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Children, War and World Disorder in the 21st Century: A Review of the Theories and the Literature on Children's Contributions to Armed Violence

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Young populations, and particularly young males, have been attributed a proclivity to aggression and unrest that puts societies at risk. Theories about the dangers of a demographic 'youth bulge' inform public and policy debates about the predictors of violent conflict, as evidenced most recently in the World Bank's *World Development Report* for 2007. This paper evaluates the validity and utility of claims linking youth bulges to civil conflicts by reviewing different literatures concerning naturalist ideas of young humans' innate aggression and cognitive incompetence as well as environmentalist ideas of environmental stimuli, processes of socialisation, and the dialectical relationship of structural conditions and human agency. This review finds that the moral panic propagated by youth bulge theorists is too often based on only one form of influence on human development and action, whether an aspect of environment, personal experience, or individual traits. A more cogent analysis must integrate the highly complex and dynamic processes involved in cognition and behaviour and aim to develop theories that take account of the social power, ideational and structural forms, and emotional and cognitive processes that young people experience and draw on in times of war. Theories of causality that fail to account for this complexity obscure understanding of the many ways in which young people and conflict may be linked.

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I. Introduction

In an alarmist and very troubling article published in October 2003, British MP David Willetts,ⁱ makes the bold assertion that the young - children, adolescents and youth - instigate most of the political and criminal violence throughout the world today. He reasons that the most turbulent countries globally are 'wrestling with the social consequences of dramatic demographic change...' as 'they can't handle youthfulness' (Willetts 2003: 18); the nations with the youngest populations being the ones most likely to collapse into a state of war. Willetts echoes concerns raised by others (Cincotta, Engelman and Anastasion 2003, Huntington in Steinberger 2001) and in making his case, draws on statistics developed by The Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC:

Of the world's 25 most youthful countries, 16 have experienced major civil conflict since 1995. And this is not a new phenomenon...Iran's median age when the Shah was deposed was 17. What do Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Pakistan all have in common now? They all have a median age of under 19....among countries with the oldest populations, only Croatia has been involved in conflict over the past 15 years. (Willetts 2003: 18)

In other words, it is suggested not just that where the young constitute a large percentage of the total population there is a ready supply of young people for recruitment, but more importantly that a high critical mass of youth is in itself a predictor of armed conflict. Some even contend that there exists a clear point beyond which communities reach a 'critical level' prone for violence (Huntington 1996, Mesquida and Wiener 2001 and 1999). Such claims centre on the idea that young humans, and specifically young males, have a special proclivity for aggression and unrest.

Following the September 11th 2001 attacks on the US, global security fears have dramatically raised the stakes of research on both urban unrest and armed conflict. Military psychology, sociology, history, demography, international relations, political economy and political science have between them developed a veritable industry of scholarship tracking causes and trends in war, and the motives for and patterns of terrorist activity and other forms of political unrest. In an environment pervaded by fears of world disorder, research centres and think tanks like The Center for Strategic and International Studies have successfully obtained the ear of politicians, military and security personnel, policy analysts and the public at large. By firmly linking young humans - especially young men - with violence against states, war researchers and commentators have the potential to instil a sense of moral panic as the 'youth bulge' in parts of the South is seen to pose a grave threat to local, national, regional and even global security (Glenn 2004, Helgerson 2002, Hendrixson 2004, Kaplan 1994, Sommers 2006 and 2003). As Henrik Urdal observes, 'youth bulges have become a popular explanation for current political instability in the Arab world and for recruitment to international terrorist networks' (Urdal 2004: 1). This sense of panic is heightened by the frequent use of intemperate language that implies mass calamity, as in a report by The Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities, which describes the phenomenon of child soldiering as a 'post-Cold War epidemic' (Borchini, Lanz and O'Connell 2002).

As someone who has long researched young people's social competencies and responsibilities within the family, workplace and society more broadly, my intuitive

reaction to these doom-laden prophecies has been to dismiss them as both a gross exaggeration and a distortion of reality. My reservations have been heightened by the irresponsible way that statistics are bandied about in much of the research and public debate. For example, it is clearly quite ludicrous to talk about child soldiering as an 'epidemic' on the basis of speculative UN figures indicating that the world's military arena at present contains a mere 250,000 combatants and support personnel under the age of 18 (United Nations 2005). In fact, it has been suggested that in most places other than sub-Saharan Africa, the number of child soldiers is decreasing (Kelley nd), and that even in sub-Saharan Africa the evidence for marauding hordes of alienated, angry and aggressive youth simply does not exist (Sommers 2003).

Nonetheless, however precarious some of the statistical data and overstated some of the claims, recent research does seem to indicate empirical backing for the argument linking young people with unbridled violence in war, raising a number of important questions about causality. These questions focus on the nature of young humans, their experiences and capabilities as social actors and their socialisation, as well as on trends in inter-generational relations and societal structures more broadly. In this article I focus particularly on young people in middle childhood and adolescence and attempt to address these questions through a review of the major explanatory models provided in the literatures of several disciplines.

II. Demographic Drives

Limitations of the model

The World Bank's *World Development Report* for 2007 takes as its focus young people (between the ages of 12 and 24) in developing countries. In a section entitled 'Do large youth cohorts cause violence? Maybe, if economic growth rates are low', the report summarises the arguments presented above and concludes that 'the risk of civil conflict for countries in the early or middle phases of their demographic transition may be heightened by an interaction of demographic factors with each other and with nondemographic factors.' (World Bank 2006: 166) While the report does not explicitly endorse or reject the hypothesised causal link between 'youth bulges' and violence, its inclusion of this hypothesis is indication of the social power of this notion. Indeed, we might regard the report's ambiguity concerning the effects of youth demographics as tacit acceptance of the theory's merits.

The social power of recent demographic data notwithstanding, my first question concerns the validity and utility of claims linking youth bulges with civil conflicts. This question turns out to be a difficult one to answer. To begin with, it is not always clear what is meant by 'youth' in terms of the age and generational cohort under consideration. One of the proponents of the demographic argument, Samuel P. Huntington, maintains that 'Generally speaking, the people who go out and kill other people are males between the ages of 16 and 30' (Huntington quoted in Steinberger 2001). Others, for instance Urdal (2004) and Braungart and Bruangart (1986), follow the official UN definition of 'youth' which refers more narrowly to young people between the ages of 15 and 24. A lack of conceptual or statistical alignment has the potential to play havoc with the debate, especially where large data sets are involved, since contributors are not always discussing the same phenomenon. To be fair to the demographers, much of the conceptual confusion is not of their making but created by others who have chosen to interpret their work very loosely, for example by conflating the generational categories of childhood, adolescence and youth. This

tendency is apparent in public commentary as exemplified in this instance by Willetts' (2003) article which conflates young people in Europe who engage in street violence and are often well below 16 years of age with young combatants in the majority world who may be as much as 30 years old.

Another difficulty with building a case on the demographic evidence is that while the statistical data can be significantly correlated with a range of factors, and as such, many of the analyses have very limited explanatory reach in terms of causality. Urdal's (2004) useful review of the assumptions underlying much of the research in this field makes this limitation abundantly clear. For instance, Urdal finds no evidence to support Huntington's claim that a youth bulge above a given critical level is a key predictor of civil conflict. Similarly, he tests the assertion that youth rebellion is incited by grievances (Collier 2000, Collier and Hoeffler 2001) due to inequality, political exclusion, ethnic dominance and similar such factors, finding that it is not born out by the evidence, which points far more directly to opportunity than injustice. Urdal establishes that availability of financing, military advantage and opportunity costs associated with male secondary education enrolment, per capita income and growth rate all have statistical significance, as does absolute population size.

The trouble is that even if Urdal's model has greater explanatory power than do many others, his conclusions are at such a high degree of generality that they cease to be very useful as a means of understanding the motivation in human behaviour.ⁱⁱ Statistical modelling has the potential to miss significant causal factors merely because some phenomena cannot adequately be tracked through quantitative methods. For example, it may be that with proportionally fewer experienced adults in a population, the familiar social constraints and practices that act against the involvement of the young in political violence break down, but the question is: how would one test for this statistically?

Possibly more critical, however, is the use of the age criterion in demographic research to demarcate social categories and, related to this, the arbitrariness and very broad span of the age thresholds applied to the youth cohort. Outside the narrow context of school and formal places of work, chronological age is rarely a determinant of social categories and in many societies people do not celebrate their birth date and are not even aware of their age. The imposition of external interpretive frames of this nature becomes especially problematic when scholars try to attach emic meanings to them. Marc Sommers (2003: 1), for example, writes about youth in Africa as 'a demographic majority that sees itself as an outcast minority'. Similarly, Paul Richards and Krijn Peters note that regardless of which combatant faction Sierra Leonean youth were associated with 'all tend to share membership in an excluded and educationally disadvantaged youth underclass' (Richards 1996: 174). And, as Urdal notes and also dismisses, there are those who claim that youth violence is an expression of a 'collective generational consciousness' (Braungart 1984).

In practice, the age thresholds for youth utilised by the UN and by demographers are likely to have no social meaning whatsoever in the war-torn societies that are the object of investigation. This renders questionable claims that this demographic majority takes political action on the basis of a collective consciousness of itself as an outcast minority. Moreover, if the demographic data are to be used to explain the involvement of boys and girls in middle childhood and adolescence in the

violence of war, they need to be far better disaggregated. Such disaggregation is especially important in gauging the causes of violence in the young because it is very likely that significant structural (or generational), experiential and developmental (or life course) differences exist between different age cohorts, these in turn producing different motives and opportunities for fighting in war.

III. Existential Crises

Adult inventions

Given that much of the statistical evidence about rebellion and violence against states implicates youth, my second question is whether adult concerns also encompass children and adolescents. If so, do such concerns reflect lived reality? Or are they a figment of the adult imagination? In an article focusing specifically on violence in middle childhood, in this case the kidnapping and killing by two young boys of British toddler Jamie Bulger, Allison James and Chris Jenks (James and Jenks 1996) maintain that there is considerable historical momentum underlying the present moral panic about the young in Western industrialised countries, with very real consequences in terms of the conceptualisation and interpretation of the issues. James and Jenks ascribe the shock and outrage sparked off by this incident to the idealisation of children and childhood in late modern Euro-American society. They maintain that: ‘...the murder was not just disturbing, but was, quite literally, unthinkable. Unthinkable, that is, because it occurred within the conceptual space of childhood which, prior to this breach, was conceived of – for the most part and for most children – as innocence enshrined’ (ibid: 315). They explore the historical origins of this reification of childhood, tracing the chief criteria that have come to characterise the dominant conceptualisation. They suggest that in modern times: ‘(1) ...the child is set apart temporally as different, through the calculation of age; (2)... the child is deemed to have a special nature, determined by Nature, (3) ... the child is innocent; and (4) therefore is vulnerably dependent’ (ibid: 318).

From this analysis James and Jenks conclude that ‘regarding children as being in possession of a special and distinctive nature, which is both untainted and vulnerably dependent, is what makes any link between children and violent crime particularly problematic, for the imagery of childhood and that of violent criminality are iconologically irreconcilable’ (ibid: 320). They advance the analysis by arguing that through the passage of modernity the child ‘came to symbolize futurity and was thus guarded and invested’ (ibid: 324). Hence, ‘any assault on what the child is, or rather, what the child has evolved into, threatens to rock the social base’, this provoking an existential crisis in late-modernity (ibid: 324). Finally, through their review of the media coverage and other popular representations, they claim that the Bulger case gave rise to two alternative explanations concerning what causes children to kill. The first affirmed early Puritan thinking which held that young humans are born sinful, with a natural propensity for evil, and hence if not properly trained and constrained are liable to spiral out of control (ibid: 321). In the second, the child murderer is viewed as a transgressive, anomalous creature, a composite child-adult that deviates from the accepted norm of childhood (ibid: 323).

While the James and Jenks article enables us to contextualise and better understand inflammatory views like those of Willetts, I would take issue with their conclusion about the historical and cultural specificity of these ideas. I have in fact encountered very similar misgivings about children in public perception and scholarly

reports from other parts of the world, including contexts where distinctive socio-historical constructions of children and childhood prevail. Young people's involvement in political violence and insurrection invokes emotions in adults that run very deep, in some cases parents even expressing doubts about their own children. I first came across what I have described elsewhere as a 'residual fear of children' in Cambodia in 1995 during a study conducted with Sara Gibbs on the social effects of the genocidal Pol Pot regime. Even though our field visit took place two decades after the collapse of the regime, adult respondents would frequently comment that, 'the children now are terrible, they have no respect for the traditional beliefs' and, children today are 'bad', 'disrespectful', 'violent', 'out of control'. They would express grave concern about adults' lack of authority over and inability to control the young. When asked about why this should be, they would refer to the terrible and inexplicable events that took place during Pol Pot's time and to the crucial role of boys and girls in these.

Scholars and commentators have observed similar discourses in several of the war-torn countries in Africa, although it is not always clear whether these discourses refer to children, adolescents or youth. Describing the inter-tribal conflict between the Dinka and the Nuer and between these tribes and Sudan's northern centralist Islamic state, Jok Madut Jok highlights how adult Nilotes '...define their interminable sufferings as a product of collapsing morality among the youth'. He cites the surviving remnants of the 'red army' who in the late 1980s were rounded up by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and marched to south-western Ethiopia to enrol in United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-supported schools, most eventually being forcibly inducted into the SPLA, as the most acute example of inter-generational breakdown of communications among contemporary Nilotes: 'The end result is a socially-isolated community of armed youth who have been brutally trained not only to kill on command but, also, to torture whomever their military superiors designate.' (2005: 7). He observes that the endless state of war in southern Sudan has eroded even the bonds between parents and children.

Likewise, writing about Sierra Leone and citing Abdullah et al. 1997, Bangura, 1997, Fanthorpe, 2001 and Richards, 1994 and 1996, Susan Shepler comments that 'many have sought to understand this war as a 'crisis of youth'' (Shepler 2004: 26). In her view adult anxieties about child soldiering in Sierra Leone are not, as in the industrialised countries of the West, focused on the loss of childhood innocence but on the separation from family and family socialisation and the idea that the nation faces the loss of a generation. Stephen Ellis similarly argues that signs of 'a crisis of youth' have been apparent in West Africa for some time, with Sierra Leone presenting the most extreme case. He notes that 'In many of the civil wars of the 1990s both local and foreign observers have detected an element of youth out of control, adolescents and even children who, in societies with strong gerontocratic traditions, seize power by force' (ibid: 11). By way of explanation, he comments that: '...sharpening generational cleavages of value and perspective are recognized by just about everyone...much of the cultural knowledge and historical experience accumulated by the senior generation has been deemed irrelevant by disrespectful youth, 'who have gone crazy with all the smoke and the sound of guns'. (Ibid: 7)

Childhood realities

From these accounts it is clear that the violence of young people in war is troubling to adults not simply because of the terrible suffering it causes but also because it is seen to foreordain societal disorder more generally. This perception calls up parallels with adult reactions to childhood criminality in industrialised countries like the UK. But it would be a mistake to exaggerate these parallels since clearly there is a major difference of scale, for while it is very rare for children in Britain to kill, in societies in conflict young boys and girls are sometimes rendered the prime instruments of violence and terror. In Cambodia, for example, children and adolescents fast became Pol Pot's foot soldiers, its torturers, its workers and its spies, policing family and community life and leading the relentless marches through the countryside that killed so many civilians. Children and adolescents have been similarly prevalent among troops in many, if not most, of the recent wars in Africa. This suggests that an existential crisis around children, childhood and adolescence in war-torn societies cannot be adequately explained in terms of irreconcilable iconologies, anomalous social categories, or even perceived disorder in inter-generational power relations.

The conflicts in Africa and Cambodia bring to the fore another particularly ominous feature of the human experience of violence, this being the evidence (sometimes no more than anecdotal) that in war children and adolescents can be and have often been far more brutal than adults. This was a focal issue in a recent seminar on child soldiers organised for US Marines by the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO). In one of the presentations Major Gray, a Royal British Marine, observes that:

They [children] fight in a very disjointed way. The egocentric nature of children, the fact that when a child is a child, they don't have the ability to think about other people. They have a simple one-step requirement that they fulfil. As you get older you understand about morality. They kind of fight like this. On a playground, they are harsh to each other, They fulfil their own needs all the time. You give them an AK-47 and it's a whole different story. You combine the fact that they are on drugs, you give them a weapon, and they behave as if they were on a playground, and it is terrifying.' (Borchini, Lanz and O'Connell 2002: 18)

In the same vein, child rights advocate Jo Becker describes how 'on the battlefield, children more readily follow orders, are less inhibited, and are more vicious than their grown-up counterparts. They seemingly have no fear, acclimatize quickly, and often do not play by the rules' (ibid: 14).

In these passages Gray and Becker conjure up a number of images of the young that have a distinctly elemental air about them. They depict children as: flouting the rules, being fearless, uninhibited, disjointed; driven by drugs and egotistical needs; vicious, harsh and lacking in empathy; and without complex reasoning ability. Ingeniously, Gray juxtaposes the image of the playground with that of the battlefield: the former a legitimate site of childhood socialisation, a carefree place of joy; and the latter, a place of great brutality and suffering where children apparently have no rightful role. In these assertions and in this imagery there are several naturalist assumptions about child combatants, assumptions that pervade many contemporary accounts of war. Such thinking is rendered all the more compelling by frequent reports of children's involvement in acts of seemingly irrational torture,

maiming, killing and cannibalism during war. Many of these atrocities have been committed against the most defenceless members of society—the very young or the very old for example—or against close family members.

Do we need to theorise young people's violence?

Writers in the human rights and applied research traditions have in recent years produced a large number of works on child soldiers, with many more in the pipeline. Often part of advocacy campaigns, these volumes have had a noticeable influence on humanitarian policy and practice as well as on political and public perception. This literature does not perceive the need to theorise children's and adolescents' violence, for the actions of young people in war are understood quite simply as the result of acts of commission or omission perpetrated by adults.

Picking up on the image of the young as innocent and vulnerably dependent, children are held in this literature to be bearers of a range of specified, universally ordained and guaranteed rights due to their status as immature beings. Chief among these rights are a safe, healthy and carefree childhood, provision and protection from violence and other infractions. According to this view, war is an anathema to childhood, a flagrant violation of children's rights. Boys and girls who fight are in effect stripped of their agency, in that their enlistment decisions are not thought of as based in the exercise of free rational choice (Brett and Specht 2004). Their participation in the violence of conflict is conceived of as due to the intercession of adult agents whose purpose it is to coerce, deceive, exploit or otherwise take advantage of the young:

Children are often forced to commit atrocities, such as killings, mutilations and rapes. Even if not actually forced, they may be induced to commit them, for example, by being primed with drugs and/or alcohol, being offered money or other material rewards, or simply being encouraged by the desire to please adult commanders, or being seduced by the sensation of power. (Brett 2000: 9)

Coercion of children is undoubtedly an abiding feature of many modern wars, most likely where military units confront serious manpower shortages or there is a rapid build up in hostilities, for the young offer 'a quick, easy, low-cost way of generating forces.' (Borchini, Lanz and O'Connell 2002: 14) And groups that otherwise would have no real military power can pose a significant threat by augmenting their ranks with boy and girl soldiers.ⁱⁱⁱ Even if coercion does play a significant part, though, the question is whether conceptualising child soldiering solely in terms of adult culpability and adult infractions is adequate to the task of explaining children's apparent predilection for violence.

The anecdotal evidence before us, however patchy or subjective, obliges scholars to engage in further examination of possible causes of youthful violence, not least because better understandings and better explanations are needed in order to lessen suffering. Below is a summary of what I take to be some of the key conceptualisations, theories and assumptions in this field.

IV. Causes and consequences: naturalist models

Animal drives

Over thirty years ago Samuel Kim observed that ‘Practically all the significant theories of war and peace in Western political thought have been postulated either implicitly or explicitly on certain images of human nature.’ (Kim 1976: 253) The most powerful of these images is of a ‘vicious and cruel animal with no compassion for his fellows’ (ibid: 254). Such images draw directly on naturalist thinking of the kind advanced by Konrad Lorenz (1966) in his theory that aggression and war in humans is phylogenetically programmed and by Sigmund Freud (1930) in his claim that aggression is one of the most primordial of all human instincts. The ideas of Lorenz and Freud have been much challenged since they were first framed, provoking a long-standing and impassioned debate about whether aggression in humans is innate or learned. This debate hinges on the extent to which human action can be regarded as governed by basic drives that are shared with other animals or by processes that are presumed to be unique to the human species and a product of human cultures, experience, and related functioning.

Freud’s assertion was that aggression is due to an inborn human tendency to destroy, an instinct that is normally directed outward at others. Konrad’s belief was that aggression is innate, immutable and inevitable, a basic drive that has developed gradually through evolutionary adaptation. From a bio-evolutionary or socio-biological perspective aggression is understood as a functional trait necessitated by competition over scarce resources. Aggressive behaviour ensures the survival and reproduction of the most successful (strongest and fittest) individuals in a species and the transmission of their traits to succeeding generations. According to Roy Baumeister and Brad Bushman (2004: 208), the fact that in all cultures young men are always the most physically aggressive group corroborates the biological basis of aggressive behaviour. These authors do not find convincing the counter-claim by feminists and social constructionists that the aggression of young males is learned through socialisation.

Bio-evolutionary and biosocial explanations have been heavily criticised for their biological reductionism. Kim condemns the reification of ‘instinctive’ drives as if their import and scope for influencing human behaviour were self-evident (Kim 1976: 257). He argues further that clinical and laboratory experiments have proved the dichotomy between instinct and learning to be misleading, observing that ‘even ‘instinctive’ behaviours operate against a complex tangle of interaction which includes other genes as well as the influence of the environment’ (ibid: 257). Both he and Jacques Lizot and Sarah Dart emphasise the problem of building a theory of war on individual behaviour. For Kim, inter-group behaviour and inter-group violence cannot be equated so readily with the inter-personal, while Lizot and Dart maintain that as ‘a complete social event’ (ibid: 846) war is ‘effectuated in the framework of a vast system of communication in which all social and political interactions are regulated’ (ibid: 859). Kim also points to studies of soldiers in combat that have revealed their reluctance to kill. Such research concludes that the aggressive urge to fight tends to be far less commonly felt than individual self-interest; this being expressed on the battlefield as ‘fear, concern for safety and survival, homesickness, anxiety for family welfare back home, job dissatisfaction and boredom’ (Kim 1976: 265).

Innate aggression in children

Several scholars have tested the nature assumption through research on the development of aggression and pro-social behaviour in children (Landers 1991) and adolescents (Cole, Cole and Lightfoot 2005). Psychologists (for example, Erikson 1982, Marcia 2001) have often theorised that the major developmental task during adolescence is the growth of an independent personal identity and it would seem as though this process is in some way being linked with an apparent tendency to heightened aggression. It was in the early 1900s that psychologist and educator G. Stanley Hall first proposed the idea that adolescence is a time of particular turbulence. Hall regarded the instability and anguish that he thought of as characterising this life phase to be a necessary precursor to the subsequent development of adult equilibrium (Durkin 1998: 515). Ethologists and socio-biologists are also of the view that some aggression during adolescence is functional, since conflict with elders is thought of as allowing the young to spend more time with peers, which in turn is part of realigning their status prior to entry into adulthood .

The problem with using this kind of reasoning to explain young people's violence in war, though, is that the adaptive advantage of childhood or adolescent aggression on the battlefield is far from self-evident. Indeed, until they have passed through puberty at least, children's physical immaturity and state of development would appear to be more a source of vulnerability during combat than of strength. For example, adolescents require inordinate amounts of sleep and adolescent boys in particular have poor physical coordination, both behavioural patterns being counter-indicative for good performance in war. As well, serum testosterone levels in male adolescents, one of the presumed precursors to negative emotional disposition and aggression, do not reach anything like adult levels until the later stages of puberty . In fact, when it comes to bio-evolutionary theories of human behaviour, they seem to be more aptly labelled theories of adult male aggression than of human aggression more generally, as others have noted (Lizot and Dart 1994).

Over the years, research has challenged the idea that adolescents are inherently troubled and rebellious (Durkin 1998, Hauser and Bowlds 1990, Larson and Lampman-Petratis 1989, Rice 1990). The question is: does this mean that biological assumptions about the nature of the young have no place in explaining violence in children and adolescents? Even if we seek to avoid biological determinism, it is probably unwise to ignore biological influences in aggression altogether, since there undoubtedly are some fundamental universal imperatives in human behaviour. Although beyond the scope of this review, I would imagine that were neuroscience to address the violence of the young in war it might have a great deal to contribute to this discussion, since it should be able to tell us whether it is the forebrain or the midbrain that is engaged during such activity.

Cognitive incompetence

While many naturalist accounts emphasise basic animal drives in youthful violence, other theorists in the naturalist tradition imply a more decisive role for cognition. Developmental psychology has played a particularly important part in this discussion. Stage theory has long been one of the most influential paradigms in this discipline, the idea that human development progresses through uniform stages first appearing in European literature in medieval times (Shahar 1990). This idea was transformed into global scientific wisdom in the 20th century largely through the

influence of Jean Piaget, whose research on child development and cognition has had major impact in many fields and disciplines. Piaget was concerned about child development in the broader sense and did not seek to explain how children engage with the extremes of environment or experience. Nevertheless, his perspectives on child cognitive development continue to permeate both scholarly and public understandings of children in war, despite the fact that many psychologists have gone on to challenge some of his central assertions.

Piaget's seminal work (1932) on cognition and its subsequent refinement by Lawrence Kohlberg (1976) have had a major impact on research into children's moral understandings and their political thought and action. Piaget drew a direct link between children's wrongdoing and their moral reasoning, emphasising both children's active nature in constructing moral principles and the importance of intent in their ideas about moral transgression. His basic premise was that human competence, functioning and growth are subject to universal forces of change which are linked most fundamentally to the human life cycle and ageing process. Thus, he found children's views on transgressions and their ideas about authority, justice and the like to differ markedly from those of adults, and hence emphasised how these views changed significantly during the course of development. He maintained further that these changes follow an ordered and irreversible sequence of cognitive stages, each one of which has certain defining features and developmental expectations, builds on the accomplishments of the previous stage and is largely immune from environmental influence. He believed that moral knowledge and reasoning in particular are based in the development of higher cognitive functions, especially the capacity for objective, rational thought and social experience.^{iv}

What relevance does this perspective on moral reasoning have for scholarly understandings of children's behaviour in war? If one can assume that there is a relationship between politico-moral or socio-moral reasoning and the character of behaviour, this kind of thinking provides a basis for hypothesising what drives children to engage in extreme violence. By emphasising rational, complex thought as a higher cognitive function, Piaget and Kohlberg in effect set a lower age limit on children's ability to employ politico-socio or socio-moral reasoning in their actions. By arguing that the young enter into advanced thought comparatively late in childhood, the suggestion seems to be that children have only a tenuous grasp on moral judgement. Hence, children are presumably regarded as not having fully internalised the regulations governing accepted behaviour and thereby as more liable to take part in 'mindless' atrocities, as follows:

One of the hallmarks of maturity is that the individual progresses from unquestioning obedience to external authority to a state of moral autonomy. Rules and values become internalized, social norms are accepted as one's own, and conscience ...now comes to determine choices between alternative courses of behaviour. (Schaffer 1999: 302-3).

Indeed, Kohlberg held that there is likely to be greater consistency between moral reasoning and conduct in individuals who have reached a higher level of cognitive maturity. This kind of argument has encouraged researchers to enquire into the link between deficits in social cognitive skills and aggression in children (De Rosier et al 1994; Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey and Brown 1986; Kendall and Braswell 1993). With regard to adolescents, there has been a focus on how their newly acquired

powers of hypothetical reasoning might provide a basis for contemplating and articulating alternatives to the status quo, this process leading them into conflict with adults (Durkin 1998: 523). In this way, stage theory has perpetuated a common sense view of children as irrational and morally pliable up to a fairly advanced point in their lives and, by default, of adolescence and youth as periods of accelerated politicisation and political turmoil. According to this developmental trajectory, children's early political ideas are thought of as concrete and simplistic, with political awareness becoming stronger and more complex in adolescence and youth (Braungart and Braungart 1986: 209).

It has now become apparent that certain cognitive processes are indeed sequenced according to underlying neurological development. Even so, contemporary child development theorists have pointed to the many difficulties with the stage model. For example, research has shown that children in different cultures engage in complex moral reasoning much younger than this model imagines. Second, there is research indicating that far from exhibiting low levels of cognition and socio-moral reasoning, children who engage in terrorist-type political activities may be more intelligent, more socially outgoing and have higher educational achievements than those who do not (Cairns 1996). Third, if there is any basis to the bio-evolutionary argument about instinctual drives, then higher cognitive processes may be at best marginal or even entirely irrelevant to a discussion of children's use of extreme violence on the battlefield where the survival instinct must surely play a significant role. In line with this kind of rationale, there are those who argue that emotions such as fear are so all-encompassing and powerful during combat that the more primitive forebrain simply takes over all other processes of the mind. It is beyond my competence to judge the validity of these kinds of claims, but it does seem that far greater attention needs to be given to the effects of psycho-emotional functioning on thought and action in war, for this area of research is sorely neglected by many scholars of cognition (Allen 2005, Damasio 2000).

Most important of all, though, there is overwhelming evidence that environmental forces are far more central to human cognition and behaviour than naturalist stage theorists have allowed for. The lack of analysis of the influence of factors like ideology, power relations, social identity and peer pressure, for example, becomes especially problematic when considering youth conduct on the battlefield (Schafer 2004).

V. Causes and consequences: environmental influences

Rejecting the idea that violence is an inherent feature of the human species, many researchers have set out to examine specific causes in specific individuals or groups. Factors such as personality, socialization, opportunity, or force are variously emphasised (Cairns 1996: 122). The bulk of this research has been conducted within psychology, with the resulting limitation that most analyses concern intra-psychic functioning and individual or interpersonal aggression rather than inter-group processes and their structural causes or collective manifestations. Indeed, some scholars do not make a clear distinction between these forms of violence, simply assuming that the incentives for individual aggression are the same as those for collective violence.

Although this review touches briefly on individual variables, the prime focus is on environmental and structural forces since these are in practice far more likely to be significant in determining young people's engagement in inter-group conflict. For example, there has been much emphasis on the idea that young people's involvement in violence may be the result of a failure of the early bonding process, but it is highly unlikely that this is a governing force in inter-group hostilities (ibid: 120; Merkle 1986). There are very divergent ideas about how the environment influences behaviour. In the more dynamic models mind and environment are regarded as interacting and mutually constituting, while in the more mechanistic accounts environmental forces appear to impact on the mind as in a one-way process. Overall three broad lines of reasoning can be discerned: one in which the environment of war acts as a stimulus to the mind and thereby to action; a second in which socio-cultural forces provide the lens through which worldviews and behaviours, including violent behaviours, are formed; and a third, which focuses on the interaction between oppressive structural forces and agentive beings.

v.i. Environmental stimuli

Psychological explanations that consider environmental factors to be an important influence in behaviour tend often to conceive of the environment as being made up of a series of stimuli that trigger violent reactions in humans. There is commonly an implicit and unquestioned assumption in this literature that children are more susceptible to environmental stimuli than are adults, with some researchers highlighting personality type as a predisposing factor. It is not always clear what the assumption of susceptibility in children is based upon. Possible lines of reasoning might be that children's internal control or self-regulatory mechanisms are less efficacious than adults' and therefore their conduct is less likely to be consistent with expected standards of behaviour (Bandura 1986, 2001), that the techniques and agents of socialisation are insufficiently robust to inculcate peaceful values in children, or simply that children's role models favour violence.

Albert Bandura's social learning theory (1973) and his ideas about psychological disorders in young humans, particularly in the context of behavior modification (Bandura 1969), have provided what is possibly the single most influential explanation of aggression within this tradition. Broadly informed by psychoanalysis, Bandura described human conduct in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences. He regarded aggression as being acquired through stimulus-response associations and observational learning, his thesis being that: 'most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action.' (Bandura 1977: 22) In his view, observational learning of aggression occurs when children see others they admire behave aggressively and when such conduct is reinforced through the achievement of desired results. Hence, this theory suggests very strongly that children adopt political values and behaviours through imitation of others rather than through their own initiative, an idea that has received support in many quarters.

Another way of thinking about environmental stimuli as a precursor to violence is through an emphasis on the psycho-emotional effects of environmental stressors. This kind of explanation is commonly invoked in war contexts. According to this

interpretation, war is so pervasive, so overwhelming and so malevolent that it subsumes all other institutions, processes and agents of socialisation, with an indelible impact on young people's thinking and action. As Sir Bryan Cartledge notes: 'The environment which the combatants have created is itself malign, inflicting death, injury, and intolerable levels of stress' (Cartledge 1995: 3). One argument is that such stress produces responses such as hyper-vigilance and emotional numbing which reduce children's capability for empathising with others and thereby increases their readiness to commit atrocities (Dawes 2004). Debra Umberson, Kristis Williams and Kristin Anderson argue that 'violence may be a component of emotional distress and that repressed emotion plays a role in triggering violent episodes' (Umberson, Williams and Anderson 2002: 191).

Carol Ember and Melvin Ember (1994) also postulate that violence is more likely among individuals who normally repress any emotional reaction to stress, adding that this tendency is particularly apparent in those who appraise situations as threatening. They suggest that some groups may be more likely to respond to stress with violence than others, offering up both socialization and situational factors as contributory. In their view, different social groups have different personal resources, roles and statuses that influence both the activation and experience of upset. Arguing from almost the opposite viewpoint, however, Garbarino, Kostelny and Dubrow (1991) claim that, far from exhibiting heightened stress, young people are attracted to violence because they find moderate danger thrilling. Supporting this claim, Fraser (1974) sees children as being predisposed towards risk-taking because they are not capable psychologically of assessing the possible consequences of their actions.

Favouring a very different explanatory model, social psychologist Ed Cairns (1996) warns that riots, demonstrations and war cannot logically be depicted as the consequence of an aggregation of individual responses to environmental stimuli. Much influenced by Henri Tajfel's (1982) social identity theory of inter-group conflict, Cairns maintains that it is the collective nature of these actions that holds the key to young people's political motivations and behaviour:

Whether or not one thinks about, at one extreme, the adolescents in France who joined the Maquis (the French underground army) because it had 'all the attractions of a great adventure', of belonging to a secret society, of engaging young boys through their love of adventure and play and above all their team spirit ... or of the gang-related activities of boys in Belfast in the 1970s ... or the children in Palestine ... the micro-social climate is probably the main factor in determining the sort of political response that children make. (Cairns 1996: 114)

Cairns envisions war not as a product of inter-personal factors and individual personality characteristics but of collective processes. He supports Tajfel's theory that when humans operate as individuals they manifest attitudes and behaviours that are quite distinct from those associated with being in groups. Tajfel's reasoning was that, confronted by a multiplicity of social stimuli, humans seek to make life more manageable by engaging in a continuous process of social categorisation, this process reducing the number of social categories they have to contend with. Essentially, these categories enable people to develop their social identity and sense of belonging—people in different categories being perceived as more different than they actually are, with those of the same category appearing more similar. The thesis is that universally humans enhance their feelings about themselves by ensuring that their social identity

is positively valued. This valuation is achieved by comparing their group with others, which in turn leads to a sense of 'social psychological distinctiveness'.

Personal identity, in other words, is hypothesised as only one element of self-concept, with individuals continuously striving to achieve positive social identity based on membership of groups. When individuals perceive themselves and others as members of groups it is their social and not their personal identity that is invoked. Hence, social identity becomes essential to how they think about both themselves and others. At the same time, choice of strategy for reinforcing positive social identity depends on the specific social and historical context. Conflict is a stronger possibility when individuals become locked into groups that are not contributing to a positive evaluation of self and where, for historical and social structural reasons, it is not possible to change group membership. Similarly, violence is more likely where social groups disagree about the legitimacy of existing status positions and are able to make out alternatives to these positions. In this way, the social identity theory of conflict seems to presuppose a high level of awareness of social coherence within groups and of difference between adversaries.

In order for large numbers of individuals to be able to hate or dislike or discriminate against other individuals seen as belonging to a common social category they first have acquired a sense of belonging to groups (or social categories) which are clearly distinct from and stand in certain relations to those they hate, dislike or discriminate against.

(Tajfel 1978: 50, quoted in Cairns 1996: 7)

This may well be the case in highly politicised environments such as the Occupied Palestinian Territories or South Africa during Apartheid rule. But it is not evident that this kind of analysis would rest well with the situations of mass violence that have occurred in other contexts, such as the rebel attack on Freetown in 1999 and the Lord's Resistance Army's (LRA) massacres in northern Uganda in recent years, in which group identity and solidarity were not necessarily very prominent.

In terms of providing an explanation for a predisposition for conflict amongst the young, this theory would need to be able to account for youthful predilections for violent social identities, as well as for youthful inclination towards aggressive strategies for sustaining these identities. If the nature assumption is to be disregarded, one would have to look for the specific historical and social factors that lead young people in certain contexts to challenge the legitimacy of existing power structures and groups. This kind of enquiry is customary within sociology and some anthropological accounts, with the research suggesting that group identity and related collective behaviour among young people is frequently created and expressed through hostile and destructive youth subcultures that actively incite intergenerational conflict.

v.ii. Socio-cultural processes

Socialisation

Anthropology and cultural psychology have a conception of how the environment shapes human thinking and behaviour that differs markedly from that based on stimulus responses. Within anthropology it has long been understood that the nature and meaning of adolescence and youth varies considerably across cultures. The most established line of reasoning is that children and adolescents become aggressive through lengthy and conscious socialisation. Focusing on the socio-cultural

antecedents for violence in the young, researchers in this tradition have sought to account for the forms of behaviour that fall within the normal range for a particular culture. The idea is that the socialisation process embodies specific regularities that engender in children particular behaviours, these behaviours being particularly valued in a given culture. The challenge in terms of the present review is that the topic of extreme violence in the young has not been a major focus of this literature.

Research in this vein generally attempts to delineate causal relations between specific features of the socialisation process and particular aspects of behaviour and/or to explore the use and legitimisation of violence in a given context. Margaret Mead (1935) was an early exponent of the idea that children in aggressive cultures become aggressive. She held that among the cannibalistic Mundugumor of eastern New Guinea parents would encourage children to be independent, combative and emotionally unresponsive to others. Napoleon Chagnon's work with the Yanomamo Indians of Amazonia (1968; 1988) reinforced this proposition, his claim being that in this violent tribe homicide, blood revenge and war are commonplace, due to individual conflicts over natural or reproductive resources. Although he did not focus much on the process of socialisation, he did hold that the Yanomamo encourage their boys to be fierce (see also Peters, 1998; Turnbull, 1972). The implication of these formulations is that certain cultures are inherently violent and have an inbuilt predisposition for war, a case that has quite often been made for conflict-affected countries in Africa.

But this position has proved quite controversial. Ember and Ember for example take the view that war causes adults to socialise for aggression in children rather than aggressive socialisation being a cause of war-related violence. They reason that when people have a lot of war they need to produce courageous warriors and will socialise their sons to be aggressive. They find that socialisation for aggression is a very strong and significant predictor of homicide and assault, high rates of homicide thus being an inadvertent and unintended consequence of war. In a similar vein, Kelley's research comparing the socialisation of child soldiers and child civilians in northern Uganda tests the hypothesis that the former are less ideally socialised to Acholi norms than the latter, this raising the possibility that militarization may result in diminished socialisation and a preference for violence. Through focus groups and interviews with Acholi adults she identifies five socialisation indicators: respect; responsibility; strong identity; collective ownership; and reconciliation. She finds that child soldiering has had an expected deleterious effect on child socialisation in half of the indicators tested (collective ownership, responsibility and reconciliation). However, she calls for caution in interpreting these data, highlighting that this tendency might also be due to other stressors, especially the fear of being re-abducted by the LRA and post-reintegration harassment. At the same time, she notes that civilian children also experienced many constraints to their socialisation associated with displacement, poverty and conflict, making it hard to attribute distortions in socialisation to war alone.

It is possible to take the causal analysis of socialisation too far. Ronald Rohner (1976) warns of the need to be wary of making an *a priori* assumption that a particular event or feature of the process of socialisation will lead to certain types of behaviour. He illustrates this by reminding that the 'differential socialisation pressure' hypothesis does not prove to be a very robust explanation of sex differences in

aggression, since males remain more aggressive than females even though different cultures approach the training of children very differently and some even encourage aggression in girls. He also dismisses the argument made by D'Andrade and Whiting (1966) that the gendered division of labour produces differences in aggression in males and females, citing research which shows that even when boys do the same tasks as girls they remain more aggressive.

Structural imperatives

More recent ethnographic accounts of children in war tend to focus less on the process of socialisation and more on the ways in which social constructions of childhood and war and the social transitions of ageing predispose the young towards military action. One dominant theme in these analyses is the idea that the institution of war is not an aberration but somehow reinforces or replicates the ideational and structural forms that prevailed prior to its outbreak. In other words, as Murray Last (2005) has observed, there are social structures which make it easy for the young of a locality to act collectively in demonstrations, riots and other forms of rebellion.

In this way, Richards (1996) emphasises how youthful recruits to the war in Sierra Leone were no strangers to violence. Street life had long been characterised by personal and political violence and thuggery was a prevalent form of post-colonial statecraft especially during the 1967-85 regime of Siaka Stevens. Susan Shepler has also explored the idea that the child soldier is a historically meaningful category in that country, her case being that certain continuities of practice and discourse around children and childhood have rendered the notion of child soldiers intelligible in the local vernacular. She identifies child labour, fosterage, apprenticeship and induction into secret societies as the prime means through which these continuities have been expressed. Other studies on Africa have similarly explained how traditional ideas linking warfare with masculinity and initiation into adulthood provide a cultural foundation for the deployment of child soldiers in modern conflicts. Ellis (2005) for example emphasises the role of secret societies in enhancing the power of children's violence in Liberia. He maintains that 'In many parts of West Africa, initiation societies have historically functioned as powerful agents of political and social incorporation, notably of young men who are most likely to be the warlike element in any society' (ibid: 6). The particular appeal of military induction for the young is that it replicates rites of initiation into adulthood and is therefore perceived as a means of achieving adult status (ibid: 5). Ellis cites the Mouvement des forces démocratiques casamançaises (MFDC) in Senegal, the Karamajors in Sierra Leone, the Lofa Defense Force in Liberia, the Dozos in Côte d'Ivoire and the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria as examples of modern militias with a detectable background in traditional initiation societies or procedures. Likewise, among the Iteso in northern Uganda warfare has become a channel through which young men are able to become adults (de Berry 2001). Years of cattle raiding by the Karamajong have decimated Iteso herds to the point that young males no longer have sufficient animals to pay bride price. Hence, they fight primarily in order to retrieve their cattle and so to be able to marry.

Within ethno-theories of human development in Africa the young are sometimes framed as being especially well suited to warfare. The Iteso for example think of young males as stubborn and wild, stubbornness in their view being an important trait associated with soldiering (ibid). In Sierra Leone the advantages of young soldiers were explained to Shepler as: 'The rebels only want young boys and

girls because they are more easily controlled. If you tell them to kill they will.... A child doesn't have a wife, he doesn't have children.' (2004: 30). Among the gerontocratic Huasa of northern Nigeria the term for the young, 'yara', refers to all those who are dependent and of low status (Last 2005). Rebellion by young people is regarded as a premature attempt to move upward in status. The compulsion for children and adolescents to become violent may be especially acute in contexts where defence of family and community is a socially-acknowledged duty of the young. Last (2005), for example, describes how certain readings of Islam require young people to take power in the face of oppression.

Cultural appropriation

Whatever the congruities between social expectations of young people and conflict and whatever the social justifications for violence, war undoubtedly causes profound social suffering and it cannot be supposed that it is within the capability or will of a culture to legitimate this kind of violence. The Iteso reacted strongly against the idea that past practices and beliefs provide a rationale for the devastation visited on their communities by Karamajong warriors in modern times. Besides, some violent episodes are truly inexplicable to both insiders and outsiders and simply defy cultural rationalization. This brings into play the idea of cultural appropriation that Jessica Schafer employs in her study of young RENAMO combatants in Mozambique. Schafer writes about how, recognising that separation from family was a strong emotional wrench for their young troops, the RENAMO commanders embraced Shona patriarchal imagery and the mantle of fictive kinship as a means of 're-socialising' their foot soldiers. The commanders cast themselves as fathers and their followers as children, with an associated incest taboo, and these filial ties bestowed new loyalties on the troops and a firm obligation to serve their masters unquestioningly on the battlefield.

What is revealed in this case and in other war-affected societies is the way in which agents of war co-opt social and cultural templates, employing them in rites of military induction, codes of military conduct and the structuring of relations within the military unit. Cultural appropriation is used variously to isolate young foot soldiers from the civilian socio-moral domain, ensure their loyalty to and discipline within the troop, and incite them to undertake acts of exceptional bravery and brutality on the battlefield. Often cultural appropriation is rendered more effective by the deliberate perversion of civilian power relations, as occurred in Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge reformulated hierarchies based on age, gender, ethnicity and wealth as an explicit tactic for creating social and moral disorder. While the wealthy, the influential and the leaders of community were largely eliminated through torture, humiliation or assassination, children and adolescents gained command over many crucial aspects of life. Social engineering by the Khmer Rouge positioned children as soldiers, spies, leaders of the long marches and other adult roles that took them outside the moral boundaries of civilian society. A similar logic is offered as explanation of RUF activities in Liberia by Michael Jackson:

The abduction of children by the RUF, and their adoption by rebel leaders—who were regarded as fathers, and called Pappy or Pa—recalls the initiatory seizure of children, whose ties with their parents are symbolically severed so that they can be reborn, in the bush, as men. This idea that war—like initiation, or play, or an adventure—is a moment out of time, spatially separated from the moral world,

may also explain why many combatants anticipate a remorse-free return to civilian life (Jackson 2004:159 cited in Shepler 2004: 23)

Supernatural powers and secular symbols

Closely related to the concept of cultural appropriation is the idea that children may be rendered fearless and ferocious on the battlefield through the intervention of magic, spirits, adherence to cult practice, or some other exceptional mind-bending force, such as hallucinogenic drugs (Zack-Williams 1999a). Researchers have identified two means by which this form of manipulation is enacted: through the claims of special spiritual or magical powers made by military leaders; and through children and young people themselves being imbued with such powers. In some cases children who are thought to possess supernatural powers are considered better protected and more effective on the battlefield than adults. For example, among the Mano peoples in pre-colonial Liberia boy mascots protected by charms and medicines would apparently walk fearless and protected in front of warring parties . And one of Shepler's respondents indicated that:

The young ones, '*na den danger*' (they're the most dangerous). In the RUF they performed the worst atrocities. In the CDF, sometimes the young ones are the most powerful witches. A lot of the CDF power comes from witch (magic) and sometimes young people are even stronger witches than old people.

(Shepler 2004: 31)

The conditions in northern Uganda have been rather different, for in this case it is the leadership that claims special powers. Alice Auma Lakwena, onetime leader of The Holy Spirit Movement, or the LRA, was possessed of several spirits and would perform healing rituals for her troops, many of whom were child abductees. She established ritual places called yards where she 'prayed for her followers ...and anointed them in oil, promising them that if they were pure, bullets would not penetrate them':

She was able to cast out the *cen*, the dangerous and polluting spirits of those who had been killed by the soldiers and she loaded them with *malaika*, the Lwo term for angels. She also explained that war is a form of healing through which people would be purified. The healing is on both sides, as those that die are like the rotten flesh cut out by a surgeon. The pure, on the other hand, could not be killed.

(Ibid: 14).

LRA leaders appear to regard violence as a way of purging society of impurity. This sense of mission underpinning the war and the protection awarded to those young LRA fighters who remain pure supposedly sustains the extreme violence that has been an abiding feature of this conflict.

Secular symbols have been identified as another important way in which children and adolescents are incited to violence during war. Often military leaders invoke globalised images of modernity, such as cult figures from the worlds of film or popular music, which are particularly attractive to the young. Richards (1996, 1999) talks about the 'dramaturgy of social exclusion' that RUF/SL commanders in Sierra Leone employed to galvanise their young troops into action. They played on the symbolism of the young misunderstood and socially excluded hero of the American film 'First Blood' (part of the Rambo trilogy) which had become extremely popular prior to the war. The particular appeal of the Rambo character was that he managed to triumph over a superior (adult) force through fearless bravery, cunning and

resourcefulness. Richards notes the parallels between Rambo's success at overcoming social rejection and the rejoicing of RUF/SL cadres at beating a numerically superior and better armed adult opponent (Richards 1999: 7). The 'Operation No Living Thing' invasion of Freetown in January 1999 by young RUF fighters was inspired by the mythologised Tupac Shakur, the deceased American rap singer (Sommers 2003). The fighters wore Tupac shirts, wrote the lyrics of his songs on their vehicles and cut their hair according to his favoured style. 'Drugged and brutalized, terrorized and truly terrifying, the rebel child and youth soldiers attacked Freetown residents. Amputations, rapes, and killings took place across the city' (ibid: 9), resulting in the deaths of an estimated 6,000 people.

v.iii. Structure and agency

As the study of children through the process of socialization has diminished, so scholars in the social sciences have developed alternative paradigms. An increasing number of researchers in this field are working from a sociological or political economy perspective. They think of young people's violence in war as a feature of the dynamic interaction between constraining structural conditions and collective human agency, these forces existing in an ongoing dialectical relationship. That is to say, youthful engagement in war is believed to be the consequence of structurally conditioned, motivated actions of volitional agents 'employing such characteristically human attributes as intention, self-awareness, identification, representation and responsibility' (Giddens 1984, Littlewood 1997: 7).

This analysis entails consideration of the historical, social, economic and political conditions that generate rebellion, the structural position and circumstances of particular social categories—in this case the young, the ideational processes that produce a sense of collective consciousness and will for action and the precise motivation that underlay violent action specifically. Appreciation of the generational, life course and gendered differences between different cohorts of young people is also deemed necessary by some in order to understand the distinct opportunities and motives for fighting available to distinct social categories. 'Structuralists argue that individuals in certain social groups ... are exposed to greater strains that elicit violence. They also argue that certain groups are characterized by norms and values that emphasise violence as an acceptable way to express feeling and solve problems' .

Structuralist theories of conflict have become particularly influential in research on Africa. Two coexisting aspects of structure are highlighted: the first being the oppressive forces associated with failed post-colonial states and the economic and socio-political inequalities of globalisation; and the second, the opportunities brought about by poor governance and corruption on the one hand and by the promise of access to modern resources and the spread of modern technologies on the other. In Africa the increase in numbers of young people as a proportion of total population and their raised aspirations associated with the expansion of education and other trappings of modernity are juxtaposed with entrenched gerontocratic hierarchies and values, limited school places, low absorptive capacity of the job market, poor access to resources, high levels of forced migration and rapid rates of urbanisation. Maintaining not just that the young are marginalised socially, economically and politically, but that they have also developed a collective sense of this exclusion, discord, unrest and violent rebellion is explained as a conscious attempt to transform power structures and gain access to resources (Richards 1996, Sommers 2003, Zack-Williams 1999a). In

other words, the case being made is that violence is motivated by outrage among the young arising from the severe constraints to their employment and power.

Following this line, Zack-Williams (1999a, 1999b) frames his analysis of the violence of youth in Sierra Leone in terms of a crisis ridden peripheral capitalist economy and the endeavours of the young to establish an alternative structure. In his view, external economic constraints, autocratic rule and economic mismanagement have all resulted in the growing alienation of large sections of the population, among whom unemployed school leavers and university graduates have figured significantly. 'In this way, the task of societal transformation became the preserve of the most alienated groups in society – though not the most exploited – children and young people of the streets' (Zack-Williams 1999b: 21).

The groundswell of rebellion in many parts of Africa is perceived by Zack-Williams as having been facilitated by advances in weapons technology and the spread of armaments, the ready availability of small, light weapons having made it possible for children to fight. Other structural changes that he cites as significant are the de-professionalisation and mobility of the armed forces in modern intra-state conflicts which similarly enhance the role of the young. In his analysis Richards focuses on the intervention of foreign companies involved in minerals extraction in enclave economies, highlighting how they have incited the violence through the deployment of private armies and the creation of diamond camps which have become inhabited by chronically homeless, 'footloose' young diggers with only a precarious hold on employment.

Picking up on similar themes, Sommers talks about young people being 'empowered through alienation'.

In this context, then, it can hardly be surprising that impoverished, unskilled, and poorly educated urban youth often recast themselves as heroic underdogs. Rather than accepting their sidelined social existence, many celebrate it. This is an indication not only of the resilience of urban youth but of their distance from those seeking to stabilise and develop African cities. (Sommers 2003: 8)

Sommers describes how throughout Tanzania young people speak what has become known as the 'language of the ignorant': 'What is called a language ... is an ever-changing vocabulary of words that Tanzanian youth use to confer their connection to *Bongoland* (Literally "Brainland", the nickname for Dar es Salaam) and their separation from elite society' (ibid: 8). This language is used by many urban youth to describe how they see themselves: as alienated outcasts.

Of the literatures considered in this review, this is the one that focuses most explicitly on the notion of children and adolescents as social actors who are engaged in conscious, intentional actions. It is also the literature that yields the most dynamic view of children in war and focuses most consistently on the motivation for collective as opposed to individual action. It provides an analysis of the particular historical, political and economic conditions that underpin young people's rebellions, and locates their political activism in the broader context of globalisation of power and economy. What is not so clear is whether the thesis of youthful rebellion as a product of generational alienation in the context of highly constrictive structures would translate well across historical, social and cultural settings.

Conclusion

Many adults have very real reasons to fear the young and it is important to acknowledge that in war children and adolescents sometimes commit far greater atrocities than do adults. Large numbers of young people with guns undoubtedly do have the power to challenge adult authority and adult society, but in many cases the moral panic incited by young people is wholly disproportionate to the threat they pose. In modern times, in a climate of anxiety about world terrorism and insurrection, violence perpetrated by young people visits a sense of foreboding as never before. Although systematic comparative research on this issue remains to be done, this brief review suggests that it is not only in Europe and North America that social definitions of childhood and adolescence tend to preclude engagement in violence, whether interpersonal or political. As a consequence it would seem that in many contexts young people who fight enter a social condition that denigrates the accepted status of childhood and adolescence. In this way, young combatants are problematised by adults and excluded from the category of child or adolescent as anomalous and threatening to the socio-moral order.

As youthful aggression becomes increasingly implicated in both rebellions against states and international terrorism, so mounting energy is being invested in the effort to make comprehensible young people's predisposition for violence during war. Yet the debate is often based on misperception and much of it is sensationalised. A great deal more research remains to be done in order for a more informed dialogue to emerge. Possibly because of personal sensibilities, ethical concerns or a profound reluctance to think the unthinkable, not many of the researchers who study war have taken on board the idea that children and adolescents may be more violent than adults—there having been far less analysis of the nature of young people's political violence than of recruitment practices and motives for child enlistment. A first step therefore would be to study this issue directly, taking into account the importance of situating the experiences and conceptions of childhood and adolescence within the wider economic and socio-political context in which violence occurs.

At the present time most theories of causality in young people's conduct appear to rest on only one form of influence on human development and action, whether an aspect of the environment, personal experience, or individual traits. Most of the existing theories have failed to do justice to the full complexity of human motivation and the forces that mediate this. A complete account needs to give due attention to the influence and interaction of experiential, environmental and biogenetic factors, exploring their cognitive, psycho-emotional and behavioural effects. Whereas consideration of biological and genetic predisposition might stress a mix of basic instinctual drives, adaptive evolutionary mechanisms and personal heritage, discussions of the mediating influence of experience might highlight starvation, fear of being killed, desire for revenge or other motivational forces. Discussion of environmental features might focus on collective values that increase racism and racial prejudice, marginalise the young and endorse cruelty, or structural constraints such as compulsion, lack of alternative economic or survival choices, or social power. However, here we confront major challenges due to the practical difficulties of researching communities in conflict, epistemological barriers and disciplinary predilections, all of which have conspired to polarise the discussion and produce serious gaps in empirical knowledge and theory.

Among the gaps that are most consequential is the failure of research on children in war to take account of the many advances made in recent years in neuroscience, cognitive science and the social sciences generally. A review of the literatures in these disciplines should yield greater understanding of how young people think and feel, the manner in which they acquire those ways of thinking and those feelings and the relationship of such knowledge and such emotions to environment, experience and action (Gauvain 2001, Siegler 2001). By the same token, mainstream research on cognition and development in humans seldom takes account of power relations, conflict or the extremes of human experience generally, and normally implies high levels of consensus and coherence of values, behaviours and social relations. Greater consideration of the full diversity of young people's lifeworlds, including lifeworlds marked by violence and political strife, is needed in all research on the young.

Finally, much of the analysis so far has infantilised the young as mere receptors of environmental stimuli or of adult ideas and culture, often disregarding the highly complex and dynamic processes involved in cognition and behaviour. As Lawrence Hirschfeld (2002) highlights with regard to anthropology, there is a tendency to resist the study of internal states and to devise a plausible theory of how individuals mediate learning. This criticism could also be levied with equal validity at sociology, political economy and other related disciplines. Hirschfeld (2002: 615) emphasises that children do not just learn by mimicking but acquire culture, represent cultural information and manipulate these representations and use them to make sense of the world and organize action in it. In other words, the child novice is expert at learning. Psychology on the other hand falls down on its tendency to de-politicise and de-contextualise childhood and adolescence to the point where the historical, cultural and socio-political bases of their rebellions are rendered invisible. Psychology does have a view of children as constructive agents and yet, like anthropology, when it comes to consideration of children in war all too often has children and adolescents acting instinctively, reacting against, or responding to, rather than actively doing, constructing, representing, or overcoming extremes of environment and experience. In order to stem the tide of moral panic about the young or at least to account more effectively for their behaviour, we need far more effective theories and evidence than at present on children's and adolescent's actions in war, theories that take account of social power, ideational and structural forms, and emotional and cognitive processes.

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ⁱ Willetts was Shadow Secretary of State for Work & Pensions from September 2001 to May 2005. Since December 2005, Willetts has been the Shadow Secretary of State for Education & Skills.

ⁱⁱ Also, Urdal makes a few leaps of faith of his own such as the availability of finance being interpreted as significant because it links to primary commodity exports and thereby to increased opportunities for extortion and corruption, which are taken for granted as fuelling conflict.

ⁱⁱⁱ Other incentives for the conscription of children include the fact that adults are generally better trained, stronger and more experienced and hence considered less expendable. Children that are sent into battle in their place may be done so with the explicit purpose of drawing enemy fire (Cain 1999). Young combatants can yield powerful military advantage, as illustrated by an incident in Sierra Leone when a contingent of the Royal Irish Regiment, reluctant to fire upon children, was captured by a group of child soldiers. Commenting on this incident, Dr Singer of the Brookings Institute observed ‘...adult, professional militaries initially tend to see child soldiers as they see children in their own cultures – harmless and innocent. They feel sorry for the children, and this presents the adults with difficult choices.’ (Borchini, Lanz and O’Connell 2002: 18)

^{iv} This being one of the very few instances in which Piaget was willing to acknowledge interpersonal influences in children’s development contending that children become moral subjectivists through interpersonal conflict between peers, which result in understanding social rules, compromise, and views of others.