

Youth in Northern Ireland: Linking Violence Exposure, Emotional Insecurity, and the Political Macrosystem

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Abstract Growing up in the aftermath of armed conflict puts youth at a higher risk for psychopathology—particularly in societies like Northern Ireland which continue to be characterized by intergroup tension and cyclical violence. This risk may be heightened during adolescence, when youth are beginning to explore their identities and are becoming more aware of intergroup dynamics in both their immediate communities and the broader society. It is also during this stage when youth increasingly witness or engage in antisocial behavior and sectarian activities. A series of studies in Belfast conducted by Cummings et al. (2014, *Child Dev Perspect*, 12(1), 16–38; 2019, *J Clin Child Adolesc Psychol*, 48(2), 296–305) showed that adolescents' exposure to sectarian violence resulted in heightened emotional insecurity about the community and subsequent adjustment problems. Though the impact of direct exposure to violence is well documented, few studies have accounted for the influence of sectarianism that occurs outside of one's immediate environment. These influences may include the general climate surrounding events that are not experienced firsthand but are nonetheless salient, such as the overarching levels of tension between groups or societal discourse that is threatening to one's identity. These higher-level influences, often referred to collectively as the macrosystem, are a necessary component to consider for adequately assessing one's socio-developmental environment. Yet,

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measurement at this level of the social ecology has proven elusive in past work. The current study advances research in this area by using newspaper coding as a method of measuring the political macrosystem in Northern Ireland and assessing whether a tense or threatening climate serves as an added risk factor for youth living in Belfast.

In the current study, we measured sectarian violence at the level of the macrosystem by systematically collecting and coding newspaper articles from Northern Ireland that were published between 2006 and 2011 ($N = 2,797$). Each article was coded according to its level of overall political tension between Catholics and Protestants, threat to Catholics, and threat to Protestants. When aggregated, these assessments reflected the overarching trends in Catholic–Protestant relations during this period. In order to assess the association between these sociopolitical trends and the direct experiences of adolescents, the newspaper coding was linked with five waves of survey data from families ($N = 999$) in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas of Belfast. Using a series of multilevel moderation analyses, we then tested whether intergroup tension and ingroup threat moderated the relation between adolescents’ direct exposure to violence and their emotional insecurity. These analyses were followed by a thematic analysis of the coded newspaper articles in order to provide further context to the findings.

The results indicated that adolescents’ response to direct exposure to sectarian violence varied based on the political climate at the time of their interview. Overall, the adolescents’ emotional insecurity about the community increased with exposure to sectarian violence. During periods when the sociopolitical climate was characterized by high levels of intergroup political tension, this relation was slightly weaker—regardless of the adolescents’ ingroup (i.e., Protestant vs. Catholic). During periods when the sociopolitical climate was coded as threatening, this relation was weaker for Catholic adolescents. That is, high levels of macro-level threat—particularly events coded as threatening for Protestants—seemed to be a protective factor for Catholic adolescents. Group differences were also found based on the adolescents’ cumulative amount of exposure to sectarian violence. As threat in the macrosystem increased, Catholic adolescents who were directly exposed to higher than average levels of sectarian violence became more emotionally secure, while Catholics with little to no exposure to violence became more insecure. Contrastingly, Protestant adolescents directly exposed to higher than average levels of sectarian violence were more insecure than Protestants with little to no violence exposure.

A thematic analysis of the newspaper articles revealed the categories of events that were viewed by coders as politically tense and threatening. Five primary themes emerged: ineffective policing and justice, family and community unrest, memories of violence, destabilized leadership, and organized paramilitary activity. Many of the articles coded as most threatening

reported on a spike in attacks organized by dissident republican groups—that is, members of the Catholic community with, particularly hardline views. This may be pertinent to the finding that associations between sectarian violence exposure and emotional insecurity were exacerbated during this time for Protestants but not for Catholics. Findings from the thematic analysis provide a deeper examination of the context of events taking place during the study period, as well as their potential bearing on interpretation of the macro-level effects.

In conclusion, these findings illustrate how one's response to the immediate environment can vary based on shifts in the political macro-system. The current study thus contributes conceptually, empirically, and methodologically to the understanding of process relations between multiple levels of the social ecology and adolescent functioning. These results may further inform the design of future interventions and policies meant to lessen the impact of political violence. The methods used here may also be useful for the study of other contexts in which macrosystem effects are likely to have a salient impact on individual wellbeing.

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Direct exposure to sectarian violence can lead to emotional insecurity and subsequent adjustment problems for youth. Are these effects heightened in the midst of a tense or threatening sociopolitical climate? In this monograph, Townsend and colleagues examine this question through the lens of post-accord Belfast by combining five years of coded news reports from Northern Ireland with five years of family survey data. Their findings suggest that the impact of sectarian violence on youth may vary based on what is happening in the political macrosystem, the individuals' ethnic background, and their cumulative violence exposure. This monograph should interest researchers who study the effects of political violence on youth, use social-ecological methods, or investigate how the macrosystem can impact individual wellbeing.