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A Social–Ecological, Process-Oriented Perspective on Political Violence and Child Development

E. Mark Cummings,

University of Notre Dame

Marcie Goeke-Morey,

Catholic University of America

Christine E. Merrilees,

State University of New York, Geneseo

Laura K. Taylor, and

University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Peter A. Shirlow

Queens University, Belfast

Abstract

Youths' risk for adjustment problems in contexts of political violence is well-documented. However, outcomes vary widely, with many children functioning well. Accordingly, moving beyond further documenting the risk for many negative outcomes associated with living in contexts of political violence, a second generation of research is moving towards identifying the mechanisms and conditions that contribute to children's adjustment. Increasing support is emerging for understanding effects on children in terms of changes in the social contexts in which children live, and in the psychological processes engaged by these social ecologies. Selected themes are considered, including (a) the need to study multiple levels of the social ecology, (b) differentiating between the effects of exposure to contexts of political versus non-political violence, and (c) theories about explanatory processes. Selected research pertinent to these directions is reviewed, including findings from a six-wave longitudinal study on political violence and children in Northern Ireland.

Keywords

Political violence; Social ecological model; Community violence; Family conflict; Child adjustment; Emotional security

Given the prevalence and extent of violent conflicts throughout the world, understanding the impact of political violence on children is an urgent concern, identified as a strategic goal of the Society for Research in Child Development (Masten, 2013). A first generation of research encompassing hundreds of studies has documented the risk for maladjustment associated with exposure to political violence across a wide range of negative outcomes, including externalizing problems (e.g. aggression), internalizing disorders (e.g. depression), and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Yet outcomes are also found to vary widely, with some

youth evidencing positive functioning in the face of threats and challenges (Barber, 2013). Given this diversity of outcomes, a second generation of research is now urgently needed to elevate understanding of processes accounting for relations between political violence and child development, including identifying the mechanisms and conditions that relate to risk for maladjustment or foster positive outcomes (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Schermerhorn, Merrilees, & Cairns, 2009; Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). Although calls for such research were first made over a decade and a half ago (e.g., Cairns & Dawes, 1996), the rigorous, longitudinal studies, guided by well-articulated theories, required to accomplish such a new level of understanding are only now emerging (e.g., Betancourt, Brennan, Rubin-Smith, Fitzmaurice, & Gilman, 2010; Dubow et al., 2010; Qouta, Punamäki, Montgomery, & El Sarraj, 2007).

This second generation of research can be characterized as reflecting a social-ecological, process-oriented perspective, consistent with the principles of developmental psychopathology, including concern with process as well as outcome, differentiating contextual influences, and interest in positive as well as negative influences, effects, and outcomes (Cummings & Valentino, in press). It typifies a small but growing body of research (e.g., Betancourt et al., 2010; Cummings et al., 2009; Dubow, Huesmann, & Boxer, 2009). This work reflects an emerging conceptualization of the impact of political violence on children in terms of effects on communities, families, and other contexts in which children live, including interest in the psychological processes engaged by these social ecologies. Another characteristic is longitudinal research designs that can identify directional relations between the social environments associated with political violence, mediating contextual or psychological processes, and child maladjustment and positive outcomes (e.g., for findings related to prosocial outcomes, see Taylor, et al., in press).

In this paper, research and theory is considered on selected topics consistent with a process-oriented social-ecological model. Topics include: (a) a social-ecological model as a framework for studying children and political violence; (b) differentiating contexts to determine effects attributable to political violence as opposed to other contextual influences, and (c) testing theories about specific explanatory processes. We address these topics with results from our research studying the impact on children of political violence in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

A Six-Wave Longitudinal Study

Since 2005, we have been conducting research based on a social-ecological, process-oriented perspective for the effects of political violence on child development in Northern Ireland (Cummings et al., 2009). This longitudinal study has involved 999 mother-child dyads drawn from economically-deprived neighborhoods in Belfast. Six waves of data were collected over consecutive years (with about 80–85% retention between waves). Children were evenly divided in gender and ranged in age from very early to late adolescence, with mean age about 12 years old at the initiation of the study. The study neighborhoods reflected the separation between Catholics and Protestants; the majority of study participants lived in homogenous wards (over 90% Catholic or Protestant) that were interfaced, that is, shared a border with neighborhoods predominately populated by the “other” group.

The Social-Ecological Model: A Framework for Studying Political Violence and Children

In order to better understand relations between political violence and child development, multiple levels of societal functioning require investigation. This social-ecological approach includes incorporating effects associated with the communities, families, and broader social contexts in which children live. A guiding assumption is that political violence does not only impact children as a “main effect,” but also as a function of the intervening contextual and psychological processes engaged by the social ecology of intergroup conflict.

Following an influential conceptualization by Bronfenbrenner (1979), we, and others (e.g., Betancourt et al., 2010; Boxer et al., 2013), are programmatically testing social-ecological, process-oriented frameworks for the effects of political violence on child development (Cummings et al., 2009; see our model in Figure 1). The fundamental concept of a social-ecological model is broad, with theorists and researchers varying in the elements studied across a wide range of areas of political violence worldwide. Given the great scope and extent of the social ecology, and possible differences across contexts of political violence, investigators must decide on which elements to focus, guided by an assessment of salient factors in a particular region. Dubow et al. (2009) proposed a social ecological framework for studying political violence and children in Israel and Palestine, focusing on cognitive processes as explanatory variables. Betancourt, McBain, Newnham, and Brennan (2013) have documented the significance of the post-accord period for the adjustment and well-being of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone. In Belfast, as in many other areas worldwide, post-accord violence and tension between conflicting groups persists, with an impact on the children.

An important first step in a research program from a social-ecological perspective is to hypothesize the elements of the social ecology to be examined in a region. Consistent with the assumptions of a social-ecological perspective, the model guiding our research program includes multiple levels, including the *macrosystem* (e.g., historical political violence), the *exosystem* (e.g., sectarian and non-sectarian community violence), the *microsystem* (e.g., family, martial violence and parenting), and *individual ontogeny* (e.g., emotional insecurity, social identity, maladjustment) (see Figure 1).

Distinguishing between Political (Sectarian) and Non-Political Community Violence

We posited at the outset that political violence affecting children and families occurs at the community level and that politically-motivated (sectarian) violence is unique in expression compared to community violence that is not politically motivated. Moreover, we hypothesized that (a) sectarian community violence would have distinctive effects on children compared to community violence that was not politically-motivated, reflecting the particular impact of violence associated with sectarian conflict, and (b) the mechanisms by which sectarian community violence affected child adjustment may differ compared with non-sectarian community violence. We posited that sectarian community violence would be

more likely to elevate insecurity, thereby increasing risk for maladjustment by this mechanism, because it posed particular threats to intercommunity relations and the integrity of the political system and to the individual's personal identity by being directed at people like oneself. Accordingly, prior to initiating our longitudinal study, we conducted focus group and pilot research to develop psychometrically-supported measures that distinguished politically-motivated (e.g., blast bombs exploded by the other community; stones or other objects thrown over walls dividing communities) and non-political (e.g., home break-ins; robberies/muggings) community violence (Goeke-Morey et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2011; see Cummings, Schermerhorn et al., 2010, for the specific items on these scales).

Results have supported the significance of distinguishing these forms of community violence. Compared to non-sectarian community violence, youth's emotional insecurity is more impacted by sectarian violence, with elevated insecurity shown to mediate relations with youth maladjustment. For example, Cummings, Schermerhorn et al. (2010) reported that sectarian community violence influenced family conflict and children's reduced security about family and community, with links to adjustment problems indexed by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 1997). A pathway to youth adjustment problems through heightened emotional insecurity did *not* emerge for non-sectarian community violence. Supporting the cogency of conceptualizing the impact of political violence through the lens of a social ecological model (see Figure 1), Cummings, Merrilees and colleagues (2010) found (a) historical political violence predicted both sectarian and non-sectarian community violence, (b) sectarian community violence was associated with marital conflict and reduced parental monitoring, (c) sectarian community violence and marital conflict were each related to children's emotional insecurity, which, in turn, (d) predicted externalizing and internalizing problems.

Relatedly, Cummings, Merrilees et al. (2013), based on three-level modeling, which allows for the study of inter-individual differences in intra-individual change and nesting by neighborhood, sectarian community violence over time was linked with youth adjustment problems on the SDQ. This link was accentuated in neighborhoods with higher crime rates, suggesting that the impact of political violence on youth adjustment is elevated in high crime areas. Further underscoring the psychological impact of sectarian community violence, Taylor et al. (2011) found that mothers reported vivid differences in focus group discussions between experiences with sectarian and non-sectarian violence, with participants describing pulling together and greater in-group social cohesion in reaction to sectarian violence. These evaluations by mothers suggest the particular risk posed by sectarian community violence. Relatedly, Shirlow et al. (2013) reported that mothers' perceived sectarian crime was disproportionately much greater than perceived nonsectarian crime indexed by recorded reports by police. Thus, the psychological significance of sectarian violence far exceeded what the base rates of these incidents would suggest.

However, it is important to recognize that non-sectarian community violence has also, albeit less consistently, been associated with youth adjustment problems in Belfast. For example, Cummings et al. (2011) reported relations between non-sectarian community violence and youth maladjustment, although emotional insecurity did *not* mediate these relations. Thus, nonsectarian community violence is related to youth adjustment problems, but sectarian

community violence is more consistently related to youth maladjustment when both types of community violence are included in the same statistical models, with emotional insecurity only mediating relations with youth maladjustment for sectarian community violence. In summary, although both forms of community violence pose risk for youth maladjustment, sectarian community violence underscores the particular problems for youth development presented by political violence.

The Importance of Theories about Explanatory Processes

Theory is essential for achieving adequate understanding of the processes underlying relations between political violence and child development, including the mechanisms and conditions accounting for maladjustment or fostering positive functioning (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Extending the extensive literature documenting negative outcomes for youth of exposure to political violence, research is now beginning to present, and systematically test, the propositions of well-articulated theoretical models in the context of multi-wave, longitudinal research designs.

Emotional Security Theory (EST)

EST has a foundation in attachment theory concerned with emotional security in parent-child relationships (Bowlby, 1969) and children's emotional security in contexts of marital conflict and violence (Cummings & Davies, 2010), and has recently been extended outside the family system to explain children's functioning in the face of community conflict and violence (Cummings et al., 2009). Emotional security is conceptualized as a set goal, fundamental to youths' adaptive emotional, behavior, cognitive, and physiological regulatory responses in threatening contexts, such as family or community violence. Youth who sense their family and community are safe havens can utilize parents and neighbors to provide security and protection (Qouta, Punamäki, & El Sarraj, 2008). A growing body of empirical studies demonstrates relations between emotional insecurity and maladjustment in response to violence at different levels of the social ecology (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Facing political violence threatens children's appraisals of felt-security, stability and safety in socio-emotional environments (e.g., Bar-Tal & Jacobson, 1998; Bleich, Gelkopf, & Solomon, 2003; Jordans et al., 2010; McAloney, McCrystal, Percy, & McCartan, 2009; Sagi-Schwartz, 2012). Thus, guided by EST, we have explored the hypothesis that the effects of political violence on children's adjustment are mediated, at least in part, by children's emotional insecurity about multiple levels of the social ecology, including the family and community.

Our recent research further supports that youths' emotional insecurity about both the community and family are psychological processes mediating the effects of political violence on children's maladjustment. Cummings et al. (2011) specifically tested emotional insecurity about the *community* as a mediator in relations between sectarian community violence and youths' externalizing and internalizing problems as assessed by mother and child report on the SDQ. Based on a three-wave model test, with controls for initial levels of adjustment, emotional insecurity about the community fully mediated relations between sectarian community violence and youths' externalizing and internalizing problems (Figure 2). Cummings et al. (2012) specifically tested emotional insecurity about the *family* as a

mediator in relations between sectarian community violence and youths' adjustment problems. Based on a three-wave model test, with controls for initial levels of adjustment, family conflict and emotional security about the family fully mediated relations between sectarian community violence and youths' externalizing (based on the SDQ reported by mother and child, and a child report measure of aggression) and internalizing problems (based on the SDQ measures) (Figure 3).

Finally, Cummings, Taylor et al. (in press) examined relations between individual trajectories of emotional insecurity about the community over four consecutive years and children's adjustment in contexts of sectarian community violence. This approach allowed exploration of the within-person development of, or change in, emotional security about the community over time, rather than simply based on a "snap shot" at one point in time (Cummings et al., 2011). Sectarian antisocial behavior served as a time-varying covariate of emotional insecurity, thereby controlling for variations in children's experience with sectarian antisocial behavior within each time point. Complementing the findings of Cummings et al. (2011), but adding a demonstration of the significance of emotional insecurity *over time* to adjustment, youths' trajectories of emotional insecurity about the community were related to risk for developing both internalizing and externalizing problems.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity as reflected in ethnic group identity has long been held pertinent to understanding the impact of contexts of intergroup sectarian conflict (Cairns, 1996). Social identity refers to an individual's self-categorization as a member of a particular group and the evaluative meaning of that group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, the strength of identification with a group in conflict is likely to alter the psychological experience of group-based conflicts such as the conflict in Northern Ireland. Results support the relevance of social identity to youths' adjustment in contexts of political violence, although a relatively complex pattern of positive and negative effects are reported (Cummings, Taylor & Merrilees, 2012). Merrilees et al. (2011) reported that the strength of mothers' social identity moderated pathways between the impact of the political violence and her mental health, with social identity serving as a *protective factor* for Catholic mothers and a *risk factor* for Protestant mothers. Based on three waves of data collection, Merrilees et al. (in press-a) reported that youth with higher ethnic group identity reported fewer emotion problems in the face of sectarian antisocial behavior, with this buffering effect stronger for Protestants in relation to Catholics (Figure 4). The moderating effect of social identity observed in these two studies may reflect the changing political context in Belfast in recent years, with Catholics gaining economic and educational achievement relative to Protestants in post-accord Belfast. At the present time, Protestant youth seem more motivated to come together with their in-group members, finding strength in this group membership, whereas Catholics may have possessed greater in-group motivation during the period of the mothers' youth (i.e., pre-accord Belfast). However, further suggesting the complex pattern of effects associated with ethnic group identity, Merrilees et al. (in press-b) found that in-group social identity weakened relations between exposure to sectarian antisocial behavior and aggressive behaviors. However, youth with higher in-group identity

were more likely to aggress against the out-group, with effects stronger for boys than girls. Finally, Merrilees et al. (in press-c) reported evidence for relations between strength of identity and insecurity about the community in late adolescence. Overall, the results of these studies suggest that strength of identity with in-group members can fuel buffering processes through the use of positive social support and pulling together with in-group members. At the same time, strength of identity may act as a risk factor if identification promotes aggressive responses to other group members.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Although the negative effects of political violence on children are well-documented, research has only begun to systematically articulate and test explanatory models for child development in these contexts. This next step is necessary for advances in scientific understanding and, ultimately, stronger bases for effective intervention. The research reviewed advances the merits of a social-ecological process-oriented perspective, focusing on child development processes and trajectories in contexts of political violence. Specifically, the findings support the (a) utility of social ecological models, (b) the value and importance for understanding pathways of influences of differentiating effects attributable to political violence as opposed to other contextual influences, and (c) the promise for greater conceptual understanding of testing theories about specific explanatory processes.

With regard to future directions, children are faced with political violence in many areas of the world but relatively few regions have been subject to systematic study, even fewer at a level of analysis consistent with the empirical standards required by a social-ecological, process-oriented perspective. Commonalities as well as differences are expected to emerge in relations between political violence and child development across contexts of intergroup conflict worldwide (Cummings et al., 2009). Study of many different parts of the world is essential for building an integrated, sophisticated understanding of the processes underlying relations between political violence and child development.

Approaches to understanding relations between political violence and child outcomes at a process-oriented, social ecological level of analysis are still evolving; there are many gaps. Few studies have investigated well-articulated models about the social ecology; even fewer have tested theory-based models about explanatory processes. Only a subset of the elements of the social ecology that may affect children have been identified and studied. Additional theoretical models about mediating processes require articulation and empirical analysis.

Finally, given the well-documented risks for youth, there is an urgent need for more effective interventions. Applied programs based on empirically-supported findings, principles, and theories offer particular potential for more effective interventions. Programs that improve the welfare of children are most likely to emerge if closely informed by high-quality research about pertinent contexts and processes related to youth maladjustment or positive outcomes (Barber, 2013; Masten, 2013; Masten & Narayan, 2012).

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Figure 1.

Theoretical framework for social ecology of political violence in Northern Ireland. Adapted from Cummings et al. (2009).

Figure 2.

Tests of the conceptual model of the role of children's emotional security in relations between community violence and child adjustment. SAB sectarian antisocial behavior; NAB nonsectarian antisocial behavior; SDQ Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

Standardized path coefficients reported. Error variances omitted from the model. $*p < .05$;

$**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

Figure 3.

Testing a social ecological model of relations between political violence and child outcomes.

SAB = sectarian antisocial behavior; NAB= nonsectarian antisocial behavior; SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Standardized path coefficients are reported. Solid lines denote significant paths; dashed lines indicate nonsignificant paths. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Figure 4. Three-way Interaction: The Moderating Roles of Ethno-Political Group Membership and Strength of Ethno-political Identity on the Relation between Sectarian Antisocial Behavior and Emotion Problems.