

Children's Representations of Parental Loss due to War

Sandra Rafman

*Université du Québec à Montréal and Montreal Children's Hospital,
Canada*

Joyce Canfield

Montreal Children's Hospital and McGill University, Canada

José Barbas and Janusz Kaczorowski

Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada

To study the specific contribution of parental loss in war, play representations and family interviews of thirty 4- to 6-year-old immigrant children (15 war-orphaned) from war-torn Central American countries were analysed. The play of children who had lost a parent through death or "disappearance" in war differed significantly from that of children who had not. Two years after the loss, war-orphaned children symbolically re-enacted the manner of the parental death or disappearance in play but could not sustain the play scenario for long. Expressions of imminent danger and emptiness were prevalent but anger and vengeance were not. Children who had been exposed to war without parental loss depicted situations and themes reflecting issues associated with their age. Low levels of secrecy surrounding reasons for immigration or past losses, parental acceptance of death, remarriage and presence of extended family characterised the content of family interviews in both groups.

The number of migrant and refugee children who have suffered many losses in their personal, social, and physical worlds as a result of war is rapidly

Requests for reprints should be sent to Dr Sandra Rafman, Département de Psychologie, Université du Québec à Montréal, C.P. 8888, Succursale Centre-Ville, Montréal, Canada. H3C 3P8. Electronic mail may be sent by Internet to rafman.sandra@uqam.ca.

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increasing. Although the uprooting of emotional attachments is viewed by many as the most significant of disruptions and losses due to war (Arroyo & Eth, 1985; Freud & Burlingham, 1943; Ressler, Tortorici, & Marcelino, 1993), the specific impact of the loss of a parent in war has rarely been studied.

Children's reactions to overwhelming events, other than war, such as natural disasters (Galante & Foa, 1986), sniper attacks (Pynoos & Nader, 1989), hostage-takings (Jessee, Strickland, & Ladewig, 1992), kidnapping (Terr, 1991), mutilation and fatal accidents (Martini, Ryan, Nakayama, & Ramenofsky, 1990) have underscored the conflict between remembering and denying the events. When exposed to violent parental death as a result of homicide or suicide, children have been found to exhibit features of what has been termed post-traumatic play (Terr, 1981). Children re-enact the events in play, while at the same time trying to alter or undo them (Malmquist, 1986, Payton & Krockner-Tuskan, 1988; Pynoos & Eth, 1986; Yule, 1989). During World War II, children who witnessed their parents being shot in community roundups are described by the ghetto doctor, (Perez, cited in Hilberg, 1992) as engaging in games of execution, grave-digging, and funerals.

Following parental loss, a child's need to relive memories of the loved one while at the same time denying the loss and its attendant painful feelings, has been highlighted in clinical studies (Altschul, 1988; Bowlby, 1960; Eth & Pynoos, 1985; Freud, 1917/1957; Mahler, 1961; Wolfenstein, 1969). Although Jensen and Shaw (1993) predict that childhood bereavement in wartime is similar to bereavement in peacetime, this has yet to be experimentally demonstrated. The circumstances of war, its human origin (Ayalon, 1982), and ambiguity regarding who is to blame (Howe, 1986) may further impede childhood bereavement, already compromised by the child's propensity to denial. Funerals and mourning rites may be impossible and other societal supports unavailable (Kijak and Pelento, 1986). There is no forum for the child to discuss the death because of secrecy surrounding the political nature of the death, or its painful effects on grieving family members.

Reports of adults who, as children, lost their parents in the Holocaust (Kestenberg, 1985; Moskovitz, 1985; Vegh, 1979), or adolescents during Cambodia's Pol Pot regime (Carlson & Rosser-Hogan, 1991; Kinzie, Sack, Angell, Clarke, & Ben, 1989; Kinzie, Sack, Angell, & Manson, 1986), highlight the effects of childhood war-related losses. The child's sense of safety within family and society is shattered by fears of separation, abandonment, and impending disaster. Feelings of anger, guilt, emptiness, and lack of worth accompany this insecurity. Although children remain concerned about who will take care of them as well as their own and their caregivers' survival, developmental outcomes may vary (Moskovitz, 1985). Protective or vulnerability factors such as the surviving parent's stage of

grief or readjustment and emotional availability (Meijer, 1985; Raphael, 1983; Rutter, 1990), the relationship with significant new caregivers and changes in the child's living conditions (Elizur & Kaffman, 1983; Furman, 1986; Garmezy, 1983; Levy-Shiff, 1982), ideological (Cairns, 1994) or cultural sanctioning of the separation or death (Minde, Minde, & Musisi, 1982) have emerged as important mediators of children's adaptation and resilience.

Retrospective accounts and direct studies of the impact of war on refugee children (Rousseau, Corin, & Renaud, 1989) or children living in war zones (Dubrow, 1995; Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991; Nader & Pynoos, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1983; Zivcic, 1993) have not specifically examined the contribution of parental loss. Arroyo and Eth (1985) conclude that the more personal and catastrophic the victimisation, the more developmental and clinical status are compromised. The Central American refugee children studied by Arroyo and Eth, however, were chosen from a psychiatric clinic. The children had experienced domestic and community violence as well as deprivation and separations from caregivers before, during, and after their war experiences. Whether their psychiatric status was due to the war experience, or to prior or subsequent violence and loss, could not be determined.

The present study focused on the effects of parental loss in war on the play of preschool children, aged 4 to 6, drawn from a nonclinical immigrant and refugee sample (i.e. children not referred for, nor undergoing, psychological or psychiatric treatment). We hypothesised that the play of children who had lost a parent during war would differ from the play of children who had experienced war without parental loss.

We anticipated that representation of parental loss would predominate in the play of the war-orphaned children and that conflict between remembering and denying the loss would be depicted. We did expect, however, that all children who had experienced war, with or without parental loss, would exhibit hypervigilance or portray imminent danger. We were also interested in discerning whether a sense of emptiness, often reported in the adult retrospective literature, would be represented in the play of the war-orphaned children.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of two groups of children and their families from war-torn countries; one group had been exposed to war and had experienced the violent death or disappearance of a parent due to war, and one group had been exposed to war without parental loss.

Inclusion Criteria. Children were selected using the following criteria: (4–6 years); country of emigration (Guatemala, Nicaragua, or El Salvador); exposure to war contexts (had lived in areas where “disappearances” and deaths due to war were common); and had not been referred for, nor solicited, mental health consultations or help. Fifteen children who had experienced the violent death or disappearance of a parent in the context of war were matched in terms of age and gender with 15 children who had been exposed to war and violence without experiencing the death of a parent. The matching was done on the aggregate level. The children and their parents were enlisted through members of local Central American communities.

Of the 15 children who had lost a parent (9 boys, 6 girls), the father of 14 children and the mother of 1 boy had been killed. The 15 children in the comparison group had all lived in areas where deaths in the context of armed conflict had occurred. At the time of this study, approximately two years had elapsed since parental death or “disappearance”.

The children’s war experiences were based on parental accounts. It could not be independently confirmed as to whether the child had learned of the killing and the discovery of the body through actual observation or through accounts of family members. For many of the children, the parent had first “disappeared” and the murdered body was discovered later; thus the criteria of death or disappearance could not be used to form two groups.

The families were Roman Catholic and of rural origin. Most of the children came from large extended families and had several siblings. Family and work patterns resembled those of recent immigrants to Canada from comparable countries. Most of the adults in both groups were employed as factory workers or as domestics with members of their extended family living in close proximity. All children attended day care and/or kindergarten. No significant difference was found with regard to the ages of the children in the two groups. The mean age of children was 66 months in the parental loss group and 65 months in the comparison group.

Procedure

The parent of a possible participant was contacted by telephone and the purpose of the research was explained. A meeting place, usually the home, was chosen. In written and verbal form, parents and children were told that the purpose of the study was to learn from their experiences, and subsequently to better understand them, as well as children and families in similar circumstances. Participants were assured that personal information would not be exchanged with any institutional or governmental agency. Information from the school was thereby precluded. Participants asked that no taperecordings be made.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the 30 children and their families. Within two days following the interview, the children participated in a play session. The third author, who had been trained in diagnostic play techniques, conducted the interviews and play sessions in Spanish. As we did not know how the children and their families would react to interviews on their past history, we restricted the procedure to one interview and one play session and excluded testing.

Ethical Considerations. We obtained signed consent from the parents and verbal consent from the children. Confidentiality was assured. Parents and children were told they could withdraw at any time from the interview or play session. Therapeutic follow-up was offered if needed.

Family Interview. Interviews were conducted with the family members in the presence of the child. Using the format of a semi-structured interview, we sought sociodemographic information regarding family constellation, actual work, school, and living situations. Families were asked about their reasons for coming to Canada and, when relevant, the circumstances of the parent's death or disappearance. Questions also included whether the surviving spouse had told the child about the parent's death or "disappearance", and whether he/she had entered into new relationships. Parents of children in the comparison group were asked whether their children had lived in areas where deaths and "disappearances" had occurred. The interviewer showed the child the box of toys intended for the subsequent play session. A detailed written record was compiled directly after the interview.

Coding of the Family Interview. Dimensions of the family interviews that were coded included whether the child had been informed of the circumstances of parental loss, whether the parent had remarried or had entered into a new relationship, and whether members of the immediate or extended family were living with the child.

Play Sessions. Nondirective diagnostic play sessions were held with the child alone within the two days following the family interview. Toys provided were representative of those used in diagnostic play sessions, including family figures, soldiers, animals, both wild and domestic, fences, vehicles, creative, and construction materials. One hour was allocated for the session. The interviewer recorded the session in as much detail as possible.

Content Analysis of Play

The written records of the play sessions of both the parental loss and the nonparental loss groups were provided to two child psychotherapists for content analysis. At this stage, therapists were unaware of the particular history of the child. The therapist-judges independently determined and listed the principal motifs, that is, the main topics of each play session.

The play session of each child was independently coded to determine the presence or absence of the principal motifs. The family interviews were then read. The interview information was used to code the “re-enactment of manner of death” motif, because it permitted us to ascertain whether the child’s play resembled the manner of parental death. A comparison of the coding indicated that judges agreed in all but three instances. The following were the coding categories.

Representative or Typical of Age. The raters coded the play motifs in terms of whether they were representative of, or frequently encountered in, the play of children aged 4 to 6 years (Cohen, Marans, Dahl, Marans, & Lewis, 1987; Fein, 1981; Piaget, 1951; Rubin & Peplar, 1982; Smith, 1977). Examples included the child’s imitation of parental behaviours such as preparing a meal for a spouse, the emulation of parental occupations, and reference to, or portrayal of, disputes with siblings.

Domestic activities and modelling after parents were exemplified by Maria. After identifying the white horse as the mother and the brown horse as the father, she stated: “The brown horse must eat. No one prepared his supper.” After going to get a make-up kit, she said: “The other animals must go to bed. Daddy’s home.” Sibling disputes were presented by Juanita who complained that one brother broke all her toy forks because he wanted to eat with them despite her having told him they were for play. She complained that her other brother broke all her other toys. She informed us that: “They are not allowed in my room anymore.”

Reference to Death or Disappearance. Judges were requested to code if the child referred, either symbolically or verbally, to parental death. For example, one girl in the parental loss group asked the interviewer if his father had died.

Modified Re-enactment of Parental Loss in Play. Judges coded whether the child re-enacted the circumstances of the death and, at the same time, included an aspect that modified the circumstances. The following are examples of play segments in which children were considered to have depicted a modified version of the way their parents died or how their bodies were discovered.

Miguel's father was murdered and his body was viewed by his family, bloody and mutilated, missing fingers and part of an ear. In Miguel's play, a jeep rammed into a horse. The collision was described as accidental in that "they were going too fast". He added "the horse has a broken foot but no blood".

Pablo was 3 years old when his father "disappeared". Pablo depicted a horse, partially buried with its feet in the air. This was the position in which his father's body was later discovered. Sonia's father had disappeared when she was 3 years old and was found dead four days later. In her play session, Sonia, now 6 years, said of the grandmother figure who was tending a farm, that she was alone, had a lot of work to do, and that nobody could help her. Sonia stated that: "Grandmother is tired because she does not have a husband, he was killed in Guatemala."

In the family interview, mother had related that Carlos' father had first disappeared and was then confirmed dead. The truck in which his father was riding had been fired upon and then fell into a ravine. In his play session, Carlos separated a little truck from the rest of the toys. After putting the other toys back in the toy box in a gentle and orderly fashion, he ordered two deer figures out. After several moments of silence and stillness, he put the two deer on the truck which he then overturned. In a low voice, he said: "The truck of my father fell into the ravine," without including the fact that his father had been shot.

Termination of Session. The interviewer noted whether the child ended the play session before the end of the allocated hour. The judges as well as the interviewer noted the content of play that preceded the termination of the session. The following are examples of abrupt terminations of the session.

Carlos promptly left the room after stating that his father's truck had fallen into a ravine. He was unable to return despite his uncle's urging. Miguel, despite encouragement to stay, left the room after playing out the accident and burial of the white horse. He came back with his mother, holding tightly to her skirt, but did not want to play any more. His mother tried to get him to clean up but he resisted firmly. After burying the horse, Pablo abruptly went to the other side of the room, threw the toys on the floor, then left the room.

Imminent Danger. The category of imminent danger was coded if a verbal or symbolic element of the child's play referred to impending disaster or the need to be vigilant. Anita prevented the animals from going too far by tying cords around them. Frederico placed the animals under his feet so that they would not stray far, and told the ones who could not stand on their own to leave. One child warned of potential trickery by referring to the Trojans who hid soldiers in a gift horse.

Someone Is Missing. Judges decided whether the child's play included the motif of someone missing. Death did not have to be mentioned. For example, Margarita depicted the serving of a festive dinner in which she continuously talked about two relatives who were missing. Rosanna's father was working on the railways when he was abducted. She began to play with the toy train but was constrained by the persistent concern that the tracks were missing. "You don't have tracks," she repeatedly said: "There are no tracks, the train can never work again. Never more."

Pairs, Circles, Lines. A motif coded by the judges involved the emphasis on pairing, lining up, or placing the toys or animals in circles. Maria placed the animals or toy figures of the widowed grandmother's farm in pairs in a circle, for example, two ducks, two horses, and so forth.

Covering. Judges noted whether the child covered the toy figure, represented as dead, with a blanket or cardboard or encircled it protectively. Daniel gently covered the figures of his mother and uncle.

Statistical Analysis

The significance of differences between the two groups for each of the seven themes was tested using chi-square (χ^2) tests, or Fisher's exact tests. Fisher's exact test was used when the total sample size and the expected values were small ($n < 20$ and < 5 , respectively) in a 2×2 table. The Bonferroni correction for multiple significance testing was considered but was rejected as too restrictive given the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample size. However, in order to partially control for multiple significance testing the $P < .01$ (two-tailed) was used as the minimum criterion for significance.

RESULTS

The children's play motifs of the parental loss and nonparental loss group are compared in Table 1. The use of either the chi-square or the Fisher test of exact probability and the corresponding significance level is also indicated.

The play of 13 children in the parental loss group referred to death. Of these 13 children, 10 re-enacted scenes of the death, and 11 abruptly terminated the play session after either a reference to parental death or re-enactment of the manner of death. Of the 11 children who left the room early, 4 children promptly ended the play and 7 children briefly depicted or referred to **feeding or being fed and then left** impending danger,

TABLE 1

Play Representations of Children having Experienced Parental Loss in War and Children exposed to War without Parental Loss

	<i>Children Exposed to War</i>		
	<i>With Parental Loss</i> (<i>n</i> = 15)	<i>Without Parental Loss</i> (<i>n</i> = 15)	<i>P level</i>
Symbolic play	14 (93)	13 (87)	.5000 ^a
Play motifs	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	
Refer to death or disappearance	13 (93)	3 (23)	.0002 ^b
Re-enact version of trauma	10 (71)	1 (8)	.0001
Leave abruptly after re-enactment	11 (79)	1 (8)	.0002 ^b
Imminent danger	10 (71)	2 (15)	.0034 ^b
Miss someone	7 (50)	2 (15)	.0659 ^a
Pairing or circling	10 (71)	3 (23)	.0119 ^b
Covering	6 (43)	2 (15)	.1269 ^a

^aFisher test of exact probability. ^bChi-square test.

hypervigilance, missing people, and the pairing and lining up of toy figures or animals were recurring features of their play.

The play of the children in the nonparental loss group consisted of themes frequently encountered or associated with their age group. Dramatic or symbolic play consisting of the emulation of parental activities and the depiction of parental, sibling, and peer relations was frequent. Of the 13 children who played, 8 children (4 boys, 4 girls) portrayed domestic activities which included preparing or serving food for the family and putting children to bed. Two served guests and 2 children awaited father's return from work. Six children emulated their parent's work or activities. One boy acted out his father's job as mechanic, another that of carpenter, and 3 girls referred to putting on make-up and looking after children. The play of 2 children, one girl and one boy, referred to conflicts between themselves and their siblings.

The Family Interview

All 15 surviving parents in the parental loss group had told their children of the other parent's death or disappearance as well as the circumstances of the loss. Moreover, with one exception, the surviving spouse had also explicitly told the child not to await the parent's return.

Most surviving spouses, generally the mother, had entered into a new relationship or had remarried. Protracted parental grief or readjustment was not apparent to the clinician who conducted the interviews nor to the therapists who coded them.

DISCUSSION

Despite experiences of disruption and devastation, the majority of the children in both groups were able to display an important developmental step, the capacity to play symbolically. Ninety per cent of all children did play and the two groups did not differ with regard to the presence of imaginative play or play involving construction and exploration. They were able to represent their experience. However, the two groups of Central American children, one group having experienced parental loss due to war, the other having experienced war without parental loss, did exhibit significant differences in their play.

The content of the play representations, the experiences represented, and the ability to sustain the play were substantially different in children who had sustained parental loss and those who had not. The play of those who had not experienced parental loss reflected motifs frequently encountered, and was representative of the play of children of comparable ages in normative samples. On the other hand, the play of the parental loss group often began with age-typical concerns, but became intertwined with the parental loss motifs. The unfolding of the play scenario, for many of the children, tended to revolve around conflicts in representing the loss.

The literature on children's reactions both to parental loss and trauma underscores the struggle between confronting and avoiding painful events. This was reflected in the play of the children who had lost a parent. The pressure to represent the loss was evident in the re-enactment play of the children. This has been characterised by Terr (1981) as post-traumatic play. Of the orphaned children, 93% (13) referred to death or disappearance and 71% (10 children) depicted play situations that clearly reflected the manner of parental death or the condition of the body when discovered. The children in the comparison group had also lived in areas where deaths and "disappearances" were occurring yet only 20% (3 children) referred to death.

The re-enactment play frequently contained important modifications likely to reflect the struggle to deny the loss. The fragility of the notions of nonfunctionality, finality, and irreversibility of death in the 4- to 6-year age range (Speece & Brent, 1984) may account for some of the modifications. The intentionality and the manner of death, however, appeared to be as difficult to accept as its finality. In general, children avoided representing blood, mutilation, or intentional harm. Fathers who had disappeared, or were dead, were transformed into grandfathers. An intentional murder was replayed as an accident. A mother discovered slain lying on the road was described as sick or absent.

Although the children depicted modified versions of the parents death, the interactions with the parent or past shared experiences were not

represented in play. This may account for the sense of emptiness or void (Vegh, 1979) as evidenced by scenes depicting the search for lost relatives and absent individuals frequently encountered in the play of the parental loss group.

References to or portrayals of the loss of the parent in play provoked denial and anxiety that was visible in behaviour. Children in the parental loss group symbolically re-enacted the manner of the parental death or disappearance but could not sustain the play scenario for long. Of the 13 children who referred to or re-enacted the manner of parental death, 11 (85%) abruptly terminated the session. In contrast, only 2 children abruptly ended the session in the comparison group. Expression of the loss in the play session was usually followed by anxiety and avoidance.

The prediction that both groups would be equally subject to hypervigilance and concerns of imminent danger in so far as both had lived in dangerous environments was not supported. These concerns were more frequently depicted in the parental loss group than in the group of children not having sustained parental loss. Losing a parent in war appeared to have rendered children more vulnerable to these concerns or conversely, it is possible that the presence of parents during wartime protected the children from such preoccupations. This is a testable proposition that would require a careful selection of the relevant comparison group(s).

Surprisingly, the children in the parental loss group rarely expressed feelings of resentment or retaliation in their play, nor did they depict themselves as the authors of violence. Moreover, they did not seem to harbour feelings of abandonment and anger at the parent for having left them (Vegh, 1979). The children in the parental loss group were more likely to place toys in pairs, circles, or lines. This feature of their play was characterised by gentleness and great care. They may have been referring to, or recreating, the lost parental couple or cultural group. These findings and their interpretations provide interesting avenues for future studies involving children who sustained parental loss in war as well as other contexts such as divorce, illness, or accidents.

Family interviews indicated that surviving parents in the parental loss group were no longer awaiting their spouse's return. Moreover, most children were clearly informed of their parents death and its circumstances and thus were spared the negative correlates of secrecy and ambiguity (Kijak & Pelento, 1986). Although the political strife that led to parental loss may not have been comprehensible to the child, the surviving parent was frequently able to talk about the killer(s) and the dead parent. For example, Miguel's mother explained that bad men had killed his father, but that he had not suffered and had gone to heaven. Openness regarding the circumstances of the death, the surviving parents' readjustment, remarriage, and the support of extended family was evident during the family interviews

in the parental loss group. Remembering lost parents openly in a safe country with extended family present is likely to differ from remembering them in contexts of secrecy and danger with few family members present. Given the number of unaccompanied children in current wars, determining whether the ongoing presence of another close family member or friend (Freud & Burlingham, 1943; Williamson, 1995) could also protect the child is crucial.

Limitations of the Study

It would be essential to establish whether differences in play representations would be paralleled by differences in developmental outcome. The play of the children in the parental loss group, even though strikingly different from the play of children in the comparison group, does not indicate that their development is compromised. Whether the play of the children in the parental loss group, in fact, represents a form of resilience, or adaptive/maladaptive coping, can only be determined by follow-up studies using carefully selected outcome variables.

Methodologically, it would be important to determine whether interviewing the family prior to the play session influenced the content of the children's play. In as much as the families in both groups were interviewed prior to the play session, similar "priming" effects would be anticipated. Yet the children in the comparison group, who had lived in war contexts where violence, death and "disappearance" frequently occurred, did not depict war situations. Whether the child personally witnessed the death, saw the dead parent, or heard of the manner of death are all important variables to consider. Migration to a country not at war, degree of exposure to war, intensity and severity, may also influence the child's reaction. Replication of the study with a larger representative sample and a variety of comparison groups, such as children from nonviolent backgrounds who have lost a parent in other ways (accidents, illness, homicide, suicide), or children still living in their native country (taking into account whether the country was still at war or not), is necessary. The number of migrant, refugee, and war-orphaned children render it essential to address these questions in planning either individual or large-scale interventions to protect them.

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