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Developmental and Social-Ecological Perspectives on Children, Political Violence, and Armed Conflict

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RUNNING HEAD: Special Section Editorial

Special Section Editorial:
Developmental and Social-Ecological Perspectives on
Children, Political Violence, and Armed Conflict

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Developmental and Social-Ecological Perspectives on
Children, Political Violence, and Armed Conflict

An increasing number of researchers and policymakers have been moved to study and intervene in the lives of children affected by violent conflicts (Masten, 2014). According to a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2009) report, over one billion children under the age of eighteen are growing up in regions where acts of political violence and armed conflict are, as Ladds and Cairns (1996, p. 15) put it, "a common occurrence—a fact of life". In recent years, UNICEF, advocacy and human rights groups, journalists, and researchers have drawn public attention to the high rates of child casualties in these regions, and to the plights of those children still caught in the crossfire. It has thus become clear that both the challenges and stakes are higher than ever to promote the safety and wellbeing of affected children around the world (Masten & Narayan, 2012; Tol, Jordans, Kohrt, Betancourt, & Komproe, 2012).

Political violence and armed conflict endangers people of all ages; however, developing children may be particularly susceptible to negative and persistent psychosocial outcomes in these contexts. The study of children exposed to political violence and armed conflict is essential to: (a) promoting healthy child development; (b) enhancing affected communities' overall adjustment and human capital; and (c) promoting long-term positive outcomes, including preventing the reemergence of violence conflict.

Thus, looking to the future and keeping in mind the ultimate goal of conducting research that may inform interventions and policies to enhance the lives of vulnerable children, it will be critical to center research agendas around not just the documentation of *outcomes* among children exposed to political violence and armed conflict, but around the identification of the *pathways* and *processes* by which exposure leads to particular outcomes over time (Cairns &

Dawes, 1996; Cicchetti, 2006; Sroufe, 2013; Werner, 2012). Unfortunately, process-oriented research studying children, political violence, and armed conflict has been relatively rare to date.

In the face of the many methodological, conceptual and practical challenges for advancing research in this area, a developmental psychopathology perspective offers valuable directions for advancing research and practice (e.g, intervention) on political violence, armed conflict and children's well-being and adjustment (Cicchetti, 2006; Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995). A key purpose of this Special Section is to advocate for more advanced research design approaches consistent with a developmental psychopathology perspective and, by means of the empirical studies included in this Special Section, provide tangible models for how scholars in this area of study may achieve more advanced study and scientific understanding of the topic, including promoting these goals in the context of intervention studies. In addition, local commentaries are included to place the contributions of specific empirical papers in cultural perspective and general commentaries are also included to further articulate and assess the broader contributions to understanding, both from developmental and methodological perspectives, including mapping of future directions for further research and practice towards better helping children and families.

A hallmark for the next generation of research, consistent with a developmental psychopathology perspective, and reflected in the empirical and other contributions of this Special Section, is the conduct of longitudinal studies that embody a process-oriented, social ecological perspective. Related goals or themes in this regard include (a) the study of *development processes* in the context of political violence and armed conflict, including trajectories or pathways of development over time of *positive as well as negative developmental outcomes and processes* (Cicchetti, 2006; Cummings & Valentino, 2015); (b) the importance to advanced scientific understanding of complex modeling and analyses of *explanatory processes*,

towards explicating key mediators and moderators of developmental outcomes, including identifying *risk, protective, and resilience processes* (Cicchetti, 2006; Masten, 2007; Masten & Tellegen, 2012); and (c) the centrality of a *social-ecological model* for fully articulating the domain of *contextual influences* on children's development (e.g., Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998; Cicchetti & Valentino, 2006).

Contexts of Political Violence and Armed Conflict: A Working Definition

Violence unfolds across communities and nations in distinct patterns. There are likely to be commonalities, but also differences, in the natures and experiences of violence in different contexts. Thus, any single, narrowly defined conceptualization of violence cannot hold across all settings. This Special Section is concerned with acts of violence that are: (a) collective (e.g., involving at least one organized group); and (b) organized around group identities or political motivations (e.g., as opposed to common crime such as homicide). For the purpose of brevity, we will use the terms *political violence* and *armed conflict* interchangeably to denote conflict of this nature. *Armed conflict* is conceptualized as a contested incompatibility concerning government and/or territory in which the use of armed force between two parties (one of which is the state) results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year (Wallensteen & Sollenberg, 2001). *Political violence*, on the other hand, is a broader term used to indicate conflict in which neither side is the state, and/or one-sided violence in which the state or organized groups target civilians (Sundberg, Eck, & Kreutz, 2012). In these cases, violence is often organized around identity lines (e.g., political, ethnic, religious) or other group-based motivations, and often persists long after a peace accord is signed (MacGinty, Muldoon, & Ferguson, 2007). Notably, despite the working definitions of these constructs, typologies of violence may vary even more

broadly and widely across contexts and cultures. This, in itself, is an important topic for future research.

This Introduction is meant to provide a brief overview of the current literature and also to begin outlining the future research directions considered in the Special Section. First, an overview of the historical and current literature on child outcomes in situations of political violence and armed conflict is provided, including research documenting contexts that facilitate both positive and negative outcomes. Second, the emerging area of *process-oriented research from a social-ecological perspective* is briefly considered, including the role of theory, the study of multiple dimensions of social-ecological context, and the value of exploring the underlying mechanisms of child development in situations of political violence based on longitudinal, process-oriented research designs (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Merrilees, Taylor, & Shirlow, 2014). Third, translational research and efforts to apply existing knowledge to prevention and intervention work is discussed (Cummings & Valentino, 2015). Finally, the Introduction concludes with a preview of the work reflected in the empirical contributions to the Special Section.

Child Outcomes in Contexts of Political Violence and Armed Conflict

The body of literature documenting the psychological outcomes of children affected by political violence and armed conflict has evolved over many years, but is nonetheless still limited in significant ways (Werner, 2012). Although social psychologists have long been engaged in the study of the impact of political violence and armed conflict, relatively few developmental and clinical psychologists have followed suit. This is unfortunate, given that developmental and clinical psychologists have great potential to make highly significant contributions in this area. This is reflected by the Society for Research in Child Development's affirmation of this topic as

a strategic goal (Masten, 2014), including the provision of funding for the meetings associated with this Special Section. Another factor limiting research from child development and abnormal child psychology perspectives is undoubtedly the immense practical and methodological challenges for conducting research and intervention efforts with affected youth (e.g., funding, staffing and institutional support). Future progress in this area will require collaboration among members of interdisciplinary teams pooling knowledge and helping one another to overcome the challenges of working with vulnerable populations in vulnerable contexts.

History of Research on the Effects on Children

Research on the impact of political violence and armed conflict on children has gradually developed over the course of the twentieth century—a century fraught with dozens of violent conflicts, two World Wars, and the emergence of new governments and technologies which dramatically altered the face of political violence and armed conflict. Over time, the number of civilians—including children and families—directly affected by political violence and armed conflict has increased dramatically. For example, the proportion of soldiers to civilians killed in armed conflict decreased from approximately 9:1 in the early 1890s to approximately 1:9 by the 1990s (Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991). Millions of children and families faced conflict-related traumas, such as the deaths of loved ones and displacement from their homes. During the era of the World Wars, many psychologists expressed concern over the possible effects of exposure to war-related events on children. As Young (1947) noted:

The postwar era will be guided by those who were children...during World War II. If the war has caused large numbers of them to have deep-seated maladjustments, the future will be correspondingly jeopardized.

Thus, researchers in the first half of the twentieth century began to investigate relations between exposure to political violence and armed conflict and child adjustment. For example, Dudson's (1941) surveyed teachers of children affected by air raids, and Freud and Burlingham (1943) studied traumatic shock and aggression among children who had been orphaned and/or exposed to wartime bombings. While some researchers reported signs of psychosocial maladjustment among affected children, others indicated that the vast majority of children were doing remarkably well given all that they had seen and experienced (see Cairns, 1996, p. 29). The body of work constructed during this era formed an important foundation for future researchers to build on, raising questions such as: Why do some children affected by political violence and armed conflict not experience serious psychological consequences? What factors (e.g., exposure type, family structure) separate these children from those who do demonstrate maladjustment? Despite these and other contributions, it is also important to acknowledge the methodological limitations of many early studies in this area. Study samples were frequently homogeneous and lacked control groups. 'Psychological distress' was vaguely and variably defined. Most studies also failed to examine the long-term effects of exposure to political violence and armed conflict, or the role of context in shaping child outcomes. Thus, the stage was set for further, more rigorous and extensive inquiry in this area.

Over the course of the next several decades, researchers continued to explore the psychological outcomes of new generations of children growing up amidst political violence and armed conflict, significantly expanding the scope of research. For example, J. Lawrence Aber and colleagues explored psychosocial development and post-traumatic stress symptoms among children who had experienced traumas during the Lebanese Civil War (e.g., Macksoud & Aber, 1996). Also in the Middle East, James Garbarino and colleagues utilized a risk accumulation

model to study similar variables among children and families from different groups affected by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (e.g., Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996; Kostelny & Garbarino, 1994). In Northern Ireland, Ed Cairns and colleagues developed a program of research investigating factors contributing to the longitudinal adjustment of children growing up during the Troubles of Northern Ireland, adding to the perpetuation of intergroup hostilities between generations (e.g., Cairns, 1982; Cairns, 1987). A Special Section of *Child Development* in 1996 marked the culmination of a century of research in this area, highlighting not only the diversity of psychological outcomes among children exposed to political violence and armed conflict (e.g., Macksoud & Aber, 1996; Straker, Mendelsohn, Moosa, & Tudin, 1996; Miller, 1996), but also a growing movement among researchers to analyze risk factors, protective factors, and child outcomes from developmental perspectives (e.g., Hoffman & Bizman, 1996; Punamäki, 1996).

The tradition of research in this field of study has continued to advance in the new millennium, expanding to areas of political violence and armed conflict across the globe. In recent years, researchers have sought to sketch pictures of the lives of youth growing up amidst increasingly diverse contexts and conflicts, from the Troubles of Northern Ireland (e.g., Cummings, Merrilees, Schermerhorn, Goeke-Morey, & Cairns, 2011) to the civil wars and contexts of poverty in the Congo (e.g., Torrente, Aber, Johnston, Shivshanker, & Annan, 2012), to the multitude of prolonged conflicts in the Middle East (e.g., Boxer et al., 2013), to post-conflict tensions in Sierra Leone (e.g., Betancourt, Newnham, McBain, & Brennan, 2013). As the faces of political violence and armed conflict become more complex, so have the questions and challenges faced by researchers in this area. Yet the need for further advances in this area—particularly in the realms of intervention and cross-cultural research—is as great or perhaps even greater than ever. Nearly two decades after the Special Section of *Child Development*, (Cairns &

Dawes, 1996), the time has come for researchers of children, political violence, and armed conflict to pool their knowledge even more proactively, to communicate and work more closely together, to identify what they have learned, and to further develop what still needs to be explored.

Impact on Child Development

Contexts associated with symptoms of child mental health problems. A primary focus of the field has been to study associations between exposure to political violence and child mental health (e.g., Belsky, 2008; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996; Qouta, Punamäki, & El Sarraj, 2008; Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). Children who have been exposed to more frequent and/or severe violence (e.g., witnessing killing; loss of a loved one; direct attack on home or school) are likely to demonstrate higher levels of mental health symptoms (e.g., Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2012; Attanayake et al., 2009; Furr, Comer, Edmunds, & Kendall, 2010). Evidence as to whether these symptoms tend to be acute or long-term (e.g., persisting months or years after violence has subsided) has been mixed. It is, however, clear that whether or not post-exposure symptoms persist, children are commonly confronted with secondary stressors (e.g., poverty, separation from loved ones, broken social and community relations) that continue to threaten their psychosocial wellbeing (Shaw, 2003).

Prevalence estimates for clinically significant psychological symptomology among exposed children vary widely from 10 to 90%, depending on trauma type, length, severity, and a variety of individual and environmental factors (see Shaw, 2003). Such symptomology may fall under the umbrellas of internalizing (e.g., depression, anxiety), externalizing (e.g., conduct disorder) or, most frequently, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD). It is also common for children to demonstrate a range of comorbid problems. For example, Hadi and Llabre (1998)

reported that among a sample of 8-12 year-old Kuwaiti children, 62% exhibited moderate and 27% exhibited severe PTSD symptomology after the Iraqi invasion of their country, and that these symptoms were positively correlated with depressive symptoms.

Researchers have also increasingly recognized the importance of examining negative psychosocial outcomes among exposed children that fall outside of the frameworks of major mental health disorders (e.g., Slone & Shechner, 2009). For example, various studies have suggested that exposure to political violence and armed conflict increases the risk of non-specific behavioral and emotional symptoms (e.g., hyperactivity, peer problems) among preschool-aged children (Thabet, Karim, & Vostanis, 2006; Zahr, 1996). Studies of older samples of children have similarly reported heightened aggression (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2012), increased risk-taking behaviors (Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2007), alcohol consumption (Schiff et al., 2006), and a host of other problems across the internalizing, attachment, somatic, and sleep sectors (e.g., Sagi-Schwartz, Seginer, & Aldeen, 2008; Qouta, Punamäki, & El-Sarraj, 2008).

Contexts associated with indicators of positive outcomes in children. Given the destruction and trauma associated with political violence and armed conflict, it is logical that researchers have focused heavily on studying potentials for negative developmental outcomes (e.g., internalizing and externalizing symptoms) among affected children. Despite this logic, results from existing studies suggest the effects of political violence and armed conflict are not limited to negative outcomes. In recent years, a growing number of researchers have also explored potentials for positive outcomes and processes among children living in these contexts. Indicators of positive developmental processes, such as prosocial behaviors (Macksoud & Aber, 1996), activism (Barber & Olsen, 2009) and other forms of civic engagement have been linked to youths' experience of political violence. Several theories have been proposed to explain why

positive outcomes may occur in these circumstances. For example, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996)'s model of post-traumatic growth asserts that struggling with the trauma can result in cognitive rebuilding, deliberate schema change, and new narrative about life. Vollhardt's (2009) theory of altruism born of suffering suggests that negative life experiences can motivate individuals to help others who have also experienced adversities. Others have suggested that experiences of intergroup conflict may motivate youth to pull together with their ingroup members to make positive changes in their communities (Merrilees et al., 2013b).

Children, Political Violence and Armed Conflict:

A Move to a Process-Oriented, Social-Ecological Perspective

As observed by Dawes and Cairns (1998) over a decade and a half ago, researchers in the area of children and political violence have "counted enough symptoms". Moreover, as we have discussed, this body of work has uncovered potentials for both positive and negative outcomes. Yet limited progress has been made towards addressing several crucial questions for understanding youth development in contexts of political violence and armed conflict: *how* and *why* do particular exposed youth arrive at particular psychosocial outcomes (i.e., mediating processes)? And *for whom* and under *what conditions* do children reach these outcomes (i.e., moderating processes)? The time has thus arrived for a new generation of research from a process-oriented, social-ecological perspective in the area of children, political violence and armed conflict. The possible face of such work can be conceptualized from a developmental psychopathology perspective that is concerned with identifying mediating and moderating processes (Cummings & Valentino, 2015). According to this perspective, emerging directions in the study of children, political violence, and armed conflict might include: (a) the explication of a broader causal net of factors which influence child adjustment (e.g., risk and resilience factors);

(b) the identification of social contexts (e.g., familial, community, ethnic, cultural) that influence causal processes and relations between various levels of these social contexts, and (c) the examination and testing of dynamic patterns of socioemotional, biological, cognitive, and other processes that underlie child outcomes (Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000, p. 37). These directions underscore the key point that the goal is to *test* relations between political violence, armed conflict, and child outcomes with greater rigor and precision. The following sections of this Introduction explore the role of context from a process-oriented, social-ecological perspective, as well as future directions in the development and testing of theories about the mechanisms underlying youth development in situations of political violence and armed conflict.

A Social-Ecological Perspective

The importance of examining the impact of multiple social-ecological levels in understanding the impact of political violence and armed conflict on child development has become increasingly clear (Cummings et al., 2014; Dubow, Huesmann, & Boxer, 2009; Joshi & O'Donnell, 2003; Sagi-Schwartz, 2008; Shaw, 2003). According to ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998), children develop within multiple nested contexts (e.g., family, school, community, broader culture), with some levels of the social ecology more proximate than others to development processes. By incorporating multiple levels of the social ecology into research designs, a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of exposure to political violence and armed conflict on children can be achieved (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Schermerhorn, Merrilees, & Cairns, 2009; Dubow et al., 2009).

The social-ecological level within which children interact directly is the microsystem, including both family and community factors. In regards to family factors, parenting dynamics

have been explored as possible mediators and/or moderators of children's psychosocial outcomes in the face of political violence. Whereas warm, supportive, non-punitive parenting behaviors have been linked to more positive outcomes among exposed children, high levels of intrusive and psychological control have been associated with higher levels of psychological symptomology (Barber, 1999; Dubow, Huesmann, et al., 2012; Keresteš, 2006; Punamäki, 1997; Thabet, Ibraheem, Shivram, Millingen, & Vostanis, 2008). Parental mental health and adjustment have likewise been identified as potentially associated with child wellbeing in contexts of political violence (Dubow, Huesmann, et al., 2012; Joshi & O'Donnell, 2003; Lynch, 2003; Shaw, 2003). In regards to the broader community, such factors may increase children's risk for psychosocial difficulties either directly or by indirectly (e.g., by exacerbating family-level stressors). For example, violence in the community can have a spillover effect by increasing conflict within the family (e.g., Boxer et al., 2013; Halpern, 2001). On the other hand, family cohesion, emotional security within the family and community, and high levels of social support and acceptance have all been identified as key attenuators of the effects of exposure to violence on child adjustment (Betancourt, Brennan, Rubin-Smith, Fitzmaurice, & Gilman, 2010; Cummings et al., 2011; O'Donnell, Schwab-Stone, & Muveed, 2002; Peltonen, Qouta, El Sarraj, & Punamäki, 2010).

An overarching social-ecological subsystem is the macrosystem, which contains broader cultural factors that set the stage for interpersonal and community dynamics (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). The macrosystem comprises culture and its institutional patterns. Such cultural components may be economic, social, or political in nature and they give meaning to the systemic and individual interactions that they embody (e.g., ethnic, religious, and political identities and ideologies). It has been suggested that tensions at the macrosystem level may

influence child adjustment by way of increasing violence in the microsystem (e.g., family, school, community; see Boxer et al., 2013). Another example of macrosystem effects is the impact of economic downturn on the experience of political violence. Political violence is more likely to negatively affect children from lower socioeconomic conditions (Cairns & Dawes, 1996). Following the effects of macro-level economic shifts will surely impact children's experiences of political violence. In all, while the measurement of macrosystem factors poses multiple methodological challenges, this is nonetheless an essential future direction as researchers seek to understand the experiences of children exposed to violence in different geographical, societal, and political contexts.

Researchers are challenged to hypothesize which factors, processes, and pathways may affect particular groups of children exposed to political violence and armed conflict. As such, studies should be conducted at multiple social-ecological levels in order to test possible cross-level interrelations. This approach may capture a more comprehensive snapshot of the effects of exposure on child adjustment in multiple contexts. Nonetheless, simply identifying variables and contexts of interest—even at multiple levels—does not paint a *complete* picture. The hypothesized *processes* through which exposure to political violence and armed conflict affects children must be integrated into conceptual and theoretical frameworks and systematically tested.

Process-Oriented Research and the Importance of Theory

Process-oriented research aims to describe the patterns and processes that lead children to positive or negative outcomes within particular scenarios and developmental contexts (Cummings et al., 2000, p. 82). Notably, causal factors for particular outcomes are not conceptualized as global or static “risk/resilience” variables that operate upon children within a vacuum. Rather, emphasis is placed on the *dynamic interplay* of socioemotional, cognitive,

biological, and other processes that influence child interactions and functioning (Cicchetti, 2006; Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995; Masten & Tellegen, 2012).

Guiding theoretical and/or conceptual models should reflect the interplay between dynamic processes and children's social-ecological contexts in shaping their outcomes in settings of political violence and armed conflict (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Previous research has documented what *kinds* of contexts and outcomes are associated with children's exposure to political violence. Moving forward, it will be critical to carefully construct and test theoretical models that investigate *how and why* (e.g., mediators), and *for whom and when* (e.g., moderators) children in particular contexts arrive at particular outcomes. This knowledge may be capitalized on to identify and support subsets of children who are at particularly high risk of negative outcomes, and to sensitively intervene in the lives of those who have already begun to show signs of maladjustment. Just as significantly, process-oriented research is needed to identify the dynamic processes and social-ecological contexts that shape positive outcomes that might be enhanced through interventions (Masten, 2014).

Longitudinal research is necessary to examine these processes in real-life settings. That is, cross-sectional designs, while useful for identifying variables and relationships of interest, cannot uncover the *processes* that account for exposed children's outcomes. Multi-wave longitudinal models, on the other hand, have the capacity to identify such processes, and to chart pathways of child development in contexts of political violence over time. Specifically, longitudinal models can uncover directional relations between the social contexts of political violence, mediating social-ecological and/or psychological processes, and positive and negative child outcomes. Longitudinal data also allows for tests of processes that happen both within and between people and new methods of analysis allow for tests of different levels of effects. In other

words, analyses incorporating random effects or multi-level models allow for the testing of effects at various levels such as the family level, the community level or even the national level. The use of these tools greatly enhances our ability to understand the multiple levels of the social ecology and how and why individuals change over time.

Resilience as a Process

A growing number of researchers have begun to document children's potential for resilience in contexts of political violence and armed conflict. *Resilience* may be defined as the capacity of a dynamic system to endure or recover from adverse circumstances that threaten its stability, viability, or development (Masten, 2011, 2012). In recent years, a number of studies have highlighted subsets of children who were functioning more normatively than expected post-exposure, or who eventually returned to mostly normative functioning levels over time (see Barber, 2013 and Barber & Doty, 2013 for reviews). The coexistence of literature documenting various maladjustment outcomes among some children exposed to political violence, and resiliency in others, need not be viewed as contradictory; rather, it points to the fact that it is impossible to make conclusive, universal statements about the psychosocial effects of armed conflict on children (Barber, 2013). As such, researchers have called for: (a) a move beyond conceptual frameworks which assume widespread trauma and dysfunction; (b) the identification of protective factors and processes across multiple ecological levels; and (c) the utilization of this knowledge to inform prevention programs and interventions promoting positive outcomes among high-risk populations.

From the developmental psychopathology perspective (Cicchetti, 2006; Cummings and Valentino, 2015), both risk and resilience are conceptualized as *processes*, or, interactions between unique individuals and contexts (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001;

2007). Individual outcomes vary based on type and dosage of exposure, age and gender, among other factors. Children's families, peers, communities, and cultures may form adaptive systems (Masten, 2001, 2007). Commonly-identified protective factors occurring in these systems include: secure attachment relationships with caregivers, high levels of cognitive skills, self-regulation, and self-esteem/self-efficacy; personality factors (e.g., tendencies toward rumination), neurobiological traits, participation in nurturing institutions (e.g., school), and political ideology (Barber, 2009; Dubow, Boxer et al., 2012; Masten & Narayan, 2012). However, the protective effects of these factors may only be relevant to particular domains. That is, youth may demonstrate competent functioning within one context (e.g., home), but not in another (e.g., school) depending on the interplay of risk and resilience factors.

Transactional Relations between the Individual and Environment

Within a social-ecological framework, relations between individuals and their environmental contexts are regarded as transactional—that is, the environment affects the individual and the individual affects the environment in a reciprocal process that evolves over time (Cicchetti, 2006). A variety of individual characteristics may shape the ways in which children exposed to political violence and armed conflict interact with different elements of their environments. At the levels of cognitive and psychological functioning, evidence suggests that emotional regulation abilities, sensitization to conflict, and biological stress reactions may mediate and/or moderate relations between exposure to political violence and armed conflict and children's psychosocial outcomes (Dubow, Huesmann et al., 2012; Lavi & Slone, 2011; Qouta, Punamäki, & El Sarraj, 2001). Children's ideological commitments have also been investigated, with some mixed results (e.g., Punamäki, 1996). For example, high levels of in-group cohesion and social identity can increase child aggression towards outgroup members, but can also buffer

them from the mental health consequences of political violence exposure. (e.g., Merrilees et al., 2013a; Merrilees et al., 2013b). Finally, as previously noted, child characteristics such as gender and age have been frequently explored, also with mixed results.

A variety of additional individual factors may also relate to children's vulnerability for negative psychosocial outcomes. For example, at the individual level, developmental stage and age at the time of exposure may be influential (e.g., Green et al., 1991; Vizek-Vidovi, Kuterovac-Jagodic, & Arambasic, 2000). This may be partially attributable to the role of developmental stage and age in children's experiences of political violence and armed conflict (e.g., perceptions, cognitive capacities to understand danger) and engagement in the events at hand (e.g., political activism, sectarian antisocial behavior, child soldiers). The role of gender in shaping children's experiences of and reactions to political violence and armed conflict has also been explored. For example, Betancourt, Borisova, de la Soudiere, and Williamson (2011) reported that female former child soldiers demonstrated lower psychosocial functioning compared to male former child soldiers. These differences may in part reflect the increased risk for girls for experiencing rape and other forms of sexual assault. Moreover, girls were found to evidence higher rates of improvement across a 4-year follow-up (Betancourt, Newnham et al., 2013).

Translational Implications:

Improving Prevention and Intervention

Methodologically rigorous research has the greatest potential to be translated into efficacious interventions for children who have been exposed to political violence and armed conflict. Too often, promising studies in this area have been conducted in the field, but have not been applied to the settings in which they were conducted in order to improve prevention and

intervention efforts. Likewise, much basic research in this area has failed to be drawn into larger conceptual frameworks with the potential to cogently inform future applications for the samples of children that were studied.

In order to develop and test basic theories with application potential for children exposed to political violence and armed conflict, it is important for researchers to be increasingly willing to join forces with experts both within and outside of their field. Research guided by a social-ecological perspective is likely to identify risk and protective factors at multiple ecological levels for youth exposed to political violence and armed conflict. Collaborative, interdisciplinary efforts will be necessary in order to disentangle the processes by which these factors lead to child maladjustment or positive development, and to develop targeted, developmentally and culturally appropriate interventions (Masten & Narayan, 2012). While not all studies of children and political violence need be explicitly geared toward intervention development or evaluation, it is important that all basic research in this area possess have clear and demonstrable potential to better the lives of those vulnerable samples of those being studied (Cicchetti & Toth, 2006). These steps will be critical toward advancing current knowledge pertaining to children and political violence, and developing and disseminating efficacious interventions.

This Special Section: Research Groups Employing Social-Ecological, Process-Oriented Perspectives on Youth and Political Violence and Armed Conflict

This Special Section aims to provide models for these new directions in research and application. Relatedly, the goal is to contribute to the body of research that employs a social-ecological, process-oriented perspective whilst systematically and longitudinally testing well-articulated theories of children and political violence and armed conflict. The process of constructing empirically-guided, well-articulated theoretical models that can be tested

longitudinally entails significant costs (e.g., time, funding) and methodological challenges (see Cummings et al., 2000, p. 82-86 for an overview). In this Special Section we will present research from four research groups that have begun to move in these important directions; below, the specific advancements presented in this volume will be highlighted and previewed.

The Intergenerational Impact of War on Sierra Leonean Youth. More than a decade after the end of a protracted (1991-2002) civil war that led to the deaths of more than 50,000 people in Sierra Leone, many post-conflict tensions and challenge remain—from widespread poverty, to the reintegration of child soldiers and lingering acts of armed violence. In recent years, Theresa Betancourt and colleagues have utilized an ecological developmental framework to examine the intergenerational transmission of both violence and resilience among affected youth, families, and communities in this region. Following the war's end, the group examined the psychosocial adjustment of 529 Sierra Leonean youth—many of whom were former child soldiers—across three biennial waves (ages 10 to 17 years at baseline assessment.) Results uncovered significant relations between specific war experiences (e.g., harming others) and post-conflict risk factors (e.g., stigma) to exposed youths' psychosocial outcomes; protective post-conflict factors (e.g., community acceptance) were also identified (e.g., Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman, Williams, & Ellis, 2010; Betancourt et al., 2010; Betancourt, McBain, Newnham, & Brennan, 2012).

As part of their ongoing work in this area, Betancourt and colleagues aim to: (a) elucidate the longitudinal effects of exposure to political violence during youth on adult mental health and family functioning; (b) uncover the mechanisms by which both violence and resilience are transmitted between generations; and (c) identify parental factors, family processes, and societal

mechanisms which might be targeted in order to improve the outcomes of individuals affected by political violence.

Political Violence and Children in Northern Ireland. The late twentieth century in Northern Ireland was marked by a period of conflict known as “The Troubles”. Disagreement between primarily Protestant Unionists/Loyalists and primarily Catholic Nationalist/Republicans over the region’s constitutional status led to eruptions of violent conflict which left over 3,500 dead. The Belfast Good Friday Agreement of 1998 marked a critical step towards peace; however, serious sectarian tensions and sporadic violence persist. E. Mark Cummings and colleagues are currently conducting a longitudinal study in post-accord Belfast examining pathways between political violence exposure, nonsectarian crime, family functioning, and adolescent adjustment. The study aims to elucidate the interpersonal and psychological processes which underlie relations between members of the city’s adjacent but segregated communities, and employs emotional security theory as a guiding framework. Notable findings thus far have revealed: (a) mediating effects of emotional insecurity about both the community and family on the effects of political violence on youth maladjustment; and (b) differential effects of exposure to sectarian versus nonsectarian violence on youth outcomes; and (c) a variety of dynamic risk and resilience processes at play for youth exposed to violence across multiple social-ecological contexts (e.g., Cummings et al., 2011; Cummings et al., 2014; Goeke-Morey et al., 2013).

The Israeli-Palestinian Exposure to Violence Study. The modern Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been underway since the mid-twentieth century; rates of sectarian violence, poverty, and refugee displacement remain high. L. Rowell Huesmann, Paul Boxer, Eric Dubow, Jeremy Gringes, Simha Landau, and Khalil Shikaki serve as the Co-Principal Investigators of an ongoing longitudinal study of the effects of extreme, persistent exposure to ethnic-political violence on

the psychosocial adjustment of youth in these regions (for a theoretical overview, see Dubow et al., 2009). The study utilizes a cohort-sequential sampling design, tracking 600 youth aged 8, 11, and 14 at baseline assessment across four annual waves. Two main hypotheses have been advanced: first, that individual differences (e.g., cognitive, emotional, and self processes) among youth exposed to extreme political violence will be linked to negative psychological and behavioral outcomes; and second, that these effects will be strongly moderated by both peer and parent-child relationships.

Results thus far have coalesced to underscore the additive effects of exposure to political violence across multiple contexts on youths' development of post-traumatic stress symptoms and aggressive behavior, to identify protective effects for youth exposed to political violence, to examine the development of ideological beliefs and negative stereotypes toward the out-group, and to support a social-cognitive-ecological framework conceptualization of the effects of political violence on youth adjustment (e.g., Boxer et al., 2013; Dubow, Huesmann, & Boxer, 2009; Dubow, Boxer et al., 2012; Dubow, Huesmann et al., 2012; Dvir Gvirsman et al., in press; Niwa et al., in press).

Impact Evaluation of a Teacher-Targeted Intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The nearly five year-long Second Congo War ended in 2003, having led to the deaths of over 5.4 million individuals and the displacement of millions more across nine African nations. Nonetheless, millions of Congolese are still faced with poverty, malnutrition, and ongoing violence at the hands of armed groups which control certain regions of the Republic. A program designed to enhance the wellbeing of Congolese schoolchildren growing up in three conflict-ridden provinces of the eastern Congo is currently being longitudinally evaluated by J. Lawrence Aber and colleagues (Torrente, Aber, Shivshanker, Anan, & Bundervoet, 2011;

Torrente et al., 2012). The program, The Opportunities for Equitable Access to Quality Basic Education (OPEQ), targets the quality of education received by over 480,000 youth in hopes of improving their academic and psychosocial outcomes. Key OPEQ components include: (a) an integrated curriculum (IC) which integrates socio-emotional learning models with high-quality reading and math curricula; (b) Teacher Training and Coaching (TTC), a school-based collaborative professional support system; and (c) community mobilization via the establishment of school management committees and parent teacher associations. The evaluation study is employing a cluster-randomized model to assess the academic and psychosocial outcomes of youth engaged in OPEQ-enhanced classrooms over three years.

A New Generation of Research:

Children and Political Violence in Multiple Societal Contexts

Children growing up in settings of political violence and armed conflict are arguably among the most vulnerable and high-risk worldwide. Child casualties in these settings are on the rise, and those children who survive are often faced with experiences of trauma and deprivation that threaten their long-term well-being. Conducting rigorous research in these settings is challenging for many methodological, conceptual, and practical reasons. Equally, or perhaps even more challenging is translating research findings into effective, evidence-based interventions that can be implemented at large scales among affected populations. Yet the latter is imperative to promoting healthy child development and community adjustment, and to preventing the intergenerational perpetuation of violent conflicts. Future generations of researchers must therefore build on the work of the last few decades, and establish sounder bases for doing rigorous research and translational work in contexts of political violence and armed conflict.

It would be impossible and impractical for all researchers in this area to focus their efforts on major longitudinal studies such as those outlined in this Introduction. However, it is important that a *greater number* do so, backed by the support of the colleagues from whose work they will draw inspiration. Accordingly, future research in this area is encouraged to include studies that rigorously test risk and resilience processes underlying diverse outcomes across multiple social-ecological contexts. Findings which are accumulated as a result of such work and which are communicated across research teams may ultimately be utilized to improve the lives of vulnerable children and their families (Barber, 2013; Masten, 2014; Masten & Narayan, 2012).

This Special Section is intended to support future methodological and conceptual advances in basic research and intervention studies on this vitally important topic for the sake of the well-being and adjustment of the great numbers of children and families worldwide affected by political violence and armed conflict. Thus, consistent with a developmental psychopathology perspective (Cicchetti, 2006), in this Special Section we explore empirical and conceptual foundations for new directions for cutting-edge research employing process-oriented, social-ecological perspectives, and longitudinal research designs. The hope is to advance the possibilities for a new generation of research setting the stage for advanced theory, research, prevention, and intervention efforts for children exposed to political violence and armed conflict.

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