Reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents in Northern Uganda

Benjamin Alipanga
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Promotor: Prof. dr. I. Derluyn
Co-promotors: Prof. dr. E. Broekaert & dr. S. Neema

Proefschrift ingediend tot het behalen van de academische graad van Doctor in de Pedagogische Wetenschappen

2015
**Begeleidingscommissie:**

Prof. dr. Ilse Derluyn (promotor)  
Universiteit Gent, Vakgroep Sociaal Werk en Sociale Pedagogiek

Prof. dr. Eric Broekaert (co-promotor)  
Universiteit Gent, Vakgroep Orthopedagogiek

Dr. Stella Neema (co-promotor)  
Makerere University, Department of Sociology

Prof. dr. Rudi Roose  
Universiteit Gent, Vakgroep Sociaal Werk en Sociale Pedagogiek

Prof. dr. Stephan Parmentier  
KULeuven, Leuven Instituut voor Criminologie


**Examencommissie:**

Prof. dr. Ilse Derluyn  
Universiteit Gent, Vakgroep Sociaal Werk en Sociale Pedagogiek

Prof. dr. Eric Broekaert  
Universiteit Gent, Vakgroep Orthopedagogiek

Prof. dr. Rudi Roose  
Universiteit Gent, Vakgroep Sociaal Werk en Sociale pedagogiek

Prof. dr. Wouter Vandenhole  
Universiteit Antwerpen, Faculteit Rechten

Dr. Sofie Vindevogel  
Universiteit Gent, Vakgroep Orthopedagogiek
Preface

This research, which examined the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected youth living in post-conflict northern Uganda, owes its development to the work I did with war-affected population in northern Uganda, following the gruesome war between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government, lasting for over twenty years. The war left many people traumatized, depressed and with general psychosocial malady. One distressing feature of the war was the conscription, mainly forcefully, of young people as fighters alongside the LRA. These youth subsequently were coerced into committing grievous crimes against their own people. Upon return of these youth into their communities, they were faced with challenges of reintegrating among the same people they aggressed against, a factor that called for reconciliation. However, despite numerous studies on the impact of armed conflicts and on reconciliation as an important part of post-conflict recovery processes, there is little evidence on the study of reconciliation attitudes, attitudes that would predispose or prevent a person from reconciling with another. The purpose of this study was to address this missing link.

The study was divided into two sections: the first study examined the reconciliation attitudes held by youth in the post-conflict setting of northern Uganda, hereby also examining possible associations with several factors (socio-demographic characteristics, war-related stressors, including experiences of child soldiering, daily stressors, and mental health problems) and with reconciliation programs. This study gives useful insights for people interested in conflict resolution and peace building processes, since an understanding of the factors associated with reconciliation attitudes will enable programs to target impacting factors, and thereby both positive and negative reconciliation attitudes.

The second study detailed the views of war-affected youth regarding reconciliation and programs instituted to promote reconciliation. Knowing what the people in need for reconciliation perceive as reconciliation, and what programs should do for them in order to realize the envisioned reconciliation, is invaluable for organizations aiming at promoting reconciliation in post-conflict settings.

Chapter one of the study presents the general introduction giving the background information to this study, the problem statement, the context, methods and aims. In chapter two, the reconciliation attitudes held by former child soldiers in northern Uganda, compared to non-abducted children is offered against the background of war-related and daily stressful life conditions they have lived through. Chapter three details the association between mental health, in particular internalizing (posttraumatic stress, depression and anxiety) and externalizing (aggressive and rule-breaking) problems in war-affected adolescents (both former child soldiers and never conscripted adolescents), and the reconciliation attitudes observed amongst them in northern Uganda. Next, chapter four explored the influence of intervention programs on reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents by comparing the reconciliation attitudes of adolescents living in two post-conflict communities in northern Uganda.
based on the fact that, at the time of the study, one of the communities benefited from peace and reconciliation intervention programs while the other one did not. Chapter five examined differences in the reconciliation attitudes held by female war-affected adolescents living in northern Uganda, compared to that of male adolescents in light of the presumed gender differences in the emotional impact of war-related and daily stressors. Chapter six, presents the reconciliation experiences of the formerly abducted adolescents, their relatives and key informants in one community of northern Uganda, giving the details of their understanding of reconciliation, and the role of reconciliation programs in their community. Finally, chapter seven presents the overall synthesis with the summary of main findings, and the limitations and implications of the study.

This research has been an important learning experience for me. Meeting and interacting with war-affected youth and the members of their community has given me a deeper understanding of the plight of war-affected people, particularly the youth who often suffer horrible experiences which they neither caused nor could escape, and which they now must hold in their memory for as long as they live. Yet, contrary to what might be expected, they still show positive reconciliation attitudes, the negative ones notwithstanding, and are prepared to give life a second chance. Hopefully, this study has exposed factors related to reconciliation that could be targeted to bring change in the lives of the many youth and communities who continue to be adversely affected by armed conflicts, and bring some improvement in their psychosocial wellbeing. My hope is that further research will delve deeper into these issues so that more and more better ways of helping such people are found.
Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the support of many wonderful people, who sacrificed their talents, time, finance, and other invaluable resources. To all who, in one way or another, helped me along with this study, for lack of appropriate words to convey what I feel deep inside my heart for you, I say “Thank you”.

To the one who sowed the seeds, watered and tended it until this moment of reaping the proceeds, Prof. dr. Ilse Derluyn, I will forever remember you in gratitude. You have shown that it is possible to combine firmness with patience, intelligence with humility, and intellectual prowess with utmost simplicity, marked by high versatility, while all the time remaining truly human! My humble hope is that I will be able to emulate some of these qualities in my own life. Thank you once again.

I am grateful to all the members of my doctoral guidance committee: Prof. dr. Eric Broekaert (co-promotor), dr. Stella Neema (co-promotor), Prof. dr. Stephan Parmentier and Prof. dr. Rudi Roose. Your guidance and support was instrumental, and steered me along, the sometimes not so clear, road.

The CCVS team: Prof dr. Gerrit, Prof. dr. Lucia, Lieve Millissen, dr. An, dr. Sofie, Julie, Leen, dr. Isabel, and dr. Julia, Kathleen, Amer, and Sama, members of CCVS-Belgium, thank you very much for all the support rendered along the trek. At Lira, CCVS-Uganda, which has become like a second home to me, I thank the wonderful people working to help the numerous war-affected youth, who never hesitated to help me when I needed anything. Patrick, Jennifer, Rebecca, Evelyn and Denis who, together with Fr. Ponsiano, went with me in rain and in sunshine, to meet some of the war-affected youth, I thank you for the generous support you readily gave me.

Colleagues at the department Social Work and Social Pedagogy; Prof dr. Maria, Dr. Lieve, Heidi, Floor, Ine, Patrick, Katrien, Tina, and all others, I cherish the unwavering support you have readily given me in very many different ways throughout the time I spent with you. At the department of Special Needs Education, I would like to recognize the contribution of all the members, particularly Dieter, ever cheerful and handy in any situation. Special thanks to Maarten De Schryver for his invaluable contribution in form of statistical analyses, a support without which it would have been impossible to successfully complete this work.

To the colleagues in Makerere University, dr. Rosco, for your encouragement when things looked grim, and your inspiration through your ability to radiate optimism. Special thanks to Dr. Nambi, you showed me the way and will remain an important mentor for me always. From Gulu University, my thanks to dr. James for useful tips you gave me.

I cannot forget my friends in Ghent. You were a source of great comfort and hope. Peter, Els and family; Denis, Judith and family; and Katrien and Daniel, whatever happens, I know in my heart that you will always remain my friends.

To my dear friend and wife, Gauden. No words can describe the sacrifice you made for me together with our lovely children, Carla and Jean, Ivan and Emma. In my absence and
in my presence, you did all you could to encourage and support my efforts. Equally no words can express the gratitude I feel for you, but all I can say is, I will always remember your unwavering love and care, thank you.

At the end of it all, the young people in northern Uganda, perhaps more than martyrs who suffer for some known and cherished value, you suffered for reasons beyond your comprehension, and probably reasons you will never ever get to understand. Thank you all for accepting to share your experiences so that it may help other people in similar situations.

Finally, my appreciation for the financial support, without which this study would not have taken place, generously provided by the people of Belgium through the Belgian Technical Cooperation (BTC) and VLIR-UOS via the HEFS Platform Harvest Call (ZIUS2013VOA0902).

Benjamin Alipanga
May, 2015
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Chapter 1

General introduction
General Introduction

Abstract

The general introduction presents the background to the armed conflict in northern Uganda involving the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel group that waged a war against the government of Uganda for over a period of 20 years, and describes the exposure of particularly young people to the conflict and the consequences they have suffered as a result. Further, this chapter explores the reality of post-conflict recovery necessitated by the adverse effects of conflict, looking at reconciliation as part of this recovery process. Additionally, the chapter, using an ecological approach, exposes the factors within post-conflict settings that are associated with reconciliation and reconciliation attitudes that war-affected people hold. Based on the limitations of available studies regarding factors of reconciliation attitudes, the research problem, aim, questions and methodology framed are presented.
1.1 Adolescent involvement in armed conflict

1.1.1 Introduction

The introduction briefly recounts young people’s exposure to armed conflicts, with particular focus on the war that took place in northern Uganda between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the government of Uganda. During the war, many young people were forced to participate either as active perpetuators or innocent victims and as a result they suffered considerable consequences ranging from death, abduction, psychological distress, to ongoing day-to-day stressors, directly or indirectly caused by the war. Abduction and forced conscription of these young people was often accompanied by acts of criminal nature, often committed against their own people. In the aftermath of the war, as everywhere, there is need for post-conflict recovery. One of the processes that is increasingly becoming important in the process of post-conflict recovery is reconciliation. Here the reconciliation attitudes held by war-affected youth in post-conflict northern Uganda is presented, as well as the factors within the post-conflict setting that are associated with reconciliation. These factors are seen as important pre-conditions for reconciliation and for the broader post-conflict recovery.

1.1.2 Young people and armed conflicts

Civilians are becoming more vulnerable as armed conflicts are changing due to new tactics employed in warfare such as suicide bombings, ambiguous battlefields, the increasing number and diversification of parties to conflict that add to the complexity of conflicts, and the deliberate targeting of traditional safe havens such as schools and hospitals (e.g., O’Malley, 2007). The perpetrators of the conflicts now use varied weapons that do not discriminate against targets such as landmines and explosives (International Campaign to Ban Landmines, 2007; UN, 2007). Between 1998 and 2004 it was estimated that globally there were over a half a million number of deaths of civilians in the hands of various armed groups in 41 countries, and the dominant number (93%) of such civilian casualties were on the African continent alone (Eck & Hultman, 2007). For example by June 2011, between 12,500 and 14,700 civilians were killed in the Afghanistan conflict alone (Crawford, 2011), while currently in Ukraine civilians continue to die (Human Rights Watch, 2014). In Africa, civilian deaths have been reported in Burundi (Human Rights Watch, 2003), and Rwanda (Verwimp, 2003). Young people and women feature prominently amongst civilians adversely affected by armed conflicts, making up around 80% of such fatalities (Dickson-Gomez, 2002; Pearn, 2003; Somasundaram, 2002; UNICEF, 2006). According to the United Nations, the involvement of young people in armed conflicts as child soldiers remains prevalent with more than 4,000 cases documented in 2013 alone, and thousands more children estimated to have been recruited and used (UN, 2014). This state of affairs means that
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armed conflicts affect children largely, with reports of hundreds of thousands of them being killed, orphaned, injured, separated from their families or raped (Machel, 2001; UNICEF, 2006). Moreover, during many of the armed conflicts, children are deliberately targeted for killing, and those who survive grow up in contexts that are deprived of material and emotional needs, since the social structures that would give them such support are destroyed (Machel, 1996).

1.1.3 Background to the war in northern Uganda

The conflict in northern Uganda was a complex one, described as the biggest forgotten and neglected emergency in the world (International Crisis Group, 2004), with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel insurgent group, and the government of Uganda as protagonists. The LRA rebellion began in 1986 (Apuuli, 2005; Carlson & Mazurana, 2008) after the current president of Uganda (Yoweri Museveni) took power through a military coup, after years of political, military and social turmoil dating back to the regime of Idi Amin in the 1970s. The turmoil which began with the British colonialists who used a divide and rule policy to control the country, pitting ethnic groups against each other, led to political, military and economic marginalization of some ethnic groups within the country (Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999; Van Acker, 2004). Following the 1986 military coup, the deposed national army, known then as Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA) largely composed of people from northern Uganda (and predominantly of Acholi ethnic group), fled and regrouped in Sudan (Carlson & Mazurana, 2008). These events marked the beginning of a series of rebellions in the north, and eventually the birth of the Lord's Resistance Movement/Army (LRA/M). Later the rebellion took on an international character when the LRA moved into Sudan in the early 1990s to seek refuge from the fighting in Uganda, where they were able to get support, mainly in form of arms, from the Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir for helping the Khartoum regime to crush the southern rebellion, and later they moved into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Carlson & Mazurana, 2008; Schomerus, 2007).

During the course of the rebellion, men and women of all ages were taken captive. The majority of the people abducted were mainly from the Acholi sub-region of northern Uganda, while a few were abducted from other neighboring districts (Pham, Vinck & Stover, 2008). However, the LRA seemed to have been interested more in abducting adolescent boys with up to 65% of those abducted reportedly being children and adolescents (Annan, Blattman & Horton, 2006). Probably, this was because adolescent males provide reliable and effective recruits (Beber & Blattman, 2008). Women and girls were also abducted, and formed up to one third of all the fighting forces (Brett, 2002; Corbin, 2008; McKay & Mazurana, 2004; Mazurana et al., 2002 UN,1996). In general, it is estimated that between 54,000 to 75,000 people were abducted by the LRA (of which about 25,000 to 38,000 were children), over a period of over 20 years (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Pham et al., 2008).

Generally, the people of northern Uganda, predominantly civilians, suffered greatly
during the conflict, as they were subjected to various horrendous experiences during the conflict, such as being beaten, suffering losses of income and productive assets, destruction of homes, being wounded or sexually abused, forced to walk and carry heavy loads for long distances, suffering secondary horror when they had relatives, killed, tortured or abducted, witnessing firsthand the LRA attacks and abductions, torture, killing, or sexual abuse of other people, or witnessed LRA fights with the national army. For those who were abducted, they were forced to commit various acts of violence, such as looting, torturing, fighting, abducting or killing people (Pham et al., 2009). One of the noticeable impacts of the conflict on the population in northern Uganda was mass movement into camps for internally displaced people (IDP camps). It was estimated that over 90 percent of the population was at one time forced into IDP-camps in the hope of finding security. However, the camps never guaranteed any security, as also here, the people were continuously attacked by the rebels (Pham, Vinck & Stover, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2005). The war led overall to devastating impoverishment of the communities living in northern Uganda, resulting in great survival challenges for both the people returning from abduction, and for everyone within the community, as the families were unable to provide for the basic needs of their members (Corbin, 2008).

1.1.4 Consequences of armed conflict on children and youth

Armed conflicts affect young people in a variety of ways. Many young people lose their lives, directly or indirectly due to armed conflicts (e.g., Coghlan et al., 2008). Other young people are wounded or maimed (Barbara, 2006; Pearn, 2003), while others are abducted and forced to participate in the activities of the captor armed forces, in the process encountering grave difficulties (Amone-P’Olak, 2007; De Berry, 2001; Francis, 2007; Okello, 2002; UN, 2008). One reason for the abduction of young people is the failure by armed groups to attract volunteers (Annan et al., 2008). In Uganda, girls were particularly abducted by the LRA to serve as sex slaves and “wives” for the commanders, to perform domestic roles for the commanders and their wives (Allen, 2005; Amone-P’Olak, 2005; Corbin, 2008; McKay & Mazurana, 2004), and to aid the creation of a new and pure generation of the Acholi ethnic group imagined by the rebels (Gardam & Charlesworth, 2000). Another important consequence of armed conflict for young people is forced displacement (Berman, 2001), ending up being exposed to even more violence and additional tragedies, and for longer periods of time than non-displaced peers, because of the stressors they are exposed to in places of refuge (Mels et al., 2010; Miller & Rasco, 2004; Montgomery & Foldspang, 2005), which, coupled with separation from family, may lead to the development of psychological problems including anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress (Derluyn, Mels & Broekaert, 2009; Rasmussen & Miller, 2010). Sexual violence is yet another important consequence of armed conflict on youth (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Verelst et al., 2014), and has been rated as one of the most traumatic experiences (McKay, 1998) that often may lead to great physical, reproductive
and emotional disturbances in the victims (e.g., McKay, 1998; Miller et al., 2002; Rehn & Sirleaf, 2009; Stevens, 2014). Of particular importance here is the shame and stigma associated with sexual violence as sources of emotional stress and a range of social problems (Burman & McKay, 2007; Corbin, 2008; McKay, 2006; Sideris, 2003). Further, available studies have documented wide-scale negative mental health consequences of armed conflicts on conflict-affected youth (e.g., Vindevogel et al., 2011), with notable increase in adverse mental health prevalence (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006). Symptoms of internalizing problems have been particularly evident in war-affected youth, including symptoms of posttraumatic stress (e.g., Barbara, 2006; Denov, 2010; Bayer, Klasen & Adam, 2007; Thabet, Abed & Vostanis, 2002), depression and anxiety (e.g., Betancourt et al., 2011; Thabet, Abed, & Vostanis, 2004). Similarly, symptoms of externalizing problems have been commonly found, such as violent behavior, hostility, drug use, and social maladjustment (e.g., Betancourt et al., 2010a; Dyregrov et al., 2000; Schaal & Elbert, 2006; Scholte et al., 2014). Literature also has large evidence of socio-economic consequences of armed conflict on youth, since productive service-oriented activities are interrupted because of the war (e.g., Human Rights Watch, 2005; World Vision, 2004), leading, besides poverty-related consequences, also to loss of family life and educational opportunity (Annan et al., 2007; Bannink-Mbazzi & Lorschiedter, 2009; Blattman & Annan, 2010; Pham & Stover, 2009), and increased hostility and social stress (Miller & Rasco, 2004; Vindevogel et al., 2011), further reducing or completely destroying social support system (Cuéllar, 2004; Schepers-Hughes & Bourgois, 2003). Economically, prolonged violence is associated with the destruction of national infrastructure and economy, thereby increasing poverty and associated psychosocial stressors (Blattman & Annan, 2010; de Berry et al., 2004), leading to severe distress among war-affected children (e.g., Allwood et al., 2002; Annan et al., 2009; Vindevogel et al., 2013) and a heavy burden on children (Wessells, 2006). The social consequences of conflicts are also manifested by increased day-to-day stressors (e.g., Annan, Brier & Aryemo, 2009; Vindevogel et al., 2013). One of the prominent daily stressors in post-conflict settings is stigma, created and sustained through a cycle of fear, perceived injustice and vengeance, that is typically found among war-affected persons (Betancourt et al., 2010a; de Jong, 2002; Sansone & Sansone, 2008), and may produce a range of psychological and social problems (Betancourt et al., 2010a; Vindevogel et al., 2013), which also might undermine the coping strategies and resources available to people in post-conflict settings (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). However, despite the myriads of negative consequences caused or ushered in by conflicts, it is gradually emerging that some positive gains are made as well, in form of post-traumatic resilience (Klasen et al., 2010). Various reasons have been advocated for resilience in the face of suffering, including supportive environments, such as family, peers, schools, communities, cultural, political and belief systems (e.g., Betancourt et al., 2010b; Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Klasen et al., 2010; Tummala-Narra, 2007; Ungar, 2005). Social support has been consistently associated with post-traumatic resilience.
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(Bonanno & Mancini, 2008; Ozer et al., 2003), due to its protective effects against stress (Araya et al., 2007; Luthar & Chicchetti, 2000; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007; Shahar et al., 2009). However despite all these information, the research on post-conflict recovery processes, in particular within communities and social groups, remains fairly limited.

1.2 Post-conflict recovery processes

Post-conflict recovery is a complex term (Barakat & Zyck, 2009). Politically, it has been looked at as the process of instituting a comprehensive set of measures that seek to address the needs of countries emerging from conflicts, such as prevention of further escalation of disputes, avoiding relapse into violence, addressing the root causes of conflict, and consolidating sustainable peace (African Union, 2006; Collier, Hoeffler & Söderbom, 2008). Economically, it is envisaged as a reconstruction involving a return to pre-conflict economic growth and employment rates (Ohiorhenuan, 2011; Flores & Nooruddin, 2009). Increasingly, more and more literature looks at post-conflict recovery in relation to healing from psychological trauma (e.g., Pearlman, 2013), and rebuilding of social networks, in particularly in relation to themes of reconciliation in communities and between social and ethnic groups.

1.2.1 Psychological recovery

Studies have presented various ways through which psychological recovery may be achieved, including targeted psychological interventions for individuals and groups (e.g., Ager et al., 2011; Anckermann et al., 2005; Annan et al., 2009; Baines, 2007; Bilali, 2014; Nakayi, 2008; Staub, 2013; Vindevogel et al., 2013). Reception and rehabilitation centers for children returning from captivity (former child soldiers) have also been used as part of a psychological recovery programming (McKay & Mazurana, 2004), where also re-socializations skills were provided (Silove & Zwi, 2005).

1.2.2 Reconciliation as part of post-conflict recovery process

In post-conflict settings, reconciliation is gradually gaining importance as one of the processes involved in post-conflict recovery, in particularly related to recovery of the social tissue. However, as a concept, reconciliation is beset with complexity (Bloomfield, 2006; Galtung, 2001). One trend looks at reconciliation as a process concerned with people’s relationship, which demands changes in attitudes, aspirations, emotions feelings, and beliefs in order to restore the relationship lost due to conflict (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004; Bloomfield, 2006; Hjort & Frisen, 2006; Lederach, 2001; McCandless, 2001; Vetlesen, 2005). Another trend emphasizes the co-existence of former enemies as key to the definition of reconciliation (e.g., Gibson, 2007; Mukashema & Mullet, 2009). Other views define reconciliation in terms of addressing past issues and planning for the future (e.g., Bloomfield, Barnes, & Huyse, 2003; Hewstone et al., 2005), Kosic & Tauber,
2010; and involve the call for justice and restitution of damages (e.g., Broneus, 2003; de la Rey, 2001). Generally, literature seems to suggest that the concept of reconciliation refers to restoration of relationships broken by conflict (e.g., Alzate, Sabucedo & Durán, 2013; Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004; Bloomfield, 2003; 2006; Lederach, 2001; McCandless, 2001). Hereby, reconciliation is considered as a dynamic interpersonal and dyadic process (Mukashema & Mullet, 2013; Nadler & Shnabel, 2008), and is often tied up with the concept of forgiveness (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; Kantz, 2000; Latigo, 2008; McCullough, 2001). While some studies have propounded that forgiveness is part of the reconciliation process (e.g., Enright, 2001; Hamber & Kelly, 2005; McLernon et al., 2003), others have argued that the two are exclusive (e.g., Huyse, 2003).

Studies have also looked at different reconciliation settings, including interpersonal and group contexts (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; Mukashema & Mullet, 2009). Reconciliation may be enacted at personal level as a process requiring change in attitudes within the individual (Gibson, 2007; Latigo, 2008); the interpersonal level where at least two people come together following separation (Enright, 2001); or the macro (political) level involving interactions between groups of persons, nations, or institutions (Huyse, 2003; Schaap, 2005, 2006).

Traditional and religious rituals have also been cited as means of psychological recovery in post-conflict settings (Amone-P’Olak, 2006; Mckay, 2004; Shanahan, 2008) as they are believed help in the restoration of lost trust and confidence, and in enhancing reconciliation (Anyeko et al., 2011; Latigo, 2008; Muldoon et al., 2014). Such programs are meant to restore social connectedness (Betancourt et al., 2008; Loughry & Eyber, 2003). However psychosocial programing for reconciliation faces numerous challenges such as costs and issues of relevance (Allen & Schomerus, 2006; Anyeko et al., 2011; Borzello, 2007) and therefore it is difficult to know whether such interventions achieve their aims, moreover there is little research on the impact of reconciliation programs in post-conflict settings.

Because of different levels of reconciliation, different activities are called for to achieve it. At the individual level, there is need for psychological interventions to help persons cope with trauma and psychological wounds (O’Callaghan et al., 2014). At the community (inter-personal) level, there is need to re-establish broken social networks and restore trust (e.g., Gibson, 2007; Petoukhov, 2012; Rettig, 2008). While at the societal (inter-group) level, it is important to create common interests and co-operation between different, divided social groups through sharing truth as a fundamental prerequisite for reconciliation, and to establish the rule of law to protect the human rights of all individuals, and to prevent further discrimination. To this end many truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) have been established in post-conflict settings (e.g., Aiken, 2008; Ajduković, & Bируski, 2004; Shaw, 2005). However, despite this research on reconciliation as important part of post-conflict recovery, there is still little research on what reconciliation means from the perspective of the people affected by conflicts themselves, and who might need to be reconciled, which is necessary to achieve contextual understanding of reconciliation (Gibson, 2007).
Various views increasingly suggest that reconciliation is important for post-conflict recovery (Baskar, 2009; Bloomfield, 2006; Dilek, 2012; Hippler, 2008; Ottaway, 2003; Sarkin, 2008; Smith, 2005; Staub, 2013). Amongst other explanations, it has been suggested that reconciliation brings adversaries together to address causes of conflicts and rebuild societies torn by conflicts (Barakat & Zyck, 2009; Bloomfield, 2006; Spence, 2001). Additionally, it is believed that reconciliation promotes justice, human rights and co-existence, which are necessary for post-conflict recovery (Bloomfield et al., 2003; Dilek, 2012; Hutchison & Bleiker, 2008; Kelman & Fisher, 2003). Literature also argues that reconciliation resolves current conflicts and prevents future discords (Bar-Tal, 2000; Bercovitch & Kadayifci, 2002; Bloomfield et al., 2003; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Staub, 2006, 2011, 2013), and alleviates the effects of destructive processes that accompany violent conflicts (Cohrs & Boehnke, 2008). Increasingly, available literature are showing interest in the role of traditional rituals as means of reconciling individuals perceived as culturally errant in post-conflict communities (Boothby, 2006; Latigo, 2008). However, there is little information on whether reconciliation helps individuals who have been emotionally wounded by traumatic war experiences, and who are living daily under stressful conditions associated with conflicts, to experience psychological recovery. It is equally unclear whether reconciliation is more difficult when it involves people suffering from psychological problems.

1.2.3 Factors impacting reconciliation attitudes

Various conditions exist within post-conflict situations that might influence whether individuals and communities actually reconcile with each other or not. In this regard, reconciliation attitudes are important. For reconciliation to happen, it is important that the people in conflict should possess some willingness or readiness to reconcile. This willingness is based on attitudes that people hold. There is a general consensus that an attitude represents an appraisal of a combination of thoughts and feelings that people experience in relation to an object or another person (Crano & Prislin, 2006). Broadly, attitude has been explained as the cognitive construction and affective evaluation of an attitude object by an agent (Bergman, 1998). Because attitude involves cognitive and emotional judgements, the attitudinal object is not understood in the same way by everyone. People differ in the way they understand and perceive the object as well as on how they feel about it (Bergman, 1998). In post-conflict situations, there are many factors that could shape reconciliation attitudes in the people who have been adversely affected by the conflict. The next section sets out to discern some of the factors of reconciliation attitudes among war-affected people.
1.2.4 Factors associated with reconciliation attitudes

Apart from cognitive and emotional evaluations by individuals that produce differences in attitudes, there are other external factors that may also introduce differences in reconciliation attitudes held (Smith, 2005). Although studies have described post-conflict factors of reconciliation, such as pre-conflict history, the conflict history, and the depth of current division in the conflict society (Bloomfield, 2003), trust, empathy, forgiveness, and altruism (Davidson, McElwee & Hannan, 2004; Fletcher & Weinstein, 2002; Kelman, 2005; Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000; Mukashema & Mullet, 2010), and satisfaction of mutual emotional needs of adversaries in conflict (Shanbel & Nadler, 2008), little has been said about other factors characteristically present in post-conflict settings that may prevail on the people's reconciliation attitudes, including socio-demographic characteristics of individuals (gender, age, father and mother's status (alive or dead), living situations (living with both parents, one or other), war-related stressors (including experiences of child soldiers), child soldiering experiences, daily stressors people face, individuals’ mental health conditions, and programs targeting post-conflict reconciliation.

Socio-demographic characteristics
In post-conflict settings, socio-demographic characteristics, particularly gender and abduction status have been associated with various mental health conditions such as posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (e.g., Kohrt et al., 2008), decreased prosocial attitudes and confidence (Betancourt et al., 2010c). There is however little evidence that such socio-demographic characteristics have been examined in association with reconciliation attitudes of war-affected people.

War-related stressors
War-related stressors have only been little explored in relation to reconciliation attitudes. A study by Lavi and Solomon (2005) established association between war-related stressors and reconciliation attitudes, particularly attitudes of goodwill and future orientation. However, whether war-related stressors impact the reconciliation attitudes held by war-affected populations, particularly young people has not been explored.

Child soldiering experiences
Numerous studies have looked at child soldiering experiences focusing on prevalence of the consequences of child soldiering (Blattman & Annan, 2010); the association of child soldiering with mental illness (e.g., Derluyn et al., 2004; Okello et al., 2007) and a few have explored associations with reconciliation attitudes (e.g. Bayer et al., 2007; Benzur & Almog, 2013). However, these studies focused mainly on PTSD symptoms and did not explore the possible influence of other factors (e.g. stressful war-related experiences and daily stressors) on the children's feelings of reconciliation, and moreover, they did not investigate possible differences between abducted children and their never conscripted counterparts.
Daily stressors
Despite the growing acknowledgement of daily stressors as an authoritative influence on mental health in post-conflict settings (e.g., Miller, Fernando & Berger, 2009; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Newnham et al., 2014), and its general influence on the psychosocial wellbeing of war-affected persons (Harel-Fischa et al., 2010; Mels et al., 2010; Vindevogel et al., 2013), it has not been adequately researched as a possible factor of post-conflict reconciliation attitudes, even though scant information exits on the association between post-conflict daily events/stressors and negative reconciliation attitudes (e.g., Overstreet, 2000).

Mental health problems
Literature on mental health shows that in post-conflict settings, presence of mental health is associated with reconciliation attitudes (Pham, Weinstein & Longman, 2004), in particular revenge attitudes (e.g., Bayer et al., 2007; Cardozo et al., 2000; Vinck et al., 2007) and pessimism and fear towards the future (Ben-Zur & Almog, 2013; Rialon, 2011). Other studies have also shown that mental health problems in general prevented people from participating effectively in reconciliation processes (Königstein, 2013). However, these studies did not look at other aspects of reconciliation attitudes, particularly goodwill and avoidance attitudes.

Post-conflict reconciliation programs
Studies show that many programs are established to promote recovery in post-conflict situations including Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR), rehabilitation programs providing psychosocial support and counseling, therapy, teaching skills to prepare the children to go back to school, and promotion of cultural activities (Andersson, 2007). Other programs aim to stabilize peace by integrating former soldiers into their communities (e.g., Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007; Nannyonjo, 2005); local justice and reconciliation mechanisms (e.g., Baines, 2007); religious-based conflict mediation efforts (e.g., Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana, 2002). In this regard, programs targeting psychosocial wellbeing of affected populations were provided (McKay & Mazurana, 2004), falling mainly under two main types of interventions; the curative approach which aimed at psychosocial and psychological treatment of individual, or small groups (trauma focused), and the developmental approach that were more preventative in nature, focusing on the consequences of war and its present challenges, and at helping children develop in a healthy manner within their social context and to protect them from future mental and social disorders (Kalksma-Van, 2007). Additionally, traditional rituals of reconciliation are increasingly becoming important (e.g., Amone-P’Olak, 2006; Awodola, 2012; Baines, 2007; Boothby, 2006; Huyse, & Salter, 2008; Latigo, 2008; Muldoon et al., 2014; Nakayi, 2008; Shanahan, 2008; Wessells, 2009) and are believed to reduce stigma associated with war experiences (Boothby, Crawford & Halperin, 2006; Keairns, 2003; Lamberg, 2004), and to repair social relationships of former child soldiers with families and communities (e.g., Boothby,
2006; Muldoon et al., 2014; Wessells, 2009) and they are believed to bring reconciliation between communities and their members who contravened cultural norms (Boothby, 2006; Latigo, 2008).

However, the effectiveness of post-conflict reconciliation programs have been called to question (e.g., Pupavac, 2001; Wessells & Monteiro, 2001), and it is not clear if the program beneficiaries and implementers share common understanding of reconciliation, and share similar views on what needs to be done to have effective post-conflict reconciliation.

Conclusively therefore, it is evident that in post-conflict situations, there are many factors that could shape reconciliation attitudes of war-affected people who have been adversely affected by the conflict. However little has been said about the factors typically found in post-conflict settings that may influence people's reconciliation attitudes, including socio-demographic characteristics of individuals (gender, age, living situations), war-related stressors (including experiences of child soldiers), daily stressors people face, individuals' mental health conditions, and programs targeting post-conflict reconciliation. There is also still need to shed more light on the effectiveness of post-conflict reconciliation interventions and the general impact of reconciliation programs on post-conflict recovery, and to establish if reconciliation is useful for individuals who have been emotionally wounded by traumatic war experiences, and who are living daily under daily stressful conditions; and to establish whether reconciliation is more difficult when it involves people suffering from psychological problems. Finally, the literature review shows that it is important to determine what reconciliation means from the perspective of the people affected by conflicts themselves, and who might need to be reconciled, which requires contextual understanding of reconciliation.

1.3 Problem statement, study objectives, methods and ethical considerations

Given the limitations of the current literature on factors relating to reconciliation attitudes in post-conflict settings, particularly in the context of northern Uganda, this study aims to focus on reconciliation as a means of post-conflict recovery, placing important consideration on reconciliation attitudes which determine if reconciliation might take place or not between the parties involved in conflict. Following is a presentation of the gaps that have given the rationale for this study.

1.3.1 Problem statement

 Civilians are becoming more vulnerable as the nature of armed conflicts are changing due to newer and more dangerous tactics employed (e.g., O'Malley, 2007) and young people continue to feature prominently among the civilian casualties and suffer adverse effects of armed conflicts, (Baskar, 2009; Bloomfield, 2006; Dilek, 2012; Hippler, 2008; Sarkin, 2008; Smith, 2005; Staub, 2013). As a result, there is general
interest in post-conflict recovery of war-affected adolescents with increasing focus on reconciliation as a means to that recovery (Annan et al., 2009; Bakke, O’Loughlin & Ward, 2009; Bayer et al., 2007; Nosworthy, 2009) as well as post-conflict recovery in general (e.g., Baskar, 2009; Dilek, 2012; Hippler, 2008; Sarkin, 2008; Smith, 2005; Staub, 2013). However, literature review shows that the factors associated with this post-conflict reconciliation are only vaguely documented (Bakke et al., 2009; Bloomfield, 2003). One of the supposed associated factors is the mental health of civilians, and although mental health effects of war itself have been well documented in different war-torn areas of Northern Uganda (e.g., Derluyn et al., 2004; Okello, Onen, & Musisi, 2007), the role of mental health problems in shaping reconciliation attitudes has not been well studied. Above, the factors possibly associated with reconciliation (i.e. certain socio-demographic characteristics, and internalizing and externalizing mental health problems) and particular factors associated with post-conflict settings (i.e. war-related and daily stressors and reconciliation programs) have received only little research interest (e.g., Bayer, Klasen & Adam, 2007; Ben-Zur & Almog, 2013; Lavi & Solomon, 2005; Overstreet, 2000; Vinck et al., 2007). Moreover, the possible influences that these factors might have on reconciliation attitudes and post-conflict reconciliation have generally been left un-researched. Additionally, there is little information regarding the meaning of reconciliation and of programs targeting reconciliation viewed from the perspective of war-affected populations themselves (e.g., Idraku, 2011; Kligerman, 2009).

To address these gaps, the overall aim of this study was to examine the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents living in post-conflict northern Uganda, and the factors associated with such attitudes, in particular socio-demographic characteristics (gender and abduction status), war-related and daily stressors, mental health problems (internalizing problems (PTSD symptoms, depression and anxiety) and externalizing problems (aggressive and rule-breaking behavior), and reconciliation programs. Reconciliation attitudes in this study are viewed as attitudes towards a person or group of persons perceived to have hurt the agent (of the attitudes), and as comprising four dimensions of goodwill, future orientation, avoidance and revenge attitudes. The study also researched the meaning of reconciliation for these young people, particularly the formerly abducted children, and their views on reconciliation programs in relation to post-conflict recovery processes. Knowledge of contextual meaning of reconciliation and factors influencing reconciliation attitudes will enable the implementation of appropriate reconciliation, which in turn will help achieve efficient and effective post-conflict recovery.

Given the identified gaps above, the following research questions were used to aid the study:

1. What are the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents in post-conflict northern Uganda?
2. What are the factors (i.e. socio-demographic characteristics, war-related stressors, daily stressors, mental health problems and local reconciliation programs) possibly influencing the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents?

3. What are the views of war-affected adolescents on post-conflict reconciliation and reconciliation programs?

This study therefore aimed at examining the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected youth living in post-conflict northern Uganda, and the individual factors associated with such attitudes, in particular socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, abduction status, father and mother’s status [alive or dead], living status [with both parents, one parent or other], and mental health problems; internalizing problems [PTSD symptoms, depression and anxiety] and externalizing problems [aggressive and rule-breaking behavior], and factors found in post-conflict environment particularly war-related stressors, daily stressors and post-conflict reconciliation programs. The study also researched the meaning that these young people, particularly the formerly abducted children attach to reconciliation, and their views on reconciliation programs in relation to post-conflict recovery processes. Knowledge of contextual meaning of reconciliation and factors influencing reconciliation attitudes will enable the implementation of psychosocial programs to foster desired reconciliation among people hurt and divided by conflict, which in turn will help achieve efficient and effective post-conflict recovery.

1.3.2 Ecological approach

The above shortcomings in available literature on post-conflict reconciliation attitudes necessitate examining reconciliation attitudes and factors in the context of the individuals involved. Therefore, this research employs an ecological approach to identify the varied contexts in which the individual must relate in his or her post-conflict environment.

**Figure 1:** The ecological model for exploring the factors of reconciliation attitudes (based on Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
The ecological approach, originating in the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), emphasizes the importance of the environmental contexts (the individual, interpersonal, interactive relationships/community and the cultural/societal contexts) in which children live and grow as determinants of their development (Tol et al., 2009), and was earlier often used to explore the experiences of children affected by armed conflict, particularly child soldiers (e.g., Boothby et al., 2006; Cummings et al., 2009), and to examine the experience of displacement of war-affected youth (Betancourt, 2005). In this study, we use this approach to explore the various contexts in which the young people found themselves, brought at least in part, by post-conflict situation. It also forms the basis to explore the contextual factors related to reconciliation attitudes of young people in post-conflict settings. This study summarizes the current findings regarding factors that may be characteristically associated with reconciliation attitudes amongst war-affected populations, and therefore includes war-related and daily stressors, mental health conditions, and indigenous perception of reconciliation and reconciliation programs and their roles in promoting post-conflict reconciliation, as well as individual's socio-demographic characteristics. Knowledge of these factors will help in understanding why war-affected people hold certain reconciliation attitudes, and particularly how negative reconciliation attitudes may be altered to achieve reconciliation, and hence permit appropriate programing for the achievement of effective post-conflict recovery.

1.3.3 Study settings

The study was conducted in the northern region of Uganda, a region still in post-conflict situation resulting from a protracted armed conflict between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group and the Ugandan government, and which resulted into large scale internal displacements, abductions, death, destruction of homes, basic infrastructure and services including education and health (Amone-P’Olak, 2006). A total of between 54,000 to 75,000 people, of which about 25,000 to 38,000 children, were believed to have been abducted by the LRA over a period of over 20 years period (Human Rights Watch, 2005: Pham et al., 2008). During the conflict, adolescents lost their parents and family members and many were abducted, used as child soldiers, and physically and sexually abused while in rebel captivity (Amone-P’Olak, 2006). Although the Juba peace process that aimed at bringing an end to the conflict between the government and the LRA collapsed (International Crisis Group, 2008; Pham et al., 2007), around 2006, the war turned international in character, particularly with the relocation of the LRA rebel activities to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic (Carlson & Mazurana, 2008) bringing with it some peace in northern Uganda. Since then, many of the abducted children returned home through escaping, being rescued or released, but have continued to face many challenges related to reintegration with their communities (Amone-P’Olak, 2005, 2007), particularly lack of basic services and problems of reintegration and reinsertion within their home communities because of
stigma, discrimination and exclusion (Annan et al., 2007; Bannink-Mbazzi & Lorschiedter, 2009; Pham et al., 2009; Verelst et al., 2014; Vindevogel et al., 2013; Wessells, 2009).

**Figure 2:** Map of Uganda showing Otuke District (Northern Uganda).

In particular, the study was carried out in two sub-counties (Adwari and Olilim) of Otuke district of post-conflict northern Uganda selected purposively in order to permit comparison between the two communities through a survey process carried out as part of pre-study in which communities affected by war in northern Uganda were assessed for level of exposure to war related violence and information on peace-building and reconciliation intervention activities. The survey found that both were exposed to similar rebel activities including abductions, killing, destruction of property resulting in mass displacements and both suffered effects of cattle raid by neighboring ethnic group, resulting in destruction of life & property. However, the findings also indicated
that only one community (Adwari) was receiving an intervention targeting peace-building and reconciliation while Olilim community did not, consequently the two were chosen to enable comparison with regard to program effectiveness.

1.3.4 Study procedure

A mixed study design employing both quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to permit collection of local views on reconciliation within the context of post-conflict setting was used. This method has been used with valuable results in post-conflict settings (e.g. Miller et al., 2009). The study involved two phases preceded by a pre-study.

Pre-study
The pre-study collected information through key informant interviews from organizations working in the field of peace building and reconciliation about the activities they were involved in to promote post-conflict reconciliation. The information obtained was meant to guide the selection of communities to be included on the study based on similar level of war-related violence they were exposed to. Findings of this survey indicated that in Otuke district, a couple of communities benefited from peace and reconciliation interventions implemented by a local non-governmental organization (NGO), Concerned Parents Association-Uganda (CPA-U), a child-focused organization spontaneously formed in 1996 by a group of parents affected by the abduction of their children by the LRA in northern Uganda. CPA-U’s program in Otuke district aimed, among other things, to support the reintegration processes of former abductees, through enhancing their psychosocial wellbeing, education and health, and also to support sustainable long-term peace-building processes through reconciliation initiatives (Idraku, 2011). They sought to achieve their objectives by training community mediators who had to identify returned former child soldiers and relevant context figures, and the execution of the traditional cleansing ceremonies such as “nyono tongweno” (stepping on fowl eggs) (e.g., Amone-P’Olak, 2006; Baines, 2007; Huyse, & Salter, 2008; Nakayi, 2008; Shanahan, 2008) in order to promote reconciliation and forgiveness. Further, the community mediators employed dialogue meetings and community monitoring to identify community members in need of being reconciled, and with the help of government, traditional and local leaders mediated and resolved conflicts on personal, community and societal levels. Radio talk shows, music, dance and drama were used in combination with these methods to sensitize the population about the need for conflict resolution and reconciliation. Issues addressed included, amongst other themes, conflicts arising from gender-based and domestic violence, early marriages and land ownership (Idraku, 2011).

However, this program was only implemented in some sub-counties of the district. At the time of the survey (2010), some sub-counties within the district, including Adwari sub-county, were covered by this program, while one community, Olilim sub-county (being rather geographically remote), was not. Consequently, for comparison purposes,
and because of similar levels of exposure to rebel activities and war-related stressors in both areas, the communities of Adwari and Olilim were purposively selected to form the study contexts of this research.

Study 1 (Research question 1 & 2, chapters 2 – 5)
The first study aimed at exploring the reconciliation (goodwill, future orientation, avoidance and revenge) attitudes of war-affected adolescents, and secondly the factors associated with these reconciliation attitudes in post-conflict northern Uganda. The factors included demographic characteristics (gender), war-related stressors, daily stressors, internalizing, externalizing mental health problems, and abduction status (abducted or not) and post-conflict reconciliation programs.

This study employed questionnaires to collect data on reconciliation attitudes and the factors associated with it from 445 adolescents, both in and out of school, originating from two communities of Adwari and Olilim in Otuke district, northern Uganda. For the school-going children, the study was carried out in the secondary schools in each community (n=2). In these schools, all 13- till 21-years old pupils who were available at the time of the study (n=286 out of a total of about 560 students; 187 out of 400 from Adwari secondary school, and 99 out 160 from Otuke secondary school) were involved. Additionally, out of school adolescents (n=151) who met the inclusion criteria (aged between 13 and 21 years, and living in either of the two targeted communities) were selected. Local leaders helped to mobilize and direct possible participants to the data collection centers identified within the communities.

The adolescents filled self-report questionnaires measuring socio-demographic characteristics using a locally designed instrument; war-related stressors assessed by the Stressful War Events (SWE) questionnaire (Derluyn et al., 2009); the current daily life stressors experienced assessed by the Adolescent Complex Emergency Exposure Scale, (Mels et al., 2009); internalizing problems (anxiety and depression) assessed by the Hopkins Symptoms Checklist – HSCL-37A (Bean et al., 2007) and posttraumatic stress symptoms measured using the Impact of Events Scale, Revised - IES-R (Weiss & Maramar, 1997); aggressive and rule-breaking behavior assessed by the Youth Self Report (Achenbach, 1991); and reconciliation attitudes measured by the Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire (Adam, 2006).

Hierarchical regression analyses were carried out for exploring possible associations between a series of independent variables (socio-demographic characteristics, war-related and daily stressors and the specific variable of interest e.g. child soldiering experience, mental health condition, place of residence and gender), and a range of independent variables (reconciliation attitudes of goodwill, future orientation, avoidance and revenge). In chapter two, measuring associations between child soldiering experiences and reconciliation attitudes in comparison to non-abducted children, the variable “abduction status” (abducted or not) was included among the independent variables and analyzed. Similarly in analyzing the association between mental health problems and reconciliation attitudes (chapter 3), the variables of
internalizing (symptoms of PTSD, depression and anxiety) mental health problems and externalizing (aggressive and rule-breaking) mental health problems were added in the model. In chapter four, place of residence and the interactions between place of residence and the other independent variables was added in the analysis as a main term. In analyzing gender difference in reconciliation attitudes (chapter 5), all two-ways interaction effects between gender and the other independent variables were included. For each of the four reconciliation attitudes, a model with all independent variables, except gender, was defined as a first step; secondly, gender and all two-ways interaction effects with gender were added. Factors were effect-coded. R 2.14.1 software were used to conduct the analyses (R Core Team, 2012). Alpha was set at .05 for all statistical tests.

Study 2 (Research question 3, chapter 6)
This study aimed to document the views of war affected adolescents, relatives, neighbors and other key stakeholders on reconciliation and reconciliation programs in one post-conflict community (Adwari) in northern Uganda. Adwari sub-county was specifically chosen, because it had a program aimed at, amongst other things, to support the reintegration processes of former abductees, through enhancing their psychosocial wellbeing, education and health, and by supporting sustainable long-term peace-building processes, through reconciliation initiatives which the other sub-county included in our study did not have.
Participants consisted of cases comprising formerly abducted children and two or three significant others out of his/her context (family member, friend, neighbor) as identified by the child him-/herself. A networking approach to identify potential participants from the population was used. Key informants were also involved in the study for the purpose of obtaining technical information. In all, three case studies were conducted involving three formerly abducted children, seven relatives and neighbors, plus two key informants using in-depth interviews. Themes from the data were identified and organized according to a framework based on the aims and objectives of the study and analyzed together as a unit, and reported in chapter six of this study.

1.4 Ethical considerations
The approval of the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) and the ethical committee of Ghent University were obtained. The ethical provisions regarding participation in the study were explained to the prospective participants, and, thereafter, all participants went through an informed consent process. The researcher provided detailed explanation of information contained in the consent forms to potential participants. Accordingly, all those persons who agreed to participate in the study (none refused to participate) were asked to give written consent by signing the consent forms that were provided for that purpose. After giving their consent following the above procedure, every participant was made to know that they were still free to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. Participants
were informed that during the conduct of the study, if any emotional disturbances arose due to the questions that were being asked, or for any reason at all, a clinical psychologist (the principal investigator) was available to give necessary help and, if needed, refer the person concerned for further help to the Mental Health Unit of Lira Regional Referral Hospital where qualified Mental Health staff were available to render further help.

1.5 Overview of the chapters

In chapter 1, we present the general introduction giving the background information to this study, the problem statement, the context, methods and aims. Contained in chapter 2, is the study on “The reconciliation attitudes of former child soldiers in northern Uganda” which examined former child soldiers’ reconciliation attitudes, against the background of the forced nature of abduction in northern Uganda and their horrific experiences (war-related stressors), the losses they suffered as well as the stigmatization and exclusion they experienced upon return (daily stressors) in comparison to a group of non-conscripted youth. The chapter additionally compares the reconciliation attitudes of former child soldiers with that of those who were never associated with the fighting.

In chapter 3, the study on “Association between mental health and reconciliation attitudes amongst war-affected adolescents in northern Uganda” that examined the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents in Northern Uganda (both former child soldiers and never conscripted adolescents), focusing on the possible associations with mental health problems, in particular internalizing (posttraumatic stress, depression and anxiety) problems and externalizing (aggressive and rule-breaking) behaviors are presented. Several findings of associations between mental health and reconciliation attitudes are given.

Next chapter 4, a study on “The impact of reconciliation programs on the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents living in two communities of northern Uganda” compared the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents living in two post-conflict communities in northern Uganda based on the fact that, at the time of the study, one of the communities benefited from peace and reconciliation intervention program while the other one did not. The findings detail the influence of intervention programs in post-conflict recovery processes.

In chapter 5, study on “Gender differences in reconciliation attitudes amongst war-affected adolescents in northern Uganda” examining the reconciliation attitudes of female adolescents compared to that of males living in post-conflict northern Uganda in light of war-related and daily stressors is presented. Gender-specific challenges faced by female adolescents are highlighted.

The study presented in chapter 6, “The experiences of reconciliation by formerly abducted adolescents: Case study of post-conflict northern Uganda” documented the reconciliation experiences of the formerly abducted adolescents, their relatives and key
informants in one community of northern Uganda on reconciliation and reconciliation programs. The meaning of reconciliation for the participants and their views on the role of reconciliation programs in their community and implications for future intervention programs targeting reconciliation among adolescents in post conflict settings are presented.

Finally chapter 7, presents the overall synthesis of discussions, summary of main findings and implications of the study.

1.6 Definition of key concepts used in this study

For the purpose of this study, important concepts used are to be understood as follows:

1.6.1 Reconciliation

In this study, reconciliation refers to restoration of relationship broken as a result of conflicts (e.g., Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004; Bloomfield, 2003, 2006; Lederach, 2001; McCandless, 2001), a dynamic interpersonal and dyadic process (Mukashema & Mullet, 2013; Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Wade & Worthington, 2005) which refers to the act of two people (or groups) coming together following separation/conflict (Enright, 2001) in order to promote mutual acknowledgement and acceptance of former enemies, giving up or reversal of personal interests and aims, in order to develop peaceful relations, mutual trust, positive attitudes, as well as a sensitivity and consideration of the interests and needs of the other party.

1.6.2 Reconciliation attitudes

For the purpose of this study reconciliation attitudes is used to denote holding of positive or negative cognitive/emotional evaluation about the persons who hurt the agent (attitude holder) in the past, which makes the agent to want to reconcile (or refuse to do so) with the person under evaluation. The reconciliation attitudes are measured herein by four dimensions including goodwill, future orientation, avoidance and revenge attitudes as set out in the Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire (Adam, 2006).

1.6.3 Post-conflict recovery processes

In the context of this study refer to the processes instituted to provide a comprehensive set of measures to address psychological trauma caused or worsened by conflict (e.g. Pearlman, 2013). In this sense, recovery is seen as reinstatement of previous, or better sense of functional state for war-affected people (Egnew, 2005) and includes the resumption of ordinary everyday life (family, sociocultural, religious, economic and political) activities (Summerfield, 2002).
1.6.4 War-affected youth

Denotes a sub-set of people designated by the phase of development between childhood and adulthood (Nsamenang, 2002) characterized by interaction of physical, emotional, intellectual, social and psychological maturation (Flanagan & Syversten, 2006; Richter, 2006), and falling between the ages of 10 and 24 years (World Health Organization - WHO), who are participants in armed conflicts, either directly as part of armed groups or indirectly as victims of war resident in areas devastated by war, and are impacted by the war either negatively or otherwise.

1.6.5 Child soldier

As used in this study describes any person below the age of 18 years associated with armed forces or armed groups, by being, or having been recruited or used by armed forces or groups in any capacity, including but not limited to fighting, cooking, messengers, spies, or for sexual purposes, and does not only refer to such persons who is involved or has taken a direct part in hostilities (The Paris Principles, 2007).

1.6.6 Formerly abducted child

Refers to a person below the age of 24 years who had been associated with armed forces or groups through forced conscription, and later left the forces or groups through escape, being released, rescued or by other means, and has come back to live once more in his/her community of origin, and popularly referred to in northern Uganda as “returnees” or “abductees” (Andersson, 2007; Corbin, 2008).

1.6.7 War-related stressors

Denote any events directly associated with effects of war such as, but not limited to, abduction or death of loved ones, being victims or witnesses to violence and destruction of homes and property (Miller & Rassmussen, 2010), as measured by the Stressful War Events Questionnaire (SWE) (Mels et al., 2009) that is the cause of, or is associated with psychological distress in affected persons.

1.6.8 Daily stressors

For the purpose of this study refer to the social and material conditions, in part or wholly caused or worsened by the conditions pertaining to an armed conflict such as poverty, lack of food, water and shelter, living in fear of one’s life, experiencing discrimination and stigmatization (Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006; Miller & Rassmussen, 2010; Wessells & Monteiro, 2004), as measured by Adolescent Complex Emergency Daily Stressors Scale (Mels et al., 2009), that is the basis of persistent, day to day psychological distress in persons (Miller et al., 2009).
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General Introduction


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General Introduction


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Chapter 2

The reconciliation attitudes
of former child soldiers in Northern Uganda*

Abstract

**Introduction:** While the reintegration processes of former child soldiers have been widely studied, little attention has been paid to their reconciliation attitudes, and in particular possible associations between these reconciliation attitudes and different risk factors. Therefore, this study examined reconciliation attitudes of formerly abducted adolescents living in post-conflict Northern Uganda, compared to non-conscripted youth, and possible associations with war-related stressful experiences and daily stressors.

**Methods:** Four hundred and forty five war-affected adolescents living in Northern Uganda were included, of which 214 (48.1%) were formerly abducted. All completed questionnaires on exposure to stressful war experiences (Stressful War Events Questionnaire), daily stressors (Adolescent Complex Emergency Daily Stressors Scale), and attitudes towards reconciliation (Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire). Associations between several socio-demographic characteristics, war-related and daily stressors and reconciliation attitudes were explored using hierarchical linear regression models.

**Results:** Findings showed that conscripted youth experienced more stressful war experiences and daily stressors than non-conscripted youth, and that they scored higher on the different reconciliation attitudes (goodwill attitudes, positive feelings towards the future, feelings of avoidance and of revenge). Having been recruited as child soldier was associated with more revenge attitudes compared to non-abducted children, and girls showed more goodwill attitudes than boys. Above, a larger exposure to war-related and daily stressors was associated with overall higher reconciliation attitudes, although particular interaction effects showed complex relationships here.

**Conclusion:** Overall war-related stressors, daily stressors and, to a lesser degree, abduction status and gender are associated with reconciliation attitudes. The findings have implications for agencies working to promote post-conflict recovery among war-affected children.
2.1 Introduction

In Uganda, up till 2006, thousands of children were exposed to experiences of child soldiering. Most of them were abducted by the rebels of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) that had been fighting against the Ugandan government. In captivity, the children had to endure various difficult experiences related to war. These included serving as porters, sexual and domestic servants, fighting, and witnessing or committing horrific injuries on others, including mutilation and killing of civilians (Amone-P’Polak, 2005, 2006; Amone-P’Lak, Gamesfki & Kraaij, 2007; Bayer, Klasen & Adam, 2007; Dunn, 2004; Pham, Vinck & Stover, 2007, 2008). Returning home, the former child soldiers had to deal with a lot of stress on daily basis. Some of such stress concerned fact that they – forcibly – went through a range of extremely difficult experiences, hereby also having lost many things in their lives, such as education, schooling, and family life (Annan et al., 2007; Bannink-Mbazzi & Lorschiedt, 2009). Moreover, back home, they often encounter a huge hostility towards them from the society in which they want to reintegrate (Vindevogel et al, 2011). This can be induced by, amongst other reasons, the extreme atrocities these former child soldiers (forcibly) committed against civilians, because they return with children resulting from sexual violence, or because of the psychological problems they still show (Akello, Reis & Richters, 2010; Corbin, 2008; Dickson-Gomez, 2003; Stott, 2009). Though many studies have looked at the reintegration processes of formerly abducted children (e.g., Pham et al., 2007; Betancourt et al, 2010), few studies have explored their attitudes towards reconciliation. For example Bayer et al. (2007), believing that rebuilding war-torn societies involves understanding how psychological trauma may shape former child soldiers’ ability to reconcile, investigated and found associations between posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and openness to reconciliation and feelings of revenge in 169 former child soldiers (aged 11-18 years) in rehabilitation centers in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, their focus was mainly on PTSD symptoms and did not explore the possible influence of stressful war-related experiences and daily stressors on the children’s feelings of reconciliation. Moreover, this study didn’t investigate possible differences between abducted children and their never conscripted counterparts.

Given former child soldiers’ forced nature of abduction in Northern Uganda and their horrific experiences, the losses they suffered as well as the stigmatization and exclusion they experienced upon return, the question whether or not this range of war-related traumatic events (including child soldiering) and daily stressors might impact the reconciliation attitudes they hold is still unanswered. This study therefore will examine reconciliation attitudes of former child soldiers in comparison with a group of non-conscripted youth, and possible associations between their attitudes towards reconciliation and the war-related traumatic events and daily stressors they endured and still are confronted with.
2.2 Methods

2.2.1 Study setting and sample

The study was approved by the Ugandan National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), the Ethical Committee of Ghent University, and local leaders (Resident District Commissioner, sub-county chiefs, Local Council chairpersons and the head teachers of the schools involved).

Four hundred and forty five Adolescents, both school-going and out-of-school youths, originating from two communities in Otuke district, Northern Uganda were included in the study. For the school-going children, the study was carried out in the secondary schools in each community (n=2). In these schools, all 13- till 21-years old pupils who were available at the time of the study (n=286 out of a total of about 560 students; 187 out of 400 from Adwari secondary school and 99 out 160 from Otuke secondary school) were involved. Additionally, out-of-school adolescents (n=151) who met the inclusion criteria (aged between 13 and 21 years and living in one of the two targeted communities) were selected. Local leaders helped to mobilize and direct possible participants to the data collection centers identified within the communities.

Of all 445 participants, 214 (48.1%) were former child soldiers, while 231 (51.9%) did not report having been conscripted by the LRA. The two groups differed on some socio-demographic characteristics: less former child soldiers live together with both parents, less were involved in schooling, and more often their father was deceased (table 1).
Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of abducted and non-abducted children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total group (n=445)</th>
<th>Former child soldiers (n=214)</th>
<th>Non-abducted children (n=231)</th>
<th>χ²/t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>277 (62.2)</td>
<td>139 (65.0)</td>
<td>138 (59.7)</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>168 (37.8)</td>
<td>75 (35.0)</td>
<td>93 (40.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lives with</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>222 (49.9)</td>
<td>87 (40.7)</td>
<td>134 (58.3)</td>
<td>13.7***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>223 (50.1)</td>
<td>127 (59.3)</td>
<td>96 (41.7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>286 (65.4)</td>
<td>125 (60.4)</td>
<td>161 (70.0)</td>
<td>4.04*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-student</td>
<td>151 (34.6)</td>
<td>82 (39.6)</td>
<td>69 (30.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Father’s status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alive</td>
<td>284 (63.9)</td>
<td>112 (52.6)</td>
<td>172 (74.5)</td>
<td>22.07***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>160 (36.1)</td>
<td>101 (47.4)</td>
<td>59 (25.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mother’s status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alive</td>
<td>353 (79.7)</td>
<td>166 (77.9)</td>
<td>188 (81.3)</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>90 (20.3)</td>
<td>47 (22.1)</td>
<td>43 (18.7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>439 (98.9)</td>
<td>210 (98.1)</td>
<td>229 (99.6)</td>
<td>5.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5 (1.1)</td>
<td>4 (1.9)</td>
<td>1 (0.43)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>17.05</td>
<td>17.04</td>
<td>17.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.88, 13-21)</td>
<td>(1.88, 14-21)</td>
<td>(1.90, 13-21)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n(%); † years: mean (SD, range)

*p < 0.05, ***p < 0.001.

Four local research assistants, all trained during three days in questionnaire administration techniques, helped with administering the questionnaires. Firstly, participants were explained the study objectives, and assurance to withdraw freely at any time was given. Participants were also informed that clinical psychiatric officers from Lira Regional Referral Hospital could provide further psychological or medical support, whenever needed. Written informed consent was obtained, and thereafter, the participants completed, in small groups under supervision of the research assistants, self-report questionnaires, either in Lango or English. In case of illiterate participants, research assistants read out questionnaires aloud, and recorded the responses.

2.2.2 Measures

First, a series of closed questions was used to assess socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, parents still alive, living situation (both parents, one parent, somebody else)).

Stressful war-related experiences were assessed by the Stressful War Events questionnaire (SWE) (Derluyn, Mels & Broekaert, 2009), questioning 16 war-related events on a yes/no scale.
Third, daily stressors were questioned with the Adolescent Complex Emergency Daily Stressors Scale (ACEDSS) (Mels et al., 2010), asking to indicate whether or not (yes/no) they experienced 17 different daily and stigmatization-related stressors (e.g., lack of food and medical care, forced marriage, rejection by family).

Fourth, the Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire (Adam, 2006) assessed the readiness for reconciliation and making peace. When completing the questionnaire, participants were instructed to think about the person or group that harmed them or their family during and/or after the war. The total score includes 33 items with four subscales: goodwill (8 items, e.g., ‘I can sympathize with the enemy’); avoidance (8 items, e.g., ‘I would never talk with the adversary’); revenge (8 items, e.g., ‘I’ll pay the opponents one day’); and, future orientation (9 items, e.g., ‘I try to focus on the future’). The items are presented on a Likert-scale from 1 (totally incorrect) to 5 (entirely correct). For the subscales ‘goodwill’ and ‘future orientation’, higher scores indicate more positive attitudes, while for the subscales ‘revenge’ and ‘avoidance’, higher scores indicate more negative attitudes. The internal consistency of the sub-scales (Cronbach’s alpha) was found to be good: goodwill: 0.79; avoidance: 0.70; future orientation: 0.73; and revenge: 0.77.

2.2.3 Analyses

Differences between both groups (former child soldiers and non-abducted participants) were analyzed with \( \chi^2 \)- and independent samples t-tests. Four hierarchical linear regression models (method: enter) were carried out to analyze possible associations between a series of independent variables (socio-demographics, child soldiering experiences or not, total number of war-related traumatic events, and total number of daily stressors), and reconciliation attitudes (four subscales); the interaction effect between war-related and daily stressors was also added as independent variable. For each of the four reconciliation attitudes, a model with the demographic variables was defined as a first step; secondly, the main term war-related stressor was added; thirdly, the main term of daily stressors was added; and, finally, the interaction between war-related and daily stressors was added. The bootstrap-procedure was used to estimate standard errors as implemented in the Lavaan-package (Rosseel, 2012) to estimate the indirect and total effects when the conditions for mediation were fulfilled. To avoid multicollinearity, the variables daily stressors and war-related stressors were centered. Factors were dummy-coded. R 2.14.1 software was used to conduct all analyses (R Core Team, 2012), and alpha was set at .05.
2.3 Results

2.3.1 War-related and daily stressors

Table 2: Stressful war-related experiences of abducted and non-abducted children (SWE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressful Experience</th>
<th>Total group (n=445)</th>
<th>Former child soldiers (n=214)</th>
<th>Non-abducted children (n=231)</th>
<th>χ²/t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death of a loved one</td>
<td>404 (91.2)</td>
<td>202 (94.4)</td>
<td>202 (88.2)</td>
<td>4.53*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful separation from family</td>
<td>282 (63.8)</td>
<td>158 (74.5)</td>
<td>124 (53.9)</td>
<td>19.42***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in IDP camp</td>
<td>320 (72.7)</td>
<td>189 (89.6)</td>
<td>131 (57.1)</td>
<td>57.18***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnessing violence against others</td>
<td>311 (70.7)</td>
<td>176 (83.4)</td>
<td>136 (59.1)</td>
<td>30.19***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of violence</td>
<td>189 (42.7)</td>
<td>123 (57.7)</td>
<td>67 (29)</td>
<td>36.23***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced to commit violence</td>
<td>165 (37.4)</td>
<td>115 (54)</td>
<td>51 (22.3)</td>
<td>46.00***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of food and water</td>
<td>358 (80.6)</td>
<td>185 (88.9)</td>
<td>168 (72.7)</td>
<td>18.41***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of education</td>
<td>342 (77.4)</td>
<td>184 (86.8)</td>
<td>158 (68.7)</td>
<td>19.84***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of medical care</td>
<td>378 (85.5)</td>
<td>192 (90.6)</td>
<td>187 (81)</td>
<td>7.51***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of jobs and income</td>
<td>357 (80.8)</td>
<td>184 (86.8)</td>
<td>174 (75.3)</td>
<td>8.65**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wounded or disabled</td>
<td>240 (54.3)</td>
<td>142 (66.7)</td>
<td>99 (42.9)</td>
<td>23.94***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life on streets</td>
<td>185 (42.0)</td>
<td>113 (53.3)</td>
<td>73 (31.7)</td>
<td>19.85***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of LRA rebels</td>
<td>379 (85.6)</td>
<td>201 (93.9)</td>
<td>179 (77.8)</td>
<td>22.00***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of not being accepted</td>
<td>258 (58.1)</td>
<td>153 (71.5)</td>
<td>106 (45.8)</td>
<td>28.90***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for other children</td>
<td>224 (50.7)</td>
<td>122 (57.5)</td>
<td>103 (44.4)</td>
<td>6.92**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of stressful war experiences</strong></td>
<td>11.41 (3.11)</td>
<td>13.36 (2.93)</td>
<td>9.46 (3.40)</td>
<td>-12.8***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N(%) answering “yes” to a particular item; †mean (SD)
*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

Overall, former child soldiers experienced all types of war-related stressors more frequently than non-abducted children (table 2).
The same tendency, although less outspoken, was found for daily stressors, where former child soldiers were more often confronted with different types of daily stressors than non-abducted children (table 3).
Table 3: Exposure of abducted and non-abducted children to current daily stressors (ACEDSS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressor</th>
<th>Total group (n=445)</th>
<th>Former child soldiers (n=214)</th>
<th>Non-abducted children (n=231)</th>
<th>χ²/t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of insecurity</td>
<td>381 (85.8)</td>
<td>191 (89.3)</td>
<td>191 (82.7)</td>
<td>3.42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with school fees</td>
<td>381 (85.8)</td>
<td>190 (88.8)</td>
<td>192 (83.1)</td>
<td>2.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate food</td>
<td>356 (80.2)</td>
<td>188 (87.9)</td>
<td>169 (73.1)</td>
<td>14.20***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate clothing</td>
<td>380 (85.6)</td>
<td>195 (91.1)</td>
<td>186 (80.5)</td>
<td>9.30***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness in family</td>
<td>390 (88.0)</td>
<td>191 (89.7)</td>
<td>200 (86.6)</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of care</td>
<td>359 (80.9)</td>
<td>181 (84.6)</td>
<td>179 (77.5)</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry about family</td>
<td>365 (82.2)</td>
<td>190 (58.8)</td>
<td>176 (76.2)</td>
<td>11.22***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much work</td>
<td>320 (72.4)</td>
<td>164 (77.0)</td>
<td>156 (68.1)</td>
<td>4.19 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment</td>
<td>272 (61.7)</td>
<td>146 (68.5)</td>
<td>127 (55.4)</td>
<td>7.46**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others talking ill of you and family</td>
<td>333 (75.3)</td>
<td>166 (77.9)</td>
<td>168 (73)</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discriminated against</td>
<td>271 (61.3)</td>
<td>144 (67.9)</td>
<td>128 (55.3)</td>
<td>6.79**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persecution by bad spirits</td>
<td>194 (43.7)</td>
<td>110 (51.4)</td>
<td>85 (36.8)</td>
<td>9.04**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling abandoned by family</td>
<td>171 (38.5)</td>
<td>96 (44.9)</td>
<td>75 (32.6)</td>
<td>6.70**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling abandoned by society</td>
<td>155 (35.1)</td>
<td>87 (41.0)</td>
<td>68 (29.6)</td>
<td>6.04**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced into marriage</td>
<td>123 (27.7)</td>
<td>73 (34.1)</td>
<td>51 (21.8)</td>
<td>7.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know father</td>
<td>127 (28.7)</td>
<td>68 (31.9)</td>
<td>609 (25.8)</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement with family</td>
<td>137 (30.9)</td>
<td>72 (33.6)</td>
<td>65 (28.3)</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of daily stressors</strong></td>
<td>10.67 (3.99)</td>
<td>11.49 (3.68)</td>
<td>9.85 (4.43)</td>
<td>-4.21***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N(%) answering ‘yes’ to a particular item; †mean (SD)

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

2.3.2 Reconciliation attitudes

Overall, the former child soldiers reported higher scores on the Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire than non-conscripted participants: they showed more goodwill attitudes and more positive attitudes towards the future, and at the same time, they also reported more avoidance and revenge attitudes than non-conscripted youths (table 4).
Table 4: Children's reconciliation attitudes (goodwill, future orientation, avoidant, and revenge attitudes) as measured by the Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total group (n=445)</th>
<th>Former child soldiers (n=214)</th>
<th>Non-abducted children (n=231)</th>
<th>T</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goodwill</td>
<td>21.54 (7.23)</td>
<td>22.46 (6.72)</td>
<td>20.71 (7.57)</td>
<td>-2.55*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future orientation</td>
<td>20.05 (6.82)</td>
<td>20.83 (6.53)</td>
<td>19.32 (7.02)</td>
<td>-2.30*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>13.73 (7.12)</td>
<td>14.91 (7.02)</td>
<td>12.65 (7.06)</td>
<td>-3.35***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>11.13 (8.17)</td>
<td>12.67 (8.61)</td>
<td>9.69 (7.48)</td>
<td>-3.87***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean (SD)

*p < 0.05, ***p < 0.001.

2.3.3 Factors impacting reconciliation attitudes

Table 5: Factors impacting reconciliation attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Goodwill</th>
<th>Future</th>
<th>Avoidant</th>
<th>Revenge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>ΔR²</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>ΔR²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (ref=male)</td>
<td>-1.48*</td>
<td>0.04***</td>
<td>-1.29</td>
<td>0.04**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abducted (ref=yes)</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living status (ref=other)</td>
<td>F(2,402) &lt; 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>F(2,399) &lt; 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One parent</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War-related stressors</td>
<td>0.28*</td>
<td>0.02**</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily stressors</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War*daily stressors</td>
<td>0.06**</td>
<td>0.02**</td>
<td>0.05**</td>
<td>0.02**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four hierarchical regression models (method: enter) with 'goodwill attitudes' ('goodwill'), 'positive attitudes towards the future' ('future'), 'attitudes of avoidance' ('avoidance') and 'attitudes of revenge' ('revenge') (as measured on the Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire) as dependent variables.

*Ref=reference; War*daily stressors: interaction term war-related traumatic events * daily stressors

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

Having experienced forced conscription significantly impact attitudes of revenge, with children abducted during the war reporting significantly higher scores than those who were never abducted. No significant impact of child soldiering was found on the other reconciliation subscales.

Gender was significantly associated with goodwill attitudes, with higher scores for girls than for boys. No differences were found in reconciliation attitudes related to participants’ age or their living situation (with one or both parents or somebody else).
Participants who experienced a high number of war-related stressors also reported more attitudes of goodwill, although we need to take into account that there was also an interaction effect of war-related and daily stressors in this model (cf. infra). Besides, war-related stressors also impacted attitudes of avoidance, with higher war-related stressors leading to higher scores of avoidant attitudes.

The number of daily stressors experienced showed an important impact on reconciliation attitudes: all subscales, except ‘orientation towards the future’, showed significant associations with the number of daily stressors (with a higher number leading to higher scores on the subscales), although for the subscale ‘goodwill’, we need to cautiously interpret these results, given that also an interaction effect with war-related trauma was found.

Last, for the subscales ‘goodwill’ and ‘positive orientation towards the future’, an interaction effect was found for the number of war-related and daily stressors: A negative relation between goodwill/future orientation and war-related stressors is observed for adolescents who experienced less daily stressors, meaning that these adolescents showed less goodwill/a more negative future orientation the more war-related stressors they had experienced. On the other hand, adolescents who experienced a lot of daily stressors were showing more goodwill/a more positive future orientation the more war-related stressors they had experienced.

2.4 Discussion

The study examined reconciliation attitudes of Northern Ugandan former child soldiers in comparison with a group of non-conscripted youth, and assessed possible associations between these attitudes towards reconciliation and the war-related traumatic events and daily stressors they endured and still are confronted with. Our findings indicate that former child soldiers overall showed more reconciliation attitudes, both ‘positive’ (a more positive orientation towards the future, more goodwill attitudes) and ‘negative’ (more attitudes of avoidance and revenge) in comparison to youths who were never abducted, although hierarchical regression analyses only gave evidence for higher attitudes of revenge. This finding can be related to the fact that these former child soldiers were abducted, so recruited against their will, which might lead to higher feelings of revenge afterwards. A recent study indicated that many child soldiers in northern Uganda perceive themselves as victims (Klasen et al., 2015), or people who because of past experiences of misfortune feel helpless to remedy it (Landau, 2000). Revenge attitudes may arise when a child is hurt and suppresses the rage (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005), or as an attempt to counteract the powerlessness, shame, and isolation associated with the trauma experience (Lafarge, 2006; Horowitz, 2007). Feelings of revenge may also arise out of perception of unfairness (De Cremer, 2006) or when the victim is unable to mourn all losses (s)he is confronted with (Thomas, 2004). Further, the high levels of stigmatization – and related difficult living circumstances – former child soldiers are confronted with when returning back home could also induce
higher feelings of revenge. This relates to the clear association that was found between attitudes of revenge with daily stressors: the more daily stressors the adolescents experienced, the higher their revenge attitudes. The importance of the post-conflict context, and the long-lasting impact of armed conflicts onto daily living conditions are clearly stressed again, now also related to its possible impact on post-conflict societal reconstruction and peace-building, possibly through its impact onto young people’s attitudes of revenge.

Also attitudes of avoidance were associated with war-related and daily stressors. This could be related to higher levels of avoidant coping when confronted with traumatic events (Bal et al., 2003; Thabet, Tischler & Vostanis, 2004). Above, one of the known mental health outcomes of exposure to war-related stressors are symptoms of posttraumatic stress (Bayer et al., 2007), which include symptoms of avoidance. Above, daily stressors have been found to mediate the effects of war-related stressors (Rasmussen et al., 2010) to produce posttraumatic stress reactions in victims. Since our study participants were exposed to a wide range of both war-related and daily stressors, it is not surprising that they also reported attitudes of avoidance. Above, particularly for former child soldiers, the challenges of resettling in the community after abduction may necessitate the use of avoidant attitudes as a coping method to overcome the hostile attitudes of the community (Annan et al., 2009; Blattman & Annan, 2010).

Further, although not confirmed in the hierarchical regression analyses, we found a tendency that, next to negative reconciliation attitudes, former child soldiers also reported more positive reconciliation attitudes. Also for these positive reconciliation attitudes, we found high associations with war-related and daily stressors. Possible explanations for this finding could be that exposure to stressors (suffering) may lead to personal gain (Linley, 2003; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), raising possibilities for personal growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004). People might also be largely resilient in face of exposure to trauma (Bonanno, 2004; Waysman, Schwarzwald & Solomon, 2001). Further, exposure to stressors might promote increased empathy and understanding of oneself and other people, hereby stimulating the emergence of pro-social behavior (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Frazier et al., 2013; Linley, 2003; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Shaw, Joseph & Linley, 2005; Staub & Vollhardt, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi, Calhoun & Kann, 2007; Vollhardt, 2009), which basis lies in positive mind state or attitudes (Almeida & Kessler, 1998). Other studies reported that exposure to trauma motivates victims work towards prevention of future suffering (Annan et al., 2009; Lifton, 2003). Another argument is that exposure to, in particular war-related stressors, does not necessarily increase the level of hostility in the victims: for example Annan et al., (2009) and Blattman and Annan (2010) found that abducted and non-abducted youth showed similar hostility levels, suggesting they still possess the ability to show positive attitudes. Further, it has been noted that with the passage of time, effects of war-related stressors lessen on their own (Thabet & Vostanis, 2000), thus allowing for positive attitudes to emerge, despite adverse experiences.
The interaction of exposure to war-related and daily stressors was also associated with reconciliation attitudes. On the one hand, children reported less goodwill/more negative future orientation if they were exposed to more war-related stressors but less daily stressors. Similar findings were made among youth living in post-conflict situation (Lavi & Solomon, 2005). On the other hand, children exposed to more daily stressors showed more goodwill/more positive future orientation if they were also exposed to more war-related stressors. Contrary to this finding, daily stressors have been found to mediate the relation between war-related stressors and psychological distress (Fernando, Miller & Berger, 2010). However studies have demonstrated as already noted that despite experience of stressors, if there is social support conciliatory attitudes may develop (Fernando et al., 2010; Annan, Blattman & Horton, 2006). The participants in this study reported presence of social support; many were in school and lived with parents (table 1).

Last, female adolescents were more likely than males to display goodwill attitudes. One hypothesis here is that female adolescents, when faced with interpersonal relationship challenges, tend to show more coping efforts than males (Santacana et al., 2012), and tend to use prosocial, assertive and empathic coping strategies (Renk & Creasey, 2003), indicating a predisposition towards positive reconciliation attitudes under stressful situations.

### 2.4.1 Implications

The study demonstrates that reconciliation attitudes are linked with adverse experiences including war-related and daily stressors. Child soldiers seem particularly susceptible to revenge attitudes. Efforts aiming at promoting reintegration and post-conflict recovery of war affected children should consider ameliorating negative reconciliation attitudes as these may prove counterproductive.

### 2.4.2 Limitations

The findings of this study need to be viewed in the light of the following limitations. The procedures used in the study generated self-reported data and may have introduced social desirability biases in the responses obtained. Moreover the sample involved in this study consisted of children living in post-conflict areas of northern Uganda, which may affect generalizability to other populations and contexts. Third, the study was cross-sectional, rendering it difficult to impute causal and temporal relationships among the variables involved.
Acknowledgements

We want to thank all participants. This study was carried out with the financial support of the Belgian Technical Cooperation.

References


The reconciliation attitudes of former child soldiers in Northern Uganda


Chapter 3

Associations between mental health and reconciliation attitudes amongst war-affected adolescents

Abstract

Introduction: Exposure to war-related and daily stressors may lead to various psychological problems among war-affected youth. Consequently interest in recovery and reintegration of such youth is increasing with particular attention being paid to reconciliation as an important part of this process. However many studies about reconciliation attitudes of war-affected populations – many of which related to PTSD – reported rather negative attitudes towards reconciliation. The current study examined reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents in northern Uganda, in association with a range of mental health problems, particularly symptoms of posttraumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and aggressive and rule-breaking behaviours.

Methods: Four hundred forty five adolescent completed measures on exposure to stressful war experiences, daily stressors, posttraumatic stress symptoms, internalizing and externalizing problems, and attitudes towards reconciliation. Associations between these variables with reconciliation attitudes were explored using hierarchical linear regression models.

Results: Overall, findings showed that the adolescents held considerable levels of reconciliation attitudes – both positive and negative – associated with various mental health conditions and to war-related and daily stressors they were exposed to.

Conclusion: The study demonstrated that reconciliation attitudes are linked with a range of mental health conditions particularly symptoms of posttraumatic stress, internalizing and externalizing problems. Implication for post-conflict recovery is discussed.
3.1 Introduction

Globally, adolescents are affected by war, either directly as child combatants or indirectly when they live in areas of conflict and are exposed to various war events (Minoiu & Shemyakina, 2014; Vindevogel et al., 2013a). Next to exposure to war-related stressful experiences, also daily and social stressors in conflict and post-conflict contexts seriously impact these war-affected youths (Vindevogel et al., 2013b). As a result, many of these young people face a range of different psychological difficulties, including symptoms of posttraumatic stress, anxiety and depression, and several behavioural problems (e.g., Scholte et al., 2004).

The recovery and reintegration processes of these war-affected youth in post-conflict contexts are not only a process of the individual adolescents themselves, but are largely related to the broader social networks in which they live. For example, since children were used during the war as fighters against their own communities, there might be a lot of hatred and distress among the affected people (Pham, Vinck & Stover, 2009; Verelst et al., 2014; Vindevogel et al., 2013b; Wessells, 2009). Above all, the large-scale human rights abuses during warfare, such as rape, torture, massacres, forced killing or witnessing killing of others, and large-scale displacement have often largely destroyed the social fabric (Derluyn, Vindevogel & De Haene, 2014). As a result, scholars pay increasing attention to processes and feelings of reconciliation (e.g., Hamber, 2007) related to post-conflict recovery, both for individuals and for broader social networks and societies. Reconciliation is a complex term, with various definitions (Bloomfield, Barnes & Huyse, 2003). There seems to be however increasing agreement that reconciliation in post-conflict settings involves restoration of broken relationship among people as a result of conflicts (e.g., Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004; Bloomfield, 2003, 2006; Hamber & Kelly, 2004; Lederach, 2001; McCandless, 2001), and is a dynamic interpersonal and dyadic process (Mukashema & Mullet, 2013; Nadler & Shnabel, 2008) which brings two people (or groups) together following separation/conflict (Enright, 2001). Emphasis has also been put on sharing of space or coexistence with former foes without violence, in order to live lives that allow for social activities (e.g., commerce, farming and schooling) to resume (Bloomfield et al., 2003). Thus the need for positive reconciliation attitudes in rebuilding societies, torn by wars, becomes apparent. At least, this reconciliation – as part of the recovery of individuals and the rebuilding of social networks and society as a whole – must then start with individuals’ experiences with and attitudes towards reconciliation (Hamber, 2007).

However, a few studies that looked at the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected populations have reported rather negative attitudes towards reconciliation, in particular in relation to the frequently present mental health problems in these groups. For example, a study in northern Uganda amongst adult participants found those presenting with high symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression were more likely to favour violent means to end conflict (Vinck et al., 2007). A related study finding among former child soldiers in northern Uganda and Eastern Democratic
Republic of Congo showed that children who had more PTSD symptoms reported significantly less openness to reconciliation, and more feelings of revenge (Bayer, Klasen & Adam, 2007). Other studies indicated that youth with PTSD symptoms were more pessimistic and afraid with regards to general expectations about the future, and showed more risk-taking behaviours (Railon, 2011), and that mental health problems in general prevented people from participating effectively in reconciliation processes (Königstein, 2013). However, these studies focused mostly onto PTSD, and did not consider a broader range of mental health problems (e.g., symptoms of anxiety and depression), and behavioural problems (e.g., rule-breaking and aggressive behaviour). Further, most of these studies focused on adult participants (Königstein, 2013; Vinck et al., 2007), and, when children were included, participants were mainly (former) child soldiers (Bayer et al., 2007; Railon, 2011). The current study therefore examined the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents in Northern Uganda (both former child soldiers and never conscripted adolescents), hereby examining possible associations with mental health problems, in particular symptoms of posttraumatic stress, depression and anxiety, and aggressive and rule-breaking behaviours.

3.2 Methods

3.2.1 Study setting and sample

The study participants included adolescents aged 13 to 21 years, attending school and those out of school at the time of data collection, and living in two communities in Otuke district of Northern Uganda. The school-attending adolescents were met in the only two secondary schools situated in the two communities. Adolescents hailing from northern Uganda who were in school and were available at the time of the study were included (n=285) in the study. Out-of-school adolescents (n=151) were selected with the help of local leaders. A total of 445 adolescents completed the questionnaires, ages ranging from 13 to 21 years with a mean of 17.04 (SD=1.88). Most of the adolescents were living with either both or at least one parent and there were more males in the sample compared to females (table 1).
Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of adolescents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>(\chi^2)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>26.70***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abducted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>231</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of residence</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>55.91***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One parent</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(**p < .001\)

Four local research assistants, all of whom were trained for three days in questionnaire administration techniques helped with the data collection exercise. At the beginning, all the participants were given explanation of the study objectives, and were assured that they may withdraw freely at any given time during the conduct of the exercise. Participants were also informed that clinical psychiatric officers from Lira Regional Referral Hospital were available to provide further psychological or medical support should any become necessary. Written informed consent was obtained, and thereafter the participants completed self-report questionnaires, either in Lango or English, in small groups under supervision of the research assistants. For participants who had difficulties with, or could neither read nor write, the research assistants read out questionnaires aloud and recorded their responses.

The study was approved by the Ugandan National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), Ethical committee of the faculty of Education and Psychological Sciences, Ghent University and by local leaders (Resident District Commissioner, sub-county chiefs, Local Council chairpersons and the head-teachers of the schools involved).

3.2.2 Measures

A questionnaire designed for collecting socio-demographic information was used to collect information on gender, age, abduction status, and living status. War-related experiences were measured using Stressful War Events (SWE) questionnaire (Derluyn, Mels & Broekaert, 2009). The instrument is a list of 17 items, designed specifically and used among war-affected adolescents in northern Uganda, and includes items referring to a specific war-related traumatic events, such as “Did you experience the death of a loved one?” The respondent is asked to show whether or not each of the events listed happened to him/her by ticking either “yes” or “no” options provided in the questionnaire. The cumulative sum of “yes” or “no” marked gives the relative measure of exposure to war related experiences. The Adolescent Complex Emergency Daily Stressors Scale (ACEDSS)
(Mels et al., 2010) was used to assess the daily stressors the adolescents experienced. The questionnaire asks participants to indicate whether or not they experienced 17 different items related to every-day stressors (e.g. lack of food and medical care, forced marriage and rejection by family). The questionnaire had a good internal consistency of .87. A self-report instrument (The Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire – Adam, 2006) was used to measure the readiness to reconcile in adolescents. The instrument was already used among former child soldiers in Uganda (Bayer et al., 2007). Participants were instructed to think of the person or group of persons that caused harm to them or to their families during and, or after the war as they gave answers to the questions. The total score includes 33 items with four subscales testing the following dimensions: goodwill (8 items, e.g.: “I can sympathize with the enemy”); avoidance (8 items, e.g. “I would never talk with the adversary”); revenge (8 items e.g. “I’ll pay the opponents one day”); and future orientation (9 items, e.g.: “I try to focus on the future”). The items are given in a likert-scale format consisting of 5 responses (“1” not correct; “2” a little correct; “3” moderately correct; “4” very correct and “5” extremely correct). For the overall scale, the items of the Revenge and Avoidance subscales are reversed. Data on violent (aggressive and rule-breaking) behaviours collected using sections of the Youth Self Report - YSR (Achenbach, 1991). Internalizing problems (anxiety and depression) were assessed using the Hopkins Symptoms Checklist – HSCL-37A (Bean et al., 2007), a self-report questionnaire used in war-affected and refugee populations (Derluyn et al., 2009; Mels et al., 2010); it comprises thirty-seven items inquiring the symptoms associated with depression and anxiety, and uses a 4-pint Likert scale ranging from 1(never) to 4 (always). Posttraumatic symptoms were assessed by the Impact of Events Scale, Revised - IES-R (Weiss & Marmar, 1997), a 22-item scale with three subscales of intrusion, avoidance and hyper arousal. The IES-R has been administered in populations of war-affected adolescents in Africa before (e.g., Mels et al., 2010).

3.2.3 Analyses

For each of the four reconciliation attitudes, several hierarchical linear models were fit with different steps. In the first step, independent variables were gender, age, abduction status (abducted or not abducted), living situation (recoded as living with one parent, both parents or other), total number of war-related and of daily stressors, and the interaction term between these two stressors. In the next step, we added one of the four mental health outcome variables to the model. Also, the two-way interaction terms of the specific mental health outcome with daily and with war-related stressors, and the three-way interaction term with these stressors variables were defined. This resulted in four (dependent: goodwill, future, avoidance and revenge) times four (independent mental health outcomes: total IES-R score; HSCL-37A, internalizing symptoms score; YSR, rule-breaking behaviour; YSR, aggressive behaviour scores) hierarchical models. To avoid multicollinearity, the variables war-related stressors, daily stressors, and the four mental health outcomes were centred. Factors were dummy-coded. R 2.14.1 software
were used to conduct the analyses (R Core Team, 2012). Alpha was set at .05 for all statistical tests.

3.3 Results

3.3.1 Stressors, mental health problems and reconciliation attitudes

Table 2: Stressors, mental health problems and reconciliation attitudes among adolescents in northern Uganda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stressors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War-related stressors (SWE)</td>
<td>11.31</td>
<td>3.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily stressors (ACEDSS)</td>
<td>10.64</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mental health problems</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-traumatic stress symptoms (IES-R)</td>
<td>40.37</td>
<td>19.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalizing problems (HSCL-37A)</td>
<td>28.83</td>
<td>15.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression (YSR)</td>
<td>19.65</td>
<td>8.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule-breaking behavior (YSR)</td>
<td>12.72</td>
<td>6.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reconciliation attitudes (ATE)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodwill</td>
<td>21.55</td>
<td>7.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td>13.75</td>
<td>7.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>11.17</td>
<td>8.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>20.04</td>
<td>6.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SWE = Stressful War Events; ACEDSS = Adolescent Complex Emergency Daily Stressors Scale; IES-R = Impact of Events Scale-Revised (total score); HSCL-37A = Hopkins Checklist-37 for Adolescents; YSR = Youth Self Report; ATE = The Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire.

Overall, adolescents living in post-conflict northern Uganda reported considerable levels of reconciliation attitudes, both positive (goodwill and future orientation attitudes) and negative (avoidant and revenge attitudes), and also important levels of mental health problems. Above, they were exposed to a great degree of war-related and daily stressors (table 2).

3.3.2 Associations between mental health and reconciliation attitudes

Table 3: Hierarchical linear regression models of demographic variables, war related stressors and daily stressors on the reconciliation attitudes goodwill, future, avoidant and revenge.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GW</th>
<th>FU</th>
<th>AV</th>
<th>RE</th>
<th></th>
<th>GW</th>
<th>FU</th>
<th>AV</th>
<th>RE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
<td>-0.91</td>
<td>-0.81</td>
<td>-0.81</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
<td>-1.51</td>
<td>-1.38</td>
<td>-1.27</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abducted? (yes)</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>2.49*</td>
<td>Abducted? (yes)</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>2.46*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living situation</td>
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<td>F &lt; 1</td>
<td>F &lt; 1</td>
<td>F(2,400) = 1.15</td>
<td>Living situation</td>
<td>F &lt; 1</td>
<td>F &lt; 1</td>
<td>F &lt; 1</td>
<td>F(2,401) = 1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>-0.41</td>
<td>Both parents</td>
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<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>-0.45</td>
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<td>One parent</td>
<td>-0.38</td>
<td>-0.80</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>1.10</td>
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<td>0.59</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.26*</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>SWE</td>
<td>0.27*</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEDSS</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.28*</td>
<td>0.52***</td>
<td>ACEDSS</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.40***</td>
<td>0.50***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSD (IES-R)</td>
<td>0.09***</td>
<td>0.08***</td>
<td>0.09***</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>RUL (YSR)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.26***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE*PTSD</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>SWE*ACEDSS</td>
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<td>0.05**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE<em>ACEDSS</em>PTSD</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>SWE<em>ACEDSS</em>RUL</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR² (PTSD)</td>
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<td>0.05***</td>
<td>0.06***</td>
<td>0.04***</td>
<td>ΔR² (RUL)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02**</td>
<td>0.03**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.15***</td>
<td>0.13***</td>
<td>0.21***</td>
<td>0.14***</td>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.10***</td>
<td>0.08***</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
<td>0.13***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GW</th>
<th>FU</th>
<th>AV</th>
<th>RE</th>
<th></th>
<th>GW</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
<td>-1.29</td>
<td>-1.05</td>
<td>-0.99</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
<td>-1.38</td>
<td>-1.20</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.15</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>2.84**</td>
<td>Abducted? (yes)</td>
<td>0.61</td>
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<td>2.48**</td>
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<td>F &lt; 1</td>
<td>F &lt; 1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.53</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>-0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One parent</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
<td>-0.59</td>
<td>0.76</td>
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<td>-0.28</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE</td>
<td>0.30*</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>SWE</td>
<td>0.28*</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEDSS</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.34***</td>
<td>0.51***</td>
<td>ACEDSS</td>
<td>0.20*</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.42***</td>
<td>0.52***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INT (HSCL-37A)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.12***</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>AGG (YSR)</td>
<td>0.09*</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>0.18***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE*ACEDSS</td>
<td>0.06**</td>
<td>0.06**</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>SWE*ACEDSS</td>
<td>0.06**</td>
<td>0.05**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE'*INT</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>SWE*AGG</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.04**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEDSS'*INT</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>ACEDSS*AGG</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE*ACEDSS'*INT</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>SWE<em>ACEDSS</em>AGG</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR² (INT)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>ΔR² (AGG)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03**</td>
<td>0.04***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.10***</td>
<td>0.08***</td>
<td>0.18***</td>
<td>0.11***</td>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.11***</td>
<td>0.09***</td>
<td>0.18***</td>
<td>0.15***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001; reference between brackets
SWE = Stressful War Events; ACEDSS = Adolescent Complex Emergency Daily Stressors Scale; PTSD = posttraumatic stress disorder as measured on the Impact of Events Scale-Revised (IES-R total score); INT = internalizing subscale of the Hopkins Checklist-37 for Adolescents (HSCL-37A); RUL = subscale rule-breaking behaviour of the Youth Self Report (YSR); AGG = subscale aggressive behaviour of the YSR. GW = Goodwill attitudes; FU = Future orientation; AV = Avoidance attitudes; and RE = Revenge attitudes.
The results showed that the reconciliation attitudes goodwill, future orientation and avoidance were associated with posttraumatic stress symptoms (IES-R) (table 3): the more posttraumatic symptoms reported, the more reconciliation attitudes (both positive and negative) they reported. Further, an interaction effect was found between daily stressors and posttraumatic stress on avoidance attitudes: when low levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms were reported, there were little associations between daily stressors and avoidance. However, when the adolescents reported more symptoms of posttraumatic stress, there was a positive relationship between daily stressors and avoidance attitudes.

Second, the reconciliation subscale of avoidance was only positively associated with internalizing problems (HSCL-INT); no associations were found for the other reconciliation attitudes.

The negative reconciliation attitudes of avoidance and revenge were positively associated with both aggressive and rule-breaking behaviour (YSR). Aggressive behaviour was also slightly associated with goodwill attitudes. Further, an interaction effect was found between war-related stressors and aggressive behaviour for attitudes of revenge: adolescents who reported more war-related stressors showed lower scores on revenge; while adolescents who reported low levels of war-related stressors showed higher estimated mean scores on revenge if they scored higher on aggressive behaviour. Further, the abduction status of the adolescents was in all models associated with revenge attitudes: former child soldiers showed higher mean scores of revenge than non-abducted adolescents.

A strong positive association was consistently observed between daily stressors and both avoidant and revenge attitudes.

Last, in three out of four models important interaction effects were found between war-related and daily stressors on the positive reconciliation attitudes (goodwill and future orientation). If children reported more war-related stressors, a steeper linear trend between daily stressors and the positive reconciliation attitudes was observed, than when less war-related stressors were reported.

No associations were found between gender, age and living status and reconciliation attitudes.

3.4 Discussion

The current study examined possible associations between a range of mental health and behavioural problems in war-affected adolescents (both former child soldiers and never conscripted adolescents) and their reconciliation attitudes. Positive reconciliation attitudes (goodwill and future orientation attitudes) seemed to be positively associated with symptoms of posttraumatic stress, which means that the more PTSD symptoms are reported, the more positive reconciliation attitudes are indicated. This relates to other studies that reported how children exposed to adversity showed remarkable resilience and an overall positive future orientation (e.g., Klasen et
al., 2010). Above, another study had found that children showed good social adaptation in the face of psychopathology or following trauma (Okello, Onen & Musisi, 2007). Moreover traumatic experiences (e.g. rape) has been found to bring positive outcomes in form of prosocial behaviour and confidence building behaviour (Betancourt et al, 2010), and that stress is thus not necessarily linked to negative outcomes only, but may actually lead to a disposition of increased sympathy and helping (Vollhardt & Staub, 2011).

PTSD – in relation to the number of daily stressors – further also impacted avoidant reconciliation attitudes: in situations of numerous daily stressors, increasing PTSD is associated with increasing avoidant attitudes. This is not surprising, given that avoidance is one of the clusters of PTSD symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Similarly, adolescents who reported high levels of internalizing symptoms (anxiety and depression) and behavioural problems (both aggressive and rule-breaking behaviour) showed higher avoidant reconciliation attitudes. The role of avoidance as coping mechanism could also here be a possible explanatory hypothesis (Thabet, Tischler & Vostanis, 2004).

Behavioural problems (both aggressive and rule-breaking behaviour) were also associated with increasing attitudes of revenge, as also already indicated in other studies (e.g., Copeland-Linder et al., 2007).

Further, our findings showed that formerly abducted adolescents exhibited higher revenge attitudes than non-conscripted youth. Feelings of revenge are frequently observed in victims exposed to war (e.g., Bayer et al., 2007), and seem to be a response to negative experiences, like interpersonal injuries or the violation of social norms (McKee & Feather, 2008). Given that almost all of these children were abducted and enlisted in the armed group and mostly had extremely hard, long-lasting times in the rebel group, this finding is not surprising, also given their difficult reintegration processes afterwards involving stigmatization, lack of educational and job related opportunities (e.g., Vindevogel et al., 2013).

Above, also a higher number of daily stressors led to more negative (revenge and avoidant) reconciliation attitudes. The important mediating role of daily stressors in the impact of war trauma onto adolescents’ mental health has been demonstrated extensively (e.g., Fernando, Miller & Berger, 2010), and it is therefore also not surprising that daily stressors also impact reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents, in particular the ‘negative’ reconciliation attitudes. However, when the adolescents were exposed to both war-related and daily stressors, they exhibited higher positive (goodwill and future orientation) reconciliation attitudes. This could be explained by the fact that in the face of trauma children show good social adaptation (e.g., Bonanno, 2004; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Okello et al., 2007; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Waysman, Schwarzwald & Solomon, 2001) and may develop positive outcomes including prosocial behaviour and confidence building (Betancourt et al., 2010). For example one study in northern Uganda found that despite the presence of severe trauma, children were still able to show high positive future orientation (Klasen et al., 2010).
3.4.1 Implications

The study demonstrates that reconciliation attitudes are linked with a range of mental health conditions, particularly symptoms of posttraumatic stress, depression and anxiety, and aggressive and rule-breaking behaviours. The findings have direct implications for post-conflict recovery as negative reconciliation attitudes may impede desired outcomes. Therefore, it is important that organizations concerned with post-conflict recovery tackle the negative reconciliation attitudes and the mental health needs of adolescents affected by war through, for example, sensitization programmes aimed at promoting reconciliation, and by the provision of counselling services, especially mental health counselling services, to counter the adverse effects of mental health problems and of war-related and daily stressors in general on post conflict recovery. Psychosocial programmes specifically targeting the alleviation effects of daily stressors may also help improve post-conflict recovery (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Additional research, probably involving longitudinal procedures, is needed to increase our understanding of these findings, as well as other possible factors associated with reconciliation attitudes that may assist speedy and effective post-conflict recovery processes.

3.4.2 Limitations

The findings of this study should be taken cautiously, as there were certain limiting factors. First, the study relied on self-report data which might have introduced some biases in the responses obtained due to social desirability. Second, the study was carried in post-conflict northern Uganda with distinct cultural practices and world views, which may affect the generalizability of our study findings to other populations and contexts. Lastly, the study employed cross-sectional design which makes it difficult to attribute causal and temporal relationships between the independent and dependent variables involved in the study.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank all participants. This study was carried out with the financial support of the Belgian Technical Cooperation.
Associations between mental health and reconciliation attitudes amongst war-affected adolescents

References


Miller, K.E. & Rasmussen, A. (2010). War exposure, daily stressors, and mental health in conflict and post-conflict settings: bridging the divide between trauma-focused and psychosocial frameworks. *Social Science & Medicine, 70*, 7-16.


Associations between mental health and reconciliation attitudes amongst war-affected adolescents


Chapter 4

Associations between reconciliation programs and reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents in Northern Uganda*

Abstract

**Introduction:** Whether post-conflict reconciliation programs are able to change hostile behaviors is not known. This study sought to assess the association between reconciliation programs and the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents in two communities in northern Uganda.

**Methods:** Four hundred and forty five adolescents within two communities, one with and the other without interventions were assessed for exposure to war-related and daily stressors and place of residence using hierarchical regression analysis to predict reconciliation attitudes.

**Results:** Adolescents in the non-intervention community recorded more positive and also more negative reconciliation attitudes, more positive associations of both daily and war-related stressors with increasing reconciliation attitudes than those on the intervention community.

**Discussion:** Overall the programs recorded limited impact on reconciliation attitudes, perhaps due to pervasive adverse social situation of the people.

**Conclusion:** There is need for multi-pronged, collaborative program effort targeting holistic recovery programs with focus on changing negative reconciliation attitudes.
4.1 Introduction

Globally, young people are affected by armed conflicts on a wide scale (Dickson-Gomez, 2002; Francis, 2007; Machel, 1996; Pearn, 2003; Zack-Williams, 2001). In Africa, and particularly in Uganda, children and adolescents were even forced to participate in war, as child soldiers in various roles (Betancourt et al., 2011; Denov, 2010; McKay, 2004; Ursano & Shaw, 2007), hereby exposing them to a range of stressors, both during the conflict (so-called “war-related stressors”), as also in the post-conflict context (“daily stressors”) (Honwana, 2008; Pham & Stover, 2009; Vindevogel et al., 2013). The targeting of civilians in war strategies (for example as child soldiers, but also, amongst others, the use of sexual violence against civilians) however does not only impact individuals, but also affects and even destroys social and communal ties (Derluyn, Vindevogel & De Haene, 2013).

In the post-conflict phase, former child soldiers need to recover individually, given their exposure to past adverse war-related experiences and also to ongoing daily stressors (Amone-P’Olak, 2006; Baines, 2007; Betancourt et al., 2008; Shanahan, 2008). In particular, once back home, many formerly abducted youth continue to face various challenges (e.g., Amone-P’Olak 2005; Vindevogel et al., 2013), particularly experiences of stigmatization and discrimination within the communities and networks they are returning to (Baines, 2007; Betancourt et al., 2010; Kligerman, 2009; Vindevogel et al., 2013). This is obviously related to the disruption of the social tissue due to the long-lasting and specific nature of the armed conflict.

Consequently, both state and non-state actors supporting recovery processes of former child soldiers recognize the need to also support communities to welcome and reaccept their children and youth when coming back from the armed faction. Further, these interventions may also contribute to broader peace-building and reconciliation processes (Annan, Brier & Aryemo, 2009; Baines, 2007), which are also increasingly considered as prerequisites for conflict resolution and for the prevention of a re-escalation of the conflict in future (Bar-Tal, 2000; Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana, 2002; Nannyonjo, 2005). Most programs and interventions set up in this framework target the individual behavior of community members towards, for example, former child soldiers or victims of war-related violence. Hereto government and non-government actors have implemented various program (e.g., Mercy Corps-Uganda, 2009; USAID, 2010; United Religious Initiative/Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, 2012). Local traditional reconciliation programs such as “Nyono tong gweno” (stepping on the egg), “kayo cuk” (“biting of hot charcoal”) and “moyo kum” (a cleansing ceremony) (e.g., Amone-P’Olak, 2006; Baines, 2007; Huyse, & Salter, 2008; Nakayi, 2008; Shanahan, 2008) were also used. Local and international psychosocial programs (e.g. reception centers) provided psychological and social support to individuals (Idraku, 2011; McKay & Mazurana, 2004). However, little attention has been given to reconciliation as a means to post-conflict recovery (Bar-Tal, 2000) and it is not known whether reconciliation programs indeed are able to change hostile behaviors of community members (e.g., Baines, 2007; Boothby,
Therefore, this study sought to examine the association between reconciliation programs and the attitudes of war-affected adolescents living in two post-conflict communities in northern Uganda, comparing one of the communities that benefited from a peace and reconciliation intervention programs to another that did not receive any such intervention.

4.2 Methods

4.2.1 Study setting

This study was carried out when the war between the LRA and Uganda government in northern Uganda had ended. During the insurgency, the LRA committed horrendous atrocities including rape, killing of unarmed people, mutilation, sexual enslavement, and abduction of young boys and girls (World Vision, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2005). Further, the rebels looted and burned houses, food granaries, shops, and villages in northern Uganda (Amone-P’Olak, 2007). The abducted children were conscripted into the LRA, and overall, it was estimated that the LRA abducted between 20,000 and 60,000 children during the war (Pham, Vinck & Stover, 2007). In captivity the children experienced persistent terror of being attacked by government soldiers, sexually abused by rebel commanders, killed, catching diseases, and exposed to extreme deprivations and hardships such as lack of water, food, and clothing. They were also forced to commit atrocities against each other and against their own people by raiding, burning villages, looting and killing (Pham et al., 2007) as deterrent measures against escape from captivity since such acts helped to sever bonds between them and their own people (Amone-P’Olak, 2004).

As a result of the activities of the LRA, more than 90 percent of the population was forced into internally displaced people’s (IDP) camps (Pham et al., 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2005). However, these camps never guaranteed any security, as also here people were continuously attacked by the rebels (Pham et al., 2007). Around 2006, the war turned international particularly with the relocation of the rebel activities to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR) (Carlson & Mazurana, 2008) ushering in some peace in northern Uganda. Many of the abducted children managed to escape, were rescued or released during and, or after the war, and have since returned home, but continue to face many challenges related to reintegration with their communities (Amone-P’Olak, 2005, 2007).

4.2.2 Pre-study

As a first step, a pre-study survey was carried out to select communities to be involved in the study. Interviews were conducted with organizations targeting peace-building and reconciliation in northern Uganda. Information about the activities they were engaged in and where they were operating was obtained. Furthermore, in order to
select communities that were exposed to a rather similar level of war-related violence, government and local community leaders were interviewed. Findings of this survey indicated that in Otuke district, a couple of communities benefited from peace and reconciliation interventions implemented by a local non-governmental organization (NGO), Concerned Parents Association-Uganda (CPA-U), a child-focused organization spontaneously formed in 1996 by a group of parents affected by the abduction of their children by the LRA in northern Uganda. CPA-U's program in Otuke district aimed, among other things, to support the reintegration processes of former abductees, through enhancing their psychosocial wellbeing, education and health, and also to support sustainable long-term peace-building processes through reconciliation initiatives (Idraku, 2011). In line with calls that humanitarian services at all levels strengthen the capacity of families to care for the material and psychological needs of former child soldiers within their communities (Corbin, 2008), CPA-U sought to achieve their objectives by training community mediators (mostly members of parents support group - PSG). Mediators had to execute all phases of traditional cleansing ceremonies, including the identification of possible former child soldiers and relevant context figures, and the execution of the traditional cleansing ceremonies such as “nyono tongweno” (stepping on fowl eggs) (e.g., Amone-P’Olak, 2006; Baines, 2007; Huyse, & Salter, 2008; Nakayi, 2008; Shanahan, 2008) in order to promote reconciliation and forgiveness. These traditional ceremonies use extant cultural beliefs and community processes that traditionally protected and supported children (Betancourt & Khan, 2008), and were familiar and known to the child, family and community, thus more culturally-sensitive and engaging than other treatment models (IASC, 2007). Further, the community mediators employed dialogue meetings and community monitoring to identify community members in need of being reconciled, and with the help of government, traditional and local leaders mediated and resolved conflicts on personal, community and societal levels. Radio talk shows, music, dance and drama were used in combination with these methods to sensitize the population about the need for conflict resolution and reconciliation. Issues addressed included, amongst other themes, conflicts arising from gender-based and domestic violence, early marriages and land ownership (Idraku, 2011).

However, this program was only implemented in some sub-counties of the district. At the time of the survey (2010), some sub-counties within the district, including Adwari sub-county, were covered by this program, while one community, Ollim sub-county (being rather geographically remote), was not. Consequently, for comparison purposes, and because of similar levels of rebel activities and exposure to war-related stressors in both areas, the communities of Adwari and Ollim were purposively selected to form the study contexts of this research.

4.2.3 Study sample and procedure

Overall, four hundred and forty five adolescents, both in- and out-of-school, living in the
two communities of Adwari and Ollilim sub-counties (Otuke district, northern Uganda) were included in the study. The school-going children were met in two secondary schools, one in each community. All pupils aged between 13 and 21 years old (inclusive) and who were present at the time of the study (n=286, out of a total of about 560 students: 187 out of 400 from Adwari Secondary School, and 99 out 160 from Otuke Secondary School in Ollilim were involved. Out-of-school adolescents (n=151) who met the inclusion criteria (having attained the age of 13 and not being older than 21 years, and living in one of the two targeted communities) were reached and recruited into the study with the help of local leaders. Some socio-demographic characteristics from both groups are depicted in table 1.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of adolescents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total group (n=445)</th>
<th>Ollilim (n=199)</th>
<th>Adwari (n=246)</th>
<th>X²/t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>277 (62.2)</td>
<td>124 (62.3)</td>
<td>153 (62.2)</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>168 (37.8)</td>
<td>75 (37.7)</td>
<td>93 (37.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>213 (50.1)</td>
<td>92 (21.6)</td>
<td>121 (28.5)</td>
<td>8.41**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One parent</td>
<td>94 (22.1)</td>
<td>54 (12.7)</td>
<td>40 (9.4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>118 (27.8)</td>
<td>45 (10.6)</td>
<td>73 (17.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17.04 (1.88)</td>
<td>17.24 (1.96)</td>
<td>16.89 (1.81)</td>
<td>17.48*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N(%); *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Local research assistants were trained for three days in questionnaire administration techniques and helped with the administration of the questionnaires. As a first step, the objectives of the study were explained to the participants, and they were assured of free withdrawal at any time from the study. The participants were also informed that in case need arose for psychological and, or medial services, clinical psychiatric officers and medical doctors were present at Lira Regional Referral Hospital and would provide help. A written informed consent was obtained from each of them, and thereafter, all the participants completed, in small groups and under the supervision of research assistants, self-report questionnaires. In case participants could not read or write, questionnaires were read aloud and responses recorded.

Approval for the study was obtained from the Ugandan National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), the Ethical Committee of Ghent University, and local leaders (Resident District Commissioner, sub-county chiefs, Local Council chairpersons and the head teachers of the schools involved in the study).

4.2.4 Measures

A self-report instrument assessed socio-demographic characteristics (i.e. age, gender and place of residence either in Ollilim or Adwari community) of the participants.
Exposure to war-related stressors were assessed using the Stressful War Events (SWE) questionnaire (Mels et al., 2010), questioning 16 war-related events on a yes/no scale. The questionnaire was originally designed to collect war-related experiences of war-affected adolescents in eastern part of Africa. Daily stressors experienced were measured by the Adolescent Complex Emergency Daily Stressors Scale (ACEDSS) (Mels et al., 2010). The scale was designed particularly for and used with war affected adolescents and asks participants to indicate whether or not (yes/no) they experienced 17 different daily and stigmatization-related stressors (e.g., lack of food and medical care, forced marriage, rejection by family).

The Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire (Adam, 2006) assessed the reconciliation attitudes of participants. Participants were asked to keep in mind the person or group that caused harm to them or their family during and/or after the war as they filled in the questionnaire. The instrument provided a list of statements presented on a Likert-scale, from 1 (totally incorrect) to 5 (entirely correct), and participants were asked to show their level of agreement with each item. The total score includes 33 items with four subscales: goodwill (8 items, e.g., ‘I can sympathize with the enemy’); avoidance (8 items, e.g., ‘I would never talk with the adversary’); revenge (8 items, e.g., ‘I’ll pay the opponents back one day’); and, future orientation (9 items, e.g., ‘I try to focus on the future’). For the subscales ‘goodwill’ and ‘future orientation’, higher scores indicate more positive attitudes, while for the subscales ‘revenge’ and ‘avoidance’, higher scores indicate more negative attitudes.

4.2.5 Analyses

Differences between both groups (adolescents living in Olilim and those living in Adwari communities) were analyzed with χ²- and independent samples t-tests. Four hierarchical linear regression models (method: enter) were carried out to analyze possible associations between a series of independent variables including socio-demographics variables (age and gender), total number of daily stressors, total number of war-related stressors with the reconciliation attitudes (goodwill, future orientation, avoidance and revenge attitudes) as the dependent variables. A model with the demographic variables (age and gender) and total scores for daily and war-related stressors were defined for each of the four reconciliation attitudes as a first step; and secondly, the main term of place of residence and the interactions between place of residence and age, place of residence and gender, place of residence and daily stressors total score, and place of residence and war-related total score was added. The bootstrap-procedure was used to estimate standard errors as implemented in the Lavaan-package (Rosseel, 2012) to estimate the indirect and total effects when the conditions for mediation were fulfilled. R 2.14.1 software was used to conduct all analyses (R Core Team, 2012), and alpha was set at .05.
4.3 Results

4.3.1 Exposure to war-related and daily stressors

Table 2: Exposure of adolescents to daily stressors (ACEDSS) by community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressor</th>
<th>Total group</th>
<th>Olilim</th>
<th>Adwari</th>
<th>X²/t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of insecurity</td>
<td>382 (85.8)</td>
<td>180 (90.5)</td>
<td>202 (82.1)</td>
<td>5.63**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with school fees</td>
<td>382 (85.8)</td>
<td>178 (89.4)</td>
<td>204 (82.9)</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate food</td>
<td>357 (80.2)</td>
<td>178 (89.4)</td>
<td>179 (72.8)</td>
<td>18.26***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate clothing</td>
<td>381 (85.6)</td>
<td>181 (91.0)</td>
<td>200 (81.3)</td>
<td>7.56**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness in family</td>
<td>391 (88.1)</td>
<td>184 (92.5)</td>
<td>207 (84.1)</td>
<td>7.24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of care</td>
<td>360 (80.9)</td>
<td>184 (92.5)</td>
<td>176 (71.5)</td>
<td>29.81***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry about family</td>
<td>366 (82.2)</td>
<td>180 (90.1)</td>
<td>186 (75.6)</td>
<td>15.60***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much work</td>
<td>320 (72.2)</td>
<td>163 (81.9)</td>
<td>157 (63.8)</td>
<td>18.59***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment</td>
<td>273 (61.8)</td>
<td>128 (64.3)</td>
<td>145 (58.9)</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others talking ill of you and family</td>
<td>334 (75.4)</td>
<td>154 (77.4)</td>
<td>180 (73.2)</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discriminated against</td>
<td>272 (61.4)</td>
<td>129 (64.8)</td>
<td>143 (58.1)</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persecution by bad spirits</td>
<td>195 (43.8)</td>
<td>103 (51.8)</td>
<td>92 (37.4)</td>
<td>8.64**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling abandoned by family</td>
<td>171 (38.4)</td>
<td>90 (45.2)</td>
<td>81 (32.9)</td>
<td>6.52**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling abandoned by society</td>
<td>155 (35.0)</td>
<td>79 (39.7)</td>
<td>76 (30.9)</td>
<td>3.68*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced into marriage</td>
<td>124 (27.9)</td>
<td>77 (38.7)</td>
<td>47 (19.1)</td>
<td>20.04***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know father</td>
<td>128 (28.8)</td>
<td>75 (37.7)</td>
<td>53 (21.5)</td>
<td>13.48***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement with family</td>
<td>137 (30.8)</td>
<td>74 (27.1)</td>
<td>63 (25.6)</td>
<td>6.39**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total daily stressors (Mean; SD)</td>
<td>10.64 (4.16)</td>
<td>11.81 (3.55)</td>
<td>9.72 (4.38)</td>
<td>5.40***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
Table 3: Exposure to war-related stressor (SWE) of adolescents by community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressor</th>
<th>Total group (n=445)</th>
<th>Olilim (n=199)</th>
<th>Adwari (n=246)</th>
<th>X²/t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death of a loved one</td>
<td>404 (91.2)</td>
<td>184 (92.5)</td>
<td>220 (89.4)</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful separation from family</td>
<td>282 (63.8)</td>
<td>142 (71.4)</td>
<td>140 (56.9)</td>
<td>10.74***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in IDP camp</td>
<td>320 (72.6)</td>
<td>177 (88.9)</td>
<td>143 (58.1)</td>
<td>56.58***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abduction</td>
<td>189 (43.2)</td>
<td>106 (53.3)</td>
<td>83 (33.7)</td>
<td>19.10***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnessing violence against others</td>
<td>312 (70.7)</td>
<td>151 (75.9)</td>
<td>161 (65.4)</td>
<td>6.99**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of violence</td>
<td>190 (42.8)</td>
<td>91 (45.7)</td>
<td>99 (40.2)</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced to commit violence</td>
<td>166 (37.6)</td>
<td>92 (46.2)</td>
<td>74 (30.1)</td>
<td>12.51***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of food and water</td>
<td>359 (80.7)</td>
<td>182 (91.5)</td>
<td>177 (72.0)</td>
<td>25.61***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of education</td>
<td>343 (77.4)</td>
<td>174 (87.4)</td>
<td>169 (68.7)</td>
<td>23.00***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of medical care</td>
<td>379 (85.6)</td>
<td>175 (87.9)</td>
<td>204 (82.9)</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of jobs and income</td>
<td>358 (80.8)</td>
<td>170 (85.4)</td>
<td>188 (76.4)</td>
<td>6.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wounded or disabled</td>
<td>241 (54.4)</td>
<td>119 (59.8)</td>
<td>122 (49.6)</td>
<td>4.73*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life on streets</td>
<td>186 (42.2)</td>
<td>99 (49.7)</td>
<td>87 (35.4)</td>
<td>9.96***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of LRA rebels</td>
<td>380 (85.6)</td>
<td>181 (91.0)</td>
<td>199 (80.9)</td>
<td>9.01***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of not being accepted</td>
<td>259 (58.3)</td>
<td>134 (65.8)</td>
<td>125 (50.8)</td>
<td>11.68***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for other children</td>
<td>225 (50.8)</td>
<td>116 (58.3)</td>
<td>109 (44.3)</td>
<td>8.72***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total war-related stressors (Mean; SD)</td>
<td>10.66 (3.87)</td>
<td>12.11 (3.14)</td>
<td>9.53 (1.01)</td>
<td>7.33***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Although participants from both communities experienced various daily and war-related stressors, generally, adolescents in Olilim (the non-intervention) community experienced more daily and more war-related stressors than those in Adwari (the intervention) community (tables 2,3).

4.3.2 Factors impacting reconciliation attitudes

Table 4: Reconciliation attitudes of adolescents in the two communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Total group (n=445)</th>
<th>Olilim (n=199)</th>
<th>Adwari (n=246)</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goodwill</td>
<td>21.55 (7.22)</td>
<td>21.30 (8.03)</td>
<td>21.74 (6.53)</td>
<td>358.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td>20.04 (6.82)</td>
<td>19.29 (7.63)</td>
<td>20.61 (6.08)</td>
<td>397.32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>13.75 (7.13)</td>
<td>15.37 (7.78)</td>
<td>12.50 (6.31)</td>
<td>358.50***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>11.17 (8.20)</td>
<td>12.86 (8.99)</td>
<td>9.84 (7.27)</td>
<td>366.47**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean (SD); *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
Overall, adolescents from Olilim (non-intervention group) showed more negative reconciliation (avoidant and revenge) attitudes than the intervention group in Adwari (table 4). Further, greater standard deviations were recorded for the Olilim than for the Adwari group.

Table 5: The impact of reconciliation programs on reconciliation attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goodwill attitudes</th>
<th>Future attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>18.92***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (ref: male)</td>
<td>-1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEDSS</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Residence (ref: Olilim)</td>
<td>-14.55*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender*Place of Residence</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age*Place of Residence</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEDSS*Place of Residence</td>
<td>0.77***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE*Place of Residence</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ R²</td>
<td>0.06***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.12***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total R²</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revenge attitudes</th>
<th>Avoidant attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (ref: male)</td>
<td>-1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEDSS</td>
<td>0.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Residence (ref: Olilim)</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender*Place of Residence</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age*Place of Residence</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEDSS*Place of Residence</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE*Place of Residence</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ R²</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R² total</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

ACEDSS: Adolescent Complex Emergency Daily Stressors Scale; SWE: Stressful War Events questionnaire.
Linear regression analyses examining the impact of the intervention (place of residence), socio-demographic factors (gender and age), and stressors (daily and war-related stressors) on reconciliation attitudes (goodwill, future orientation, revenge and avoidant attitudes) revealed, firstly, that 'place of residence' had an impact on positive reconciliation attitudes, both as main effect (with participants from Olilim having higher scores than those from Adwari), and in interaction with the number of daily stressors: for participants from Olilim (non-intervention community), the impact of daily stressors onto positive reconciliation attitudes was much greater (positive relationship) than for participants from the community in which an intervention was set up. Further, more war-related stressors led to significantly more positive reconciliation attitudes and also more attitudes of avoidance, while daily stressors impacted both negative reconciliation (avoidance and revenge) attitudes. Last, no impact was found for gender and age.

4.4 Discussion

This study assessed the association between reconciliation programs and the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected youth in Northern Uganda living in two communities of post-conflict northern Uganda, whereby one community benefited from a peace-building and reconciliation program, while the other community did not. Overall, the results indicate that the impact of the programs was relatively limited, with in particular no impact on negative reconciliation (avoidant and revenge) attitudes that still persisted amongst the adolescents in the intervention community. Several possible explanations can be discussed to deepen this lack of impact: First, Pupavac (2001) suggested that psychosocial interventions tend to concentrate on people's feelings rather than rational thoughts, and in this way obscure other possible sources of conflict feelings (especially in the environment), which renders it hard for people to see beyond their own negative perspectives and overcome feelings of enmity. Further, this kind of interventions encourages dependence upon the intervening bodies (programs), hereby corroding personal initiatives and reliance on local ties and institutions (Pupavac, 2001). Third, findings among women living in post-conflict settings indicate that people affected by conflicts often are more concerned with everyday problems relating to difficult living conditions and rebuilding their lives than with past traumatic events, and this prevents their effective participation in program activities (Iskandar-Dharmawan & Arifin, 2006). Therefore, to promote healing and hope, it seems essential to revitalize communities and to address all social-ecological factors (such as poverty, illness and lack of education) which probably affect program effectiveness (Wessells & Monteiro, 2007).

The study findings further show that the reconciliation program even decreased the prevalence of positive reconciliation attitudes, and even though adolescents from both communities showed positive reconciliation attitudes, those from the non-intervention group had higher positive reconciliation attitudes. Above, the non-intervention
group reported a stronger relationship between exposure to stressors and positive reconciliation attitudes, in contrast to what could have been expected given the absence of intervention. This might be explained by the fact that, lacking external interventions, the adolescents had to focus onto mobilizing their own personal resources (Wessely, Bisson & Rose, 2000) and onto support that could be given by other people (including former foes) in order to cope with the stressful daily situation they are in. Hereby, it is possible that the adolescents in the intervention community, while having a lot of trust in the reconciliation programs, did not develop strong personal coping capacities, oriented onto their immediate living contexts, to deal with their problems (Pupavac, 2001), and thus showed relatively weaker positive reconciliation attitudes compared to adolescents in the non-intervention community.

Further, exposure to more war-related stressors led to both more positive reconciliation attitudes, and also to more avoidance (negative) attitudes in both communities, echoing a persistent theme of posttraumatic growth literature that suffering may lead to positive personal growth (e.g., Linley, 2003; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The finding associating exposure to war-related stressors to negative reconciliation attitudes of avoidance and revenge suggests coping efforts by severely maltreated children (e.g., Bal et al., 2003; Cardozo et al., 2000; Thabet, Tischler & Vostanis, 2004). However, though these findings were true for both communities, the non-intervention community experienced the impacts of the stressors on reconciliation attitudes more than the intervention community, related to the above described possible explanatory hypotheses.

4.4.1 Implications

This study showed that post-conflict reconciliation programs should take care of the broader community concerns, including improvement of the general socio-economic situations of the people if they are to achieve their objectives. This implies that there is need for multi-pronged, collaborative approach that should involve, not only the local institutions and groups, but also the bigger/national governments in order to rejuvenate communities by addressing all factors in the social ecology (such as poverty, illness and lack of education) that may prevent people from benefiting from the programs (Wessells & Monteiro, 2007). Future reconciliation programs need to identify and strengthen the specific factors that may promote reconciliation attitudes for particular affected communities.

4.4.2 Limitations

The study findings need to take into account some methodological limitations. First, we were not present during the time of the intervention, so we had to rely on information of program providers on the specific content of the program and the way it was implemented. Therefore, evaluating the program needs to be done carefully (Bryant & Njenga, 2006). Second, the study mainly focused on one program (CPA-U), and thus the
findings might be highly particular and not applicable to other reconciliation programs in post-conflict settings. Third, the data used for the research purpose were based on self-reported information of participants, and might therefore not entirely capture the whole actual impact of the program intervention. Fourth, the study was carried after the war had ceased for quite some time, and therefore some information, particularly the data on war-related stressors, might be vulnerable to errors arising from memory difficulties. Fifth, this study was highly specific to post-conflict northern Uganda, and the findings should be cautiously applied to other post-conflict areas. Last, the quantitative nature of the study could not permit in-depth exploration of the reconciliation attitudes measured as well as the variety of the individual experiences with and after the war.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank all the young people who participated in this study. This study was carried out with the financial support of the Belgian Technical Cooperation.

References


Reconciliation programs and attitudes of war-affected adolescents in Northern Uganda


Gender differences in reconciliation attitudes amongst war-affected adolescents in Northern Uganda

Abstract

Introduction: In post-conflict settings, it is rather unclear whether reconciliation attitudes differ between particular groups in the population taking into account their war-related experiences and current daily stressors. This study aimed at assessing the reconciliation attitudes of adolescents, comparing the attitudes of girls and boys, given their presumed different background of war-related experiences and their different current living situation in terms of daily social and economic stressors in post-conflict northern Uganda.

Methods: Hierarchical linear regression models were used to analyze possible associations between the independent variables (socio-demographic characteristics, war-related and daily stressors) and the independent variables (goodwill, future orientation, avoidance and revenge reconciliation attitudes).

Results: Generally there were no gender difference in reconciliation attitudes of boys and girls, although girls were exposed to greater daily stressors. Exposure to daily stressors were positively associated with negative reconciliation (avoidance and revenge) attitudes, and war-related stressors were instead associated with positive reconciliation (goodwill and future orientation) attitudes.

Conclusion: Although in post-conflict settings boys and girls may experience similar stressful situations, girls tend to bear the greater part of the burden of everyday living. Moreover, the attitudes of avoidance and revenge triggered by the post-conflict stressors linger on in the young people. Therefore interventions should aim at ameliorating this disproportionate burden of these stressors by gender, and provision of individualized psychosocial interventions to tackle negative reconciliation (avoidance and revenge) attitudes resulting from daily stressors.
5.1 Introduction

Although it is generally assumed that war affects both male and female adolescents in a quite equal manner (see e.g., Annan et al., 2011; Betancourt et al., 2011), studies show that girls tend to suffer from a greater emotional impact than boys in conflict and post-conflict settings (Betancourt et al., 2010a, 2011; Kohrt et al., 2008). For example, studies among a sample of formerly abducted children at a reception center in Gulu district (northern Uganda) showed that the participating girls exhibited more severe traumatic reactions, such as withdrawal behavior, extreme suspiciousness and nightmares, and reported severe depression, bleak future expectations, sadness, irritability, lack of concentration, and bedwetting (Amone-P’Olak, 2004, 2005). One important reason for the greater emotional impact suffered by girls might be the sexual violence they endured during the war and which particularly impacted girls (e.g., Amone-P’Olak, 2005; McKay, 1998; Miller et al., 2002; Rehn & Sirleaf, 2009). Often sexual violence is deliberately targeted at young girls as a policy of armed groups, because, amongst other reasons, young girls are believed to be free of sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV/AIDS (Amone-P’Olak, 2005; McKay, 1998) or, as was the case in northern Uganda, sexual violence is used as a means of proliferating a new and pure generation of a particular ethnic group (Gardam & Charlesworth, 2015). Next to the direct physical and psychological impact of sexual violence on the individual, another important and adverse effect of exposure to sexual violence is the shame and stigma the affected girls encounter, especially within the community where they reside (Verelst et al., 2014a; Burman & Mckay, 2007; Corbin, 2008; McKay, 1998, 2006; Sideris, 2003). One element herein is that victims of sexual violence, including former female child soldiers who were used as sex slaves while in captivity, experience great difficulties to get married, evoking stigma and exclusion as many societies consider marriage as mandatory for women, and see unmarried women thus as social outcasts (McKay, 2007). Above, females who bore children through forced sex are often marginalized by families and communities, because their experiences are seen as going against traditional cultural norms (Corbin, 2008; McKay, 2006; McKay & Mazurana, 2004). In Mozambique, for example, a study has shown that women subjected to sexual violence during or after war developed fear of rejection, while men with similar experiences did not show any threat of rejection, since they are not perceived as having gone against gender relations and local cultural practice (Sideris, 2003). Cultural interpretation of the situation of girls consequently make the girls developing a deep sense of shame associated with the sexual violence and with not being able to conform to traditional gender roles and norms, such as finding a marriage partner, leading to perceived lack of usefulness in society (Burman & McKay, 2007).

Apart from these war-related and social stressors, it is also known that armed conflicts generate or may worsen several continuing, stressful conditions of daily life, both in the conflict and in the post-conflict context, constituting daily stressors that are known to
largely impact adolescents’ psychosocial well-being (Al-Krenawi, Lev-Wiesel & Sehwail, 2007; Barenbaum, Ruchkin & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Kalksma-Van Lith, 2007; Mels et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2008; Miller & Rasco, 2004; Verelst et al., 2014b; Vindevogel, et al., 2012; Wessells & Monteiro, 2006). However, it is rather unclear whether daily stressors are of greater impact in girls’ lives in post-conflict contexts, compared to the lives of male adolescents.

The great impact of war and armed conflicts onto individual adolescents’ wellbeing, and its broader impact on the social tissue in communities and societies (Derluyn, Vindevogel & De Haene, 2013) urges for a variety of interventions, both directed at individuals and at larger communities and societies. In this process of rebuilding societies in post-conflict contexts, processes of reconciliation between individuals and in larger communities and the entire society are increasingly regarded as a crucial strategy (Dwyer, 1999). Reconciliation has, amongst other conceptualizations, been defined as a social-psychological process that takes place within the minds of people, but may be generated by societal and/or institutional changes, overall aiming at changing destructive, violent and negative images and attitudes into peaceful and constructive ones (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004; Riesenfeld, 2008). In respect of this, traditional community ceremonies of reconciliation in northern Uganda, for example, have been widely used, particularly at the moment former child soldiers returned to their community, in an attempt to promote reconciliation at both the individual and community levels, through restoring mutual trust and confidence in all civilians (Latigo, 2008). These interventions were applied to the whole population, without any differentiation in relation to individual’s particular profile (gender, age, past experiences, current daily stressors etc.). However there is a general lack of knowledge on whether attitudes towards reconciliation indeed differ between particular groups in the population, and are associated with their war-related experiences and current daily stressors. In this study, we therefore aim at assessing the reconciliation attitudes of adolescents living in the post-conflict context of Northern Uganda, with a particular aim to compare the reconciliation attitudes of girls and boys, given their presumed different background of war-related experiences and their different current living situation in terms of daily social and economic stressors.

5.2 Methods

5.2.1 Study setting and sample

The study was approved by the Ugandan National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), the Ethical Committee of Ghent University, and local leaders (Resident District Commissioner, sub-county chiefs, Local Council chairpersons and the head teachers of the schools involved).

Four hundred forty-four adolescents, both school-going and out-of-school youths, originating from two communities in Otuke district, Northern Uganda, were included in
the study. For the school-going adolescents, the study was carried out in the secondary schools in each community. In these schools, all 13- till 21-years old pupils who were available at the time of the study were involved. Additionally, out-of-school adolescents who met the inclusion criteria (aged between 13 and 21 years, and living in one of the two targeted communities) were selected. Prospective participants were mobilized and directed to the data collection centers identified within the communities. Of all 445 participants, male participants were 277 (62.2%), while 168 (37.8%) were female adolescents; generally, no important social and demographic differences were found between the two groups (table 1).

### Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Total group</strong> (n=445)</th>
<th><strong>Females</strong> (n=168)</th>
<th><strong>Males</strong> (n=277)</th>
<th>χ²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father’s status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alive</td>
<td>284 (64.0)</td>
<td>100 (35.2)</td>
<td>184 (64.8)</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>160 (36.0)</td>
<td>68 (42.5)</td>
<td>92 (57.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alive</td>
<td>354 (79.7)</td>
<td>133 (37.6)</td>
<td>221 (62.4)</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>90 (20.3)</td>
<td>35 (38.9)</td>
<td>55 (61.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (Mean; SD)</td>
<td>17.01 (1.89)</td>
<td>16.88 (1.85)</td>
<td>17.14 (1.90)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four local research assistants who were trained for three days in questionnaire administration techniques helped with the questionnaires administration. The study objectives were explained to the participants, and they were given assurance about the study’s anonymity and to withdraw freely at any time during the study if they chose to do so. Participants were also informed that clinical psychiatric officers and medical doctors at Lira Regional Referral Hospital were available to provide psychological or medical support if need arose. Written informed consent was obtained from each of the participants, and thereafter, they completed, under supervision of the research assistants, self-report questionnaires. Participants who could neither read nor write had research assistants privately read out the questionnaires and record the responses they gave.

### 5.2.2 Measures

First, a series of closed questions was used to assess socio-demographic characteristics. Second, war-related experiences were measured using Stressful War Events (SWE) questionnaire (Derluyn, Mels & Broekaert, 2009). The instrument is a list of 17 items, and was used among war-affected adolescents in northern Uganda, and includes items referring to a specific war-related traumatic event, such as “Did you experience the death of a loved one?” The respondent is asked to show whether or not each of the events listed happened to him/her by ticking either “yes” or “no” options provided...
in the questionnaire. The cumulative sum of “yes” or “no” marked gives the measure of exposure to war related experiences.

Third, the Adolescent Complex Emergency Daily Stressors Scale (ACEDSS) (Mels et al., 2010) was used to assess the daily stressors the adolescents experienced. The questionnaire asks participants to indicate whether or not they experienced 17 different items related to every-day stressors (e.g. lack of food and medical care, forced marriage rejection by family).

Last, a self-report instrument (The Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire – Adam, 2006) was used to measure the readiness to reconcile in adolescents. The instrument was used among former child soldiers in Uganda (Bayer, Klasen & Adam, 2007). Participants were instructed to think of the person or group of persons that caused harm to them or to their families during and, or after the war as they gave answers to the questions. The total score includes 33 items with four subscales testing the following dimensions: goodwill (8 items, e.g.: “I can sympathize with the enemy”); avoidance (8 items, e.g. “I would never talk with the adversary”); revenge (8 items e.g. “I’ll pay the opponents one day”); and future orientation (9 items, e.g.: “I try to focus on the future”). The items are given in a likert-scale format consisting of 5 responses (“1” not correct; “2” a little correct; “3” moderately correct; “4” very correct and “5” extremely correct). For the overall scale, the items of the Revenge and Avoidance subscales are reversed.

5.2.3 Analyses

Differences between gender characterizes were analyzed with χ²- and independent samples t-tests. Four hierarchical linear regression models were carried out to analyze possible associations between a series of independent variables (with measures of the four sub-scales of the Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire (‘goodwill attitudes’, ‘positive attitudes towards the future’, ‘attitudes of avoidance’ and ‘attitudes of revenge’) being the dependent variables; while father’s status (alive or dead), mother’s status (alive or dead), age, total number of daily stressors (ACCEDS) and total number of war-related stressors (SWE) being the independent variables. Further, all two-ways interaction effects between gender and the other independent variables were included. For each of the four reconciliation attitudes, a model with all independent variables, except gender, was defined as a first step; secondly, gender and all two-ways interaction effects with gender were added. Factors were effect-coded. R 2.14.1 software was used to conduct all analyses (R Core Team, 2012), and alpha was set at .05.
### 5.3 Results

**Table 2:** Stressful war-related experiences (SWE) of adolescents by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Total group</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>$\chi^2/t$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death of a loved one</td>
<td>404 (90.8)</td>
<td>161(95.3)</td>
<td>243(87.7)</td>
<td>6.35**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful separation from family</td>
<td>282 (63.4)</td>
<td>131 (78.0)</td>
<td>151 (54.5)</td>
<td>23.9***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in IDP camp</td>
<td>320 (71.9)</td>
<td>129 (76.3)</td>
<td>191 (69.0)</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in captivity</td>
<td>189 (42.5)</td>
<td>68 (40.5)</td>
<td>121 (53.3)</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnessing violence against others</td>
<td>312 (70.1)</td>
<td>118 (70.2)</td>
<td>194 (70.0)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of violence</td>
<td>190 (42.7)</td>
<td>76 (45.2)</td>
<td>114 (41.2)</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced to commit violence</td>
<td>166 (37.3)</td>
<td>59 (35.1)</td>
<td>107 (38.6)</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of food and water</td>
<td>359 (80.7)</td>
<td>137 (81.5)</td>
<td>222 (80.1)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of education</td>
<td>343 (77.1)</td>
<td>136 (81.0)</td>
<td>207 (74.7)</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of medical care</td>
<td>379 (85.2)</td>
<td>135 (80.4)</td>
<td>244 (80.1)</td>
<td>4.23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of jobs and income</td>
<td>358 (80.4)</td>
<td>134 (79.8)</td>
<td>224 (80.7)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wounded or disabled</td>
<td>241 (54.2)</td>
<td>96 (57.1)</td>
<td>145 (52.3)</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life on streets</td>
<td>186 (41.8)</td>
<td>82 (40.8)</td>
<td>104 (37.5)</td>
<td>4.84*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of LRA rebels</td>
<td>380 (85.4)</td>
<td>147 (87.5)</td>
<td>233 (84.1)</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of not being accepted</td>
<td>259 (58.2)</td>
<td>101 (60.1)</td>
<td>158 (57.0)</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for other children</td>
<td>225 (50.6)</td>
<td>93 (55.4)</td>
<td>132 (47.7)</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other stressful events</td>
<td>166 (37.3)</td>
<td>161 (95.8)</td>
<td>276 (99.6)</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of war-related events¹</strong></td>
<td>10.74 (3.86)</td>
<td>11.04 (3.81)</td>
<td>10.43 (3.90)</td>
<td>-1.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N(%) answering “yes” to a particular item according to gender; †mean (SD)

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
Table 3: Exposure of female and male adolescents to current daily stressors (ACEDSS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total group</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>χ²/t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of insecurity</td>
<td>382 (85.8)</td>
<td>152 (90.5)</td>
<td>230 (83.0)</td>
<td>4.81*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with school fees</td>
<td>382 (85.8)</td>
<td>147 (87.5)</td>
<td>235 (84.8)</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate food</td>
<td>357 (80.2)</td>
<td>139 (82.7)</td>
<td>218 (78.7)</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate clothing</td>
<td>381 (85.6)</td>
<td>151 (89.9)</td>
<td>230 (83.0)</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness in family</td>
<td>391 (87.9)</td>
<td>153 (91.1)</td>
<td>238 (85.9)</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of care</td>
<td>360 (80.9)</td>
<td>139 (82.7)</td>
<td>221 (79.8)</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry about family</td>
<td>366 (82.2)</td>
<td>148 (88.1)</td>
<td>218 (78.7)</td>
<td>5.69*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much work</td>
<td>320 (71.9)</td>
<td>130 (77.2)</td>
<td>190 (68.6)</td>
<td>3.77*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment</td>
<td>273 (61.3)</td>
<td>116 (69.0)</td>
<td>157 (56.7)</td>
<td>7.56**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others talking ill of you &amp; family</td>
<td>334 (75.1)</td>
<td>134 (79.8)</td>
<td>200 (72.2)</td>
<td>3.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discriminated against</td>
<td>272 (61.1)</td>
<td>107 (63.7)</td>
<td>165 (61.0)</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persecution by bad spirits</td>
<td>195 (43.8)</td>
<td>88 (52.4)</td>
<td>107 (38.6)</td>
<td>7.49***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling abandoned by family</td>
<td>171 (38.4)</td>
<td>69 (41.1)</td>
<td>102 (36.8)</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling abandoned by society</td>
<td>155 (34.8)</td>
<td>63 (37.5)</td>
<td>92 (33.2)</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced into marriage</td>
<td>124 (27.9)</td>
<td>61 (36.3)</td>
<td>63 (22.7)</td>
<td>8.91***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know father</td>
<td>128 (28.8)</td>
<td>63 (37.5)</td>
<td>65 (23.5)</td>
<td>9.64***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement with family</td>
<td>137 (30.8)</td>
<td>60 (35.7)</td>
<td>77 (27.8)</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total number of daily stressors | 10.64 (4.16) | 11.50 (3.83) | 10.14 (4.27) | -3.36*** |

N(%) answering “yes” to a particular item; †mean (SD)

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Little differences were found in war-related experiences between girls and boys, except for forceful separation from family, death of a loved one, lack of medical care and living on the streets, with higher reports from girls (table 2). In contrast, girls reported a significant higher total number of daily stressors, with, amongst others, higher reports of being forced into marriage, being unaware of their father’s identity, and more experiences of punishment (table 3).
### Table 4: Female and male participants’ reconciliation attitudes (goodwill, future orientation, avoidant, and revenge attitudes) as measured by the Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total group (n=444)</th>
<th>Females (n=214)</th>
<th>Males (n=231)</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goodwill</td>
<td>21.54 (7.23)</td>
<td>22.35 (7.49)</td>
<td>21.06 (7.01)</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future orientation</td>
<td>20.20 (6.82)</td>
<td>20.86 (6.96)</td>
<td>19.54 (6.68)</td>
<td>0.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>13.97 (7.15)</td>
<td>14.85 (7.42)</td>
<td>13.09 (6.87)</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>11.24 (8.23)</td>
<td>11.51 (8.32)</td>
<td>10.96 (8.14)</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean (SD)

*p < .05

Overall, female and male adolescents showed no significant differences in their reconciliation attitudes, except for the subscale of future orientation with female adolescents showing a slightly more positive future orientation than their male counterparts (Table 4).

### Table 5: Factors impacting reconciliation attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Goodwill attitudes</th>
<th>Future attitudes</th>
<th>Avoidance attitudes</th>
<th>Revenge attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>15.24 (3.38)***</td>
<td>13.69 (3.24)***</td>
<td>0.39 (3.24)</td>
<td>0.75 (3.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s status</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.39)</td>
<td>-0.22 (0.37)</td>
<td>-0.86 (0.37)*</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s status</td>
<td>0.76 (0.45)</td>
<td>0.30 (0.43)</td>
<td>0.46 (0.43)</td>
<td>0.47 (0.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.10 (0.20)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.19)</td>
<td>0.31 (0.19)</td>
<td>0.26 (0.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEDSS</td>
<td>0.18 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.16 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.40 (0.10)***</td>
<td>0.46 (0.12)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE</td>
<td>0.30 (0.10)***</td>
<td>0.24 (0.10)*</td>
<td>0.38 (0.10)***</td>
<td>0.12 (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.96 (3.38)</td>
<td>1.08 (3.24)</td>
<td>-0.70 (3.24)</td>
<td>-4.71 (3.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s status*Gender</td>
<td>0.23 (0.39)</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.37)</td>
<td>-0.44 (0.37)</td>
<td>-0.75 (0.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s status*Gender</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.45)</td>
<td>-0.08 (0.43)</td>
<td>0.50 (0.43)</td>
<td>0.83 (0.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age*Gender</td>
<td>-0.15 (0.20)</td>
<td>-0.16 (0.19)</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.19)</td>
<td>0.23 (0.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEDSS*Gender</td>
<td>0.17 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.15 (0.10)</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE*Gender</td>
<td>0.05 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.19 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.09 (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.06***</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$ total</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

β(SE)

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Four hierarchical regression models (method: enter) with ‘goodwill attitudes’, ‘positive attitudes towards the future’, ‘attitudes of avoidance’ and ‘attitudes of revenge’ (Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire) as dependent variables; and father’s status (alive or dead), mother’s status (alive or dead), age, daily stressors (ACEDSS), war-related stressors (SWE) and gender, with interaction terms between father’s status and gender, mother’s status and gender, age and gender, daily stressors and gender, and war-related stressor and gender as independent variables were fit.
However, in the regression analyses (table 5), the impact of gender was not withheld, and overall, little impact was found of the included independent variables (demographic characteristics, war-related and daily stressors) on the participants’ reconciliation attitudes. However, clearly important associations were noted for daily stressors with avoidance and revenge attitudes, and for war-related stressors with avoidance, goodwill attitudes and positive attitudes towards the future; the more daily stressors experienced, the more avoidance and revenge attitudes reported, and the more war-related stressors recorded, the more goodwill and positive future orientation attitudes reported.

5.4 Discussion

This study compared the reconciliation attitudes of girls and boys living in the post-conflict context of Northern Uganda, taking into account presumed gender-specific differences in their experiences relating to war-related events and to current living situation in terms of daily social and economic stressors. Although girls in the study reported higher numbers of daily stressors compared to the boys, the findings showed that there was little difference in war-related experiences of girls and boys, as already noted by previous findings (e.g., Annan et al., 2011; Betancourt et al., 2011). Despite the overall high levels of reconciliation attitudes shown by the study participants, there were no important differences in the reconciliation attitudes of girls and boys. One hypothesis could be that the participants all had similar access to participate in diverse psychosocial support interventions aimed at normalizing systems and structures such as, schooling, promotion of cultural rites and events, re-establishment of social networks, skills and vocational training, family supports, reintegration programs, provision of material support (e.g., Annan et al., 2006; MacMullin & Loughry, 2004), and to interventions to promote reconciliation such as traditional cleansing and reconciliation rites (e.g., Boothby, 2006; Latigo, 2008). These interventions possibly not only directly enhance positive attitudes towards reconciliation, but can also indirectly lead to more positive reconciliation attitudes, as they may enhance adolescents’ psychosocial wellbeing, and a better psychosocial wellbeing is known to being associated with more positive reconciliation attitudes. Additionally, it is now known that suffering troubling experiences by girls (e.g. rape) was not only associated with negative consequences, but above that, with positive outcomes in form of prosocial behavior and confidence building (Betancourt et al., 2010b) probably due to the development of resourcefulness and agency needed to respond to harsh treatment and to counteract stigma within the community (Betancourt et al., 2010c).

In contrast with the absence of gender differences, the study findings indicated that war-related stressors were positively associated with avoidance, goodwill attitudes and positive attitudes towards the future. Other studies found similar associations between war-related stressors and avoidance (e.g., Bayer et al., 2007; Horowitz, 2007; Orth, Montada & Maercker, 2006; Thabet, Tischler & Vostanis, 2004). The finding of
association of war-related stressors with positive (goodwill and future) reconciliation attitudes agrees with previous study results in northern Uganda showing that despite the presence of severe trauma, children were still able to display high average scores of positive future orientation (Klasen et al., 2010). Besides various studies have linked exposure to stressors with the development of positive gain and growth in victims (e.g., Linley & Joseph, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Other studies suggested that when faced with stressors (e.g. traumatic experiences), people became resilient (e.g., Bonanno, 2004; Waysman, Schwarzwald & Solomon, 2001). Additionally other studies found that mere exposure to war-related stressors did not necessarily increase the level of hostility in formerly abducted youth (Annan, Brier & Aryemo, 2009; Blattman & Annan, 2010). These studies suggest that exposure to war-related stressors might, contrary to what would be expected, promote positive attitudes towards self and others, including reconciliation attitudes.

Further, as with war-related stressors, the findings showed that experiencing daily stressors by the children was positively associated with negative reconciliation attitudes of avoidance and revenge. Past studies in post-war settings have associated daily stressors with psychological distress including depression, anxiety, PTSD (Rassmusen et al., 2010), which are in their turn known to being linked with attitudes of revenge and avoidance (Bayer et al., 2007). It has been found that in such post-conflict settings (such as northern Uganda) traumatized adolescents exhibited and used more avoidant coping strategies than those less traumatized (e.g., Bal et al., 2003).

5.4.1 Implications

The study findings indicated that there was no difference in the reconciliation attitudes held by girls and boys despite the large differences found in exposure to daily stressors (with girls reporting more daily stressors). Post-conflict interventions however need to address this disproportionate distribution of the burden of daily stressors by gender, through for example, awareness campaign on the need to treat girls and boys equally. There is also need for intervention programs in post-conflict settings to focus on individualized psychosocial interventions in order to address the negative reconciliation attitudes of avoidance and revenge that persists in young people due to the problems arising from the stressors experienced daily in their lives caused or worsened by the conflict.

5.4.2 Limitations

This study was based on self-report of the participants, which might have introduced some biases in the responses got. Secondly, we did not have information on the mental health conditions of the participants, which might have been related to the avoidance and revenge attitudes that girls and boys seemed to harbor. Third, the study was limited to children living in post-conflict northern Uganda, which might present a unique situation that hinders generalization to other war-affected populations.
Acknowledgements

We want to thank all who willingly accepted to participate in this study. This study was carried out with the financial support of the Belgian Technical Cooperation and of VLIR-UOS via the HEFS Platform Harvest Call (ZIUS2013VOA0902).

References


Gender differences in reconciliation attitudes amongst war-affected adolescents in Northern Uganda

International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University.


Chapter 6

Reconciliation and reconciliation programs: experiences and views of war-affected adolescents in post-conflict Northern Uganda

Abstract

Today, more than ever, armed conflict perpetuators capitalize on the resourcefulness of young people to achieve their aims leading to young people's involvement in armed conflicts as 'child soldiers', and exposing them to adverse problems including broken relationships with their own families or communities against whom they might have committed (forcibly or otherwise) serious crimes. Consequently when the conflict ends, or the young people manage to return home they are faced with enormous challenge of reintegrating within the communities the transgressed against, an issue which calls for reconciliation. However what reconciliation means from the perspective of those who had to go through it, and what post-conflict programing should do for them is not clear. This study, employing in-depth case study approach, sought to increase current understanding of reconciliation and reconciliation programs by examining the views of formerly abducted children themselves, relatives and key informants, drawing from their lived experiences in the context of post-conflict Northern Uganda.
6.1 Introduction

Today, more than ever, armed conflict perpetuators capitalize on the energy, resourcefulness, enthusiasm and innovation of young people to achieve their aims (Mac-Ikemenjima, 2008). As a consequence, young people's involvement in armed conflicts, as so-called 'child soldier,' remains prevalent with more than 4,000 cases documented by the United Nations in 2013 alone, but thousands more children are estimated to have been recruited and used (UN, 2014). The consequences of exposing young people to war and armed conflicts are many, and include, amongst others, adverse medical, psychological and economic problems (e.g., Albertyn et al., 2003; Bayer, Klasen & Adam, 2007; Betancourt & Kahn, 2008; Derluyn et al., 2004; Francis, 2007; Kienzler, 2008; Okello, Onen & Musisi, 2007; Ovuga, Oyok & Moro, 2008). Moreover, they may have particular social problems, such as broken relationships with the families or communities where they come from, particularly when they have committed serious crimes against own family or community members during the armed conflict (Pham, Vinck & Stover, 2009). These problems, and in particular the social difficulties, render it challenging, once the conflict has come to an end, to reintegrate these former child soldiers back into their family and community, and to live peacefully in the communities they've potentially hurt (Pham et al., 2007).

In Uganda, for example, during the war between the rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government that lasted over 20 years, between 25,000 to 38,000 children and young adolescents were abducted by the LRA (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Pham et al., 2008), and had to become part of the rebels (Annan, Blattman & Horton, 2006; Beber & Blattman, 2008; Brett, 2002; Corbin, 2008; McKay & Mazurana, 2004). While in abduction, the children committed (forcefully or otherwise) many atrocities, including atrocities against other abducted children and against members of their own family or community, through raiding, burning villages, looting and killing (Pham et al., 2007). Often, the rebels enforced these acts upon them in a deliberate effort to breaking the bonds between the abducted children and their own people (Amone-P'Olak, 2004). Consequently, when the children escaped or were released or rescued, they experienced great difficulties to return to cohabitate with the people against whom they had committed grievous atrocities (Pham et al., 2009), and many of these children are facing threats of reprisal attacks and possible rejection by family and community (Verelst et al., 2014; Vindevogel et al., 2013; Wessells, 2009).

Due to problems of reintegration faced by formerly abducted children (FAC) upon return to their communities, traditional cleansing and healing rituals have been an important part of trying to promote the reintegration processes (Awodola, 2012; Betancourt et al., 2008; Latigo, 2008; Muldoon, et al., 2014; Stark, 2006), since such ceremonies are believed to reduce the stigma and isolation of youths by communities that think of them as 'contaminated' by their war experiences (Boothby, Crawford & Halperin, 2006; Keairns, 2003; Lamberg, 2004). These ceremonies are generally perceived to help in the repair of social relationships of former child soldiers with families and communities, by
increasing the sense of acceptance of the child soldier by the family and community, by reducing the sense of guilt and shame over past misdeeds, and the ceremonies also represent a form of protection for community members who have fear of the returned child soldier (e.g., Boothby, 2006; Muldoon et al., 2014; Wessells, 2009). In most cases, the ceremonies are also believed to bring reconciliation between communities and their members who contravened cultural norms (Boothby, 2006; Latigo, 2008).

However, reconciliation is a difficult concept to define, since it takes on varying meanings according to a diversity of situations (Bloomfield, 2003). A general trend in literature seems to suggest that the concept of reconciliation refers to restoration of broken relationships amongst people as a result of conflicts (e.g., Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004; Bloomfield, 2003, 2006; Lederach, 2001; Hamber & Kelly, 2004; McCandless, 2001). Hereby, reconciliation is considered as a dynamic interpersonal and dyadic process (Mukashema & Mullet, 2013; Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Worthington, 2005) which refers to the act of two people (or groups) coming together following separation/conflict (Enright, 2001). However, for lay people (outside academia), the concept of reconciliation is often tied up with a bigger concept, that of forgiveness (Kantz, 2000). The process of rebuilding broken trust at times requires coming together emotionally, giving apologies, and sharing expressions of sorrow and forgiveness (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; Latigo, 2008).

There is much that has been researched about the (mental) health and experiences of former child soldiers in post-conflict Northern Uganda (e.g., Amone-P’Olak, 2004, 2005; Bayer et al., 2007; Derluyn et al., 2004), about their experiences in rehabilitation centres upon their return (e.g., Allen & Schomerus, 2006), and on their reintegration processes and social experiences (e.g., Annan, Brier & Aryemo, 2009; Corbin, 2008; Vindevogel et al., 2013). However, there is little, if any, data on their experiences of reconciliation from their own perspectives. Moreover, there is increasing concern about the efficacy of reconciliation programs (such as traditional cleansing and other reconciliation programs) that are often meant to enhance smooth and effective reintegration of former child soldiers within their communities (Allen & Schomerus, 2006). This study, employing an in-depth case study approach, therefore adds to our current understanding of reconciliation and reconciliation programs through examining the lived experiences of formerly abducted children themselves in the context of post-conflict Northern Uganda. Additionally, to supplement the views of the formerly abducted children for better understanding, the study incorporated the views of the relatives of the formerly abducted children who went through the reconciliation experiences with them, completed with the views of key figures working with reconciliation programs in the research area.
6.2 Methods

6.2.1 Participants

A holistic, single case study approach was pursued in order to include the context of the formerly abducted children and their experiences, through incorporating the views and lived experiences of multiple individuals in one environment (Yin, 2003). This means that we aimed at having three case studies in our study, with in each case study one formerly abducted child and two or three significant others out of his/her context, as identified by the child him-/herself (family member, friend, neighbor).

We used a networking approach to identify potential participants from the population in the geographical area of Adwari sub-county, Otuke district, Northern Uganda. We chose this sub-county because it had a program aimed at, amongst other things, supporting the reintegration processes of former abductees, through enhancing their psychosocial wellbeing, education and health, and also aimed at supporting sustainable long-term peace-building processes through reconciliation initiatives (Idraku, 2011).

Elected community leaders were approached, and we explained them the reasons for the study, and the characteristics of the people required to participate. Their permission to carry out the study was obtained, and they were asked to help in identifying potential candidates for the study within their communities. Three formerly abducted children – one female and two males – were identified based on the inclusion criteria (being formerly abducted youth, having been in abduction for a duration longer than 3 months, having been a beneficiary of a reconciliation program, and being a resident of Adwari sub-county in Otuke district, Northern Uganda).

The formerly abducted children who were identified through this process were then in turn asked to inform relatives (parents, siblings, spouses, cousins, etc.) or neighbors who met the criteria for inclusion the study (being present at the time when the FAC returned from captivity, and having witnessed or participated in the reconciliation process of the concerned FAC) about the study and its aims. The study team, using the criteria for inclusion and depending on the time schedule and availability of the participants, made the final selection about the participants being included in the study.

All the FAC lived with their parents or close relatives (parents, uncle or aunt). Immediately after return, two of the FAC were enrolled at a local rehabilitation center (Rachele Rehabilitation Centre in Lira) for a range of one week to one year. One returned directly home and did not go to the rehabilitation center. Next to the three FAC, seven relatives of FAC, were interviewed (table 1). Additionally, we interviewed two key informants to obtain more information about the reconciliation programs that had taken place in the past, a government administrative officer and a social worker who worked with one of the organizations promoting reconciliation programs in this area.

The study participants consisted of formerly abducted children and their relatives (Table 1).
Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study</th>
<th>Name of respondent</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age (yrs)</th>
<th>Duration of abduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>FAC 1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother of FAC 1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neighbor of FAC 1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>FAC 2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6m 2weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aunt of FAC 2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncle of FAC 2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>FAC 3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother of FAC 3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father of FAC 3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cousin to FAC 3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Key Informant 1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Key Informant 2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NA: Not Applicable

6.2.2 Study procedure

Once a potential participant was identified, further information was given about the study. Those who felt able to participate arranged a convenient time and venue to meet with the study team. An explanation of what the study was about, how it would be conducted, and the freedom of the participant to refuse participation at any moment of the study was given in form of a written document which subsequently was signed as proof of informed consent to participate in the study.

All the participants were interviewed individually, typically in places removed from other members of the family and community to ensure that their responses were original and not biased by suggestions from other people. The interviews were semi-structured, including questions about biographical data, background information regarding return from captivity, meaning of reconciliation for participants (benefits, what promotes and bars reconciliation), and types and processes of reconciliation programs. Each interview lasted on average for two hours. The majority of the participants could not communicate in English, and a translator, knowledgeable in the local Luo language (Lango) was present during the interviews. Only two participants (key informants) preferred to be interviewed in English. Interviews were tape-recorded, and literally transcribed by a person well versed with Lango language. Later, the transcripts were translated into English by another person and finally analyzed.
6.2.3 Data analysis

All transcribed interviewees were first read carefully in order to identify themes that might emerge out of the interviews, independently from the interview guide questions. An organizing framework for the identified themes that emerged, inter-linking the themes with each other in a manner that seemed most logical, was discerned and used to weave the themes together. Individual responses were then fitted under these distinct themes. The interviews from every case study were analyzed together, as a unit, and then possible comparisons over the three case studies were made.

6.2.4 Ethical considerations

Approval for the study was obtained from the Ethical Committee of Ghent University, the Ugandan National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), and local leaders of the study locality (Resident District Commissioner, sub-county chief, and Local Council chairpersons). Potential participants were provided with written information and verbal explanations before the study began, and were requested to sign a consent form. All respondents were reassured that they could change their minds about participating or not at any time, without any adverse consequence. At the start of each interview, requests for consent to use a tape recorder and write down notes were made and obtained. If needed, referrals were made to further follow-up in terms of extra support or guidance.

6.3 Results

The findings are presented around four major themes; reconciliation as forgiveness and forgetting, strategies used to achieve reconciliation, the effects of using such a strategy on both the community members and the FAC, and the role of organizations in promoting reconciliation in the community.

6.3.1 Reconciliation as forgiveness and forgetting

When asked to explain what reconciliation meant for them, several respondents reported that reconciliation refers to forgiveness, reconciliation is “to forgive one who does wrong”.

“Reconciliation is when someone has wronged you, and he comes to ask for forgiveness from you, and you have to forgive that person and forget the wrong he has done to you.” (Relative of FAC)

“It is freeing all you had [kept] in your heart. This I learnt from my childhood, in my life, I didn't like people to have conflicts, (...) and that made me grow up knowing that forgiveness is there as part of our life, even in my work as Local Chief, you know
people we lead are very stubborn, even if you abuse me like anything, and later come for help, I forgive you and help you just the way I help others, and this makes them [the people forgiven] come back alone and ask for forgiveness, I forgive them and we get reconciled.” (Relative of FAC).

For several participants, reconciliation, besides being linked with forgiveness, was also associated with forgetting the past painful experiences, avoiding thinking of them, accepting the perpetrator as who they are, and moving on positively focusing onto the future.

“Reconciliation…., it is leaving what you see that is not good in your life, forgetting the past that brings pain in your heart, and looking at your enemy as your friend, as if he doesn't have any problems with you.” (FAC).

“Reconciliation is like those days when I had just come back from the bush and people would complain about me that I was keeping quiet most of the time, and it looked [to them] like I had killed somebody when still in the bush there. Although I may have killed somebody, even if people say so, I don't take it in heart [because] I know that that person does not know what happened. I don't take it personal. I still talk to them and release them in my heart, forget about it.” (FAC)

Interestingly in this quote is also that this FAC saw reconciliation as forgetting and forgiving what other people did wrong to him, whereby he considered himself as the victim and others as the victimizers.

For another respondent, reconciliation is something done by the person who has been hurt, that is to stop thinking about it and forget.

“Reconciliation is what you do to someone who has hurt you, you stop thinking about what that person did to you, and, if possible, you forget it.” (Relative of FAC).

6.3.2 Strategies used to achieve reconciliation

In order to achieve reconciliation, here understood as forgiveness and forgetting, the respondents mentioned several strategies: traditional cleansing rituals, prayers and religious ceremonies, offering material and educational support, and silencing.

All the FAC reported going through some form of traditional cleansing rituals upon their return from captivity. The most commonly reported type of ritual was the “stepping on fowl eggs” (nyono tong gweno) ceremony, meant for cleansing and healing the individual from evils believed to be associated with bad experiences, such as abduction, and resulted in reconciling him with the community. Several relatives of FAC reported that these traditional rituals performed for the FAC were important:

“I did them and I believe they brought change in my life. I was able to forgive others, peace came back to my life and there was change in my life since I had a settled mind, and had a strong heart (courage) in that house (when sleeping together with him), and was able to stop him from fighting, all these I believe as a result of the rituals performed.” (Mother)
Another respondent thought that the traditional rituals helped to remove fear that the community have of the FAC. Below she described what happened immediately after the ritual was performed on her son and what it meant for her.

“I showed him to the people and they were happy and made shouts of joy, the fear from their eyes had gone as they saw a new person in him. They started greeting him with joy, and this was very comforting for me, as I had mourned for my child whom I believed was dead. This greeting was a sign of support for me, the love they had for me was also given to my son, I had mourned for long, it was meant to calm me down in peace.” (Mother of FAC)

However there were also opposing views from some respondents suggesting that the traditional rituals were not helpful for the FAC:

“I don’t really understand why it was performed, but after it, nothing happened. It is not helpful, because you remain as you are, nothing new happens to your life… It is only prayers that can help that person, but not that thing. Even the words said during the ritual, what they say, I think, it does nothing, it doesn’t change you.” (Aunt)

Another respondent even believed these rituals might possibly be harmful to the FAC, although to some members of the community they could be beneficial.

“I cannot know if it [the ritual] has brought some change, that I don’t understand. […..] This ritual may be beneficial in the life of some of the community members here, since it is the way they welcome these children. However to the new generation, it made them more confused, and for a traumatized child, like [this one], she was scared, as the rites have got some scaring situations: at some stage, they slaughter animals on the victim, and use spears to simulate the act of killing, when rebuking the spirits of the dead who may be hovering around the person. The sight of blood alone may trigger their [the children's] bad memories, that is why she was very scared. To me, this is not in order. (…) It brings peace to those who have belief in it, and to those who do not, it may be meaningless.” (Relative of FAC)

For the FAC themselves, the significance of the rituals were rather unclear, and they felt as being culturally imposed onto them.

“I knew they were performing some cultural ritual on me, but I didn’t understand what it was all about.” (FAC).

One FAC expressed that he went through the traditional ritual, but only because he was asked to do so:

“Okay, it [the ritual] happened to me on the day I returned home. I found that they had put an egg on the way. That happened [while still in Lira] town. It looks like they had talked about it earlier. So when they saw me arrive, they told me to step on it, and pass on to the home. I did as instructed. That is all I did.” (FAC).

When probed further if he tried to ask somebody to explain the ritual, he explained how he understood the ritual and what is really important to him as a person:
“Now during that time, I was confused, but today, I just heard from the elders saying that even prisoners, when they come back home, they have to step on an egg. Once you have stepped on it, what happened to you in the past will not happen again. But I don’t I agree with them, I have seen about two to three people who were imprisoned, they came back, but did something bad later, and they were imprisoned again. So that is why I take it like something which is not true. What made me free was the way my mother and the home people came and visited me, [it] made me see that they [have] hope in me.” (FAC).

One informant indicated that he refused to take part in the ritual, but acknowledged it as being part of a certain cultural context:

“Now, personally I don’t understand those things [the traditional rituals], and I don’t believe in them. Okay, there are many rituals and beliefs that are here, when you are abducted as you come home, you must step on an egg, or they lay a spear down and you jump over [it] as you reach home. Not only as you come from the bush, if you have had [an] accident somewhere else, as you are coming home, you must not just walk home as usual, something has to be done to make you come back as a different person. But, personally, I don’t believe in it. It is the issue of the tribe I subscribe to, I am born to, but I don’t believe in them. Like one time I had an accident in Kampala. (…) I told them I was taken to hospital (…). When I was coming, I found different factions of thinking, now, let him step on [the egg]. (…) I told them, I am not part of that. They said, if you have not done it, you will again die soon. I told them: ‘Please, I am not about to die’, and I did not follow it [the ritual], and I am still around, and it is about four years ago. (…) In respect to those who were in captivity, and as they come home, they ask for those rituals to take place. First of all, I don’t think it is correct, me, I don’t believe it. However, for social corporate responsibility, when they come here (in the NGO), we give them a go ahead to go and practice it, because they believe in it, and I am telling you, if they don’t do it, they will remain with it in their head: that the reason things are happening in the home, the way it is happening, is because it was not done. So to treat their psychology, we always give them time to go [and perform the rites], (…) to them, it is necessary and useful, and they are subject to their thinking.” (Key informant).

Next to the traditional cleansing rituals, several respondents believed that religious rites in form of communal prayers were useful for healing and reconciliation of the individual FAC. The prayers were organized by the community, and the FAC participated in these:

“They [people at home] called for prayers and was led by father Q [a priest in a Christian church] who anointed me and blessed me [saying] that: ‘even if you have killed people, you should come back [and live] among people’.” (FAC)

For another FAC, mainly the prayers and talking words of wisdom from leaders during the traditional rituals were useful, rather than the traditional rituals themselves:

“(…) but to me in case of any ritual, the first thing should be prayer and after prayer
if there is any speech they may do so. The LC1 [elected community leader], clan leaders, elders of that home should also talk words of wisdom to people. After all their speeches, they can celebrate with eating the foods and drinks.” (FAC)

The prayers were not only used for reconciliation purposes, but also for psychological healing of the individual, and often supplemented or followed earlier executed traditional rituals. For example, the parents of a FAC who was experiencing disturbing dreams and flashbacks, and had participated in a traditional ritual but did not get better, turned their attention to prayers:

“The dream is there up to now. They are planning to call for a stronger Itogo [traditional exorcist] or for healing prayer group to pray for me.” (FAC)

A third strategy to achieve reconciliation (in terms of forgetting past adverse experiences) was the provision of material and educational support to the former child soldiers. According to the respondents, such support could be in form of skills training, communal income-generating projects, financial support to go to school, and provision of employment opportunities. This support was reported by both FAC and other respondents as necessary to help the FAC to forget the past experiences, and to concentrate on the present and future.

“You, the NGOs (referring to the investigating team), should also support them to do something [useful], or offer them employment opportunity to keep them busy to help them forget the past.” (Neighbor of FAC)

One respondent considered educational support and provision of gainful employment as necessary to facilitate the FAC in forgetting the past:

“The whole community should work in close collaboration with the government and formerly abducted children like [this child here], who are young children, and should be given educational support up to where they are able to reach. You, the NGOs, should also support them to do something [useful], or offer them employment opportunity to keep them busy to help them forget the past.” (Relative of FAC).

The support was considered as helpful to the FAC on an individual basis, but at the same time, it must enable them to become back again “as the others”, which then will make it easier for other community members to accept them and to forgive/forget.

“If I had success in some work that would make other people admire my way of life, that would make it easy to forgive. Another thing the government should do is train people in skills, this training teaches how to solve problems, live with people, to enable the community to develop the heart of calling people for reconciliation.” (FAC)

Related here, another strategy commonly reported to promote reconciliation as forgetting is to silence and disregard past aversive experiences. According to several participants, silence and disregard of what other people are saying or doing are helpful
for the FAC to forget their past painful experiences. One FAC recounted the following, when asked what should be done to have reconciliation:

“We should remove our heart from the past, so that even if someone is talking about it, we should not listen to them.” (FAC)

Another respondent narrated from his own experience and action that FAC could be protected against community stigmatization by keeping them away from public scrutiny:

“To help her heal, we advised her father to take her to a different place where she is not known very well. We tried our best to keep her information confidential, and we did not tell people that she returned from the bush, and advised her brothers to do the same to avoid other people from insulting her. From that time, we stopped telling people the story of her life. This stopped people from talking about her, since they did not know anything about her. (Relative of FAC)

Similarly, another respondent reported that she often used to talk to one of the FAC ignore people talking about her to help her improve relationship with them:

“I am very close to [name of FAC], so time and again I would talk to her about forgiveness, I would tell her that, ‘if something happened to you, people talk about you like they do about people who are HIV/AIDS infected, but you have to ignore them and try to forgive, don’t be aggressive, don’t fight them, there is no way you can stop people from talking about you.’” (Relative of FAC)

However, some respondents held contrary views, and explained that talking, rather than silencing, helped to bring good relationships (reconciliation) with other people. When asked what could be done to promote reconciliation, one FAC explained:

“I find that, sometimes what you would do to make you persuade them, and make them develop a good heart [so] that [they] can even [begin] living well with people and having a forgiving heart, is to have time and [to] keep going to the person who has pain in the heart. Keep talking to that person, but don’t talk too much; talk little and see his response.” (FAC).

6.3.3 Did strategies to promote reconciliation as forgetting work out?

Apparently the strategies worked only partially. Several respondents mentioned that, despite the traditional rituals or religious rites, still many community members feared FAC, leading to discrimination and stigmatization.

“Although I was given a good welcome, (…) some people started fearing being close to me, I only stayed with home people [relatives]. I felt lonely as my movements were restricted, yet I wanted to be with the people. (…). Even the civilians were afraid of me, they thought I was different from them, since I was a child soldier. I found myself staying alone and with my home people only;” (FAC)
Another FAC explained what happened to him in the community and school:

“Many people feared me, I was lonely and this made me to share a house with my mother (in Lango culture grown-up children do not share house with their parents). (…) The same thing happened when I went to join my father who was living with my stepmother, many people feared me and thought I would kill them since I was a rebel. (…) While in school, the same isolation happened to me, they had the same fear that sometimes the people who were abducted can do dangerous things, they can easily kill a person. So I had very few friends.” (FAC)

In support of this statement, his mother also reiterated the same experiences of people fearing her son:

“When he came back, many people feared him and were not free with him, especially at night, they were afraid he could kill them. (…) People were afraid of him because of the bad things he experienced from the bush, and the strange oil that he was smeared with while in rebel captivity. I am convinced he was cleansed, but I think many people were still afraid of him and feared he might harm them” (Mother of FAC).

“I was isolated and rejected by my people, except my mother who gave me all the support.” (FAC)

“Although I was given a good welcome, some people started talking about me and calling me names (…), they [also] call me ‘Kony’ (the name of the rebel leader) or ‘Ototong’ (literally, a person who cuts others) and every day they abuse me and ridicule me.” (FAC)

The FAC narrated how the fear, discrimination and stigma they felt from community members elicited anger and aggressive behavior in them, which further alienated them within the community. A mother explained what caused her son to become angry and behave aggressively:

“If someone annoys him when he goes somewhere (…), and they abuse him, he fights. Personally, when I hear this, I get worried. When he goes outside [home], he gets insulted from there. When he comes back home, angry sometimes, he transfers the anger on people from home here.” (Relative to FAC)

Some respondents however believed that the anger and aggression displayed by the FAC were related to other causes, such as mental illness and learning from their rebel captors in captivity. One respondent explained the following in relation to FAC anger and aggression:

“There are some people you see who seem to be calm with sound mental health, but anything can trigger their anger, and you find him or her running from the community (…). It is this mental illness, (…), that is why they suffer continuous nightmares and behave aggressively.” (Relative of FAC)
For another respondent, it is the change the FAC experienced in captivity that is responsible for their anger and aggression.

“Living in the bush is not easy, when she came back she had changed; she was aggressive and very irritable, but now she is somehow calm. Sometimes something little and trifle may trigger her anger and you will see her tears flowing. (...) Often she would respond to such bad talks by people by crying and sometimes with aggression, some time, she would wish to fight. I keep stopping her from fighting, I tell her: ‘don’t fight, don’t fight.” (Relative of FAC).

Thus the achievement of reconciliation seemed to have succeeded mainly on the community level as such, but individual members, including the formerly abducted children, did not feel completely reconciled as manifested by the presence of discrimination, stigmatization, fear and aggression. Hereby, their only coping method seemed to be to ‘silence’ their backgrounds as much as possible, however hereby ignoring their own possible needs to talk about their past.

6.3.4. Role of organizations in promoting reconciliation

The role of organizations in promoting reconciliation according to the respondents was to support the above-mentioned strategies (except the silencing): supporting the execution of the traditional rituals or religious prayers, and providing the FAC with material, economic and/or educational support.

First, one method of helping the reconciliation of FAC was the provision of material assistance to the communities to enable them to meet the costs of performing the traditional rituals:

“But as you know for reconciliation, it is a process (...), the communities and families of the returnees requested some ceremonies to be done. But as you know, these are vulnerable communities at times, they don’t have the facilitation to have the ceremonies done, so again as [an organization], we went ahead and supported these families to like buy some items to facilitate the process [rituals].” (Key informant).

Second, other organizations helped with reconciliation through promotion of religious rituals expressed in public prayers:

“Am also aware of Christian initiatives, for instance we had a grand prayer at our parish here in Aliwang, that brought also on board parents and the affected children, those who were abducted. We also had prayers with them here, they were also talked to - that was also an initiative by the parish, and all these were geared towards counseling these children and families that were affected.” (Informant).

Thirdly, skills training was cited as one of the important ways through which organizations sought to help FAC to build peace. Keeping FAC productive would make them become peaceful. One key informant narrated:
“So when they are playing a role, like some of them were training in apprenticeship, vocational thing [skills] and were given start up [capital], engaging in an activity,…, this alone for formerly abducted [children] is already a step towards peace-building.”

And also on a broader level, material, educational and/or economic support (in diverse ways) was considered as valuable to promote reconciliation in communities, and particularly between the FAC and environment:

“You know organizations have different cultures, they came with reconciliation teachings in different ways. [One] for instance, came with reconciliation by bringing people together and training them in different skills, and after training them, they gave them jobs, some were given carpentry and joinery skills, tailoring skills, and other organizations who came from Europe did not talk about religion, but taught people to stay in unity as a way to fight poverty.” (Relative of FAC)

6.4 Discussion

This study aimed at adding to the current body of knowledge about reconciliation and reconciliation programs through examining the views and lived experiences of formerly abducted children themselves and their relatives in the context of post-conflict Northern Uganda. The findings indicated that reconciliation was mainly understood by participants as “forgiveness” and “forgetting”. Despite the fact that available literature distinguishes between forgiveness and reconciliation (e.g., Enright, 2001; Wade & Worthington, 2005), this finding is consistent with numerous others establishing essential relationships between reconciliation and forgiveness, including that forgiveness increases reconciliation chances and vice-versa (Mukashema & Mullet, 2013), that reconciliation is an important part (Fincham, 2000; Kantz, 2000; Kearns & Fincham, 2004) or a necessary precondition for reconciliation (Williamson & Gonzales, 2007), or reconciliation is understood as a practical expression of forgiveness (Gibson, 2007), hence one and the same thing. These associations between reconciliation and forgiveness are based on the fact that forgiveness reduces negative emotions and avoidant behavior after an interpersonal offense (Luskin, 2002; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002), and thereby enables the development of more positive attitudes toward the other (offending) party (Zembylas, 2011). The vagueness surrounding the concepts of reconciliation and forgiveness for the participants can also be understood in light of the fact that for the people in Northern Uganda the words “forgiveness” and “reconciliation” seem not to be conceptually distinct as one word: “timó-kica” (doing/having mercy) refers both to “forgiving” or “reconciling”, or “amnesty”, and thus can be used for both concepts (Allen & Schomerus, 2006; Pham et al., 2007). Therefore, for the respondents, there can be no reconciliation without forgiveness. However, forgiveness implies sometimes suppressing one’s anger or resentment, which might potentially be hurtful psychologically (Saunders, 2011). On top, the silencing strategy as clearly reported by the former child soldiers in the study reinforces the repression of feelings of anger
associated with the widely reported experiences of stigmatization of the former child soldiers, and might lead to increased emotional problems such as anger that makes reconciliation difficult. Moreover, particularly Christian religious groups stress the inappropriateness and unacceptability of anger (Saunders, 2011), leading equally to increased silencing of particular feelings and emotions.

Secondly, the study findings show that participants also understood reconciliation as “forgetting”. Increasingly, studies are highlighting the importance of forgetting past experiences as a valuable resource for war-affected people to manage the dire memoires, fears, attitudes, and above all troubled relationships (Annan et al., 2009; Corbin, 2008; Veale & Stavrou, 2007). Moreover, it is suggested that forgetting brings relief from pain of the stigma associated with past child soldiering experiences and allows affected persons to become “like everyone else” in the society (Boothby, 2006).

Because of that, forgetting is therefore seen as one of the resources needed to help break with the past (Vindevogel et al., 2013). In this sense forgetting becomes an important prerequisite for reconciliation – the rebuilding of broken relationships and putting the past behind. However, in many African societies reconciliation is never complete without accountability and reparation, (Huyse & Salter, 2008; Latigo, 2008), and so in practice reconciliation as forgiving and forgetting might not be workable.

The respondents generally saw reconciliation as a unidirectional process in which the victim should “forget”, hereby contradicting available studies that mainly suggest that reconciliation is an interpersonal entity based on trust of the other (e.g., Mukashema & Mullet, 2013). Contrary to the other respondents’ view, only one responded saw reconciliation (forgetting) as a bi-directional process:

“According to me, I would say reconciliation should be a state where (...) I lose a bit and win a bit, somebody should lose a bit and win a bit. That I would call an appropriate reconciliation” (Informant)

The unidirectional understanding of reconciliation (forgetting) applied only to the formerly abducted children suggests that the formerly abducted children continue to blame themselves for what happened and do not realize that they were coerced into doing all the horrendous acts they performed. It might also mean that there were no engagements of the victims to reconcile with the formerly abducted children, some of whom inflicted hurt on them though forcefully.

Additionally, the findings indicate that the respondents employed various strategies to achieve the desired reconciliation, including traditional and religious rituals, provision of material and educational support, and the above-mentioned strategy of “silencing”. Studies show that traditional ceremonies, a form of highly accessible, non-focused specialized support (Wessells, 2009), are one of the most commonly used practices in reintegration programming (Muldoon et al., 2014), and serve the purposes of psycho-social reintegration, healing, and reconciliation with families. These traditional ceremonies make it possible for the formerly abducted children to forget past malignant experiences, and to get a second chance to live normal life (Boothby, 2006; Boothby et
al., 2006; Huyse & Salter, 2008; McKay & Mazurana 2004; Stark, 2006; Wessells, 2009), through increasing mutual acceptance between the community and the formerly abducted children (Awodola, 2012; Williamson, 2006). However, this view of traditional ceremonies as advancing or reconciliation leaves out the aspect of accountability (and justice), a key component of reconciliation processes (Allen, 2006, 2010; Porter 2012). Moreover, the traditional rituals tend to exclude young people who are regarded as culturally immature (Huyse & Salter, 2008) – which is supported by our finding that some respondents viewed the rituals as imposed and more of community rather than individual affair, and reported to have gone through them without full understanding of their implications.

Secondly, religious rituals, mainly in the form of public prayers, were also listed amongst the strategies of fostering reconciliation. As with traditional rituals, religion has been found to be one of the most important resources necessary for the reintegration of formerly abducted children (Vindevogel et al., 2014), since it gives meaning to experiences and provides prescriptions needed to cope with adverse situations (Laufer & Solomon, 2011; Wessells & Stang, 2006). However, religious rituals have been criticized for inducing feelings of guilt, and thus function to decrease the readiness to reconcile (Heim & Schaal, 2014). Additionally, religious rituals emphasize forgiving and forgetting, which might engender impaired self-esteem, encourage harmful forms of repression, and cause significant psychic distress (Saunders, 2011) that might militate against reconciliation.

The findings further show that provision of resources was yet another strategy that was indicated as enhancing reconciliation. Interestingly, and in contrast with the two other strategies mentioned before, this is mainly an ‘indirect’ form of reconciliation, although supporting the same overall idea of ‘forgetting’ (erasing, silencing). These resources, both material and non-material (e.g., education, knowledge and skills), are seen as valuable in helping former child soldiers to resume meaningful social roles in the community. So, through helping children to resume life after being associated with armed groups (becoming a ‘civilian’ again), it might be easier to reconcile (Annan et al., 2009; Veale & Stavrou, 2007; Vindevogel, et al., 2013).

The finding that ‘silencing’, or not talking about past grim experiences, has been indicated as one of the strategies to promote reconciliation finds support in previous research. It is suggested that it helps the affected children to avoiding retribution, future harm or stigma (e.g., Guterman, Cameron, & Staller, 2000), and to access (re)acceptance from the community (Annan et al., 2009; Annan et al., 2011; Denov, 2010; Shepler, 2005). Not talking of past experiences has also been seen as a necessary and effective adaptive coping skill for children, particularly with mental malaise in the absence of formal mental health or psychosocial support programs (Boothby, 2006). However, it has been pointed out that forcibly not talking or “forgetting” painful past experiences might cause problems, as some children really want or need to talk about their emotions and experiences, and/or might not be referred to appropriate psychosocial intervention if they and the community do not discuss their experiences and feelings (Corbin, 2008).
Although the formerly abducted children and the community seemed to use these strategies, our findings showed that the achievement of reconciliation was only partial, since fear and stigmatization still largely persisted in the community. One therefore could question whether these strategies and the NGO programs supporting these strategies have really worked, and thus whether we should not look for possible other strategies or interventions. In any case, post-conflict programs trying to promote reconciliation need to be informed by such understandings of reconciliation in their design and implementation. Hereby, it is equally important to understand the weaknesses of the community-held practices. Therefore, the importance of community (stake holders) consultation over what they want to achieve and how it should be achieved is necessary. A multi-pronged program design including community-wide and individual intervention strategies is called for to address past unwanted memories, reduce stigma and hostility and enhance forgiveness, and thus promote not only reconciliation within communities, but also between particular individuals.

6.4.1 Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted in view of several limitations that might have cropped in during its conduct. Although a skilled translator (a master's degree holder with over eight years' background in teaching) was used during the data collection, and the interview questions were pilot tested in the participants' language prior to the actual interviews, there might still be concerns about the accuracy of the interpretation of the cultural meanings, nuances, and tone which could have differed from the intentions of the respondents (Murray & Wynne, 2001). Despite efforts to win the confidence of the participants before each interview, the researcher's presence and identity as an outsider during data gathering could have been associated with some bias in the subjects' responses (Anderson, 2010). Moreover, the need to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of participants could have affected the conveyance of a detailed, accurate accounts of the findings presented (Kaiser, 2009). Finally, the study involved few participants, and with specific background of child soldiering which might affect generalizability of the study findings.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank all the young people, their relatives and informants who accepted to give their valuable views incorporated in this study. This study was carried out with the financial support of the Belgian Technical Cooperation and of VLIR-UOS via the HEFS Platform Harvest Call (ZIUS2013VOA0902).
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Experiences and views of war-affected adolescents in post-conflict Northern Uganda


and Electoral Assistance (IDEA).


Chapter 7

General discussion
7.1 Introduction

The overall objective of this study was to examine the reality of reconciliation, and reconciliation attitudes, as an aspect of post-conflict recovery processes. This aim arose from the need to investigate the ways reconciliation may contribute to post-conflict recovery, particularly in the recovery of individuals who are adversely affected by armed conflicts and in their relationships with and amongst each other. However, the achievement of reconciliation depends on what kind of attitudes the individuals concerned hold towards reconciling. The study sought to examine this topic by exposing key reconciliation factors (socio-demographic characteristics, mental health conditions, war-related stressors, daily stressors and reconciliation programs) in post-conflict settings that might be altered or emphasized to promote reconciliation. An integrated study approach was executed in order to make the findings culturally relevant and to gain contextual understanding of particularly reconciliation, and what needs to be done to achieve it.

7.1.1 Problem statement

Due to the changing nature of armed conflicts, since newer and more dangerous tactics are employed (e.g., O’Malley, 2007), civilians, and particularly young people, continue to feature prominently as casualties of warfare, and suffer adverse effects of armed conflicts (Baskar, 2009; Dilek, 2012; Hippler, 2008; Sarkin, 2008; Staub, 2013). As a result, there is general interest in post-conflict recovery of war-affected youth with increasing focus on reconciliation as a means to that recovery (Annan, Brier & Aryemo, 2009; Bakke, O’Loughlin & Ward, 2009; Bayer, Klasen & Adam, 2007; Nosworthy, 2009) as well as to post-conflict recovery in general (e.g. Dilek, 2012; Sarkin, 2008; Smith, 2005; Staub, 2013). However, our literature review showed that the factors associated with this post-conflict reconciliation are only vaguely documented (Bakke et al., 2009; Bloomfield, 2003). One of the supposed associated factors is the mental health of civilians, and although mental health effects of war itself have been well documented in different war-torn areas of Northern Uganda (see e.g., Derluyn et al., 2004; Okello, Onen, & Musisi, 2007), the role of mental health problems in shaping reconciliation attitudes has not been well studied. Above, also other factors possibly associated with reconciliation (i.e., socio-demographic characteristics, including gender) and particular factors associated with post-conflict settings (i.e., war-related experiences, daily stressors and reconciliation programs) have received only little research interest (e.g., Bayer et al., 2007; Ben-Zur & Almog, 2013; Lavi & Solomon, 2005; Overstreet, 2000; Vinck et al., 2007). Additionally, there is little information regarding the meaning of reconciliation and of programs targeting reconciliation viewed from the perspective of war-affected populations themselves (e.g., Idraku, 2011; Kligerman, 2009).

To address these gaps, this study aimed to examine the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents living in post-conflict northern Uganda, and the factors associated
with such attitudes, in particular socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, father and mother’s status [alive or dead], living status [with both parents, one parent or other]), war-related experiences (including experiences of child soldiering) and daily stressors, mental health problems (internalizing problems [PTSD, depression and anxiety symptoms] and externalizing problems [aggressive and rule-breaking behavior]), and reconciliation programs. Reconciliation attitudes in this study are viewed as attitudes towards a person or group of persons perceived to have hurt the person holding the attitudes. In our study, reconciliation attitudes comprise four dimensions: goodwill, future orientation, avoidance and revenge attitudes. The study also researched the meaning of reconciliation for these young people, particularly the formerly abducted children, and their views on reconciliation programs in relation to post-conflict recovery processes. Knowledge of contextual meaning of reconciliation and factors influencing reconciliation attitudes will enable the implementation of appropriate reconciliation, which in turn will help achieve efficient and effective post-conflict recovery.

Given the identified gaps above, the following research questions were studied:

1. What are the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents in post-conflict northern Uganda?
2. What are the factors (i.e. socio-demographic characteristics, war-related stressors, daily stressors, mental health problems and post-conflict reconciliation programs) possibly influencing the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents?
3. What are the views of war-affected adolescents on post-conflict reconciliation and reconciliation programs?

This study was carried out in the post-conflict setting of northern Uganda, where many young people were conscripted to fight alongside the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) against the government of Uganda, and subsequently (forcefully or otherwise) committed crimes against their own people (Amone-P’Olak, 2004; Pham et al., 2007). Consequently, when these youth returned and had to live with the people against whom they had committed grievous atrocities, they were faced with challenges of reacceptance by the community (Verelst et al., 2014; Vindevogel et al., 2013; Wessells, 2009), a situation which clearly called for reconciliation to help affected people (former child soldiers and the community) to recover. Two studies were completed in this doctoral dissertation: the first study (chapters 2 to 5) examined the prevalence of reconciliation attitudes as measured by four dimensions (i.e., goodwill, future orientation, avoidance and revenge attitudes) among 445 war-affected children and adolescents living in northern Uganda using self-report questionnaires. Hereby, we examined possible factors associated with these reconciliation attitudes: socio-demographic characteristics (i.e. age, gender, whether father and mother are still alive, and the child’s living situation), war-related stressors, including experiences of child soldiering, daily stressors, internalizing mental health problems (i.e. symptoms of posttraumatic stress, depression and anxiety) and externalizing problems (i.e. aggressive and rule-breaking behavior). Above, we examined possible associations of reconciliation programs with the reconciliation attitudes of war-affected youth in this post-conflict setting. The second study (chapter
6) explored the understandings of reconciliation held by former child soldiers and their close relatives, and explored their views on the roles that reconciliation programs should accomplish to achieve reconciliation.

This chapter presents the integration of the findings of these studies in order to address the overall research questions and deduce meaningful actions out of this. The findings are therefore discussed in view of each research question, followed by a section on the implications of the findings for practice and policy, a reflection on the study limitations, and possible implications for future research.

7.2 Major findings

7.2.1 Reconciliation attitudes of war-affected youth

As first research question, we wanted to investigate what kind of attitudes regarding reconciliation war-affected children and adolescents living in the post-conflict context of northern Uganda might hold. Moreover, given the paucity of information regarding reconciliation attitudes in post-conflict settings where reconciliation is an indispensable part of post-conflict recovery processes, it was important to find out from the war-affected youth themselves whether, despite everything that happened to them, they still had the willingness to reconcile with perceived enemies or not.

From the analysis, it was found out that war-affected youth generally reported mixed reconciliation attitudes, both positive (goodwill and future orientation) and negative (avoidance and revenge). This trend of mixed attitudes towards reconciliation has been noted by studies in similar situations, for example a study of girls exposed to rape during a conflict situation showed that the girls displayed both negative and positive outcomes (Betancourt, et al., 2010a). While stressors have been linked to negative outcomes (Ben-Zur & Almog, 2013), they have also been associated with the development of resourcefulness needed to cope with problems of daily living created by the stressful experiences (Betancourt et al., 2010b; Klasen et al., 2010).

7.2.2 Factors of reconciliation attitudes

The factors of reconciliation attitudes were examined and discussed in three chapters 3, 4 and 5, in an attempt to answer the second research question; the examination of the factors in the post-conflict ecology of war-affected youth that might be associated with the reconciliation attitudes they reported.

7.2.3 Socio-demographic characteristics

First, the association between the reported attitudes towards reconciliation and certain socio-demographic characteristics of the participants were examined, in particular participants’ gender and age, whether their father and mother were still alive or not.
The findings demonstrated that girls carried the greater burden of daily stressful experiences as compared to the boys, however both girls and boys displayed little difference in war-related experiences as also already noted by previous findings (e.g., Annan et al., 2011; Betancourt et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2008). Further, the findings showed that there were no important differences in the reconciliation attitudes of girls and boys. This means that war-affected youth perceive the stressful conditions pertaining to armed conflict and its aftermath similarly despite different levels of exposure to daily stressful experiences. The finding may also be an indication that, despite difficulties of varying degrees, war-affected youth in general are disposed to reconcile.

There were no associations observed for other demo-graphic characteristics of age, father’s status (dead or alive) and mother’s status (dead or alive). The lack of association between these demographic variables and reconciliation attitudes may be related to the fact that few people were spared exposure to war-related and daily stressors, moreover no particular groups were especially protected or more at risk than others (Miller, et al., 2002).

These findings mean that war-affected youth suffer great mental and behavioral problems and that their attitudes towards reconciliation might depend on the nature and severity of these mental health problems. Further implication is that war-affected youth might have learnt to accept suffering with which they were confronted, and perceived such experiences as pervasive, affecting everyone rather than only themselves as individuals, thus no difference in the influence of gender and other personal characteristics on reconciliation attitudes.

### 7.2.4 War-related stressors

Throughout the study, the role of war-related stressors as an important factor of reconciliation attitudes continued to be manifested. The findings showed that adolescents living in post-conflict settings were exposed to numerous war-related stressors. Previous studies detailing exposure to war-related stressors in post-conflict settings reported similar findings (e.g., Bayer et al., 2007; Betancourt et al., 2011; Derluyn et al., 2004). Above, the findings also indicated that former child soldiers overall experienced more war-related stressors than non-abducted youth, as also recorded by earlier studies (e.g., Annan, Blattman & Horton, 2006), a fact which relate to the vastness of abuse children conscripted into fighting forces endured (e.g., Amone-P’Olak, 2007; Pham et al., 2008).

Overall, this study found that the experience of war-related stressors was strongly associated with positive reconciliation (goodwill and future orientation) attitudes. Similar findings were made among young people in other post-conflict settings and in northern Uganda, showing that, despite being subjected to war-related stressors including rape, these children still showed significant positive future orientation attitudes (Klasen et al., 2010), possibly echoing a persistent theme of posttraumatic growth literature that suffering may lead to positive personal growth (e.g., Linley, 2003; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This finding suggests that adverse war-related situations do not always have
a negative impact on young people, but might also include an opportunity for them
develop positive attitudes towards self and others, including reconciliation attitudes,
and the energies needed for their continued function in the community.
The findings also showed that despite exposure to war-related stressors being related
to positive reconciliation attitudes, they were also at times associated with negative
reconciliation attitudes, particularly avoidance, as also found by numerous previous
studies (e.g., Bayer et al., 2007; Horowitz, 2007; Orth, Montada & Maercker, 2006;
Thabet, Tischler & Vostanis, 2004). One possible explanation is the need by war-affected
youth to use avoidance as a coping strategy (e.g., Bal et al., 2003; Cardozo et al., 2000).
This finding should be interpreted in relation to the finding of high prevalence of
mental health problems among war-affected youth and their possible influence on
reconciliation attitudes.
Moreover, the findings indicated that exposure to greater war-related stressors were
associated with revenge attitudes as noted particularly among former child soldiers.
Probable explanation could be that because they were forcefully recruited into child
soldiering, they therefore felt they were victimized and might have developed revenge
attitudes (De Cremer, 2006; Klasen et al., 2015).

7.2.5 Daily stressors

As with war-related stressors, the exposure to daily stressors by young people in post-
conflict northern Ugandan setting was found to be quite high, and in agreement
with similar findings made in northern Uganda (e.g., Vindevogel et al., 2013). Findings
indicated that exposure to daily stressors was mainly associated with increase in
negative reconciliation attitudes (both avoidance attitudes and attitudes of revenge,
suggesting that youth exposed to more daily stressful conditions were much less
willing to reconcile. As already noted, this is an area not yet well studied, nevertheless
studies in post-conflict settings indicate that daily stressors represent ongoing and
chronic threats to psychological wellbeing, and so has continuous effects on individuals
over long periods of time, leading to erosion of coping resources while heavily straining
their mental capacities (e.g., Groh, 2007; Kubiak, 2005; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). It has
also been argued that daily stressors are largely beyond people’s control, and might
lead to negative psychological outcomes (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Unlike war-related
stressors, they are pervasive in post-conflict settings (Rasmussen et al., 2010), and
therefore may act as source of constant reminder for, and rumination over past adverse
events, which has been linked to lack of forgiveness (McCullough, et al., 2001), and thus
by implication, to more negative reconciliation attitudes.

7.2.6 Interacting factors

The findings exposed several factors interacting with each other in their association
with reconciliation attitudes. First, although daily stressors generally were associated
with negative reconciliation attitudes, in the presence of more war-related stressors, it was associated with positive reconciliation attitudes; the more war-related stressors experienced, the more strongly daily stressors is associated with positive reconciliation attitudes. A related study in northern Uganda found that, despite being severely traumatized, children were still able to show positive future orientation (Klasen et al., 2010). Suggested explanations from related studies on resilience are that good social adaptation emerge when people are faced with trauma (e.g., Okello et al., 2007; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Waysman, Schwarzwald & Solomon, 2001), leading to the development of positive outcomes including prosocial behavior and confidence building (Betancourt et al, 2010). Contained in these suggestions is the fact that when faced with extremely difficult situations (war-related and daily stressors combined), as the stressors impact increase and there seems to be no way out, people tend to focus on their own resources to help themselves out (e.g., Betancourt et al., 2010b), and in the process develop better understanding of their own personal resources, and the resources of other people.

7.2.7 Mental health

Studies have detailed how mental problems in people affected by armed conflicts are increasingly becoming associated with reconciliation attitudes (e.g., Bayer et al., 2007; Königstein, 2013; Railon, 2011; Newnham et al., 2014; Vinck et al., 2007; Rassmusen et al., 2010). This study therefore examined reconciliation attitudes of war-affected adolescents in northern Uganda, against the background of the mental health problems they reported, particularly symptoms of posttraumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and aggressive and rule-breaking behavior. Socio-demographic characteristics, war-related and daily stressors were also included in these analyses.

The findings showed that presence of posttraumatic symptoms in youth were associated with positive reconciliation attitudes (goodwill and future orientation). Studies in northern Uganda examining psychiatric disorders amongst war-affected youth found similarly that, despite presence of psychopathology and exposure to trauma, children still showed good social adaptation (Okello et al., 2007), and displayed an overall positive future orientation (e.g., Klasen et al., 2010). However, further findings showed that behavioral problems (both aggressive and rule-breaking behavior) were associated with increasing negative reconciliation attitudes of revenge, agreeing with observations of previous studies (e.g., Copeland-Linder et al., 2007). Moreover the findings indicated also that youth exposed to numerous daily stressors, and at the same time had many symptoms of PTSD, reported a stronger association between daily stressors and avoidance attitudes. Implied here is the saturation effect of two strong factors both exerting influence. Further the findings showed that youth who were exposed to many war-related stressors and simultaneously had numerous symptoms of aggressive behavior, also reported negative reconciliation of revenge attitudes. These findings mean that war-affected youth suffer great burden
of mental problems, both internalizing and externalizing problems within the post-conflict ecology, and that the nature and severity of these mental health problems shape their attitudes towards reconciliation.

### 7.2.8 Reconciliation programs

Reconciliation programs were identified as yet another factor that serves the purpose of promoting reconciliation attitudes in war-affected people by enabling communities to welcome and reaccept youth who returned from armed forces, and by helping to mend broken relations with others seen to have gone against cultural norms (e.g., Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; Latigo, 2008). Further, these interventions are also seen to contribute to broader peace-building and reconciliation processes (Annan et al., 2009; Baines, 2007). Accordingly, we here collected information on the attitudes of young people residing in two post-conflict communities in northern Uganda, one with, and the other without a reconciliation program, in order to observe the impact of such programs on reconciliation attitudes.

The program implemented in the community sought to strengthen the capacity of families to care for the material and psychological needs of former child soldiers within their communities by, amongst other things, supporting the reintegration processes of formerly abducted children through enhancing their psychosocial wellbeing, education and health, and also supporting sustainable long-term peace-building processes through reconciliation initiatives (Idraku, 2011). To do this, community mediators were trained in conducting traditional cleansing ceremonies, such as “nyono tongweno” (stepping on fowl eggs) aimed at promoting reconciliation and forgiveness (e.g., Amone-P’Olak, 2006; Baines, 2007; Huyse, & Salter, 2008; Nakayi, 2008; Shanahan, 2008). Further, the community mediators identified community members in need of reconciliation (particularly formerly abducted children with greater exposure to war-related stressors), and with the help of government, traditional and local leaders, arranged dialogue meetings, mediated and resolved conflicts on personal, community and societal levels. To supplement these, radio talk shows, music, dance and drama were used to sensitize the population about the need for conflict resolution and reconciliation. Issues addressed included, amongst others, sources of daily stressors, such as conflicts arising from gender-based and domestic violence, early marriages and land ownership (Idraku, 2011).

Findings showed that the impact of the programs was relatively limited, particularly there was no impact on negative reconciliation (avoidant and revenge) attitudes, which were still found to persist amongst the adolescents in the intervention community. The study findings further showed that, despite the youth from both communities generally holding positive reconciliation attitudes, the prevalence of positive reconciliation attitudes was more pronounced among youth from the non-intervention group. Further, for the youth from the non-intervention group, exposure to greater daily stressors was associated with increased positive reconciliation attitudes compared to
the youth in the intervention community. These findings could pinpoint the need for reconciliation programs to revise the strategies they currently use. The programs should aim at helping the youth affected by conflicts to identify the sources of conflict within their environment that may prevent them to see beyond their own negative perspectives and overcome feelings of enmity. This calls for the promotion of reliance on personal initiatives, and on localities and institutions among the beneficiaries of the programs (Pupavac, 2001). It is also important for programs to aim at revitalizing entire communities and to address all social-ecological factors (such as poverty, illness and lack of education) which probably affect program effectiveness (Wessells & Monteiro, 2007).

7.3 Views on reconciliation and reconciliation programs

In our second study, in which we examined the views of former child soldiers, relatives and key informants on reconciliation and reconciliation programs, the findings showed that the participants viewed reconciliation as forgiving and forgetting. This is consistent with other findings (e.g., Allen & Schomerus, 2006; Fincham, 2000; Gibson, 2007; Kantz, 2000; Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Mukashema & Mullet, 2013; Pham et al., 2007; Williamson & Gonzales, 2007) showing that “forgiveness” has been often been associated with reconciliation, and that “forgetting” was seen as part of reconciliation, as a resource for managing past bad experiences (Annan et al., 2009; Corbin, 2008; Veale & Stavrout, 2007; Vindevogel et al., 2013), and therefore promoted reconciliation through helping people break with the past and embrace the present and future.

Additionally, the findings indicated that the respondents employed various strategies to achieve the desired reconciliation, including traditional rituals (e.g., Boothby, 2006; Boothby, Crawford & Halperin, 2006; Huyse & Salter, 2008; Wessells, 2009) which were seen, mainly by the family and community members, as useful for increasing mutual acceptance between them and formerly abducted children (Awodola, 2012; Williamson, 2006). Our findings however, showed that former child soldiers themselves felt that such rituals were being imposed on them, and that they did not understand their full implications as also noted in other studies (Huyse & Salter, 2008).

Second, religious rituals were also seen as another important strategy to enhance reconciliation and promote the reintegration of former child soldiers into their communities (Laufer & Solomon, 2011; Vindevogel et al., 2014). Generally the respondents thought that religious rites, particularly prayers, were also important for psychological healing of the individual, and was often performed in combination with, or supplementary to traditional rituals. Third, provision of resources, such as education, knowledge, skills and material resources, to former child soldiers were believed to as necessary for helping these youths to resume normal social roles (Betancourt, 2005; Vindevogel et al., 2014), and to reducing fear of each other (Vindevogel et al., 2013), and thus promote reconciliation. The respondents believed that provision of resources would help keep the former child soldiers productive, and to forget the past experiences,
and to concentrate on the present and future, thus peaceful.
Yet, another and last strategy to achieve reconciliation was reported to be “silencing”,
not talking about past grim experiences. Respondents believed that silence about past
grim experiences helped the former child soldiers keep away from public scrutiny and
to improve relationship with people in the community as they cannot be hurt through
insults and stigmatization. This finding complement previous research suggesting that
silence helps war-affected children to avoid retribution, future harm or stigma (e.g.,
Guterman, Cameron, & Staller, 2000), and to access acceptance from the community
(Denov, 2010; Shepler, 2005). Silence here might be understood as a form of passive
reaction aimed at avoiding aggressive responses to provocations (Annan et al., 2009),
and thus seen as promoting reconciliation.
Although the formerly abducted children and the community seemed to use these
strategies, they differed in their evaluations of these strategies, with the former child
soldiers generally preferring the provision of resources to other methods of achieving
reconciliation. However, these strategies were not always beneficial as our findings
showed that the achievement of reconciliation was only partial, since fear and
stigmatization still largely persisted in the community. This points to the need to for
programs supporting these strategies to look for other strategies or interventions to
supplement or replace the non-beneficial ones.
The findings of this study demonstrated the pervasiveness of war-related and daily
stressors in post-conflict settings. This is seen in the fact that individual characteristics
(socio-demographic characteristics) did not come out as important factors of
reconciliation attitudes, probably because everyone, irrespective of age, gender or
status, was equally affected by the presence of the stressors. Further, the findings re-emphasized the influence of mental health on reconciliation attitudes. Internalizing
problems were associated with more positive reconciliation attitudes, while
externalizing problems related to negative, revenge attitudes.
Another important finding is that war-related stressors in itself may not exert serious
negative influence on reconciliation attitudes, except when present in greater amounts
then it might be associated with negative reconciliation attitudes. This is demonstrated
by the finding that former child soldiers showed more negative reconciliation attitudes
than other non-abducted children. On the other hand, daily stressors has come out
strongly as one of the most important and consistent factors associated with negative
reconciliation attitudes. Moreover when combined with mental health problems, its
association with negative attitudes, particularly avoidance became much stronger. A
probable explanation is that daily stressors by nature are long lasting and exert equally
enduring impacts, and therefore might help to evoke past bad memories that may lead
to the attitudes of revenge.
Additionally, the findings show that for the participants of the qualitative study,
reconciliation meant “forgiving” and “forgetting”, a fact supported by the high levels of
positive reconciliation attitudes recorded among participants in the quantitative study
as well, suggesting conscious effort to put the past behind and move on with life. But
such a definition of reconciliation raises the issue of why then negative reconciliation (revenge and avoidance) attitudes persisted. One possible explanation is that, the forgiving and forgetting was not out of free volition of the war-affected youth. As such, the forgiving and forgetting represented a strategy for survival, a strategy of silence in an attempt to please the community that demanded reconciliation. In return the youth received acceptance which they needed from the community. This position is supported by the findings in the qualitative study showing that the reconciliation ceremonies were perceived by the former child soldiers as imposed by the community, and the finding that one of the strategies used to achieve the reconciliation emphasized “silence”, not talking about past experiences. This means that the youth had no other way to of dealing with their feelings and emotions except through repressing them. However, these feelings and emotions were vented out in one way or another, including in the form of aggression which also the study participants reported, and which might be rooted in feelings of revenge. Alternatively, the youth might have used avoidance to reinforce the silence in order to achieve the forgiveness and forgetting demanded of them. Thus, despite the reconciliation (forgiving and forgetting), negative reconciliation attitudes represented by avoidance and revenge attitudes still persisted.

The findings of this study further suggested that the reconciliation programs had limited impact. Again this could be understood against the lack of personal significance of the programs reported by the former child soldiers in the interviews. According to the interview findings, the children perceived the programs as important for the relatives and the community, rather than for themselves. This is supported by the fact that in the interviews they emphasized strategies other than direct reconciliation programs, and included vocational skills training, education and material resources as means of achieving reconciliation. The emphasis on indirect reconciliation programs directed at the recovery of individual also seems to relate to the silencing strategy of helping the former child soldiers forget the past and live “normally”, as if nothing happened to them. Moreover, in both studies (qualitative and quantitative), the participants showed preference for the indirect reconciliation program (e.g. vocational skills training, educational support, job opportunity) which are also the means that would be used to fight daily stressors. The implication here is that daily stressors prevent reconciliation, and therefore removing it would promote reconciliation. This agrees with the findings of quantitative study showing that daily stressors was consistently linked with negative reconciliation attitudes.

7.4 To conclude

The most visible finding in this study was that negative reconciliation attitudes were persistently present among youth living in post-conflict settings, and seemed to be associated with all the factors of reconciliation attitudes identified in this study within the various levels of post-conflict ecology of war-affected young people.

At the individual level, symptoms of mental health problems, particularly symptoms
of posttraumatic stress, depression and anxiety, and aggressive and rule-breaking behaviors were common, and seem to impact whether individuals get reconciled or not, in particular whether they have negative attitudes of revenge. However, demographic characteristics, like gender and age, and whether young people’s parents are still alive or not, have little or no impact onto their attitudes towards reconciliation.

However, an interesting relationship can be found with the difficult experiences children had during the war: on the one hand, war-related stressors showed a positive association with the positive reconciliation attitudes of goodwill and future orientation. This indicates that children who have experienced many war-related stressors seem to develop positive attitudes towards the future and towards reconciliation, and thus seem to use these difficult experiences in a positive way. However, formerly abducted children showed clearly more negative reconciliation attitudes then their non-abducted peers. This indicates that they have the feeling that they were victims of large abuse, while on the other hand, they are not always acknowledged for this injustice, given the ongoing stigmatization they experience, and the fact that they are not really allowed to speak about their experience or, when they speak, that it leads to (further) stigmatization: our findings indicated that the youth were repeatedly counseled to “forget” past adverse experiences in order to be acceptable to the community, suggesting forced suppression of the feelings they might have wanted to express and that would have enabled them to seek reconciliation (‘silencing’ as needed/imposed coping strategy).

The ongoing stigmatization towards former child soldiers, and the feelings in former child soldiers that they are not really accepted by the community as they are, with their particular background and experiences of child soldiering (the larger part of this group seemed to be only accepted when they become ‘normal’ again, and when they do not talk any more about their past experiences) shows that there is still no ‘real’ reconciliation in the communities involved. From our participant observations, we could see that people get along with each other, including the former child soldiers, and that people also express the need for re-acceptance and re-integration of these formerly abducted children, but at the same time, there is little ‘real’ reacceptance as these young people are, with their particular experiences of child soldiering and the impact these had on their ‘being’ and ‘behaving’. Therefore, the community and interpersonal level of the post-conflict ecology contains elements that might prevent reconciliation as indicated by the strong negative reconciliation attitudes in the war-affected youth in this study.

On the social level, an important finding in this research regards the association with daily stressors which is consistently associated with negative reconciliation attitudes, particularly avoidance and revenge attitudes.

These stressful daily living conditions include poverty caused or worsened by the general economic destruction and the particular loss of family livelihoods due to the war, loss of social support caused by the weakening of social networks through the death or disability of family members, displacement during and after the war, and overall lack of access to basic goods and services, such as health care and schooling (Kalksma-Van
Lith, 2007; Wessells & Monteiro, 2006). Daily stressors by nature are long lasting and might gnaw at a person’s coping mechanism when faced with problems. As such it may lead, in the long run, to negative feelings towards reconciliation, including avoidance of situations that have potential for harm, such as perceived enemies, thus blocking chances of reconciliation. Moreover, it may increase the emergence of memories of past bad experiences and blame apportioning, leading to revenge attitudes.

On the social and on the macro level, our findings showed that programs aimed at promoting reconciliation instituted within the community sometimes fail to achieve reconciliation. The study participants still showed presence of revenge and avoidance attitudes, which are known to go against reconciliation. We here see two possible explanations: on the one hand, the specific content of the programs might have not been adequate to promote positive reconciliation attitudes and decrease negative ones. This could have two reasons: First, many reconciliation programs seem to be directed at the individual, in particular former child soldiers, to equip them with particular economic and social skills in order to enhance their reintegration in the community, or to support them psychologically with counseling services. This became also clear in the qualitative study where both family members of former child soldiers and key actors indicated the importance of this type of programs for formerly abducted children, and follows the tendency that one seems to try to ‘make’ former child soldiers becoming ‘normal again’. Second, the failure of these programs could also be due to the fact that they are too far away from the particular realities and views of the communities themselves. An overall critic on humanitarian programming is this detachment from local communities and the limited involvement of target groups themselves. Interestingly, the case studies showed that in particular the traditional healing ceremonies – which can be seen as close to the local realities – were considered as very beneficial by the family and community members, but not by the former child soldiers themselves, at least indicating that for this group, these programs were not really fitting their needs and views.

A second reason why participants kept on showing negative reconciliation attitudes, despite the presence of reconciliation programs could be due to the fact that in a way it is difficult to enhance reconciliation in a short term, in particular when the ongoing living conditions and daily stressors keep on being very high. The rampart daily stressors in post-conflict situations could be thus part of this explanation for the failure of reconciliation programs, since they keep people focused on their own needs to the exclusion of interpersonal demands. Here, we also see that programs in the past have mainly targeted former child soldiers or other ‘vulnerable’ groups, also in their economic-oriented programs, while little initiatives have been taken towards the community in general. Also on the macro level, the government is still searching on how to ameliorate the living conditions and daily stressors in this post-conflict context.

Above, at the macro level (the societal or national level), the bigger factors that affect everyone are also found in our study, including the difficult experiences caused by the
war, poor economic policy and particular political practices that all may worsen the lower post-conflict ecology. Factors at the macro level affect individuals both directly and indirectly through influencing other factors at lower levels: lack of security, for example, may lead to war-related stressors as conflicts might erupt or poor economic policies may be associated with increased poverty. As indicated, our findings have shown that both war-related and daily stressors – related to this macro level – have strong links with particularly negative reconciliation attitudes.

Our study also found strong support for the important interplay between the different ecological levels, with war-related stressors impacting individuals’ mental health status, and daily stressors also interrelating with war-related stressors towards its association with reconciliation attitudes. This clearly calls for holistic approaches, in which interventions are not targeted at one level or group alone (e.g., only at the individual level or only at mental health problems of former child soldiers), but encompass a range of interventions directed at the different levels and taking into account particular groups with their own experiences and needs.

7.5 Implications for practice

The integrated study approach adopted by this dissertation made it possible to come up with contextually informed understanding of factors associated with reconciliation attitudes. The combination of these findings enabled us to suggest implications for practice, to support the well-being of young people – and by extension all war-affected people living in post-conflict settings, such as northern Uganda. Overall, these implications call for systemic-oriented interventions that target the factors of reconciliation attitudes at all levels of the ecology of post-conflict situation.

Programs should tackle mental health issues at the level of the individual, which in our study was associated with negative reconciliation attitudes. We hereby recommend to use interventions employing systemic, collaborative approaches, because these also include the immediate context of the individual in need of psychological support, and may therefore be much more beneficial to enhance support from the social network, both in the short and the longer term. In Northern Uganda, we could get important inspiration by the particular work the Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations in Lira, Northern Uganda, is executing. Focusing particularly on psychological problems in children, they have developed a unique approach in which they use a systemic-oriented view in all their interventions, through applying family and group therapy, but even in individual therapy, important figures out of the child’s context are included in the interventions and talkings. Hereby, the social support for the individual is increased, but also the social ties in the families and communities. Above, a more long-term and sustainable impact of the interventions can be guaranteed through this way of working.

At the interpersonal and community ecological levels, there is need to offer support to families to look after the psychosocial wellbeing of the young people in their care. Family and/or systemic therapy might be useful to help war-affected youth to cope
with psychological difficulties or also with social stressors, such as stigmatization encountered in the community, in order also to help build positive reconciliation attitudes. Additionally, community or group involvement in the programs targeting war-affected children should be encouraged by, for instance, using group therapy as an effective mean to help groups with particular problems (e.g., O’Callagan et al, 2012), and which could be helpful in addressing the negative reconciliation attitudes of avoidance and revenge that persists in war-affected youth.

Moreover, institutions within the community could be used to help young people in post-conflict situations to improve their attitudes towards reconciliation. Schools and churches offer excellent opportunities to educate youth, through counselling and group therapy, as well as spiritual direction, about the need for reconciliation, both for individual and community wellbeing. Further, such institutions can help with community-wide sensitization about, for example, the negative consequences of stigmatizing its members as a way to promote peace-full co-existence and pro-reconciliation attitudes.

Post-conflict reconciliation programs might benefit from the findings of this study that war-affected youth hold quite particular views on reconciliation. On the one hand, they – and in particular also family and community members – have indicated that the provision of resources is an important strategy to achieve reconciliation. Also in the qualitative study, the negative impact of daily stressors onto reconciliation attitudes was clearly marked. This calls for programs, both on the social and on the macro level, to tackle daily stressors in the post-conflict contexts. Hereby, programs should take into account the limited nature of their projects: in the post-conflict context of Northern Uganda, most organizations have left the country after the war has ended, although the needs are still very salient. Therefore, they need to put in place mechanisms to ensure the help extended to war-affected populations are sustained over longer periods of time. This could be done by, amongst other ways, training and equipping local personnel to carry on the work. Hereby, programs should take care of the broader community concerns, including improvement of the general socio-economic situations of the people. A multi-pronged, collaborative approach that should involve, not only the local institutions and groups, but also the bigger/national governments in order to rejuvenate communities by addressing all factors in the social ecology (such as poverty, illness and lack of education) that may prevent people from benefitting from the programs (Wessells & Monteiro, 2007) is hereby called for. Above, establishing good political order, complete with good economic policies translates into reduced chances of war-related stressors, and reduced level of daily stressors.

At the same time, the imposed strategy of ‘silencing’, together with the indicated high levels of stigmatization, both in this and in many other studies, indicate that interventions and humanitarian programming that are only directed at the individual and/or at these daily stressors are clearly not sufficient enough. We should start thinking about how to directly address reconciliation between individuals and in communities. We hereby could think on how local rituals of dealing with conflicts between individuals could be adapted to also address the specific harm that was caused by former child soldiers,
although hereby taking into account that these children were abducted as child soldier, and often were extremely young when getting involved in the rebel army. Secondly, an interesting method seems to be the one of “community therapy”, as developed by the Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations in Eastern Congo. Community members are here brought together in groups, and psychosocial problems are discussed, under supervision of a skilled community therapy group leader. Through sharing problems, perspectives on these problems and also possible solutions towards these problems, not only individuals are helped to deal with their problems and possible large daily stressors are partially alleviated, but at the same time, the social support between individuals and the social cohesion within communities is increased and supported. This method could be of particular interest to also address the ongoing reconciliation problems that are still present in post-conflict Northern Uganda.

7.6 Implications for policy

Given the situation of war-affected youth in northern Uganda, and the fact that young people will continue to be victimized and alienated from their own people, deliberate policies need to be put in place to help resolve conflicts between, and among war-affected youth when they arise. In this regard, schools which bring together many children, their teachers and parents need to be targeted as a unit where psychosocial support is provided through training teachers in counseling skills to provide both individual and groups counselling for the youth. Moreover conflict resolution skills and awareness campaign can be done using the school for both the youth and their parents. Further, our study linked particularly daily stressors to reduced reconciliation attitudes. To address this problem, governments need to put in place policies aimed at reducing stressful conditions that may impinge upon children’s psychosocial well-being. Such conditions in post-conflict settings may include poverty caused or worsened by the loss of family livelihoods, loss of social support caused by the death of family members, and a lack of access to basic goods and services such as health care and schooling (Fernando et al., 2010). This can be done through increased investment in agriculture which has abundant land in northern Uganda to support it, to employ war-affected youth. The government needs to provide vocational skills training for these youth to empower them to embrace such agricultural and other gainful employments.

It is also important to have structures within the local government system, that can handle conflicts in the community and reconcile feuding parties. This needs training of persons to work within such structures in conflict resolution and conciliation skills, as well as specialists in the field of mental health, counseling and conflict resolution who can provide support to such structures.

Moreover, as a measure of lasting conflict resolution, there is need for government to establish truth and reconciliation commissions that will work to ensure that the root causes of the conflicts are found and removed, while at the same time some form of compensation for victims are also provided.
7.7 Limitations

The findings of this study need to be interpreted bearing in mind some limitations as discussed below.

The study mainly employed a cross-sectional design which, although useful for ascribing associations, renders it difficult to impute causal relationships. Moreover the changes in reconciliation attitudes that might have occurred in the young people over time, since the war ended up to the present cannot be captured using this method (Layne et al, 2009).

The data used in the first quantitative were generated using self-report questionnaires. This raises the issues of accuracy of information recall that must be carried out retrospectively, and might have led to incomplete, distorted or mistaken information. Secondly, self-reporting may be imbued with the need to portray oneself as according to expected social standards, hence leading to social desirability bias which might have affected the quality of information gathered. Thirdly, information obtained through questionnaires yielded quantitative data that could not permit in-depth exploration of the reconciliation attitudes and factors associated with it that were measured, as well as the variety of individual experiences both during and after the war (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008).

Further, despite the cultural validation of the instruments used to collect the data, they might still not be fully adapted to the local cultural context as their construction were influenced by their Western prototypes.

Additionally, this study took place over six years after the war in northern Uganda ended. This means that the war-related stressors’ impact might have faded due to passage of time and so might have compromised the effects reported on reconciliation attitudes for the example of the finding that war-related stressors was associated with positive reconciliation attitudes. Moreover the post-conflict daily stressors as well could have changed, possibly introducing alterations in the findings that have been made had the study been carried at an earlier date.

Another important limitation that could have affected the study relate to generalizability of the findings. This study was carried out within a rural post conflict setting of northern Uganda, among people of one ethnic group with their own culture, world-view and specific social conditions which might not be identical with other post-conflict settings, especially those that occur within urban and multi-ethnic situations. Moreover, the qualitative study included only formerly abducted participants and their immediate relatives which makes the findings difficult to generalize to war-affected youth and populations.

It is also important to keep in mind that the constructs defining reconciliation attitudes (goodwill, future orientation, avoidance and revenge) attitudes might not be the only ones. There could be other reconciliation attitudes that were not captured owing to the paucity of research in this area as this study demonstrated.

Further, ideally the number of participants should have been distributed uniformly
across gender and educational level (student or non-student), but this was not possible owing to a number of factors including the population structure and higher number of young people enrolled in schools leading to fewer females and out-of-school youth participating in the study, and could have meant that their input could have been different than what was reflected in this study.

In assessing programs, first, we were not present during the time of the intervention, and had to rely on information of program providers on the specific content of the program and the way it was implemented, and on the on self-reported information of participants, which might not have captured in entirety the actual impact of the program intervention (Bryant & Njenga, 2006). Moreover, the study mainly focused on one program, and thus the findings might be highly particular and not applicable to other reconciliation programs in post-conflict settings. In light of these constraints, there is need therefore to evaluate the findings about the post-conflict programs carefully. Lastly, we did not have information on the mental health conditions of the participants, but relied on the assessment of the number of symptoms reported by the participating adolescents.

### 7.8 Implications for further research

The shortcomings of this study notwithstanding, this study has contributed uniquely to the available research on the understanding reconciliation and the factors associated with reconciliation attitudes in post-conflict settings. Having knowledge of factors affecting reconciliation attitudes will go a long way to improve psychosocial interventions of war-affected youth. However, additional research is needed to improve knowledge in this area. Based on the study limitations, future studies need to take note of the following gaps.

Further research needs to be done to establish the nature of the associations between the factors identified in this study and reconciliation attitudes. Longitudinal research design that enables the observation of direct causal relationships between the factors of, and reconciliation attitudes, and might capture the changes over time that might affect the attitudes of war-affected people, since it involves stability and continuity over time (Farrington, 1991) might be useful. Additionally, integrated study method which has been demonstrated as important by this study in obtaining contextual understanding of reconciliation, could be used much more to explore other factors in the post-conflict ecology of war-affected people. These could involve methods such as in-depth interviews and ethnographic approaches to enable researchers get answers to questions like, why young people exposed to great war-related and daily stressors are still able to show positive reconciliation attitudes, and what maintains the negative attitudes they seem to harbor for such long times. Such methods will also ensure the information obtained is accurate and complete as researchers will have chance to probe and cross-check data, and social desirability biases might be reduced (Zainal, 2007).

There is need to work on improving further the existing, and or creating new instruments.
for data collection in the field of reconciliation studies. This will enable exploration of culturally specific understanding of the processes of reconciliation and factors that promote or impede it, and come with comprehensive constructs of reconciliation that might be operational among post-conflict populations.

There is need to carry out more research on the importance of particularly daily stressors as a factor of reconciliation attitudes since this study has shown that it is associated with especially negative reconciliation attitudes. It is equally important to research on how daily stressors might be targeted for change through psychosocial programming in order to promote positive reconciliation attitudes.

Further studies need to involve multi-ethnic and rural-urban settings to study reconciliation attitudes. Significant differences might be found compared to studies done within a mono-ethnic setting, among deeply rural populations. It is needed also to involve a range of groups within war-affected populations (such as women, adults and youth), and not to limit studies only on one group of only youth or formerly abducted children.

References


Miller, K.E. & Rasmussen, A. (2010). War exposure, daily stressors, and mental health in conflict and post-conflict settings: Bridging the divide between trauma-focused and psychosocial frameworks. *Social Science & Medicine, 70*, 7-16.


Data storage fact sheet
Data storage fact sheet

1. Contact details

1a. Main researcher
   - name: Benjamin Alipanga
   - address: Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, H. Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium
   - e-mail: benpanga@gmail.com

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)
   - name: Ilse Derluyn
   - address: Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, H. Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium
   - e-mail: ilse.derluyn@ugent.be

If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

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  Alipanga, B., De Schryver, M. Neema, S., Broekaert, E. & Derluyn, I. (Submitted for editorial review to the *International Journal of Psychology*). Associations between mental health and reconciliation attitudes amongst war-affected adolescents.
  Alipanga, B., De Schryver, M., Neema, S., Broekaert, E. & Derluyn, I. (Under review in *Afrika Focus*). Associations between Reconciliation Programs and Reconciliation Attitudes of War-Affected Adolescents in Northern Uganda.

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- name: Benjamin Alipanga
- address: Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, H. Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium
- e-mail: benpanga@gmail.com

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)
- name: Ilse Derluyn
- address: Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, H. Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium
- e-mail: ilse.derluyn@ugent.be

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Nederlandstalige samenvatting

Attitudes van verzoening bij door oorlog getroffen adolescenten in Noord-Oeganda
Samenvatting

Inleiding

Burgers en met name jongeren zijn vaak betrokken bij gewapende conflicten. Velen van hen lijden dan ook onder de ernstige gevolgen daarvan: niet alleen worden veel burgers gedood, maar velen raken ook gewond, worden gefolterd en/of worden gedwongen om zelf mee te vechten, anderen te vermoorden, te plunderen en vernieling te zaaien. Zo werden in Oeganda tienduizenden jongeren ontvoerd en gedwongen om te vechten aan de kant van het rebellenleger Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), dat twintig jaar lang oorlog voerde tegen de Oegandese overheid. Tijdens het conflict werden de jongeren die ontvoerd werden als kindsoldaat onderworpen aan afschuwelijke praktijken. Zo werden ze bijvoorbeeld gedwongen om te wreedheden tegen hun eigen familieleden of buren, als een manier om de loyaliteit van de jongeren naar de rebellengroep te vergroten en om zo te verhinderen dat ze zouden ontsnappen. Omdat een gewapende conflict meestal meedeling en haat tussen individuen en/of tussen groepen mensen met zich meebrengt, wordt verzoening ('reconciliation') steeds meer beschouwd als een belangrijk aspect van herstelprocessen na het einde van het conflict. Deze studie bestudeert de attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening van jongeren die getroffen werden door de oorlog in Noord-Oeganda, als een belangrijke factor om verzoening binnen de gemeenschap en de samenleving te kunnen realiseren. Deze attitudes worden gesitueerd op vier dimensies: welwillendheid ('goodwill'), oriëntering naar de toekomst toe ('future orientation'), vermijding ('avoidance') en wraak ('revenge'). De studie analyseert verder een aantal factoren, met name socio-demografische karakteristieken, oorlogsgerelateerde stressoren, dagelijkse stressoren, psychische problemen en interventies die zich op verzoening richten, waarvan aangenomen wordt dat deze een invloed kunnen hebben op deze attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening. Tot slot exploreerde de studie de selectie van voormalige kindsoldaten op verzoening en verzoeningsprogramma's. Kennis over attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening, over de factoren die deze attitudes beïnvloeden en over de betekenis die jongeren geven aan verzoening en verzoeningsprogramma's is belangrijk voor het opzetten en aanbieden van adequate psychosociale interventies die verzoening en herstelprocessen in post-conflict situaties nastreven.

Probleemstelling, doelstelling en onderzoeksvragen

Als gevolg van de veranderende aard van conflicten worden burgers en voornamelijk jongeren voortdurend tot oorlogsslachtoffers gemaakt en krijgen ze blijvend te maken met de negatieve gevolgen van gewapend conflict. Van daar is er een groeiende interesse om deze door oorlog getroffen jongeren te helpen, waarbij er steeds vaker nadruk wordt gelegd op het belang van verzoening als middel om herstel en verzoening in de post-conflict situatie te bereiken. De literatuurstudie toont echter aan dat de factoren die geassocieerd kunnen worden met verzoening slechts vaag gedocumenteerd zijn. Psychisch welzijn is bijvoorbeeld één factor
waarvan verondersteld wordt dat die geassocieerd kan worden met attitudes t.a.v. verzoening. Hoewel de effecten van oorlog op het psychisch welzijn van burgers grondig bestudeerd zijn in verschillende door oorlog getroffen gebieden, waaronder Noord-Oeganda, is de rol ervan in de vorming van attitudes t.a.v. verzoening slechts weinig onderzocht. Ook andere factoren die mogelijk geassocieerd zijn met verzoening (m.n. socio-demografische karakteristieken, externaliserende problemen) en factoren die geassocieerd zijn met (post-)conflict settings (oorlogsgere lateerde stressoren, dagelijkse stressoren, verzoeningsprogramma’s) kregen nog maar weinig aandacht in onderzoek. Daarnaast is er weinig informatie over de betekenissen van verzoening en verzoeningsprogramma’s voor de door oorlog getroffen bevolking zelf.

De studie richt zich daarom op het onderzoeken van attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening van door oorlog getroffen jongeren die in postconflict Noord-Oeganda leven en op de factoren die geassocieerd zijn met deze attitudes: sociodemografische karakteristieken (leeftijd, gender, of de vader en moeder al dan niet nog leven, met wie de jongeren samenleven), internaliserende psychische problemen (symptomen van posttraumatische stress, depressie en angst), externaliserende problemen (agressief gedrag, regelovertredend gedrag) en factoren die verbonden zijn aan de postconflict setting (oorlogsgere lateerde stressoren, ervaringen van het kindssoldaat zijn, dagelijkse stressoren en de impact van postconflict verzoeningsprogramma’s). Attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening worden in deze studie gezien als attitudes die men heeft ten aanzien van een individu of groep die de persoon in kwestie schade berokkend zou(den) hebben. Deze attitudes omvatten vier dimensies: welwillendheid, toekomstoriëntatie, vermijding en wraak. De studie onderzocht ook de betekenissen die jongeren, met name voormalige kindsoldaten, en figuren uit hun onmiddellijk context geven aan verzoening en aan verzoeningsprogramma’s in relatie tot postconflict herstelprocessen. Kennis van de gecontextualiseerde betekenissen van verzoening en van de factoren die attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening beïnvloeden is van belang bij de implementatie van psychosociale programma’s die verzoening tussen mensen die pijn geleden hebben en verdeeld zijn geworden door een conflict. Dit zal op zijn beurt helpen bij het realiseren van een postconflict herstel.

De studie richt zich dan ook op volgende onderzoeksvragen:
1. Wat zijn de attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening van door oorlog getroffen adolescenten in postconflict Noord-Oeganda?
2. Welke factoren (sociodemografische karakteristieken, oorlogsgere relateerde stressoren, dagelijkse stressoren, psychische problemen en verzoeningsprogramma’s) hebben een invloed op de attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening van door oorlog getroffen adolescenten?
3. Wat zijn de perspectieven van door oorlog getroffen adolescenten op verzoening en op verzoeningsprogramma’s?
Onderzoeksdesign

Om de verzameling van lokale perspectieven op verzoening in een postconflict setting mogelijk te maken, werd een combinatie van zowel kwantitatieve als kwantitatieve methoden gebruikt. Deze methode leidde reeds eerder tot waardevolle resultaten in postconflict settings. De studie bestond uit twee fasen, voorafgegaan door een voorstudie waarin interviews werden afgenomen met sleutelinformanten uit organisaties die werkzaam zijn in het domein van vredesopbouw en verzoening, met de bedoeling om informatie te verzamelen over de vredes- en verzoeningsactiviteiten waarin zij betrokken waren. Op basis van de verkregen informatie en in het bijzonder de mate waarin al dan niet interventies t.a.v. verzoening werden uitgeoefend in deze gemeenschappen selecteerden we de twee centrale contexten van onze studie (met name de subcounty's Adwari en Olilim).

De eerste studie exploreerde voor eerst de attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening van door oorlog getroffen jongeren en ten tweede de factoren die kunnen geassocieerd worden met deze attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening in postconflict Noord-Oeganda. Deze factoren omvatten sociodemografische kenmerken (leeftijd, gender, of de vader en moeder leven of gestorven zijn, met wie de jongeren samenleven), oorlogsgereleerde stressoren, inclusief ervaringen van het kindsoldaat-zijn, dagelijkse stressoren, internaliserende en externaliserende psychische problemen en de impact van interventies gericht op verzoening.

In deze studie werd gebruik gemaakt van zelfrapportagevragenlijsten. 445 jongeren, zowel schoolgaande als niet-schoolgaande, uit de twee gemeenschappen Adwari en Olilim in het Otuke district in Noord-Oeganda vulden de vragenlijsten in.

Om schoolgaande jongeren te bereiken, werden vragenlijsten afgenomen in de secundaire scholen van beide gemeenschappen (n=2). In deze scholen werden alle leerlingen tussen 13 en 21 jaar oud die aanwezig waren op het moment van de studie ondervraagd (n=286 op een totaal van 560 leerlingen; 187 op een totaal van 400 leerlingen in de secundaire school van Adwari, en 99 op een totaal van 160 leerlingen in de secundaire school in Otuke). Daarnaast werden niet-schoolgaande jongeren (n=151) geselecteerd die voldeden aan volgende inclusierestrictions: jongeren tussen 13 en 21 jaar en woonachtig zijn in één van de twee geselecteerde gemeenschappen. Lokale leiders hielpen bij het mobiliseren van jongeren en het doorverwijzen van mogelijke participanten naar de dataverzamelingscentra in de gemeenschappen.

De jongeren vulden voor eerst een vragenlijst in waarin gepeild werd naar een aantal sociodemografische kenmerken. Daarnaast een zelfrapportagevragenlijst rond hun ervaringen met oorlogsgereleerde stressoren (de Stressful War Events questionnaire (SWE)), een vragenlijst rond de huidige dagelijkse stressoren (Adolescent Complex Emergency Exposure Scale), een bevraging van symptomen van angst en depressie (Hopkins Symptoms Checklist (HSCL-37A) en van posttraumatische stress (Impact of Events Scale-Revised (IES-R), een vragenlijst rond het voorkomen van agressief en regelovertrekend gedrag (Youth Self Report) en ten slotte een vragenlijst rond hun
attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening (Openness to Reconciliation Questionnaire). In de data-analyse werd voor elk van de vier verzoeningsattitudes stapsgewijze hiërarchische lineaire modellen gefit, met de vier attitudes als afhankelijke variabelen (welwillendheid, toekomstoriëntatie, vermijding en wraakattitudes) en de genoemde mogelijke geassocieerde variabelen (demografische kenmerken, oorlogsgerelateerde stressoren, ervaringen als kindsoldaat, dagelijkse stressoren, internaliserende en externaliserende psychische problemen en verzoeningsprogramma’s) als onafhankelijke variabelen. R 2.14.1 software werd gebruikt om de analyses uit te voeren.

Studie twee documenteerde de perspectieven van voormalige kindsoldaten op verzoening en verzoeningsprogramma’s in een postconflict gemeenschap (Adwari) in Noord-Oeganda. In aanvulling met deze data werden eveneens de perspectieven verzameld van dichte familieleden (die aanwezig waren wanneer de voormalig ontvoerde kinderen naar huis terugkeerden uit gevangenschap en deelnamen aan de voor hen ontworpen verzoeningsprogramma’s) en sleuteleinformaten (werkzaam bij organisaties betrokken bij verzoening in het onderzoeksgebied). De bestudeerde cases bestonden uit voormalig ontvoerde kinderen en twee of drie significante personen uit zijn/haar context (een familielid, vriend, buur,…), geïdentificeerd door het kind zelf. Er werd gebruik gemaakt van een netwerkbenadering om potentiële participanten te identificeren uit de populatie. In totaal werden drie casestudies uitgevoerd waarbij drie voormalig ontvoerde kinderen, zeven familieleden en buren en twee sleuteleinformaten werden bevraagd aan de hand van diepte-interviews. Er werd gekozen om cases in de Adwari gemeenschap te bestuderen omdat deze gemeenschap, in tegenstelling tot de andere gemeenschap Ollilim, een specifiek verzoeningsprogramma had met onder meer als doel om het re-integratieproces van voormalig ontvoerde kinderen te ondersteunen. Dit gebeurde via het verbeteren van hun psychosociaal welbevinden, via onderwijs en gezondheidszorg, en via het ondersteunen van duurzame vredesopbouw aan de hand van verzoeningsinitiatieven. De data werd geanalyseerd via thematische analyse.

De studie werd goedgekeurd door de Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) en de ethische commissie van de Universiteit Gent. De ethische condities van deelname aan de studie werden uitgelegd aan de participanten en vervolgens werd samen met hen een informed consent overlopen. De onderzoeker gaf een gedetailleerde uitleg aan de potentieel participanten over alle informatie in het informed consent formulier. Vervolgens werden alle personen die toestemden om deel te nemen aan het onderzoek (geen enkel potentiële participant weigerde deel te nemen) gevraagd om hun toestemming schriftelijk te bevestigen door het ondertekenen van het consent formulier. Na de ondertekening van het consent volgens de beschreven procedure, werd iedere participant op de hoogte gebracht van het feit dat ze nog steeds vrij waren om zich op ieder moment terug te trekken uit het onderzoek zonder enige negatieve gevolgen. De participanten werden geïnformeerd dat er tijdens het onderzoek een klinisch psycholoog (beschikbaar was die ondersteuning kon bieden indien er emotionele moeilijkheden zouden optreden door de gestelde vragen of door
eventuele andere zaken. Indien nodig kon een respondent eveneens doorverwezen worden naar de Mental Health Unit van het Lira Regional Referral Hospital waar gekwalificeerde professionals aanwezig waren om verdere ondersteuning te geven.

Bevindingen

In een *eerste deelluik* van de eerste studie bestudeerden we de verzoeningsattitudes van voormalige kindsoldaten in Noord-Oeganda in vergelijking met jongeren zonder verleden als kindsoldaten. De resultaten tonen dat over het algemeen hoge niveaus worden vastgesteld bij beide groepen in hun attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening, zowel in de positieve (welwillendheid en toekomstoriëntering) als de negatieve (vermijding en wraak) attitudes. Opvallend was echter dat voormalige kindsoldaten hogere attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening rapporteerden, zowel positieve als negatieve. Een dergelijke trend van gemengde attitudes op het vlak van verzoening werd reeds vastgesteld in andere studies in gelijkaardige situaties. Daarnaast werd in deze studie vastgesteld dat vrouwelijke adolescenten meestal meer positieve attitudes van welwillendheid ten aanzien van verzoening vertonen dan mannelijke adolescenten en was er een duidelijke associatie met zowel de blootstelling aan oorlogsgerelateerde als aan dagelijkse stressoren. En vaak zijn het de ex-kindsoldaten die het zwaarst getroffen worden door deze laatste beide types stressoren.

Het *tweede deelluik* van de studie wilde mogelijke associaties nagaan tussen attitudes van verzoening en psychische problemen, met internaliserende psychische problemen (symptomen van posttraumatische stress, depressie en angst) en externaliserend problemen (agressief en regelovertredend gedrag). De bevindingen toonden aan dat de aanwezigheid van posttraumatische symptomen geassocieerd was met positieve attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening (welwillendheid en toekomstoriëntatie). Deze bevinding komt overeen met andere studies in Noord-Oeganda die aantoonden dat kinderen, ondanks de aanwezigheid van psychische problemen en de blootstelling aan trauma’s, zich nog steeds vrij goed terug konden integreren in hun gemeenschap en een positief perspectief op de toekomst hadden. Anderzijds toonde de studie aan dat kinderen die meer dagelijkse stressoren rapporteerden en tegelijkertijd meer psychische problemen (zowel internaliserende als externaliserende) ook meer vermijdende attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening rapporteerden. Bovendien toonde deze studie aan dat gedragsproblemen (zowel agressief als regelovertredend gedrag) geassocieerd waren met meer wraakattitudes. Ook dit bevestigt resultaten van eerdere studies. De bevindingen impliceerden dat jongeren getroffen door oorlog lijden onder belangrijke internaliserende en externaliserende psychische problemen en dat hun attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening kunnen afhangen van de aard en ernst van dit psychisch welzijn.

Een *derde deelluik* van deze studie gaat mogelijke genderverschillen na in attitudes
ten aanzien van verzoening bij door oorlog getroffen jongeren in Noord-Oeganda. De attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening van jongens en meisjes werden vergeleken, gezien de veronderstelde verschillen in eerdere oorlogsgerelateerde stressoren en dagelijkse sociale en economische stressoren in hun huidige levenssituatie in postconflict Noord-Oeganda. De resultaten toonden aan dat meisjes meer dagelijkse stressoren rapporteerden dan jongens, maar dat meisjes en jongens anderzijds weinig verschillen vertoonden in oorlogsgerelateerde ervaringen. Verder toonde de studie aan dat er geen belangrijke verschillen waren qua attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening bij meisjes en jongens. Dit betekent dat jongeren die getroffen worden door oorlog de stresserende omstandigheden die samengaan met oorlog en de nasleep daarvan op een gelijkwaardige manier ervaren, ondanks het feit dat sommigen in grotere mate worden blootgesteld aan deze stresserende omstandigheden dan anderen. Dit kan wijzen op het feit dat jongeren getroffen door oorlog in het algemeen geneigd zijn tot verzoening, onafhankelijk van de blootstelling aan stresserende omstandigheden. Er werden geen associaties gevonden met de sociodemografische kenmerken leeftijd en het feit of de vader en moeder nog leefden of gestorven waren.

In alle studies werd aangetoond dat de participanten blootgesteld werden aan talrijke oorlogsgerelateerde stressoren. We vonden een sterke positieve associatie tussen het aantal oorlogsgerelateerde stressoren en positieve attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening (welwillendheid en toekomstoriëntatie). Dit sluit aan bij een belangrijk thema in de ‘posttraumatic growth’ literatuur, die stelt dat lijden kan uitmonden in positieve persoonlijke groei. Deze bevinding kan erop wijzen dat negatieve oorlogsgerelateerde situaties niet altijd een negatieve impact hebben op jongeren, maar in tegendeel een kans kunnen vormen om positieve attitudes ten aanzien van zichzelf en anderen te ontwikkelen, inclusief attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening, en om energie uit te putten voor het blijvend functioneren in hun gemeenschap.

De resultaten tonen ook aan dat oorlogsgerelateerde stressoren, hoewel ze geassocieerd werden met positieve attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening, soms ook geassocieerd werden met negatieve vermijdingsattitudes ten aanzien van verzoening (ook aangetoond in eerdere studies). Dit zou verklaard kunnen worden door de nood van ex-kindsoldaten en andere door oorlog getroffen adolescenten om vermijding te gebruiken als een copingstrategie. Deze bevinding kan eveneens geïnterpreteerd worden in relatie tot de hoge prevalentie van psychische problemen bij door oorlog getroffen jongeren en de mogelijke invloed daarvan op hun attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening in Noord-Oeganda.

Net zoals bij oorlogsgerelateerde stressoren werd vastgesteld dat de blootstelling aan dagelijkse stressoren voor jongeren in postconflict Noord-Oeganda vrij hoog was, wat de resultaten van eerdere studies in Noord-Oeganda bevestigt. Een hogere blootstelling aan dagelijkse stressoren was in het algemeen geassocieerd met een toename in negatieve attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening, wat wijst op het feit dat
jongeren die blootgesteld worden aan meer dagelijkse stressoren minder bereid waren tot verzoening. Opmerkelijk is dat dagelijkse stressoren wel geassocieerd worden met positieve attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening wanneer er eveneens veel oorlogsgerelateerde stressoren gerapporteerd werden. Zoals reeds aangegeven is dit thema nog maar weinig bestudeerd in onderzoek, hoewel studies over dagelijkse stressoren in postconflict settings aantonen dat ze een voortdurende en chronische bedreiging vormen voor het psychologische welzijn. Ze hebben dus een ingrijpende impact op langere termijn, wat kan leiden tot een erosie van copingbronnen, dit terwijl ze zwaar doorwegen op de psychische gezondheid. Dit zou mede bepaald worden door het gegeven dat dagelijkse stressoren ervaren waren als erg controleerbaar en blijvend aanwezig zijn in de post-conflict setting, waardoor hun impact op het psychisch welzijn groter kan zijn. Dit blijkt eveneens uit wat we vaststelden over de gecombineerde invloed van stressoren en psychische problemen op de attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening: zo vonden we een hoge associatie tussen de blootstelling aan dagelijkse stressoren in combinatie met hoge niveaus van posttraumatische stress en vermijdingsattitudes. Daarnaast lieten de bevinden zien dat negatieve wraakattitudes ten aanzien verzoening gevonden worden, indien de blootstelling aan oorlogsgerelateerde stressoren gecombineerd werd met agressief gedrag.

In een vierde deelluik van deze eerste studie bestudeerden we de mogelijke associaties tussen verzoeningsprogramma's en attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening bij adolescenten getroffen door oorlog in twee gemeenschappen in Noord-Oeganda. Daarbij werden de attitudes van jongeren in de ene gemeenschap, waar wel een vredes- en verzoeningsprogramma werd opgezet, vergeleken met de attitudes van de jongeren in de andere gemeenschap, waar geen soortgelijke formele interventie werd uitgevoerd. De resultaten toonden aan dat de impact van deze programma's vrij beperkt bleef. Zo was er geen invloed op negatieve attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening (vermijding en wraak). De resultaten tonen zelfs aan dat, hoewel de jongeren van beide gemeenschappen positieve attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening toonden, de prevalentie van positieve attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening hoger was bij jongeren van de niet-interventiegroep. Deze resultaten tonen aan dat dergelijke verzoeningsprogramma's hun strategieën om verzoening te bereiken moeten herzien. Ze zouden jongeren getroffen door conflict moeten kunnen helpen om de bronnen van conflict te identificeren die hen verhinderen om voorbij hun negatieve perspectieven te kijken en om hun vijandige gevoelens ten aanzien van hun omgeving te boven te komen. Dit betekent dat men meer dient aan te sluiten bij lokale initiatieven, verbanden en organisaties van de doelgroep waar men zich op richt. Het is eveneens belangrijk dat de programma's zich richten op het revitaliseren van de hele gemeenschap en aandacht schenken aan alle sociaal-ecologische factoren (zoals bijvoorbeeld armoede, ziekte en gebrek aan onderwijs) die mogelijk een impact hebben op de effectiviteit van de programma's.
In de *tweede studie* worden de ‘lived experiences’ van verzoening bij voormalige kindsoldaten bestudeerd. We opteerden voor deze doelgroep omwille van hun directe en actieve betrokkenheid in het gewapend conflict en doordat zij in sterke mate te maken kregen met sociale problemen, zoals gebroken relaties met hun eigen families of gemeenschappen tegen wie ze (gedwongen of om andere redenen) ernstige misdaden begingen en een vaak erg moeilijk verlopend proces van re-integreatie in de gemeenschappen. Hoewel dit gegeven duidelijk de noodzaak van verzoening oproept is het echter onduidelijk wat verzoening precies betekent vanuit de ex-kindsoldaten en wat postconflict programma’s voor hen zouden moeten doen. Deze studie maakte gebruik van diepgaande casestudies om meer perspectieven te onderzoeken. Deze data werden daarnaast aangevuld met de perspectieven van familieleden en andere naasten omtrent dezelfde thema’s. De studie toonde aan dat de participanten verzoening zagen als ‘vergeven’ en ‘vergeten’. Dit is consistent met bevindingen uit andere studies waarin ‘vergeven’ vaak verbonden wordt met verzoening en dat ‘vergeten’ vaak rechtstreeks geassocieerd wordt met verzoening omdat het een manier is om om te gaan met slechte ervaringen uit het verleden. ‘Vergeten’ zou dus verzoening stimuleren omdat het mensen helpt om te vergeten en te luisteren en de toekomst te omarmen.

Daarnaast biedt de studie zicht op het feit dat de respondenten verschillende strategieën gebruikten om de gewenste verzoening (vergeten en vergeven) te realiseren. Zo werden traditionele rituelen gezien als een manier om de wederzijdse aanvaarding tussen de gemeenschap en voorheen ontvoerde kinderen te verhogen. Daarnaast werden religieuze rituelen (bidden) gezien als belangrijk voor processen van coping. Het ter beschikking stellen van zaken als onderwijs, vaardigheden en materiële ondersteuning werd als belangrijk gezien om voormalige kindsoldaten te helpen terug ‘normale’ sociale rollen op te nemen en om de angst voor elkaar te verminderen en op die manier dus verzoening te bevorderen. Ten slotte werd ‘silencing’, het niet praten over wrede ervaringen uit het verleden, aangegeven als een strategie om verzoening te bereiken, wat we ook terugvinden in ander onderzoek. ‘Silencing’ werd aangeduid als noodzakelijke copingstrategie om de voormalige kindsoldaten te helpen vergelding, toekomstige schade of stigma te vermijden en om (re)acceptatie te kunnen bekomen van de gemeenschap. Echter, hoewel deze strategieën verzoening promoten – begrepen als vergeten en vergeven – toonde de studie aan dat verzoening slechts beperkt plaatsvond in de realiteit, gezien angst en stigmatisering blijvend plaatsvonden in de gemeenschap.

**Beperkingen van het onderzoek**

De bevindingen van de studies dienen geïnterpreteerd te worden in het licht van een aantal methodologische beperkingen. Vooreerst maakte de studie gebruik van een *cross-sectioneel* design dat, hoewel het zinvol kan zijn om associaties na te gaan, moeilijk
toelaat om causale verbanden te leggen. Bovendien kunnen eventuele veranderingen in attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening bij de jongeren sinds het einde van de oorlog moeilijk nagegaan worden met deze methode. Bovendien ging deze studie door zes jaar na het einde van de oorlog in Noord-Oeganda. Dit betekent dat de impact van oorlogsgereleerde stressoren afgenomen kan zijn door het verstrijken van de tijd en dat op die manier de interpretatie van de effecten ervan op attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening complexer wordt, bijvoorbeeld dat oorlogsgereleerde stressoren geassocieerd werden met positieve attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening. Bovendien kunnen de dagelijkse postconflict stressoren ook veranderd zijn, wat mogelijks andere bevindingen opgeleverd zou hebben indien de studie eerder was uitgevoerd.

De data die gebruikt werden in deze studie zijn voornamelijk gebaseerd op zelfrapportage via vragenlijsten. Dit kan vragen doen rijzen over de nauwkeurigheid van de retrospectieve informatie. Daarnaast biedt het verzamelen van informatie via vragenlijsten niet de mogelijkheid tot een diepgaande exploratie van attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening, van de erme geassocieerde factoren en van de verscheidenheid van individuele ervaringen, zowel tijdens als na de oorlog die gemeten en gerapporteerd werden in deze studie. Hoewel er een cultureel valideringsproces plaatsvond van de instrumenten die gebruikt werden om de data te verzamelen, zou het kunnen – gezien de constructie ervan beïnvloed werd door Westerse prototypes – dat ze nog altijd niet volledig aangepast zijn aan de lokale culturele context. Dit heeft mogelijks het type en de kwaliteit van de bekomen responsen beïnvloed.

Een andere belangrijke beperking heeft betrekking op de generalisering van de bevindingen. Deze studie werd uitgevoerd in de rurale postconflict setting van Noord-Oeganda, onder mensen van één etnische groep met een eigen cultuur en visie op de wereld en specifieke sociale omstandigheden die misschien niet identiek zijn aan andere postconflict settings, voornamelijk diegene die zich voordoen in stedelijke en multi-etnische situaties.

Het is ook belangrijk om in gedachten te houden dat de constructen waarmee we attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening definieerden (welwillendheid, toekomstoriëntatie, vermijding en wraak) misschien niet de enige zijn. Er zouden andere attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening kunnen zijn die niet gekend zijn, gezien de beperkte hoeveelheid onderzoek die beschikbaar is in verband met dit thema.

Bovendien zouden de participanten idealiter gelijk verdeeld moeten zijn op vlak van gender en onderwijsniveau (studerend of niet-studerend), maar dit was niet mogelijk omwille van verschillende factoren. Een van diefactoren is de bevolkingsstructuur en het hogere aantal jongeren dat schoolgaand is, wat leidde tot een lager aantal vrouwelijke en niet-schoolgaande participanten. Dit zou kunnen betekenen dat hun situatie toch anders is dan wat weergegeven is in deze studie.

Okkangaande het beoordelen van de programma’s is er een aantal beperkingen. Ten eerste waren we niet aanwezig tijdens de interventies en dienden we wat betreft de concrete inhoud en de implementatiewijze van deze programma’s af te gaan op de informatie van de aanbieders van die programma’s en op de zelfgerapporteerde
informatie van de participanten. Dit heeft er misschien voor gezorgd dat we de feitelijke impact van deze programma's niet in zijn volledigheid konden vatten. Bovendien heeft de studie zich voornamelijk gefocust op één specifiek programma, waardoor de resultaten mogelijk zeer specifiek zijn en misschien niet te veralgemenen zijn naar andere verzoeningsprogramma's in postconflict settings. Gezien deze laatstgenoemde beperkingen, is het noodzakelijk om voorzichtig om te springen met onze resultaten over de interventieprogramma's.

Ten slotte hadden we geen informatie over het psychische welzijn van de participanten. We moesten terugvallen op de symptomen die de jongeren zelf rapporteerden, wat mogelijks samenhangt met de vermijdings- en wraakattitudes die de participanten bleken te hebben.

Aanbevelingen voor verder onderzoek

Ondanks de tekortkomingen ervan heeft deze studie op unieke wijze bijgedragen tot het beschikbare onderzoek dat inzicht probeert te verwerven in verzoening en de factoren die samengaan met attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening in postconflict settings. Kennis over factoren die een invloed hebben op attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening zal een belangrijke bijdrage leveren aan het verbeteren van psychosociale interventies ten aanzien van jongeren getroffen door oorlog. Niettemin is bijkomend onderzoek nodig om hierover meer kennis te verzamelen. Zoals al aangegeven heeft deze studie bepaalde tekortkomingen en toekomstig onderzoek kan deze hiaten aangrijpen als startpunt.

Er is nood aan longitudinaal onderzoek om het bestuderen van directe causale relaties mogelijk te maken tussen factoren van verzoening enerzijds en attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening anderzijds en om zicht te krijgen op evoluties doorheen de tijd die mogelijk een impact hebben op deze attitudes. Bovendien moeten andere methodes, zoals diepte-interviews en etnografische methoden, ingezet worden om contextueel relevante informatie over de betekenis van verzoening en attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening te verzamelen. Dit zou het mogelijk moeten maken om een antwoord te bieden op vragen zoals waarom jongeren die in hoge mate te maken kregen met oorlogsgelateerde en dagelijkse stressoren nog steeds positieve attitudes hebben ten aanzien van verzoening? Paalde zaken en de data te cross-checken.

Men moet werken aan het verder verbeteren van bestaande instrumenten en/ of het ontwikkelen van nieuwe instrumenten voor de dataverzameling binnen verzoeningsstudies. Dit zal de exploratie mogelijk maken van een specifiek cultureel ingebred begrip van processen van verzoening en factoren die deze processen bevorderen of verhinderen en zal waar nodig leiden tot betere constructen van verzoening.

Ten slotte is er nood aan meer onderzoek over het belang van dagelijkse stressoren als een factor die geassocieerd is met verzoeningsattitudes en dienen er ook studies uitgevoerd te worden rond verzoening in multi-etnische en stedelijke settings.
Implicaties voor psychosociale interventies

Onze bevindingen hebben directe implicaties voor postconflict herstel, gezien negatieve attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening de gewenste verzoening kunnen verhinderen. Het is dus belangrijk om aandacht te geven aan het verbeteren van negatieve attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening, gezien ze contraproducentie kunnen zijn bij het realiseren van verzoening, re-integratie en postconflict herstel van door oorlog getroffen kinderen. Studies tonen aan dat psychosociale programma’s in Noord-Oeganda op dit moment op heel veel aspecten focussen, maar zelden specifiek inzetten op verzoening. Dit zorgde ervoor dat het werk op het vlak van verzoening voornamelijk overgelaten werd aan traditionele verzoeningsprogramma’s. Er is nood aan suggesties voor manieren waarop programma’s verzoening zouden kunnen bevorderen in postconflict settings. Dit zou onder andere gedaan kunnen worden door het aanpakken van negatieve attitudes ten aanzien van verzoening en door aandacht te hebben voor de psychische problemen bij door oorlog getroffen jongeren, bijvoorbeeld door sensibiliseringsprogramma’s die erop gericht zijn om verzoening te bevorderen en door het voorzien van psychologische ondersteuning. Psychosociale programma’s die er specifiek op gericht zijn om de effecten van dagelijkse stressoren te verzachten kunnen ook helpen om de postconflict situatie te verbeteren. Het is ook belangrijk om de capaciteiten te versterken van traditionele instutitues om verder effectieve verzoeningsprogramma’s aan te bieden in postconflict settings.

Deze studie toonde aan dat wie postconflict verzoeningsprogramma’s implementeert ook rekening moet houden met de ruimere bezorgdheden van de gemeenschappen waarin ze werken, onder andere via het verbeteren van de algemene socionoeconomische situatie van mensen. Dit betekent dat er nood is aan een multidimensionele, gezamenlijke aanpak, die niet alleen de lokale instituties en organisaties, maar ook de ruimere en nationale overheden betrekt, om gemeenschappen te ondersteunen waarbij alle factoren in de sociale ecologie (zoals armoede, ziekte en gebrek aan onderwijs) aangepakt worden.

Ten slotte toonden de resultaten aan dat ex-kindsoldaten extra vatbaar lijken te zijn voor wraakattitudes. Er moeten doelbewuste inspanningen gedaan worden om deze groep van door oorlog getroffen jongeren te helpen om de negatieve verzoeningsattitudes die ze hebben om te buigen. Tegelijkertijd dient er blijvend te worden ingezet op het ombuigen van de stigmatiserende en discriminerende houdingen van burgers t.a.v. deze voormalige kindsoldaten. Hierbij stelt zich ook duidelijk de vraag hoe de strategie van ‘silencing’ kan omgebogen worden, zodanig dat dit voor iedereen en op elk vlak (zowel het psychisch welzijn van het individu als zijn sociale positie) een positief verhaal kan worden.