war and political violence as "the new normal." But war and political violence, along with the accompanying displacement, deprivation, lawlessness, terror, and injustice are, indisputably, the context within which tens of millions of children around the world are growing up. In the past decade alone two million children were killed due to war and six million were injured. Ten million children live as refugees in foreign countries as a consequence of armed conflict; an additional thirteen million have been internally displaced in their own countries. Several hundred thousand serve as child soldiers in various armies, guerrilla groups, and militias; thousands more participate voluntarily on an ad-hoc basis as struggles break out in their towns and communities. Because of the drawn-out nature of most of these conflicts, most of these youths have never known anything but war and political violence in their lives.

Psychologists have long been concerned with the effects of long-term exposure to violent conditions on children's psychological wellbeing. Most research efforts have used a trauma model and measured the consequences of chronic exposure to violence in terms of mental health outcomes generally captured by the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnostic criteria. More than a decade ago, commenting on a volume devoted to children growing up in the midst of political violence, noted developmentalists Ed Cairns and Andy Dawes (1996) underscored the scarcity of research on the effects of war-related trauma on normative development, and urged researchers to move beyond the documentation of distress symptoms and to place a greater emphasis on examining the impacts that war, violence, and dislocation have on children's development. And yet, as the volume so aptly edited by Brian Barber, *Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence*, clearly indicates, the field has only recently begun to heed this call.

As suggested by its title, this volume focuses its attention specifically on adolescents. This deliberate emphasis is due in part to Barber's perception that past research has not sufficiently attended to teenagers living in the midst of political conflict, even as he also acknowledges the difficulties in determining the precise boundaries of adolescence in diverse cultures and socio-political ecologies. Though most of the chapters included in this volume indeed focus on youths in their teens and twenties, some deal with children as young as 10-year-olds, and others revolve around adolescents whose exposure to political violence happened during childhood. In any case, Barber's focus on adolescence appears to be driven less by a concern with a specific age group than by a determination to contest what he perceives as an over-generalized and misguided assumption of vulnerability and incompetence surrounding youth. I believe there is a dilemma embedded in the decision to treat adolescents as minors or as less than fully mature or competent adults, as this distinct status can be limiting but can also be nurturing and protective; nurture and protection may not be superfluous, as adolescents' physical, cognitive, emotional, and social immaturity, relative to adults, is a factor in their recruitment into armed groups and their vulnerability to exploitation in the hands of divisive ideologues. Regardless, there is no arguing with the proposition that teens–or even children–are engaged participants, with many creative capacities and a disposition toward making sense of and adapting to the circumstances that befall them; the accumulating weight of research on developmental psychology is indeed squarely behind it. More poignant is the idea–and this is a proposition that has been recently echoed by many others (e.g., Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006; Boyden & de Berry, 2004; Daiute, Beykont, Higson-Smith, & Nucci, 2006; Wessells, 2006)–that even youths who are exposed to political violence should be thought of not as vulnerable casualties or passive victims but as active, competent, and resilient constructors of their social world.

And thus, appropriately and provocatively, in the introduction to this volume Barber asks not merely how youth are affected by political violence, but how youth "understand, experience, respond to, and adapt to" (p. 3) political violence. And to answer such a question, he further proposes, the field of inquiry must be broadened to look, in two main directions, beyond the relation between violence exposure and trauma-related psychological impairment. One is to include a search for factors that can more precisely explain the nature of this relation. The underlying rationale is that not all youths are likely to be equally influenced by their experiences of violence, hence the search for moderators and mediators should help us get a clearer sense of who is most–and who is least–negatively affected, and why. But research, Barber insists, should also be expanded in a further direction, to include attention to indicators of the competent functioning that might accompany youths' engagements with politically violent environments. His argument in this regard is that although psychologists' preoccupation with youths' psychological distress is understandable given the overwhelming research evidence, such a narrow focus substantially restricts our grasp of youths' experiences and capacities. In relation to these two goals as set up by Barber, this volume encompasses a remarkably coherent collection of contributions, with some chapters discussing mediators or moderators and others examining indicators of competent functioning or using methodologies–such as narratives–that allow researchers to glean both negative and positive outcomes of violence exposure.

The proposition that researchers need to look for ways to unpack the global effects of political violence is timely and fruitful. The research presented in this volume contributes to the rapidly growing evidence that emotional distress and PTSD symptoms are not generalized outcomes of political violence (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Boyden, 2003; Fremont, 2004; Shaw, 2003). Rather, the pathways by way of which violence exposure results in disrupted functioning are complex and are qualified by factors in the broader social ecology, such as demographic moderators

(e.g., social class, ethnicity) or subtle differences in the degree of exposure or, more importantly, by the relative availability of ideological systems enabling youth to ascribe meanings to, and make more or less sense of, the political violence in which they find themselves implicated. Indeed, the findings described in several chapters suggest that the meanings youths attribute to violence can act as a protective factor vis-à-vis psychological distress inasmuch as such meanings render the violence justifiable and even desirable.

The search for mediators and moderators yields a much more complicated picture of how, and for whom, violence exposure might result in emotional distress, thereby supporting Barber's fitting argument against the assumption that most war-affected youths are pathologically or dysfunctionally distressed. Still, further broadening of the lens through which these youths are studied is possible, because the concern with the mediation and moderation of emotional distress leaves in place the clinical definition of mental health as absence of trauma—a definition that ignores important aspects of healthy personhood and development. Indeed, traumatic disorder is only one negative consequence of violence exposure; other consequences may entail developmental disruptions that do not manifest themselves in an overt clinical fashion. One potentially serious example is the disruptions in the development of moral capacities and the construction of moral agency (Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Raffman, 2004; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2008, 2010). To further complicate matters, it is likely that some of the factors that are responsible for moderating stress are also those that increase risks for long-term developmental disruptions. For example, the very ideologies that buffer the negative effects of violence exposure and offer some measure of protection against psychological distress are, at the same time, responsible for the increased risks in the development of moral capacities, for their buffering effects rely, to a considerable extent, on fostering collective identities that may lead to perpetuating cycles of violence and revenge (Punamaki, 1996; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010; Wessells, 2006). Undoubtedly, no single book can address all relevant dimensions of a complex phenomenon, thus this point is not by way of criticizing the significant contributions that this volume makes to the study of the relation between violence exposure and emotional distress. On the contrary, this point echoes Barber's call for broadening the field of inquiry; the additional frontier is further programmatic research looking at the potential long-term developmental implications of exposure to and participation in political violence—a direction that is consonant with that suggested by Cairns and Dawes many years ago.

In contrast to the abundance of evidence concerning the negative effects of violence exposure, the evidence suggestive of positive outcomes is not yet as extensive. Still, several chapters in this volume go some way towards showing that although exposure to and participation in political conflict may be at odds with youths' ultimate developmental interests, such experiences nevertheless also provide them with opportunities, at least in the short term, to assume responsible roles and learn skills, and let them enjoy some measure of control over their lives. In the longer term, many years after the struggle has ended, former youth activism appears to be associated with increased political awareness and civic participation; former youth soldiering yields a mixture of lingering distress symptoms and avoidant behavior with productive adult functioning.

Barber wisely maintains that the concern with indicators of positive functioning should not replace but rather extend the focus on distress. Indeed, he makes a convincing case for the need to acknowledge the complexity of youths' experience, such that realms of impaired functioning go hand in hand with indicators of competent functioning—a case that is nicely illustrated, collectively, in the various contributions to the volume. Further, Barber does not content himself with merely listing evidence of disrupted functioning alongside evidence of positive functioning; he also poses a most penetrating question, "How does one square the evidence of both disrupted and competent functioning in the same individuals or groups of persons?" (p. 19). I found this question so thought provoking that I hoped each contributor had been asked to address it, or perhaps that Barber himself would take it up in a concluding chapter. But the question is left open for readers to ponder on their own, which is not necessarily a failing but a challenge—and one developmentalists will do well to wrestle with. And Barber does not leave his readers entirely out in the wilderness; in the introductory chapter he entertains a number of ways in which the coexistence of disrupted and competent functioning might be understood.

Some of the explanations rely on the notion of resilience or post-trauma growth. The construct of resilience carries some definitional problems, as it is often unclear whether it is meant to be cause, process, or outcome. Nevertheless, underlying these notions is the assumption that the negative effects of violence exposure are transient and thus while the quality of healthy functioning may be at first reduced, such reduction is temporary, after which youths "resile" or bounce back, presumably to a previous level of normal functioning. In the "post-trauma growth" version, the argument goes even further: trauma exposure is said to result in positive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes of a magnitude that take the individual beyond the pre-trauma level of functioning. Ultimately, the reader will have to evaluate the notions of resilience and post-trauma growth against the specific evidence reported in various chapters in this book. It does appear as though many, perhaps even most, youths exposed to conditions of chronic and severe political violence, as well deprivation, displacement, and lawlessness, find ways to cope and adapt, even to learn, grow, and "get over it"—what choice do they have? But the lingering effects of trauma are well documented and should not be underestimated or minimized; in the process of "getting over it," elements of their emotional, cognitive, social, and moral potential may be diminished (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Boyden, 2003; Perry, Pollard, Blakley, & Vigilante, 1995).

Another way to think about the coexistence of disrupted and competent functioning, Barber proposes, may be to adopt what he labels a "balancing perspective" that calls for measuring and addressing the relative balance of both negative and positive aspects of functioning. I think the advantage of this perspective is that, unlike more "transformative" perspectives (as Barber calls them), this approach calls for acknowledging the juxtaposition of forms of functioning without converting the negative into positive, or the pain into gain. What it lacks is the attempt at explaining the developmental dynamics behind these juxtapositions: How does growth sit on loss, and loss on growth? Or how do they sit besides one another? It may indeed be that the picture of human functioning post-violence and trauma–including these youths' functioning–involves substantial positive, creative capacities alongside enduring pain and loss. It is our job, as developmentalists, to specify the possible pathways and to identify where we anticipate problems or vulnerabilities—to express where one needs to look to grasp more comprehensively these youths' functioning.

Regardless of youths' vast capacities for adaptation, war and violence are not optimal conditions for developing and thriving. Our desire, as psychologists, to see the positive, the adaptive, and the competent in war-affected youths may often be driven at least in part, and very understandably, by our own despair and grief, and even guilt, at seeing so many millions of youths for whom, irrevocably, war and violence have become the "new normal." The ultimate strength of Barber's volume–and of Barber's voice as it comes through the various chapters–lies in that it does not ask us to think of war and violence as normative, even in the context of looking at a fuller range of youths' experiences and capacities.

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