THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL SECURITY, NARRATIVE, AND RESILIENCE FOR YOUTH AND FAMILIES IN CONTEXTS OF ARMED CONFLICT

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The far-reaching devastation created by contemporary armed conflict puts children and families at risk. The goal of this article is to describe current research on the effects of armed conflict and political violence on families and youth with a focus on the roles of emotional insecurity and narratives of conflict that can persist long after the end of conflict. We describe how identity processes that are at the heart of many intergroup conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries are linked with emotional insecurity and the historical and personal narratives of youth in these contexts. We conclude with general considerations for legal, medical, and mental health practitioners working with families who have experienced armed conflict.

Key Points for the Family Court Community:

- Understanding the effects of political violence on youth and families begins with recognizing the role of the history and culture of the conflict and families who have experienced it.
- Exposure to political violence negatively affects youths' sense of emotional security at multiple levels. The sense of security in familial relationships and the community are particularly important in these contexts.
- Youth actively engage in making meaning of their conflict experiences; they are not just passive recipients of violence. When possible, this engagement and meaning making should be incorporated into programming for youth.
- Support and programming for youth and families who have experienced political violence should cut across service providers (e.g., basic needs and mental health).

Keywords: *Armed Conflict; Emotional Insecurity; Intergroup Conflict; Narrative; Resilience; and Youth.*

Armed conflict in the 21st century has impacted the lives of millions of families, destroying the social fabric of communities, and, in many cases, forcing families to leave their homes and their ways of life in hopes of finding safety and a promising future. Families who have experienced armed conflict face overwhelming stressors across domains of life, many of which will persist well past the escape from or formal end of conflict. Compared to the conditions of civilians in the interstate conflicts that dominated the first half of the 20th century, the trauma and fear that define contemporary forms of war are heightened for civilians who are now more likely to be both victims and coerced or forced to partake in the violence (Pederson, 2002). Understanding the emerging theoretical and empirical findings on the effects of political violence on children and families provides important lessons for practitioners and legal professionals working with families from these communities.

The goal of this article is to review and evaluate the recent research findings regarding youth in contexts of political violence and armed conflict with a focus on the interaction between family and community functioning and youth development. Given the devastating nature of war, much of the research on youth in war-torn communities has focused on mental health outcomes such as posttraumatic stress disorder ("PTSD"), associated with exposure to political violence and armed conflict (Barber & Schluterman, 2009). It is only recently that a broader approach has been taken that examines other youth outcomes, such as intergroup attitudes, prosocial behaviors, civic engagement, and the processes, risk, and protective factors that explain these outcomes (Cummings, Merrilees, Taylor, & Mondi, 2017a). In what follows, we briefly describe the nature of contemporary armed conflict and the range of experiences families and youth find in these contexts. We then focus the review on

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research that has specifically examined family and community processes that are likely to impact youth development in these contexts. Embedded within this conversation is recognition of the role that historical narratives and culture play in the intergenerational transmission of the effects of political violence on families and youth. The article concludes with general recommendations for family court practitioners working with families who have experienced political violence in their communities.

CONTEMPORARY ARMED CONFLICT

Contemporary forms of war and armed conflict increasingly put children and families at great risk. Experts across fields such as political science, history, and psychology have noted that across the globe, wars are now more likely to occur within a country's or community's borders (Pederson, 2002). Moreover, the tactics of contemporary armed conflict include fear-inducing strategies like terrorism, including creating widespread, long-lasting distress and uncertainty about one's safety in homes, schools, places of religious worship, playgrounds, and hospitals, which are the contexts in which children live and grow and that provide the supports on which families rely.

Civilian experiences of war may range widely based on conflict intensity, duration, proximity, and type. Although the definitions and criteria for the multiple forms of conflict that fall within these domains of intrastate conflict, civil war, armed conflict, and political violence are discussed elsewhere (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, n.d.), within this article the terms war, armed conflict, and political violence will be used interchangeably. Across these types of conflict, civilian experiences range from hearing about attacks in the news to separation from family due to death or abduction. Separation may also be the result of being internally or internationally displaced.

Although most research has examined youths as passive victims of political violence, they may also participate in conflict voluntarily or through forced participation as child combatants. Voluntary participation can take the form of political activism, including taking part in demonstrations or rioting, distributing propaganda, or caring for those wounded in conflict.

On the other hand, youth may be recruited or forced into joining an armed group. Again, within this subgroup of violence-exposed youth, the range of experiences and responses to participation is large and varied (Wessels & Kostelny, 2009). Participation with armed groups can include witnessing and committing violent acts, being the victim or perpetrator of sexual assaults, drug use, mine clearing, and even otherwise normal daily activities such as cooking. Across this range of experiences, research evidence suggests that political violence exposure increases a child's risk of multiple maladaptive outcomes; however, reflecting the diverse nature of youths' experiences with political violence, their responses to exposure also vary, with many children showing adaptive responses, civic engagement, and general resilience (Cummings, Merrilees, Taylor, & Mondi, 2017b). Identifying the individual, family, and community characteristics that promote resilience and the conditions under which youths develop adaptively in these situations is at the heart of current and ongoing empirical investigations (Dubow, Aber, Betancourt, Cummings, & Huesmann, 2017).

Given this reality, an increasing amount of research in child development has focused on the effects of political violence on youths and families (Cummings et al., 2017a). As armed conflict has been brought off the battlefield and into civilians' daily lives, researchers have started to assess the multiple contexts that are disrupted by contemporary forms of war so that youths and families from these backgrounds can be more adequately understood and served. Given the wide-ranging impacts of these forms of violence, contemporary studies assessing the effects of political violence on youth recognize the interconnected nature of the multiple environments in which we all live and grow (Cummings et al., 2009; Vindevogel, 2017). Studying within the social ecological model requires that we consider not just the immediate contexts in which one interacts, but also the key factors in the larger social, economic, cultural, and historical systems that have affected individuals, families, and communities to that point (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The social ecological model assesses how systems adapting over time is crucial to understanding the supports on which children and families

rely and specifies that child development is affected by interactions that happen between these larger systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

EMOTIONAL SECURITY

Although there are many historical and political differences across contexts of armed conflict (e.g., Syria, Israel and Palestine, Northern Ireland), there are some similarities in the expected processes that are enacted due to the nature of contemporary forms of war. The nature of contemporary war and political violence increases the likelihood that exposure to violence will threaten youths' feelings of security at multiple levels. Within the field of child development, notions of emotional security are most often associated with parent–child attachment (Bowlby, 1969). One of the most influential and widely studied socio-emotional phenomenon in child psychology, Bowlby's attachment theory, suggests that children have an evolutionarily rooted system that develops over time, and assuming the system is adaptive, infants and a primary caregiver develop a secure emotional bond or attachment that allows the child to effectively communicate needs and the primary caregiver to respond to make the infant feel secure about having his/her needs met. Over the first months and years of life, the infant develops a cognitive model or representation of the primary caregiver as someone to be trusted to fulfill their needs. In the case of maladaptive attachment, an emotionally insecure attachment reflects distrust and a primary caregiver who cannot consistently meet their needs. According to Bowlby, this cognitive representation and related emotional systems associated with attachment serve as the base from which the young child learns to explore his/her social world. Although there is debate about the degree to which this representation changes over time with new social experiences, a large body of research has documented the links between a secure primary-caregiver attachment and positive outcomes across domains of life (Groh, Fearon, van Ijzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Roisman, 2017).

This notion of feeling secure in one's environment has been extended beyond the parent–child relationship. Emotional security theory (EST; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies & Cummings, 1994) posits that the need for feelings of security go beyond the parent–child relationship to include larger social systems such as the family and the community (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Merrilees, Taylor, & Shirlow, 2014). According to EST, when considering children's and adolescents' feelings of emotional security, the broader systems in which they live must be considered. It is important to remember that children's or adolescents' feelings of security will be impacted not just by their relationships with their parents, but by their interactions in the broader social world. In other words, feelings of insecurity, which are linked with aggression, depression, anxiety, and academic problems, among other outcomes, can be exacerbated by the multiple factors that children consider when taking note of their environments.

Given that emotional security is impacted by the environment in which youths reside, the concept of felt-security within the context of political violence has been discussed frequently in research. Bar-Tal and Jacobson (1998) suggested that in addition to studying the political, military, and economic conditions of security in contexts of political violence and armed conflict, the psychological processes such as perception, cognition, and coping strategies should be studied. In their conceptualization, Bar-Tal and Jacobson (1998) utilized the notion that stress is the outcome of a process of appraisal through which individuals evaluate dangers in their environments against the coping strategies they have to handle these dangers (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Based on the appraisal theory, Bar-Tal and Jacobson (1998) suggested that security belief is formulated by perceived threat from the environment and preexisting beliefs of individuals (i.e., goals, ideology, and coping capability). Individuals become selective collectors of information that ensures security and avoids processing information that may endanger security because the inclination for safety is a basic human need. In two empirical studies done in Israel in which the sense of national insecurity is generally high due to constant intergroup conflicts, the researchers found that personal variables, including gender, level of income, family history, and belief regarding military policy (i.e.,

doves and hawks), are as important as the environment in forming beliefs about security (Jacobson & Bar-Tal, 1995; Bar-TaI, Jacobson, & Freund, 1995). Furthermore, when individuals lack the direct experience of threatening events such as terrorism, they tend to rely on collective beliefs from media, political figures, or friends in forming their feeling of security/insecurity. Taken together, it is crucial to understand that not only environmental factors but also personal factors influence security beliefs when examining the subjectivity of security.

Empirical research has documented the links between these broader conceptualizations of security and youth development. Examining the role of human security in a large sample of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, McNeely et al. (2014) found that feelings of fear for the safety of one's self, family, and home predicted multiple aspects of physical and mental well-being. Security processes have also been found to interact across contexts. Within the context of segregation and sectarian tension in economically and socially deprived communities in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Cummings, Schermerhorn et al. (2010), and Cummings et al. (2012) found that stress associated with sectarian violence in the community directly impacted family conflict, children's feelings of insecurity and ultimately their well-being. These studies are important because they highlight the interconnected role of community- and family-level stressors and children's feelings of insecurity in the multiple contexts in which they develop. Within the context of political violence in the Middle East, Dubow et al. (2012) found that exposure to political violence and family conflict independently predicted PTSD symptoms in children and adolescents.

Community and family processes also interact to affect youth responses to conflict-based stressors. Cummings, Taylor, Merrilees, Goeke-Morey, and Shirlow (2016) found that the relationship between family conflict and feelings of insecurity in children and adolescents within the family system is stronger for children with more exposure to intergroup violence in their communities. In other words, community violence exposure seemed to increase children's sensitivity to violence in the home, resulting in decreased security. Family processes are also important sources of support for youth. Taylor, Merrilees, Goeke-Morey, Shirlow, and Cummings (2016) found that the cohesiveness of the family is a key process that protects youth from developing aggressive tendencies in the face of violence in their communities. In other words, for youth facing the stress of intergroup conflict in their communities, children in families that stuck together and supported one another were less likely to develop aggression in response to that stressor over time. This study highlights that the cohesiveness of the family is important not just in terms of the direct benefits of having supportive relationships, but that this feeling of working together as a team can buffer children from other stressors they face.

Interactions between family experiences with armed conflict and youth development are also reflected in patterns of intergenerational transmission. For example, Saile, Ertl, Neuner, and Catni (2014) found that female guardians' experiences with the civil war in Northern Uganda and male guardians' PTSD symptoms independently increased children's reports of maltreatment. In Belfast, Merrilees et al. (2011) found that mothers' experiences with the Northern Irish Troubles impacted their children's mental health through her own mental health problems years after the formal end of the conflict. The research literature is mixed, however. In a meta-analysis of Holocaust survivors, van Ijzendoorn, Bakersman-Kranenberg, and Sagi-Schwartz (2003) found that secondary traumatization was only present in clinical samples and not in community samples.

In sum, the body of research on emotional security processes at play for families and youth with histories of political violence exposure suggests that feelings of insecurity are likely to span multiple contexts, including the nuclear and extended family and the local community. Thus, practitioners working with families who have experienced political violence must be aware of the cross-cutting and interacting nature of this form of violence. In other words, the long-term impact of political violence must be understood within the context of the family system and the history of conflict that affects both the family system and the local community. Ensuring a sense of security for these children and families must include family-based resources as well as community-based resources and recovery.

IDENTITY, SECURITY, AND ENGAGEMENT

The intergenerational effects of conflict can also be transmitted through narratives about conflict. Because many of the contemporary armed conflicts that exist today often pit national, ethnic, and religious groups against one another, identification and meaning making around these groups and their histories play an important role in how children and adolescents make sense of their social worlds (Barber, 2009; Hammack, 2010). Research suggests that as children age and become more aware of their surroundings and the messages their social world provides to them, they begin to construct their identities and attitudes based in part on the content of these messages (Merrilees et al., 2018; Nesdale, 2004). Within the context of political violence and armed conflict these messages include information about the history of their group's suffering, the characteristics of and acts perpetrated by out-group members, and broader messages about the legitimization of the use of violence in the name of group preservation.

Often these messages are embedded in multiple forms of narrative (e.g., historical and personal narratives). It has been suggested that the role of narratives in contexts of conflict strengthens collective identity in individuals and it can be both beneficial and harmful (Hammack, 2010). That is, narratives can function as a tool for promoting psychological adjustment such as resilience and coping capability at the personal level but can also function to fuel negative intergroup attitudes and violence. Prior theory and research about the role of identity, group stories, and histories in feelings of security suggest that being part of and connected to our social groups provide a sense of social support and a path through which one can make sense of their experiences with violence (Hammack, 2010). In other words, strong identification with one's group prevents youth from experiencing potential negative outcomes of exposure to political violence (Barber, 2008). Furthermore, Hammack (2010) suggests that youth are the most susceptible to the process of narrative engagement in which individuals make meaning of the conflict settings and the process is heightened due to their developmental need for a sense of identity and security. Looking directly at change in emotional security and identity for Catholic and Protestant youth in Belfast, Merrilees, Taylor, Goeke-Morey, Shirlow, and Cummings (2014) found that identity and emotional security are correlated for adolescents. They concluded that in the context of postaccord sectarianism in Belfast, youth who feel more insecure in their communities pull together with family and in-group members, strengthening their ethnopolitical identities as Catholic or Protestant and this may decrease their risk for emotional problems (Merrilees et al., 2014). Narrative can also be utilized for the collective benefit. Several studies have shown that storytelling with a focus on positive group relations is commonly used in peace education (Bar-On & Kassem, 2004). According to Auerbach (2009), the act of sharing personal narratives can bring opposing groups together by leaving out the collective identity.

On the other hand, historical and cultural narratives can also reproduce intergroup conflict and thereby maintain or intensify conflicts. A large empirical literature has documented the role that ethnic identity commitments can play in strengthening prejudice, discrimination, and aggressive responding to out-group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Cairns, 1996). For example, studies have shown that those who strongly identify with an in-group are more likely to endorse negative responses to that threat, including prejudiced attitudes and, in some instances, aggressive behavioral responses (Fischer, Haslam, & Smith, 2010; Struch & Schwartz, 1989). Identity commitments can also increase the likelihood of behaviors that make a symbolic statement directed at the entire out-group (Barber, 2009), such as the destruction of property. Looking specifically at youth responses to intergroup threats in Belfast, Merrilees et al. (2013) found that youth with higher strength of identity as Catholic or Protestant were more likely to report using aggression against out-group members compared to those with lower strength of identity.

Given this recognition, it is important that our conceptualization of youths' responses to political conflict is not limited to passive pathological processes. For example, traditional models of aggression and externalizing problems suggest that "violence begets violence" based on modeling of violent behaviors, increased sensitivity to violent cues, and maladaptive cognitive social processing

(Punamaki, 2009). In line with understanding the context and narrative for youth growing up amidst political violence and armed conflict, those studying and working with youth must be aware of the ways in which they are actively processing and acting on their social worlds. Youth are not passive recipients of their contexts; they actively and purposefully engage with the images, words, actions, and systems functioning around them.

In an earlier study of youth in South Africa, Straker et al. (1996) compared responses about hardships experienced by children at different years in the same town. She found that youths who had experienced earlier years of the violence and considered it part of the struggle for liberation viewed the violence less negatively than children in the same town years later. In this case, understanding the violence as part of the fight for liberation served as a buffer to children. Similarly, in a highly contextualized examination of the conflict experiences of Palestinian and Bosnian youth, Barber (2008) found beneficial effects on well-being of the meaning and commitments of the Palestinian youth compared to the Bosnian youth. Barber (2008) explained these benefits in terms of Palestinians' opportunities to engage in conflict and construct meaning and identity around their experiences, which contrasted the Bosnian youths' experiences that did not allow them to engage in this way due to the nature and history of the conflict in the Balkans. Speaking about Gazan youths' narratives, Barber (2009) stated, "The Palestinian narratives were indeed intense, yet it was (not always, but overwhelmingly so) an intensity of passion, not despair; of commitment, not chaos; of pride, not dismay; of welfare, not wound" (p. 287). Here, Barber pointed out the mistake outsiders make in overemphasizing the fear and trauma associated with this form of conflict as well as not recognizing human adaptation through engagement and meaning making.

Thus, practitioners working with youth who have experienced political violence must acknowledge and incorporate youths' own perspectives and meaning making into their healing process. Allowing the experiences of youths to inform their treatment and recovery efforts, and recognizing the buffering role of youth civic engagement, will be crucial to their positive developmental trajectories.

RESILIENCE AS A COMMUNITY PROCESS

Related to notions of human adaptability, the concept of youth resilience is widely discussed within the context of armed conflict. Given findings suggesting that many youths adapt effectively in the face of violence, recent efforts have focused on understanding why it is that youth do well in the face of such adversities (Barber, 2013). Within this context, Barber (2013) interrogated ideas about the distinction between resilience and adaptive development. In his review of the literature, Barber pointed out that most of the empirical literature on youth in contexts of political violence suggest that youth function adaptively across contexts. These results call into question the assumption that contexts of political violence inevitably present extreme adversity that would rob youth of the opportunity to develop adaptively. He concluded in part by suggesting that resilience be considered a process that occurs at the interaction between the individual and the many levels of society in which individuals develop.

Paralleling Barber's recommendations about a contextual approach to studying resilience processes in war-affected youth, Vindevogel (2017) argued that macrostructural factors that promote (or hinder) resilience must be considered. She argued that although theoretical approaches to understanding resilience are increasingly incorporating family and community processes, most current interventions designed to promote resilience are rooted in individualistic notions of self-determination and self-help. These approaches can have the unintended consequence of placing the burden of recovery on youth while neglecting the fact that resources to help oneself are often unequally distributed in society. This lack of equal distribution of resources is most likely to be true in the context of armed conflict, which may have stemmed from such lack of equity across groups in society. In other words, for individuals, families, and communities to help one another, societal macrolevel structures must be in place to ensure resources are available to everyone.

In line with a comprehensive approach to supporting children exposed to armed conflict, Wessells (2017) argued that the systematic and multilevel support regarding basic needs (i.e., water, food, and housing), security, education, and mental health at the level of society, community, family, and professional individuals is crucial in helping war-affected children. The key conditions regarding the systematic support is the fluent collaboration between levels and the focus is on growing both individual and collective resilience instead of solely depending on the traditional deficit and risk approach. He also emphasized the importance of providing both economic and psychological support given poverty is related to stress and of individualizing such support based on age, vulnerability status, and gender of the target population. Besides the comprehensiveness of the ideal support system, Wessells suggested that building sustainability of the support and identifying the causes of unintentional harms such as discrimination are important in providing the adequate intervention for war-affected children.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Unsurprisingly, mapping the processes at play for families and youth in contexts of political violence is highly complex. The nature of contemporary armed conflict necessitates identification of the larger social contexts (e.g., family history of conflict, historical and personal narratives). Thus, cultural awareness is essential. Those working with families who have experienced some form of political violence or armed conflict have an obligation to be aware of the culture and context around the conflict that may be embedded in the narrative, history, and personal experiences of those affected by it.

Related to this first point, one should be cautious about generalizing across contexts of conflict. One of the most challenging questions for researchers and policy makers in the field of youth and political violence is that of generalizability. In other words, how much do the patterns that we see emerge for families in post-accord Belfast apply to families experiencing postwar segregation and tension in Croatia? Can the lessons we have learned from the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa help us to understand reconciliation processes in Rwanda? All those stepping in to aid children and families during and in postwar situations must check their usually good intentions to help with the contrasting realities of those they intend to aid. While there are likely some general patterns of responses that are experienced across contexts, there are also important differences between contexts of political conflict that should be considered when evaluating youths' responses to violence and their general development.

A second important lesson emerging from literature on youth and families in contexts of political violence is that legal, medical, and mental health practitioners should be careful not to underestimate youth agency and adaptability. Youth actively construct their social worlds and find meaning and support when they engage and can participate in society. As they gain cognitive and socio-emotional capabilities through childhood and adolescence, we should be aware that their actions might not reflect maladaptive coping strategies but carefully calculated decisions to act through political engagement.

Another important lesson emerging from the current findings on youth and families in armed conflict is the importance of understanding multiple contexts and the need to feel supported within those contexts. Families and children do not develop in vacuums separate from the various political, economic, and social systems around them. For the families who have endured armed conflict, these systems include historical experiences, personal and historical narratives about violence, and often histories of group-based oppression, repression, and persecution. These negative experiences across domains of life interact to create feelings of insecurity across multiple levels of the social ecology that impact future responses to stress.

Findings indicate that exposure to armed conflict affects youth, families, and communities across multiple contexts, with catastrophic and far-reaching effects. The research has been focused on identifying the stressors associated with such exposure, with the finding that it is related not only to

individuals' inability to adapt but also to strife within their families and communities. War-torn families are more vulnerable to violent situations and their emotional security is often compromised, which calls for a careful and farsighted approach when dealing with them. Those who help should keep the bigger picture in mind to measure the impact of political violence on family-level stressors.

To ensure greater security in multiple contexts and areas of functioning, care should be taken to work across support providers wherever possible. In addition, as Wessells (2017) suggested, the provision of systematic support in multiple domains (such as basic needs and mental health) promotes the feeling of security by meeting the needs of families affected by armed conflict and ultimately makes them feel supported at every level. The research has focused on identifying the factors that explain the various outcomes of political violence, with the findings showing that armed conflict threatens youths' sense of security. This is affected by both individual perceptions and beliefs and wider social contexts. Ensuring that these young people feel secure at every possible level can help prevent adverse outcomes such as aggression and depression.

To sum up, current research on the effects of armed conflict and political violence on families and youth point to the interconnectedness of family, community functioning, and youth development. These long-lasting and negative outcomes have been well documented, and we must now turn our attention to identifying the underlying processes that will promote recovery and long-term trajectories of well-being. Support should be based on a good understanding of the cultural background, with care taken not to overgeneralize the patterns or underestimate youths' agency and adaptability, and there must be an understanding of multiple contexts and the need to feel supported therein. Because of the complexities of contemporary armed conflict, helping affected youth, families, and communities cannot be accomplished without understanding the multiple contexts in which they reside. The starting point of this help comes from an understanding of the interconnectedness of these contexts and a strong belief in promoting youth adaptability through consistent and systematic support. When practitioners and legal professionals working with families from war-affected communities keep all these points in mind and provide support across multiple domains, they can help enhance their emotional security and ultimately assist them in adopting greater resilience and coping capabilities.

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