

Political Violence and Disruptions in the Development of Moral Agency

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ABSTRACT—*Researchers have studied the effects of exposure to long-term political violence on children largely in terms of adverse mental health outcomes, typically measured in relation to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. This study argues that for children, the important aftereffects of exposure to political violence extend beyond emotional distress to influence the development of morality. It points to 2 specific disruptions likely to occur in the development of moral agency and concludes by outlining future research directions and speculating about implications for policy and intervention.*

KEYWORDS—*political violence; moral development; PTSD*

In the last decade, wars killed 2 million children, injured 6 million, and displaced nearly 30 million; 300,000 children serve as soldiers (United Nations, 2006). Psychologists have long been concerned with the effects of chronic exposure to political violence. Most research has used a trauma model, measuring the consequences of violence exposure in terms of mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, dissociation, avoidance, psychosomatic disturbances, and other symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Fremont, 2004; Shaw, 2003). This research has demonstrated that risks increase when the violence is proximal, intense, and chronic. Conversely, the meanings that children attribute to violence can act as a protective factor by rendering the violence justifiable. For example, Palestinian youth, who have available a wealth of religious and historical justifications for their engagement in political violence, display less psychological distress than Bosnian youth, who lack

similarly coherent belief systems for explaining their engagement in violence (Barber, Schluterman, Denny, & McCouch, 2006; Laor et al., 2006; Punamaki, 1996). And yet, in spite of evidence for very high rates of PTSD among these youth (Boyden, 2003), the trauma model has come under criticism.

One concern, voiced largely by psychologists involved in the delivery of services in war-torn areas, is that in addition to psychological trauma, these youth face grave psychosocial stresses including chronic poverty, poor health, and lack of education (Wessells, 2006; Williamson & Robinson, 2006). Their assumption is that children are resilient and adjust quite well if their psychosocial needs are met, but the excessive emphasis on risk and trauma magnifies these children's vulnerabilities while restricting the attention and resources devoted to meeting their psychosocial needs.

But assessing, or even simply defining, resilience is far from simple. We cannot merely infer children's long-term psychological health from what seems like well-adjusted behavior. Nor can we take at face value the fact that war-affected children typically articulate needs of a pragmatic, rather than a psychological, nature. These youth's reliance on avoidance strategies (Jones, 2002; Wessells, 2006) is unsurprising given that the focus on distressing experiences recreates distress in the short term (e.g., Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Although such strategies may be adaptive in the short term, it is unknown whether children are capable of leaving awful experiences behind or what consequences doing so may have for their future development. Thus, although it is undeniably important that we not overstate the vulnerabilities of war-affected youth, and essential—indeed, a matter of basic human rights—that we address their psychosocial needs fully and promptly, it is equally critical that we not overestimate their resilience. An overly optimistic focus on resilience can unwittingly lead to overlooking what may be significant and enduring adverse psychological effects of war exposure (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Dawes, Tredoux, & Feinstein, 1989).

That there is wisdom in considering both risks and resilience when researching the impacts of war exposure does not, however,

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imply that the notion of PTSD provides the best model for such explorations. Indeed, some have argued that the medical framework underlying the trauma model does not fully capture the psychological impact of armed conflict because it overemphasizes symptoms while overlooking the centrality of meaning-making (Boyden, 2003; Pedersen, Tremblay, Errazuriz, & Gamarra, 2008). As we mentioned earlier, children might make sense of their war experiences in ways that decrease their distress or alter its behavioral manifestations. Thus, the absence of psychiatric symptoms cannot be taken to imply that children are unaffected (Miller, Kulkarni, & Kushner, 2006; Wessells & Monteiro, 2006).

Clearly, to capture the myriad of ways in which children experience and express trauma and distress, we need a broader conceptual and research framework. Still, even this may be too narrow an approach because the *clinical* definition of mental health as the absence of trauma and emotional distress ignores important aspects of healthy personhood and development. Our specific concern is children's moral development because the protracted nature of political conflicts and the normalization of violence and lawlessness pose particular challenges to the development of moral capacities (Dawes, 1994; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1993; Leavitt & Fox, 1993; for the impacts of war on other realms of development, see Ladd & Cairns, 1996). Furthermore, the very ideologies that offer some protection against PTSD may have serious deleterious long-term effects on precisely those moral capacities, fostering cycles of violence and revenge (Jones, 2002; Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Punamaki, 1996; Raffman, 2004; Wessells, 2006). Extant research indicates that war-exposed children do develop moral concepts (Ardila-Rey, Killen, & Brenick, 2009; Cairns, 1996; Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Raffman, 2004), but their everyday lives abundantly illustrate the very behaviors their moral concepts decry. The question is how these youth think of the actual violence they experience and the violence they perpetrate, and how—or even whether—they integrate such experiences with their moral understandings and with a view of themselves, and of others, as moral beings.

BEING HURT, HURTING OTHERS, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MORAL AGENCY

Children in all cultures develop moral concerns with welfare and justice, including in non-Western societies organized around collectivistic or hierarchical systems (Wainryb, 1997, 2004, 2005). Indeed, although belief systems, such as those bearing on the origins of illness, the workings of spirits, or the afterlife, vary dramatically from culture to culture, welfare and justice are important organizing themes in the lives of people across the world (Shweder, 1990; Turiel, 1998). Even in the midst of continuous violence, children develop moral concepts such as that it is wrong to hurt others and to steal (Ardila-Rey et al., 2009; Posada & Wainryb, 2008), and even children's decisions to engage in armed conflict reflect, in part, their concern with injustice and their commitment to bettering the welfare of their communities

(Barber et al., 2006; Wessells, 2006). Research shows, however, that these youth's moral conceptions of what is just and right are often divorced from what they expect others, and themselves, to actually do, and are applied selectively to some people but not others. For example, war-displaced youth in Colombia expect that they and others would steal and hurt people despite acknowledging that this is morally wrong, and many judge that revenge against some groups is justifiable (Posada & Wainryb, 2008).

These findings point to significant gaps between what children know about right and wrong and what they do. Although those gaps may be taken to mean that moral judgments are irrelevant (Blasi, 1995), we propose that those very gaps may offer a context for development. In nonviolent settings, even children as young as 4 or 5 judge that it is wrong to hurt people (Turiel, 1998), but most also engage in harmful behaviors, such as hitting a sibling or betraying a friend. In struggling to resolve their own wrongdoing, children develop as moral beings. Indeed, the very act of making sense of instances in which they have engaged in harm or injustice despite believing harm and injustice to be wrong signals the creation of what we term "moral agency" (Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2008).

Moral agency refers to how children construct understandings of their own and others' harmful actions as arising from beliefs, desires, emotions, and other psychological processes. This view is consistent with that of other developmentalists (Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2004), who similarly posit that children's sense of agency is not innate but a developmental achievement that emerges when children view their actions as being initiated and guided by their own mental states. Furthermore, the sense of agency, including the willingness to report on mental states, is not specific to certain cultures. Research in comparative linguistics has shown that although some cultures provide more expansive elaboration of internal states than others, the capacity to express internality, as conveyed by words referring to feelings and thoughts, is present in all languages (Wierzbicka, 1992).

By relating their own harmful actions to their mental states, children connect sequences of actions (e.g., "I told him"; "I hit him") to a sense of themselves as agents. Such "mentalized" representations of harmful behaviors allow children to view their own wrongdoing as arising from their own, at times opaque, reasons, beliefs, preferences, and emotions. By also representing another person's psychological experience (e.g., "She wanted to . . ."), children construct a world in which agents—with sometimes overlapping, sometimes distinct internal experiences—interact with one another in ways that result in agreements and disagreements, understandings and misunderstandings, likes and dislikes. Harmful acts become integrated into a sense of themselves and others as moral agents who can acknowledge and regret the pain they caused, learn moral lessons, make future commitments, and, possibly, also forgive (Pasupathi & Wainryb, in press; Wainryb, Komolova, & Florsheim, 2010).

In our own work, we capture the construal of moral agency by examining how children recall and describe their own experiences of wrongdoing. Research with children growing up in non-violent contexts has shown that by the age of 5 or 6 children can provide fairly coherent accounts of times they hurt others (Wainryb et al., 2005; Wainryb et al., 2010). By the early school years, most children include in their accounts some representations of themselves and others as psychological beings; by adolescence, references to psychological states make up about half of their accounts. Consider, as an example, the following narrative account given by a male adolescent of a time when he hurt a peer (Wainryb et al., 2005; Wainryb et al., 2010):

Yeah it was probably a couple months ago. We were . . . going to a game and we stopped to get something to eat and my friend left without paying. And so I was like, “Man . . .” So I . . . I like walked over to him and I’m like, “You had the most expensive thing, you don’t expect us to pay for your meal, right?” So I kind of said some bad words to him, like “get back over there,” like “do that.” So and I . . . I can see like in his face that he was hurt by it. But at the time, I thought it was okay because you don’t just walk out on something. So . . . that was probably the time that I said something to somebody that . . . that I feel that I hurt them. And later . . . later I found out that I kind of . . . I kind of didn’t get the whole story before I walked to him. Because later I found out that he didn’t have any money with him and one of his . . . one of my other friends was going to pay for him, and he was going to pay him when he got back to his house, so I kind of didn’t get all of the situation before I took it . . . I walked over to him and talked to him so . . .

This narrator tells us not only what he and others did, or when and where they did it, but also what he thought and felt and what he thought the other people intended and felt; indeed, the narrative hinges on the narrator’s beliefs about his friend’s intentions. The narrator’s actions are thus rendered coherent through a rich sense of his own internal experience and that of the person he hurt. His account contains the “seeds” of a moral lesson and the foundations by which he and his friend can forgive one another and repair their relationship.

Importantly, this narrative captures more than the capacity implied in having a “theory of mind” (Wellman & Lagattuta, 2000), as it is possible for children to be capable of attributing mental states to themselves and others while being impaired in their everyday use of that knowledge (Griffin & Gross, 2004; Happe & Frith, 1996; Sutton, Reeves, & Keogh, 2000). The construct of moral agency as manifested in the above narrative captures children’s use of their knowledge about mental processes to organize their moral transgressions and moral experiences. In what follows, we consider the possibility that exposure to political violence can create conditions in which youth might fail to call on their ability to attribute mental states to themselves and others, and that this failure may contribute to additional violence.

DISRUPTIONS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MORAL AGENCY

The harmful and unjust interactions typical of children in normative contexts rarely challenge a basic faith in themselves or others as moral. The universe of interpersonal harm and unfairness of war-exposed children involves becoming witnesses, victims, and even perpetrators of extreme atrocities, all in the context of systemic violence and injustice. Furthermore, the public rhetoric required to engage large groups in these types of action tends to construct polarized and dehumanizing ideas about what is right and just (Bandura, 2002; Moshman, 2004). It is easy to imagine that such an environment might undermine both children’s ability to believe that justice and welfare truly matter and their motivation to consider these issues in making choices (Arsenio & Gold, 2006; O’Donnell, Schwab-Stone, & Ruchkin, 2006). Beyond that, such “toxic” environments (Garbarino, 1997) hinder, by various means, children’s ability to think about their own and others’ actions in psychological terms, thereby disrupting their construal of moral agency. Extreme forms of violence provoke the sort of hyperarousal that interferes with children’s understandings of events; after the fact, numbing and avoidance arise to forestall pain and anger (Fonagy, 2003). Instances of extreme violence and injustice also force children to overlook agency—their own and others’—so that those behaviors, in appearing to emanate from the surrounding circumstances rather than from human choice, become more tolerable (Loney, Frick, Clements, Ellis, & Kerlin, 2003).

Thus, it may be especially difficult for war-exposed children to make sense of their experiences in ways that promote and preserve a sense of themselves and others as moral agents. Those difficulties can be captured by disruptions in the ways they narrate their own experiences with violence and unfairness. One type of disruption involves a relative dearth of agency, resulting in opaque accounts in which children do not represent—or represent only minimally—their own and other people’s internal experiences. The other disruption implicates a relative imbalance in children’s articulation of their own versus other people’s agency.

The following narrative excerpt illustrates opaque accounts. It comes from a male adolescent from a war-displaced community in Colombia, a country that has been in a state of civil war for more than 50 years and has nearly 4 million internally displaced individuals. This teen describes a time when he hurt someone he knew:

I remember a time when we were in the classroom and the teacher left. Then I tried to hurt one of my best friends with a rope that was hanging from the roof. I put it around his neck and started pulling. I don’t know why I did it. Everybody saw that, and they called the principal . . . and she began to scold me and she told me that she might expel me from school. And then she told me that I was

useless, and after that everybody avoided me and they made me feel like I don't belong in there. And so I felt really bad, I cried.

This narrative, which is fairly representative of those provided by a sample of 48 Colombian displaced youth (ages 13–17; Posada, 2008), has two noteworthy features. Note, first, the pervasive emphasis on references to observable behaviors and the almost complete absence of references to the narrator's own and his friend's desires, beliefs, or intentions. The narrative is even devoid of emotional language, especially in the portion that is linked to the harm the child caused. In fact, the psychological content is so impoverished that the behaviors remain incomprehensible to the reader and, apparently, to the actor himself. Second, note the narrator's tendency to conflate the role of aggressor and victim, as he depicts himself as a victim even when describing how he hurt his friend. When children do not represent themselves and others as agents whose actions are coordinated with a mental life, their mere actions stand in for character, and agency is undermined. The perpetration–victimization overlap also reflects a diminished sense of agency, as though children cannot unequivocally distinguish between what they did and what was done to them. Consequently, these youth's ability to exhibit morally informed judgment and action is likely to be significantly constrained. Their ability to manage their own aggressive impulses is also likely to suffer; indeed, the lack of experiential ownership of action is the aspect of agentive-self deficit that is most closely linked to violence (Fonagy, 2003; Wainryb et al., 2010).

The second form of disruption, in which children construct a restricted moral universe wherein only they and members of their own group are represented as moral agents whose actions are guided by goals, intentions, beliefs, and emotions, is illustrated by the following narrative by an Enga male adolescent from Papua New Guinea. The Enga are a horticultural population of some 300,000 people divided into 108 tribes. This tribal society has had a 350-year-long history of continuous and culturally sanctioned warfare, as they view war as an acceptable solution to gain reparation or quell anger (Wiessner & Tumu, 1998). In this narrative,¹ a 14-year-old describes engaging, together with his tribesmen, in harming another group after learning that a girl from their tribe had been raped by members of that group.

[Male name] saw the girl bleeding and shouted to all of us clansmen. Me and some of my clansmen heard that and we took our

bushknives and ran to the Akupa. We entered the dancing ground and checked to see if any of the rapists' clansmen were there. There were lots and lots of people there but none of the rapists' clansmen were there. We were very frustrated and we burned all their mess houses, like tea-houses and flour-houses. [. . .] Then we went to another place in search of men to kill, but we couldn't find any. So we left their village and we went back to our village. Early the next morning my clansmen called out from every corner; the clansmen and women gathered in the village. The clansmen talked about the rape and said that we would go and attack the rapists' clan. After the discussion, we went to [village-name] and fought. We didn't bring any guns, we brought spears and arrows. We destroyed their gardens and we chopped down their big trees. [. . .] While we were destroying their places, they shot one of our clansmen with a spear. The war went on for about one week and we realized that we weren't winning so the elders stopped the war.

Although its content is particularly harsh, in its form this narrative represents well those produced by a sample of 60 Enga youth (ages 7–17) about instances of collective violence. This youth speaks about his own actions, and those of his tribesmen, as implicating some sense of internality and, thus, agency: Their actions—to engage in violence and to end the violence—were related to what they knew or believed; their decisions and feelings were also represented. In contrast, the “others” in this conflict—the many members of the other tribe—are not represented, individually or collectively, in ways that include any discernible psychological agency. It may be that the ability to engage in acts of collective violence and warfare relies on this kind of imbalance. However, a similar imbalance was also evident in how Enga youth constructed instances of much less violent interpersonal hurt. Consider the following narrative by another Enga youth, about a time when he hurt someone he knew.

Sometimes I ask some of the boys I know to help me to do my work that needs many hands to complete, for example making a garden or building a house. But they say no. That really makes me unhappy. They are not my little brothers, so I can't force them, so I used to keep my feelings inside and walk away. I cannot do anything, so I make up my mind that, one fine day, I'll pay them back. So, one day they came to me and asked me to help them. I told them off; I said “when I came to you for help you said no. So why should I help you. If you had helped me then, now I would help you.” When I say that, they feel embarrassed and angry with me and they go away. They cannot do anything. They just get angry and flee away. I believe in the principle that “if you help me, I'll help you.” No free hand outs.

Like in the previous narrative concerning collective wrongdoing, the narrator here represents his own thoughts, intentions, and emotions—mostly concerning issues of balance, exchange, and retribution—with plentiful detail: We learn of his wants and frustrations, his decisions and plans, his beliefs and principles. The same narrator, however, represents the thoughts and inten-

¹This narrative portion was preceded by a detailed, graphic, and horrific account of the rape, which we omit because it does not directly include any actions by the narrator. Still, it is worth noting that the materials omitted included multiple psychological references regarding the victimized girl (“she realized . . .”; “she wanted . . .”; “she decided . . .”), who belongs to *the narrator's own tribe*, but no psychological references whatsoever to the rapists, who belong to *the other tribe*, and who were represented solely in terms of their actions (“they hid in a water pipe . . .”; “some grabbed her hands . . .”; “others held on to her neck . . .”). In the narrative portion we do present, repetitive actions were sometimes edited out (as denoted by “[. . .]”) for brevity's sake, but no references to internal experience were omitted.

tions of others far less extensively; the only references to others' internality revolve around emotions, which have outward, identifiable expressions. In fact, this narrator's behavior, while coherently organized around his own thoughts and emotions, takes no account of what others may have thought or intended, only what others did. This imbalanced construal of moral agency, wherein others' internality is underemphasized and others' actions are perceived as laying the foundation for retribution, is likely to facilitate interpersonal aggression and to carry the risk of perpetuating cycles of harm and injustice (Bandura, 2002; Moshman, 2004; Reed & Aquino, 2003; Ruble et al., 2004).

FUTURE RESEARCH AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

We have suggested that one way in which exposure to political violence adversely affects children's development is by disrupting their construal of moral agency. It may be that such disruptions constitute effective adaptations to politically conflicted environments, where extreme violence, disputed values, and exigency-driven behavior prevail. Nevertheless, it has been documented that such disruptions also tend to beget further interpersonal violence, inasmuch as they provide little basis for understanding, let alone forgiving, oneself and others (Fonagy, 2003; Wainryb et al., 2010). But more importantly, what is effective for functioning in the short term may be deeply problematic when societies need to move forward toward postconflict resolution. In those circumstances, it becomes critical that children be 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. It also becomes important that children be able to acknowledge the same truths about other aggressors. These two tasks form the basis for forgiveness—of self and other—that permits individuals and collectives to move beyond past wrongs.

In normative contexts, youth tend to spontaneously recount their hurtful and unfair behaviors, often half-bragging about and half-confessing to their moral transgressions. The telling of such stories and the improvised conversations that ensue with parents or other adults operate as the context within which youth make sense of their transgressions in ways that 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, ultimately, regulate their aggression. But the psychosocial context of war is short of these supports at both the individual and collective levels. Adults are often overwhelmed and unavailable for listening to and containing these youth's aggressive impulses and desires, and polarized war rhetoric and systemic injustices offer little in the form of societal containment, further compromising the normal processes by which children develop moral agency. The assistance youth require to successfully navigate this critical developmental task may thus need to come as part of the broader psychosocial interventions provided to them in the aftermath of conflict.

To inform and guide intervention and policy, future research may consider three sets of questions about moral agency disruption. First, we need systematic evidence about whether these disruptions are indeed prevalent, and whether certain disruptions are predictive of more detrimental developmental outcomes in the short term (such as during the conflict and in its immediate aftermath) and in the long run (e.g., as children return to functioning in a postwar society). Future research might also investigate whether specific disruptions are linked to specific features of sociopolitical conflicts. It may be, for example, that political conflicts in which the violence is organized around coherent ideologies and well-defined adversaries tend to promote imbalanced construals of moral agency, whereas those in which the violence appears to be more arbitrary give ground to more generally restricted and opaque construals. Finally, research should address the extent to which disruptions in moral agency are context specific and circumscribed to children's thinking about themselves and others around violent experiences, or whether they are more generalized; postconflict interventions would vary depending on whether children do or do not have reservoirs of moral agency to call on (Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2008).

Psychologists have already made significant contributions both to documenting the traumatic effects of political violence on children and to adapting established treatments to local situations (Stepakoff et al., 2006; Wessells & Monteiro, 2006). Given the prevalence of collective conflict in the world, the problems of helping children to recover will be with us for some time. Our hope is that researchers take a broader and long-term perspective on what recovery means.

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