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Dealing With the Consequences of War: Resources of Formerly Recruited and Non-Recruited Youth in Northern Uganda

Sofie Vindevogel, Ph.D. [a,*], Michael Wessells, Ph.D. [b], Maarten De Schryver, M.Sc. [c], Eric Broekaert, Ph.D. [a], and Ilse Derluyn, Ph.D. [d]

[a] *Department of Special Education/Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium*
[b] *Program on Forced Migration and Health, Department of Clinical Population and Family Health, Columbia University, New York, New York*
[c] *Department of Experimental, Clinical, and Health Psychology, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium*
[d] *Department of Social Welfare Studies/Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium*

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This article explores resources that help formerly recruited young people in dealing with war-related adversity and subsequent challenges, hence fostering their resilience.
Methods: Self-reports on pertinent resources were collected from 1,008 northern Ugandan youth, of whom 330 had formerly been recruited by the Lord's Resistance Army. Based on the conceptual framework developed by the Psychosocial Working Group, the reported resources were thematically clustered and quantitatively analyzed.
Results: This study identified a range of human, social, and cultural resources, with little difference between groups. Religious beliefs, social support, and mental health resources were most frequently reported by former child soldiers.
Conclusions: These results reveal a multitude of resources and suggest that it is important to build on these resources in interventions that aim to support former child soldiers in the aftermath of armed conflict.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This study contributes to the relatively young discipline of strengths-based research and interventions for young people in situations of armed conflict, by revealing the resources that former child soldiers and other war-affected children experience in the aftermath of war.

Worldwide, armed conflicts cause extensive physical and psychological harm to children [1]. Living in war zones, children and their families may be subjected to multiple, interacting risks such as family separation, displacement, and sexual violence [2]. These stressors add to and compound the chronic poverty and structural violence that pervade many war zones [3]. Prolonged armed conflict creates violence embedded in political, economic, and social structures, systematically harming people and affecting their lives in myriad ways. An important subgroup of war-affected children is child soldiers: that is, children who have been recruited by or associated with armed forces or armed groups. The psychosocial impact of child soldiering experiences is profound, but also arises from everyday stressors [4–7]. Formerly recruited children experience stresses related to stigma, deprivation of education, joblessness, and an inability to meet basic needs [8].

Despite these wartime experiences and considerable challenges in war's aftermath, diverse analysts have noted that many formerly recruited children exhibit remarkable resilience [5,9–13]. Such focus on resilience has encouraged less singular attention to deficits and emphasizes the resources that enable children's well-being [14]. According to Hobfoll ([14], p. 307), resources are "those entities that either are centrally valued in their own right (e.g., self-esteem, close attachments, health, and inner peace), or act as a means to obtain centrally valued ends (e.g., money, social support, and credit)." It has long been emphasized that children's responses to stress should be interpreted within the context of their interaction and transaction with the environment [15]. Resources that have been identified as helping young people to deal with war-related and postwar challenges include a range of individual characteristics as well as

* Address correspondence to: Sofie Vindevogel, Ph.D., Department of Special Education, Ghent University, Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Gent, Belgium.
E-mail address: Sofie.Vindevogel@UGent.be (S. Vindevogel).

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aspects of the social, material, and cultural context. A recent systematic review of associated factors of postconflict psychosocial adjustment and social integration of former child soldiers identified family acceptance, social support, and educational and economic opportunities as major resources [16].

However, previous research has also pointed to the devastating impact of warfare on resources, encompassing multifaceted and multilevel disruption of the political, social, health, economic, and cultural dimensions of life [2]. This possibly affects the ability and readiness to propound or share resources within affected communities. This might particularly concern former child soldiers, because support for them in war-affected settings is often considered "a reward for perpetrators of atrocities" [17]. In addition, former child soldiers are often stigmatized, which may indicate that they possibly experience larger social exclusion, leading to reduced access to opportunities and support [17]. Therefore, it is plausible that they hold significantly different resources and, in particular, fewer communal sociocultural resources compared with non-recruited young people.

This study analyzed the differences in resources of former child soldiers and resources compared with non-recruited counterparts, using the conceptual framework of the Psychosocial Working Group (PWG) [18]. This framework was useful because it integrates insights from two valuable, complementary approaches to understanding psychosocial well-being—resource-based approaches [14] and social ecological approaches to child development [19]—and applies them to diverse cultural contexts. The PWG framework identifies three core domains as spaces where resources may be marshaled. The first domain is human capacity, which encompasses the resources endowed to individuals. The second domain is social ecology, which includes supportive resources at multiple levels of the social environment. The third domain is culture and values, and includes cultural practices, human rights, and religious beliefs of the people. The framework envisions that processes of mobilization, negotiation, and exchange of resources across the domains enable the resilience of a system and its members [2,18]. Knowledge of the resources that former child soldiers use may inform the programming of interventions that aim to facilitate resilient responses to child soldiering, by strengthening resources and dealing with extant barriers. Comparison designs may generate knowledge about the incremental impact of child soldiering, and may therefore strengthen the weak evidence base in the field [20].

Methods

Sites

Northern Uganda has been the hotbed of a 2-decade–long armed conflict involving numerous civilian casualties, among whom are thousands of child soldiers. This study was carried out in Lira district, which was a site of systematic abductions of children by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). In the wake of the cessation of hostilities agreement in 2006, this area continues to undergo a transition from violence toward peace, which requires children's well-being to break cycles of violence [21].

Participants

Participants were young men and women between the ages of 12 and 25 years. The sample included a mixture of in-school and out-of-school young people. Based on the District Education Office's overview of secondary schools in Lira district, six schools (15%) equally divided over urban (n = 2), peri-urban (n = 2), and rural (n = 2) areas were randomly selected. All students of classes Senior 2 and 3 of the lower secondary O-level were invited to participate; none refused. This resulted in a sample of 732 in-school participants. For each included school, the two nearest villages were selected. With assistance of the Local Council 1's chairpersons, youth in these areas meeting the criteria of 12–25 years of age and no school attendance were invited to participate. This led to a sample of 278 out-of-school participants; information on possible refusals is missing. The aggregated sample was composed of 1,010 participants, two of whom were older than 25 years of age and hence were excluded. Approximately one third (n = 330) of participants had been recruited by the LRA. All participants provided written informed consent or assent. Pursuing consent from legally authorized representatives for minors was an obstacle owing to several practical constraints, including primary caretakers living separately or in a remote residence. Their principals/Local Council 1 chairpersons gave approval for the study, the design of which had been approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences.

Measures

The first measure was a sociodemographic questionnaire that collected information about the participant's age, gender, district and location of residence, occupation, religion, household composition, and former child soldiering experiences. The second was a free-listing task, a qualitative method in which participants were asked to generate a list of a maximum of five items in response to the statement, "List five things that help you in dealing with difficulties." The bicultural research team carefully designed this wording ensure ease of understanding and the likelihood of inviting participants to identify the most important resources that they actually use. No attempt was made to have participants list exhaustively or rank order the items they generated. The free-listing method itself has proven to be culturally valid and efficient for generating items in Uganda [22,23].

Data Collection

Data were collected from October to December 2010. In-school participants were individually administered a written version of the measure in English (the official language of education); the researcher and a trained bilingual research assistant remained available for further clarification of questions when necessary. For out-of-school participants with low levels of literacy, questions were administered verbally in English by the researcher and simultaneously translated onsite in Lango (the native language of the region) by trained bilingual research assistants. The research assistants received a training session on the purpose of the study, how to apply its methods in an appropriate, ethical manner, and how to translate and explain the questions.

Data analysis

Qualitative analysis. A cumulative number of 4,132 resources were reported by participants. The first phase of qualitative