HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Human Development and Political Violence presents an innovative approach to research and practice with young people growing up in the context of political violence. Based on developmental theory, this book explains and illustrates how children and youth interact with environments defined by war, armed conflict, and the aftermath of displacement, poverty, political instability, and personal loss. The case study for this inquiry is a research workshop in three countries and a refugee community of the former Yugoslavia, where youth aged 12 to 27 participated in activities designed to promote their development. The theory-based *Dynamic Story-Telling by Youth* workshop engaged participants as social historians and critics sharing their experiences via narratives, evaluations of society, letters to public officials, debates, and collaborative inquiries. Analyses of these youth perspectives augment archival materials and researcher field notes to offer insights about developmental strategies for dealing with the threats and opportunities of war and major political change. Findings indicate that young people interact with such situations in normative ways.

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For Jack

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PREFACE

When writing a letter to a public official, Visnja,[1] a young woman whose life has been defined by war, echoes sentiments expressed by many other young people growing up during and after political violence across the world.

> *Hmmm, hmmm, who should I write to? I am 24 years old, and for 10 years already I have problems, I live in them. Who should I talk to, and who would be open to listening to the "complaints of the youth" and take them seriously? Everyone is shaking their head for 10 years already, the old guard politicians are still shaking their heads, and they tell us 'it will be better.' . . . Yeah, right!*[2]

Comments like Visnja's implore those of us who work with young people to learn more about how they perceive environments of armed conflict and its aftermath. Toward that end, the goal of the research discussed in this book was to interact with young people involved in practical activities to gain insights about the development of individuals and society. With an innovative theoretical approach, we ask, "How do young people growing up in political violence understand their plight?"

In spite of our advances, civilization at the beginning of the 21st century continues to be characterized by political violence, which is experienced by increasing numbers of young people (Barber, 2009;

[1] All young people's names are pseudonyms.
[2] Texts and talk by youth are translations when not originally in English.

Boyden, 2009). Like many of her peers aged 12 to 27 years across a region fractured by wars during the 1990s, Visnja notices that the views of youth are not taken seriously amidst the din of political conflict and inertia. That Visnja's frustration verges on sarcasm is all the more understandable given the recent international recognition of children's rights, support for youth civic engagement, and child-oriented projects like the Millenium Development Goals, 2015 (www.unicef.org/mdg).

With more than 40 nations at war and many others struggling with insurgencies, the effects on children and youth are an urgent concern. Nevertheless, research and practice have focused quite narrowly on psychopathology and social reproduction, especially among young people directly involved in and exposed to acute phases of violence, such as child soldiers, witnesses to death and assaults, and refugee orphans in camps. Because the effects of war persist long after fighting has officially ended – on average, at least seven years (Collier, 2003), an entire generation if not more is subject to myriad consequences, including displacement, poverty, homelessness, exploitation, political instability, interrupted education, unhealthy living conditions, discrimination, and a lack of resources for "youthful pleasures," as one teenager in our study lamented. To account for the broad reach of political violence across space and time, a developmental approach is long overdue.

Although millions of children's lives are defined by political violence, we know little about what young people notice, what matters to them, what challenges and opportunities they perceive, or how they draw on resources to deal with those circumstances in their everyday lives. How do bombing, death of loved ones, interruption of schooling, and loss of friends who had to flee figure into their attention, explanations, and goals? Although most youth are concerned about unemployment, for example, they also appreciate free time for spontaneous and caring relationships, even if they have that freedom because "there's nothing else to focus on but hedonism," as one youth commented. Defining development as the

mutual interaction of individuals in society, we can usefully focus on the perspectives of children and youth whose ideas elders have marginalized. Marginalization sometimes occurs to protect young people, such as from learning about the horrors committed by neighbors during war; sometimes to protect society, such as from facing responsibility for recruiting children to fight; or to serve other ends, such as excluding minorities from participation.

"Human development" and "political violence" do not seem to belong together. It is, for example, difficult to believe that humans as advanced as we are in some ways still resort to violence as a political strategy. When we think about young lives, it is, moreover, difficult to believe that children could possibly develop well in the context of armed conflict and the consequences that follow. At the same time, we know that development turns on the uniquely human capacities of language, thought, and creativity, which children learn early to use for their benefit, and thus could apply to chaotic and impoverished situations. The potential of considering such cultural development (Vygotsky, 1978) to explain the consequences of political violence in children's everyday lives is enormous, albeit untapped. The former Yugoslavia is an appropriate case study for such inquiry not only because of the recent, tragic nature of its dissolution but also because a generation born in one country is now growing up in separate countries and experiencing very different environmental, political, economic, and social circumstances. With this case study, we consider adolescents making transitions to adulthood in nations making political transitions from war to peace and from communist dictatorships to capitalist democracies.

Given the tensions and dangers in contexts of political violence, taking young people seriously, as Visnja urges, is not simply a matter of interviewing them. Human development involves participation in purposeful activities, so it makes sense to elicit youth perspectives in realistic contexts. Participation is, for example, subject to requirements such as the preferred story to tell about the war, tensions such as conflicts between honoring parents' sacrifices, orienting

toward one's own goals for a better future, and dealing with public pressures to avoid stories that could represent a country in a negative light internationally. Taking young people seriously requires employing research tools that address such realities in their everyday lives, the realities of interacting with other people, institutions, the environment, and their own thoughts. Developmental inquiry must, therefore, occur within the context of meaningful practical activities.

I wrote this book to integrate theory, research, and practice relevant to child and youth development in extremely challenging circumstances, so I imagine audiences working with diverse goals from diverse disciplinary perspectives. A primary audience is researchers and students who are interested in whether and how diverse challenges affect human development. Educators and program developers are a major audience, as they consider issues of context and developmental processes for designing and implementing programs in extremely challenging situations. My hope is that adults and young people working with youth in schools, community centers, and clinical practice also find a perspective and information that are useful to their activities. This practice-based approach, moreover, offers a new way to design research in situations requiring intervention. When I argue that we consider the normative nature of growing up in crisis situations, I do not imply that political crisis is optimal or acceptable as a developmental context, but that we must understand the full range of interactions to design research, practice, and policy.

The research for this book involved immersion in interdisciplinary studies of the effects of war on children and youth, accounts of the 1990s' wars in the former Yugoslavia, and ethnographic work with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), educational institutions, independent scholars, and young people. Some of the archival research, for example, focused on the organizers, goals, and activities of programs devoted to youth development across the region, in particular peace education programs sponsored by numerous institutions including the European Union; the Council of Europe; Ministries

of Education, Science, and Sport; Human Rights Centers; academic and outreach programs at universities; school systems; and NGOs working closely with children and families. The empirical phase of the study involved creating a workshop curriculum consistent with programs I had observed, implementing this *Dynamic Story-Telling by Youth* research workshop with young people, and analyzing young people's work to learn about their views.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 reviews previous approaches to studying the effects of human-made crises, concluding that what is missing is a developmental approach. Chapter 2 offers a theoretical and methodological rationale for this developmental approach based on principles of cultural–historical activity theory, bringing these theoretical premises to life with practices in the *Dynamic Story-Telling by Youth* workshop, which serves as a context for the basic research about development in violence.

Chapters 3 through 6 present young people's perspectives on conflict as it has affected various aspects of their lives and goals for the future. We learn from those chapters how young people use cultural tools, such as narrating, to manage (mediate) personal and societal relations, as would their peers in more mundane contexts. Chapter 3 explains that young people can echo their specific national scripts but also that these scripts are living history evolving in relation to current circumstances rather than the frozen narratives of war. Chapter 4 reveals the particularly contentious local knowledge that emerges as young participants shift positions of social–relational discourse. Chapter 5 focuses on youth participation in their communities as an important site of self and societal development. Chapter 6 focuses on "sociobiographies," individual variations within and across the diverse national psyches identified in Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 7 zooms out from our illustrative case study to suggest implications for

human development research, practice, and policy in other regions plagued by political conflict and transition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Because the project discussed in this book builds on my previous research, I feel as though I have been nurturing it along for a long time, in a most focused way since 2001, when I broadened my focus on social development in conflict from United States to international contexts in which children are experiencing major challenges to their well-being and development. This current research reaching from Serbia in the East to New York in the West has, of course, involved the support of generous foundations, organizations, and individuals. Support for the journey to the former Yugoslavia came first from the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, which supported my transitional research for an international conference to shift the study of child and youth conflict from a primarily biological one to a more integrated bio-socio-behavioral analysis. That project resulted in the volume *International Perspectives on Youth Conflict and Development* (Oxford University Press, 2006) involving coeditors Larry Nucci, Craig Higson-Smith, and Zeynep Beykont and chapter authors from across seven continents, to whom I am indebted for their insights and collaboration. More recently, I am grateful to the United States Institute of Peace, the National Council of Teachers of English, the PSC-CUNY Research Fund, and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York for grants that made this transnational research possible. The ideas, conclusions, and suggested implications herein are mine and not those of these supporting organizations, but I hope these organizations find the work useful, persuasive, and indicative for future agendas.

Several scholarly institutes made it possible for me to engage in the interdisciplinary conversations required for this approach to transnational child and youth development in armed conflict. During my

work on this project, colleagues at seminars at several gathering places involved me in their activities and patiently listened to a developmental psychologist, not typically at their table: The Harriman Institute at the Columbia University School for International Affairs, where I spent my sabbatical as a Visiting Scholar analyzing data and writing drafts; The Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Warwick, where I was a Visiting Fellow discussing material from several chapters; and the Center for Place, Culture, and Politics and the Center for the Humanities, both at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, where participation in seminars on war, violence and political change introduced me to literature and debates in political science, philosophy, history, geography, and English. Opportunities to present preliminary analyses at the University of Zagreb and the University of Belgrade were also essential to my being able to progress from analyzing the rich reflections by young people to writing about them in a way that communicates across contexts.

Administrators, youth advocates, and young people at several NGOs participated in the project in a range of ways by inviting me to observe their activities or participating in the research. Among many other activities, these colleagues discussed the ongoing needs of youth across the region, commented on and translated materials, recruited participants, led workshops, and hosted me and my research assistants. NGOs involved in various phases along the way include RACOON in the United States, Suncokret and Globus in Croatia, Group Most in Serbia, Prism Research and Krila Nade in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Bosnian Bakery in the United States. Individuals in these organizations who deserve my sincere gratitude include Maja Turniski, Mei Eldorazdi, Dragan Popodic, Rada Gosovic, Dino Djepa, Snjeziana Kojic Hasanajic, Lejla Kadic, and Indira Kajosevic, among others. I am also extremely grateful to research assistants, especially Luka Lucic, for relevant conversations, data-analysis contributions, helping with the workshops translations, and coauthorship on related studies; to Danielle Delpriore and Vicky Barrios for their assistance in

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Finally, but not least, to Visnja and the other young people who participated so generously in this study and activities leading up to it, I offer my thanks and respect not only for your plights but also for the dignity with which you have weathered them. My sincere hope is that if you read this book, you think that I listened to you, took you seriously, and got it right.