Research article

Unaccompanied refugee minors' early life narratives of physical abuse from caregivers and teachers in their home countries

Envor M. Skårdalsmo Bjørgo [a], Tine K. Jensen [a,b,*]

[a] *Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies, Oslo, Norway*
[b] *Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Norway*

A B S T R A C T

The early life narratives of 34 unaccompanied refugee minors, especially their reports of interpersonal violence, were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The youth originated from eight countries, with Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Sri Lanka being the most frequent origins, and they arrived to Norway before the age of 15. Four of these youth were girls. The physical violence took place at home and/or at school and could be extremely harsh. Approximately half of the youth expressed some type of ambivalence toward the perpetrator. In analyzing how the youth understood the reasons for violence two categories of internal and three categories of external attributions were found. Several of the youth blamed their own behavior for the abuse, although such internal attributions were frequently combined with external attributions. Some different patterns of attributions emerged between home and school violence. Most of the youth placed the blame for school violence on their own behavior or that violence was part of normal school discipline. For violence at home there was a tendency to place more blame on the perpetrator (mostly fathers). Possible long-term consequences of the experiences and the different attributional styles as well as implications of the findings are discussed. Professionals should assess refugee children for interpersonal violence experiences as well as for other experiences in their home country.

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In this paper, we analyze the early life narratives of 34 unaccompanied refugee minors who came to Norway before the age of 15. More specifically, we focus on their reports of interpersonal violence while growing up in their home countries. In the interviews, accounts of serious physical abuse, both in the family and from the teachers at school, were reported. When analyzing the data, we examined how the youth describe and experience this violence, their feelings toward the perpetrator, and how they interpret and make sense of their experiences. To the best of our knowledge, no other studies have examined refugee children's own reports of violence at home and in school in their countries of origin.

There may be several reasons for a child to flee from their home country. War- or conflict related issues including death or persecution of family members and forced recruitment to military forces, seeking protection, family unification, economic motives, opportunities for work, and education are some of the reasons provided (Vervliet, Vanobbergen, Broekaert, & Derluyn, 2014). To the best of our knowledge, no studies have examined interpersonal violence as a specific reason for

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1094, Blindern, 0317 Oslo, Norway.

flight. Scholars have questioned whether evaluations of risk factors that influence adverse outcomes have overly focused on refugee minors' exposure to military conflict at the expense of other types of violence (Reed, Fazel, Jones, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012). This oversight is unfortunate because studies have indicated that the impact of child maltreatment on mental health may surpass the damage of war trauma (Olema, Catani, Ertl, Saile, & Neuner, 2014).

Studies in some war-torn societies have shown high levels of children's exposure to violence inside the family (Catani, Schauer, & Neuner, 2008). Furthermore, war-related violence has been shown to contribute to the continuity of violence against children in the post-conflict era (Saile, Ertl, Neuner, & Catani, 2014). Although these studies have indicated high levels of interpersonal violence in refugee youth, none have examined the youth's own experiences and attributions related to such abuse. Some studies have also investigated violence from school teachers (e.g. Chianu, 2000; Elbla, 2012; Sheikhattari et al., 2006), but to the best of our knowledge, none have investigated refugee youth's early exposure to school violence. In particular, no studies have examined how the youth experience and understand these acts of violence.

Research in Western societies has shown that growing up with domestic violence often has severe consequences for children's well-being and mental health and is a risk factor for experiencing more abuse and other adversities later in life (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). Additionally, high cumulative levels of victimization have been associated with mental health problems in children and youth (Anda et al., 2006; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2009).

Epidemiological studies in war-affected populations have found that as children and adults are exposed to more traumas, their risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) increases (Catani et al., 2008). For refugee youth, the experience of interpersonal violence is superimposed on the multiple traumas that they have experienced from war and violence in the society and during their flight from the home countries (e.g., Miller, Omidian, Rasmussen, Yaqubi, & Daudzai, 2008). The number of potentially traumatizing events has been shown to be a strong predictor of mental health and adjustment problems in unaccompanied minors (Jensen, Fjermestad, Granly, & Wilhelmsen, 2013; Vervliet, Meyer Demott, et al., 2014). Although the risks cannot simply be summed (Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012), it has been shown that pre-migration exposure to violence is strongly predictive of psychological disturbance among refugee children (Fazel et al., 2012; Reed et al., 2012). An added stressor for these youth is that many may fear being sent home to an abusive life situation if they are not granted asylum. In addition to the impact of cumulative trauma, researchers have documented the particularly detrimental effects of exposure to interpersonal violence from a young age, over time, and from family members or other persons within the caregiving system. These effects are often referred to as complex traumatization (Cook et al., 2005; Kliethermes, Schacht, & Drewry, 2014).

The experience of such complex trauma may influence the developing brain and manifest itself in a variety of symptoms or domains of functioning, with the loss of core capacities for self-regulation and interpersonal relatedness as some main characteristics. Nonetheless, some factors may foster resilience against the pervasive effects on the mental health of the developing child. Positive self-esteem and a secure attachment to a non-violent parent or other significant caregiver have been examined (Cook et al., 2005; Holt et al., 2008).

Also, the way that a child interprets acts of interpersonal violence may influence the development of later mental health problems (Valle & Silovsky, 2002). Valle and Silovsky (2002) define attributions as an individual's explanations of the causes of events. Studies of abused children's attributions have focused on how attributions are related to later psychopathology (e.g. Brown & Kolko, 1999; Kolko, Brown, & Berliner, 2002; Kolko & Feiring, 2002; Runyon & Kenny, 2002). In one of the few studies assessing children's attributions and adjustment following physical abuse from their parents, Brown and Kolko (1999) found that children's abuse-specific attributions and general attributional style predicted the level of psychopathology beyond the variance accounted for by the severity of parent-to-child violence. They also found that self-blame and guilt was associated with children's abuse-specific fears and worries (e.g., being taken away from parents) and internalizing symptoms, such as depression and anxiety.

Violence or corporal punishment and its perception as either abusive or acceptable varies across cultures (Kolhatkar & Berkowitz, 2014). Studies have shown how cultural normativeness of violence against children moderates the relationship between corporal punishment and children's adjustment in such a way that the effects of corporal punishment were less adverse when children perceived the violence as normative for their culture (Gershoff et al., 2010; Lansford et al., 2005). The meaning children attach to parents' discipline strategies is thus important in understanding associations between discipline and children's adjustment.

We do not know of similar studies that have investigated the relationship between cultural normativeness, attributions and violence from teachers. Nevertheless, when a child comes from a culture that widely accepts child physical abuse into a culture that has a legal and normative ban on such use of violence they might adjust their perceptions looking back at their childhood.

In an extensive literature review, Valle and Silovsky (2002) discuss abuse-specific attributions along the following four dimensions: internal vs. external factors (beliefs that the event was caused by one's own characteristics/behavior or was caused by someone/something else); stable vs. unstable factors (whether the cause is viewed as temporary or permanent); specific vs. global factors (whether the cause of an event is interpreted to be relevant to only a specific situation or as occurring across situations), and controllable vs. uncontrollable factors (whether or not the cause of an event is perceived as under the person's control). They state that by attributing the reasons for the abuse to internal and stable factors (characterological self-blame), the child is more prone to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, distress, feelings of helplessness, limited attempts at coping, and internalizing problems, such as depression. By contrast, unstable internal attributions (behavioral self-blame) are likely to be perceived as controllable because they tend to be linked to the person's behavior in a given situation. Such