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Aims and Scope

In today's world, national borders seem irrelevant when it comes to international crime and terrorism. Likewise, human rights, poverty, inequality, democracy, development, trade, bioethics, hunger, war and peace are all issues of global rather than national justice. The fact that mass demonstrations are organized whenever the world's governments and politicians gather to discuss such major international issues is testimony to a widespread appeal for justice around the world.

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Values and Violence

Intangible Aspects of Terrorism

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Developing Moral Agency in the Midst of Violence: Children, Political Conflict, and Values

Cecilia Wainryb and Monisha Pasupathi

Introduction

As reported by the *UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict*, children in approximately 50 countries grow up in the midst of armed conflict and its aftermath. In the last decade alone, wars injured 6 million children, killed 2 million, and displaced nearly 30 million. While no precise figures exist distinguishing the number of children growing up under conditions of state-sponsored violence versus violence from non-state-sponsored groups or terrorism, the report also calls special attention to the approximately 300,000 children who are drawn directly into political conflicts as child soldiers and forced to serve in various military roles, including participation in killings and torture.¹

The concern for the fate of child soldiers is of such proportions that it is now monitored directly by the United Nations. One of the most significant developments in more recent times on their behalf has been the intervention of the United Nations Security Council and the passing of resolution 1612 of 26 July 2005. Based on this resolution, the Office of the Special Representative has established a comprehensive monitoring and reporting process relating to grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict, in particular the recruitment and use of children as soldiers. In addition to taking measures for monitoring and reporting violations, the Special Representative has advocated for rigorous post-conflict rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives and programs for children, and has striven to ensure that children's protection, demobilization and reintegration needs are addressed in the initial planning and implementation of peacekeeping and peace-building operations. Finally, and in pursuit of the objectives outlined above, the Office of the Special Representative has also underscored the need for further research focusing

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¹ U.N. (2006a). *The impact of armed conflict on children. Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict*. Retrieved 3/10/2006, from www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict/index.html

on lessons learned and best practices, as well as other emerging areas of concern, including research on child soldiers, their needs and attitudes to violence, and successful strategies for their reintegration into society.²

A most serious concern arising out of this situation is the impact that exposure to political violence has on the wellbeing of children. In this chapter, we focus in particular on the impact that active involvement in political violence is likely to have on the long-term development of children who participate in armed groups, such as child soldiers – especially their ability to think of themselves as moral agents. Children's moral capacities have tremendous implications not only for their individual sense of identity, dignity, and well-being, but also for the possibility of breaking cycles of violence and the ultimate success of humanitarian and political interventions geared toward conflict resolution and social reconstruction.

The Impact of Political Violence on Children's Psychological Well-being

Psychologists have long been concerned with the effects that long-term exposure to political violence has on children's well-being. Most research efforts in this regard have used a trauma model and measured the consequences of exposure to violence in terms of mental health outcomes. Whereas findings concerning children's specific patterns of symptoms have varied across studies as a function of the domains of adjustment targeted and the characteristics of the samples studied, in general children's reactions to political violence have included anxiety, depression, dissociation, avoidance and numbness, psychosomatic disturbances, anger and hostility, and other symptoms that have come to be associated with post-traumatic stress, or PTSD.³ Specific features of the conflict situation, such as the relative proximity (emotional and physical), intensity, and chronicity of violence, have been found to increase the likelihood of symptom development or play a protective role. As an example, it has been shown that children are minimally affected by isolated or short-term instances of violence, especially if parental support remains available, but repeated or long-term exposure to political violence, societal disintegration, and displacement constitute major risk factors. As indicated by risk accumulation models, multiple stressors compound the effects,⁴ which are further amplified when the stressors are chronic. Research has also shown that child soldiers, who are directly engaged in

violence, exhibit much higher rates of PTSD than children who had been exposed to violence – rates that also vary with the severity and chronicity of their experiences.⁵ (Findings from research on PTSD rates of war-affected children and child soldiers should be interpreted with caution, as the nature of armed conflict makes it unfeasible to adhere to methodological requirements such as control groups and pre-war baseline rates).

And yet, research suggests that the sorts of interpretations and meanings that children attribute to the violence to which they are exposed might mitigate symptom development. Political violence can be given different meanings in different communities and while no public discourse or ideology can fully remove suffering, it can shape what is experienced as either meaningful or hopeless.⁶ In particular for those who become directly engaged in political struggle and fighting, ideology can bolster their sense of self-worth and integrity by offering a compelling narrative that renders their world comprehensible and their own violent behaviors justifiable. While systematic research relating in-depth assessments of children's ideological beliefs and the effects of political violence is scant, there is some evidence suggesting that ideological commitment may act as a protective factor against at least some of the negative outcomes associated with exposure to political violence. As an example, Palestinian youth, who are assumed to have available to them a wealth of religious and historical justifications for their engagement in political violence, have been shown to display less psychological distress (e.g., less depression, insecurity, anxiety) than, for example, Bosnian youth, who cannot rely on a similarly coherent belief system for explaining the violence to which they are exposed.⁷

This and similar findings relating ideological commitments to decreased symptomatology and increased subjective sense of wellbeing have received quite a lot of attention recently, in part because they suggest the possibility of resilience in the face of adversity. This potential makes for the kind of story that many people like to hear – one in which hardship and loss result in renewed meaning and strength

continuous traumatic stress disorder: The single therapeutic interview," *Psychology and Sociology* 9 (1987), pp. 48–79.

⁵ M. Wessells, *Child soldiers: From violence to protection* (London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁶ A. Dawes, "The effects of political violence on children: A consideration of South African and related studies," *International Journal of Psychology* 25 (1990), pp. 13–31.

⁷ B. K. Barber, J. M. Schluterman, E. S. Denny, & R. J. McCouch, "Adolescents and political violence," in M. Fitzduff and C. Stout (eds.), *The psychology of resolving global conflicts: From war to peace 2*, Group and social factors (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2006), pp. 171–190; see also N. Laor, L. Wolmer, M. Alon, J. Siev, E. Samuel, & P. Toren, "Risk and protective factors mediating psychological symptoms and ideological commitments of adolescents facing continuous terrorism," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 194, 4 (2006), pp. 279–286; R. L. Punamaki, "Can ideological commitment protect children's psychosocial wellbeing in situations of political violence?," *Child Development* 67 (1996), pp. 55–69; R. L. Punamaki, S. Quota, & E. El-Sarraj, "Models of traumatic experiences and children's psychological adjustment," *Child Development* 68 (1997), pp. 718–728.

² U.N. (2006a). *The impact of armed conflict on children. Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict*. Retrieved 3/10/2006, from www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict/index.html.

³ D. Browne, "Examining the impact of terrorism on children," in A. Silke (ed.), *Terrorists, victims, and society: Psychological perspectives on terrorism and its consequences* (New York: Wiley, 2003), pp. 189–211; J. A. Shaw, "Children exposed to war/terrorism," *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 6 (2003), pp. 237–246.

⁴ J. Garbarino, & K. Kostelny, "The effects of political violence on Palestinian children's behavior problems: A risk accumulation model," *Child Development* 67 (1996), pp. 33–45; G. Straker, "The

of character.⁸ Of course, it is absurd to conclude that persuading children to share the ideologies of combatants is a good solution, and in fact, this points to a broader issue. Namely, the tendency to ground questions concerning the effects of political violence on children within a mental health paradigm may be overly narrow, as clinical definitions of mental health in terms of the absence of symptoms does not include aspects of healthy personhood, such as children's ability to tell right from wrong and to view themselves as moral agents, or their capacity to function as members of a civil society in a moral sense. These aspects of psychological health are not only important for individuals, but are also critical for collective well-being. In fact, the very ideological belief structures that offer some measure of protection against the symptoms that typically accompany sustained exposure to violence (e.g., depression, anxiety, avoidance, numbness), may at the same time have serious deleterious long-term effects on precisely those capabilities.⁹

While serious psychopathology cannot be ruled out, especially in contexts in which children face extreme brutalization on a large scale, the sequelae of exposure to political violence are not likely to be limited to emotional distress. In fact, given the protracted nature of contemporary political conflicts, such that violence (injustice, violation of rights) is normalized, children's moral capacities are most vulnerable. Thus the question is not so much whether children cope emotionally – most do – but what price they (and ultimately society) pay, in terms of their long-term development, for their continued coping with and adaptation to such excruciating living conditions in which exigencies of mere survival may oblige them to breach moral values and codes. This is likely to be especially true for children who have been active participants in political violence – children who themselves have been combatants.

Even as a number of researchers have alluded to the potential importance of understanding the moral development of war-affected children,¹⁰ systematic research in this area has been limited. In part this has been because, understandably, most research undertaken with children affected by armed conflict has tended to

⁸ D. P. McAdams, *The redemptive self: Stories Americans live by* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹ Dawes, "The Effect of Political Violence on Children," pp. 13–31; J. Garbarino & K. Kostelny, "Children's response to war: What do we know?," in L. A. Leavitt & N. A. Fox (eds.), *The psychological effects of war and violence on children* (Hillsdale, NJ: LEA, 1993), pp. 23–40; Loar et al., "Risk and Protective Factors," pp. 279–286; R. Posada, & C. Wainryb, "Moral development in a violent society: Colombian children's judgments in the context of survival and revenge," *Child Development* 79 (2008), pp. 882–898; Punamaki, op cit. note 7, pp. 55–69.

¹⁰ See, e.g., E. Cairns, *Children and political violence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); A. Dawes, "The effects of political violence on socio-moral reasoning and conduct," in A. Dawes & D. Donald (eds.), *Childhood and Adversity* (Cape Town, South Africa: David Philip Publishers, 1994), pp. 200–219; Garbarino and Kostelny, "The effects of Political Violence on Palestinian Children's Behavior," pp. 33–45; L. A. Leavitt & N. A. Fox, (eds.), *The psychological effects of war and violence on children* (Hillsdale, NJ: LEA, 1993); M. Macksoud, L. & Aber, "The war experiences and psychological development of children in Lebanon," *Child Development* 67 (1996), pp. 70–88; Punamaki, "Can Ideological Commitment Protect Children's Psychosocial Wellbeing," pp. 55–69.

accommodate the most pressing needs for immediate intervention.¹¹ Psychologists have made significant contributions in this regard, both to documenting the traumatic effects of political violence on children, and to adapting established treatments to local situations on the ground in conflict-torn regions of the world.¹²

Beyond the very pressing concerns guiding research, it is also likely that the type of research questions being examined has been constrained by available conceptual frameworks for studying moral development. One such limitation is that nearly all the moral development research conducted in war-torn countries has relied on assessments based on hypothetical moral dilemmas designed to rank-order the sophistication of children's moral reasoning. The findings of this research have been mixed, with some researchers reporting that children living in the midst of political violence evidenced lower levels of moral reasoning, and others suggesting that the moral development of these youths was not negatively affected.¹³ The mixed nature of these findings may be associated with the fact that this evidence was obtained largely on the basis of assessments of global stages of moral reasoning, with the underlying question being whether children in communities characterized by political violence can be said to generally reason at lower (or higher) stages. Much research conducted in the last several decades with children developing in normative contexts has pointed to the limitations of global assessments of moral stages.¹⁴ Furthermore, the assessments of moral stages typically used in moral development research do not tap into the unique types of conflicts and dilemmas associated with growing up in war-torn countries. Indeed, political upheaval, war, terrorism, displacement, and chronic violence are likely to produce a multitude of moral realities bearing little resemblance to most of the hypothetical situations used in moral development research. Thus findings such as that children growing up in a war-torn region reason at a lower (or higher) global stage of moral thinking than children growing up in a nonviolent region are likely to tell us little regarding how these children might make sense of their experiences and of themselves and others as moral beings.

¹¹ Dawes, "The Effects of Political Violence on Children," pp. 13–31; O. T. Muldoon, "Children of the troubles: The impact of political violence in Northern Ireland," *Journal of Social Issues* 60, 3 (2004), pp. 453–468.

¹² S. Stepakoff, J. Hubbard, M. Katoh, E. Falk, J. Mikulu, P. Nkhoma, P., et al. "Trauma healing in refugee camps in Guinea: A psychosocial program for Liberian and Sierra Leonean survivors of torture and war," *American Psychologist* 61, 8 (2006), pp. 919–932; M. Wessells, K. & Kostelny, *After the Taliban: A child-focused assessment in the northern Afghan provinces of Kunduz, Takhar, and Badakshan* (Richmond, VA: CCF International, 2002); M. Wessells, & C. Monteiro, "Psychosocial assistance for youth: Toward reconstruction for peace in Angola," *Journal of Social Issues* 62, 1 (2006), pp. 121–139.

¹³ For a comprehensive review, see Cairns, *Children and Political Violence*.

¹⁴ For reviews, see J. Smetana, "Social-cognitive domain theory: Consistencies and variations in children's moral and social judgments," in M. Killen & J. Smetana (eds.), *Handbook of moral development* (Mahwah, NJ: LEA, 2006), pp. 119–154; E. Turiel, "The development of morality," in W. Damon & N. Eisenberg (eds.), *Handbook of psychology, 5th Edition, Vol. 3, Social, emotional and personality development* (New York: Wiley, 1998), pp. 863–932.

Another limitation of the extant research is that it has overlooked the significance – for children’s moral development – of how children make sense of experiences in which they were the agents of harm. However, the inferences that children draw about themselves as moral beings based on their real experiences of doing harm are likely to hold long-term implications for the development of moral identity, and ultimately, for moral conduct.¹⁵ Thus the important, and more useful, questions bear on how these children think about the moral complexities and ambiguities within which they function, and how they reconcile themselves with their own experiences of both committing and enduring injustice and violence, and integrate them within a sense of themselves as moral – a sense deemed essential for sustained commitment to moral action.¹⁶ Before we address these questions, it is necessary that we consider, as a starting point, the development of children’s moral capacities under normative conditions.

The Development of Children’s Moral Capacities

Moral development research conducted over the last 25 years has demonstrated that, starting at the age of 2 or 3 years, children are consistently bothered by injustice and are concerned with people being hurt, physically or psychologically. Indeed, in contrast to what was previously assumed,¹⁷ research suggests that even young children develop basic prescriptive moral concepts – that is, ways of thinking about welfare, justice, and rights – and do so on the basis of their actual social interactions.¹⁸ This is to say that while children generally attend to the rules and teachings of adults, it is not the internalization of rules per se that is at the basis of children’s moral development, but children’s own perceptions and interpretations of the features of social interactions (e.g., their construal of the consequences of an act of aggression or a violation of a promise), including – or perhaps in particular – those interactions involving conflicts, transgressions, injustice, and aggression.

Although the lion’s share of this research has been conducted in Western societies, studies have also been conducted in South America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This research has demonstrated that in spite of the considerable diversity in cultural practices and religious beliefs, the processes of moral development

¹⁵ See S. Dwyer, “Reconciliation for realists,” *Ethics of International Affairs* 13 (1999), pp. 81–98.

¹⁶ A. Colby & W. Damon, *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1992); S. A. Hardy & G. Carlo, “Identity as a source of moral motivation,” *Human Development* 48 (2005), pp. 232–256; M. K. Matsuba, & L. J. Walker, “Young adult moral exemplars: The making of self through stories,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 15 (2005), pp. 275–297.

¹⁷ See, e.g., L. Kohlberg, “Stage and sequence: The cognitive developmental approach to socialization,” in D. Goslin (ed.), *Handbook of socialization theory and research* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), pp. 347–480.

¹⁸ For comprehensive reviews of this research, see Smetana, “Social-Cognitive Domain Theory,” pp. 119–154; Turiel, “The Development of Morality,” pp. 863–932; C. Wainryb, B. Brehl, & S. Matwin, “Being hurt and hurting others: Children’s narrative accounts and moral judgments of their own interpersonal conflicts,” *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 70 (2005).

are largely the same across cultures.¹⁹ Across the world, children tend to reason that it is morally wrong to, for example, hurt or mistreat others, not because they may otherwise be punished, but rather because of their concerns with fairness and the well-being of persons, and they tend to bring these concepts to bear on actual social interactions.

Of course this is not to say that children never hurt others or that they never behave unfairly towards others. They certainly do. The concrete instances in which this happens hold in them an inherent tension between what children think and what they sometimes do.²⁰ One could regard morality as insisting on self-denial, such that the demands of morality are necessarily antagonistic to other interests that an individual may have. From this perspective one would view these instances as evidence that children (or people in general) find it difficult to live up to the demands of morality and are not, in general, very moral. Such a perspective is rooted in a conception of morality as radically “disengaged from the perspective of the individual agent – from the full range of concerns associated with the living of an actual human life.”²¹ Scheffler and other contemporary moral philosophers²² have suggested, instead, that the discussion of the relations between morality and the interests of the individual requires consideration of the complexity of psychological reality. Importantly, they have underscored that morality is fully compatible with a realistic picture of human deliberation, including experiences of ambivalence and regret in the face of situations of moral conflict in which no act is available that is without pain, loss, or harm. This latter view is more closely aligned with our conception. Moral life is not about sainthood, and experiences of mistreating or inflicting harm on other people, as well as experiences of being mistreated or hurt, are part of children’s *moral* lives. Being a moral person thus implies the need to negotiate not only the potential for being a very good person, but also the threats implicated in one’s actions, that is, one’s potential for also, sometimes, being a bad person or doing the wrong thing.

Given the inevitability of causing and experiencing harm in an interpersonal world, it is essential that we understand how people integrate such actions and make sense of themselves and others as moral agents. Thus in recent years we have moved away from the more typical approach to studying moral development in terms of children’s judgments about hypothetical scenarios, toward a focus on how children understand and make sense of their own and other people’s *real* harmful and unjust actions.²³ How do children grasp these situations? What sense do they make of

¹⁹ For a review of research conducted across cultures, see C. Wainryb, “Moral development in culture: Diversity, tolerance, and justice,” in M. Killen & J. Smetana (eds.), *Handbook of moral development* (Mahwah, NJ: LEA, 2006), pp. 211–240.

²⁰ Wainryb et al., op cit. note 18, “Being Hurt and Hurting Others.”

²¹ S. Scheffler, *Human morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 18.

²² S. Hampshire, *Morality and conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); B. Williams, *Ethics and the limits of philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

²³ C. Wainryb, “Is and ought: Moral judgments about the world as understood,” in B. W. Sokol & J. Baird (eds.), *Mind, morals, and action: The interface between children’s theories of mind and socio-moral development* 103 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 3–17; Wainryb et al., “Being Hurt and Hurting Others.”

them? What do they think about themselves and others and whatever circumstances lead up to such hurtful interactions? How do they integrate these experiences into their understandings of themselves and others as moral beings? Existing findings point to the role of personal experiences, and of children's construction of meaning out of those experiences, as important forces in the development of a moral self. Indeed, it is in the struggle to make sense of their own actions that children are likely to further their sense of themselves as moral beings.

One of the ways in which we have learned about these processes in our research is by observing and analyzing how children talk about situations in which they have caused harm to others. This approach draws from narrative traditions for looking at self and identity development.²⁴ Such approaches, while heterogeneous, aim to capture the way people's experiences *and their subjective understandings of those experiences* are linked to their further development. In part, the narratives that result from children's talk about harmful (or indeed, any) events reflect the way they have experienced those events. But such narratives also reflect how children have made sense of the events at multiple levels – the way they have linked an event to their own intentions, goals, beliefs, and emotions. Further, such narratives may actually involve drawing connections between children's experiences and what children believe to be true of themselves and others, and ultimately, how they construe what it means to be a good person – their sense of themselves as moral agents.

Our research²⁵ has shown that even very young children consider their own needs and their own reasons for having acted the way they did, and they also consider the needs and feelings of the people they hurt. They think about how their actions affect others, and they think about how to repair relationships. It appears as though children find ways to integrate their own acts of perpetration – when they hurt others – within a sense of who they are and who they want to become. Indeed, for the most part children can acknowledge the consequences of their harmful actions without being devastated by what they did. There is a sense in which they take this “bad” part of themselves and integrate it into an understanding of themselves, and also rely on these experiences to draw conclusions about their future behavior – their future self. Empirically, that process is reflected in specific features of the contents of narratives, in particular a greater emphasis on subjective, interpretive, and psychological (intentions, goals, emotions) aspects of experience, relative to facts.

Because this perspective on moral development does not exclude the perpetration of aggression from the scope of moral life, it lends itself to asking how children who are exposed to and are themselves active participants in political violence might develop a sense of morality and a sense of being moral agents. Next, we consider

²⁴ M. Pasupathi, E. Mansour, & J. Brubaker, “Developing a Life Story: Constructing relations between self and experience in autobiographical narratives,” *Human Development* 50 (2007), pp. 85–110; D. P. McAdams, *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993); K. C. McLean, “Late adolescent identity development: Narrative meaning-making and memory telling,” *Developmental Psychology*, 41 (2005), pp. 683–691.

²⁵ Wainryb, et al., op cit. note 18, “Being Hurt and Hurting Others.”

what our approach has already suggested about the impact of exposure to political violence in children.

Moral Development of War-Affected Children: Exposure to Political Violence

Colombia has been in a state of civil war for more than 50 years, with leftist guerrilla groups and rightist paramilitary groups waging war against the government and against each other. The ongoing conflict has been characterized by widespread violence, resulting in one of the highest kidnapping and homicide rates worldwide.²⁶ As a result of this conflict, nearly 3 million people (out of a population of 44 million) have been forced to leave their homes and towns, seeking refuge in the big cities. More than 400,000 of these internal refugees have relocated in shanty-towns in the outskirts of Bogota – a startling number given that the capital's total population is 8 million – creating peripheral rings of squatter settlements characterized by high population density, poor housing, lack of public services, and inadequate nutrition. In the last several years, we²⁷ have been studying a group of displaced children and adolescents (ages 6–17) in Usme, one of southern Bogota's poorest slums (population 230,000) featuring one of the largest concentrations of displaced persons. Usme is a vast warren of concrete homes and plywood-and-aluminum shacks. Only some roads are paved, and in many places people have to walk through mud and sewage. Sanitation is poor and access to water and electricity sporadic (e.g., during the time we conducted interviews, the water supply was cut off for days at a time.) Usme is considered one of the most dangerous localities in Bogota, with a rate of 3.3 violent deaths per 10,000.²⁸ Although reliable figures could not be obtained, many of the children we studied had been separated from their parents or lost their parents; most lived in abject poverty and all of them reported having witnessed different forms of violence perpetrated on others, including events as severe as seeing someone being shot at or killed or finding a dead body.²⁹

In general, we found that in spite of their appalling experiences, these children nevertheless develop basic moral concepts (e.g., that it is wrong to steal from others or to inflict harm on others). This is not an insignificant finding, given that

²⁶ World Bank, *Violence in Colombia: Building sustainable peace and social capital*. (Washington, DC 2006).

²⁷ Posada and Wainryb, *Moral Development in a Violent Society*; R. Posada, & C. Wainryb, “Narratives of violence: Making sense of interpersonal conflicts from a victim and perpetrator's perspective,” paper presented at the biennial meetings of the Society for Research on Child Development, Boston, MA (March 2007); C. Wainryb, & R. Posada, *Moral development in Colombia: Children's judgments about what people should and will do in the context of survival and revenge*, Society for Research on Child Development, Boston, MA (March 2007).

²⁸ Red Bogota, *Hacer publico lo publico*. <http://www.redbogota.com/lopublico/index.htm>, retrieved on 3/10/2006.

²⁹ Posada and Wainryb, *Moral Development in a Violent Society*.

the circumstances of their lives would not seem to facilitate (explicitly or implicitly) such learning. We suggest that this finding, rather than the protective effects of ideology, may be a source of hopefulness about the long-term potential of war-affected children for developing a healthy sense of moral agency.

That said, our research also indicated that their conceptions of what is right and just were divorced from what they expected others and themselves to actually do, and were applied selectively to some groups of people but not others.³⁰ For example, the majority of children interviewed consistently predicted that they and others would actually steal and inflict physical harm on people in a variety of situations, despite acknowledging that these actions would be wrong. Also, they judged that while aggression is wrong, it is permissible when inflicted on those people they considered their enemies. While the distinctions drawn by children in these studies between moral prohibitions (oughts) and normative expectations can be seen as realistic and sophisticated, they also indicate a construal of the world as one in which nobody follows ethical principles. It is not difficult to imagine that, in such a world, the motivation to do the morally right thing may be undermined. It is also not difficult to imagine that in such a world, it might be hard to trust others, and indeed, oneself, to honor commitments and control aggressive impulses. Functional civil societies, however, rely on the assumption that their citizens possess precisely these capacities.

Another issue of importance is how these children might negotiate views of themselves and others as moral agents in relation to their specific experiences of victimization and perpetration. Previous work suggests that past moral experiences and what people make of those experiences, can further the moral self. How those events in which they could be seen as "bad" are explained or negotiated is critical for understanding how children come to evaluate themselves and others along moral lines and, even, how they understand their place in the world. These children's expectation that no one abides by moral rules appears to also translate into fairly "thin" views of themselves and others as moral agents – something that is clearly evident in how they talked about situations in which they had been the perpetrators of violence. In our research, we asked displaced Colombian children to tell us about a time when they hurt someone they knew. What follows is an excerpt from a story told by a displaced teenage boy about a time when he hurt someone:

I remember a time when we were in the classroom and the teacher left. Then I tried to hurt one of my best friends with a rope that was hanging from the roof. I put it around his neck 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 the narratives given by this group of children, has two noteworthy features. First, as this teenage boy tells us about a time when he hurt his best friend (he put a rope around his neck and pulled – not an

insignificant infraction!), he devotes a few short sentences to describing what he did to his friend, and devotes the rest of the narrative to describing how he himself had been victimized: he was scolded, he was told he'd be expelled, he was told he was useless, everyone avoided him, and he felt sad. This pattern was true of about 70% of the narrative accounts produced by displaced children. Indeed, one of the essential features of these children's perpetration stories was their focus on the idea that their perpetration had turned *them* into victims. This pattern, which was pervasive among displaced children, was never found in normative samples in the United States.³¹

The other important feature of this narrative is the prevailing emphasis on observable events and behaviors, and the near total absence of references to the meanings that these behaviors may carry. There is almost no inferential content in this account – no references to non-observable information, the type of information that requires the communication of internal states, desires, wants, feelings, thoughts. It is even devoid of emotional language, especially in the portion that is linked to this child's perpetration. Notably, the only reference to internality and emotions appears when he switches to describing how he had felt victimized: "I felt really bad, I cried." This feature, too, is inconsistent with the ways in which children and adolescents in normative samples speak about and think about times in which they had hurt others.³² Notably, however, the narratives of juvenile delinquents and behaviorally troubled adolescents tend to exhibit patterns similar to those of displaced children.³³

Should we be concerned about this? Yes.

By talking about mental states, emotions, interpretations, intentions – people make sense, more or less coherently, of complex situations. It is through this type of language that people connect a sequence of actions in a comprehensible way – by relating the actions to a sense of themselves as agents with beliefs, desires, and feelings. It is also through this kind of language that children (and adults) connect specific events to a more continuous sense of the type of person they think they are. When this type of language is missing from a narrative, actions are rendered incoherent; the actions simply stand in for internal character and agency is undermined. This teenager's narrative suggests avoidance and lack of integration. It is as though this child cannot integrate a sense of himself as a wrong-doer, but is fully aware of himself as a powerless weeping victim. In this narrative, the impoverished language leaves his behavior incomprehensible even to himself – the only clarity in this story involves the pain of his own exclusion after having attempted to hurt his friend.

This child's inability to make sense of his own behavior, and the juxtaposition of that senselessness with his much more coherent pain of victimization, is deeply problematic. It is deeply problematic for this individual's future welfare. But it is

³¹ Wainryb et al., "Being Hurt and Hurting Others."

³² Wainryb et al., "Being Hurt and Hurting Others."

³³ A. Sanderson, "A narrative analysis of behaviorally troubled adolescents' life stories," Doctoral dissertation, The University of Calgary, 2001, *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 62 (2001), p. 4076; C. Wainryb, M. Komolova, M. Coquillon, & P. Florsheim, "Youth offenders' and high-school teens' narrative accounts of their own aggressive behaviors," paper presented at the biennial meetings of the Society for Research on Child Development, Boston, MA, (March 2007).

³⁰ S. Opatow, "Moral exclusion and injustice," *Journal of Social Issues*, 46 (1990), pp. 1–20.

also deeply problematic for us all to live in a world populated by hurting adolescents who cannot make coherent sense of their own dangerous behavior, but who can see themselves very clearly as victims. These data thus suggest that there is reason for concern. In fact, all this should leave us deeply concerned about the potential that political violence around the world has for undermining children's development as moral agents. The disruption in the development of moral capacities is likely to be even more severe for child-soldiers, who at an early age were forced to become instruments of killing and torture. Globally there are an estimated 300,000 child soldiers.³⁴ However, virtually nothing is known about their moral development. Next, we begin by reviewing what is known about the process by which children become actively involved in armed groups, and then consider the implications for their moral development.

Moral Development of War-Affected Children: Involvement in Political Violence

It is not surprising that living in the midst of social disarray and poverty, having been displaced and often separated from their parents and families, children become easy targets for recruitment into violent organizations. Nowadays, given the availability of lightweight automatic weapons, even young children can become fighters. Children are recruited by both government forces and non-state groups. In some cases children are coerced into joining armed groups through forced conscription or abduction. Even when not coerced, children's "voluntary" decision to join an armed group is typically informed by the adverse conditions in the midst of which they grow up: children join armed groups to escape abject poverty or family violence, to remain with a family member who had recruited or enlisted, to acquire skills or education that cannot be had elsewhere, or to gain prestige, power, or excitement. It is also the case that in social contexts characterized by injustice and lack of opportunity, youth may become highly politicized and volunteer to join armed groups out of ideological conviction. While some of the children who join armed groups engage only in the more peripheral activities, serving in roles such as porters, cooks, or spies (with many girl soldiers serving in the role of "wives" or sexual slaves), many become fighters, participating in killings, torture, and destruction.³⁵

There is evidence that, across the world, many armed groups target young children for indoctrination into programs that glorify violence and self sacrifice.³⁶ One of the consequences of such indoctrination processes and of those ideologies that ascribe meaning to the violence in their lives, is that children in politically violent

³⁴ S. McKay, "Girls as 'weapons of terror' in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leonean rebel fighting forces," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28 (2005), pp. 385-397; Wessels, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*.

³⁵ Wessels, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*.

³⁶ Browne, "Examining the Impact of Terrorism on Children," pp. 189-211; Cairns, *Children and Political Violence*.

worlds become identified with an in-group and develop a clear sense of the out-group as *Other*. This process, it should be noted, is part of normal human development. In fact, the tendency to glorify the in-group and to denigrate the *Other* is so robust and compelling that it can be triggered with even trivial laboratory psychological experiments.³⁷ Thus it is not surprising that in the context of political violence, and even without explicit training, children would acquire, often from a young age, belief-systems concerning the presumed goodness of the in-group and the badness of the *Other*, as well as collective narratives concerning their group's mistreatment at the hands of the *Other*. While these communal ideologies aid children in making sense of their bewildering and distressing lives, they also tend to disallow or dismiss ambiguities and contradictions,³⁸ thereby leading children to develop polarized understandings of the complex realities within which they operate, dehumanize the *Other*, and ultimately justify violence and revenge. Strongly held ideological beliefs can also lead youth to higher risk taking and acceptance of future loss, or an increased "willingness to sacrifice"³⁹ which, when combined with a distorted image of the *Other*, might contribute to continuing cycles of violence. It has been argued, for example, that the phenomenon of suicide bombers is shaped by such communal beliefs. The target group is portrayed as so evil and threatening that killing its members is seen not as murder but as justified revenge or admirable self defense. As the language of "martyrdom" replaces the language of "suicide," the larger purpose and nobility of those who carry on the attacks are reframed. Note, indeed, that the distinction between suicide and martyrdom is given in the belief system, as martyrs exist only in the minds of those who confer their status.⁴⁰

It is also well known that many fighting groups have developed brutal and perversely sophisticated techniques, explicitly calculated to isolate children from their communities, harden and numb them to violence, dehumanize their victims, and prepare them for killing. Children are often forced at first to witness violence, and subsequently are made to join in and brutally beat and kill others. Sometimes they are compelled to participate in the killing of family members, because it is understood by these groups that there is "no way back home" for children after they have committed such crimes.⁴¹

How do such appalling and abhorring experiences affect the development of child soldiers? While it is possible that psychopathology and severe mental illness characterize some of them, this is unlikely to be the case across the board.⁴² Speaking about arrested moral development in global terms is similarly unlikely to do justice

³⁷ See, e.g., T. M. Ostrom & C. Sedikides, "Out-group homogeneity effects in natural and minimal groups," *Psychological Bulletin* 112 (1992), pp. 536-552.

³⁸ Punamaki, "Can Ideological Commitment Protect Children's Psychosocial Wellbeing," pp. 55-69; Wessels, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*.

³⁹ Loar, et al., "Risk and Protective Factors," 279-286.

⁴⁰ B. Hoffman & G. H. McCormick, "Terrorism, signaling, and suicide attack," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27 (2004), pp. 243-281.

⁴¹ McKay, "Girls as 'Weapons of Terror,'" 385-397.

⁴² Wessels, *Child Soldiers: From Protection to Violence*.

to the complexity of these youths' experience. The more useful questions are how child soldiers reconcile themselves with their own experiences of both committing and enduring injustice and violence, and how they integrate these experiences within a sense of themselves as moral.

One possibility is that in attempting to make sense of their experiences, whether before or after joining (voluntarily or involuntarily) an armed group, child soldiers carve up the world in Manichean terms, as "us" and "them" or "good" and "evil," thereby construing their actions as the desirable and justifiable means for ridding the world of the evil enemy and exacting revenge for perceived past wrongs. This process, which is surely aided by ideology and indoctrination, tends to exclude certain groups of people from the moral universe⁴³ and increases the probability of continuing cycles of violence.

Another possibility is one that actually prevents or precludes meaning-making. Even normal, healthy adults report avoiding disclosing troubling events in order to attempt to forget those experiences.⁴⁴ So it is not surprising that children faced with extreme experiences, that run counter to their values and principles, might also respond with numbness and more extreme kinds of repression or dissociation. While this strategy may be adaptive in the short term, inasmuch as it facilitates children's self-preservation, it is far from clear whether children (or adults, for that matter) are capable of leaving awful experiences "to the side" – forgetting them on purpose, if you will – without serious consequences for their functioning. In our normative samples, it is noteworthy that despite attempts to forget everyday troubles, people are still reporting them in the research setting, even many years later. And in samples of people with documented, true recovered memories, there is evidence that such memories are capable of resurfacing years later with troubling consequences for those individuals.⁴⁵

To date, there is no systematic evidence about how prevalent each of these strategies may be, and whether some strategies may be predictive of better developmental outcomes in the short-term – for example, during the conflict and in its immediate aftermath, and in the long-run, as children need to return to functioning in a post-war society. The sort of narrative examinations and analyses that we described in relation to war-affected children in Colombia are useful for understanding how child soldiers (or former child soldiers) go about integrating, or not integrating, their own experiences of victimization and perpetration into a sense of themselves and others as moral agents. This approach has the advantage of preserving a sense that child soldiers are active constructors of their own experiences. Furthermore,

⁴³ Opatow, "Moral Exclusion and Injustice," pp. 1–20; S. Opatow, J. Gerson, & S. Woodside, "From moral exclusion to moral inclusion: Theory for teaching peace," *Theory into Practice* 44 (2005), pp. 303–318.

⁴⁴ M. Pasupathi, K. C. McLean, & T. Weeks, *The told and untold narrative self*, Unpublished manuscript, University of Utah (2007).

⁴⁵ J. W. Schooler, M. Bendixsen, & Z. Ambadar, "Taking the middle line: Can we accommodate both fabricated and recovered memories of sexual abuse?," in M. A. Conway (ed.), *False and recovered memories* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 251–292.

because narratives are social constructions,⁴⁶ focusing on child soldiers' narratives also leaves open the possibility for guiding or aiding them into reconstruing the same experiences in alternative ways – construals that may help in both short- and long-term ways.

How *do* child soldiers talk about their experiences? While, to our knowledge, we are the first to propose these kinds of systematic narrative examinations and analyses, existing records of conversations with former child soldiers can be used to illustrate our approach. Between 1995 and 2005, psychologist and child-protection practitioner Michael Wessells interviewed more than 400 former child soldiers between the ages of 7 and 18 years in Afghanistan, Angola, Kosovo, northern Uganda, Sierra Leone, and South Africa. In a groundbreaking book, Wessells departs from the more traditionally simplistic and sensationalist approach to this phenomenon, and sets the stage for understanding the complex and multifaceted experiences of child soldiers.⁴⁷ In fact, one of the most important contributions of Wessells' book is the attention and respect it gives to child soldiers' own subjective construals of their experiences. In what follows, we refer to some of the compelling narratives reported by Wessells to illustrate how children's own words – what they do and do not include in their subjective construals – can be used to understand the psychological mechanisms underlying their interpretations and sense-making of their realities, as well as what that might mean for their moral development.

The following narrative, by a Philippine boy who had joined the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) at age 13, is where we begin:

It feels great to kill your enemy. The MILF does not initiate attacks. If the military didn't attack us, there would be no trouble. They are the ones who are really at fault. They deserve to be killed. The other children, they are happy too. They are not sad. I really do not regret killing. If they are your enemies, you can kill them. But if they are not your enemies, you shouldn't kill them.⁴⁸

This narrative differs from the type that we would normally examine in that it does not refer to a specific event experienced by this child but rather to the child's views about the generic experiences of killing. Nevertheless, this narrative illustrates an extraordinarily polarized universe, in which there are good people (the MILF) and enemies (the military); killing of the enemy is associated with positivity and the high moral ground. It is difficult to know for certain how this boy might tell a story about a specific time when he killed an enemy person, but we speculate that, given this starting point, he might tell a story involving very little subjective content (other than happiness for the killing of the enemy), little sense of moral struggle, and perhaps even a sense of righteous self-defense – the kind of reversal of victimhood that we observed in the Colombian displaced youth's story, earlier.

⁴⁶ M. Pasupathi, "The social construction of the personal past and its implications for adult development," *Psychological Bulletin* 127 (2001), pp. 651–672.

⁴⁷ Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*.

⁴⁸ Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, p. 81.

Whereas the boy in the narrative above seems to exist in a straightforward moral world, the language in the following two narratives, which are much closer to the type of data we employ in our work, points to much less clarity, certainty, and integration. In the narrative below, a boy who had been abducted by the LRA in northern Uganda told about the way in which this group dealt with escapees.⁴⁹ The narrative after next, pertains to a 12-year-old Colombian girl who had joined the FARC-EP and recounts how she was forced to administer punishment on her friend.⁵⁰

One boy tried to escape and was caught, tied up, and marched back to camp. All the recruits from the various companies were told that we were never going home, that we were fighting now with the LRA so as a symbol of our pledge to fight on, this boy would be killed and we would help. Soldiers then laid the boy on the ground and stabbed him three times with a bayonet until the blood began seeping from the wounds. Then the new recruits approached the boy and beat him on the chest. Each one has a turn and could only stop once the blood from the body splashed up on to you. This boy was 16 years old. We were beating him with sticks, each recruit was given a stick.

I had a friend, Juanita, who got into trouble for sleeping around. We had been friends in civilian life and we shared a tent together. The commander said that it didn't matter that she was my best friend. She had committed an error and had to be killed. I closed my eyes and fired the gun, but I didn't hit her. So I shot again. The grave was right nearby. I had to bury her and put dirt on top of her. The commander said "You did very well. Even though you started to cry, you did well. You'll have to do this again many more times, and you'll have to learn not to cry."

In both these narratives, there is a near complete absence of psychological, interpretive language. Virtually every sentence contains only observable information. The boy reports things that could be seen (the escapee being tied up and marched to camp, being laid on the ground, etc.) or heard (told we would never go home. . .). There is no mention of what the boy himself felt, thought, wanted, or did not want, in relation to these actions. In the girl's narrative, the references to emotion, and the evaluations that are provided (crying, doing well), are contained in reported speech. Without constructing links between actions and thoughts/feelings, even when those links involve a sense of coercion, ambivalence, or fear, it is likely to be difficult for each of these children to integrate their own experiences – experiences which are horrifying even to read about – with their own autobiography. One noteworthy feature in the girl's narrative is that the one piece of information in the text that is not directly observable is her statement about her friendship with the victim. That claim is, of course, incoherent with the act of killing; again, this experience poses serious problems for integration with a sense of the self as a moral agent. And again, this narrative provides little evidence that any integration has occurred.

Not all the narrative accounts given by child soldiers are devoid of internality and interpretive language. In the following narrative, a Colombian boy explains how he was forced to watch and participate in the killing of captives:

They bring the people they catch, guerrillas and robbers, to the training course. My squad had to kill three people. After the first one was killed, the commander told me that the next

day I'd have to do the killing. I was stunned and appalled. I had to do it publicly, in front of the whole company, fifty people. I had to shoot him in the head. I was trembling. Afterwards, I couldn't eat. I'd see the person's blood. For weeks, I had a hard time sleeping. . . some of the victims cried and screamed. The commander told us we had to learn how to kill.⁵¹

This narrative's content and structure are closer in some ways to those obtained in normative samples with much less severe types of harm. For this boy, there are statements of mental states – stunned, appalled. There are reports of flashback experiences, difficulty with sleeping. And the victims remain human beings who express terror and pain – crying, screaming. While the pain experienced by the boy is clearer in this narrative, this narrative also reflects a remaining sense of moral agency that is lacking in the other narratives. That agency is somewhat constrained, given the coercion involved, but it is there. It is because of this tension between experiencing pain and retaining a sense of agency that child soldiers will struggle to reconcile these events within a sense of themselves as moral beings.

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

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

When I finished telling Esther the story, she had tears in her eyes, and she couldn't decide whether to rub my head or hug me. In the end she did neither, but said: "None of what happened was your fault. You were just a little boy" . . . I became angry and regretted that I had told someone, a civilian, about my experience. I hated the "It is not your fault" line that all the staff members said every time anyone spoke about the war.⁵²

Such anger may seem puzzling. But consider that the statement "it was not your fault," while heartfelt and well-intentioned, acts so as to deny Ishmael's sense of agency. This type of statement also denies whatever positive consequences this child perceives may have resulted from his participation in this armed group. Child soldiers often are or become committed to the ideology of their group, believing strongly in the validity of what they did.

⁴⁹ Wessels, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, p. 70.

⁵² Ishmael Beah, *A long way gone: Memoirs of a boy soldier* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), pp. 159–160.

⁴⁹ Wessels, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, p. 59.

⁵⁰ Wessels, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, p. 64.

On the Reclamation of Moral Agency

Having raised the alarm about the implications of collective violence in general and participation as soldiers in particular for children's moral development, one might ask whether there is any hope at all. In closing, we focus on two areas in which there may be reservoirs to call on, for rehabilitating children's sense of moral agency. One of those ways involves the fact that these children retain what we might call reservoirs of moral sentiment – their relationships to others. Indeed, one common thread in very diverse accounts given by child soldiers, is the depiction of strong friendships developing among child soldiers. Beah depicts developing and nurturing those very friendships, and as we have noted above, the girl soldier's account of killing her friend did not in itself deny the friendship and its meaning.⁵³ These relationships maintain the kinds of sentiments of care and concern that can be used to remind child soldiers that they *also* acted as positive agents, and that they can do so again.

A second route involves helping former child soldiers, as well as the communities from which they come, to make sense of their own actions with regard to the larger political and historical conflict. Children and communities naturally attempt at making sense of their actions and of the events endured. Unfortunately, this often happens by calling upon entrenched ideologies and in-group/out-group dynamics. There is little doubt that the presence of a truly evil enemy makes one's own killing sensible and right. Sadly, this kind of ideology also makes one more likely to pursue violence again. But there are ways to place one's own and other people's unthinkable actions within the context of a more complex understanding of the political and historical conflict, one that acknowledges the culpability and atrocities on all sides. This type of context can help to make sense of a child soldier's actions without relying on a polarized view of self and *Other* that justifies the killing. In some sense, this is the ideal pursued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa – the notion that a sufficiently comprehensive understanding of the blood on everyone's hands will reduce the potential for renewed conflict.⁵⁴

Many children participating in terrorist and armed groups are beyond our reach, but increasing numbers can be helped, as when they participate, in the aftermath of conflict, in programs of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) under the auspices of the U.N. and child protection agencies. Gargantuan DDR efforts have been tremendously aided by needs-assessment studies carried out by DDR officers and related personnel.⁵⁵ These studies have worked to uncover the

⁵³ Beah, *A Long Way Gone*; see also J. Boyden, "The moral development of child soldiers," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 9 (2003), pp. 343–362; Michael Wessels, *Child Soldiers: From Protection to Violence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006).

⁵⁴ See, e.g., C. Villa-Vicencio, & W. Verwoerd (eds.), *Looking back reaching forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa* (Cape Town, South Africa: University of Cape Town Press, 2000).

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Wessels and Kostelny, "After the Taliban;" Wessels and Monteiro, "Psychosocial Assistance for Youth," pp. 121–139.

many psycho-social needs of this group of children. It has been suggested⁵⁶ that, of the entire DDR process, the task of reintegrating children into civilian life, whether their communities and families of origin or some newly reconstituted community, presents the most challenges. This is because returning child soldiers bring with them the residues of their war experiences. They have learned to use violence as a means for achieving goals, and because they have been the instruments of brutality, often forced to commit atrocities in their own communities, many communities fear, resent, and reject former child soldiers. Thus, reintegration often requires community negotiation and healing as well as help for the individuals.

Ultimately, of course, the question is how to help these children reconcile or integrate their experiences with victimization and transgression in ways that help both individuals and groups to heal. The answers to these questions will not come easily, and moving from these answers towards a significant positive impact in conflict-torn regions around the globe will be even more complicated. It is our belief that these children's stories – their narrative accounts of their own experiences – are not only a key to seeing what is going wrong with children exposed to violence, but they are also likely to be a way to put things right. But not all stories will put things right in a sustainable way. The more sustaining stories will be those that embrace everything about these children and their place in the world – the good, and the bad. The best stories will be the complicated, full ones, those that encompass where the children started and where they have been.

Relying heavily on accounts and interviews given by former child soldiers from around the world, Uzodinma Iweala, an American writer from Nigerian descent, created a character he called Agu – a child soldier in an unnamed West African country, who is abducted and forced to commit murder, rape, and other atrocities. The book, *Beasts of No Nation*, ends with Agu foreshadowing that kind of complicated, encompassing story:

And every day I am talking to Amy. She is white woman from America who is coming here to be helping people like me. . . . She is telling me to speak speak speak. . . . I am saying to her sometimes, I am not saying many thing because I am knowing too many terrible thing to be saying to you. I am seeing more terrible thing than ten thousand men and I am doing more terrible thing than twenty thousand men. . . . So I am saying to her, if I am telling this to you it will be making you to think that I am beast or devil. Amy is never saying anything when I am saying this. . . . And I am saying to her, fine. I am all of this thing, but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me.⁵⁷

As implied in this story, child soldiers, like Agu, are complex individuals, with histories, relationships, desires, regrets, and hopes. It is by construing and telling stories in which they recognize themselves as such, that they can hope to survive the brutality and insanity they experienced and further their own sense of self as moral beings.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Wessels, *Child Soldiers*, note 53.

⁵⁷ Uzodinma Iweala, *Beasts of No Nation* (New York: Harper, 2005), pp. 140–142.