

# Children of the Troubles: The need to explore the long-term impact on appraisal and coping

ANGELA STEPHANIE MAZZETTI<sup>1</sup>

*Although the impact on children of the political conflict in Northern Ireland has been widely studied, leading researchers in the discipline highlight a series of paradoxical findings, which they suggest are as a result of a variety of methodological and ethical issues. As such they suggest that there are a number of gaps in our understanding of how children and young people appraised and coped with the Troubles. In particular, we know little about the long-term and cumulative impact of living in such a society. There is a need, therefore, to explore how growing up in an environment characterised by difference and political violence influences appraisal and coping later in life. This article therefore presents the rationale for studying the long-term impact of growing up during the Troubles in order to enhance our knowledge and understanding of these issues.*

*Given the vicissitudes of the human drama, it is a wonder that anyone is left physically or psychologically healthy (Hobfoll, 2002:63).*

## **Introduction**

Since the start of the conflict in Northern Ireland, euphemistically referred to as the ‘Troubles’ (McWhirter 1983; Smyth 1998), there has been a plethora of research projects and studies on the subject, leading some researchers to suggest that the Troubles has become the most thoroughly researched conflict (Dunn 1995; Dunn *et al.* 1995; Smyth and Hamilton 2003). A key interest for researchers has been the impact of the violence on children and young people, and more specifically how

---

<sup>1</sup> Angela is a part-time PhD student in the School of History and Anthropology at Queen’s University, Belfast. She is currently researching the long-term impact of growing up during the ‘Troubles’ on stress and coping. Any errors are the author’s own. The author can be contacted at [amazzeiti01@qub.ac.uk](mailto:amazzeiti01@qub.ac.uk).

children adapted to and coped with the conflict (Cairns 1987). Leading researchers in the discipline have conducted a series of reviews of these studies, and they highlight a number of paradoxical findings, which they suggest are the results of a variety of methodological and ethical issues (Cairns 1996; Gallagher 2004; Muldoon 2004). They also suggest that, despite the abundance of such studies, we know little about the long-term impact of exposure to political conflict (Cairns 1996). Therefore, the aim of this article is to summarise the gaps in our understanding of the impact of the Troubles on children and young people and to present the rationale for exploring the long-term impact of growing up during the Troubles on appraisal and coping.

### **Appraisal and coping**

Cairns (1996) suggests that in the context of children exposed to political violence, few studies have adopted Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive phenomenological model. According to this model, the way an event is perceived (appraised) and dealt with (coping) will impact the psychological and emotional outcome. Lazarus (1999) distinguished two types of appraisal, primary and secondary. Primary appraisal is an evaluation of whether or not the situation is personally significant and worthy of attention, whereas secondary appraisal is focused on the availability of coping resources to deal with the event, and in any stressful encounter they are dependent on one another (Folkman *et al.* 1986). Stress arises if there is a perception that a situation has the potential to impact significantly on values, aspirations or beliefs; tax available coping resources; threaten well-being; or disturb normal functioning (Folkman *et al.* 1986). Lazarus (1999) noted a number of individual factors (goals and aspirations, beliefs about self, and personal resources), environmental factors (environmental demands, constraints and opportunities, and culture), and temporal factors (timing and duration of the event) which influenced the appraisal process. Cairns (1996) notes that we know relatively little regarding how children appraise different forms of political violence or what factors impact this appraisal; however, he notes that some of the possible sources of information which children may use include their parents (particularly their mother) and the media.

Cairns (1996) suggests we have a better understanding of how children cope with political violence. Aldwin (2007:125) defines coping as “the use of strategies for dealing with actual or anticipated problems and their attendant negative emotions”. Coping strategies are generally referred to as emotion-focused or problem-focused (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) and the negative emotions associated with stressful encounters include anger, shame, guilt, and anxiety (Lazarus 1991). Emotion-focused coping involves the deployment of cognitive and behavioural efforts to change the meaning of the stressful encounter and problem-focused coping involves the deployment of cognitive and behavioural efforts to change the circumstances of the problem (Folkman *et al.* 1986). Lazarus (1999) emphasised that, in practice, it is not easy to decide which thoughts or actions are problem-focused or emotion-focused. Nor is one strategy necessarily better than the other, as its effectiveness depends on the person, the specific situation being encountered, the timing of the encounter and the anticipated outcome of the encounter (Lazarus 1993), and in stressful encounters individuals may draw on both strategies (Lazarus 1999). Regardless of the coping strategy used, an important factor is the overlap between appraisal and coping (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004). Coping is dependent on appraisal and therefore needs to be understood in the context of the meaning attributed to a stressful encounter (Lazarus 1999).

Cairns (1996: 55) highlights that coping is not the same as “mastery over the environment”, as “many sources of stress cannot be mastered”. He suggests rather that effective coping should be considered as a “strategy which allows the person to tolerate, minimise, accept or ignore what cannot be mastered”. In addition, Aldwin (2007) highlights the importance of socio-cultural factors in determining coping behaviours. Individuals do not exist in isolation, but are ‘nested’ in the wider ‘families’ and ‘tribes’ to which they belong (Hobfoll 2001). To understand coping we therefore need to understand the socio-cultural context in which individuals are ‘nested’, as coping is embedded within this wider context, which determines the demands we encounter, our access to coping resources, and which coping behaviours are considered appropriate and which are not (Aldwin 2007; Hobfoll 2004). In his review of the impact of political violence on children, Cairns (1996) states that

frequent emotion-focused coping strategies highlighted in the literature are denial, distancing, and an avoidance of thinking about the situation and the problems. He further notes that some studies have suggested a more problem-focused ideologically-based active engagement with political violence

### **Coping with the Troubles**

Early 1970s researchers feared that against a backdrop of violence children “would become shell-shocked zombies flooding psychiatric hospitals, or amoral juvenile delinquents totally out of adult control” (Cairns and Cairns 1995: 97). Therefore, initial research focused on the moral and emotional development of children as a result of the violence (Connolly and Healy 2003; Muldoon 2004) and warned that children would suffer serious pathological conditions as a result of exposure to political violence (Cairns and Cairns 1995). These early warnings led to a surge of studies in the 1980s (Connolly and Healy 2003). Muldoon (2004) notes that these studies focused on both the impact of the Troubles on mental health disorders, such as increased anxiety levels and depression symptomology, and also on externalised antisocial behaviours. However, these subsequent studies found little evidence that the Troubles had a significant impact on moral attitudes, church attendance or religiosity, antisocial behaviours, child psychiatric disorders, or stress levels (Cairns and Cairns 1995; Muldoon 2004). As McWhirter (1983: 389) notes: “It would seem, therefore, that fears of a serious growth in antisocial behaviour among the young people of Northern Ireland and the total disintegration of Northern Ireland society are largely unjustified”.

This led to an interest into how children were coping with the Troubles and to a view in the 1980s that young people were coping quite well, as they were becoming resilient to the violence (Gallagher 2004; Muldoon 2004). This ‘hysterical emphasis’ on resilience (Cairns 1996: 11) has since been challenged for overstating the normality of everyday life in very abnormal circumstances (Gallagher 2004), and researchers have suggested that the paradoxical findings of the impact of the conflict are due to a number of conceptual, methodological and ethical issues inherent in the studies (Cairns and Cairns 1995; Cairns 1996; Gallagher 2004; Muldoon 2004).

As Cairns (1996) notes, much of the research in the early 1970s was conducted by psychiatrists and psychologists and conceptually, therefore, the focus was on individual children and their reaction to specific traumatic events. He notes that many such studies focused on capturing reactions to a specific incident (for example street riots); however, he emphasises that, in the context of political violence, children will be exposed to many incidents. He also stresses that one cannot study one isolated event in the life history of the child, as some children will be more prone to develop psychological problems because of personal factors such as age, gender, and personality. Muldoon (2004: 463) therefore suggests that:

*...while considerable effort has been expended on considering the negative impact of traumatic violent experiences on young people growing up in Northern Ireland, the effect of growing up in a divided society has less frequently been considered.*

Gallagher (2004: 635) therefore highlights that many studies failed to differentiate between individual and social explanations and therefore much “early work by psychologists was based on methodological individualism” and as such there was limited consideration of “individual behaviour within social contexts”. Gallagher (2004) notes with exception the work of Cairns, who viewed the conflict through a lens of Tajfel’s (1982) social identity theory, a framework later applied to many studies in Northern Ireland to explore how and when children categorise themselves as either Catholic or Protestant and differentiate between the two groups (Trew 2004). Gallagher (2004) also notes the work of the social anthropologists Bell, Burton, Darby and Harris, who focused on the wider social and economic factors impacting children’s exposure and attitudes to the conflict. For example, Muldoon (2004: 461) notes that these studies highlighted that the impact of the conflict was not “evenly distributed within the population”, as those from economically deprived backgrounds (as opposed to those from middle-class backgrounds), boys (rather than girls) and those from the minority ethno-national group (rather than those from the majority group) tended to report higher levels of violence. She therefore suggests that “the net

effect of these wider social factors is crucial to a full understanding of the impact of conflict” (462).

Cairns (1996) further highlights that the paradoxical findings may be due to the different methods and measures adopted by researchers, making it difficult to ascertain if they were researching the same phenomenon. Gallagher (2004) therefore suggests that this has led to conflicting research findings as to how children were coping; some researchers have found that children were coping, while others have found that children had become habituated to events, and still others have found that young people were developing exit coping mechanisms, either on a psychological or physical level. He further suggests that early researchers failed to acknowledge the many young men who joined paramilitary organisations as a coping strategy. Muldoon (2004) further suggests that early research studies all too often reflected the interests of the researcher rather than those issues pertinent to the children. For example, Connolly and Healy (2003) suggest that researchers focused on the study of religious identity and difference may have overemphasised the significance of these factors, which may not have held the same salience for children. Muldoon (2004) suggests that much of the research on the Troubles has relied on traditional methods, and there is value in adopting a wider range of conceptual perspectives, research methods and methods of data analyses.

Cairns (1996) also highlights the ethical issues involved in such studies, as children cannot give informed consent. This led to researchers adopting a number of indirect methods and experimental designs to produce data (Cairns and Cairns 1995; Connolly and Healy 2003). For example, Cairns (1996) notes that some research studies used adults (either parents or teachers) rather than children as their research participants; however, he suggests that adults often underemphasise the impact on children. He notes that other studies sought adult permission to conduct research directly with children; however, in their attempts to protect their children, adults often refused to allow their children to participate. Cairns (1996: 18) highlights a further ethical dilemma in that the research on the impact of political violence may be “sensitizing children to the negative aspects of their society, of which they may be happily

ignorant”. Gallagher (2004) therefore suggests that many researchers opted to use more readily accessible data in the form of statistical data based on the number of referrals to say, for example, psychiatrists. However, he warns that this only offers a snapshot of the impact, as not all children who are suffering psychological impact will be referred for treatment.

### **Researching the long-term impact**

In his review of the impact of political violence on children, Cairns (1996) suggests that despite the plethora of studies, we know little of the long-term impact of exposure to political violence over a sustained period such as the Northern Ireland context. He posits a number of hypotheses. First, will having to display an outward persona of being apparently unaffected to cope with events lead to difficulties in later life when this coping strategy is no longer needed? Second, Cairns (1996: 60) speculates whether “having to cope with traumatic events in childhood [will] predispose individuals to disorders later in life if they are again exposed to stressful events”. Third, citing a letter signed by eighty Yugoslavian psychologists published in the 1992 edition of *The Psychologist*, Cairns (1996: 59) highlights the fear that children exposed to stressful events in childhood may develop into “substantially impoverished generations of emotionally unstable, intellectually incompetent, socially limited and intolerant individuals”. Additionally Cairns (1996: 183) postulates “are children directly exposed to political conflict able to envisage peace in the future, or have their experiences turned them into perpetual warmongers?”

Some leading stress and coping researchers highlight that much of the focus in the literature has been on the negative impact associated with exposure to stressful encounters and that we therefore know little about the possible positive outcomes of long-term exposure to stressful events (Aldwin 2007; Frydenberg 2002; Hobfoll 2002). For example, Cairns (1996) posits that surviving stressful events in childhood may have a positive impact in later life through the development of refined coping strategies. Therefore, leading researchers on the impact of the Troubles highlight that although we have had a plethora of studies with children and young people, we know

little about the cumulative and long-term impact of their exposure to political violence (Cairns 1996; Smyth 1998).

However, why is further research in this area necessary in a post-conflict era? Smyth (1998:13) highlights that due to the longevity of the conflict, few adults in Northern Ireland have lived in relative peace. She suggests that:

*For those of us who grew up here, and who are in their forties and younger, the Troubles has provided the societal context – and often traumatic punctuation and turning points – to our lives as children and adults.*

Therefore, she suggests that there is a need to better understand the long-term impact for those who grew up against the backdrop of the Troubles.

Additionally, Muldoon (2004) suggests three reasons why the impact of political conflict is an important social issue for research. First, she suggests that we need to have a better understanding of the causes of conflict so that this knowledge can be used to build peaceful societies and prevent further conflict. Second, she notes that researchers have a duty to highlight the human cost of conflict as this is often neglected in the rhetoric of opposing factions. Third, she highlights that we need a better understanding of the impact of conflict on civilians so that we can better understand their needs and improve the humanitarian support they are offered during periods of conflict.

### **Conclusion**

Although there have been a number of reviews on the impact of the Troubles on children and young adults, they have highlighted a number of paradoxical findings, and as such, there are still gaps in our understanding of how children experienced and coped with the Troubles. In addition, we know little about the cumulative and long-term impacts of growing up in a divided and violent society and how this affects appraisal and coping later in life. Further studies are needed in this area. Additional



research will go some way to address the gaps in our understanding of how children and young people coped with the conflict. Such studies need to adopt research designs that capture the individual within the wider socio-cultural context. Finally, there is a need for studies which explore the long-term impacts of political violence on children, so that we can better understand the cumulative impact of growing up in the context of sustained political conflict.

### **Bibliography**

Aldwin, C. (2007) *Stress, Coping, and Development*. New York: The Guildford Press.

Cairns, E. (1987) *Caught in the Crossfire: Children and the Northern Ireland Conflict*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Cairns, E. (1996) *Children and Political Violence*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd.

Cairns, E. and Cairns, T. (1995) 'Children and Conflict: A Psychological Perspective' in Dunn, S. (ed.) *Facets of the Conflict in Northern Ireland*. Hampshire, UK: McMillan Press, Ltd., 97-113.

Connolly, P. and Healy, J. (2003) 'The Development of Children's Attitudes to the Troubles in Northern Ireland' in Hargie, O. and Dickson, D. (eds.) *Researching the Troubles: Social Science Perspectives on the Northern Ireland Conflict*. Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 37-58.

Dunn, S. (1995) *Facets of the Conflict in Northern Ireland*. Hampshire: McMillan Press, Ltd.

Dunn, S., Ó Maoláin, C. and McClean, S. (1995) 'Sources of Information, Research and Data' in Dunn, S. (eds.) *Facets of the Conflict in Northern Ireland*. Hampshire: McMillan Press, Ltd., 251-278.

Folkman, S., Lazarus, R. S., Dunkel-Schetter, C., DeLongis, A. and Gruen, R. J. (1986) 'Dynamics of a Stressful Encounter: Cognitive Appraisal, Coping, and Encounter Outcomes' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50(5): 992-1003.

Folkman, S. and Moskowitz, J. T. (2004) 'Coping: Pitfalls and promise' *Annual Review of Psychology* 55: 745-774.

Frydenberg, E. (2002) 'Beyond Coping: Some Paradigms to Consider' in Frydenberg, E. (eds.) *Beyond Coping: Meeting Goals, Visions and Challenges*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-16.

Gallagher, T. (2004) 'After the War Comes Peace? An Examination of the Impact of the Northern Ireland Conflict on Young People' *Journal of Social Issues* 60: 629-642.

Hobfoll, S. E. (2001) 'The Influence of Culture, Community, and the Nested-Self in the Stress Process: Advancing Conservation of Resources Theory' *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 50: 337-421.

Hobfoll, S. E. (2002) 'Alone Together: Comparing Communal Versus Individualistic Resiliency' in Frydenberg, E. (ed.) *Beyond Coping: Meeting Goals, visions and challenges*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 63-81.

Hobfoll, S. E. (2004) *Stress, culture and community: the psychology and philosophy of stress*. London: The Springer Series in Social Clinical Psychology.

Lazarus, R. S. (1991) *Emotion and Adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lazarus, R. S. (1993) 'Coping Theory and Research: Past, Present, and Future' *Psychosomatic Medicine* 55: 234-247.

Lazarus, R. S. (1999) *Stress and Emotion*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc.

Lazarus, R. S. and Folkman, S. (1984) *Stress Appraisal and Coping*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

McWhirter, L. (1983) 'Northern Ireland: Growing Up With the "Troubles"' in Goldstein, A. P. and Segall, M. H. (eds.) *Aggression in Global Perspective*. New York: Pergamon Press, 367-400.

Muldoon, O. T. (2004) 'Children of the Troubles: The Impact of Political Violence in Northern Ireland' *Journal of Social Issues* 60: 453-468.

Smyth, M. (1998) *Half the Battle: Understanding the effects of the "Troubles" on children and young people in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Litho Printers Limited.

Smyth, M. and Hamilton, J. (2003) 'The Human Costs of the Troubles' in Hargie, O. and Dickson, D. (eds.) *Researching the Troubles: Social Science Perspectives on the Northern Ireland Conflict*. Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 15-36.

Tajfel, H. (1982) *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Trew, K. (2004) 'Children and Socio-Cultural Divisions in Northern Ireland' *Journal of Social Issues* 60: 507-522.