Adolescent understandings of political violence and psychological well-being: a qualitative study from Bosnia Herzegovina

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Abstract

The Harvard Trauma Questionnaire and Hopkins Symptoms Checklist (HSCL-25) were given to 337 13–15 year olds who had lived through the recent war in Bosnia Herzegovina, on opposite sides of the conflict. A gender-balanced sub-sample of 40 adolescents was selected on the basis of their combined symptom scores, including equal numbers of high and low scorers from each side. A year of participant observation in two cities and in-depth interviews were conducted with the sub-sample to explore their understandings of the war and their subjective perceptions of their psychological well-being.

Case studies are presented to show that the degree to which an adolescent engaged in a search for meaning to the conflict is related to their psychological well-being. Searching for meaning did not appear to be protective. Less well adolescents in both cities were more engaged in searching for meaning. Well adolescents appeared to be more disengaged. Searching for meaning appeared to be associated with sensitivity to the political environment, and feelings of insecurity about the prospect of a future war. The particular local context had an important effect in mediating the manner in which disengagement and engagement occurred.

These findings suggest that the more avoidant methods of coping with political violence warrant further investigation. Political engagement may be protective in low-level conflicts where there is a possibility for action. When there is little opportunity for active engagement, the search for meaning has a different effect. Adolescents engaged in the search for meaning recognise that their recovery is bound up with the recovery of their communities as a whole. Assistance and support may have to address the material, social and political difficulties that the search uncovers.
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Keywords: Adolescents; Political violence; Psychological well-being; PTSD; Bosnia Herzegovina

Introduction

In the decade since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF reports that at least two million children have been killed and six million injured or disabled in armed conflicts. Of the 30 million refugees and displaced people worldwide, it is estimated that 50% are children under 15 (Ladd & Cairns, 1996). For many children political violence has created the defining context of their whole lives. There has been a growing interest in understanding the impact of war on children's mental health. Researchers have for the most part focused on the identification and measurement of psychopathological responses, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Adjukovic & Adjukovic, 1993; Arroyo & Eth, 1984; Elbedour, Ten Bensel, & Bastien, 1993; Goldstein, Wampler, & Wise, 1997; Kinzie, Sack, Angell, Mansion, & Rah, 1986; Magwaza, Killian, Petersen, & Pillay, 1993; Nader & Pynoos, 1993; Sack, Clarke, & Seeley, 1996). It has become increasingly clear that children exposed to political violence do not inevitably suffer serious psychological consequences. A common finding in studies from diverse parts of the

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world is that the majority of children exposed to political violence show no signs of clinical disorder (Cairns & Dawes, 1996). A recent review of the literature on PTSD in children and adolescents, agreed that the "majority of individuals exposed to trauma do not develop the disorder" (Perrin, Smith, & Yule, 2000).

Such findings have led to an increasing interest in identifying those factors that promote resilience, including age, gender (Gabarino & Kostelny, 1996; Kostelny & Garbarino, 1994), existing psychopathology (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990), maternal mental health (Bryce, Walker, Ghorayeb, & Kanj, 1989; McLoskey, Southwick, Fernandez-Esquer, & Locke, 1995; Miller, 1996), and exposure severity (Foy, Madvig, Pynoos, & Camilleri, 1996). Attempts to isolate factors responsible for protection and vulnerability have had contradictory results. For example some argue that there is a direct relationship between the amount of violence to which a child is exposed and its psychopathological effect (Foy et al., 1996; Mollica, Poole, Son, Murray, & Tor, 1997). Others that the meaning of the violence is more important than the amount. When looking at the effect of differing degrees of exposure to shelling, Ziv and Israeli (1973) found that Israeli children living in kibbutzim that were bombarded in the late sixties had no greater anxiety levels than those of children living in kibbutzim that were not bombarded. Their explanations for this finding depended on the children's understanding of the significance of the shelling. They suggested that the children living in the bombarded kibbutzim had accustomed themselves to shelling, and therefore no longer saw it as threatening, that the kibbutzim ideology of co-operation and mutual support added to their sense of security; and that Israeli media attention had allowed the children to perceive themselves as heroes. However these were the authors' interpretations of the results. They did not verify them by asking the children themselves what the shelling meant to them.

There is some direct evidence from South Africa, the Philippines and Palestine that shows that active engagement in or ideological commitment to political struggle can increase resilience (Dawes & De Villiers, 1987; Kostelny & Garbarino, 1994; Protacio-Marcelino, 1989; Punamaki, 1996). Kostelny and Garbarino, interviewing mothers and children in Palestine, concluded that it was the adolescents' ability to perceive themselves as "freedom fighters" that made the experiences of invasion and detention less traumatic. In a study of over 300 Israeli young adolescents Punamaki showed that stronger ideological commitment was related to fewer psychosocial problems and that higher exposure to traumatic events was likely to produce more commitment (Punamaki, 1996). In other studies of adolescents living through and participating in the Intifada in the Gaza Strip, both Qouta and Punamaki have shown the

complex interaction between exposure to traumatic events, active participation, and beliefs (Punamaki & Suleiman, 1990; Qouta, Punamaki, & El Sarraj, 1995). These studies demonstrated the importance of the interpretation of an event in determining its impact on mental health and how interpretations are affected by changes in the political and military contexts.

Confirming the significance of changing context over time, Straker and others studied three cohorts of black South African youth at three different points in a black township's history. They found that a high reported exposure to political violence did not, in all political contexts, lead to a subjective sense that violence was problematic. "Whether or not it is problematic at least in part seems to be dependent on the meanings such violence is construed to have and this in turn is dependent on the context within which violence occurs" (Straker, Mendelsohn, & Tudin, 1996, p. 54). In summary, although there is a relative paucity of studies that make child or adolescent understanding the central object of investigation, overall the evidence suggests that both subjective understanding and political context do mediate the impact of political violence.

So far most of the studies examining subjective meaning and context have been confined to low-intensity warfare where there has been an opportunity for children to actively participate. In addition these studies have been predominantly quantitative. This has not allowed for the detailed exploration of the child's subjective understanding of the situation without the imposition of adult structures of interpretation. A second difficulty is that psychological well-being has mostly been determined on the basis of various symptom-rating scales. The use of such scales poses a number of problems. Many of the scales have not been validated for the cultures in which they are used (Richman, 1993). The ability to elicit similar symptoms in different cultural contexts in response to different kinds of stress does not mean they have the same meaning and significance within that context (Richman, 1993; Summerfield, 1999). To assume that they do is to commit what Kleinman calls a "category fallacy" (Kleinman, 1987). For example, particular symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder such as avoidance may be adaptive in certain situations such as flight from a zone of conflict, while nightmares that might be regarded as sleep disorders in one culture may be seen as helpful messages from ancestors in another (Eisenbruch, 1991). Zur points out that without understanding the cultural construction of emotions it is not possible to measure the significance of their presence or absence (Zur, 1996).

Thus high levels of symptoms do not necessarily equal psychiatric disability. They may reflect a norm for that population or a temporary adjustment to the stresses of war (Westermeyer, 2000). When studying 364 displaced

children in Bosnia. Goldstein found that 94% met DSM-IV criteria for PTSD. However he noted that during the two-month period of data collection there was shelling of the city on 35 days and suggested that many of the symptoms were adaptive in that context (Goldstein et al., 1997). On the other hand, the absence of symptoms is not always proof of psychological well-being. Eisenbruch has shown that the absence of sadness and apparently successful assimilation into a host country may not indicate good psychological health in child Cambodian refugees. Just as the continuing presence of "nostalgia" may be a crucial component of sustaining identity and continuity in a new environment rather than a symptom of pathological grief (Eisenbruch, 1990). Symptoms are negotiated in the context of the expectations of help available (Littlewood & Lipsedge, 1986).

In order to address these issues there have been frequent calls for more ethnographic and qualitative work (Cairns, 1994; Cairns & Dawes, 1996; Jensen & Shaw, 1993; Richman, 1993). A growing number of studies have taken this approach both in conflict and post-conflict regions (Honwana, 1999; McCallin, 1998; Peters & Richards, 1998; Povrzanovic, 1995; Povrzanovic, 1997). Miller interviewed Guatemalan refugee children on their understandings of the violence that had driven them from their homes. He discovered that even quite young children had surprisingly accurate understandings, which reflected their parents' narratives. However they had little interest in the themes of political violence and also showed minimal evidence of psychological trauma. Apfel and Simon (2000) have been engaged in a long-term open-ended qualitative study of Palestinian and Israeli children's understandings of the conflict that also demonstrates the importance of developmental age and family narratives. Weine's study of 12 adolescent Bosnian survivors of ethnic cleansing resettled in the United States combined in-depth interviews and the use of standard clinical assessments. He found that the adolescents did have vivid and intrusive memories of the atrocities that they had witnessed, but that their traumatic experiences, including resettlement, did not appear to interfere with the normal processes of adolescent development or social functioning. The political meaning they gave to their traumatic experiences led to an interpretation of their symptoms as non-problematic (Weine, Becker, McGlashan, Vojvoda, Hartman, & Robbins, 1995).

I have been conducting an ethnographic study of young teenagers who have lived through the recent war in Bosnia-Herzegovina on opposite sides of the conflict, and who now live in the two different entities that composes the country. The adolescents come from the towns of Foca/Srbinje in Republika Srpska (RS), and Gorazde in the Federation. The cities are both located in Eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina and are some 30 min apart

by car. Although both were multi-ethnic cities before the war, they have had significantly different experiences during and since the war, and thus provide a unique opportunity to study how different subjective understandings of historical events may emerge in different political, social and cultural contexts. This paper focuses specifically on the qualitative data that explores the relationship between political understanding and psychological well-being.

Background to the conflict

Prior to the war that began in the Spring of 1992, Bosnia Herzegovina was a constituent republic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The total population was 4.35 million, 44% were Bosniaks (Slavic Muslims) and the rest were Serbs and Croats. The Republic had the highest rate of intermarriage in the former Yugoslavia and the various ethnic groups were intermingled throughout the region, particularly in urban centres. The political system was Communist and children in all parts of the Republic received a similar secular education in State schools. In urban centres all three religions–Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim–coexisted peacefully (Malcolm, 1996). Thus urban children in the Republic grew up in a similar sociopolitical context.

Bosnia Herzegovina held a referendum on independence in March 1992, in which 64% of the population voted for independence.[1] On the day that Bosnia Herzegovina received international recognition, Bosnian Serb forces, helped by the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), began their siege of Sarajevo. Within three months the Bosnian Serb forces had taken control of two-thirds of the country. At the end of August 1995, NATO began two weeks of airstrikes which, in combination with a Bosnian Croat offensive, brought about a Serb withdrawal to approximately 49% of the territory. The US-sponsored peace talks in Dayton brought about the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the war in December 1995. The agreement created two entities: RS and the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina. There was a weak central government and tripartite Presidency, but the entities had their own parliaments and security forces and a great deal of autonomy. The military aspects of separating the forces and maintaining the cease-fire were established and supervised by international troops (now called SFOR).[2] Dayton also guaranteed freedom of movement, that refugees had the

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[1] What they voted for was "a Sovereign and Independent Bosnia Herzegovina, a state of equal citizens and nations of Muslims, Serbs, Croats and others who live in it". Many urban Serbs participated in this referendum (Malcolm, 1996, p. 231).

[2] NATO stabilisation forces.

right to return to their homes, and that war criminals would be arrested for trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia at The Hague. Four years on, these latter aspects of the agreement still remain problematic. Overall the war displaced approximately one million people, and around 250,000 are thought to have died, the majority of them civilians.

What follows is an explanation of the local contexts in which the adolescents lived, including the dominant adult explanations for the War in each community.

Foca

Foca is situated in RS. According to the 1991 census, the pre-war population of the municipality was 40,513, of which 51.6% were Bosniaks, and 45.3% were Bosnian Serbs. The town had a religious and political significance for all the communities. Relationships within the community were good until the year before the war when large political rallies were organised by Serb and Muslim Political parties and a strike at the local bus-company resulted in some polarisation within the community.

According to Human Rights Watch, some months prior to the outbreak of war, the Bosnian Serb community in Foca formed a Crisis Committee, similar to those formed in other Serb autonomous regions, in order to plan and carry out the Serb takeover of Foca. Paramilitary troops and reservists from neighbouring Serbia and Montenegro assisted them. Between the 7 and 17 of April 1992, Serb military forces occupied and took over Foca town. Surrounding villages remained under siege until mid-July 1992. The occupation was immediately followed by the destruction of Muslim shops, homes and mosques, the forced expulsion of thousands of non-Serb inhabitants and the detention of some thousands of others. Most detainees were Muslim civilians who had not been charged with any crime. Many of those detained were kept in inhuman conditions and tortured, beaten, and terrorized. Many died in the process, or were summarily executed by Serb forces. Many non-Serb women, including girls as young as 12, were systematically sexually assaulted. Some of these assaults took place in the local high school. The majority of detainees were exchanged or released during 1992 and 1993, but the main detention facility functioned until October 1994 (Human Rights Watch, 1998; The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, 1999).

The Serbian families had for the most part sent their children to the countryside or to Serbia prior to the onset of actual fighting in the town in April 1992. Many of them had been told in advance to do so. Most returned within the year. The town itself was not involved in further fighting, although living conditions were harsh. Power and water were intermittent. School was interrupted by the frequent mobilisations of staff to fight on the front line, and most families depended on humanitarian aid or grew their own food. In September 1995 NATO air strikes destroyed three of the six bridges in the town. There were no civilian casualties of the NATO bombing in this area. Shortly after the Dayton Agreement ended the military conflict and resulted in the return of some Serb-held territory to Federation control. Many Bosnian Serbs, believing they would not be secure in these areas, came to Foca. After the war the municipal authorities renamed the town Srbinje to reflect its Serbian nature, although many local people continued to use the name Foca.

In 1998 the population of Foca municipality was approximately 24,000. The town itself was 100% Serb. At this time the local authorities were still refusing to comply with the Dayton Peace Agreement in a number of respects. In particular, they were not cooperating with the return of non-Serb refugees to the town, could not guarantee secure freedom of movement for non-Serbs, and indicted war criminals still remained at large and visible in town.[3] This meant that there was little international aid money coming into the town. Unemployment was at 60% and primary school teachers had not been paid for the previous three months and were on strike at the onset of my field work in October 1997. There were frequent power cuts and water shortages. Although Sarajevo was the nearest large city and a Bailey bridge had been constructed to ease communication, most local citizens took the very poor-quality road to Montenegro to obtain things they needed. A first visit to Foca in Spring 1997 revealed that the main damage from shelling was the destroyed bridges. However the substantial area of Muslim housing remained burnt, overgrown and empty. All 14 mosques had been destroyed, as had large areas of the centre of town where many Muslims had had small shops. This gave the town a curiously spacious and disjointed feel, combined with the neglected and dilapidated appearance of every building.

The atmosphere was one of tiredness, bitterness and depression, combined with unfailing hospitality towards this researcher. Local people felt they had been betrayed and abandoned on all sides. Most adults explained that the West had not understood the real causes of the war: They believed that Muslims had begun the war by voting for independence. Faced with the danger of an Islamic takeover and the impossibility of living in a "Muslim-dominated state" it had been necessary for Serbs to defend themselves. Ethnic cleansing, a term they used themselves, was a defensive necessity since they believed that the Serb population of Foca would have been

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[3] One arrest of a local Primary School headmaster who had been in charge of the main prison during the war took place while I was there.

killed. I was told that the reports of human rights crimes were exaggerated. Many gave accounts of assisting their own Muslim neighbours and friends to flee by giving them money. They saw the devastation of religious monuments and burning of houses as the work of psychopaths and outsiders. Dayton was regarded as unjust because, although it gave them a "Republic" they felt it jeopardised their security by the insistence on allowing Muslims to return. Few Serb refugees from Federation areas thought it was safe to go home. People also felt betrayed by their own politicians who they viewed as corrupt and as out to make money at their expense. Few had any knowledge of the nature of the war that had occurred on Federation territory. These adult explanations closely resembled the views and explanations given in the Serbian media.

Gorazde

Prior to the war, Gorazde was one of the most prosperous towns in the region. The municipality had a population of 37,000 of whom 74% were Bosniaks and 23% Bosnian Serbs. The town had above-average levels of employment and good relationships between ethnic communities. In May 1992, Bosnian Serb forces began an offensive against the city, putting it under a siege that was to last for almost four years. Many Serbs had left the town prior to the onset of war. During 1992 and 1993, the majority of the Serb population left, and there was some ill treatment of some of those that remained although no systematic, organised abuses of the kind described in Foca have been documented in Gorazde. In Josanice, a Serbian village near Foca, Muslim militiamen killed over 60 civilian Serbs, all of them elderly or children. For most of the war, most of the adolescents in the study were in the town as they had had no forewarning and were unable to leave. The city was completely dependent on airdrops of humanitarian aid and what could be procured locally. In spite of having been declared a "safe area" by the United Nations Security Council in April 1993, the city continued to suffer intermittent shelling and sniping throughout the war and there were regular Bosnian Serb offensives to take it. None were successful. The Dayton Agreement kept Gorazde as a pocket of land belonging to the Federation, almost entirely surrounded by RS, with the main road to Sarajevo going through that entity, although there was a promise by the international community to build a new highway on Federation territory through the mountains.

At the time of this study, in 1998, the feelings of geographical and social isolation were still present and economic difficulties persisted. Those travelling through RS risked robbery, stonings, assault, and arbitrary fines. This hampered the transport of goods in and out, and deterred professionals from returning to the town to work there. Psychological insecurity was increased in 1997 by the discussion in the press of possible plans for the actual partition of Bosnia in which Gorazde would be exchanged with some other area and handed to the Serbs. Moreover the renewed outbreak of fighting that began in 1998 in Kosovo added to the feeling that the peace was not stable yet. A continuing reminder of war was that those non-Serbs displaced from RS still could not return to live there because local Serbs, particularly those in the town of Foca, were against it. At that time, the Canton (a larger area than the municipality) had a population of around 37,000 of whom 35% were internally displaced. In November 1997, Gorazde declared itself an "Open City", committing itself to facilitating the return of non-Bosniak refugees and a steady trickle of visitors began. (There are currently around 100 non-Bosniaks living in the town.) Unemployment remained the major problem. With the help of international aid much of the town was being rebuilt, and my Foca translator commented, on a visit, that the town had a feeling of energy entirely absent from Foca.

The predominant adult explanation of the war in Gorazde was that it had come as a complete surprise, which is why most of the Bosniak adolescents in my study were in the town throughout the war. Most people told me they had voted for independence because, once Slovenia and Croatia had left Yugoslavia, they were afraid to remain in a rump Yugoslavia dominated by Milosevic. They feared as Muslims that they would be treated like the Kosovar Albanians who had suffered apartheid-like conditions since 1989. However, they had imagined an independent Bosnia as a mini -Yugoslavia and were astounded that their Serb neighbours regarded them as "fundamentalists". They believed that Serbs had primary responsibility for the conflict. However, they still felt that Bosnia was not viable except as a multi-ethnic state, and that Gorazde in particular, because of its geographical position, had no future without Serbs returning to live there. This would allow the substantial Muslim refugee population from RS to return there. They did not believe relations would be the same between communities for some time, but did not feel threatened by the idea of living together.

Methods

The study was begun two years after the military conflict had ended. It was carried out in parallel in both cities between October 1997 and July 1998, and was approved by The Cambridge University Psychology Research Ethics Committee. Apteker and Stocklin (1980) summarise some of the difficulties facing cross-cultural researchers working with war-affected young

people–the problems of getting the balance between too much emotional engagement and too great objectivity; holding an idealistic, ethnocentric concept of childhood; the problems of culturally valid instruments (addressed above); the fluid and changing nature of the context; and the necessarily retrospective nature of the work. Some of these issues are addressed in a previous article (Jones, 1998). Mainly, this researcher emphasised her willingness to learn and immerse herself in the perspective of both sides. Many families told her that no one from "the West" had taken so much time to listen before. In addition explorations were carried out with the children about their ideas regarding the nature, roles and responsibilities of their age group. The retrospective nature of the work and its very specific contextual location in time and place could have been problematic had the aim been to obtain an accurate record of actual events. However, this was not an issue when the focus was adolescent interpretation and their subjective feelings within specific contexts.

My concern was with the development of subjective understanding in the adolescents, their processes for making sense of complex events, and the ways these emerged in particular war-affected societies. These issues cannot easily be explored through quantitative methods (Mastnak, 1995; Reason & Rowan, 1981). The main focus of the work was qualitative, centered on in-depth interviewing and participant observation.

Identifying a sample of adolescents for interview

Headmasters in both communities agreed to the study and allocated classes of 7th, 8th grade primary and 1st grade high school on the basis of timetable convenience. One hundred and eighty-three adolescents between 13 and 15 in Gorazde, and 154 adolescents of the same age in Foca (337 children in total) completed the Hopkins Symptoms Checklist (HSCL-25), which is composed of 10 questions on anxiety and 15 items on depression. In addition, the 16-question trauma symptom component of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) (Mollica et al., 1991) was administered. Regarding semantic validity, both these questionnaires had already been translated and back-translated for a Bosnian population. Local interpreters in both cities back translated them again. These scales had already been shown to be meaningful to a population exposed to long-term mass political violence in Indochina (Mollica, Caspi-Yavin, Bollini, Toan Truong, & Lavelle, 1992). The range and expression of symptoms matched those presenting to the author when she worked as a clinical psychiatrist in Gorazde in the six months preceding the study and thus appeared to be relevant to these communities and have content validity. Content validity was also checked by

piloting the questionnaire with 100 adolescents. As a result the question relating to loss of sexual interest or pleasure was eliminated.

The questionnaire was completed in supervised class time. In all cases the author provided a detailed explanation of each question with the class, answered questions, and continued to be available to adolescents as they filled in the questionnaire, if they had difficulties. All the adolescents were in good health and, apart from one girl, had not been in any psychological support programme. All of them participated anonymously and any that wished could abstain. None did. One questionnaire was discarded as unusable.

Based on the combined symptom scores from the two rating scales, a gender-matched sub-sample of 20 was selected from each town, consisting of the highest and lowest scoring adolescents. Each selected adolescent and their parents were sent an explanatory letter and invitation to participate. The school pedagogues in each school assisted with the selection to enable the researcher to remain blind to the adolescent's symptom score until the end of the study. Once the whole sub-sample was collected, a meeting with each family was arranged to go over the study procedures and answer any questions. If an adolescent did not wish to participate, the adolescent of the appropriate gender in that school with the next score up or down was invited. In all there were 47 refusals, the majority of whom were low scoring boys in both cities. Since criterion validity for these scales had not been established in these communities, the cut off points established by Mollica for an Indochinese population (Mollica et al., 1991) were not used. However, all 20 selected low scorers fell within the lowest quartiles and all 20 selected high scorers within the highest quartiles for the two populations. This paper focuses only on the results of the sub-sample of 40 adolescents.

In-depth interviews with adolescents

The interviews with all the adolescents were conducted in private. They were broken into two sessions usually lasting around two hours each. I did not use a questionnaire but worked from a protocol that was developed and adapted over the course of the fieldwork. Adolescents were asked to narrate their lives' experiences in their own way, before, during and after the war. This approach showed me what the adolescent saw as key events and how they saw the war in the context of their whole lives. It gave an indication of coping strategies, for example, the degree to which they were actively trying to forget. Their narrative also provided a map for further questioning and clarification. Some adolescents talked spontaneously for over an hour, some asked me to give them structure through concrete questions. Overall the topics covered included

biographical information and life history, including their and their family's experiences with the war; questions about how they made sense of the war, for example, what they thought it was for, whether it had achieved its goals. Also explored were attitudes to politics; identity issues including political, religious and ethnic affiliations; moral values; beliefs about other groups; adolescents' subjective perceptions of well-being, their worries and problems; ideas about interpersonal and intergroup conflict-resolution; personal ambitions; and their views about the future.

Story-writing

All the participants in the study (3 3 7) had been asked to write stories entitled "What War Means to Me and How It Has Affected My Life," during a class period. The stories composed by the 40 adolescents in the sub-sample were analysed with the interview material.

Parental interviews

Family interviews were conducted with two-thirds of the sample. These were carried out in the family home. Both parents were seen (except in single parent families) and the more formal part of the interview was conducted without the adolescent present. Questions included discussion of their child's well-being and what explanations if any, they gave to their children, what questions the children asked, their perceptions of the impact of war on the child. Young teenagers, unlike their contemporaries in Britain, are immersed in family life, especially in these two small towns where there are few alternative activities. The interviews rapidly immersed me in the collective experiences and culture of the communities, built up trust, and made it easier to establish rapport with the adolescent.

Participant observation

In addition to the formal interviews I was engaged in the life of both communities for a year. In both towns, I participated in normal life: shopping, watching television, socialising, attending religious festivities and holiday events with my families and their networks of friends. This gave me the opportunity to see family life from the inside, and to look at the social and political context through their eyes. I also spent time in school, and conducted formal interviews with key community leaders in order to increase my understanding. All the fieldwork in this study was conducted with the assistance of local interpreters from each community. The interpreters and their families also became cultural brokers assisting me in my understanding of the communities, and facilitating my contacts with other people in the town.

Assessing exposure to political violence

Exposure to political violence was assessed in three ways: firstly, from the author's own knowledge of the amount of violence in the area where the adolescent spent the war; secondly, from the adolescents' and their parents' narratives, including discussion of their worst experiences. Thirdly, during the course of the interview, adolescents were asked to fill out an exposure to War-Related Events Questionnaire. The trauma event component of the HTQ was not culturally appropriate. In order to cover the full range of events experienced by adolescents in Bosnia, I adapted Macksoud's Childhood War Trauma questionnaire (Macksoud, 1992), adding particular events from the Bosnian war to create a 45-item questionnaire. As well as yes/no answers to what events were experienced or witnessed, the questionnaire was structured to elicit the length and duration of the event, and the number of times it occurred, or how many people were affected. In this way I attempted to quantify some of the more enduring aspects of the Bosnian war, such as repeated shelling or sniping, lengthy times without food, living in a shelter, missing school, etc. The specific relationship between this quantitative measure and well-being will be explored in future publications.

Assessing adolescent well-being

Since the aim of this research was to allow children to frame their responses to the war in their own terms and to ensure they would not be overly influenced by the researcher's expectations of its effects upon them, formal clinical interviews structured to elicit pathological symptoms were not carried out. The intention was to see how adolescents constructed their own concepts of well-being, Thus the in-depth interviews included open-ended questions on well-being framed in a variety of ways: such as, How is your life today? Do you have any worries or fears? Have you changed from before the war? Are there any difficulties? Any significant responses to such questions were then followed up, including more in-depth clinical and symptomatic exploration if this seemed warranted. Thus the lead came from the adolescent. In addition, if they had experienced losses, an exploration of their reactions followed.

The lifeline: The adolescents were asked to draw a lifeline as a non-verbal method of exploring their past and present subjective sense of psychological well-being. This lifeline is an adaptation of an instrument developed to explore how young people construct the past (Gergen, 1988). A grid was constructed with the *x*-axis represent-

ing calendar years in the adolescent's life and the *y*-axis representing overall psychological well-being expressed as a percentage. Thus 100% represented "wonderful" or "completely well" and 0% represented "awful" or "completely unwell". The adolescents were asked to place a dot on the grid showing how well they remembered feeling for each year of their lives, from the year when they were five. The dots were then joined to produce a lifeline. This allowed less articulate adolescents to express subtle differences in feeling and relative differences between years. A score was established on the basis of the position of the final (most recent) dot in relation to the best year of their lives: Adolescents received a score of 1 if it was in the same position as their best year, that is they were as well now as they had ever been. A score of 2 indicated a <25% drop from their best year. A score of 3 indicated a >25% drop from their best year and so on (See Fig. 1).

School marks: Both primary and secondary school children in the former Yugoslavia are graded out of five for every subject, with a grade average given at the end of the year. (5 = Excellent 1 = Failure). The child's end-of-year grade average was taken as a measure of social function: This average was compared to previous years and the adolescent's general performance was discussed with their parents and teachers.

Psychological well-being

Adolescents were classified as psychologically "well" or "less well" on the basis of four qualitative assessment measures:

1. The adolescent's subjective assessment non-verbally expressed in the lifeline.
2. The author's impression drawn from observation and interview.
3. Parents' and/or teachers' view.
4. School marks as a measure of function.

Particular importance was given to a negative subjective view expressed by a lifeline score of 3. If adolescents gave themselves an end point on the lifeline that scored as 3, regardless of other measures, they were categorised as "less well". If they gave themselves an endpoint that scored 1, they were only categorized as "less well" overall if they came across as "less well" on the basis of at least two of the other three measures. Thus poor school marks, parental anxieties or author impression, on their own, were not enough to classify a child as "less well".

Symptom rating scales were not used as a mean of assessing well-being. They were only used as a means of identifying children for the study. This is because the
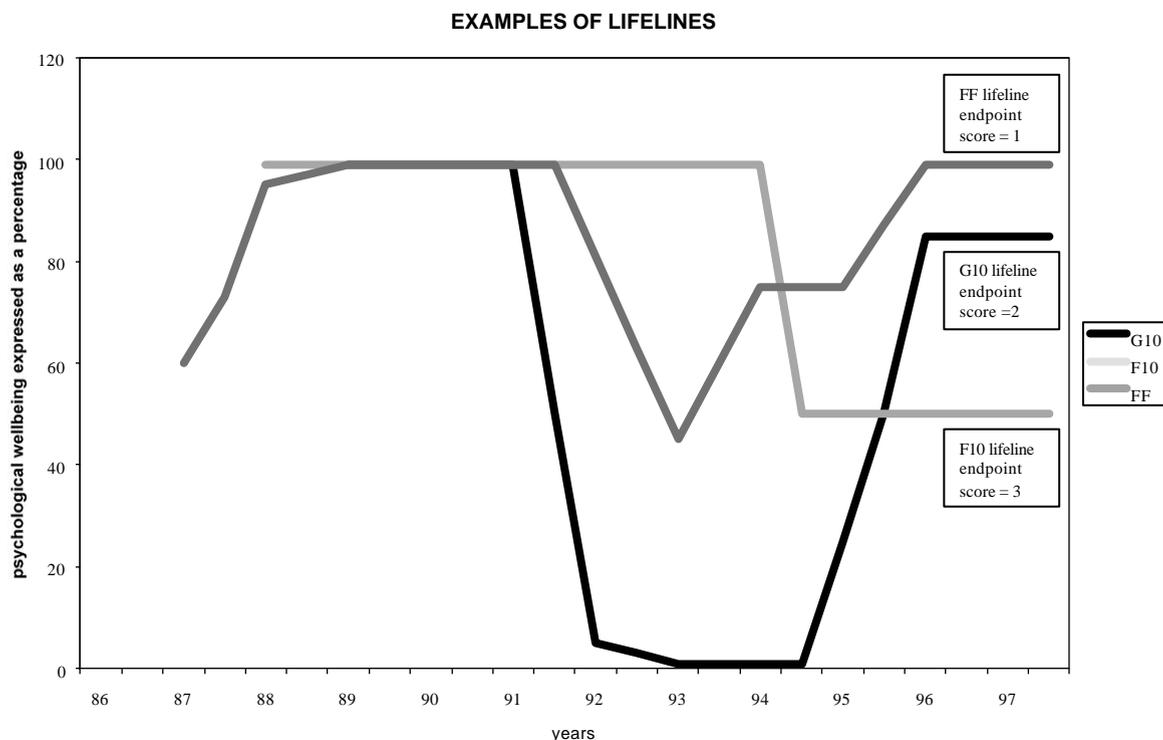

Fig. 1. Diagram illustrating examples of lifelines.

symptom scales had not been tested for criterion validity with this population and because of the issues raised in the literature review regarding cross-cultural work, in particular that high levels of symptoms may not equal psychiatric disability (Westermeyer, 2000); while the failure to acknowledge symptoms in a checklist may not signify greater well-being. Further analysis of the results from the different measures of well-being showed 9/40 children whose overall well-being measured by qualitative means, was not reflected in the symptom checklist score. This suggests that use of a self-report checklist as a clinical screening instrument can be problematic. This was reinforced by the fact that discriminant functions analysis could distinguish high and low scorers but not the "less well" from the "well" (Jones & Kafetsios, 2001). Self-report scales may pick up transient emotional states that are not significant to the individual, and result in the unnecessary pathologising of normal distress. They may fail to identify those who cannot or do not wish to express their distress in symptomatic terms. This may be for cultural reasons: in Balkan society as a whole, the admission of psychological difficulties is stigmatising. In addition visible emotional distress is seen as less appropriate in men and boys, particularly in Muslim culture, which values stoicism. This study, like many others (Kuterovac, Dyregrov, & Stuvland, 1994; Macksoud & Aber, 1996; Green et al., 1991) showed significantly higher symptom levels for girls than boys, but an absence of any gender difference when using qualitative means of assessment. This suggests that the symptom rating scales were picking up a more open response style from the girls, rather than greater levels of pathology.

Data analysis

From the outset of this research project, I was engaged in ethnographic work to gain as full a picture as possible of how young people in Bosnia understood the experience of political violence and its impact upon them. I had no specific hypotheses as to what particular aspects of understanding might emerge as significant. For this reason an approach to data analysis that was informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1997) seemed appropriate. The method was not followed in every detail, but many of the basic principles were adopted. Thus "rather than working from a priori assumptions" (Filstead, 1971, p. 6) theory was "generated in the course of close inspection and analysis" (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992, p. 103). Analysis of the data began while in the field. Concepts and categories began to emerge from repeated readings of transcripts and notes leading to further development of the interview protocol and further exploration of particular themes with respondents. On leaving the field, all the materials were transcribed,

checked, and tapes were listened to again. Notes were made as to emotional tone and narrative style as well as to content. The data was coded with a continuous alertness to "the similarities and differences which exist between instances, cases and concepts, to ensure that the full diversity and complexity of the data is explored" (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992, p. 103). This is in contrast to selecting data to fit preformed hypotheses. Coding in this manner, with repeated reading, a preparedness to recode, subcategorise, and examine interrelationships, allows recurrent themes, patterns and clusters of responses to emerge which allows for the creation of typologies and case examples to illustrate particular theories (Mastnak, 1995; Orona, 1997). This process was aided by computer software for qualitative analysis (Nud*ist 4).

Results

Psychological well-being

Using the qualitative criteria described above, just over half ($n = 21$) of the adolescents (12 girls and 9 boys) in the study could be classified as psychologically "well" 17 (8 girls and 9 boys) as "less well". There were slightly more "less well" adolescents in Foca. Two adolescent boys were classified as equivocal, because although they did not meet the criteria for "less well" described above, there was an aspect of their presentation during interview that prevented this author from defining them as psychologically well. The results are summarised in Tables 1 and 2.

Political understanding

Attitude to Politics: The majority of adolescents in both towns (Foca 18/20, Gorazde 14/20) felt alienated from "Politics" when the term was used to refer to party politics or government. In Foca, most (16/20) had no idea what politicians did or a very negative view of their activities. This conversation with F10[4] in Foca was typical:

I: So what does the word politics mean to you? How do you define it?

F10: (groan) Awful.

I: Awful, could you tell me what the word means to you?

F10: Nothing.

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[4] Adolescents are coded by letter to maintain anonymity. The coding system is as follows. F refers to Foca and G to Gorazde. With reference to the second figure or letter: numbered children are from the primary schools and lettered children are from high school.

Table 1
Adolescent psychological well-being by town and gender

	Gorazde		Foca		Total
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
Well	5	6	4	6	21
Equivocal	2	0	0	0	2
Less well	3	4	6	4	17

I: Nothing. But the fact that you don't like it shows me that you have an idea what it is, so what is it that you don't like?

F10: It just disturbs people.

A few adolescents in Gorazde (5/20) had slightly more interest and half (10/20) had a more positive view of what politicians did: For example GA was interested and saw politicians as responsible "for solving the accommodation of the population, employment of the people". The majority of adolescents told me they would vote if they were 18, but a distinction could be made

Table 2
Summary of results[a]

Code	YOB	Town	Gender	Lifeline	P/T view	Int imp	Marks	Wellbeing	SS	EPV
F06	1984	Foca	Female	2	Positive	Positive	4	Well	103	26
F02	1984	Foca	Female	1	Positive	Positive	3	Well	104	23
FF	1982	Foca	Female	1	Positive	Positive	4	Well	104	11
GF	1982	Gorazde	Female	1	Positive	Positive	5	Well	97	61
GA	1982	Gorazde	Male	1	Positive	Positive	3	Well	80	23
F12	1983	Foca	Male	1	Positive	Positive	5	Well	57	16
G03	1984	Gorazde	Female	1	Negative	positive	3	Well	53	23
GD	1982	Gorazde	Male	1	Positive	positive	4	Well	50	42
FD	1982	Foca	Female	2	Positive	positive	5	Well	51	27
G02	1983	Gorazde	Female	1	Positive	positive	5	Well	50	49
G12	1983	Gorazde	Male	1	Positive	positive	3	Well	50	55
F05	1984	Foca	Male	1	Positive	positive	5	Well	50	13
G05	1983	Gorazde	Female	1	Positive	positive	3	Well	49	41
GH	1982	Gorazde	Female	1	Positive	positive	4	Well	48	25
G09	1983	Gorazde	Male	1	Positive	positive	3	Well	47	43
F11	1983	Foca	Female	1	Positive	positive	3	Well	45	19
G11	1983	Gorazde	Male	1	Positive	positive	3	Well	45	31
GC	1982	Gorazde	Female	1	Negative	positive	3	Well	44	23
FH	1982	Foca	Male	2	Positive	positive	3	Well	44	51
F07	1983	Foca	Female	1	Positive	positive	2	Well	42	19
FC	1982	Foca	Male	1	Positive	positive	3	Well	42	27
G06	1984	Gorazde	Female	3	Negative	negative	4	Less well	130	58
G08	1983	Gorazde	Female	3	Positive	negative	2	Less well	122	59
G10	1984	Gorazde	Female	2	Negative	negative	4	Less well	120	40
F10	1983	Foca	Female	3	Negative	negative	3	Less well	101	21
GE	1982	Gorazde	Female	1	Negative	negative	3	Less well	97	58
FB	1982	Foca	Male	3	Positive	negative	3	Less well	95	17
G04	1984	Gorazde	Male	1	Negative	negative	1	Less well	94	46
G07	1984	Gorazde	Male	1	Negative	negative	2	Less well	93	45
FE	1981	Foca	Female	3	Negative	Negative	2	Less well	84	22
F08	1982	Foca	Male	1	Negative	Negative	1	Less well	76	5
F04	1984	Foca	Male	3	Positive	Positive	3	Less well	80	17
FG	1983	Foca	Male	3	Positive	Positive	4	Less well	78	13
FA	1982	Foca	Female	3	Positive	Negative	3	Less well	49	24
F09	1984	Foca	Male	3	Positive	Negative	4	Less well	49	39
F03	1984	Foca	Female	3	Negative	Negative	4	Less well	46	21
F01	1984	Foca	Male	1	Negative	Negative	2	Less well	92	14
GB	1982	Gorazde	Male	1	Negative	Negative	2	Less well	50	42
GG	1982	Gorazde	Male	2	Positive	?	4	Equivocal	95	32
G01	1983	Gorazde	Male	2	Positive	?	5	Equivocal	88	43

[a] P/T = parent or teacher view; INT IMP = impression at interview; SS = summated symptom checklist scores (these were used for selection of the subgroup, not for assessing wellbeing); EPV = Exposure to political violence questionnaire scores.

between towns. Reflecting their greater alienation from politics, more adolescents in Foca told me they would avoid voting (7/20). Amongst those who would vote (11/20) the majority would vote for a national, that is, Serbian party (8/11). In Gorazde most adolescents (16/20) thought they would vote, and for most of them (10/16) it did not matter whether or not it was a ''Muslim'' party. Yet in spite of their alienation from politics most adolescents in both towns felt patriotic, stating that they would fight for their country if war came again, and they were male and 18 (14/20 Gorazde, 13/20 Foca). However half (10/20) of the adolescents from Foca wanted to be living in another country in 10 years' time, while the majority (15/20) of Gorazde adolescents hoped they would still be in Bosnia.

The inter-relationship between political understanding and psychological well-being

Regarding the categories described above, there was no clear relationship with psychological well-being. However as adolescents discussed how they made sense of what had happened and what explanations they had come up with, and as I listened again to their tapes, a new theoretical construct began to emerge with regard not to the content of the answers but to the adolescents' attitudes to the type of questions and to the style and manner in which they answered. The adolescents could be divided into two groups: One group, present in both towns, was interested in discussing why the conflict had taken place and what it was about. Even if they lacked information themselves, they were looking for answers. This group was labelled engaged (see Fig. 2) because they were fully engaged in the search for meaning. The other group of adolescents, in both towns, were not interested in discussing the meaning of the conflict, in terms of what caused it, who was responsible, or what it had achieved. Through verbal and non-verbal language they made clear that such questions were boring and unimportant. This group is labelled as disengaged. Disengagement did not necessarily imply lack of knowledge. Some of these disengaged adolescents said they simply did not know and were not curious about the answers to such questions. Other had answers and volunteered them on request, but said the discussion on these topics was boring. Nor does disengagement from looking for meaning imply disengagement as a whole. Most of these same adolescents were happy to volunteer quite detailed descriptions of their concrete war experiences and were animated, and sometimes visibly moved, in doing so. In addition all were actively engaged in normal life, had plenty to say about it, and were functioning well. Thus disengagement is not the same as the clinical concept of avoidance—i.e., that the whole topic of war was avoided because the adolescent found it distressing. Two adolescents from Gorazde who had been exposed to a great deal violence could be described as less well and clinically avoidant. One was unable to remember any detail of his war experiences, and was withdrawn and monosyllabic throughout the interviews. He was doing badly at school since the war because of poor concentration. The other told the researcher that the questions on how she made sense of the war were ''literally killing her'' and that she tried not to think about it.

Detailed analysis of this category of engagement/disengagement made clear that it was a core category that related to other theoretical constructs, most significantly the adolescents' psychological well-being. The majority of psychologically well adolescents were

	WELL	LESS WELL
GORAZDE	**Disengaged**	**Engaged**
	<Exposed to political violence	>Exposed to political violence
	Secure	Insecure
	<Politically sensitive	>Politically sensitive
	Open to Serb return	Ambivalent about Serb return
	Non-partisan attributions	Partisan attributions
FOCA	**Disengaged**	**Engaged**
	Secure	Insecure
	<Politically sensitive	>Politically sensitive
	Hostile to Muslim return	Ambivalent about Muslim return
	Partisan attributions	Non-partisan attributions

Fig. 2. Typology summarising relationships between political understanding and psychological wellbeing.

disengaged (13/21), while the majority of psychologically less well adolescents were engaged in trying to make sense of the conflict (11/17). In addition, engagement or disengagement in the search for meaning appeared to relate to a number of other categories:

1. The adolescents' feelings of safety and security, which emerged from discussions about whether they were afraid of another war, or how they felt about foreign troops in the town.
2. Their political sensitivity or awareness of current political events. It was possible to find adolescents who were politically sensitive–that is, alert to what was going on around them, without either liking politics or being politically well-informed.
3. Their current attitude to other ethnicities, exemplified in the manner in which they talked about who they held responsible for the war, how they felt about former neighbours, or the possibility of people of another ethnicity returning home.
4. The amount of violence to which they had been exposed during the war. (This relationship was only significant for those exposed to the greater levels of political violence, including siege and repeated bombardment that occurred in Gorazde.)

Through exploring these interrelationships in depth, it became clear that the process of engaging or disengaging in the search for meaning took a different form and significance in each community. These patterns of interrelationships can be divided into four main types of response to the war. Fig. 2 summarises these inter-relationships in the form of a typology. Case vignettes are reported below to illustrate each of the four types of responses.

Gorazde, Engaged and Less Well: A cluster of adolescents in Gorazde could be characterised as both "less well" and engaged in a search for meaning for the conflict. They mentioned it in their written narratives and discussed aspects of the causes and results of the conflict at length in the interviews. In addition, they felt less safe than the other adolescents in Gorazde. The parents of these adolescents would report that they seemed more sensitive to political events and more insecure. They picked up on items of the news and asked questions like "Does that mean the war will start again?" In the interview, these adolescents would also spontaneously alert me to current local or national political events that concerned them. In Gorazde, this would include issues like the city becoming an "Open town" or the rumours that Gorazde might be "given up" in some way to RS if there was a partition of Bosnia. When discussing how they made sense of the conflict, this group made strong attributions of responsibility to the other side. The majority of Gorazde respondents were not opposed to former Serb neigh-

bours coming home. However, a few from this engaged, less well group did express ambivalence, although none were completely against it. All of these adolescents had been among the most exposed to political violence in the whole study: witnessing horrifying deaths, living under siege, being held prisoner within their homes, losing their fathers.

Case vignette: 14 year-old G7

Fourteen year-old G7 lived in a mainly Serb part of Gorazde. Both his parents are factory workers He was imprisoned with his family in their house in Gorazde by their Serb neighbours for some weeks at the beginning of the war. They visited regularly and threatened and terrorised the family. He vividly remembers one of the Serbs suggesting to his father that he should kill his three children because otherwise it would be even worse for them. They later escaped to another town and returned to Gorazde after the conflict had ended. Their house was destroyed and they live in a collective centre. G7 described himself as "kind of a frightened person" and "a bit lonely". His father told me this was a change since the war: "He became sort of frightened. He doesn't dare get into fights with other children. He doesn't dare to have a real discussion with his friends. I mean a discussion which can lead to violence or which can lead to the fight. He's not… he's withdrawn I think".

When G7 was asked how he made sense of what had happened, he was engaged and animated during the discussion and had a clear explanation in which he saw Serbs as responsible for the conflict: "Everything started because Serbs hated Muslims. […] Serbs hated Muslims too much […] They [the Serbs] wanted to have Bosnia. […] So that Muslims wouldn't be there. They wanted to have only Serbia". Then at a later point: "I get confused about […] some things which I cannot understand. […] about Serbs, about politics". He clearly wanted to sort things out. He wanted to know: "why did they hate, and why did they want that? Why did they want to rule?" One manifestation of his insecurity and the way it connected to his political sensitivity emerged in another part of the discussion on how he defined politics:" Can I say something? In the war, … this is an 'Open Town' and anyone can enter this town. […] Yesterday two Cetniks[5] went and entered G-. I think they were visiting their homes, and they were armed, they had guns". He went on to describe how they had shot at a dog, and his anxiety because being an Open Town meant that the police no longer searched people who entered Gorazde, so it might not be safe. He discussed these things with both his parents and remained frightened that there was

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[5]The term Cetnik was originally the term used by Draza Mihajlovic to refer to the Royalist Serbs in the Second World War. When used by Bosniaks it is a disparaging term for Serbs, meaning those involved in the violence against them.

going to be another war, an anxiety they shared with him. Regarding the return of Serbs to Gorazde, in principle, he felt everyone had the right to go home, however, in reality he felt ambivalent. He wanted his neighbours back but not the ones who had threatened and imprisoned him. However, on another occasion he said he could forgive Serbs, who could come back if they learnt to behave and did not swear and curse and if they learnt the Latin as well as their own Cyrillic alphabet in school.

Foca, Engaged and Less Well: As in Gorazde, there was a cluster of less well adolescents who were more engaged in the search for meaning for the conflict, more sensitive to local current events and more insecure about the future in terms of whether there might be another war. The political events that were salient and caused concern were, not surprisingly, different from those in Gorazde. For example, Foca children brought up their fears about war starting in Kosovo and spreading, or about the fights within the RS political assembly. In contrast to the less well adolescents in Gorazde, they tended to be more even-handed in their attributions of responsibility and see all parties as responsible for the conflict. They were also ambivalent about whether Muslims should return to Foca. However, in Foca this ambivalence contrasted with both the political leadership and popular opinion as expressed in the local media, which was adamantly opposed to Muslim return, and held the Muslim community responsible for the outbreak of war. Thus, the more moderate opinions of these less-well adolescents were considerably at odds with the public discourse in the town. There was no clear relationship between degree of engagement and the amount of exposure to political violence in Foca. Although this more engaged group included two adolescents who had lost a close relative, it also included those with minimal exposure to violence.

Case vignette: 15 year-old F10

Fifteen year-old F10 is a displaced girl from a rural area, whose father frequently works abroad as a factory worker. Her village was ethnically mixed and she and her whole family had close friendships with Muslims. Her family described how, at the outset of the war, Muslim and Serb neighbours kept guard together against outsiders, but that when shooting began around the village, trust broke down and everyone fled to their respective areas. She and her mother went to Belgrade, which she enjoyed, although they were very poor. Her father had to join up. After a year they returned to Foca, and have lived in five separate flats since then and been evicted four times by Serbian police. These evictions, some of which were physically rough, were her worst experiences of the war. She was not so scared by the NATO bombing: "I watched my friends crying when we

were in the cellar. I felt sorry for them, but I was not scared".

Regarding her well-being she told me: "I don't cry, but I'm nervous. I mind about everything. I cannot sit still". These were changes since the war and she had a marked drop in her lifeline since the war. She had also had some difficulties at school necessitating repeating a year. She did want to understand the war: "I ask myself but I don't know the answers. […] I am just wondering why this happened". And like other engaged adolescents, although she had no interest in politics (see her words in the Attitude to politics sub-section on page XXX), she was politically sensitive. She had heard on TV that "something is happening in Kosovo, which makes me a little scared". Regarding responsibility for the war she did not blame nor was she angry with anybody. F10 was one of two adolescents in Foca who unequivocally wanted things to return to how they were before. She told me she would love to have her Muslim friends and neighbours back and saw no danger: "They are people, they are human beings just like us".

Gorazde, Disengaged and Well: Almost all the adolescents who were disengaged from the search for meaning for the conflict were psychologically well, but showed different characteristics depending on which town they were living in. In Gorazde, the disengagement appeared closely related to exposure. The disengaged, well adolescents had been the least exposed to the war. Two of them had been in relatively safe villages within Bosnia; three of them had been refugees abroad with their families. Moreover these latter three were part of the small group of Gorazde adolescents who could be seen as least patriotic. They were not interested in fighting for their country in another war, or living there in the future. All the disengaged adolescents had a more dispassionate, less partisan view of the conflict than their more engaged and less well contemporaries, attributing responsibility more evenly to both sides, and having less problem with the idea of Serbs returning home. What worries they had centered on school and passing tests. They were mostly less aware of current political events, felt safe and did not worry about another war.

Case vignette: 15 year-old GC

Fifteen year-old GC was a refugee in Germany with both her parents during the war. She had watched television coverage there and worried about her grandparents and friends, but she had suffered no losses and could not identify any particularly frightening experience. She returned to her home in Gorazde a year after the war was over and initially found adjusting to the very different school quite difficult, but had settled in, found friends and felt quite well and happy. She had no interest in making sense of the war at all, as this conversation demonstrated:

I: So when you try and make sense of what has happened, what explanations do you come up with?

GC: I don't know really.

I: Do you have any explanation? If you had to explain to your children when you're grown up why there was a war, what would you tell them?

GC: I don't know.

I: Do you hear any explanations from other people?

GC: Nobody really says anything about that, but the Muslims say the Serbs are guilty and Serbs say the Muslims are guilty.

I: And do you have an opinion on that?

GC: No.

I: Do your parents?

GC I don't speak with my parents about it.

I: Because? You're not interested?

GC: I'm not interested in that.

The conversation also shows her lack of interest in who was responsible. Nor did she mind if Serbs returned: "For me it's the same. If they come back, if they don't come back, it's the same". Although she thought they might have some problems at first and expressed some empathy, suggesting they might be treated in the same way or worse than refugees who had returned from Germany to Gorazde. She was not concerned by or aware of particular local or national political events, felt quite secure in Gorazde, where her family ran a small business, and was not worried about the prospect of a future war.

Foca, Disengaged and Well: In Foca, all the disengaged adolescents were psychologically well, showed less political sensitivity and were unconcerned about the prospect of a future war, but in other respects they differed from their well contemporaries in Gorazde. There was no clear relationship to exposure to violence. The group included children with very varied histories of exposure, although none had been exposed to as much violence as the Gorazde group. The main distinction was that, in Foca, it was the disengaged adolescents who made stronger attributions of responsibility to the other side and were more opposed to the return of the non-Serb population than their less well, engaged contemporaries within the town.

Case vignette: 14 year-old F7's

Fourteen year-old F7's family had a smallholding in a predominantly Serb village near Gorazde. Her father worker in a factory. She remembers shooting starting suddenly around her village and the family leaving abruptly without the animals, three days later. They stayed in a town near Foca through the war until it was given to the Federation at Dayton, and their own authorities told them to leave. They now live in a Muslim house in Foca. It was these two experiences of running away that she remembers as the most frighten-

ing. She was present when NATO bombed. But the family knew they were not the targets and no one remembers this as frightening. Her mother told me "we were not scared, we went out and watched". F7 enjoys her life, has friends and does not regard herself as unwell in anyway. Like many displaced people who have made a move from rural to urban conditions, she sees many aspects of her life as improved. F7 had no interest in discussing the meaning of the war and had no idea what her father was fighting for. However when asked she was clear that Turks[6] were responsible for starting the war, although she did not know why. She was also clear that she did not want to live with them again.

I: Can you tell me what would make it difficult, impossible you said, to live with the Turks again.

F7: Because I don't like to live with them.

I: Why is that?

F7: Because I don't like them.

I: And why don't you like them?

F7: I don't know why.

I: You don't know why? Well you must have some reason. (Translator says 'speak freely')

F7: Because they are Turks that's why I don't like them.

I: And what's the difference then between Turks and Serbs? Could you explain that to me.

F7: (pause).

I: You like Serbs?

F7: Of course.

I: Of course, so you must... There must be some difference between Serbs and Turks, if you like Serbs and you don't like Turks.

F7: (pause)

I: Are they different to look at?

F7: Yes.

I: How?

F7: I don't know.

I: Well your friends in Gorazde, Turkish girls, for example did they look differently from you. Or behave differently from you?

F7: No.

I: So did you like Turks before the war?

F7: (pause)

I: Did you know who were Turks before the war?

F7: No.

I: No, it's only since the war?

F7: Yes.

I: So what has made Turks since the war so unlikable? In general.

F7: (pause). I don't know. [Serbs] looked nicer to me […] and I have more friends now. Serbs.

I: Okay can you tell me about the Turkish friends you had before the war? Do you hate them also?

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[6] "Turks" is the disparaging term used by Serbs for Muslims, associating them with the Ottoman occupation of the area.

F7: No, why? They didn't do anything to me.
I: So would you ever like to see them again?
F7: No.
I: Because?
F7: I don't know why.
[…]
I: Do you think Turks hate Serbs?
F7: Yes, I think they hate us.
I: Why do you think they hate Serbs?
F7: (long pause).
I: Have you any idea?
F7: No, I don't.

This dialogue is very revealing of the unthought-out but firmly held nature of the beliefs of the disengaged adolescents in Foca. Moreover, it makes clear that such beliefs were not present before the war and that the discomfort at the prospect of seeing former neighbours rests on her belief that they hate her.

Discussion

There are limitations to the study design. The selection of the adolescents was not randomly done. The school classes were picked for timetable convenience, but it was apparent that there were no significant differences with the other classes of children of similar age groups in the two communities. I could not completely randomise the selection of low and high scoring children because of the intensive cooperation required from the families. In addition, there was a large number of refusals. Those children who refused to participate in the qualitative part of the study had particular characteristics: the bulk of refusals came from younger boys with low scores, in both towns, and from one particular class in Gorazde. One explanation might be that most young boys who see themselves as "symptom free", feel they have better things to do with their spare time than talk to a female interviewer about feelings and experiences. A few of these boys were identified by staff as having behaviour problems in school. Also in Foca some of the refusals are likely to have come from families hostile to a researcher from a NATO country. In Gorazde there was the added problem of one class having an influential teacher who regarded anything psychological as "stupid". This may mean the study sample is slightly biased towards the more symptomatic group in the population, including those who felt psychological well-being and the war itself were worth discussing, and away from those who lacked or denied symptoms, or did not want to talk about the war. However this should not invalidate an exploration of the relationships between political understanding and psychological well-being, given that the sample still contained a wide range of responses and attitudes.

This paper does not discuss the additional effects of parental attitudes and health, the role of school, previous vulnerabilities in the child, all of which contributed to the micro-context in which the adolescent lived. These will be examined in future publications. Since this is a qualitative study with small numbers, the relationships described refer to small clusters of adolescents. However, the findings are consistent enough to suggest a clear pattern of relationships between the degree to which adolescents are engaged in the search for the meaning of political violence, the contexts in which they lived, and their psychological well-being.

In this study, similar numbers of children from both communities were psychologically less well two years after the conflict was over, and there did not seem to be a specific relationship between well-being and particular ideological beliefs or degree of patriotism. However disengagement, in the form of disinterest in the causes and explanations for the war, seemed to be associated with greater psychological well-being and feeling secure. Engagement in searching for a meaning for the conflict was associated with feeling less well and more insecure about the prospect of a future war. These relationships were mediated by the particular contexts in which the adolescent lived. These findings are in contrast to the body of literature quoted earlier showing that active engagement and ideological commitment facilitates better coping. But the contrast can be explained when one looks at the nature and contexts of the political violence, and the different meaning active engagement has in these contexts. Most of the research reviewed in the introduction was on low-intensity conflict where active engagement meant actual participation. In Palestine, for example, although this led to greater exposure and some degree of greater psychological problems, in the long run, once peace had come, participation led to greater self-esteem and to a reconstrual of previous traumatic experience as less significant. Children who had been passive did not review their experiences in this light and continued to suffer problems (Qouta et al., 1995). Developmental age played a role as well. Older Palestinian adolescents who could view themselves as freedom fighters dealt better with police attacks than younger children who lacked the cultural knowledge to adopt an ideological position (Kostelny & Garbarino, 1994).

However, the adolescents in this study were involved in a prolonged high intensity conflict. In both communities, there was little opportunity for active participation, except in the form of sharing the tasks of basic survival. All respondents had to endure long periods of anxiety wondering about close relatives on front lines and the threat of military action against them. In addition, Gorazde adolescents endured a reality of shelling and siege for nearly four years. The majority of these told me that they used various distractions to

pass the time in the shelters. Weisenberg (looking at Israeli children exposed to Scud missile attacks) also suggests that avoidance and distraction are effective in this context (Weisenberg, Schwarzwald, Waysman, Solomon, & Klingman, 1993). Those Foca adolescents worried by the NATO bombing did the same, although as is clear above, some reacted with curiosity and interest because they did not feel threatened. Post-war, both groups of adolescents live in relatively unstable political environments: Gorazde is an island within the other entity. Foca is at odds with the international community monitoring the peace accords and suffering the consequences. The presence of SFOR throughout the country is a constant reminder of the war. Both groups of adolescents also live with the legacy common to all post-Communist states: disenchantment and alienation with politics and a belief that politicians are corrupt and self-serving. They are also old enough to remember that the upsurge of political activism in their country in the early nineties was a prelude to war. They do not have models of effective democratic political activism available nor clear targets against which to act. Families on both sides talked of their feelings of unimportance and powerlessness. In this context, it is not surprising that adolescents use disengagement from the war and everything associated with it as the most effective coping strategy. Rather than searching for meaning for past events they could not control, they are focussed on friendships and personal achievement, such as good marks at school, sport, or music. Meanwhile the less well adolescents are engaged in looking for meaning and pay the price of a certain political sensitivity and awareness of threats to their security. Because of their powerlessness in the face of these threats, this sensitivity results in feelings of discomfort, which leads to more alertness and more discomfort. Adolescents who are sensitive to their political environment without the possibility of being able to act on their conclusions, find themselves as many described: sad, anxious and restless.

These findings are in keeping with some other research on the need to ascribe meaning. Dollinger studied the effects of a lightning strike disaster at a soccer game that killed three children. After the event, he found that those children most upset by the lightning strike were those most likely to make any attributions. The least upset made none. Dollinger speculated that two models might explain his findings. One alternative was that "upset leads to an attributional search". The second that "attributions lead to greater upset" (Dollinger, 1986). The results in this study suggest that the model at work will depend on the micro-context.

In the more war-exposed Gorazde, the "upset leads to attributions" model makes sense. Greater exposure made some (though not all) of the adolescents feel less well, as a consequence of which they were more engaged in making sense of what had happened. This involved thinking about questions such as "Why did they want to kill me?", "Why can't I go home?", and "Who was responsible?" As the dialogues show above, there are no easy answers to such questions. The search for meaning has no easy resolution and does not bring psychological comfort. In addition, their political sensitivity and insecurity made the prospect of living with perceived aggressors more alarming. Not surprisingly they were more ambivalent about doing so and more partisan in attributing blame. The less exposed adolescents in Gorazde were less troubled and more secure. They felt more distanced from the conflict and did not need to look for explanations, because they did not experience the same degree of upset. This also allowed them to be less partisan and more open to the return of former neighbours.

In contrast the search for meaning had a different significance for adolescents living in a community less exposed to the physical violence of war but in a position to witness ethnic cleansing as bystanders. In Foca the "attribution leads to upset" model might fit better. Rather than exposure to violence leading to a search for meaning, the search for meaning seemed to result in greater openness to the possibility of living with non-Serbs again, and less partisan ideas about who was responsible for the war. But it also exposed them to uncomfortable "truths" about their own community, which contributed to their psychological discomfort. For example, when discussing the international community's wish for Muslims' return to their homes in Foca, FE, a 15 year-old girl, told me "A lot lost their homes, and at the end it would be for nothing if we live together. What was the purpose of the war?" But she then went on to tell me that while people could not be happy together, she did not think they could be happy separately either. When asked if she felt stuck, her response was: "exactly!" F10 (described in the case vignette above) missed her Muslim friends and wanted them back. They had to make sense of the sudden disappearance of large numbers of people, destruction in a town that was not shelled, parental silence when asking questions, large spaces where mosques once stood, sudden arrests by international troops, including the headmaster of one of the primary schools, and the depressing, stagnant nature of the town. They were also aware that some people were very rich in the midst of the general poverty. "Now it appears that people fought just because of somebody's money, just so that somebody can earn more money", one told me. The trouble for these adolescents in Foca was that looking for meaning was likely to have a psychological cost because it put them at odds with the dominant communal discourse that accommodated itself to (and even celebrated) the results of ethnic cleansing.

Those adolescents in Foca who avoided examining such events appeared to have better psychological health. They were enjoying their lives and doing well at school. However disengagement in this context was associated with more hostile attitudes to the other side, more partisan attributions of responsibility and in some cases a marked lack of empathy. For example, another 15 year-old girl, FF, told me: "All those who were Muslims left, but it didn't stress me or shock me". She described how she had watched one of her Muslim neighbours' houses burning.

FF: But I wasn't very upset. […] I knew them. They were first neighbours.[7] But they already left, actually left at the beginning. So I knew they wouldn't come back.

I: So it didn't matter that the house was burnt down?

FF: No.

I: You didn't care?

FF: (little laugh) No.

I: How would you have felt if it had been your house that had been burnt down?

FF I would feel sorry. Everybody is sorry when his or her house is burning.

Thus there is a cost to disengagement in some contexts, although it is not measurable in conventional approaches to individual psychological health.

Implications

This research has implications both for future research and practice. The literature reviewed above shows that the role of subjective meaning is receiving more attention. The results of this study suggest that it is not only the content of meanings that matter in determining the response to stressful events, but also the process. Whether or not an individual engages in such a search will affect their psychological well-being.

The finding that some adolescents in certain contexts use disengagement as an effective method of coping challenges some of the assumptions of a cognitivist approach to understanding the impact of stressful events. This approach takes the view that "people who are exposed to uncontrollable and unpredictable events are strongly motivated to understand why the event occurred" (Joseph, 1999, p. 52) as a means of recreating a controllable and predictable world (Janoff-Bulman, 1985, 1992). Following from such assumptions much therapeutic endeavour is based on the premise that stressful experiences should be explored and re-exam-

ined in order to be processed and assimilated. One cannot take for granted that this approach is appropriate in all contexts (Bracken, 1998). Recent research on debriefing (a method that in its essence involves exploration of a traumatic event, combined with counseling and giving information shortly after its occurrence) has suggested that it is ineffective and may actually contribute to poorer outcomes (Kenardy, 2000; Raphael, Meldrum, & McFarlane, 1995; Small, Lumley, Donohue, Potter, & Waldenstrom, 2000; Wessely, Rose, & Bisson, 1999). In a small study of coping mechanisms in Holocaust survivors, those with repressive coping styles including avoidance and distancing, the repression of traumatic memories and non-recall of dreams, were significantly better adjusted than those with frequent recall of traumatic memories, sensitivity to their environments, particularly threatening aspects, and sleep disturbance and nightmares (Kaminer & Lavie, 1993). Not enough attention has been paid to usefulness of repression and distancing as healthy methods of coping. It is noteworthy that it was disengagement from the search for meaning in Gorazde that allowed adolescents to acknowledge the role of their own side in the conflict and feel more open to reconciliation with former enemies. This study suggests that further exploration of such coping methods is warranted.

The study also demonstrates that in some contexts the immediate individual psychological benefits of disengagement may have long-term negative consequences. The Foca adolescents who used disengagement came across as well adjusted to the context within which they lived. But avoidance and silence on issues such as ethnic cleansing and the alleged existence of a previous rape "camp" in the high school where some of them now studied, left the communal discourse on these matters unchallenged. This means that a second generation is likely to grow up with the implicit beliefs that ethnic cleansing was a defensive necessity, and that security rests in living in an ethnically homogenous mini-state. Neither of these assumptions are likely to promote the chances of rebuilding inter-communal relationships within the country, the long-term stability of the region, or their own security and well-being as individuals.

Conversely, this study should not be taken to imply that the search for meaning should be prevented because of its association with greater psychological distress. On the contrary, the study suggests that adolescents engaged in such a search are looking for their own recovery. The question is, how are they best supported in doing so? All the less-well adolescents were offered psychological support, all except one rejected it. One adolescent attended and benefited from a traditional healer. All identified material, social, and political changes that would in different ways radically alter

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[7] First neighbours are the closest neighbours. This is a very important social relationship in Balkan society, involving the exchange of visits, gifts and shared responsibilities. First neighbours can be more important than relatives.

and improve the contexts in which they lived. These included: improved living conditions in the form of stable places to live or the possibility of returning home; having their parents less stressed by poverty, unemployment and grief; reconnecting with old friends; friendlier, more understanding and supportive teachers; ending corruption, reparations, the arrest of war criminals; and security. These less-well adolescents recognised that the processes of their own recovery were intimately bound up with the recovery of the social and political communities in which they lived. This has implications for those providing aid and political leadership in the Balkans. It suggests that programmes directed at social problems such as re-energising the economy, the integration and modernisation of the education system, and political initiatives such as the arrest of war criminals, removal of corrupt authorities, and protection of returning refugees, will have as profound impact on psychological well-being as those focussed on individual psychological recovery.

Finally, it is important to note that, two years post-conflict, the number of less-well children was slightly greater in Foca than in the much more war-exposed city of Gorazde. The fact that most of the children were more alienated than in Gorazde, and half of them wanted to leave, shows that the misery and difficulties of living in a politically isolated and materially neglected community such as Foca may well outweigh the more studied effects of war such as bombing and shooting. Such post-conflict societies warrant more study in their own right.

Conclusions

This research is a small part of a much larger ethnographic exploration of how adolescents make sense of political violence. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of meaning and significance. Participant observation allows for an immersion in the specific cultural contexts. The obvious limitation is its specificity. The models of relationships suggested herein are made on the basis of small clusters of case studies and located in specific cultural contexts at a particular historical moment. However, they raise important questions about the relationship between political understanding and psychological well-being that may have applicability in other war-affected societies.

In the context of a prolonged and brutal war in which adolescents had little opportunity for active engagement except in assisting in the tasks of basic survival, searching for meaning does not appear to be protective. Moreover, searching for meaning appears to be associated with sensitivity to the political environment and consequent greater feelings of insecurity. In the more

exposed environment of Gorazde, the more exposed adolescents were more likely to engage in a search for meaning and to be more partisan in their attributions of responsibility. Less-exposed adolescents were more disengaged and more dispassionate about the causes of the conflict.

In Foca, there was no relationship between exposure and engagement. Engagement appeared to bring adolescents face to face with insoluble contradictions regarding explanations for events and relationships with other ethnic groups. Disengagement allowed adolescents to avoid such contradictions and maintain better individual psychological health. But it also meant that the implicit beliefs of the Serbian community in this area–that their security depends on ethnic separatism–could go unchallenged by the younger generation. Given the international community's commitment to a multi-ethnic Bosnia, the cost of this at an inter-communal level has yet to be calculated.

The results suggest that when studying young people in war-affected societies, more attention should be paid to the process of engaging in a search for meaning as well as in the content of the meanings themselves. More exploration of the benefits of the more avoidant coping mechanisms is also warranted. Post-conflict societies require more study in all their complexity, including the long-term communal and social effects of political violence. For those young people that do engage in the search for meaning, the best forms of support and assistance may take the form of advocating material, social, and political changes that will bring some resolution to the contradictions and difficulties that they face.

Acknowledgements

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