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Individual Lives and Social History: Extending the Lessons of Macrosystem Research beyond Northern Ireland

Andres Molano

Universidad de los Andes

a.molano@uniandes.edu.co

In the *SRCD Monograph* entitled "[Youth in Northern Ireland: Linking Violence Exposure, Emotional Insecurity, and the Political Macrosystem](#)," Townsend, Taylor, Merrilees, Furey, Goeke-Morey, Shirlow, and Cummings (2020) explore how the longitudinal associations between sectarian violence and emotional insecurity are moderated by the cumulative and time-variant effects of political tension and threat in Belfast, almost ten years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Employing a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative methods, the authors offer an insightful illustration of what Urie Bronfenbrenner and Pamela Morris defined as *Developmental Science in the Discovery Mode* (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Their findings, while rooted in strong theoretical predictions, highlight the complex interactions of proximal processes unfolding over personal time and the time-variant characteristics of a dynamic macrosystem. In this work, theory provides a stage where "Of primary scientific interest are not those aspects of the observed pattern already anticipated in the existing theoretical model, but those features that point to more differentiated and precise theoretical formulations." (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, pp.802)

Whereas general expectations of the intra-individual associations between cumulative exposure to sectarian violence and emotional insecurity – a developmental correlate of internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Cummings et al., 2016; Cummings, Cheung, & Davies, 2013) – would suggest a negative association, the work of Townsend et al. illustrates that these general patterns are highly dependent on the historic progression of events unfolding in the macrosystem of post-accord Northern Ireland. Specifically, as noted by the authors, "During periods of higher political tension, those [adolescents] who had more total exposure to violence were *more emotionally secure*, while those with less total exposure were largely unaffected—regardless of their group identity (p. 90)". This overall picture becomes more interesting and intricate after the authors explore how specific threats to either Catholic or Protestant groups unfold in the macrosystem over time and discuss them in light of historical events that differentially affect these groups.

Without posing as an expert on the peace process of Northern Ireland – and with the help of the well-crafted timeline of events presented by the authors – my own experience resonates with their findings. A couple of years ago, as a member of a Colombian delegation interested in youth transitional justice interventions in Belfast, I had the opportunity to visit Ireland and interact with young people involved in their judicial system. My trip took place in spring of 2017 which meant that my visit to Belfast came right after I had experienced the signing of the Colombian peace agreements that attempted to end almost five decades of internal conflict. Given my own experiences in Colombia, one of the most appealing observations I made in Ireland was the language young people in Belfast used to describe the political climate of their country. That is, I saw that almost twenty years after the signing of the Northern Ireland agreement, both Catholic and Protestant youth unequivocally referred to their macrosystem as being in “a peace process.” As a Colombian, elated by our newly minted agreement, it was hard to understand how the perception of process – a succession of events taken in order to achieve a particular end (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) – could remain so vivid in a society almost twenty years beyond their post-accord phase.

At a personal level, the monograph by Townsend et al. provides a possible explanation for the anecdote I just described, by masterfully demonstrating how history and biography are mutually constituted. Macrolevel political processes shape individuals’ development and at the same time, individual perceptions and positions color (and in turn) modify these macrolevel political processes. The notion of process that these adolescents in Belfast used is one that recognized the implicit and subtle dynamics between individual and social forces across time. As time has shown, the ways that I heard adolescents in Belfast describe the political tensions of their country during my 2017 visit appear to have started to unfold in the macrosystem of Colombia. With a current government that is hostile to the signed agreements, there have been mistrusts, political tension, and sectarian homicides resurfacing in the context of a post-accord Colombia. Young people from different parts of the society have led mobilizations in reaction to these changes, and will probably be affected by, and will change, the turn of history in this country.

As developmental scientists, we should not be surprised by findings that run against our predictions. From our strong theoretical models we are trained to expect that “the principal main effects are likely to be interactions” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); yet the mastery of the work by Townsend et al. resides in their careful design, implementation, and communication of a research program that extends beyond the field’s comfort zone of intra-individual change. It does so by measuring and testing patterns at the macrosystem, and by examining how these patterns interact with individual development. Wright Mills’ (1959) concept of a sociological imagination – where biography and history are linked to understand social phenomena – is brought to developmental science in this monograph. This feat is accomplished by the investigators’ methods of carefully selecting and coding newspaper articles that reflect events of intergroup tension and threat over five years of post-accord in Belfast. As pointed out by Townsend et al., the process of coding these sources of information is not free from bias, yet it allows the investigators to qualitatively and quantitatively represent the way in which historical times and events are experienced over the life-course of their participants, above and beyond aggregated accounts.

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By carefully crafting and implementing a Multilevel Model for Change (Singer & Willett, 2003) where these indicators of the macro-time are represented as intra- and inter-individual predictors of development, the authors provide their readers with one unique empirical test of the predictions of the Bioecological Theory of Human Development that equally weights and balances history and biography. This balance between history and biography is also represented in the modeling decisions Townsend et al. make. By modeling the macrosystem as an intra-individual varying predictor, and paying particular attention to the interpretation of this effect, the authors successfully represent and test how environmental factors differentially affect individuals within the same setting over a 5-year period of their life-course.

Due to the exceptional attention that Townsend et al. pay to the macrosystem, one might think that their findings are bounded to time and place, yet I would argue that their findings extend theoretically and methodologically to different societies where conflict has shaped the lives of individuals. The fact that sectarian violence impacts the development of adolescents differentially, depending on the social contexts in which environmental risk is experienced, is not unusual for people developing under the threat of violence. In my own work in Colombia, the Middle East, and the United States, I have also tried to represent how violence in the larger social context (i.e., in schools, refuge settlements, neighborhoods, and extended social networks) shape and interact with intra-individual developmental processes.

A common finding across these settings and studies is represented in the work of Townsend et al. insofar as they find that variability in the social positions of individuals exacerbate or mitigate the effect of external threats on development. For example, in collaborative work with Stephanie Jones and Catalina Torrente, we have documented how Colombian children's classroom contexts moderate effects of exposure to family and neighborhood risks (Molano, Torrente, & Jones, 2015). We have also explored how seasonal and compositional variations affect child aggression in New York City (Jones & Molano, 2016), and how social networks among elementary school children serve as channels through which classroom aggression influences development (Molano, Jones, Aber, & Brown, 2013). Finally, in more recent work, I have explored how exposure to violence in the vicinity of schools differentially affects social and emotional development of children in Colombia (Molano, Harker, & Cristancho, 2018) and how perception of family and community resources impacts the mental health of refuge families in Jordan (Hilgendorf et al., *under review*). What is common across this work, and that of others, are the attempts to represent how contextual features interact with individual human development. What is unique about the work of Townsend et al. is that they have achieved an accurate and person-centered representation and modeling of how macro and micro level processes interact across time.

In contemporary times, our lives have been impacted by macrolevel threats such as COVID-19. Due to the current emergency, we have been forced to realize that such risks interact differentially across individuals, settings, and societal attributes over time. What comes to mind is the concept of *syndemic* – a biological threat that synergistically interacts with social factors to affect populations (see Singer, Bulled, Ostrach, & Mendenhall, 2017). Within the current context, what the monograph by Townsend et al. highlights is the idea that threat comes not only from biological vectors, but also from living with the sustained threats of violence across years. I expect that this monograph will spark many theoretical and methodological conversations within developmental science, and across disciplines. From direct experience as

human beings who live and develop within an ecological context, we can no longer assume that our biography is independent from the historical times we live in and help to shape. “Youth in Northern Ireland: Linking Violence Exposure, Emotional Insecurity, and the Political Macrosystem,” by Townsend et al. provides an excellent example for developmental scientists to navigate the theoretical and methodological challenges that lie ahead.

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