



FIGURE 1.1. Caught between decay and future.

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## Beyond the *Youth Gap* in Understanding Political Violence

*Youth are never taken seriously, and we sometimes have ideas that would be good for all people.*

Alex, Croatia

*... Some things do depend on us; war, consequences of the war, poverty; the influence of the church interfering with the state affairs, which must not be so.*

Ljubicia, Serbia

As we hear in these comments by two teenagers who have grown up in the shadow of political violence, their generation is aware of the past and its legacies. These brief quotes mention many details that young people in easier situations may not notice: “consequences

of the war,” “the influence of the church interfering with the state affairs,” youth responsibility for the future (“some things do depend on us”), and their capacity to contribute to the benefit of society (“we sometimes have ideas that would be good for all people”). These reflections echo the letter we read by Visnja in the Preface, pointing out, ironically, that youth perspectives are usually ignored: “Who would be open to listening to the ‘complaints of youth’ and take them seriously?” On the other hand, those in power are stymied about how to create a future: “The old guard politicians are still shaking their heads, and they tell us ‘it will be better’. . . . Yeah, right!” Scholars have contributed information about children and youth as the objects of study in situations of political violence, but the literature has offered little from the perspectives of young people themselves.

Previous research and practice have focused, in particular, on two types of responses by young people growing up during or after armed conflict: pathology and risk. After a brief review of these approaches, I discuss the need for inquiry into youth perspectives on political violence to fill the remaining gap in research and practice.

#### HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE RESPOND TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE?

Research and practice on the human effects of political violence have increased in the past decade. Young people, especially in developing countries, are the major group affected by violence ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)), so assessing the costs to them is important. Children are, after all, vulnerable to and inheritors of situations created by others. Consistent with such reasoning, representations of *child* and *youth* in scholarly and practical discourse evoke images of victims, potential villains, or both. To examine the prevalence of those representations, I did a computer search of the phrases “child/youth armed conflict” and “child/youth political violence” in a social science database of articles from 1983 through 2008, and I noted how the young person was

described. The search indicated that 65 percent of the relevant citations portrayed the figure of the young person in terms of war-related damage and concerns about cycles of violence.

### The Damage Response

The following e-mail message from a male teenager in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) suggests the overwhelming focus on psychopathology as a response to war. Once an esoteric medical diagnosis, post-traumatic stress disorder (commonly referred to as “ptsd”) is available for war-related humor.

*Dear Friends, I'm sorry for not coming to the meeting. can't get out of bed, that old ptsd acting up again!!!!!! Ha ha ha ha ha!!!!!!  
From D.*

In this e-mail to his supervisor and peers at a community center, D. uses “ptsd acting up again” as an excuse for not being able to “get out of bed,” obviously playing, “!!!!, Ha ha ha ha ha,” with the overuse of what is sometimes a result of exposure to violence. Along with similar examples in my field notes, this message hints at the overuse of medical explanations for responses to war, in particular war-related damage to the young. Suggested by D.’s humorous approach, such terms have become commonplace in lay discourse.

More than 41 percent of the articles in the database of relevant scholarly literature on political violence represents children as victims. Terms like *ptsd*, *depression*, and *anxiety* are common, with or without scientific measures designed to assess those disorders. Medical language, including *suffering*, *vulnerability*, *helplessness*, *behavior problems*, and the need for *healing*, appears widely in research and program reports. Terms for antisocial personal traits, like *aggressiveness*, *victims*, *internalizers*, and *externalizers*, are also prevalent. Research has identified damage to functional systems, including moral deficits,

such as to child soldiers who have been forced to kill (Posada & Wainryb, 2008), and lack of perspective-taking abilities among those who may be repressing traumatic memories as perpetrators or victims. Because imagining, considering, and empathizing with the perspectives of others are major sociocognitive capacities (Damon, Lerner, & Eisenberg, 2006), assessments of these processes are relevant to development in situations of violence. This figure of the child as victim is, furthermore, consistent with the consideration of interpersonal effects such as *abuse, bullying, forced migration, sexual exploitation, abduction, and child labor*.

Researchers have explained that psychopathological responses like PTSD occur but are overdetermined (Bonanno, 2004). Although the medical definition of PTSD includes thoughts and behaviors that disrupt normal activity and social relations for up to 6 months, researchers and practitioners apply it across much longer time spans. Even when applying concepts like PTSD correctly, research indicates that the disorder occurs less than once reported (Bonanno, 2004; Inter-Agency Standing Committee [IASC], 2007; Summerfield, 1999), suggesting a need to study resilience (Barber, 2009; Boyden, 2003). Those citing the overattribution of psychosocial damage have urged researchers to broaden their inquiry beyond acute phases of violence to the devastating residual effects across time and space (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Daiute & Turniski, 2005; IASC, 2007).

Representations of vulnerability and psychopathology have practical implications. Knowledge about the nature and course of violence-related trauma and developmental deficits is useful to clinicians (Apfel & Simon, 1996). At the same time, explanations emphasizing vulnerability could promote passivity, in part because such responses garner financial and political support (McMahon, 2009). Scholars have also proposed that focusing on youth victimization and risk may be consistent with government efforts to negate political activism by children involved in violence, such as when they participate on the

frontlines of battle (Boyden, 2009) or when they protest against violence and injustice (Daiute, 2009a). Although contributing insights for therapy, focusing on damage to individuals reduces the analysis of political violence to the relatively narrow scope of *intrapersonal* processes. Political violence is, however, an activity that occurs over a broad range of actors, spaces, and time. Broadening inquiry to address this complex nature of violence can complement prior research.

### Cycles of Violence

The other major representation of the young person in situations of armed conflict is one of potential villain, either directly or as a result of having been a victim. Twenty-four percent of the articles about effects of political violence on children and youth represent children and especially youth as potential villains (9%) or victims at risk for becoming villains (15%). Mentions of *risk*, *prevention*, *perpetrator*, *child soldier*, *rehabilitation*, *neo-Nazi*, and *ethnic hatred* express this view.

An implicit idea behind this view is that children internalize the beliefs, values, and practices of their societies, families, and like-minded peers. In situations of political violence, older people exhibit actions and subjectivities that socialize young people to their ways. Often referred to as *social reproduction*, this phenomenon is mentioned in sociological research, some anthropological research, and psychological research emphasizing the enculturation of a child into society via collective memories of violence and the practices of ethnic cultures.

At the same time that such deficits are imposed on children and youth, adults in their societies express the need to protect young people from the horrors of the past, which, in turn, results in reducing conversations about history. Explanations based on views about social reproduction focus on causes and effects of violence as inevitable

sequences of events, such as a history of animosity among people of different ethnic groups sharing the same spaces and resources. When we assume a broader political perspective, we realize, however, that such views reduce the analysis, such as to ethnic hatred in the former Yugoslavia. Most simply stated, even children growing up during the 1990s wars point out that if their parents and grandparents had lived with Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Catholics, Muslims, and others peacefully for nearly a half century, why, all of a sudden, did they have to fight and kill one another? Resonant with that question, numerous detailed political analyses document the exploitation of ethnic differences and tensions by leaders who were economically motivated to fracture the loosely integrated republics of Yugoslavia (Gagnon, 2004; MacDonald, 2002; Silber & Little, 1995; Woodward, 1995).

An assumption related to concern about cycles of violence is that children grow by internalizing past history. Implying this view are comments by parents who are reluctant to answer their children's questions about the past for fear that stories about the war will harm the children and, perhaps, their own image as parents (Freedman & Abazovic, 2006). Also, despite arguments for reconciliation after inter-group conflict, there are fears that narrating violent events could easily ignite emotions, fueling ongoing cycles of violence. Such formulations imply that learning is a one-way process from adults to children rather than *inter*-action in everyday activities. Assumptions that young people internalize the views of the previous generation are consistent with an emphasis on the passing along of master narratives or dominant discourses (Salomon, 2004). In accordance with such logic, research and practice have explored interventions designed to overcome or prevent past animosities, for example, by promoting positive social-relational understandings and perspective taking.

The social-reproduction explanation, like the focus on damage, defines the problem within the individual. Analyses that focus on an

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individual life course, for example, tend to consider a child's exposure to violence, protections from such exposure, antidotes to it, and a child's own inclination to become violent. Evidence for such cycles of violence exists, but researchers continue to debate the nature and extent of the explanation that violence begets violence in any predictable way (Boyden, 2003; Widom, 1989). Research has broadened from examining cause-and-effect cycles within families, neighborhoods (Earls & Carlson, 1999), and cultures (Ware, 2006). Within this latter line of research, the focus is on individual young people's behavior measured in outcomes like fighting, school delinquency, expulsions, criminal offenses, intergroup conflicts, group identity, self-esteem, and other factors related to living in low-income, ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Similar studies contribute information about ecologies of violence, but explanations could also focus on young people's reasoning about the circumstances of violence surrounding them or their goals. Cultures develop systems of meaning, which may include rationales for violence (Barber, 2009), so the dynamic nature of meaning systems warrants further inquiry in the increasingly volatile global situation. In political-economic revolutions, in particular, young people cannot simply follow in their elders' footsteps because so much has changed since parents, teachers, and older siblings interacted with former regimes in education, the media, and public life.

Political changes, such as holding fair elections and allowing media independence in former dictatorships, are imposed without precedents or role models, a situation that is especially acute in the postwar Western Balkan nations gradually entering the European Union (EU). Although EU economic standards for candidate nations present incentives and hope, political requirements, such as turning over war criminals, affect young people who are aware of being associated with violence in their country. Diverse pressures apply to youth interacting internationally (such as on the Internet) and during migration or other travel. For example, Serbians face prejudice

for the crimes of Slobodan Milosevic, Croats face ties with the Third Reich in World War II, and refugees face double threats from Americans who resent their immigrant status and from Bosnians at home who may resent their having abandoned the homeland in crisis.

Along with important information about the damaging effects of war, postwar transitions, and related consequences, we need to know how young people make sense of circumstances like displacement, political-economic instability, and lack of infrastructure, especially as those circumstances impact adolescent transitions to adulthood. To learn about the developmental nature of growing up in environments defined by political violence, we can usefully shift the perspective away from assumptions about damage and fear to inquire with young people about how they perceive their situations. In other words, we can take young people “seriously” to learn about the legacies of war that matter in their lives, the factors that “depend on them,” and their “ideas that could help all people.”

#### THE NEED FOR YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

As suggested in the quotations at the beginning of this chapter, young people feel the need to express their knowledge about society and the need to be heard by those in power. This need is supported by other academic and practical sources.

Of the articles about the effects of armed conflict on the young, 19 percent point to a broadening away from the damage and reproduction models. Approximately 13 percent of the reports define children's roles in terms of broader sociopolitical issues, and 5.9 percent analyze conflict in terms of young people's understandings about effects. Survey research has, for example, offered information about young people's attitudes and activities (Kovac-Cerovic, Popadic, Knezevic, & Matkovic, 2006; Popadic, 2000; Srna, 2005), providing foundations for in-depth inquiry into the complexities of these views. This shift to



more active representations of young people is clearly worth exploration, but it requires new theory and methods.

Research on the useful employment of young people in contexts of armed conflict has begun to show, for example, that serving in the field as medics and cooks offers stable institutions, education, and opportunities for productive and, in some ways, protective activity to children who are bereft of their parents (Honwana & De Boeck, 2005; Sta. Maria, 2006). Although the powerful in society create and allow seeds of violence to grow, young people caught up in those situations become the focus of blame as members of *youth gangs* exacerbating violence. Ethnographic research in the oil-rich delta region of Nigeria shows, in contrast, that some of those same youth labeled *gang members* develop strategies for dealing in socially conscious ways with the competing motivations of local leaders to comply with multinational corporations and the need for local control over precious natural resources (Akinwumi, 2006; Ukeje, 2006). Such observations have led to interest in learning about how children and youth engage developmentally in conflict.

Shifting the focus from youth subject to subjectivity is imperative for creating analyses of violence that integrate individual and societal development. Young people's interpretations of their environments can provide a foundation for education, community development, and international relations, because those views not only provide a way for educators and leaders to connect with young people but also contribute insights about orientations and goals that could influence public sentiment in the future. Other rationales include young people's desire to speak, their awareness of self-determination rights, and their capacity to understand the challenges and opportunities in contemporary realities. Such youth perspectives are not completely separate from those of their elders or the goals of the state but are likely to be unique in how they link the past and the future from the perspective of present experiences.

Studying young people's perspectives requires a different paradigm for considering the effects of political violence. Both damage and social-reproduction models assume that political violence is an interruption in some natural course of events. Instead, as we see in the situation of the former Yugoslavia and other contemporary societal transformations, war changes society dramatically and, consequently, the circumstances of development with which the postwar generation interacts. In the former Yugoslavia, for example, adults and older youth once lived within a communist dictatorship now separated into distinct, emerging capitalist democracies. Even though the "old guard politicians" are still in power, as Visnja stated, many postwar institutions like education, civil society, and government are creating democratic practices, like voting, if not complete democratic philosophies. Young people have firsthand knowledge of the new practices and probably experience contemporary circumstances more openly than adults who speak for them based on knowledge and ideology from the previous system. Although it is clear that war can cause psychological as well as physical damage, the idea that individuals or states heal after a war may not be what actually happens with the passing of time. Similarly, fears about the passing along of hatreds that fueled the war and, for some, that justified committing atrocities, may be exaggerated because the prewar mentalities have changed.

Given political, economic, and social changes, the postwar generation is also likely to develop unique goals based, in part, on the fact that they cannot rely on realities of the communist past, such as guaranteed access to health care and, in part, on the fact that their future is tied to participation in Europe and the wider world. The transformed political system, rituals of daily life, and goals for the future across ex-Yugoslavia, as in other dramatically changing societies, warrant eliciting young people's perspectives about the state of the society and the effects of the war.

A major innovation for young people growing up at the beginning of the 21st century, especially in newly formed and developing