



Understanding the impact of political violence in childhood: A theoretical review using a social identity approach



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Social group are central to understanding exposure to political violence.
- Political violence elicits both psychological distress and aggressive behavior.
- The social identity approach can explain these apparently contrary clinical consequences.
- This avoids unhelpful false dichotomies of victims and perpetrators.

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ABSTRACT

The present paper reviews the literature that has assessed the psychological impact of political violence on children. Concern for those growing up in situations of political violence has resulted in two areas of research within psychology: the first considers children as victims of conflict and considers the mental health consequences of political violence. The second considers children as protagonists or aggressors in conflict and considers related moral and attitudinal consequences of exposure to political violence. These two literatures are most often considered separately. Here the two strands of research are brought together using a social identity framework, allowing apparently divergent findings to be integrated into a more coherent understanding of the totality of consequences for children and young people growing up in situations of armed conflict.

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1. Introduction

It is estimated that over the past decade at least 40 countries world-wide have been affected by ongoing armed civil conflict. In his seventh report to the Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict, the Secretary-General documents violations against children (United Nations, 2007). The report cites 57 State and non-State actors that have commissioned grave violations against children. Estimates are that over 2 million children have been killed in armed conflicts, another 6 million have been permanently disabled, and, more than 250,000 children continue to be exploited as child soldiers (United Nations, 2007).

Civilian fatalities are disproportionately higher than ever before in the history of warfare. In World War I, 10% of all fatalities were civilian casualties; in World War II civilians represented 50% of all casualties. However, during all subsequent conflicts, civilian casualties have represented upwards of 80% of conflict related fatalities (Cairns, 1996). The changed nature of warfare has led to a concern about the psychological cost of exposure to such conflicts which is often very difficult to measure (Pearm, 2003). However, it is safe to assume that given the increased number of civilian victims in political conflicts over the last number of decades, there has been a concomitant increase in the number of people exposed to acute and chronic traumas associated with political conflict.

This changed nature of warfare and political violence—with increased civilian casualties—have significantly heightened risks for children (Ahlstrum, 1991). As well as the very real risks to life and limb (United Nations, 2007), exposure to violence based on national, religious and ethnic violence during childhood has the potential to alter children's views of their social worlds dramatically (Dubow, Huesmann, & Boxer, 2009). Classic developmental psychological perspectives emphasise the importance of childhood experiences: from a Vygotskian perspective all mental functions and representations of the social world are developed through a shared knowledge of culture (Vygotsky, 1986). How children come to see their world may be dramatically altered, for example, if their mother lives in fear for their futures, or their father's dehumanisation of, and anger towards, those he views as being on 'the other side' is the ubiquitous atmosphere in their family home. Living in a segregated neighbourhood and attending religiously segregated schools, a practice commonly evident in divided communities (Gallagher, 2004), the child may have no opportunity to meet those from the other side. As such an increasingly autonomous and active child would interpret and appropriate their own varied (war) experiences based on both their own previously internalised model and their own emotional and cognitive understandings of that experience (Wood, 1998).

Barber (2009a) articulates the complexity of conceptualizing political violence and its consequences for children. Though fraught with methodological and conceptual challenges (Cairns, 1996), this is a field that is nascent (Betancourt et al., 2013) as well as interesting and important. A testament to this is the several recent publications that have attempted to review the field and highlight the challenges and complexities of the issues (see Barber, 2008; Betancourt et al., 2013 for excellent examples). In this paper, the aim is not to go over this ground: rather it is to reconsider the evidence available using an alternate level of analysis. Previous reviews have largely oriented to individual differences and demonstrated, for example, why some youth become aggressive as a consequence of war and others do not, whilst others have considered the potential interactions between context and biological and/or personality level variables (Punamaki, 2009). Studies have also very successfully highlighted parental practices that act to protect children from the impact of political violence (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Schermerhorn, Merrilees, & Cairns, 2009). Other studies have articulated the role of culture and context in framing both identity and adaptation (Barber, 2009b; Hammack, 2008). The analysis offered here, arises from a tradition within social and developmental psychology that highlights group characteristics and

memberships as central to all life experiences. This alternate level of analysis, a group-level analysis, views all experiences and adaptation as inherently social and as such the perspective integrates fully the cultural and the psychological (Bar-Tal, 2013; Reicher, 2004).

So this analysis does not orient to individual-level differences in children's responses to war (themes covered expertly by others elsewhere). Rather in the proceeding sections a group-level analysis is offered. First, moving beyond individual-level analysis the first section (Section 2) of the paper considers how group memberships shape children's war-time experience. Next the importance of these group memberships and their relationship to children's developing sense of their own place in the world are outlined (Section 3). The social identity approach is introduced more fully and the appropriateness of its application to understanding the impact of political violence in childhood is underlined with reference to both the social identity of development, and social identity of conflict literature. Subsequently the paper considers two potential bodies of research that have assessed the consequences of children's war experiences in terms of distress and aggression (Section 4 and Table 1). Drawing on this literature, the next section of the paper (Section 5) uses a group-level analysis, to (re)examine the ways in which groups shape everyday life, frame access and availability of social support as well as relations within and between groups. This novel analysis frames an understanding and interpretation of the experience of political violence and war which highlights the importance of this alternate level of analysis for both researchers and practitioners in the concluding section of the paper (Section 6).

2. Understanding the impact of war: moving from an individual to a group-level analysis

Gergen (2001) eloquently articulates the influence of modernist thinking on scholarly thought within psychology: this tendency has given rise in the clinical area to an implicit tendency to problematise individuals who are adversely affected by contemporary social problems, rather than to examine the role of wider cultural contexts in shaping psychological responses to trauma (Pupavac, 2004). One need only consider the frequent tendency by Western media to pathologise those involved in and affected by political violence as terrorists, criminals and/or as mentally unstable (Horgan, 2003) to demonstrate this point. However group memberships, rather than individual differences, profoundly affect the likelihood of any of us being drawn into political violence. Groups are central to the business of war and political violence.

To illustrate this point, an analysis of the children who are most likely to experience war is instructive. Many of those most severely affected by war and political violence are resident in the poorest regions of the world. In the year 2000, 300,000 people died as a direct result of conflicts (WHO, 2002). Worldwide, the rate of mortality associated with political violence varied from 1 per 100,000 population in high income countries to 6.2 per 100,000 population in low and middle income countries (WHO, 2002). Further, the highest rates of fatalities due to war were in African countries, with approximately 32 fatalities per 100,000 of the population (WHO, 2002). Besides the many thousands who are killed each year, huge numbers are injured, including some who are permanently disabled. Others are raped or tortured, or suffer disease and famine. Again, available evidence suggests that those at highest risk of these experiences are those living in the least affluent nations (Cairns, 1996; WHO, 2002).

At the most fundamental level then, exposure to political violence and war is related to the affluence of the nation to which you belong. Not only then does your national group membership shape the experiences you have, but the relative affluence of your nation is central to the likelihood of being exposed to war. And your experiences during war-time will be shaped, sometimes very profoundly, by your gender group. For example, sex crimes during times of war have been widely reported, and those victimised are disproportionately female, again a group level variable (Swiss & Giller, 1993). And the use of rape as a

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