

# Youths Making Sense of Political Conflict: Considering Protective and Maladaptive Possibilities

**Essay Review of Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence by B.K. Barber, Human Development and Political Violence by C. Daiute, and Narrative and the Politics of Identity: The Cultural Psychology of Israeli and Palestinian Youth by P.L. Hammack**

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It is widely recognized that adolescence is a time of unique adaptability as well as vulnerability. Indeed, the teenage years are often considered to be a distinct developmental period precisely because youths are in the midst of an unfinished process of constructing a sense of themselves in the world. This is equally the case for adolescents whose worlds have been turned upside down, as in the context of war. Nevertheless, research on youths exposed to political violence has rarely focused on the developmental implications of the interplay between adolescents' capacities for adaptation and their unique vulnerabilities. As such, there is an urgent need to gain a more comprehensive understanding of adolescent development in relation to their experiences of political conflict, and in a way that recognizes the wide-ranging and far-reaching consequences of these events.

Typically, past research on youths' experiences with political conflict has characterized young people as victims of war. As such, studies have largely focused on trauma and the distress that results from their exposure to violence. Indeed, connections between war-related experiences and post-traumatic stress disorder symptomatology are well established and far from surprising [Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Betancourt & Khan, 2008]. However, three recent books, including a volume edited by Brian Barber [2009a] as well as books by Colette Daiute [2010] and Phillip Hammack [2011], introduce and underscore the important and more novel proposition that youths are not just victims or passive recipients of war-related experiences, but rather active participants in these contexts who interpret events through the lens of their own understandings. Indeed, given that young people are in the process of becoming the next adult generation, each volume emphasizes that ignoring their active abilities to adapt and to effect positive social change

would constitute a lost opportunity to interrupt intergenerational cycles of conflict and violence.

These books, individually and collectively, make substantial headway in helping us to recognize young people's own perspectives as they make sense of their experiences of war and go a long way towards elucidating how youths' meaning-making may promote psychological resilience in these difficult contexts. Yet, we will argue that it is also necessary to consider how the capacities for meaning-making that underlie resilience might sometimes be predictive of risk, in ways that go beyond the emotional distress that has been the focus of most research on youths exposed to political conflict. Indeed, we propose that moving away from characterizing young people as simply victims of war towards imbuing them with a sense of agency does not suggest either inherently positive or negative pathways of development. Even further, we suggest that under some circumstances, one and the same form of meaning-making may be *both* protective and maladaptive. Listening to what adolescents are saying (and reflecting on what they may not be saying) may be critical in this regard, by revealing the different meanings constructed by young people themselves. In sum, we maintain that judiciously considering adolescents' struggles to make sense of their experiences is key to understanding the interplay of developmental resilience and risk for youths growing up in the context of political conflict.

### **A Triad of Recent Books on Adolescents' Subjective Voices in the Context of Political Conflict**

If given the choice, we would all prefer that our children grow up under circumstances of peace, rather than war. Thus, in many respects, an emphasis on children as uniformly victimized by political conflict is quite reasonable, in that it acknowledges the pressing need to understand and address the acute negative psychosocial consequences of such experiences. However, without minimizing the potentially devastating effects of growing up in a violent society, recent scholarship brings a more discriminating perspective to bear on these issues. Research increasingly demonstrates that risk is not distributed homogeneously among youths exposed to political conflict, and that not all young people exposed to political conflict exhibit symptoms of emotional distress.

A main proponent of these trends, Brian Barber [2009a] has compiled an edited volume, *Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence*, that aims to address these very issues. Specifically, the overarching goals of this book are to explain why particular kinds of war experiences may be associated with negative outcomes, and to identify the factors accounting for the heterogeneity of resilience among youths in political conflict. In an impressively coherent set of quantitative and qualitative contributions, the various authors in this book highlight the multiplicity of young people's experiences and the diversity of their conflict roles. Adolescents may experience violence as victims, perpetrators, or witnesses; they may or may not engage in political activism, in the context of conflicts that are more or less understandable to them; they are positioned from different socioeconomic, religious, and cultural stances within a society; they must cope with intractable and continuing hostilities, or the aftermath of conflicts with tentative resolutions. This book also illustrates the distinct ways in which different groups of youths may inter-

pret the same set of conflict events. As an example, research by Muldoon, Cassidy and McCullough [2009] demonstrates that children's perceptions of the stressfulness of events such as witnessing a march or hearing a bomb go off in post-ceasefire Northern Ireland vary considerably as a function of their gender, religious background, and socioeconomic status. Similarly, Slone's [2009] work reveals that increased exposure to political violence is linked to greater psychological distress among Israeli youth but to less distress among Palestinian youth. These examples, as well as many others strewn throughout this interesting volume, highlight the particularity of young people's circumstances. In doing so, they collectively furnish strong support for Barber's view that a one-size-fits-all model of adolescents' experiences in political conflict is certain to be grossly inadequate. Even more, this book underscores that researchers must strive to not only document the breadth of 'what happens' to young people in war, but also to delineate how adolescents themselves understand or make sense of such diverse experiences.

In a book entitled *Human Development and Political Violence*, Colette Daiute [2010] also argues for a fuller consideration of youths' own perspectives on political conflict. Her analysis is concerned specifically with adolescents and young adults in the former Yugoslavia. She uses the results of a research workshop with these youths to reveal processes of human development across a particular political violence system. In this regard, her workshop is designed to gain insight into youths' own perspectives on war and its aftermath. Among other activities, she asked adolescents to provide accounts of actual conflicts between peers (i.e., their own experiences and those of their agemates) and between adults (i.e., their observations and reflections on adult society), as well as construct stories about fictional community events and write letters to community leaders. Through their participation in these diverse activities, Daiute aims to demonstrate how young people flexibly use cultural tools (such as narrative) to make sense of their experiences and their circumstances, and thus reveal how these processes mediate youth development. Her program of research especially emphasizes adolescents' critical perspectives on political conflict, and the potentially transformative powers of fiction and of appropriating and engaging with the cultural scripts of the previous generation.

Echoing Barber's [2009a] arguments, Daiute's [2010] volume illustrates the distinct themes that come up in the narrative accounts of young people from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, as well as a refugee Bosnian community in the United States – all implicated, albeit in different positions, in one and the same political conflict. But in our view, the novelty of Daiute's contribution lies in her providing a glimpse into how most adolescents are also capable of considering conflicts from multiple, and even competing, perspectives. Indeed, among studies of war-affected youths, her methodology stands out in its attempt to capture the complexity of adolescents' perspectives by engaging them in a wide variety of discursive activities. This research dovetails nicely with studies of youths in non-war environments suggesting that children learn important social and moral lessons and gain insights into themselves by assuming different perspectives on specific experiences [Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005; Wainryb, Komolova, & Brehl, 2010]. In this respect, a major contribution of Daiute's volume is in showing that youths growing up in the context of political conflict may similarly draw on multiple alternative meanings to make sense of their experiences. Based on these data, Daiute underscores adolescents' ability to creatively and flexibly engage with established belief systems and structures as a pro-

cess that underlies resilience. However, considered another way, we would also note that her analysis implies that *inflexibility* in such meanings when youths are asked to narrate from different perspectives may be cause for concern. Although Daiute does not focus on this issue, our own data provide troubling evidence for precisely such patterns of inflexibility in various groups of war-affected youths. For example, unlike adolescents in non-war contexts, youths displaced by war in Colombia recounted their own experiences of harming others and being harmed by others in similar ways that largely emphasized their sense of themselves as victims [Posada, 2008; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2008, 2010]. It is easy to imagine how this inflexibility could limit developmental possibilities for these young people as well as their potential for re-storying their experiences.

Whereas the research summarized in Daiute's [2010] volume insinuates the potential for risk in youths' inability to consider war-related experiences in ways that acknowledge multiple perspectives on the same events, the risks associated with the construction of certain kinds of meanings are at the very heart of a volume by Philip Hammack [2011], *Narrative and the Politics of Identity: The Cultural Psychology of Israeli and Palestinian Youth*. Hammack's book deals with life stories of adolescents in Israel and Palestine before and after their participation in intervention programs designed to promote the construction of a common identity imparted through intergroup contact. Even as Hammack, like Daiute [2010], explores how youths engage with their own culture's scripts, his position in regard to the developmental consequences of adolescents' meaning-making is less unequivocally optimistic. It is important to note that Hammack's focus is on the development of identity, rather than meaning-making per se. Nevertheless, his emphasis on the *construction* of identity reflects a conception of adolescents as active agents who grapple with and, at times, contest the received master narratives of their social worlds. Like Daiute, he argues that youths interact with the cultural scripts of their parents' generation, and do not simply passively reproduce them. However, he also emphasizes that because of the concrete realities of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, teenagers on different sides of this struggle frequently make sense of their life experiences in ways that reflect troublingly polarized and mutually exclusive cultural identities that ultimately perpetuate established patterns of animosity. For instance, Israeli adolescents' life stories evoke themes of Jewish persecution and victimization along with continued existential insecurity that motivates engagement in practices promoting national identities, such as military service. In turn, Palestinian youths emphasize themes of loss and dispossession and express their own sense of existential insecurity following from a fragile sense of national identity, leading to a perception of the need to resist and struggle for self-determination.

### **On the Possibility that Resilience-Promoting Meanings May Be Simultaneously Linked to Risk**

In an effort to explain youths' tendency to construct life stories reflecting polarized cultural identities, Hammack [2011] considers the functions that such identities serve for Palestinian and Israeli adolescents, and advances an argument that we consider to be crucial: he suggests that identity may simultaneously act as *both* burden and benefit in the context of an ongoing political conflict [see also Hammack, 2010].

The ‘burden’ side of things is easy to grasp: Polarized identities are indisputably problematic inasmuch as they serve to perpetuate conflict and violence [see also Moshman, 2007; Sen, 2006]. This explains why intervention programs (often conceived by outsiders, such as American academics or humanitarian organizations) typically aim to transcend mutually polarized identities and promote, instead, the construction of a shared cosmopolitan identity. Yet Hammack questions whether the goal of identity transcendence is realistic, given the realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is not because he does not recognize the risk inherent in polarized identities – it is abundantly clear that he does. Rather, in what he himself admits to be an audacious proposal, he argues that polarized identities may also act as a *benefit* by serving as a tool for cultural recognition and supporting each group’s continuing struggle for legitimacy and social justice. At the level of the individual, too, such polarized discourses may be protective inasmuch as they provide comfort and a sense of security in the context of ongoing conflict. Indeed, Hammack’s analysis of adolescents’ life stories when interviewed following their participation in interventions did not reveal the expected patterns of identity transcendence; rather, more frequently, youths’ life stories after exploring their identities in the context of intervention programs were characterized by an *accentuation* of polarized identities. Thus, Hammack makes the bold claim that, despite their best efforts, some interventions may actually result in identity change that is the *opposite* of that which is desired and anticipated.

Hammack’s [2011] argument concerning the psychological benefits of identity echoes both Barber’s [2009a] and Daiute’s [2010] claims that the ability to find meaning in political conflict may serve protective functions for youths’ development in the context of war. For instance, Daiute suggests that meaning-making is a process that is fundamentally linked to resilience: ‘Leading activities among adolescents and young adults across these contexts are ... motivated to deal with the political-economic circumstances and to foster strategies for thriving in those circumstances’ (p. 245). Yet Hammack’s reflections on the possibility that identity constructions may at once be both a benefit and a burden are in line with our own misgivings about focusing exclusively on the positive consequences of finding meaning in war-related experience. Although Hammack’s concern is with the consequences of *polarized* forms of identity, might not the same intersection of benefit and burden (or resilience and risk) be applied to other forms of meaning-making and agency construction? Or posed in a slightly different way: How might psychologically protective ways of making sense of experience be simultaneously associated with troubling outcomes? And what may be the longer-term developmental consequences of different forms of meaning-making?

Questions surrounding the interplay between protective and maladaptive developmental trajectories are not new. The literature on developmental psychopathology makes clear that when children are obliged to adapt to high-risk environments, they can certainly do so, and often in heartbreakingly resourceful ways, but it also provides substantial evidence that many of those adaptations carry long-term negative outcomes [e.g., Rutter & Sroufe, 2000]. An example directly relevant to adolescent development in the midst of political conflict bears on youths’ widespread reliance on avoidance as a coping strategy that has been shown to be adaptive in the short term and maladaptive in the longer term [Fonagy, 2003; Kerig & Becker, 2010; van der Kolk, 1996]. Nevertheless, questions surrounding the interplay of risk and resil-

ience have not yet been adequately explored in relation to the sorts of meanings that adolescents make vis-à-vis the political conflict and violence they are exposed to.

How best to do so? In line with Barber [2009a], Daiute [2010], and Hammack [2011], we think that attending to young people's own narrative accounts is key for gaining insight into their experience, as their stories provide a glimpse into how they understand these experiences and how they connect them to a sense of who they are. In this respect, narrative accounts provide a powerful window into how youths construct resilience-promoting meanings. Yet such accounts constitute an equally powerful tool for understanding the creation of meanings linked to psychological risk, and in a way that moves beyond the more widely studied socioemotional outcomes linked to trauma.

### **Development in the Context of War: The Construction of Meaning and Agency in Adolescents' Narrative Accounts**

Consider the following excerpt from a young Palestinian's description of his experience during the first Intifada, as quoted by Barber [2009b]: 'My emotions took me. Where? I didn't know. I just wanted to fight and help end our suffering. We wanted this occupation to end. I can't describe, believe me, I just can't describe what a wonderful feeling it was to share with my people in the struggle against the occupation' (p. 299). Barber aptly notes this young man's sense of unity with his fellow Palestinians and his clarity of purpose – indeed, his ability to draw on broader cultural, political, and historical meaning systems to make sense of the harrowing experience of injustice and war – as being linked to certain forms of psychological resilience, such as self-efficacy and civic involvement [see also Barber, 2008]. Yet there may be other consequences of finding meaning in such ideological commitments. For although these meaning systems may both be psychologically protective and serve as a catalyst for social change, they can also act to constrain identity-related possibilities [Appiah, 2005; Hammack, 2010, 2011]. Furthermore, the construction of a sense of agency that is fundamentally premised on group-related ideological commitments may act to perpetuate conflict and violence via psychological processes such as moral exclusion, dehumanization, and Manichean world views that make it easier to justify aggression against others [e.g., Opotow, 1990; Punamaki, 1996; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010].

To contrast with the Palestinian youths, who tend to make sense of their experiences with political violence through the lens of identity-relevant meaning systems, Barber [2009b] points to the accounts that Bosnian adolescents made of their own experiences with political violence. These accounts appear to reflect Bosnian adolescents' perceptions of themselves as collective victims of frightening and incomprehensible events: 'I couldn't understand the situation the way it was. It was without any meaning. My parents didn't know and they didn't know what to tell me, why this was happening, what is going to become of us, are we going to be alive' (p. 296). Similarly, Daiute's [2010] analysis suggests that young people in Bosnia (unlike those in Croatia, Serbia, or the United States) tend to organize their accounts of conflicts between adults around themes of unresolved tension. She also presents examples of Bosnian youths' narrative accounts that convey a similar sense of victimhood in their everyday conflict experiences with peers: '... a boy from another class put a

firecracker in my rucksack ... I realized that my books were burning, so I ... ran away because I was scared ... the other students either ran away or laughed; none of them defended me, nobody said anything to that boy' (p. 64). Although Barber rightly notes that these stories reveal a sense of being victimized and divested of control, in line with Daiute, we might suggest that this form of sense-making also reveals that these youths are not without a perspective on the frightening events that make up their lives; in fact, the above narrators convey in a rather clear fashion what they were thinking and feeling about these events. In this respect, the narratives constructed by Bosnian adolescents are similar to the accounts that victims in general tend to provide of their experiences, in that they focus exclusively on their own perspective while either ignoring the perpetrators' motives or describing them as incomprehensible [Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Wainryb et al., 2005]. Thus, even as these youths view and describe themselves as victims of their circumstances, they also reveal themselves as actively trying to make sense of such circumstances.

Further, Barber [2009a] identifies an additional unique feature of these accounts: Bosnian adolescents were often unable to connect their experiences with political conflict and violence to their understanding of themselves and the world. For instance, a Bosnian refugee in the US described her experience when the war started: 'In one day [my Serbian classmates] became complete strangers. In some ways I became a stranger to myself, too. My life and the lives of my family members were in danger because of our names and religion. I never knew those things mattered, which means that I did not know many things about myself, too' [Weine, Klebic, Celik, & Bicic, 2009, p. 269]. In this eloquent account, this young woman explains how she was victimized on the basis of an ascribed identity that was not relevant to her sense of self. Barber describes this common theme among Bosnian adolescents as being associated with psychological trauma and continued suffering. Although we unhesitatingly agree with Barber that there are psychological risks associated with these forms of meaning [Wainryb, 2011], we also agree with Daiute that it is important to ponder how 'being able to express this bleak message also expresses the figured world of possibility and change' (p. 253). In particular, we note that this narrator's telling conveys a reflective process of *searching for*, and failing to find self-relevant meaning in what is happening to her. Indeed, in this context where war-related experiences may be frightening and incomprehensible, other research demonstrates that it may be more psychologically protective to disengage from considering such meanings at all [e.g., Jones, 2002]. Yet importantly, Jones [2002] also astutely observed that, even though the process may be painful, youths should not necessarily be discouraged from searching for meaning, and thus seeking their own recovery. Rather, the emphasis should be on finding the best ways to support and guide them in this process. Obviously, this is a critical question for researchers engaged in developing interventions.

From our own perspective as developmental psychologists, we are also left to ponder the longer-term psychological, social, and moral consequences of this form of meaning. Indeed, they are far from obvious. Perceiving oneself as a victim of incomprehensible and uncontrollable events may be linked to a somewhat narrow self-focus and the selective blaming of others for the conflict or its consequences. Yet it could also be true that when youths recognize that their war-related experiences are jarring and discordant with whom they think they are, this might circumvent the developmental constraints imposed by constructing self-relevant meanings bound

up with war-related collective identities. We simply do not yet know the answers to these questions. As such, we propose that future research must strive to better understand the distinct short-term and long-term developmental consequences of young people's tendency to feel victimized and alienated by, versus empowered by and directly implicated in, their experiences of political conflict.

Finally, we think that it is critical for future research on adolescents' subjective interpretations of political conflict to explicitly distinguish between making no sense of war and *failing* to make sense of war. Put in another way, we suggest that in the quotes above, Bosnian adolescents are reflecting on who they are, as thinking, feeling agents, and ultimately constructing accounts conveying that their war-related experiences just don't make any sense to them, given what they know about their world and themselves. We propose that this is quite distinct from failing to make sense of experience altogether. As an illustration, Daiute [2010] indicates that some Bosnian youths in her study were unwilling or unable to reflect on conflicts between adults in their society. Indeed, as compared to young people in the United States, Serbia, or Croatia, they were much more likely to claim that 'I have never observed conflicts among adults' (p. 85). She suggests that this denial may be linked to the particular difficulties faced by Bosnian youths. Furthermore, in our own data we have observed that when youths *do* furnish narrative accounts of their own conflict experiences, adolescents' exposure to and especially perpetration of violence appear to be linked to their constructing a uniquely impoverished sense of their own agency and of other people's agency, perhaps as a way to cope with particularly devastating experiences [Wainryb, Komolova, & Florsheim, 2010; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2008, 2010]. This work is consistent with Daiute's proposal that 'researchers and practitioners should consider assumptions in the silences between words in oral language and between the lines in written language' (p. 47). That is, some young people describe war-related events, and even their own actions vis-à-vis these events, in a way that fails to consider their experiences in relation to their own and others' motives, cognitions, and emotions. Notably, this troubling numbing of agency is most evident in what adolescents *don't* say. For instance, when asked to describe an event in which he had harmed another person, a 14-year-old Colombian former child soldier constructed the following account: 'So that, so that day, well, when they ordered me to kill someone and so – we went, we left like, like three and – we got there and, and, we killed a cop and, then we left, well, the guerrilla told me to kill someone, so then they ordered me, then we got there and, and we killed a cop and then we returned to – returned to our camp' [Wainryb, 2011]. This narrator's account is striking, in that the motivations, feelings, and thoughts underlying his own and others' actions are entirely left unstated – we don't know why he was ordered to kill the cop, why he obeyed, or how he felt about doing so. This pattern not only stands in stark contrast to the narrative accounts of adolescents in less violent environments [Wainryb et al., 2005], but importantly, also differs from the two forms of meaning portrayed above as constructed by youths in the midst of violence and political conflict. It is not clear whether this pattern in narrative accounts results from a passive deadening of agency, or youths' more active strategies for avoiding the implications of their actions. It may be that both processes are at play. Regardless, we suggest that the construction of meanings reflecting a numbing of agency is a source of serious concern, as it implies that these young people are unable to recognize the connections between their own behaviors and their sense of who they are. This type of fail-

ure or inability to acknowledge their own status as an agent responsible for their actions has been linked to unregulated, aggressive behavior and poor psychosocial adjustment [Fonagy, 2003; Kerig & Becker, 2010; van der Kolk, 1996]. At the same time, it is understandable why this strategy would be psychologically protective in a context in which youths encounter chronic violence [Jones, 2002; Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010], and perhaps especially for young people who have themselves perpetrated such acts [Betancourt et al., 2010; Klasen et al., 2010].

## Conclusion

We present this series of three examples to suggest three different ways in which adolescents may construct meaning from their war-related experiences: (a) as personally or culturally significant and fundamentally tied to their sense of themselves, (b) as frightening, incomprehensible and constraining to their sense of themselves, and (c) as too threatening to consider in light of their sense of themselves. Each pattern reveals a qualitatively different way of making sense of political conflict. Indeed, youths' tendency to make meaning of their experiences may be inevitable: If we take seriously the notion that youths are active interpreters of their experiences, then heterogeneity in the nature of risk is likely to be found in the *kinds* of meaning they make. Further, we suggest that certain strategies for making sense of war-related experiences may come with their own distinct long-term developmental tradeoffs. Following from this, in proposing a broader consideration of the developmental consequences of youths' war-related meaning-making, we caution against replacing a narrow focus on trauma with an equally limited focus on resilience.

Our analyses of the developmental implications of youths' meaning-making are made possible by a new trend in research on young people's development in the context of political conflict – one that acknowledges that adolescents themselves are active agents struggling to make sense of their social worlds. The three books reviewed here constitute groundbreaking examples of studies that move away from the more usual research focus on trauma and listen – really listen – to adolescents' emerging and evolving complicated voices. The volume edited by Brian Barber [2009a] will delight most readers as it clearly highlights the very diverse experiences that youths mired in political conflict might be confronted with, as well as the heterogeneity of perspectives that adolescents may bring to bear on such experiences. By underscoring this complexity, Barber's book provides considerable insight into the distinct processes that may underlie resilience for particular groups of youths. In turn, Colette Daiute's [2010] volume demonstrates how an adolescent's abilities to draw on multiple, alternative meanings to make sense of his/her world may act as a basic capacity that underlies resilience, but similar to Barber, also illustrates that the particular meanings that youths are likely to construct vary substantially depending on their position within a political violence system. Many readers will also appreciate the weight that Daiute places on adolescents' own narrative accounts and stories – the compelling voices of her young participants remained with us long after we had finished reading her book. Phillip Hammack [2011] also shows that young people who are positioned differently within the same conflict may construct distinct – indeed, often highly polarized and mutually exclusive – ways of understanding their experiences. By presenting youths' own life stories in rich detail, his book also evokes

considerable empathy for perspectives that might otherwise be seen as extremist and unyielding positions on conflict. Further, by following the same adolescents over time, he provides a fascinating glimpse into how young people's understandings can change as they wrestle with vexing and intractable challenges. His unique contribution is also in noting that, given the social and political realities faced by youth in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the polarized meanings they construct may be linked to both problems and possibilities. Thus, collectively, these three forward-looking books make clear that young people's subjective interpretations of their own experiences provide a way to simultaneously understand both protective and maladaptive developmental processes and a rich glimpse into the wealth of information, both hopeful and heartbreakng, that can be derived from youths' own voices. We applaud their efforts to make such voices heard.

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