Political Conflict and Youth: A Long-Term View

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the scientific study of youth experience with political conflict has come into its own as a recognized, vibrant field of scholarship. This essay briefly reviews the state of the research. It notes the upsurge in volume and increase in the sophistication of the research, including larger and more representative samples, inclusion of locally defined assessments of youth functioning, and the study of the broader social ecology of youth who experience political conflict. These elements of progress notwithstanding, the research remains overwhelming driven by psychopathology models and has yet to extend either to systematically explore a broader focus on youth social, civic, economic, and political functioning or to seriously consider youth's cognitive and behavioral engagements in political conflict.

The bulk of the essay focuses on a different and crucial need for research refinement: namely, adopting a longer term view in to youth's development and functioning. As the large majority of young people survive the violence of political conflict without serious dysfunction, the field needs to examine the degree to which the normative transitions of their onward lives are shaped by their experiences with political conflict. The essay invokes classic theory from sociology and developmental psychology in advocating for such a life course perspective and it details a methodology—event history calendaring—ideally suited to collect such data. The essay closes with a brief overview of an ongoing study of the adult functioning of Palestinian youth of the first intifada to illustrate the feasibility and utility of this methodology.

INTRODUCTION

Appropriate to the continuing incidence of violent political conflicts globally in which youth are centrally involved, the scientific study of youth experience with political conflict has developed solidly over the past two decades. Since the late 1990s, hundreds of studies have been conducted in many regions of the world, and—particularly given the establishment of several region-specific research teams who benefit from generous private and public funding—there is good reason to believe that this momentum will continue (see Barber, 2014, a recent review).

In this essay, I wish to briefly summarize the conclusions from these previous reviews, but then concentrate on developing the arguments for why and how longer term assessments of youth functioning is a pursuit that should be developed vigorously. In brief, many reviews have shown that the large majority of populations of youth who experience violent political conflict survive without serious dysfunction. Therefore, our research designs—instead of recycling conventional models that correlate psychological or behavioral problems with violent exposures near in time to the conflict—need to incorporate a longer term view to if or how political conflict impacts their transitions to and through adulthood. I will lay out theoretical arguments and illustrate a methodology for capturing trajectories of life events and youth development across the transition to adulthood. Finally, I use an on-going study as illustration and validation for the feasibility and utility of this method.

STATE OF THE RESEARCH

Although a relatively new specialty of inquiry, the scientific literature investigating how exposure to or involvement in political conflict impacts children, and youth has grown substantially and rapidly since pioneers of the field laid the groundwork two decades ago (Cairns & Dawes, 1996). My recent review of the field used their expectations and admonitions as standards, and found the current state of research both encouraging and discouraging (Barber, 2014).

Clear progress has been made in the overall volume of the work—averaging 15 peer-reviewed empirical (quantitative) studies per year over the past 4 years (2010–2013). Further, largely owing to the interest and backing of both private foundations and government agencies, studies are increasingly examining larger, more representative samples. This, in turn, has permitted the use of sophisticated analytic methods.

Other areas of progress include an increasing sensitivity to both culture and context. As for culture, instead of only importing Western-derived constructs and measures of mental functioning, increasingly studies are developing and employing locally defined measures. As examples, these include measures of distress (Afghanistan; Panter-Brick, Eggerman, Gonzalez, & Safdar, 2009), problems (Rwanda; Betancourt *et al.*, 2012), possession by spirits or demons (Northern Uganda; Neuner *et al.*, 2012), and feelings of being broken or destroyed (Palestine; McNeely *et al.*, 2014).

As for context, in the effort to detect the impact on young people of exposure to political conflict, much work is now better acknowledging the complex social ecologies that youth inhabit (i.e., as opposed to simply measuring exposure to political violence). Specifically, models now include assessments

of community, school, religion, peers, family, and/or ethnic group. Findings generally show that youth experiences in most of these contexts uniquely and/or cumulatively impact their well-being apart from their experiences with political conflict (e.g., Barber, 2001; Betancourt *et al.*, 2012; Boxer *et al.*, 2013; Cummings *et al.*, 2012).

Understandably, the family context has received the most consistent attention in these enhanced models. Elements of family life—family structure, positive family relations, conflict, abuse, parents' health, etc.—have been shown to directly impact the functioning of young people in conflict zones and/or to mediate the impact of exposure to political violence on youth well-being (e.g., Betancourt, McBain, Newnham, & Brennan, 2013; Cummings *et al.*, 2012; Dubow *et al.*, 2012; Panter-Brick, Grimon, & Eggerman, 2013; Slone, Shechner, & Oula, 2012).

These areas of progress notwithstanding, the research literature suffers from formidable limitations. One is the persistent preoccupation with mental health and behavioral problems when conceptualizing and measuring the impact of political conflict on young people. Consistent with prior periods, over 90% of the studies published in the upsurge of work over the past 4 years have focused exclusively or primarily on mental and behavioral problems of young people in conflict zones (Barber, 2014). This narrow focus severely limits the utility of the research findings and must be broadened if we are going to approach understanding the complex impact of political conflict on young people (i.e., beyond the minority who manifests significant problem behaviors).

The recommendation to do so was made already two decades ago (Cairns & Dawes, 1996) and has been repeated regularly since (e.g., Barber, 2013; Pedersen, Tremblay, Errazuriz, & Gamarra, 2008). The risks and consequences of this narrow focus are elaborated in those publications. In brief, they include isolating the individual from the collective, pathologizing normative stress, questionable validity of mental health constructs, etc. The issue is not if there is risk to mental functioning from political conflict, but rather how functioning should be construed, measured, and modeled. Anyone's functioning is broader than the psychological, and thus the pressing questions are what other aspects of a young person's life (e.g., social, civic, religious, economic, and political) are impacted by their experiences with political conflict and what the linkages are among those diverse domains of experience.

A second limitation is the failure to seriously consider youth as active agents in their experiences with political conflict. Conventional models treat youth as passive victims of degrading political violence. However, both youth and political conflict are far more complex than this. As elaborated elsewhere (Barber, 2013, 2014), substantial gains in understanding youth response to political conflict would be made if we explicitly acknowledge

them as active agents with partially formed identities, orientations, and perspective regarding self and society—who, moreover, engage with political conflict, whether cognitively or behaviorally. Ample research has shown that young people interpret political conflict and respond to it variably depending on how understandable, predictable, legitimate, and urgent they judge it to be (Barber, 2009; Jones, 2002; Punamäki, 1996; Straker, Mendelsohn, Moosa, & Tudin, 1996). Such cognitive engagement has not yet been acknowledged in conventional research models exploring youth response to political conflict. Neither has youth's behavioral engagement as activists in political conflict been incorporated into research models, despite their key role in many of the conflicts that researchers study (for one exception, see Barber & Olsen, 2009).

As summarized previously, a fundamental reworking of conventional models would enhance our ability to understand the impact of political conflict on young people. Such refined models would include holistic assessments of functioning, acknowledge youth's cognitive and behavioral engagement, and—rather than treat exposure to political violence as the starting point of inquiry—"probe how substantially the rigorous challenges of political conflict have shaped (i.e., interrupted, delayed, altered, curtailed, redirected, enhanced, etc.) their continuing development as individuals and citizens" (Barber, 2014, p. 128).

The balance of this essay addresses yet another crucial need in the study of youth experience with political conflict; namely, tracing the impact of their conflict experiences across the long term as they transition to adulthood.

FUTURE RESEARCH: ASSESSING LONGER TERM FUNCTIONING

Several factors coincide to recommend that one key direction for future research is assessing the impact of political conflict on the longer term functioning of young people. First, we now have ample evidence from conventional cross-sectional and short-term longitudinal studies that exposure to political violence has weak to moderate correlations with mental and behavioral problems. It is time now to assess how else political conflict might impact young people. Moreover, as the large majority survive conflict and proceed on with their lives, our investigations should be tracking their development over time.

Second, a clear momentum to look to the longer term is emerging. Specifically, while the large majority of research studies are still cross-sectional and conducted close in time to the moments of political conflict, nearly one-quarter of the studies published in the past 4 years have included multiple, typically annual, assessments for up to 4 years (e.g., Betancourt *et al.*, 2013; Boxer *et al.*, 2013; Cummings *et al.*, 2012; Dubow *et al.*, 2012;

Panter-Brick, Goodman, Tol, & Eggerman, 2011). This reflects researchers' increasing appreciation for the need for longitudinal evidence, and it also signals abundant funding necessary to conduct such studies. To date, however, the design of most of the recent longitudinal studies has been to maintain the conventional focus on violence exposure and problem behaviors, and to confirm the common finding of correlation from cross-sectional analyses.

Third, theoretically informed methods are available to achieve data necessary to answer the question of the long-term impact of political conflict. One such promising method is event history calendaring (Belli, Stafford, & Alwin, 2009). This method has been rigorously tested and validated in economics and cognitive psychology, but, until recently, it has not been employed in research on political conflict and its impact on the developing young person.

In the following sections, I will lay out theory that is helpful in contemplating how to approach the study of long-term effects. Then, I will describe a specific method that can be used to that end. I will conclude with illustrations of the use of that method in an on-going project.

EVENT HISTORY THEORY

Considering the question of the long-term impact of political conflict invites inclusion of rich theories from psychology (e.g., lifespan development; Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999) and sociology (e.g., life course theory; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003) that speak to human development across the life span. Such approaches have not yet been well integrated into the burgeoning research on political conflict, which remains dominated by psychopathology, stress, and biomedical perspectives (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010).

Relevant theories invoke different terminology—such as life history, life span, or life course—but all share several basic presumptions. First and most basic is the presumption that, regardless of age, human development continues throughout the course of life and that individuals establish pathways or trajectories through the variety and sequence of events that they experience in their various contexts (Baltes *et al.*, 1999; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder *et al.*, 2003; Hobfoll, 2002; Lerner, 1991).

Second, this contextualized development is, therefore, embedded in history such that it is impacted by the sociocultural conditions present in a given historical period and how these conditions change or evolve over time (Baltes *et al.*, 1999; Hobfoll, 2002). Thus, evaluating an individual's well-being requires not only a charting of the key events that have occurred over the course of his or her life but to note that specific historical periods—particularly those that involve large-scale social changes such as

economic cycles and war—substantially affect the challenges, opportunities, and resources available to individuals and can involve changes in both personal and social identities (Elder *et al.*, 2003). In support of the relevance of this approach, recent evidence from nonconflict studies of youth indicates that the environmental parameters of harshness and unpredictability have both concurrent effects on life history development in adolescence as well as longitudinal effects into young adulthood (Brumbach, Figueredo, & Ellis, 2009).

Third, there are specific life events that can be particularly significant—both in the fact of their occurrence and their timing or sequencing—that shape an individual's development, some of which can be considered turning points in that they involve substantial change in a given life trajectory or pathway (Elder *et al.*, 2003). In the case of Palestinian male youth in the first Intifada, for example, the event of imprisonment [experienced once or more often by at least 25% of them (Barber & Olsen, 2009)] was highly significant for many in that it fundamentally altered their political orientation and, contrary to the intent of deterrence, it spurred for many enhanced self-esteem and greater commitments to the movement (Barber, 2009).

However, to emphasize the point of the salience of event timing, the same imprisonment event experienced later in the course of life might not have the same promotive significance or might even be experienced as a damaging. This could be so for a number of reasons, examples of which are if the individual had married, he might view the imprisonment as a burden because it distracted from the higher priority of supporting his family; if he had by then concluded that his past efforts to affect political change were fruitless; or, if the later imprisonment was actually at the hands of the Palestinian leadership once they had acceded to power. (Very few females were imprisoned.)

Fourth, life history orientations share the view that lives are lived interdependently. This connectedness is especially salient in many cultures that are undergoing political strife that place high value on interpersonal, particularly family, relationships. Connectedness can be impacted directly and indirectly. Thus, the direct loss of a key person(s) is a highly salient event that likely significantly impacts a young person's well-being. In addition, economic hardship—a central consequence of political conflict—can also reduce the availability or effectiveness of parents or peers in providing critical social support, thereby indirectly reducing the young person's social well-being (Elder & Conger, 2000).

A fifth fundamental component of life span theories makes an important bridge to a second main element of the relevant theoretical frameworks: namely, resources. Fundamental to resource frameworks is the assertion that well-being is a function of the balance of gains and losses that individuals experience through the course of their lives (Baltes *et al.*, 1999).

RESOURCE THEORY

Elaborations of life event theory, such as resource theories (e.g., Hobfoll, 1989), are especially salient to the study of political conflict due to the destruction conflict can do to economic (housing, food supplies, employment, etc.) and social (the death, detention, or incapacitation of kin and peers, etc.) resources (Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Boyden, 2003). One specific elaboration of life event, resource, and stress theories is Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resource theory (COR). More so than other resource or stress theories, Hobfoll—viewing resources broadly and defined by culture—elaborates importantly on the nature and dynamics of *resource loss*. Beyond having demonstrated that resource loss is consistently more predictive than resource gain, Hobfoll specifies that resource *loss* is more salient to well-being than resource *lack* (Hobfoll, 2001) and thus change in resources is more determinative than absolute level of resources (Freund & Riediger, 2001). Further, resource loss tends to accumulate (i.e., in *resource caravans*; Hobfoll, 2002; see also Layne *et al*., 2009).

In sum, contemplating how experiences with political conflict might impact the later functioning of young people can be enriched by consideration of life course and lifespan theories. These and related theories instruct on the importance of analyzing life trajectories: that is, timing and patterning of events; how those events might be clustered in pivotal historical periods, or might otherwise be experienced as landmark events; that the well-being of young people is interconnected with that of significant others; and that progressing across the life course is a matter of retention, gain, or—most saliently, loss—of economic and other culturally valued resources.

EVENT HISTORY METHODS—THE EVENT HISTORY CALENDAR

Life event calendaring has become a highly respected and credible method of assessing an individual's biographical history (Belli, Bilgen, & Al Baghal, 2013; Belli *et al*., 2009). It allows for the assessment of multiple dimensions of a person's life that unfold simultaneously and that are interwoven both temporally and causally (Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, & Young-DeMarco, 1988). The method is effective at overcoming the subjective and often elusive nature of memory, particularly regarding post-event trauma recall, by facilitating the reconstruction of memory through increasing the respondent's ability to place different activities within the same time frame during the interview process (Freedman *et al*., 1988). The Event History Calendar (EHC) approach differs notably from other life event work in that it emphasizes timing and patterns of life events rather than just incidence (e.g., Tennant, 2002).

Specifically, certain events are readily remembered, such as marriages, births, and changes in residence, and they provide important reference points for recalling less salient events or extended life circumstances such as school enrollment, details of employment, and living arrangements. Researchers have found that when individuals attempt to recall a past event, they typically align their memories spatially as well as temporally, and visually connect seemingly unrelated events to one another (Barsalou, 1988; Neisser & Winograd, 1988). Thus, a particular advantage of the EHC method is that it allows respondents to visualize in the calendar the interconnectedness of past events and determine whether they have accurately reported the co-occurrence or ordering of various events (Axinn, Pearce, & Ghimire, 1999). By achieving a comprehensive set of observations over time, the researcher can examine the sequencing of events, as well simultaneous transitions in different domains, and is thereby able to provide a richer picture of potential causal mechanisms in the development of an individual's well-being (Freedman *et al.*, 1988; Roberts & Mulvey, 2009).

In conflict environments, episodes of conflict could also serve as key anchoring events. This is particularly the case for Palestinian youth whose lives have included regular moments of clearly circumscribed and widely recognized episodes or lulls between episodes of conflict, such as the 1987–1993 first Intifada; the 1994–2000 Oslo period; the specific day of the second in 2000; the 2005 withdrawal of Israeli settlers from Gaza; the 2006 election of Hamas; and the 2007 military takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas.

Past empirical evidence has demonstrated the validity of EHC methodology across areas of social science research, epidemiology, and family planning studies in achieving high quality retrospective reports of employment status, work history, health-related issues, income, and cohabitation patterns (Agrawal, Andreski, & Belli, 2004; Belli, Shay, & Stafford, 2001; Glasner & van der Vaart, 2009). For example, Caspi *et al.* (1996) used EHC as a follow-up measure to substantiate data collected 3 years earlier for living arrangements, cohabitation, schooling, employment, and job training for young adults transitioning to adulthood and found significant agreement between reports. Belli *et al.* (2001) compared EHC with more traditional Q-List techniques using a national sample of respondents from the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Comparisons between the two approaches revealed that the EHC methodology yielded more accurate reports of work history, income, and mobility. A review of seven studies that simultaneously implemented calendar methods and conventional survey methods concluded that the use of a calendar outperforms conventional methods in terms of data quality. Data quality was measured as the concordance between retrospective reports and an independent source of validation

and as the more frequent reporting of events under the assumption that underreporting is the norm (Belli *et al.*, 2013).

EHC methodologies have also been employed to investigate areas such as stressful life events, youth life histories, and the impact of daily exposure to filial violence on youth. For example, Ensel, Peek, Lin, and Lai (1996) utilized EHC to examine undesirable life changes over a 15-year period to investigate differential responses to distal versus more recent or proximal stressors in relationship to respondent age (32 years of age and older), finding that life events even as far back as 15 years prior still have a significant and measureable impact on well-being.

In sum, the EHC is an optimal method for retrospectively tracking the life trajectories of youth who have lived through political conflict. This is particularly the case because political conflict typically includes highly memorable events that, along with other standard life course landmark events, assist in accurately recalling experience. Collecting accurate data on the key events of life—particularly those related with loss—will greatly enhance our ability to test if and how experience with political conflict is reflected via trajectories of development through the transition to adulthood.

EVENT HISTORY CALENDARING: A CASE STUDY AMONG PALESTINIANS

Finally, as a case study validation of the feasibility and value of employing an EHC method in studying the long-term impact of political conflict, I will briefly summarize some of the progress of our on-going project: *The Impact of Political Conflict on Youth*: *Assessing Long-Term Well-Being via an Event History—Resource Model* (hereafter: the PAL Project). This multi-phased investigation of the storied generation of Palestinian stone throwers of the first intifada now as adults—funded by the Jacobs Foundation, Switzerland—was designed explicitly to pioneer the use of the EHC method. We are at the beginning stages of analyses of the EHC data. Thus, we cannot yet offer findings from the elaborate life history models that we will eventually test regarding, for example, how experience with political conflict as a youth impacts life event trajectories and adult well-being. Nevertheless, our experience with the implementation of the method—including input from the fieldworkers who conducted the interviews—and findings from preliminary analyses strongly recommend the feasibility of this methodology.

The PAL project has had several phases; including extensive interviewing to learn how this cohort of Palestinian adults conceives of quality of life and well-being (Barber *et al.*, 2014), and careful pilot testing of the multi-domain functioning assessment we created from these interviews (McNeely *et al.*, 2014). Of most relevance to this article is the main, EHC phase of the project.

On the basis of the interview data from the first phase of the project, and in extensive consultation with several key informants, we created a list of events most relevant to understanding the life history trajectories of this population to be included on the EHC. In the same interview, we administered the multi-domain inventory of current functioning.

An EHC is essentially a grid, with life events listed in the left column (right column in the Arabic version) with succeeding columns, in our case, representing years of the life course from 1987 (beginning of the first intifada) to 2011 (the year of the interview). The final EHC covered 15 domains (with multiple questions within each domain), including, among others, education, employment, family formation, significant separations, violence exposure, political activism, restrictions on movement, and resource adequacy. The interviewer and respondent work jointly in the respondent's home to record values for each event × year cell, with the interviewer using several cross-checking techniques to validate the data. The EHC was written in English, back-translated to Arabic, pilot tested, and revised.

Utilizing an EHC methodology required us learning the method and then training local fieldworkers how to implement it. We conducted multiple, 3-day training sessions (two each in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) with 47 fieldworkers from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR; Ramallah, West Bank). In September and October 2011, these field workers conducted in Arabic household interviews with a representative sample of 1,800 30–40 year olds in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. The clustered three-stage probability sample was drawn from all Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) enumeration areas from updated 2007 PCBS census maps. Kish tables were used to select one eligible adult per household. Two fieldworkers—a male and a female—conducted every interview in order to maximize entry to all of the homes in the sample (i.e., avoiding having only a male interviewing a female, and vice versa). The response rate was 97%.

Given that this method of interview was new to these otherwise highly experienced home interviewers, it was important to assess how they experienced the process. Accordingly, we surveyed the fieldworkers and supervisors as to their perceptions of the EHC method. The large majority of interviewers reported confidence: in the respondents' ability to remember both major (95.7%) and detailed (85.1%) events; in the accuracy of the data (95.7%); and that the method of recording responses on the EHC was easy to understand and master (91.4%).

Preliminary analyses of the data also make us confident of its validity. Descriptively, for example, PAL participants' reports of the frequency of their exposure to specific forms of political violence two decades earlier as youth of the first intifada are very much in line with those reported in

1998 by youth of the same generation (Barber & Olsen, 2009). In addition, the latent profile analyses we have conducted of trajectories of specific life events across the 25-year period [e.g., demographics (education, employment, and marriage; Spellings, McNeely, Barber, & Belli, 2012); exposure to political violence (Barber, McNeely, Olsen, Spellings, & Belli, 2013); and imprisonment (McNeely, 2014)] have resulted in historically and culturally sensible clusters (i.e., classes) of individuals.

In sum, every evidence to date confirms the feasibility and validity of an EHC method in assessing adults whose lives have been punctuated by historic periods of intense political conflict. We look forward to the results of forthcoming analyses that exploit these data to identify how youth move forward with their lives and how their experiences with political conflict impact those trajectories. We also look forward to other research teams adopting and validating this method in the search for understanding experience with political conflict shapes the lives of young people as they move forward with their lives.

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