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Fear of violence during armed conflict: Social roles and responsibilities as determinants of fear

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the prevalence and determinants of fear as a consequence of living through armed conflict. We use survey data from Nepal during the armed conflict (1996–2006) to examine how trauma, sex and gender, age, marriage, and household size affect fear of violence. We also disaggregate types of worry, and find substantial variance on whether respondents were more concerned about livelihood consequences of conflict than physical danger. We supplement quantitative analyses with discussion of in-depth interviews from the study area on these same topics. Overall, our results highlight the enduring impact of gender roles in Nepal and that conflict might disproportionately affect those who are already vulnerable and have greater social responsibilities. This article provides a unique comparison between fear of violence during armed conflict in a low-income country to the fear of crime literature based in high-income countries.

1. Introduction

Quantitative research on the consequences of armed conflict on civilians has largely focused on human casualties from violence and specific morbidities, such as injuries, infectious diseases, malnutrition, and mental health disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression (Bolton and Betancourt, 2004; Garfield, 2007; Ghobarah et al., 2003; Krug et al., 2002; Levy and Sidel, 2000; Mack, 2005; Murray et al., 2002; Pedersen, 2002; Sonis et al., 2009; Thapa and Hauff, 2005). Beyond the direct consequences of living through an armed conflict – such as physical injuries, disruptions to daily life and routine mobility, and poor living conditions (e.g., limited and unsafe water and food supplies and poor access to health care), such an environment leads to heightened insecurity and unpredictability in daily life. Recent research on trauma and mental health suggests that chronic feelings of insecurity and stress might be one unexplored mechanism through which conflict affects well-being and health outcomes (Green et al., 2003; Momartin et al., 2006; Steel et al., 2006, 2009; Thapa and Hauff, 2005). Despite this suggestion, these indirect mechanisms connecting armed conflict with well-being and health outcomes have received little attention in the literature (Miller and Rasmussen, 2010; Panter-Brick, 2010; Pedersen, 2002; Tol et al., 2010). This key gap in the literature leaves us with an incomplete understanding of how the broader context of armed conflict, including the concomitant stress and fear, might impact individuals and families immediately and in the long-term.

In this paper we seek to improve our understanding of one of the indirect, but possibly influential, mechanisms that might connect the experience of armed conflict to health and well-being outcomes—stress and insecurity. Given that this is a broad concept, in this study we operationalize stress and insecurity more specifically as fear of violence. We examine how individual-level characteristics,

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particularly related to social roles and responsibilities, influence variance in levels of fear of violence during armed conflict.

We conceptualize fear of violence as a negative emotional response to a situation that is perceived to be threatening. In the case of armed conflicts, which can last for long periods of time, fear of violence manifests as chronic feelings of insecurity and threat. Fear of violence is an important result in its own right as it affects quality of life in multiple ways. As a form of chronic stress, fear of violence might also be a key mechanism that affects other mental and physical health outcomes during and post-conflict, including PTSD, depression, and anxiety (Christopher, 2004; Gunnar and Quevedo, 2007; Ferry et al., 2008; Miller and Rasmussen, 2010). In addition, fear of violence can influence important health-related behaviors such as movement within the community, the development of supportive social relationships, utilization of health services, marriage, childbearing, and migration (Agadjanian and Prata, 2002, 2001; Caldwell, 2004; Cullen and Levitt, 1999; Das-Gupta and Li, 1999; De Smedt, 1998; Lester, 1993; Lindstrom and Berhanu, 1999; Rountree and Land, 1996a; Saxena et al., 2004). On the other hand, fear is also associated with worry, which research shows can have negative consequences as well as positive consequences on motivating productive or safety-seeking behaviors and as an emotional buffer (Sweeny and Dooley, 2017).

Despite the serious short- and long-term consequences of chronic fear of violence during armed conflict, there is limited attention in the literature on the question of who is likely to experience fear and why. An important exception is several recent ethnographic studies of fear during conflicts in Nepal, Guatemala, and Northern Ireland (Ferry et al., 2008; Green, 1995; Lysaght, 2005; Pettigrew, 2003; Pettigrew and Adhikari, 2009). For example, in an ethnographic study of fear during the recent Nepali conflict, Pettigrew and Adhikari identify variations in fear related to, “personality, the impact of particular experiences and life situations, coping skills and available resources including degrees of support.” (Pettigrew and Adhikari, 2009:412). However, we are not aware of any systematic quantitative studies that address the social, cultural, and economic factors that influence the development of fear of violence during armed conflict.

Another area of study—fear of crime—hosts a substantial body of theoretical and empirical literature that provides some important insights and can help guide the study of fear of violence during conflict. Fear of crime research has linked higher levels of fear to perceived risk and vulnerability, poverty, physical vulnerability, sex and gender, age, and race and ethnicity (Ferraro, 1996; Franklin and Franklin, 2009; Hale, 1996; Killias, 1990; Killias and Clerici, 2000; Madriz, 1997; Pantazis, 2000; Rader et al., 2012; Riger et al., 1978; Snedker, 2012; Warr and Stafford, 1983). Moreover, fear of crime can include both fear for oneself and fear of crime for others known as altruistic fear (Warr and Ellison, 2000).

In addition to personal vulnerability, fear of crime research also addresses the influence of community context. Neighborhood conditions such as perceived disorder and incivilities, lack of social integration, and lack of community social capital are associated with greater levels of fear (Ferguson and Mindel, 2007; Franklin et al., 2008; Ross and Jang, 2000; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; Wyant, 2008). Notions of ‘ecological vulnerability’ are linked with higher levels of fear, especially for women (Hale, 1996). However, the vast majority of these studies are based in the United States and Western Europe in the context of generalized political peace[1] and mostly in urban contexts. There exists little understanding of how the development of fear might be different between high-income and low income settings or universal in both, during armed conflicts that are characterized by long-term and widespread violence, and in populations not related to the European diaspora.

Borrowing insights from the fear of crime literature, we assess the applicability of existing theories to understanding fear of violence during armed conflict in Nepal. Do expected findings from fear of crime research produce similar results in terms of fear of violence in a context of armed conflict? What additional insights can we gain about fear of crime in general, by applying theories to an entirely new context? Our empirical analyses are based primarily on statistical analysis of detailed survey data and supplemented with in-depth interview data that aids in our interpretation of statistical results.

In the next section, we describe the context of this study, the Chitwan Valley in rural Nepal, and the conflict that occurred there between 1996 and 2006. After that, we present a theoretical discussion of the ways in which social roles and responsibilities might influence the development of fear of violence during armed conflict. In that section, we draw heavily on the fear of crime literature. We discuss how these insights might be more and less applicable in the context of armed conflict and how they might apply to the specific context of rural Nepal.

2. Context and setting

Our case study is based on the decade-long armed conflict between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the government security forces in Nepal. The study site is the western Chitwan Valley of south-central Nepal. The valley is flat, fertile, and dominated by agriculture. The administrative district of Chitwan borders India and is about 100 miles from Kathmandu. There is one large city, Narayanghat, and the rest of Chitwan's population, like much of Nepal, lives in small rural villages.

Armed conflict officially began in 1996 when the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) made a formal declaration of “People's War” following a relatively unsuccessful political campaign. The aim of their movement was to unseat the constitutional monarchy and install a democratic republic. They charged the government with poor administration, corruption, unfair taxation, and neglect of poor rural areas of the country.

The earlier stages of the conflict were contained primarily in several mid-western districts, the most remote and under developed part of the country, and aimed at damage to government installations and communication infrastructure, capturing weapons, and

[1] Many of these studies are undertaken in neighborhoods where there is substantial interpersonal violence. In those cases, there might be more similarities than not to our context of generalized armed conflict in Nepal.

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