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Helping Kids! Cross-cultural research on children's prosocial behavior in societies transitioning to peace

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Abstract Intrastate conflicts dominate the twenty-first century. Understanding the psychological mechanisms necessary to transform such settings into more peaceful societies is essential. Toward that end, *Helping Kids!* is a cross-cultural project that focuses on children in conflict-affected contexts. Moving away from the conceptualization of youth as perpetrators or powerless victims, *Helping Kids!* recognizes that children can foster a peaceful future, despite growing up in the shadow of war. This chapter approaches peace holistically and understands it as not merely the absence of violence, exploring a conceptualization of positive peace. In line with this understanding, *Helping Kids!* goes beyond reducing prejudice to focus on intergroup prosocial acts. The chapter first outlines

how outgroup prosociality can be understood as an antecedent of peacebuilding, then presents evidence from elementary school-aged children in five different contexts of intergroup conflict (Northern Ireland, Croatia, Kosovo, Republic of North Macedonia, and Israel) to reflect both the complexity and diversity of this area of research. We highlight both the common characteristics as well as differences across the *Helping Kids!* contexts and how children can contribute to a transition to peace. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and practice.

Keywords Children; peacebuilding; intergenerational violence; intergroup prosocial behavior; protracted conflict; post-accord generation; Developmental Peacebuilding Model (DPM)

16.1 Introduction

Research and policymaking during peace processes typically focus on traditional positions of power, such as political leaders, military and armed actors, or formal institutions. Although these are essential mechanisms for change, a fundamental aspect of any sustainable transition to peace is working with the generation raised in the wake of war.

The cross-cultural project *Helping Kids!* recognizes that children can foster a transition to a peaceful future, despite growing up in contexts of intergroup conflict (Helsing et al., 2006). The project is framed by the Developmental Peacebuilding Model (DPM; Taylor, 2020) and informed by the growing body of research that conceptualizes young people not as powerless victims or violent perpetrators, but rather as potential protagonists for peace (McKeown & Taylor, 2017; O'Driscoll et al., 2018). *Helping Kids!* also builds on research with adults that has explored how prosocial behavior across group lines may be promoted through Altruism Born of Suffering (Staub & Vollhardt, 2008; Taylor & Hanna, 2018).

In this chapter, we first argue that a focus on children is essential for positive peace. Second, we present a brief background on how children are affected by different types and phases of intergroup conflicts across five *Helping Kids!* contexts (Northern Ireland, Croatia, Kosovo, Republic of North Macedonia (RNM), and Israel). In each of these contexts, the vast majority of children attend separate educational systems. Third, we explore intergroup prosocial behavior across all five contexts. Finally, we make recommendations for future research and practice.

16.2 Fostering positive peace among children

A peace agreement does not in and of itself make society peaceful (Mac Ginty et al., 2007). The transition to peace is often marred by lingering social division even after a conflict has officially ended (Wohl & Branscombe, 2005). The legacy of ethnic division underpins continued tension and hostility (Shirlow et al., 2013). Socialized in ethnically divided environments (Barber, 2008; Reidy et al., 2015), children develop an understanding of the socio-psychological infrastructure, or *conflict ethos* (Bar-Tal, 2000), through the transgenerational narratives of group suffering (Taylor et al., 2020c). Shifting away from a narrow focus on negative peace (i.e. ending direct violence), *Helping Kids!* explores how children can promote positive peace (Galtung, 1969). That is, going beyond the mere absence of physical violence toward positive, harmonious intergroup relations (Taylor & Christie, 2015) or warm peace (Bar-Tal, 2011). Through focusing on distribution equality, human rights, opportunities and psychological security this understanding supports a departure away from the narrow conceptualization of peace as merely the absence of conflict, but rather embraces the perception that the absence of structural violence is essential for a peaceful society (Galtung, 1969). Thus, positive peace includes major transformations within transitional societies (Bar-Tal, 2011).

Positive peace is underpinned and maintained by peacebuilding, a future-oriented, long-term process of forging constructive societal relations (Lederach, 1997). Building on the growing body of social and developmental research that focuses on the peacebuilding potential of children (e.g., McKeown & Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Glen, 2020; Taylor et al., 2020b), *Helping Kids!* recognizes children as *resources for* peacebuilding, rather than *recipients of* peacebuilding initiatives (Taylor, 2020). This focus remains even for those in the 'post-accord' generation, or children born after a peace agreement (Burns et al., 2020; Taylor & McKeown, 2017). The protracted insecurity after a formal peace agreement continues to shape the contexts in which children develop a sense of self and various overlapping identities (Cummings et al., 2013, 2014, 2016; Merrilees et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2017). In order to better understand children's contributions to positive peace, *Helping Kids!* adopted a cross-cultural research approach to identify the unique and universal aspects of promoting prosocial behaviors toward the conflict-related outgroup.

16.3 Prosocial behavior: Achieving peace through helping the 'other'

In contrast to past research which has extensively studied the negative impact of conflict on children (Cummings et al., 2017), *Helping Kids!* highlights children's prosocial behavior and its peacebuilding potential in transitional societies. Prosocial acts have been defined as voluntary behaviors primarily aimed to benefit another person (Eisenberg et al., 2015). Framed by the Developmental Peacebuilding Model (DPM; Taylor, 2020), different types of prosocial behavior aim to promote constructive social change across levels of the social ecology. For instance, prosociality at the microsystem level may include sharing, helping, and comforting (Schroeder & Graziana, 2015), as well as cooperation (Dovidio et al., 2006). Civic engagement and volunteering are aimed at social change in the exosystem, while political activism aims for broader macro systemic change. Central to each type of

prosocial act is the target (i.e., the recipient). The DPM argues that outgroup prosociality, particularly toward the conflict rival, is the foundation for children's peacebuilding (Taylor, 2020). Distinguishing between different outgroup targets (individuals, the group as a whole, broader collective culture) the DPM outlines various ways through which prosocial behavior in post-accord settings can foster positive peace. The DPM suggests that microsystemic, interpersonal forms of prosocial behavior such as cross-group helping in early developmental stages enable macro systemic structural change. Thus, small-scale interpersonal prosociality is crucial since it initiates wider societal peacebuilding. The developmental perspective of the DPM stresses that with greater agency and autonomy children are able to transform the post-accord society on an extensive scale.

Exposure to ethnic conflict has been associated with lower levels of general (i.e., target not specified) prosocial behavior in children (Keresteš, 2006; Kijewski & Freitag, 2018; Rohner et al., 2013). Outgroup-specific prosocial behavior may be perceived as disloyal towards ingroup members (Abrams et al., 2008), resulting in social penalties (Abrams et al., 2014; Pinto et al., 2010) or physical punishments (Monaghan & McLaughlin, 2006). In intergroup conflicts, prosocial behavior benefiting the outgroup is especially low when a child strongly identifies with their ingroup (O'Driscoll et al., 2018). These social challenges may shape children's outgroup prosociality in conflict-affected contexts.

Yet, altruism may interrupt cycles of violence. Altruism Born of Suffering (ABS; Staub & Vollhardt, 2008; Taylor & Hanna, 2018) proposes that after individually or collectively experienced harm, victims may feel the need to help others. For example, prolonged exposure to sectarianism was related to later civic engagement among adolescents in Northern Ireland (Taylor et al., 2018). Moreover, intragroup threats related to higher general and outgroup-specific prosocial behavior a year later (Taylor et al., 2014). ABS further identifies empathy as a key mediating process. Among emerging adults in that same

context, empathy was found to mediate the link between perceived harm and desire to help others (Taylor & Hanna, 2018). Cross-sectional research with elementary school children, and a two-wave study with adolescents, also found empathy to be linked to outgroup prosocial behavior via outgroup attitudes in a post-accord context (Taylor et al., 2020b).

Empathy also has been shown to be a key mediator in the link from intergroup contact to less outgroup prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Intergroup contact has been linked with greater outgroup inclusion in Kosovo (Maloku et al., 2020) as well as more outgroup prosocial behavior among adolescents in Northern Ireland (McKeown & Taylor, 2018). Intergroup contact has therefore been identified as a tool for peacebuilding interventions (Christie, 2006). Particularly in settings of ethnically separated schools, integrated education and shared education have peacebuilding potential (Ben-Nun, 2013; Loader & Hughes, 2017), through facilitating positive intergroup relations (Siem et al., 2016) and cross-group friendships (Irwin et al., 1991). Moreover, pedagogical practices, such as cooperative learning, can increase prosocial behavior and decrease aggression (Choi et al., 2011). Thus, both higher quantity and quality contact can promote support for peacebuilding, which in turn, can relate to constructive youth outcomes, such as civic engagement (McKeown & Taylor, 2017).

One method designed to enable positive intergroup contact is the transformation of the divided education system (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). Shared education is an alternative schooling approach in which children continue to attend separate schools but come together in locally tailored and culturally relevant contexts (Loader & Hughes, 2017). Enabling cross-group contact, while at the same time maintaining separate schools to protect the different cultural, religious, and linguistic identities, shared education represents an innovative method for educational transition. This form of promoting intergroup relations may be more likely to gain the support of different stakeholders in post-accord contexts.

Although this aforementioned research shows promise in children's peacebuilding potential, the majority is carried out in a single context. A deeper understanding necessitates comparative studies that can tease apart unique and universal patterns.

16.4 Comparing across contexts

To contextualize the *Helping Kids!* findings, a brief comparison of research contexts will highlight the shared and distinct nature of the five conflicts (Table 16.1). In-depth conflict analysis is beyond the scope of the current chapter; instead, these brief descriptions focus on the contemporary impact of the conflict on children.

All of the conflicts are protracted (i.e., lasting longer than 25 years) and very resource-consuming (Bar-Tal, 2013), and will be presented in the order of their official peace agreement. The four European contexts are post-accord (Northern Ireland, Croatia, Kosovo, and RNM), while the fifth, Israel, represents an ongoing intractable conflict.

[INSERT TABLE 16.1 HERE]

16.4.1 Northern Ireland: The 'Troubles' between Protestants and Catholics

The Northern Ireland conflict between the two ethno-nationalist groups – Unionists/Loyalists (mainly Protestants) who desired the continuation of the union of Northern Ireland with Britain, and Nationalists/Republicans (mainly Catholics) who desired reunification of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland – intensified at the end of the twentieth century. The armed conflict known as 'The Troubles' (1968-1998) started, in part, out of the campaign in Northern Ireland for civil rights for Catholics. During this period, approximately 3,600 people died, including 274 children (Fay et al., 1999; McEvoy & Shirlow, 2009). The conflict was officially resolved in 1998 with the Belfast Agreement; yet,

intergroup hostilities continue to shape lived realities in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland remains highly divided (Gillespie, 2010), with a separate educational system (O'Driscoll et al., 2018). Currently, 48% of the population identifies as Protestant, and 45% as Catholic.

16.4.2 Croatia: Different narratives of Croats and Serbs

After Croatia declared independence in 1991, a brutal war swept the country. A symbol of Croatian national suffering during the war (1991–1995) was the city of Vukovar, which, prior to the war, was a well-integrated, multi-ethnic community. Today, Vukovar has a population of 27,700 residents, of which the majority are Croats (57%) and Serbs (35%) are the largest minority group. Even 25 years after the Erdut Agreement was signed, the city and surrounding towns are dealing with interethnic divisions. For example, Croat and Serb children attend separate kindergartens and elementary schools. Social reconstruction efforts show only minor improvements (Čorkalo Biruški, 2016) primarily due to the different interpretations of war-related events (Čorkalo Biruški & Ajduković, 2009). The two groups interact differently with the postaccord generation regarding the war; Serbs question the need to address war crimes, while Croats tell children to never forget (Reidy et al., 2015).

16.4.3 Kosovo: Tensions between Albanians and Serbs

One of the deadliest wars in Europe since World War II has worsened the relationship between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo. Although the conflict officially ended with the 1999 Kumanovo Agreement, intergroup tensions continue. The recent declaration of independence from Serbia (2008) is viewed very differently by the two groups; celebrated by the Albanian ethnic majority (87%), the ethnic Serb minority (8%) regards it as an unjust separation from Serbia (Judah, 2008). Interaction across ethnic lines is minimal and preference to remain separated prevails among both groups (Maloku et al., 2019). Attending separate educational

systems since the 1990s, children grow up unable to speak each other's language. An inclusive society remains elusive in the newborn country, home to one of the youngest populations in Europe (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2017; Maluku et al., 2016).

16.4.4 Republic of North Macedonia (RNM): Recent conflict between Macedonians and Albanians

After independence in 1991, a tense relationship between ethnic Macedonians (64%) and ethnic Albanians escalated into six months of violence in 2001, when Albanians (25%), the largest minority group, demanded greater rights (Koppa, 2001; Reka, 2008). Although the Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed, the population still remains highly divided along ethnic lines. There is still a high level of distrust and social distance between the groups (Maleska, 2010). For example, ethnic Albanians are mostly present in the northwestern and western parts of the country (in some places up to 90% of the population). Children are educated in separated classes based on ethnicity and language (Lyon, 2013), which complicates communications across such divisions.

16.4.5 Israel: Intractable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians

Israel is influenced by the intractable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians (Bartal, 2011), which is situated in regional tensions between Israeli/Jewish and Arab/Muslim populations. The conflict demands an extensive investment of both material and psychological resources (Kriesberg, 1993), in part, because of the overlapping territorial self-images shaping the contrasting identities (Liu & Paez, 2012). The dispute is shaped by power asymmetries, which influence the conflict dynamics (Rouhana & Fiske, 1995) and intergroup attitudes in adults (Shamoa-Nir, & Razpurker-Apfeld, 2019) and children (Shamoa-Nir et al., 2020). Despite various attempts of the formal resolution, since 2000 more than 10,000

people, including 2,152 children, have died as a result of the conflict (Huesmann et al., 2012). Against this backdrop, Jewish and Arab/Muslim citizens within Israel are largely educated in separate schools (Bekerman, 2007).

16.4.6 Divided social realities

Despite the unique nature of each of these conflicts, one similarity is a divided educational system. Such daily divisions reinforce an 'us' and 'them' mentality (Abrams & Rutland, 2008). For example, students attending separate schools have a limited understanding of and more negative attitudes toward the other group (Hayes et al., 2007, 2013; Hughes et al., 2013; Stringer et al., 2000, 2009). Yet, despite this social reality, there is a potential to build positive peace. The following sections explore how children may begin to contribute to these processes, even when raised in the context of intergroup conflict.

16.5 Ingroup and outgroup prosocial behavior in *Helping Kids!*

Building on this body of work, and local partnerships in each context, *Helping Kids!* examines the development of intergroup relations among children in conflict-affected societies (Taylor et al., 2020a; Tomovska Misoska et al., 2019, 2020), with a focus on factors that can promote or dampen outgroup prosocial behavior.

Overall, 1,236 children (52% female) participated in the series of interactive games, with some variation in sample size across contexts (Table 16.1). In each context, we sampled elementary school children attending separate schools, aged 5-11 years old ($M_{\text{age}} = 8.57$; $SD = 1.93$), from both majority and the primary minority ethnic group. Consistent with ethical procedures approved by participating universities, we had principal and parental permission and child assent.

In Northern Ireland, Croatia, Kosovo, RNM, and Israel, the same child-friendly resource allocation task was applied (adapted from O'Driscoll et al., 2018); participants were allowed to share seven stickers between an ingroup and outgroup member. Given the zero-sum nature of these conflicts (i.e., where a gain for the outgroup can be perceived as a loss for the ingroup), these resource allocation tasks may have important, long-term peacebuilding implications (O'Driscoll et al., 2018; Shamo-Nir et al., 2020).

If children's sharing was based on chance alone (i.e., no distinctions by group membership), children would give an average of 3.5 stickers to each target. In each context, outgroup giving was significantly lower than that expected 'at chance' value (all $p < .001$). That is, in Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Croatia, RNM, and Israel, children gave significantly fewer stickers to an outgroup member than if they were making those decisions based on chance.

Moreover, across all five contexts, children allocated more stickers to ingroup members compared to outgroup members (Fig. 16.1; all $p < .001$). For example, in Northern Ireland ($M_{in} = 3.96$; $M_{out} = 3.04$; $SD = 1.12$), Croatia ($M_{in} = 3.98$; $M_{out} = 3.02$; $SD = 0.69$) and the RNM ($M_{in} = 4.14$; $M_{out} = 2.86$; $SD = 1.68$), on average, children gave approximately four stickers to ingroup and three stickers to the outgroup member. That is, of the seven stickers, children gave the 'extra' sticker to an ingroup member. This difference was slightly more pronounced in Kosovo ($M_{in} = 4.68$; $M_{out} = 2.32$; $SD = 1.22$) and Israel ($M_{in} = 5.19$; $M_{out} = 1.81$; $SD = 1.34$). The ingroup bias in prosocial behavior is not surprising at this age but does have long-term implications for how resources are distributed across rival groups in conflict-affected contexts.

[INSERT FIGURE 16.1 HERE]

If we assume, therefore, that there will be an ingroup bias given the odd number of stickers, children would be expected to give four stickers to the ingroup and three stickers to the outgroup target. This next set of analyses revealed that in Northern Ireland, Croatia, and RNM, children did not statistically deviate from this hypothesized ingroup-giving bias. For example, after allocating the first six stickers fairly across groups, children chose to give the seventh sticker to an ingroup member on average. In Kosovo and Israel, however, children's bias in giving was more pronounced (both $p < .001$). That is, children chose to give fewer stickers to an outgroup member, even after adjusting for an expected ingroup bias given the odd number of stickers used in this task.

Finally, patterns in outgroup giving were compared across context. Using Croatia as the reference group with the most even distribution across groups, there were no significant differences in outgroup giving compared to Northern Ireland or RNM. Children in Kosovo gave significantly fewer stickers to outgroup members than Croatia, NI, or RNM; and, children in Israel gave the fewest stickers to outgroup members (i.e., less than outgroup giving in Kosovo and other contexts).

Comparing these findings, the intensity and salience of the most recent period of intergroup conflict may play a role. That is, where peace agreements have been signed and a relative period of stability maintained (i.e., Northern Ireland, Croatia, RNM) there are higher levels of outgroup giving, on average, compared to those where the violent conflict was more recent, with a higher relative level of fatalities (i.e., Kosovo) or underlying conflict remains unresolved (i.e., Israel). This type of cross-cultural comparative research helps to shed light on similarities and differences across different conflicts.

With this basic foundation, *Helping Kids!* is beginning to look at the predictors, moderators, and mediators of children's outgroup prosocial behaviors. For example, a recent paper found that the effect of age on outgroup prosocial giving was serially mediated by the

child's ingroup symbol preference and negative outgroup attitudes in Israel. The multiple-group chain mediation was held across both majority (i.e., Israeli/Jewish) and minority (i.e., Arab/Muslim) groups (Shamoa-Nir et al., 2020). Identifying the processes that underpin social and developmental processes of prosocial giving across group lines in conflict-affected societies has implications for future interventions.

16.6 Conclusion

Societies transitioning to peace face important dilemmas. In reconstruction efforts, resources must be allocated to help rebuild infrastructure, develop communities, and provide a secure future to all citizens. At the same time, children born into social divisions are influenced by the conflict narratives of those around them (Taylor et al., 2020c), perhaps contributing to their biased resource distribution. Understanding how children adopt behaviors consistent with past divisions versus behaviors that contribute to unfreezing conflicting group boundaries (Taylor et al., 2014), has important peacebuilding implications. Through outgroup prosocial behavior, children can create an environment of harmonious intergroup relations, challenging the internalized conflict ethos (Taylor, 2020).

Relevant to this edited volume, preliminary findings from *Helping Kids!* suggests that there are some shared patterns in the development of children's prosocial giving to outgroup members. Comparisons across five *Helping Kids!* contexts also demonstrate the need for cross-cultural collaboration to further understand similar and diverging patterns in children's prosociality in these adverse contexts. For example, in Northern Ireland, Croatia and RNM, children showed an ingroup bias, which was more pronounced in Kosovo and Israel, where the intergroup violence is relatively more recent. This finding suggests early intervention immediately after the peace agreement has been signed may be key to future-proof a peace process so that positive peace can take root. This chapter also argues that children's

interpersonal prosocial behavior intended to benefit the conflict-related outgroup can be considered as peacebuilding. This novel approach, outlined in the Developmental Peacebuilding Model (Taylor, 2020), can inform future peace psychology research and practice.

The findings presented in this chapter should be considered in light of two limitations. First, the data present a cross-sectional snapshot of one developmental period. Future research should include longitudinal designs that allow for modeling trajectories of prosocial behavior across childhood and adolescence in intergroup conflicts (e.g., Taylor et al., 2018). Second, in intergroup conflicts, outgroup helping may not always be positive. That is, research into the motivations of majority groups helping minority status groups has been linked with the desire to maintain a relative position of social dominance (Nadler et al., 2009). In order to draw a holistic picture, we recommend research on motivations and potential unintended consequences of children's intergroup prosocial behavior.

There is great peacebuilding potential in children's outgroup prosocial behavior in societies transitioning away from violent conflict. As such, interventions with children, adolescents, and young adults may face difficulties in delivery due to the divided nature of social life. In Northern Ireland, one means for increasing the quantity and quality of intergroup contact, while recognizing the underlying reasons for separate education has been advanced. In this context, 'shared education' provides a mechanism for transforming deeply divided educational systems. Although a relatively new initiative, there appears to be support, both among schools (Gallagher, 2016), families (Bähr et al., 2020), children, and the wider community (Hayes et al., 2007). Various forms of 'shared education' are also being developed or implemented in the other contexts considered in this chapter, such as the RNM (Loader et al., 2018) and Kosovo (RIT, 2019). In this light, peace education initiatives that

establish the foundation for positive intergroup relations and mutual understanding

(Kupermintz & Salomon, 2005) may help to strengthen a society's lasting transition to peace.

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Jocelyn B. Dautel (Ph.D.) is an assistant professor in the School of Psychology at Queen's University, Belfast. Her research employs experimental methods from cognitive and social development to investigate when, and how, social and cultural contexts influence social cognition. Dautel has found that variation in children's cultural and historical context, exposure to diversity, family socialization, and perceptions of intergroup conflict, can all influence social and moral cognition and behavior. Through comparative research she hopes to contribute to debates about unique and universal processes in the development of social cognition and intergroup behaviors, impacting at local and global levels.

Edona Maloku is a lecturer of psychology at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Kosovo. Her research examines how identification with social groups shapes intergroup relations. Maloku's work has been recognized internationally and she has published with top scientific outlets. Her most recent work focuses on using education as a tool for transformative change in Kosovo's ethnically divided education system, (endorsed by Kosovo's former President, Atifete Jahjaha (2011-2016) to lead the initiative in this country). She is currently the co-recipient of the Global Challenge Research Fund grant that addresses the peacebuilding potential of education in Kosovo's transitional society.

Irene Razpurker-Apfeld (Ph.D.) is a lecturer at the Department of Behavioral Sciences – Zefat Academic College (Israel). Her dissertation dealt with processes of perceptual organization and visual attention. As a Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Faculty of Medicine at the Technion, she researched the processes of visual attention using ERP for mapping electrical activity in the brain. Her recent research focuses on social cognition, where she brings her expertise in cognitive processes and methods while examining social processes. Research

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Jasmina Tomašić Humer (Ph.D.) is an Assistant Professor at Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek (Croatia). In her research, she investigates identity formation, intergroup relations, and prejudice in children and adolescents. She published over 15 journal articles.

Ana Tomovska Misoška (Ph.D.) is a Professor at University American College Skopje. Her research interests include the development of ethnic identity, use of contact hypothesis, promotion of better intergroup relations in post-conflict societies, and using education as a tool for development in transitional economies. She has been involved in a number of research projects in the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as projects with an international focus, and has received numerous research grants. She is an author of numerous publications in renowned academic journals, as well as book chapters, and has produced numerous policy-based papers at the local level.

Laura K. Taylor (Ph.D.) is an Assistant Professor at University College Dublin and Reader at Queen's University Belfast. Her research investigates the impact of political violence on young people and their communities. She has published a book, 60 journal articles (21 first-authored), and 16 peer-reviewed chapters (5-year h-index of 17), and secured over €3 million in research funding with collaborators, much of it directly toward LMICs countries. Her publications are in top psychology journals, as well as interdisciplinary peace and research methods journals. Moreover, demonstrating her focus on mentorship, 19 of these outputs are published with student authors.