

Annual Research Review: The experience of youth with political conflict – challenging notions of resilience and encouraging research refinement

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Aims and method: Drawing on empirical studies and literature reviews, this paper aims to clarify and qualify the relevance of resilience to youth experiencing political conflict. It focuses on the discordance between expectations of widespread dysfunction among conflict-affected youth and a body of empirical evidence that does not confirm these expectations. **Findings:** The expectation for widespread dysfunction appears exaggerated, relying as it does on low correlations and on presumptions of universal response to adversity. Such a position ignores cultural differences in understanding and responding to adversity, and in the specific case of political conflict, it does not account for the critical role of ideologies and meaning systems that underlie the political conflict and shape a young people's interpretation of the conflict, and their exposure, participation, and processing of experiences. With respect to empirical evidence, the findings must be viewed as tentative given the primitive nature of research designs: namely, concentration on violence exposure as the primary risk factor, at the expense of recognizing war's impact on the broader ecology of youth's lives, including disruptions to key economic, social, and political resources; priority given to psychopathology in the assessment of youth functioning, rather than holistic assessments that would include social and institutional functioning and fit with cultural and normative expectations and transitions; and heavy reliance on cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal, studies. **Conclusions:** Researchers and practitioners interested in employing resilience as a guiding construct will face such questions: Is resilience predicated on evidence of competent functioning across the breadth of risks associated with political conflict, across most or all domains of functioning, and/or across time? In reality, youth resilience amidst political conflict is likely a complex package of better and poorer functioning that varies over time and in direct relationship to social, economic, and political opportunities. Addressing this complexity will complicate the definition of resilience, but it confronts the ambiguities and limitations of work in cross-cultural contexts. **Keywords:** Youth, political conflict, war, competence, resilience.

Introduction

Efforts to understand and assist young people who experience political conflict are increasingly invoking 'resilience' as a construct or framework. As many practitioner-researchers note, this evolution reflects a very significant and useful transition away from deficit and trauma frameworks to prevention and intervention models that consider the strengths and capacities of young people and their social ecology (e.g., Ager, 2013, this issue; Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013, this issue). Although the value of this transition is clear (and consistent with urgings from researchers investigating the impact of political conflict on youth; Barber, 2009a), the importation of resilience as a label for these efforts is not without problem. This is so because despite (or because of) its widespread use across academic disciplines and professions it is not clear what resilience actually means. The construct is confused and complex, perhaps nowhere more so than in literatures that address the functioning of young people exposed to the potentially traumatic events of war. For example,

Layne, Warren, Watson, and Shalev (2007) note that there are as many as eight different definitions of resilience in the trauma literatures alone. They and others call for more precision when defining and measuring the construct (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Richardson, 2002).

The purpose of this article was to cover some of the key issues that make up the complexity of the construct so that those who choose to adopt it are equipped to know its limits and make decisions about clarifying or avoiding its historical problems. The mechanism used in the article to inspect the viability of the resilience construct is to juxtapose it with findings from the rapidly expanding research literatures on youth and political conflict. [For a more elaborated treatment of this analysis, see Barber and Doty (2013)]. The choice of reconciling the construct with the literatures on youth and political conflict is apt because one of the fundamental concerns of resilience scholars when justifying the construct is that studies have not been done within the resilience literatures on populations at high enough risk to adequately establish a real test of whether the functioning they observe can properly be considered resilient (Vanderbilt-Adriance &

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Shaw, 2008). The concern is therefore that reported levels of resilience may be exaggerated. Contexts of political conflict seem ideal to such an examination given their obvious, extreme, and often persistent adversity.

In pursuing this analysis, substantial conceptual information on resilience is discussed and many findings of research on conflict youth are reviewed. Hopefully, therefore, the material will be valuable for scholars/professionals in these respective realms who may not be fluent with the material from the alternate domain. Likewise, the strategy of confronting the ambiguities or limitations of the bodies of work should be useful for both groups as they move forward with considering employing the resilience construct in their work.

In brief, the analysis reveals substantial incompatibility or dissonance between historic conceptualizations of resilience and research findings on youth and political conflict. Specifically, contrary to the expected widespread dysfunction of youth experiencing such severe adversity, majorities of youth populations experiencing political conflict appear to function effectively (see critique below).

The analysis begins by articulating a few main principles of the construct of resilience that together imply or explicitly forecast relatively rare competent functioning among youth in a population with as much risk as war. The research literatures are then briefly reviewed to reveal the dissonance between those expectations and the research findings. Next the article discusses potential resolutions to that dissonance, considering, on the one hand, that expecting limited competent functioning in such conditions might itself be unreasonable; and, on the other hand, that it may be that the limitations of research have prevented detection of the widespread dysfunction that might actually exist. The article concludes with a discussion of some challenges scholars and practitioners face when employing the construct of resilience in their work.

Defining resilience

Consistent with the admonitions of resilience scholars to carefully define the construct, I first articulate three principles that appear to be fundamental to it, particularly as it would apply to youth experiencing political conflict. This will create a conceptual standard to be used in critiquing the research findings on youth and political conflict. These principles are basic to defining resilience and, crucially, its putative distinctiveness from more normative functioning. As the article will make clear, they are, however, problematic in their own right and reveal some of the many inconsistencies or contradictions that exist in the dense literatures on resilience. The principles are: (a) resilience requires risk; (b) resilient functioning is uncommon; and (c) political conflict can entail such extreme adversity that resilience would be even rarer.

Resilience requires risk

One of the original challenges to the viability of the construct of resilience was whether and how it differs from normative functioning or adaptation (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). The central argument by proponents in defense of the construct in the face of this basic concern has been to clarify that resilience refers explicitly and exclusively to functioning in contexts of substantial risk or adversity (Masten & Reed, 2001; Rutter, 2006). Indeed, in a recent defense of the distinctiveness of resilient functioning (i.e., distinct from competence), Rutter (2012) makes plain that one cannot consider resilience unless serious contextual adversities are clearly established and baselined; only after which a determination can be attempted as to which individuals exposed to those adversities might be functioning resiliently. In essence, according to this view, resilience is a unique form of competent functioning that can only be apparent in the face of considerable adversity.

That said, this defining principle of resilience has itself not been without challenge within the resilience literatures. Other resilience scholars have preferred to view resilience as not necessarily different from adaptation to more ordinary challenges (Sameroff & Rosenblum, 2006), but rather as an extension of the study of normal development (Layne et al., 2007). Consistent with this view would be the failure to find evidence of protective factors associated with resilient functioning that are substantively different than those that predict normative functioning (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Masten & Curtis, 2000).

Resilient functioning is uncommon

Inherent in the grounding distinction that resilient functioning is unique from normative adaptation is the implication that such functioning is uncommon. Thus, resilient children or youth function relatively well compared to others despite suffering adversity, by defying expectations and not succumbing to risk-induced negative outcomes that most suffer (Cicchetti, 1996; Luthar, 1991; Luthar et al., 2000; Rutter, 2006). Related is the debate about whether resilience should be considered as resistance or recovery. For some, rather than revealing competent adjustment, the construct describes a distinctive response in the face of challenge or risk that is variously characterized as resisting, escaping, being less vulnerable, not struggling as much as others, or having a heightened ability to handle stress (Hoge, Austin & Pollack, 2007; Westpahl & Bonanno, 2007; Wexler, DiFluvio & Burke, 2009). Others explicitly separate resistance from resilience (Layne et al., 2007), with resistance referring to maintained functioning under stressful conditions and resilience describing quick or full recovery from significant decrements in functioning upon exposure to stress (e.g., Bonanno, 2008; Masten, 2001).

Although these finer grained distinctions between resilience, resistance, and recovery complicate understanding what resilience is, together they imply that adaptation in the context of risk is exceptional; that is, unexpected and remarkable (Layne et al., 2007; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Indeed, in his recent articulation of the distinctiveness of resilient functioning, Rutter (2012) makes clear that only some individuals function well in the face of the type of adversity required to reveal resilience. The discordance of this exceptionalist view of resilience with another thread in the resilience literatures – that resilience is more normative – will be discussed below. Suffice it for the moment to make the point that basic conceptualizations of resilience (particularly, resistance) imply that it reflects uncommon imperviousness to expected injury or an unusual ability to quickly recover from it (Barber & Doty, 2013).

Political conflict as the ultimate challenge to resilience

The third presumption of the conceptual foundation of resilience relevant to the analysis of this article is that the specific context of political conflict exemplifies the very type of extreme risk that is requisite for identifying exceptionally functioning individuals. In general, scholars have contended that children have low odds of success in high-risk contexts; that their resilience cannot be sustained in such environments; and that maladjustment is inevitable (Luthar, 1991; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Although until recently, resilience per se has not been frequently studied in populations experiencing political conflict, comments from resilience scholars regarding war include describing it as containing serious life adversities and extreme trauma (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Masten & Reed, 2002). These contexts are viewed as so extremely risky that some have recommended a downgrading of the standard for identifying resilience, such that the mere absence of psychopathology or maladjustment (rather than evidence of positive functioning) would be adequate to identify resilience (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Luthar et al., 2000; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008).

In sum, three basic principles or presuppositions underlie the historic conceptualization of resilience relevant to the task of this analysis. They suggest that resilience, by definition, is a unique, nonnormative type of functioning that can be exhibited only in the face of adversity. Because severe adversity is presumed to disable most people, resilient functioning in such contexts is viewed as extraordinary. As the argument goes, this would be the case especially in severely adverse contexts such as war and other forms of violent political conflict wherein simply escaping psychopathology would qualify as resilience.

The discordance between expectations and research findings

These expectations do not receive support, however, when examining the research literatures on the impact of political conflict on youth. In that substantial body of work, typically weak correlations between war exposure and negative (primarily psychological) functioning are found in most studies (particularly when community samples are studied). And, in as many as a fifth of them either no correlation is found or they discern an association that is positive (i.e., the higher the exposure, the lower the problem behavior score; see Barber & Schluterman, 2009 for a review). Accordingly, reviewers of the research literatures have regularly concluded that despite the violence and varied forms of destructiveness that characterize political conflict, the evidence is that there is not widespread maladaptive functioning in these populations (Almedom & Glandon, 2007; Barenbaum, Ruchkin & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Cairns & Dawes, 1996; Daiute, 2006; Gilligan, 2009; Layne et al., 2007; Panter-Brick, 2010; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). The conclusion applies across studies of passive exposure to violence, voluntary engagement in conflict, and coerced soldierhood (Annan, Blattman, Mazurana & Carlson, 2011; Betancourt, McBain, Newnham & Brennan, 2012; Betancourt, Williams, Kellner, Gebre-Medhin, Hann, and Kayiteshonga (2012); Wessells & Kostelny, 2009).

This consensus runs directly counter to the expectations of resilience discussed above whereby resilient functioning would certainly not be expected in a majority of young people experiencing such severe adversity. As we wrote elsewhere: 'it begs the fundamental question of how it is possible for a majority to be resilient. That is, if resilience defines a unique group of individuals – a group that would be of even smaller size because of the severity of the risks it is exposed to – then it is logically untenable for the group to also be characterized a majority.' (Barber & Doty, 2013)

Instead, the research findings are consistent with a different thread within the resilience literatures that suggests that such functioning is far more ordinary than it is unusual (Bonanno, 2004, 2008), even in contexts of severe adversity (Masten, 2001). Here, rather than being unique or unexpected, resilience is construed as a defining feature of life (Richardson, 2002); as intrinsic recovery, a fundamental characteristic of normal coping, not a sign of exceptional strength (Bonanno, 2008); and that majorities of people exposed to potentially traumatic events exhibit stable, healthy functioning (Hoge et al., 2007; Westpahl & Bonanno, 2007).

In sum, the research conclusion of majority adaptive functioning in the contexts of political conflict challenges the principles outlined at the beginning of the article. It contradicts the expectation from

resilience conceptualizations that only some would function adequately in these contexts of extreme adversity. It thereby also reinforces the skepticism about the distinctiveness of resilience from normative functioning.

Resolving the dissonance between expected dysfunction and majority competence

There are at least three ways in which the dissonance between the expectations from foundational thinking about resilience and the research findings can be resolved. One solution would be to reframe the contexts of war and political conflict as not particularly risky, such that the findings of majority competent functioning among youth would no longer be surprising. This explanation is clearly unacceptable since such contexts are indisputably risky, containing as they do harsh and brutal circumstances that injure, kill, and disrupt access to essential resource, services, and social networks (Barber, 2008; Betancourt & Khan, 2008). The circumstances are even more severe when considering conscripted soldiers who not only witness the harshness of violence but are often coerced to perpetrate it in brutal ways (Annan et al., 2011; Betancourt et al., 2013; Wessells, 2006; Wessells & Kostelny, 2009).

One is left therefore to resolve the dissonance by either questioning the presumed inevitability of dysfunction in such adverse circumstances, or to question the finding of majority competence; that is, that limitations in the research process may be preventing the detection of real widespread dysfunction. Beginning with the first approach, two standards for conceptualizing and determining risk or trauma are discussed below that deserve challenge: the 'universality' of risk and trauma, and the statistical determination of risk and trauma.

The 'Universality' of risk and trauma

Definitions of risk and trauma share the essential criterion that the riskiness or traumatic nature of events or circumstances of concern are experienced universally. For an event to qualify as a risk or as adversity, the experience would need to be considered a stressor to most people (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). Furthermore, trauma associated with PTSD (the most commonly studied outcome in research on the impact of war and conflict) is formally defined as a stressor that 'would evoke significant symptoms of distress in most people' or 'would be markedly distressing to almost anyone' (Criterion A for *DSM-III* and *DSM-III-R*, respectively; Weathers & Keane, 2007).

These definitions are problematic, however, because of the presumption that events are understood and processed similarly across individuals and cultures; in the present case, presuming that all

individuals or groups, either within or across conflicts, interpret the events of those periods of strife uniformly. This runs counter to classic theory which holds that events are considered stressful only to the degree that they are perceived as such (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and that the subjective experience of individuals (and cultures) is critical, therefore, in defining the perception and impact of an event or experience. This is particularly salient in the context of political conflict in which contests typically surround national, cultural, or ethnic identity. These infuse events or aspects of conflict with ideals and values that can impart essential meaning about the legitimacy, urgency, and morality of conflict. Such differential meaning can literally determine what about conflict is or is not stressful, as perceived by youth themselves (e.g., Hammack, 2011; Jones, 2002; Punamäki, 1996) or on the part of caregivers (Betancourt & Khan, 2008).

Instructive in this regard is work comparing the narratives of Bosnian and Palestinian youth who experienced substantial political conflict during the late 1980s and 1990s. Both groups reported having grown from experiences with their respective conflicts (Barber, 2008), but their narratives of conflict were starkly different. The narratives of the Bosnian youths were sterile, empty of elaboration, and full of the trauma of their war, while the narratives of the Palestinian youth were dense with explanatory discourse about the meaning and purpose of their conflict (Barber, 2009b; see also Jones, 2002).

These findings are consistent with other work that has highlighted the salient role of political ideology in how youths process their conflict experiences and their adaptation to it (e.g., Nguyen-Gillham, Giacaman, Naser & Boyce, 2008; Punamäki, 1996; Punamäki, Qouta & El-Sarraj, 2001; Slone, 2009). The central implication of such findings for the argument at hand is that there can be no expectation of inevitable outcomes of experiences with political conflict. Specific conflicts vary on all sorts of parameters, and perhaps most critically on the degree to which young people involved in them find legitimacy, sensibility, and moral/political clarity to the conflict. The availability of such meaning appears to inform their adaptation to the rigors of conflict and to the development of their own identities (Barber, 2009b; Barber & Youniss, 2012; Gibson, 1989; Hammack, 2010; Jones, 2002).

This challenge to the universally distressful nature of political conflict is consistent with concerns of social scientists and psychiatrists about the tendency to exaggerate the prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder. Collectively they note the Western orientation to individual psychology and its tendency to pathologize normative stress (Barenbaum et al., 2004; Becker, 1995; Gilligan, 2009; Summerfield, 2002; Ungar, 2004). Further challenges to the universality of distress in the face of adversity are

the empirical findings of competent functioning in extreme contexts of various kinds (e.g., health adversities, severe personal grief, stress or trauma; see Almedom, 2005; Barber, 2009a; Westpahl & Bonanno, 2007; for reviews of these literatures), including the possibility that some even grow (i.e., past pre trauma adaptation; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) from their conflict experiences. (See Hobfoll et al., 2007 and Westpahl & Bonanno, 2007 for a debate on the viability of such posttraumatic growth.)

The statistical determination of risk and trauma

The expectation of widespread disability is particularly questionable when considering that risk researchers do not typically hold to this standard of the universality of impact of risk and trauma. Resilience research, for example, rarely tests prevalence and when so it employs questionably informative populations (i.e., among whom risk may not be substantial enough to warrant resilience) (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Instead, most of the work relies on statistical correlations to define risk. Those few studies that actually define risk suggest that an event is a risk if it is correlated with a negative outcome (e.g., Gutman, Sameroff & Cole, 2003); that is, it increases the probability of developmental or adjustment problems (e.g., Gerard & Buehler, 2004; Ladd & Burgess, 2001).

Yet, as Kraemer, Stice, Kazdin, Offord, and Kupfer (2001) note, correlates are not causal and therefore are not necessarily risk factors; alternatively, for example, they could be risk markers (i.e., correlates, rather than causal factors; see also Layne et al., 2009 for a discussion of this distinction). Moreover, statistically significant correlates, even if causal, do not justify the expectation that most youth experiencing the risks of war would be suffering substantially from them. Kraemer (2003) notes further that if a standard of a nonzero correlation is used to establish risk, most any variable could qualify if samples were large enough. She and others (e.g., Roisman, 2005) recommend that for risk to be concluded, some evidence of potency should be offered, such that genuine adversity can be distinguished from statistical risk. For their part, resilience researchers acknowledge that much of the work has attended to factors that have statistical associations (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000) and that, moreover, these correlations are typically small (Rutter, 2000).

In this section arguments were presented for challenging the expectation that most young people experiencing political conflict would manifest substantial dysfunction. The expectation was criticized for insensitivity to individual and cultural variability in perceiving and responding to risk and adversity. The expectation was also challenged on the use of (often low) statistical correlations to define risk conditions that predict dysfunction, a method-

ology that does not imply that majorities of individuals exposed to such risks would be harmed by them.

Needed improvements in conflict research related to resilience

An alternative approach to resolving the dissonance is to retain the expectation of widespread dysfunction but to challenge the evidence that contradicts it. Thus, even though the consensus of majority competent functioning among conflict youth as noted above is robust across approaches, conflicts, types of youth engagement, and populations, the overall research on the impact of political conflict remains nevertheless relatively primitive (Barber & Schluterman, 2009; Betancourt et al., 2013). It is appropriate therefore to scrutinize it with an eye to how rectification of its limitations might resolve the dissonance, or otherwise offer insight useful to conceptualizing resilience and its relevance to conflict populations. Full sets of recommendations for needed improvements in the research are offered elsewhere (Barber, 2009c; Betancourt et al., 2013; Panter-Brick, 2010). Here, three are addressed that appear particularly relevant to the discussion at hand: (a) specifying conflict exposure; (b) specifying domains of youth functioning; and (c) assessing functioning over the long-term.

Specifying exposure

The tendency in research on political conflict has been to aggregate exposure into risk or trauma scores, i.e., not to distinguish types of exposure as has been done, for example, in research on nonpolitical violence where exposure is discriminated as direct, indirect, vicarious, witnessed, or by proximity of context (Barbarin, Richter & de Wet, 2001; Trickett, Durán & Horn, 2003). While it is the case that most discussions or indexes of war and political conflict do in fact include multiple types of exposure (e.g., violence exposure, loss, deprivation; e.g., Allwood, Bell-Dolan & Husain, 2002; Macksoud & Aber, 1996; Slone, 2009), most studies aggregate such diverse experiences in an overall trauma index and thereby lose the ability to detect unique effects of different types of conflict exposure.

Distinguishing type of exposure would enhance understanding of the specific potential risks of political conflict. To this end, Layne et al. (2010) have recommended precision in differentiating types of war violence exposure (e.g., direct and witnessed political violence, life threat, traumatic death, loss and displacement, and threat, harm, or loss of loved ones). It is important also to expand past a focus on political violence exposure. Panter-Brick, Goodman, Tol and Eggerman (2011) have recently found, for example, that family violence, more so than political violence, impacted the well-being of Afghan youth.

Appreciating the real impact of political conflict requires also extending past violence *per se*. Studies have shown, for example, that, more so than violence exposure, disruptions in access to key resources are related to difficulty among youth and adults. These disruptions occur in the social domain (e.g., loss of life, displacement, separation, loss of social support, reduction in social networks, etc.) as well as the economic domain (e.g., economic self-sufficiency, ability to buy certain types of food, hunger, breakdown of basic services, cuts in electricity, demolition of homes, access to health care, imprisonment, etc.) (e.g., Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Farhood et al., 1993; Giacaman et al., 2004; Jones & Kafetsios, 2005; Kuterovac-Jagodic, 2003; Punamäki, Muhammed & Abdulrahman, 2004; Weine, Klebic, Celik & Bivic, 2009).

This trend toward specification runs counter, however, to work on risk and resilience that increasingly has favored assessing cumulative exposure (Canavan, 2008; Masten & Reed, 2002) to correct for either its past focus on single risk factors or the implication that risk factors are independent of each other (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Rutter, 2000; Sameroff & Rosenblum, 2006). While accumulated stress or exposure is certainly worth considering (particularly if such accumulation distributes itself in discernible, particularly loss, trajectories; e.g., Hobfoll, 2001; Layne et al., 2009; Luthar et al., 2006), at this stage of appraising what it is about political conflict that might pose risk for youth development it would not be useful to follow this method of accumulation. Rather, the increased specification called for in the conflict youth research literatures would permit discovering if there are specific elements of political involvement or exposure that do reliably compromise large proportions of youth populations.

Specifying youth functioning

A common concern of the resilience and conflict youth literatures is the call for measuring functioning broadly. For its part, the research on the effects of political conflict has focused historically quite narrowly on negative psychological outcomes (Barber & Schluterman, 2009); and much of the current work continues this restricted focus (Cummings et al., 2012; Dubow et al., 2012; Hobfoll, Mancini, Hall, Canetti & Bonanno, 2011). The narrow focus on mental health is problematic because it ignores other domains of holistic functioning (cultural, social, economic, education, religious, political, etc.) that make up the lives of individuals everywhere (Bracken, Giller & Summerfield, 1995). It is also problematic from a cultural perspective, by pathologizing normative stress (e.g., Honwana, 2006; Kleinman & Desjarlais, 1995; Summerfield, 1999), artificially isolating the individual from the collective (Barber, 2009a; Dawes & Cairns, 1998), and, in the

case of political conflict, risking attributing the malady of war and its disruption of resources to the individual rather than to the political and social ecology (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008).

It is encouraging that many are now recommending the establishment of culturally relevant measures of functioning that extend past a narrow focus on intrapsychic states (Ager, 2002; Betancourt, McBain, et al., 2012; Betancourt, Williams, et al. (2012); Giacaman et al., 2007; Mataria et al., 2009; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Panter-Brick, 2010; Panter-Brick et al., 2011; Stark et al., 2009). Particularly valuable is the growing acknowledgement and exploration of political conditions as elements of well-being and quality of life (Barber, McNeely & Spellings, 2012; Giacaman et al., 2011). There are two significant payoffs of this extension. First, it shifts a focus to the ecology of conflict, suggesting that individual functioning (resilience) in large part be a reflection of the ability (resilience) of cultural, social, economic, and political systems to adapt to the disturbances of conflict (Ungar, 2012). Second, it brings to the fore conditions of power, justice, human rights, safety, security, and dignity that are frequently violated in the control and oppression that undergird many political conflicts (Batniji, 2012; Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Prilleltensky, 2012).

As for the resilience literatures, the recommended expansion of the scope of functioning derives from empirical findings that resilience (however measured) is not necessarily continuous or steady across multiple domains of functioning (Bonanno, 2008; Canavan, 2008; Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl & Egolf, 1994; Luthar et al., 2000; Wexler et al., 2009). The implication is that before resilience can be concluded one must study functioning broadly and that it would be manifest 'configurally', i.e., in multiple ways or cumulatively (Masten & Reed, 2002). Some resilience scholars acknowledge, however, that a lack of stability across domains of functioning might call into question the viability of the construct itself – i.e., how can it be resilience if it is not generalized? (Luthar et al., 2000); others caution not to discuss resilience in global ways, but to confine any conclusions to discreet domains of functioning (Layne et al., 2007; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008).

This controversy over the scope of functioning requisite to conclude resilience is another of the inherent ambiguities of the conceptualization of the construct. Nevertheless, regarding broadening the scope of functioning, there is some compatibility between resilience scholars and those studying youth who experience political conflict. One commonality is the admonition to study both problematic and positive functioning. For example, resilience researchers have recommended studying both distress and functioning (Luthar, 1991), or dual factor (i.e., pathogenic and salutogenic) models of health

(Almedom & Glandon, 2007; Ungar, 2004). Conflict researchers for their part have similarly noted the need to study positive outcomes as well as pathology. Those that have studied negative and positive functioning of conflict youth have found both to be predicted by conflict exposure (Barber & Schluterman, 2009), with one study showing that in multivariate analyses it is political activism (more so than exposure) that predicts later positive personal, social, and civic functioning (Barber & Olsen, 2009; see also Blattman, 2009). Ironically, activism is rarely studied in the conflict youth literatures, despite its salience to many of the populations who are examined. Including it would be one way of simultaneously more adequately assessing conditions of political conflict (i.e., past chronicling exposure; see above) and potentially better specifying the impact of political conflict (i.e., either or both positive and negative functioning).

In sum, because of the limited scope of inquiry within the research on the effects of political conflict (i.e., primarily on psychopathology), the conclusion of majority youth competent functioning is automatically qualified. It is conceivable that the conclusion would be otherwise if broader assessments of youth functioning were studied. More likely, however, pursuing more holistic models will add considerable complexity, likely revealing that functioning consists of multiple positive and negative elements.

Studying youth over the longer term

A third way in which the research on youth and political conflict needs to be enhanced is to study the longer term effects of conflict experience. Some short-term longitudinal studies are emerging (e.g., Betancourt, McBain, et al., 2012; Betancourt, Williams, et al. (2012); Hobfoll et al., 2011; Panter-Brick et al., 2011), but most of the studies on the effects of political conflict remain cross-sectional. Expanding to include studies of the longer term functioning of young people who experience political conflict will facilitate the broadened scope of functioning described above, particularly when it focuses on if and how experience with political conflict complicates youths' transitions (and their culturally prescribed timing; Hogan, 1978) to adulthood: employment, forming families, participating in the support and governance of their societies, and so on. Particularly in regions where conflict and restrictions on autonomy persist, it becomes important to also consider how youths' past and current experiences with conflict shape their attitudes toward conflict, peace, acceptable resolutions, types of governmental systems, etc.

Charting the longer term course of young people's lives would also afford the ability to test the impact of conflict exposure relative to other key elements of the ecology that may or may not be related to the conflict per se. As noted, recent work has begun to demon-

strate the determining influence of economic and political conditions in the quality of lives of individuals in conflict zones (Barber et al., 2012; Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Giacaman et al., 2007; Mataria et al., 2009; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010).

Temporal concerns have been discussed regularly in the resilience literatures, again as part of the effort to define the construct. For example, Bonanno (2005) has considered the possibility that short-term coping might be outweighed by longer term costs. Others have suggested that overall quality of life is a function of the trajectories of symptoms or growth that individuals develop over time (Layne et al., 2007), which are otherwise characterized as 'cascades' (Luthar et al., 2006) or resource/loss 'caravans' (Hobfoll, 2001). The implication is that resilience would only be able to be determined by and after developmental patterns have set in. Complicating such a reliance on patterning, however, is the suggestion that resilient functioning itself may not be stable, fluid, or static (Herrenkohl et al., 1994; Wexler et al., 2009), but rather episodic (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008) or interspersed with setbacks (Luthar, 1991). An important task for researchers would be to clarify how much of such fluctuation might be in response to instability in the prevailing contexts themselves. In many political conflicts, economic and political conditions change substantially and regularly over time, a dynamic that informs correspondingly shifting narratives and identities (Barber, 2010; Hammack, 2011).

In sum, because of the cross-sectional limitations to most of the research on the effects of political conflict, it is possible that the conclusion of majority adaptive functioning among youths in such contexts could be premature or certainly incomplete. Although some studies of child functioning after exposure to political conflict (and natural disaster) show a reduction in symptoms over time (Betancourt, McBain, et al., 2012; Betancourt, Williams, et al. (2012); Punamäki et al., 2001), the empirical base is not large or robust enough to answer the question of long-term impact. As for the specific argument being pursued in this article, studies of long-term of functioning will add useful findings pertaining to the relative stability of functioning, a further issue that complicates the definitions of resilience. Yet, it is not clear that such findings would reverse the conclusion of majority adaptive functioning, but, as above, substantially complicate the picture of functioning.

In sum, it is unclear if remedying key limitations of the research on youth and political conflict would alter the consensus to date that majorities of young people survive their experiences with political conflict without substantial disturbance. It is certainly conceivable that modeling the diversity of types of conflict exposures, implementing more holistic frameworks of youth functioning, and investigating longer term effects would reveal specific exposure types that would compromise certain types of

functioning in the majority of young people over time. Just as likely, however, will be revelations of adaptive functioning in the face of certain adversities and of particular kinds. Regardless, this inevitable specificity will continue to challenge the construct of resilience to the extent that it requires generality across domains and stability over time.

Conclusion

This article sought to critique the widely used construct of resilience by evaluating its compatibility with findings from research on youth and political conflict. The exercise was sensible since a basic criticism of the resilience work in general is that it has not yet studied populations at risk severe enough to make a determination about the prevalence of resilient functioning (and thereby may have overestimated it). Since war and political conflict indisputably involve strong and often persistent adversity, levels of youth functioning within them should therefore more accurately illustrate the degree of resilient functioning.

The analysis revealed a fundamental incompatibility between the research findings and expectations that derive from guiding conceptualizations of resilience. One would expect from some principles of resilience that, due to the severity of risk associated with political conflict, most would suffer substantially, i.e., not escape psychopathology. Yet the conclusion from reviews of the research literature is the opposite: that majorities of young people experiencing political conflict appear to function quite competently. The article used a heuristic of resolving this dissonance by challenging each of its parts.

First, the expectation of widespread dysfunction among conflict youth was criticized as potentially unreasonable, due both to how risk is determined (i.e., from statistical correlations that are both weak and noncausal) and to the presumption of universal response to challenging events (i.e., being insensitive to individual and cultural variations in definition and response to difficulty). Adjusting for these problems, the dissonance would be reduced by no longer expecting widespread dysfunction. In general, such an adjustment would harmonize with the thread of resilience conceptualization that describes it as an ordinary, human capacity to adapt. No longer expecting a universal response to the rigors of conflict would also acknowledge variability within and between conflicts, and, regarding youth themselves, would recognize that their functioning has much to do with the particular ideologies they hold (particularly, if and how they make meaning of the conflict).

Alternatively, the conclusion from research of majority competent functioning of conflict youth was challenged by acknowledging limitations of research designs that might preclude the ability to detect the dysfunction that may actually be real. Three needs for improvement in research design

were reviewed with an eye to how rectification of them might assist in resolving the dissonance or otherwise informing on resilience: (a) more comprehensively specifying the variety of elements of political conflict; (b) more broadly assessing domains of youth functioning; and (c) assessing the long-term impact of political conflict. It is not evident from that analysis that improving research in these important ways would lead to a conclusion that aligned better with the expectation of widespread dysfunction. Instead, it appears that such enhancements would appropriately complicate understanding youth functioning and in the process challenge any generalized definition of resilience.

The balance of this discussion summarizes three challenges to the use of the construct of resilience when understanding youth who experience political conflict.

Resilience as normative or exceptional

Scholars and practitioners who wish to employ the construct of resilience in their work on conflict populations must decide how strictly they will adhere to the conceptual foundations of the construct. In its purest form, resilience can only refer to very distinct portions of any population. Candidates for resilient functioning are that remarkable subgroup of a larger population that experiences and is disabled by severe adversity. Technically, youth experiencing political conflict do not qualify for this level of functioning because a baseline of adversity severe enough to compromise the functioning of most who endure it has not been established (Rutter, 2012). Rather, the findings continually demonstrate that most young people in these contexts function competently. Those who would wish to ground their research designs or programs in such traditional perspectives on resilience would also need to wrestle with the granular distinctions that the literature proposes between versions of functioning such as resistance, recovery, and so on.

To the degree that research findings on conflict youth are reliable, they provide perhaps the strongest evidence to date of the normality of competent functioning, in showing that majorities of populations experiencing the substantial and varied rigors and dangers of war are able to adapt effectively. The shift away from deficit and trauma models mentioned at the beginning of the article likely reflects this acknowledgement. But, to maximize the contribution of that work, scholars and practitioners should explicate clearly that they are building on this normative construal of resilience; in other words, making plain the expectation that most of the young people they will study will have adapted effectively and therefore that the purpose of the work, is, for example, either to understand that adaptability more clearly, or to better identify that minority of young people who do suffer mightily (and

who, therefore, are in the most need of understanding and support).

This view of resilience as ordinary problematizes the distinction between resilience and normative functioning that is at the heart of traditional conceptualizations. Therefore, it would be appropriate and helpful for scholars and practitioners to define their version of resilience as compatible (or, in some cases, synonymous) with other common renditions of functioning, such as: competence, adaptation, adjustment, coping, positive functioning, among many, to avoid the misimpression that they are studying a highly unique form of functioning.

The complexity of youth functioning amidst conflict

As welcome and appropriate as the shift away from deficit models is, a purely competence framework would be equally narrow. As discussed extensively elsewhere, progress in understanding functioning amidst conflict will necessarily include attention to both positive and negative elements of youths' adaptation (Barber, 2009a). A variety of frameworks were offered there to explain how both the negative and positive can be understood in the same individual (or group), including the very real possibilities that functioning amidst conflict is ambiguous (e.g., differing cultural definitions or expectations of appropriate adaptation), or that it is a complicated and variable balance of positive and negative features (across domains across time). The challenge for those who wish to employ the construct of resilience is how to accommodate this intricacy. It seems questionably productive to wrestle as to what breadth, duration, or consistency of adaptation would be required to make an all-encompassing determination of resilience. Who, after all, would make such a determination, even if it were a logical goal: theorists, methodologists, cultural experts, policy makers? Better would be to simply be clear about the necessarily limited scope of any work undertaken, including contextualizing it by articulating what realms of functioning were not addressed in the particular effort.

Contextualizing resilience

Finally, there is still a decidedly individual flavor to much of the traditional writing on resilience and conflict youth. The real synergy between individual and context is not new to the resilience field. Indeed, to avoid the implication that resilience is a personal characteristic, efforts were made early on to assure that resilience be understood as a process or an interaction between individual and context (e.g., Luthar et al., 2000). Yet, as articulated above, the treatment of context in discussions about political conflict has been inadequate by presuming universal response to risks without adequate empirical validation and specificity.

Some resilience scholars are arguing strongly for a more serious integration of context into conceptualizations of resilience generally, viewing the social ecology as both producing risk and potentiating adaptation to it (Ungar, 2012). This is particularly relevant for understanding political conflict and human functioning amidst it. Virtually by definition, political strife results from perceived imbalances in fundamental aspects of prevailing context (equity, rights, national/ethnic identity, territory, etc.) – with contestants struggling to change or to preserve such contextual imbalances.

Because of the profound relevance of context to political conflict, scholars and practitioners are particularly charged to integrate it in their definitions and assessments of resilience. Contexts are not only disturbed by political conflict (e.g., disrupted access to economic, social, and political resources) but well-being and quality of life can in large measure be determined by the degree to which the fundamental changes sought via the conflict (rights, security, safety, dignity, self-determination, etc.) have been achieved.

A variety of theoretical approaches or frameworks could be adapted to assist in appreciating such complexities of youth experience amidst political conflict. In addition to Ungar's (2012; Ungar, Ghazinoor & Richter, 2013) social ecological framework, useful would be: psychosocial frameworks (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010); wellness approaches being adopted by some trauma theorists (e.g., Friedman, Resick & Keane, 2007; Layne et al., 2009); social suffering from anthropology (e.g., Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Kleinman, Das & Lock, 1997); quality of life frameworks from public health, particularly as revised by Giacaman (Giacaman et al., 2007; Mataria et al., 2009); youth development (Larson, 2000); positive psychology (Seligman, 2002); resilience (e.g., Almedom, 2005; Almedom & Glandon, 2007); posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004); and various treatments of meaning from psychology (e.g., Antonovsky, 1987; Molden & Dweck, 2006; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Attempts to integrate many of these approaches in understanding youth and political conflict specifically can be found in Barber (2009a,b).

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Key points

- Resilience is a diffuse and inconsistent construct. Contrary to many expectations, research findings on conflict-affected youth conclude that the majority of young people can function effectively. This raises an issue regarding resilience as exceptional or normative.
- Research designs on conflict-affected youth need much improvement: to specify the specific risks of political conflict, which elements of youth functioning are or are not impacted, and how youth function over the long-term as they transition to adulthood and citizenship.
- Understanding youth's perceptions of the meaning, value, urgency, and legitimacy of conflict; their cognitive and behavioral commitments to the goals that define the conflict; and the degree to which they perceive those goals to have been met, are especially important.
- Youth resilience amidst political conflict is probably a complex assortment of better and poorer functioning that varies over time in direct relationship to social, economic, and political opportunities. This complicates a simplistic adherence to an all-encompassing definition of resilience.
- Researchers and practitioners should be explicit about which elements of the resilience process they focus upon in their work, and acknowledge which components they leave unaddressed, to permit comparisons across studies or programs that can facilitate program evaluation and theory enhancement.

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