
Where the Political and the Psychological Meet: Moral Disruption and Children's Understanding of War

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Abstract

I argue for the inclusion of a moral dimension in the study of children's responses to loss and trauma in contexts of armed conflict and political violence. In my clinical and research studies, the disruption of a rule-governed moral universe is revealed in the symbolic and verbal representations of both community-based and clinically referred children whose parents have disappeared or been killed in contexts of political violence. Dilemmas related to good and evil, trust and betrayal, protection and aggression, are prevalent in war-affected children's representations of their traumatic experiences. Not only should more attention be paid to children's construction of moral narrative in the aftermath of political violence, but also this should be done in conjunction with an examination of the moral narratives embedded in national and cultural ideologies. Following political violence, the child's search for meaning occurs at the same time that his or her relevant culture(s) or nation(s) are struggling to construct a collective narrative, often in the context of conflicting historical accounts, memories and narratives. Interventions and research addressing the recovery of war-affected children should recognize the interconnectedness of political, social, psychological and moral dimensions of armed conflict and political violence.

Keywords: *armed conflict, children, moral development, mourning, narrative, parental death, political violence, posttraumatic stress disorder, trauma*

Suddenly the window will open
and Mother will call
it's time to come in
the wall will part
and I will enter heaven in muddy shoes
I will come to the table
and answer questions rudely
I am all right leave me
alone. Head in hand I
sit and sit. How can I tell them
about that long
and tangled way.
Here in heaven mothers
Knit green scarves
.....



No – surely I can't tell them
that people are at each
other's throats.

Tadusz Rozewicz¹

Armed conflict and political violence entail attacks on the body and on the body politic. For more than 35 million children in the world, political violence is the defining context of their lives.² Children in contexts of war and political violence experience disruption not only of their physical, relational and social worlds but a shattering of their moral universe as well. Although children's moral development in contexts of non-violence and children's psychological development in contexts of violence have been studied extensively, focus on children's moral competence and development in contexts of violence is rare. Just as adults, policymakers and caregivers have systematically underestimated the suffering experienced by children in situations of illness, death or war, so they have neglected children's moral understanding of and response to social and political events.³

Researchers and theorists examining children's response to armed conflict often fail to acknowledge distinctions between their emotional and moral responses. Clarifying the relationship between psychological and moral implications is of critical interest; the failure to make appropriate distinctions confuses our understanding of the impact of political violence on children. We should anticipate that the relationships between the moral, psychological and political issues engendered by violence are complex. Just as armed conflict does not have a uniform emotional and psychological effect on children, so we should not anticipate that armed conflict would have one moral impact. Nor should we assume that measures that lead to psychological well-being necessarily contribute to healthy moral or political developments.

This article begins by examining the rich literature on children's moral development and competence in cultures where armed conflict is not occurring. The impact of armed conflict and political violence on the child's psychological development is then addressed with a particular focus on recent findings, approaches, puzzles and controversies. The relatively fewer studies of children's moral development and competences in contexts of political violence are then explored, with a particular focus on children's struggle to resolve moral dilemmas in inherently conflictual contexts. I highlight the importance of clarifying the role of intentionality, ambiguity, interpretation, ideology, cultural narratives and meaning. The article concludes with some implications of these findings for models of recovery for children and their societies following the moral, physical and social/relational devastation occasioned by war and political violence.

Children's moral development in contexts of non-violence

Children bring multiple concepts to bear in interpreting and evaluating their social reality.⁴ They make moral judgments from an early age, and can distinguish the world as it is from the world as (they think) it ought to be. Although early psychoanalytic thought hypothesized that moral development occurred in conjunction with or following the resolution of the oedipal conflict – that is, following three to five years of age – research from different perspectives and theoretical frameworks are placing at least moral emotions and possibly moral reasoning at earlier points.⁵

Prosocial behaviors such as helping, sharing and providing comfort may emerge between the ages of one and two years and are linked to expressions of concern as well as efforts to understand and experience the other's plight.⁶ Children's reparative behaviors after they cause distress also increase with age.⁷ Three-year-old children in their play narratives are able to create coherent stories that include relationships of reciprocity and empathy as well as internalized prohibitions and rules. Moreover, they are able to consider alternative outcomes to resolve a moral dilemma.⁸

There are even early indications of children's awareness of the incorrectness of 'bystander behavior to harm and pain'. When four- and five-year-old children were asked to judge another child's behavior, their judgment of children who helped or shared with another child or victimized another child depended on the presence or absence of an observing teacher. In contrast, their judgments of a child who failed to help or share did not depend on a teacher's presence.⁹ Increasingly, the moral judgments of preschool children are found to be more advanced with respect to equality and justice than Piaget's original findings.¹⁰ At seven to 12 years of age, children's moral conceptions are highly differentiated and reflect a general sensitivity to differences in types of socio-moral events and the roles of individuals in these events.¹¹

A large body of research has demonstrated that, by a fairly young age, children begin to form moral judgments that are distinct from other types of social judgments, such as judgments about the conventions of social institutions and the social system. From age four onwards, children of varying backgrounds and characteristics (such as violent or non-violent, perpetrators or victims, maltreated, abused or not maltreated), evaluate moral transgressions resulting in unfairness, physical¹² or psychological¹³ harm as very serious, deserving of punishment, wrong across social contexts and wrong whether or not there are rules or whether or not a teacher witnesses the acts. Moreover, children's judgments of moral transgressions are different and far more severe than their evaluations of the violations of social-conventional rules.¹⁴

Particularly relevant for this discussion is the role of provocation and retribution. When eight- to twelve-year-old children evaluated provoked and unprovoked situations, both violent and non-violent children condemned unprovoked violence using moral reasoning. With provoked situations, violent children focused more on the immorality of the provocation and perceived 'hitting back' as a form of

reciprocal justice. Non-violent children perceived 'hitting' as worse than the psychological harm of the provocation and condemned a violent response.¹⁵ Although the judgments of violent and non-violent children differed with respect to provoked violence, moral reasoning was the basis of the judgment.

Although social and cultural frameworks may shape the expression of moral judgments, children's sociological frame alone does not determine their moral judgment. Helwig, Turiel and Wainryb's research programs emphasize that across cultures and gender, children make complex moral judgements involving rights, justice, tradition and authority that cannot be determined or explained by appeal to cultural framework alone.¹⁶ For example, when Druze and Jewish children in Israel were presented with dilemmas involving conflicts between justice, personal, interpersonal and authority concerns, the judgments of both Druze and Jewish children were heterogeneous and complex.¹⁷ These researchers emphasize the complexity of culture and their studies reveal that moral dilemmas and conflicts are integral to the social and moral life of individuals even in societies not mired by armed conflict and political violence.¹⁸

Children's psychological development in contexts of political violence

In contexts of war and political violence, children typically experience or witness moral attacks such as torture, mutilation, disappearances and sexual exploitation. In many contemporary armed conflicts, children are increasingly conscripted as soldiers. The physical and psychological ills children experience in such contexts are not distributed equally, and can be perceived by children themselves as unjust. Those children or their societies that are powerless, marginal or have lesser standing within their culture will suffer more from impoverishment, inadequate nutrition, interrupted schooling, increased risk of illness, injury from land mines, conscription, early marriage and early employment.¹⁹

Research on the psychological impact of war on children has increased tremendously in recent years. The impact of war on the child has been examined in terms of concepts such as coping, stress, and adaptation, a conceptual model in which a moral dimension is not intrinsically present. Much of this research has embedded its findings within concepts akin to posttraumatic stress, which, despite the term's clear limitations and contradictions, does capture many of the psychological 'symptoms' following terrifying, uncontrollable and unpredictable events.²⁰ Hyper-arousal or vigilance, nightmares, sleep and eating disturbances, intrusive images, repetitive behaviors, loss of interest, restlessness and increased irritability are symptoms often noted.²¹

Since many children after traumatic events are seen to cope well, if measured by symptoms or functioning, the exploration of protective and vulnerability factors that contribute to children's resilience in the face of adversity has come to dominate the field. Former child soldiers and orphaned adolescents in Sierra Leone have been found to cope well despite complex physical and psychological injuries caused by

exposure to terrible violence and loss while living under highly stressful environmental conditions with severely damaged or non-existent community resources and support. Adolescents who could maintain an intact sense of purpose, effective control of traumatic memories, and successful protection against destructive social isolation did better psychologically.²² Conditions that favor purposeful remembering included the presence of supportive peers and a responsive adult, structured exercises and rituals, an ability to suspend remembering at any time, and pragmatic assistance from friends and adults.²³ Maternal mental health, prior traumatic experience, support systems and possibility for active participation, among other variables, have been found to mediate the child's psychological response to the traumatic events of war. Rarely do studies about children's psychological resilience, however, include variables that reflect moral precepts or views of good and evil.

The term 'resilience' itself brings many definitional problems. It risks being tautological and it is often unclear whether the concept is considered to be cause, process or outcome. The notion of a resilient child, however, does shift the focus from the child as solely a vulnerable and dependent victim to a competent constructor of his universe.²⁴ As conceptualizations move from perceiving children not only as passive victims but also as resilient youth and co-constructors of their social world, the associated logic is that they are also constructors of their moral world. Children by their moral choices also participate in the construction of their social universe.

What is particularly relevant to our concerns is the repeated finding of the persistence over time of posttraumatic stress symptoms.²⁵ For example, over a one-year period, feelings of hatred toward Serbs and desire for revenge decreased, and social functioning improved among Kosovo Albanians aged 15 years or older, but posttraumatic stress symptoms increased.²⁶ When the terrors, nightmares, re-enactments and intrusive memories do not abate on their own, when traumatic grief persists, examination of the child's feelings and thoughts around the trauma often reveals unresolved moral dilemmas.

Children's moral development in contexts of political violence

The events of war shatter the moral universe as well as children's physical, emotional and social universe. In war the moral order is turned upside down. Killing has become intentional and acceptable and is now politically organized and socially sanctioned. The organized and sanctioned nature of war and political violence makes it difficult to identify aggressors or to attribute blame. For the child, the perpetrators (whose identity is frequently ambiguous and uncertain) often operate during and after war with impunity. In contexts of armed conflict, children often encounter complex situations that present moral dilemmas, where they may be obliged to engage in acts they view as immoral, such as stealing for food. Child soldiers are forced to commit atrocities against their own families, placing them in

moral dilemmas where relational, moral and survival imperatives conflict and permit no resolution.²⁷ After war they are typically viewed with greater suspicion and distrust than adults who have committed similar acts.²⁸ In war individuals including children are forced to make impossible moral choices among alternatives that are equally reprehensible.

(i) Moral dilemmas in community-based children

Despite the moral chaos of war, children are able to exhibit moral judgment and competence distinct from the societal context.²⁹ In a survey conducted with 1836 youth of Sri Lanka, a country ravaged by a particularly brutal and vicious civil war, little difference was found between Sinhalese and Tamil youth in their views about the legitimacy of violence. Nonetheless, 30 percent thought violence a proper method to achieve their demands as compared to 14 percent of Indian youth. In the specific areas most affected by the conflict, however – that is, the northern and eastern districts – a smaller percentage (26 percent and 27 percent respectively) considered violence to be legitimate.³⁰

In the studies of my own research group, moral dilemmas were found to underlie the content of play narratives of war-orphaned Central American children of differing clinical status.³¹ The play narratives and symbolic representations of non-clinical community-based children from Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador who had lost parent(s) through death or disappearance in the context of political violence was compared to both non-war-orphaned community children and war-orphaned clinical children who exhibited various psychological disturbances.

The play of children whose parents had survived differed significantly from that of children whose parent(s) had been killed in war; for children whose parents survived, their stories and their universe had coherence and their motifs were readily discernible. The community-based non-clinical children who had lost parent(s) in contexts of political violence re-created how their parents died or how their parents' bodies were discovered, but they were not able to sustain the play scenario for long. In play the children undid or modified the intentionality, the cruelty and the finality of their parent's death, but not the event itself. Murderous attacks became accidents; bodies found bloodied and mutilated were discovered unbloodied.

Such play reveals that the children could not confront or resolve intentional evil, such as how human beings could intentionally commit bloody and cruel deeds against other human beings. The child's ability to acknowledge the parent's death was complicated by her inability to comprehend how her mother or father could have died by a wilful violent human act. The relational imperative required remembering and mourning the lost parent but the moral reality of intentional evil left the child too horrified to admit the cause of her loss. The transgression of a moral edict, and the conflict between a relational and moral imperative, rather than the parental loss alone, froze the child at the moment of the killing.

(ii) Moral dilemmas in children referred for psychological consultation

The narratives and play of children referred for psychological consultation differed from that of non-referred children. Initially their play sessions were characterized by more disjointed, fragmented, and ambiguous scenes than those of their community-based non-clinical counterparts. Whereas community-based non-referred children re-enacted the killing of their parent, the referred children re-enacted the destruction of their moral universe. Their remembered and fantasized scenes were not so much about terrible brutality but about anguished moral choices that permitted no resolution. The theme of good and evil linked seemingly disparate episodes together. Roles of perpetrator and victim, aggressor, betrayer and protector shifted rapidly as moral ambiguities permeated their fragmented play scenes. Children often confuse the rage of the aggressor with their own rage, further complicating the identification of perpetrator and victim, a confusion often shared by adults who have undergone extreme violence.

The play of the war-orphaned clinical children could also be understood from the perspective of mourning (resolved or not) and trauma. Nonetheless, the referred war-orphaned children differed from the community-based orphaned children in what they were mourning and what they were re-enacting. What had been lost and what had been fragmented was found to differ as children struggled to re-create their shattered social and moral worlds.

The sense of injustice that often maintains feelings of chronic anger following human-engendered trauma further shows the interdependence of the emotional and the moral. Although interrelated, the moral and psychological implications of political violence must nonetheless be distinguished. In some contexts, the immediate psychological benefit of some 'coping mechanisms' may have long-term negative consequences on moral, not to mention political, development. Jones interviewed young teenagers who have lived through the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina on opposite sides of the conflict, and who now live in the two different entities that compose the country.³² The degree to which adolescents were engaged in a search for meaning to the conflict was inversely related to their psychological well-being. Those adolescents who were disengaged were more likely to score as well adjusted on psychological measures, whereas those adolescents who were trying to make sense of the conflict were more likely to be less well adjusted by these measures. Avoidance and silence on issues such as ethnic cleansing left the collective or communal discourse unchallenged. Disengaged adolescents were thus not likely to engage in attempts to promote the re-building of inter-communal relationships, leaving the long-term stability of the region and their own moral well-being even more compromised.

In another study, children in Kabul distinguished between the short- and long-term effects of different 'coping mechanisms'. They acknowledged that not telling the truth, over-protection, the use of physical punishment, violence and taking revenge, used by themselves and their parents, helped and comforted them in their immediate circumstances, but they identified these methods as having negative repercussions for themselves in the long term.³³

Meaning as comprehensibility and meaning as significance

In an attempt to come to terms with their traumatic experiences, adolescents in Sierra Leone formed a performance troupe and enacted plays that often centered on a specific catastrophic event. In one play, a teen who was made to watch as combatants tortured and murdered his family returns to his village where he finds the murderers and has the opportunity to take his revenge. Through the play the actors/adolescents work through their experienced moral dilemmas and conclude with a shouting chorus of 'Forgive yes but never forget.'³⁴ Janoff-Bulman³⁵ points out that meaning itself has two distinct connotations: meaning as comprehensibility and meaning as significance. In meaning as comprehensibility, something 'makes sense' when it fits in with a system of formally or newly accepted rules or theories. This sense of meaning can be quite distinct from asking whether something is of value or worth. In war, the child is confronted with the tasks of finding meaning in both senses.

(i) The role of ideology

Ideology as an intervening variable affecting interpretations and reactions to political violence itself requires theoretical and experimental clarification. Ideological beliefs embody profound moral and cultural views regarding vengeance and justice and their relation to an individual and society's security and identity is multilayered and complex. Depending on the meaning ascribed to a death, human-induced violence, assumed to be more problematic, need not have more dire psychological consequences than incidents such as road accidents. Israeli adolescents who lost relatives in war fared better psychologically than adolescents who had lost relatives to traffic accidents. Even more remarkable was the finding that the war-bereaved adolescents performed better on psychological adjustment tests than the general non-bereaved population.³⁶ The pattern of relationship between exposure to political violence and psychological distress is strikingly different for Palestinian and Israeli children and adolescents. For Israeli children the greater the exposure the greater was their distress, whereas for Palestinian children there was a consistent inverse relation. Increased severity of exposure to political violence led to less overall distress and fewer symptoms.³⁷

In comparing the attitudes towards war of 11- to 14-year-olds in Croatia to Israelis and Palestinians who were assessed 18 years earlier, at ages nine to 13 years, Croatian children generally had a negative attitude towards war but strongly supported their country's fight for freedom. Moreover, a greater similarity was found between the attitudes of Croatian and Israeli youth than between the attitudes of Croatian and Palestinian youth, or Israeli and Palestinian youth.³⁸ Adolescent Bosnian survivors of ethnic cleansing resettled in the United States did have vivid and intrusive memories of the atrocities that they had witnessed, but their traumatic experiences, including resettlement, did not appear to interfere with the normal processes of adolescent development or social functioning. The political meaning they gave to their traumatic experiences led to an interpretation of their symptoms as non-problematic.³⁹

(ii) The role of ambiguity

Children attribute more hostile intent and suggest more problematic solutions when the provocation is ambiguous and when they are placed in a situation where they see themselves to be failing.⁴⁰ Aggressive boys attributed more hostile intent than did non-aggressive boys in ambiguous situations when the objectionable action was directed at them but not when it was directed at others. Often the line between political and criminal violence is not clear. Confirming the significance of changing political context over time, black South African youth at three different points in a township's history construed high levels of political violence to be problematic primarily in the more ambiguous context of intra-community violence, but much less so in contexts of overt state-community conflict, covert opposition and political repression.⁴¹

Implications for models of recovery and narratives of transformation

Increasingly notions of stress, coping or adaptation are being replaced by a discourse based on the need for transformations following traumatic events. The (re-)construction of a life narrative is increasingly seen as critical to the therapeutic process and as a preferred way of addressing the child's losses and traumas. In my own studies the clinical children's re-enactment of the events that had disrupted their lives was modified, partial and fragmented. The child's perception of the traumatic events and the narrative s/he constructs must be seen as embedded within (although not identical with) the perception of the traumatic events and narrative being constructed by the culture(s) of which the child is a member. But just as political violence devastates the child's assumptive world, it also devastates the assumptive world of his culture(s). Just as children and adults need to mourn emotional losses, so they must mourn cultural loss and losses of their assumptive worlds. Although children's understanding occurs within the context of the surrounding society's beliefs and perspectives, this relationship is precisely in flux and at risk in contexts of war. Faith in having control over one's destiny, and trust in a moral order, are shattered for the relevant community or nation as well.

Societies and cultures may have chosen traumata. Although the group does not choose to be victimized, they may integrate the mental representation of the trauma into their very identity and relentlessly convey the consequences to the next generation. These social narratives, which can become myths, are created out of a nation's traumatic experiences and may become the national narrative. Both child and culture may re-create their narratives as means of understanding or overcoming the break in the moral universe, as a way of coming to terms with evil and suffering. They construct their narratives with the aim of providing a sense of safety, unity and esteem while addressing the emotions of the trauma, making them bearable.⁴²

The ability to create a continuous narrative is viewed as therapeutic, but we need to ask whether all narratives are equal and who controls the content of the narrative.

As Pick points out, some national myths or narratives may prevent mourning from occurring and potentially entitle the 'victim group to vengeance'.⁴³ Simon and Apfel, in exploring what modifies and transforms the traumatic effects of violence and loss, found that Palestinian and Israeli children's developmental age and family narratives were critical to their understandings of the conflict.⁴⁴ Like Pick, they argue that each generation feels pressured to transmit the experience of its own trauma to the next generation. Palgi illustrates the formation and function of cultural symbols during the mourning process.⁴⁵ A child who had lost his father in a war became overly preoccupied with national and biblical heroes and thus an exaggerated use of culturally constituted defense mechanisms was not necessarily productive.

Narratives are not morally or politically neutral. An examination of the relationship between power and culture may reveal that cultural narratives of trauma and survival may serve a liberating or repressive potential.⁴⁶ As both child and culture or nation are in flux and at risk in contexts of war and political violence, children and their reference group(s) often find themselves in the midst of two or more conflicting narratives, as it is for Bosnian, Israeli, Palestinian and Singhalese and Tamil children, to cite just a few examples. The day of independence in the Israeli narrative is the day of disaster in the Palestinian narrative. Such narratives may address or suppress the immediate pain of suffering and loss, but they also fuel political violence. Nor, as we have seen, is their long-term psychological benefit self-evident.

Recognition that both the social universe and the moral universe have been disrupted could counteract the trend to oppose recovery programs that focus on mental health and those that emphasize the need to restore social structures.⁴⁷ Children recognize that the processes of their own recovery are bound up with the recovery of their social and political communities.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Children from an early age reveal a moral competence that should be considered in attempts to understand the impact of war and political violence on their well-being. More attention needs to be paid to the moral impetus underlying posttraumatic stress symptoms. In war moral taboos are broken, and fundamental moral edicts transgressed. Fractured moral and political relations rather than fragmented social relations alone become the repositories of a host of socio-moral-psychological dilemmas. In play, war-affected children continuously re-enact unresolved emotional and moral issues. The meanings, in terms of comprehensibility and significance, of their narratives and play become clearer when we understand them as attempts to present and resolve moral dilemmas occasioned by the destruction of moral continuity in their lives, and as struggles to construct a moral order they can once more affirm. Political violence and its associated travesties confront the child with the problem of evil and hold the potential to make of him a philosopher.

Notes

- 1 Tadeusz Różewicz, 'The Return', in *Conversations with the Prince and other Poems*, trans. Adam Czerniawski (London: Anvil Press, 1982), p. 36.
- 2 See Lynne Jones, 'Adolescent Understandings of Political Violence and Psychological Well-Being: A Qualitative Study from Bosnia Herzegovina', *Social Science and Medicine*, 55(8), 2002, pp. 1351–71, p. 1351. In the decade since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF reports that at least two million children have been killed and six million injured or disabled in armed conflicts. Of the 30 million refugees and displaced people worldwide, it is estimated that 50 percent are children under 15. See also UNICEF's *The State of the World's Children Reports*, <<http://www.unicef.org/sowc02/pdf/sowc2002-eng.p7-31.pdf>>.
- 3 Renata Miljevic-Ridjicki and Goranka Lugomer-Armano, 'Children's Comprehension of War', *Child Abuse Review*, 3(2), 1994, pp. 134–44.
- 4 Kirstin D. Neff and Charles C. Helwig 'A Constructivist Approach to Understanding the Development of Reasoning about Rights and Authority within Cultural Contexts', *Cognitive Development*, 17(3–4), 2002, pp. 1429–50.
- 5 It is important to recognize that different theoretical frameworks will determine to a considerable degree what is sought and possibly what is found. Important differences exist in the psychological literature regarding the role and interpretation of emotion as a basis for morality. See Orlando Lourenco, 'Understanding the Moral Meaning of Children's Attribution of Emotions to Victimizers', *Archives de Psychologie*, 69(268–269), 2001, pp. 63–79.
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- 18 See Turiel and Wainryb, 'Social Life in Cultures', p. 251.
- 19 Paul Onyango, 'The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children', *Child Abuse Review*, 7(4), 1998, pp. 219–29.
- 20 Gordana Kuterovac-Jagodic, 'Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Croatian Children Exposed to War: A Prospective Study', *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 59(1), January 2003, pp. 9–25.
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