Resilience and the Child Soldier

Traditional approaches to the study of war-affected children tend to be highly medicalized and to emphasize individualized therapeutic care of traumatized children in clinical settings (Boyden & Mann, 2000). War experience is characterized as an illness that must be cured, with children presented as broken. Hart (2006) points to the trend within the literature when he states: “Among the dominant ways in which children are conceptualized within contemporary humanitarianism and popular discourse is through the notion of vulnerability” (p. 220). Contrary to the tendency exercised in trauma-focused approaches, the development of child soldiers and other war-affected young people may not be adequately described in terms of an accumulation of risks to their physical, emotional, and social well-being. These approaches ignore young people’s inner resources, along with the interpersonal relationships developed and maintained throughout the span of their involvement in conflict. A strengths perspective and the ethical frame of the social work profession acknowledge the resilience exercised, the social networks developed, the mutual aid, and decision-making (agency) inherent to the process of survival.

Prompted by a disciplinary shift from deficits and risk factors to resilience in social psychology, this area has become a site of considerable interest for researchers of all persuasions. While classic works of Rutter (1987), Masten (2001), Garmezy (1991), Werner (1995), and Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker (2000), for example, represent foundational efforts to concretize the concept of resilience, the field runs rather broad and has come to include research studies that seek to understand the psychosocial resourcefulness demonstrated by such various groups as:
survivors of the 2005 Tsunami, former foster youth attending college, and members of the Intifada (Barber, 1999; Hestyanti, 2006; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005). Theoretical work has taken on the task of exploring the situation of children in armed conflict (Betancourt & Khan, 2008), those exposed to “isolated and potentially traumatic events” (Bonanno & Mancini, 2008, p. 369), as well as young people living in prolonged situations of violence and adversity (Boyden, 2003), while also analyzing the discourse for the practitioners and scholars working with communities affected by violence (Dowdney, 2007).

Whether viewed as an inherent process of human adaptation (Erikson, 1997), a collection of individual attributes (Garbarino, 1999; Garmezy, 1993), a process (Rutter, 1987), or an interactive engagement (Waller, 2001; Yates, Egeland, & Sroufe, 2003), the study of resilience is on the rise. Within humanitarian literature on children affected by armed conflict, it would seem however that resilience in children is sometimes conceived of “more as the absence of pathology rather than the presence of personal agency” (Boyden & Mann, 2000, p. 11). This passivity is not consistent with definitions offered within academic literature. For example, resilience may be viewed as “self-righting tendencies” (Garmezy, 1993, p. 127); or, the ability “to recover or move on from violent or negative experiences” (Dowdney, 2007, p. 6). In the case of underage combatants, it may be envisioned as “children actively managing and even in some instances improving their situation” (Boyden & Mann, 2000, p. 11). Or, interestingly, resilience may be defined as “the ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event...to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning, as well as the capacity for generative experiences and
positive emotions” (Bonanno & Mancini, 2008, p. 371, emphasis added). Various definitions can be found throughout the literature, which emphasize varying degrees of passivity or agency.

Despite depictions of African children broadly displayed in the media, resilience in children typically viewed as “at-risk” is quite common (Bonnano, 2004; Erikson, 1997; Masten, 2001). But, again, what is this resilience? And, what accounts for it? There is no single definition. It is alternately considered to be an innate ability (Garmezy, 1993) and somehow brought about by adversity (Strumpfer, 2002). Borrowed from the engineering field, the term is meant to represent the ability to “bounce back” following exposure to potentially detrimental circumstance or actions. Considered a type of “recovery” by some (Garmezy, 1993) but not others (Bonanno, 2004), resilience is most readily understood as the ability to manage, that is, to not succumb to adversity. Resilience is defined elsewhere as a pattern over time “characterized by good eventual adaptation despite developmental risks, acute stressors, or chronic adversities” (Masten, 1994, p. 5). Taking a broader, more-inclusive, ecological perspective, Hayes (2009) asserts: “Resilience in children is a product of personal characteristics, the availability of social support, and the interaction between these factors” (Fraser, 1997; Hayes, 2009, p. 40).

While early works conceived of resilience as primarily an intrapsychic phenomenon, contemporary understandings highlight the contribution of interpersonal relationships in building resilience. Ecological approaches to resilience have shifted the fundamental question that guides research from “What makes a person resilient?” to “Within what contexts do particular processes cultivate resilience for particular people?” (Harney, 2007, p. 77). The ability to exercise resilience is often affected by social position and the ability to access community resources (be
they persons providing social support or such local structures as educational institutions). McAdam-Crisp (2006) identifies a number of protective factors established within the literature, including: “temperament, gender, physical health, age, developmental stage, sense of humor, self-esteem, locus of control, family support, parental discipline, spirituality, community support, intelligence, coping techniques, psychological state, sense of direction or mission, adaptive distancing, androgynous sex roles and realistic appraisal of the environment” (pp. 463 – 464). In their comprehensive review, Howard, Dryden & Johnson (1999) recommend that future resilience research be more ecologically framed and ever mindful of social context. Resilience may be viewed as a dynamic concept that emphasizes the interaction between multiple stressors and mediating factors (Freitas & Downey, 1998). It may be measured in part by the presence of supportive relationships (Werner & Smith, 1992) or by the ability of individual’s to adopt new behaviors in an evolving context (Williams et al., 2001).

In her discussion of adolescence and armed conflict in Columbia, Alvis Palma (2009) takes a decidedly political stance as it relates to resilience, asserting that “the promotion of ‘resilience’ is also inseparable from the pursuit of conflict resolution, reparation and restitution of human and civil rights” (p. 231). Jareg asks us to view resilience as a “mobile capacity,” as such “resilience is not a fixed quality which children do or do not possess, but a capacity to respond positively to adversity if other supportive contextual elements have been/are experienced” (e.g. presence of a supportive, caring adult) (Dowdney, 2007, p. 6). Like concepts of childhood, discussed elsewhere in this proposal, resilience has its definitional roots in the West. That is to say: While resilience itself is manifest globally, the scholarly work done centers on a North American
cultural context. This bias informs our understanding of resilience even as it “limits its explanatory scope” (Boyden & Mann, 2000, p. 11).

Traditional frameworks outline collections of protective and risk factors that reflect normative assumptions well-being that are universalized across culture (Boyden, 2003). Some factors may seem to fit a West African context, such as Sierra Leone. Research, for example, has established that a positive relationship with an adult caregiver serves as a protective factor (Werner & Smith, 1992) and that cumulative risks result in a higher likelihood of ill effects (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004; Rutter, 1985). In the particular case of underage combatants, some important factors may include: age and developmental level at time of recruitment; manner of recruitment (whether or not forced to perpetrate violence on community member); length of time in armed group, and the role within that group...among others (Dowdney, 2007).

Fordham & Ogbu (1986) argue that a misreading of the environment may account for the labeling of youth coping as maladaptive by some researchers, when in fact these non-normative responses are culturally congruent and contextually appropriate. Examples may include a confrontational affect that is labeled (medicalized/pathologized) as either a personality or conduct disorder. Additional examples may be found within the work of Schiele (2000), who has applied an Afrocentric lens to his view of the behaviors of lower-income, urban, African-American youth, which can be aptly applied to the population of interest to this study:
Although their behavior has detrimental corollaries for both themselves and others, an Afrocentric analysis would suggest that these youths’ decisions to engage in the street life represents “a logical means for them to cope with, and protest against, a society that practices pervasive employment discrimination” (Schiele, 1996, p. 289). Furthermore, the money these youths can generate from the street economy, with little or no requirement to delay gratification, is far more attractive than the alternative of attending college or graduate school for prolonged periods and still possibly being unable to command an income that is desirable or commensurate with the training thus acquired (Lemelle, 1991; Majors & Billson, 1992).

From an Afrocentric perspective, the political and economic oppression experienced by lower-income youths is especially revealed in the anger they feel toward others, and even perhaps themselves. The anger can be interpreted as a function of the wretched living conditions they have been reared in, which, conspicuously, are not conducive to the development of a “happy” and wholesome self (pp. 76 - 77).

So, rather than traffic in absolutes based on Western-derived understandings, this study must “go where the client is” through on-going contextual analysis in discerning resilient behavior and how it may manifest among this population.

Rutter (1985) a major voice within resilience discourse, attempted to outline a range of possibilities from vulnerable at one end of the spectrum to resilient at the other. Resilience and vulnerability do not exist as either polar opposites (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) or in zero-sum terms. As research in Africa has shown, people are quite capable of being both at once (See:
Silberschmidt & Rasch, 2001; Utas, 2005c). Therefore, the importance of meaning-making, of how one views the experience cannot be overlooked, as "children's reactions to stressors [also] depend on the meanings they attribute to them" (Wessells, 1998, p. 642; See: Dawes, 1992).

More research is needed in order to understand factors which contribute to psychosocial well-being in a variety of contexts to strengthen the evidence base that informs practice and policy strategies (Fraser & Galinsky, 2004).

While presenting individuals with incredible challenges, soldiering does not unequivocally empty a child of his or her potential. Certain core pathologies may of course be attributed to wartime experiences but there are also several central processes which are exercised very much to the benefit of the child. Far from broken, children and youth function as resilient agents to the process of their own development. Positive (if you will) aspects of the soldiering experience (as with gang membership) have been cited—bonding with a peer group, a sense of purpose, a semblance of order, security, and solidarity are among those listed (Mendelson & Straker, 1998).

These elements contribute to a child’s ability to endure. Mastery of war craft may feed a child’s inherent yearning for competence, especially in those of school age. This may in fact serve as a protective factor or in other ways contribute to a child’s resiliency (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Masten & Obradovic, 2006), we do not know.

It has also been suggested that children’s exposure to political ideology may allow them to organize the events taking place around them, rather than succumbing to chaotic circumstance. Punamäki, Qouta & El Sarraj (2001) has found that ideology protects against the effects of trauma. A sense of purpose and meaning provide young people with a means of understanding the events in which they operate. Ideology shapes meaning and can aid in active coping or
resilience, Barber (1999) discusses the role of political consciousness as part of the youth experience in the Palestinian Intifada. Akello, Richters, & Reis (2006) extend this notion of ideology to include the opportunistic Christianity of the Lord’s Resistance Army of Northern Uganda. In fact, Wessells (1998) points out, "strong ideological commitment, although it encourages soldiering, is associated with reduced anxiety and depression” (p. 642). He cites the work of Punamaki (1996) and Straker (1992). Research suggests that in post-conflict settings, opportunities for community reconstruction, a bluntly physical collectivist gesture, also contribute to resilience-building efforts (Boyden & Mann, 2000; Wessells, 2005).

Although the “role will be characterized by violence, brutality, deprivation, death, sexual exploitation and callous indifference to other,” the military itself may prove a psychological stand-in for a lost parental presence, providing a framework of understanding, a social role, and opportunity for physical survival where there otherwise would be none (Faulkner, 2001). Indeed, protective environments may include military units and rebel groups—especially in the case of government factions that are viewed as community protectors and rebel groups which represent themselves as seekers of justice against an oppressive regime. Identification with cultural values is considered a protective factor as is a sense of community. Each of these is alive within conflict settings, where factions are often comprised of particular age grades, ethnic groups, or ideological adherents. In her review of resilience and children of war, McAdam-Crisp (2006) explores the sense of belonging that the RUF leveraged in its recruitment efforts, along with the incentive of potential skill-building. Through Richards (1996), she notes how “this provided children of lower-socio-economic status with the opportunities and responsibilities of command and the experience of their own powerfulness” (p. 27; McAdam-Crisp, 2006, p. 469).
Coulter, Persson & Utas (2008) describe the resiliency and competencies gained during female fighters’ participation in combat, when they state “During years they spent in fighting forces, often under immense pressure, former women and girl fighters learned survival techniques and made tactical choices, and acquired the skills and strengths that kept them alive” (p. 28). Denov (2007), notes the “subtle and bold acts of resistance” (p. 12) young girls engaged in while inhabiting a number of roles, including “sex slave”, domestic worker, and armed combatant that allowed them “to actively negotiate...victimization experiences and gendered insecurities with agency, resistance and resourcefulness” (p. 11). Millard (2001) describes the pride and sense of accomplishment felt by an under-age female sniper in El Salvador’s civil war. Denov & Maclure (2005) draw on quotes from ethnographic work done with young female combatants to illustrate the sense of power and authority—not to mention increased security—some young soldiers felt with the mastery of weaponry. Wessells (2006) relates comments offered by a 16-year-old former female commander in Sierra Leone who said, “I’m proud of what I learned—how to speak to groups, organize people, command, use weapons....If I had it to do again, I’d join again” (p. 237).

Populations of study have not generally included child soldiers, so as yet we have very little to draw from in how former combatants make meaning of their experience or the methods by which they made their way through it. Overlooked in resiliency work—the realities of people’s lives where “normalcy” means different things among different populations. There are continuities, which exist between periods of peace and war and peace, that have been ignored in some of the available literature on child soldiers. Much of the work done on the development of child combatants errs in assuming that the pre-conflict environment was markedly different from
the period of conflict in terms of the political economy—that it held adequate nutrition, health care, educational opportunities, and the absence of physical danger (Summerfield, 2000). Some views of development continue to adhere to a very particular notion of “normalcy” that excludes the experience of those who, as in Angola (where the war, comprised of three distinct conflicts, waged unabated for 47 years), were born into conflicts, came of age, and served as adults. Armed conflict is the norm for at least three generations in that area of Southern Africa. Furthermore, the recent emergence of qualitative work within the literature on child soldiers (Annan, 2007; Annan, Brier, & Aryemo, under review; Blattman & Annan, 2007; Corbin, 2008; Denov, 2007) centers on reintegration, providing no pre-conflict or wartime insights.

Established within the literature as both a factor and a process, resilience in this work is viewed as interactive, exercised within contexts of adversity; and taken as a given, that “Stress is a function of life, and so is resilience” (McAdams-Crisp, 2006, p. 459). Rather unlike the prevailing paradigm of trauma, resilience concerns itself with patterns or occasions of capacity and strengths across time through interaction between an individual and her environment, a phenomenon Yates, Egeland, & Sroufe (2003) characterize as a “dynamic developmental process” (p. 244). The next section offers a review of ecological theory and discusses its relationship to the concept of resilience and to the population of interest.