

Commentary on Cummings et al.

BRANDON HAMBER AND ELIZABETH GALLAGHER

Ulster University, Northern Ireland

There have been over 40 years of direct political conflict in Northern Ireland (Cairns & Darby, 1998; Gallagher & Cairns, 2011). The impact of this extended conflict from a mental health perspective has been extensive, and it continues to have a widespread effect on the society (Connolly & Healy, 2004; Gallagher & Hamber, 2014; Gallagher, Hamber, & Joy, 2012; O'Neill et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2007, 2012). Although a peace agreement was reached in Northern Ireland in 1998, the situation has been described as a negative peace where the underlying causes of the conflict have not been addressed (Nolan, 2014). The impact of the conflict continues to linger, and sharp social and political separation persists. In dealing with the legacy of armed conflict, there is a growing awareness of the negative impact on children and young people (Connolly, Smith, & Kelly, 2002; O'Neill et al., 2015). However, few interventions, certainly in societies such as Northern Ireland that are emerging from periods of protracted violent conflict, focus on the contextual, developmental, and psychological impact of political violence on youth adjustment.

Cummings et al.'s article "Emotional Insecurity About the Community: A Dynamic, Within-Person Mediator of Child Adjustment in the Contexts of Political Violence" offers a unique longitudinal viewpoint on how emotional insecurity about the community can affect childhood and youth adjustment. This article broadens our understanding on the psychological processes that trigger emotional insecurity and put young people at risk of maladjustment. This type of longitudinal research is essential in advancing understanding of the aetiology of youth adjustment and offers a unique insight into how the psychological processes affecting youth development are likely to change over time.

The study indicates that in contexts of political violence, youth's risk for total adjustment is affected by emotional insecurity about the community. Building on previous research (i.e., Cummings et al., 2011), the study finds that in addition to interindividual differences, intraindividual emotional insecurity about the community, over multiple time points, is related to children's total adjustment problems. Furthermore, the study highlights gender differences in the link between exposure to sectarian antisocial behavior and youth's security in the community. Girls showed greater insecurity about the community, and there were stronger links between sectarian community violence and emotional insecurity for girls than

for boys. The study posits that adolescents who continue on a path of insecurity about their community are over time at a heightened risk for later adjustment problems. The findings highlight the need for consideration to be given to the psychological and developmental processes, as well as contextual factors, which relate to adolescent delinquency in contexts of political violence. The study further demonstrates that emotional security is a self-regulating system that responds to an ever-changing context. Therefore, the study comprehensively and empirically establishes that there is a clear link between political violence and the type of context it creates and youth adjustment.

This article calls for the provision of integrated services. In recent years, a number of strategies have been developed focusing on children and young people in Northern Ireland. A review of child and adolescent mental health services in Northern Ireland was carried out by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority in 2010 and found that although provisions were moving forward, there was still a long way to go before the needs of the young people in Northern Ireland were effectively met (Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, 2011). The "Our Children and Young People—Our Pledge" sets out a 10-year framework (2006–2016) to ensure that all children and young peoples' needs are addressed and that Northern Ireland rises to the challenges of a society emerging from conflict (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006). Some of the themes identified within this strategy include gaining and harnessing the support of parents, carers, and the community, and it also alludes to a gradual shift to preventative and early intervention practice.

However, a key question, when one reads the stark results of the Cummings, Merrilees, Taylor, Goekle-Morey & Shirlow study, is whether what is taking place in terms of service provision is sufficient and if fragmentation of services has been overcome. The Community Relations Council has argued, as late as 2010, for "a serious youth strategy, which deals with the various needs of young people as they are, rather than the current provider-led models which leave too many young people without support" (Community Relations Council, 2010, p. 19). The research endorses the need for not only such an integrated, overarching multiagency, multiple-issue youth strategy but also one that is underpinned by a more rigorous understanding of the developmental and

psychological processes at hand that include an early intervention focus.

Previous research has recognized that it is far more effective and less expensive to adopt preventative early interventions and promote resilience learning at an early age than the implementation of treatment at a later stage (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). The present study offers a valuable insight into the developmental processes that may be useful and aid the implementation of preventive intervention strategies that are also context sensitive. The study demonstrates that emotional insecurity about the community is increased by sectarian community violence and in turn heightens child adjustment problems.

The findings from this study therefore have the potential to guide intervention and social policies and outline specific directions for preventative intervention efforts. As noted by the National Advisory Mental Health Council (2000), reinforcement of the evidence base for prevention and intervention approaches needs to take place with increased emphasis placed on family and community-based interventions (Betancourt et al., 2013). This study also highlights the need for preventative interventions to take into consideration the vulnerability factors (e.g., gender and exposure to sectarian community

violence) that can effect adjustment negatively, as well as the protective factors (positive relationships) that can modify the impact of risk in a positive way. Therefore, preventative interventions need to be aware of and identify vulnerability and protective factors that might affect the emotional security about the community and in turn modify child adjustment.

Finally, the results suggest that an important goal if we are to improve adolescents' well-being, including reducing the risk for delinquency, is through lessening children's insecurity about the community in contexts of political violence in the first place. This belies a bigger question: why are some young people, over 15 years after the peace agreement in Northern Ireland, still living in communities that promote the type of insecurity the researchers have so carefully documented? The study calls for an ecological framework based on multilevel approaches to intervention, which takes into account the level of the individual, the family, and the community. Appropriate, integrated, and early individual and community service provisions will make a difference as has been noted, but clearly more also needs to be done at a political level to ensure the social conditions that promote insecurity, primarily in historically disadvantaged communities, are more effectively tackled.

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