

1

Separated Children

CARE AND SUPPORT IN CONTEXT

Gillian Mann

Introduction

It is currently estimated that approximately one in every three-hundred children around the world is displaced by war and political violence (Machel 2000). This amounts to at least twenty million children, approximately one million of whom have been separated from their families (Djeddah n.d.). In Rwanda alone, by the end of 1994, more than 100,000 children had become orphaned or had lost contact with their parents as a direct result of the war (Machel 1996). The numbers in other countries are equally high: it is estimated that by 1992 the war in Mozambique had left nearly 200,000 separated children, and in 1995, a UNICEF study found that 20 percent of Angolan children had been separated from their parents and relatives as a result of the country's long-standing civil war (Garbarino et al. 1991). Moreover, recent UNHCR estimates indicate that at any one time, there may be up to 100,000 separated children in Western Europe alone (UNHCR 2001). Today large numbers of children around the world continue to be displaced from their families and communities as a result of armed conflict. Difficulties with definitions and with data collection have meant that the problem is probably larger than these statistics indicate.

In recent years these astonishing statistics have captured the attention of the international community. The plight of war-affected children, and separated children in particular, has become an issue of growing concern for governments and donor agencies worldwide. While the phenomenon of parent-child separation in times of crisis is not new (Ressler et al. 1988), in modern conflicts increasing numbers of children have become separated from their families (Petty and Jareg 1998; Rousseau et al. 1998). This situation may be due in part to the increasing impact of war on civilian pop-

ulations and the heightening of associated risks, particularly for people in the developing world, where many communities have been terrorised by indiscriminate attacks, killing, abduction, rape, forced recruitment and other atrocities (Petty and Jareg 1998). Coupled with the devastation of subsistence agriculture and rural infrastructure, these threats have weakened the coping capacities of families and communities, thereby increasing the likelihood of parent–child separation.

Most people believe that family unity is essential for child survival in wartime. Without their parents or carers to protect them, children may be especially vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, abduction, hunger, malnutrition, disease and death. Recognition of these serious risks to children’s physical and psychological wellbeing has led academics, practitioners and policymakers to consider those children who live without their families to be among the most vulnerable groups of war-affected populations. Efforts to protect separated children have thus become a priority for intervening agencies.

Despite a significant body of theoretical work on the subject, not enough is known about the impact of family separation on children. What is known about separation tends to be general in nature, referring mostly to the vulnerability of children of different ages while failing to account for the differences in experience between boys and girls, and children in different cultural and family contexts. The purpose of this chapter is to identify some of the shortcomings of the existing literature on family separation and to argue that these shortcomings arise from a failure to consider the role of context in shaping the meaning of family separation for children. Consideration of social and cultural constructions of family and childhood, theories of child development, and the nature of childcare practices in different communities can provide crucial information about the particular circumstances of children’s lives and the cultural norms and values that have shaped their development. These contextual elements therefore play an important role in shaping the meaning children make of the various events in their life, including family separation.

Who are ‘Separated Children’?

‘Separated children’ is a generic term used to describe children who have come to live apart from their parents, usually as a result of war or natural disaster (Tolfree 1995). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines ‘separated children’ as those individuals ‘under 18 years of age who are separated from both parents or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver’ (UNHCR 2000).

In the context of war, the economic, instrumental and emotional roles of children are often disrupted and children can become separated from

their parents in a number of different ways. These include becoming lost while fleeing from attacks on villages, trying to escape forced recruitment into military service, or simply searching for food. Parents may die while travelling or fleeing, they may be killed, or they may abandon children because they or the child are too weak to continue. Some parents leave their children at a hospital or camp, believing their chances of survival are better if left in the care of others. Others send their children away, in the hope that they will escape danger and reach asylum in a neighbouring country. Some children choose to leave their families in order to gain employment, to fight in the war, to reduce the financial burden on their parents, to seek safety or to escape abuse. Many separated children have not chosen to be apart from their parents; rather, war has made it unavoidable for them. In many cases, separation can be a wrenching and difficult experience for both the parents and the child.

Boys and girls of all ages become separated as a result of war and other emergencies. However, the literature says that significantly more boys become separated than do girls (Ashabranner and Ashabranner 1987; Baker 1982; Ressler et al. 1988). The reasons for this disparity are not entirely understood. It is nevertheless argued that in many cultures, boys are believed to be best able to look after and protect themselves, particularly in wartime. This belief may lead parents to make a conscious decision to send their sons away, or boys themselves may decide to leave in order to escape to safety or to pursue new opportunities. The predominance of separated boys may also reflect the social construction of gender roles in most cultures, where girls are more likely to remain with their parents in order to support them in their domestic and child rearing tasks.

While these reasons may be true, they do not on their own provide a satisfactory explanation for why more boys become separated than do girls. Evidence from other sources suggests that in many societies, families accord a higher value to male offspring. The growing body of research on child labour, for example, suggests that large numbers of girls live apart from their families in order to work in the sex trade and in domestic service, among other types of employment. The fact that more boys have been found to be separated than girls may reflect the reality that most research with separated children has taken place in the public sphere, and in most places, girls are more likely to be found in the private, domestic sphere of the household. Their existence may therefore not be readily apparent to researchers, programme designers and policy makers. Furthermore, large numbers of girls 'disappear' through trafficking and may not be accounted for in statistics or research. It is therefore worth questioning the assumption or apparent truth that a large majority of separated children are boys.

Understanding the Impact of Separation

Academic interest in the wellbeing of separated children began during the Second World War, when large numbers of children were evacuated from England and other war-affected countries of Western Europe in the early 1940s. At the time, psychologists such as Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham (1943) began to study the behaviour of evacuated children in order to understand the psychological consequences of physical separation from their mothers. They found convincing evidence that separation from mothers was more traumatic for children than was exposure to bombings and the death, destruction and injury associated with air raids. These findings asserted the critical role of mothers (and other family members) in the maintenance of children's health and wellbeing and provided the basic framework within which parent-child separation has been understood by scholars to date, including the highly influential work of both John Bowlby (1973) and Mary Ainsworth (1967). Current understandings of the psychological needs of separated children, the consequences of separation for children and the factors for consideration in their care and placement have all been informed by these early studies.

Among both scholars and practitioners, it is widely believed that children who become separated from their families face profound physical and psychological risks. The literature argues that at all times, and particularly during situations of armed conflict and political violence, parental care provides children with an essential measure of physical protection and emotional security (Werner 1990). For children who are attempting to cope with chronic danger and stress, the love, care and affection parents provide is said to be integral to a child's sense of personal security and thus to the development of individual resiliency (Werner). It is argued that for those children who cannot access these relationships, separation can have a devastating social and psychological impact (Garbarino and Kostelny 1996).

This view of the impact of family separation on children is firmly rooted in dominant understandings of child development, which argue that secure attachment relationships with adults are central to a child's social and emotional development. The idea that the mother is the primary caregiver to her child is implicit in much of this research, as is the notion that the mother-child dyad is the most important relationship in a child's life. That these attachments are strongest within the nuclear family is a tacit, yet clear view expressed in the majority of the literature. These assumptions may be true in certain contexts, but in many societies childcare is a social enterprise in which children have multiple caretakers and experience exclusive maternal care only in the first few months of life (Harkness and Super 1992; Leiderman and Leiderman 1977; Nsamenang 1992b; Weisner 1984). In this context, parenting can be seen as an aggregate of

services, sometimes provided by one or two parents, and other times provided by a series of different people at different times in a child's life. From this perspective, the term 'maternal behaviour' cannot be defined as 'that which is done by the mother' (Goldberg 1977).

Certainly no one would dispute the vital role that loving parents play in guaranteeing the survival and healthy development of their children. Parents who nurture their children, provide for them economically, and support them to develop into competent and confident individuals help to equip their children with the skills and attitudes needed to live happy and fulfilling lives. However, caring for children is a complex endeavour, and parenting goals and roles differ enormously across cultures and contexts. Parents protect and care for their children according to the norms and practices predominant in their specific communities and children rely on their parents for those things that they are accustomed to receiving from them.

Research into the risks and vulnerabilities of separated children of different ages has provided important insight into their needs and circumstances. However, there is a tendency in much of the literature to decontextualise the circumstances of children's lives, in which local context and cultural norms regarding child rearing are considered to be of secondary importance to understanding the psychological wellbeing of the child. While research often appears to consider culture, on closer examination it is clear that culture is seen to be an independent variable that affects child development, like gender or age, but not a system of meanings that creates alternative pathways for social, emotional and cognitive development. Studies may indicate the socio-economic level and ethnicity of a child, describe the physical environment in which he or she has been raised, and briefly outline the kinship structure particular to the community, yet in the end the child described is a generic child. Little attention is paid, for example, to a child's daily routine, childcare practices, child-child interaction, and the work that boys and girls are expected to do at different ages. Analysis of these and other measures is critical to understanding the immediate situational circumstances that provide the framework for how children learn to think, speak and behave (Weisner 1984).

The Role of Sibling Caregiving

Most separated children come from the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. For the majority of people in these regions, it is children who are responsible for performing the bulk of childcare tasks (Weisner 1987). The notion that children should have unlimited access to their mothers is often impossible, given the heavy domestic workloads

and economic reality of most families in this context. The participation of older siblings and peers in the care of young children enables mothers to direct their energies elsewhere, either towards the family's subsistence needs, or towards the care of a newborn child. In this way, sibling care-giving is an essential contribution to household livelihood in many communities and a contextual feature which influences children's development.

For many families in this context, the care of infants and young children is an expected stage in the lives of most children and a daily activity (Harkness and Super 1992). From almost as early as they can remember, children begin to learn alongside their parents to care for their younger siblings and to provide them with emotional support and comfort. Usually the child caretaker is a young girl, but this varies according to culture and may also depend on the sibling composition of the family and the birth order of the child. As child caregivers come to understand the tasks that they are observing and practising, they are expected to take on increasing levels of responsibility for meeting the direct childcare needs of their younger siblings (Harkness and Super 1991; LeVine et al. 1994; Nsamenang 1992b; Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1991). From as early as 2 months of age, mothers may leave their infants in the care of an older child, first for a few moments and later for longer periods of time. This graduated process enables mothers to perform other domestic tasks. It also enables child caregivers to slowly develop a relationship, or 'unhurried attachment bond', with their infant sibling (Nsamenang 1992b). Mothers usually stop providing direct care at about the time of weaning, when responsibility is passed to the child caregiver and the multi-age sibling or peer group to which he or she belongs (Leiderman and Leiderman 1977). From this point on, mothers play a supervisory role, rather than an implementing role, in meeting their young child's needs for direct care (Goldberg 1977; Nsamenang 1992b). For example, among highland East African groups, by the time a girl (or a boy in those households which lack older daughters) has reached the age of 6 or 7, she or he will be entrusted with an infant of 4 months or older for two or three hours at a time. Once a child caregiver has reached the age of 9 or 10, she will be responsible for performing a series of household chores, including caring for an infant all day, with the help of younger siblings, while her mother is away from the homestead (Harkness and Super 1992).

In many cases, mothers may employ a deliberate strategy for training their children to cope effectively for periods of time with minimal or no adult involvement. This training appears in part to explain the successful coping of the sample of separated boys from the north of Somalia studied by Rousseau et al. (1998) in Montréal, Canada. Among the traditional pastoral nomadic peoples of northern Somalia, it is common for boys from approximately age 6 onward to become responsible for tending herds and

to spend increasing periods of time away from their parents and home-stead. By the time they have reached the age of 12, absences of up to several months are common. During these periods, boys live among their peers and rely upon one another for practical and emotional support. This period of family separation is traditionally associated with learning and initiation into manhood: in their own and others' eyes, the experience of adversity and the solidification of lasting, lifelong peer relationships enables boys to learn self-sufficiency and autonomy and to acquire adult status in their communities. Hence, in this particular context, Rousseau et al. (1998) found that for the separated boys in their study, exile and separation from family were viewed not as forms of deprivation or loss, but as having certain positive attributes. The boys' resilience could be in part attributed to the collective cultural understanding of travel and separation as a valuable life experience that brings with it knowledge and wisdom.

In those communities where parenting tasks are distributed among a large social network, childcare is not only seen as the 'proper' role for children, it is also seen as a predicted stage of life for children themselves. From an early age, boys and girls learn that the tasks they perform are important to the welfare of the family, and thus come to appreciate the social utility and legitimacy of their labour. Mothers inculcate in children a desire to participate as a means of feeling important and valued in their family and community by encouraging them to take on tasks that are congruent with their developing capacities. In fact, often a mother who does not expect her child to work is considered negligent in her child rearing role (Wenger 1989) because it is through childcare and other forms of work that children are expected to learn responsibility and the value of cooperation. For children in this context, being given responsibility for the care of a younger sibling or cousin is a way of being recognised as competent and signals to a growing child his or her acceptance and integration into family and community life.

This sense of competence and purpose derived from caring for others was apparent among the tens of thousands of Sudanese boys who became separated from their families by war in the early 1990s. Zutt argues that it was common for these boys to express a desire to assist others, as they had been assisted by their parents, friends, siblings and other adults. They saw 'themselves caring for others not only in the distant future, when their own children and their elderly parents will need help, but also in the immediate present, when younger children and other persons in their presence show demonstrable need' (Zutt 1994: 19). In this way, caring for other children provided these boys with an opportunity to contribute to the welfare of others and in so doing to feel valued among a large network of people previously unknown to them. Far from their families and other familiar cultural referents, they were able to develop a shared identity and a sense of belonging with other children and community members in the

camp. These positive experiences of caring and community involvement have been shown to play a critical role in supporting children's resilience and coping, particularly in situations of armed conflict and political violence (Werner 1990).

Questioning Assumed Models of Care

Surprisingly, the role of delegated parenting is not discussed in the literature on separated children, despite the developmental implications for children reared in this way. Research with separated children has taken place almost exclusively in the context of refugee camps and children's homes. These environments have been accessible to researchers and have provided a window through which to learn how children cope with separation from parents. However, the majority of these studies have focused on the individual child, with little or no reference to his or her prior experiences of family life and domestic roles, responsibilities and relationships before separation. Without prior exposure to different models of childcare, such as delegated parenting, most psychologists have tended to rely on their disciplinary training (Göncü 1999) and to assume the universality and exclusivity of the mother-child bond. Furthermore, research with separated children has tended to use medical assessments, checklists of symptoms and events, and structured questionnaires. Rarely have children's perspectives on their own experience been solicited in an open-ended way.

There is ample evidence in the anthropological literature on child rearing to suggest that in sibling caregiving societies, children develop diffuse attachments with their mother and close bonds with their child caregivers (Harkness and Super 1992; Konner 1977; Leiderman and Leiderman 1977; LeVine 1994; Weisner 1997; Weisner and Gallimore 1977; Whiting and Edwards 1988). In fact, among the pastoral and tribal peoples of East Africa, where sibling caregiving is 'ubiquitous' (Harkness and Super 1992: 448), it is argued that some babies are fonder of their child caregiver than their mother. Whiting and Edwards (1988) also found that in many of the sub-Saharan communities that they studied, young children often approached older siblings for help and support rather than their mothers. Similarly, Nsamenang, writing about childcare patterns in Cameroon, comments that 'even a casual observer could not fail to remark how, in stressful situations like illness, some children preferred being handled by their sitters than by their mothers' (Nsamenang 1992a: 424). Some argue that this diffusion of early attachment may also increase a child's sense that others in the community will care for him or her (Weisner and Gallimore 1977).

These findings may be especially relevant to separated children affected by armed conflict in many parts of the world. Weisner (1987) argues that in

places where there are significant threats to community safety, such as communal violence and warfare, sibling caregiving is more likely to occur. In these instances, adults (especially men) and adolescent boys may be involved in community protection away from home. The absence of these family members may intensify children's, and especially girls', responsibility for looking after one another. Research by Freud and Burlingham (1943) showed that in dangerous situations, children's feelings of trust and interdependence may take on increasing significance. In this way, war may encourage sibling caregiving and other mechanisms of delegated parenting, such as child fostering. It may also accentuate the practice in those communities where strong, caring relationships already exist between children. The young, and girls in particular, may play a more important role as buffers of stress than is commonly understood, offering emotional comfort and physical protection to their peers and siblings. Child-child relationships may be an essential protective factor for separated children.

These facts are important to consider in the design of psychosocial interventions for separated children because in certain cultures a child may feel that he or she needs to do specific tasks or have specific skills in order to become a respected member of the community. What does it mean for a child if he or she is unable to undertake these responsibilities? Research with teenage girls in a residential institution in Nepal highlighted the girls' concern that they were not given any opportunities to care for younger children, and as a result they were being denied the experience of traditional roles and relationships (Tolfree 1995). Furthermore, research with Eritrean orphans living in a large institution found that both younger and older children felt better cared for, protected and nurtured after the institution changed the dormitory groups to include children of different ages (Wolff et al. 1995). The authors of this study argue that enabling older children to care for younger ones resonated with the particular social worlds which these children had experienced and to which they would be introduced as adults. A sense of identity and personal coherence is tied not only to people and place, but also to the familiar and the predictable elements of life, including an understanding of one's place in the world and expected roles and responsibilities.

Children's Peer Relationships

That peers are crucial supports for separated children should not be underestimated: the majority of the separated children in the world today have been raised in societies where the management of childcare is shared, and in this context the sharing of domestic responsibilities and tasks promotes interdependence among siblings, parents, cousins, peers and neighbours. In these multi-age peer and sibling groups, children

learn important survival skills, as well as how to relate to one another, to lead and follow others, to agree and disagree, to negotiate with one another and to support one another in the achievement of shared tasks. Membership in the multi-age peer and sibling group also enables children to set the terms of their relationships and collaboration themselves. Perhaps most importantly, it is widely argued that participation in this group eases the child's transition away from the mother (Konner 1977). Tietjen (1989: 47) states that 'it appears that in households with many children parents must spread themselves more thinly among the children, and the siblings, in turn, may come to rely on each other and on peers more than on adults'.

In her research among indigenous groups in the Pacific, Margaret Mead (1968) observed that in societies where child caregiving relied more on children than on parents, there was usually a 'fostering group' of peers (cited in Aptekar 1988: 185). In his exploration of what he determined to be strong, supportive relationships between street children in Cali, Colombia, Aptekar (1991) also found sibling caregiving to be the dominant mode of child rearing in the sample children's families. He argues that Mary Ainsworth's original research on attachment showed that separation from home was less stressful for children who had been reared in this way. This assertion is substantiated elsewhere in the literature, where it is generally believed that children who care for other children experience an acceleration of what are assumed to be universal stages of child development, especially in the development of pro-social, nurturing and responsible behaviour (Aptekar 1988; Harkness and Super 1992; Leiderman and Leiderman 1977; Nsamenang 1992a; Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1991; Weisner 1984, 1987, 1989; Whiting and Edwards 1988; Whiting and Whiting 1963). Aptekar (1991) argues that for most street children in Colombia, their developmental experiences are closer to those of adolescents or early adolescents than to 'childhood' as defined by traditional child development thinking. The same contention may apply to separated children in emergencies.

Many other researchers have explored the value of peer relationships to the psychological wellbeing of children who live apart from their families. The bulk of this literature has focused, like Aptekar, on the lives of street children and their moral development (see Aptekar 1988; Baker, Panter-Brick and Todd 1997; Connolly 1990; Ennew 1994; Felsman 1989; Patel 1990; Swart 1990; Verma 1999). It stresses the crucial nature of the emotional and material support that peers provide to one another. To date, these issues have not been a focus of the literature on children who are separated from their families in emergencies, despite the fact that street children and separated children share a common base of experience (both groups of children are, effectively, looking after themselves), and the fact that many street children come from war zones. The circumstances of

these two groups of children are rarely examined alongside one another. Consequently, understandings of the needs of separated children in emergencies are rarely informed by those of other groups of children who live apart from families, and vice versa.

Research into the importance of peer and sibling groups as support mechanisms for separated children might provide important insight into the needs and functioning of child-headed households. Children in these domestic units may be relying on the 'training for interdependence and affiliation, not autonomous independence and achievement, among the peer group' (Weisner 1987: 248), which is associated with sibling care and delegated parenting systems. They may be accustomed to being the primary caregivers and socialising agents of their younger siblings. Again, insights from research with street children might be relevant to the experiences of separated children in this context: Verma (1999) argues that children who live apart from their families on the streets of Delhi, India, gained enough exposure as young children to the various roles that different family members occupy, so that they are able to replicate these roles through role playing the tasks of mother, father, etc. Similarly, Barker and Knaul (2000) suggest that street girls in Kenya and Bolivia often form common-law families with street boys through which they attempt to replicate their experiences of family life. These findings suggest that children on their own still know how the family functions and that they replicate these processes in their relationships with one another. This way of learning fits with the pattern of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Rogoff et al. 1993) common in those societies where delegated parenting is the norm, and has important implications for understanding the care and protection needs of separated children.

While the role of peers and siblings as social supports has been underestimated in the literature on separated children, so too has an analysis of the role that parents play in the establishment and functioning of these supportive relationships. Children reared in delegated parenting societies are expected to perform many important domestic tasks, including child-care. However, children in this context are also expected to turn to adults and other, more experienced people in their immediate family and communal environment when they need help and support (Dembele n.d.; Harkness and Super 1992; Weisner 1997; Werner and Smith 1982). The close relationships between siblings who have been reared in this way does not render the role of mothers and fathers unnecessary or unimportant. On the contrary, it highlights for researchers and practitioners the fact that children and parents play different roles in different families and societies. To date, research with separated children has not adequately addressed these differences and as a result the nature of these roles and relationships has been poorly understood. Yet attention to these contextual variations in parent-child relationships might highlight other assump-

tions and misconceptions inherent in our understanding of the needs and experiences of separated children.

The reality is that a child's (just as an adult's) support network is a complex web of relationships with all kinds of different people, and the amount of time spent with each individual in this network does not necessarily reflect his or her meaning or importance to the child. It may be that the very existence of a particular adult is just as important to a child as is the direct involvement of that adult in his or her daily activities. Children heading households in Rwanda after the 1994 genocide reported feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility associated with caring for their younger siblings when they had no adults to turn to for support: not only were these boys and girls responsible for the day-to-day care of their younger brothers and sisters, but they also had to cultivate the land, and find money for food, school fees and clothing (Cohen and Hendler 1997). While these children may have been responsible for most of these tasks before their parents died, the implicit support and guidance their presence provided was no longer accessible to them. Children in these circumstances, like others who live without adults' support, may be especially vulnerable because they cannot decline to perform a task, or to manage the accumulation of tasks, that may be beyond their abilities.

The reality is that in those communities which have been devastated by conflict, HIV/AIDS, or both, the numbers of adults available to provide material and emotional support to children are rapidly decreasing. Female, elderly and child-headed households are increasingly prevalent in many communities and these demographic changes are dramatically altering the environment in which children are raised. In these circumstances, children no longer have access to a wide network of adults to structure and monitor their responsibilities and to assist them to take on tasks consistent with their growing abilities. They may therefore face increased risks to their health and wellbeing, particularly if they are forced to assume especially arduous and hazardous tasks. They may also have to restructure and develop new networks of support to meet their emotional and physical needs. How these changes will affect the capabilities and vulnerabilities of children is not yet well understood.

These questions are pertinent to the care and protection of war-affected separated children. In those communities devastated by conflict, where large numbers of adults may have been killed, surviving families may face pressures and challenges previously unknown to them. For example, the interethnic nature of the conflict in Rwanda has resulted in many places in the total elimination of trust at the community level. In these instances, neighbours no longer feel able to turn to one another for help and support in times of crisis. This lack of trust, coupled with conditions of often serious deprivation, can undermine the mutual ties and obligations of communities to care for children.

Effect of Age on Separation

The literature asserts that one of the most important determinants of the effect of family separation on children is the age of the child at separation (Baker 1982; Goyos 1997; Ressler et al. 1988; Tolfree 1995). Because children vary significantly in terms of their developmental needs, abilities and limitations, it is argued that separation at different ages and developmental stages will have different meanings and implications for every child (Ressler et al. 1988). A similar event of separation will evoke different reactions in children of different ages.

It is commonly understood by academics and practitioners that separated children under the age of 5 face serious risks because family separation at this age threatens to disrupt a child's socialisation process and growing sense of autonomy (Werner 1990). Without adult caregivers to help orient children to the world around them, it is believed that children are less likely to understand and adapt to the circumstances in which they find themselves. For children at this age, it is argued that family separation is very quickly felt as permanent loss and is accompanied by intense feelings of powerlessness and despair (Boothby 1984). These feelings often manifest themselves in the regression of previous developmental attainments, such as bedwetting and the re-commencement of baby-talk, and may also lead to significant increases in fear, both of imaginary and actual objects (Garbarino and Kostelny 1996; Ressler et al. 1988).

It is generally agreed that children aged 6 or 7 and older children, seem better able to cope with the stress of family separation than do their younger counterparts. Many believe this ability is due in part to a number of factors, including the growing sense of self-efficacy and independence experienced at these ages (Werner 1990). Moreover, children who attempt to establish positive relationships with adults and peers and actively engage with others are also considered to be more resilient (Boothby 1984; Eunson 1996; Garbarino et al. 1991; Garbarino and Kostelny 1996; Rousseau et al. 1998; Werner 1990). Furthermore, it is believed that older children may be better able to understand the nature and circumstances of separation because they have more life experience and possess more advanced language and cognitive skills (Tolfree 1995).

Research into the risks and vulnerabilities of separated children of different ages has provided important insight into their psychological and emotional needs and the behavioural manifestations of their separation from parents. However, it cannot be assumed that children of the same age range will experience separation in a similar manner in all contexts. Nevertheless, with a few notable exceptions,¹ understanding a particular culture or community's definition and goals for child development has not yet been the focus of research with separated children. Child development is assumed to take place in stages and these stages are seen to be

natural and universal. Children are believed to understand and respond to the events in their lives according to their stage position, and the social and cultural construction of their responses is often not considered. For example, a widely-used UNHCR field guide for working with separated children states at the outset, ‘Despite slight variations in timing owing to cultural and other influences, all children pass through the same stages of development from infancy, through childhood and adolescence. In normal circumstances, children of similar ages will be found to be very much alike’ (UNHCR 1994: 3). Differential attainment of child development goals is attributed to factors individual to the child, such as temperament or ability, and rarely to population or culture-specific patterns that shape the way children interact with the world around them.

Considerations of Gender and Other Personal Characteristics

The majority of the literature on parent–child separation refers to ‘separated children’ as though they were a monolithic group. When the term ‘separated child’ is used, often it refers to boys rather than to both boys and girls. Rarely is any distinction made between the needs, interests and circumstances of these two groups. Yet throughout the world, boys and girls are treated differently from birth onwards and the gap tends to widen at puberty (Mensch et al. 1998). In times of war, the magnitude and nature of the risks they face may not be the same. For example, in certain contexts, girls may be more vulnerable to trafficking and sexual exploitation than boys. Similarly, boys may be at greater risk of forced recruitment in those societies where males make up the majority of combatants. However, the extent to which boys and girls may share these different risks is also not well understood. Moreover, the contextual nature of children’s vulnerability is also important to consider in order to understand the different experiences of boys and girls. For instance, in Afghanistan, the greater mobility of boys puts them at increased risk of hazardous work such as landmine clearance. Girls’ relative confinement to the domestic sphere means that they may be less vulnerable to these dangers, but more susceptible to nutritional deficiencies because their limited mobility means that they cannot access food for themselves (Joanna de Berry, personal communication).

These oversights in the differential experience of boys and girls arise in part from a lack of in-depth information about children’s lives, and girls’ lives in particular. Researchers and practitioners need to consult girls to learn more about their time use, their living arrangements, their health, mobility, productive work and other aspects of their lives (Mensch et al. 1998). More attention must be paid to local definitions of girlhood and womanhood. In many societies, boys pass through a stage of adolescence

before acquiring the status of full adults within their society. But for many girls, the transition from child to woman takes place at menarche, often without an extended period of adolescence. Consequently, studies into the situation of separated children may miss the experience of girls after they reach the age of 12 or 13 years. At this point their needs and experiences may be understood as those of women and not of children. I found this to be the case in my research into the situation of separated Burmese children in Thailand in 2000, where it is widely argued that there are no separated girls. After speaking with members of an ethnic minority women's group, I learned that many of the 'women' who lived in the nearby shelter were between the ages of 14 and 18. I also learned that it was not uncommon for women to come to the border on their own. When I asked the age of these 'women' I learned that they were usually about 15 years or older. In this way, the invisibility of separated girls became ever more apparent to me. I suspect that there are many other ways in which the situation of certain populations of children remains unknown.

Gender is not the only social attribute that is overlooked in the literature on separated children. Little mention is made of the characteristics of those children who have become separated from their families; for example, birth order, physical abilities, or fitness. Yet within the general category of 'children', there are many structural and personal differences that distinguish individual children and groups of children. In conflict situations some may be more vulnerable to separation than others; for example, in the late 1970s in Cambodia, children of the urban elite were especially targeted by the military and forcibly separated from their parents. As well, during the civil war in Mozambique in the 1980s and early 1990s, the rebel army (RENAMO) deliberately targeted those individuals who were furthering the socialist project of the state. Teachers and nurses were at particular risk of abduction and murder. Consequently, their children were especially vulnerable to being orphaned or separated.

Within communities affected by war, children with social and economic power will experience conflict differently from those who have less power. The same applies to children's experience of family separation. A child's gender, class, ethnicity, religion and economic status will affect whether or not he or she becomes separated and if so, his or her experience of separation. Similarly, a child's personal attributes such as cognitive ability, temperament and physique, as well as sex and birth order may also influence his or her status and treatment within the family and the community (Boyden and Mann 2000). These factors may affect a family's or child's decision to remain together or to separate. They may also influence a child's experience of separation. For example, an intelligent and resourceful child may be more capable of arranging shelter and food for him or herself than another child who may not possess the same problem-solving abilities.

The literature on family separation does not explore the level of exposure of certain groups of children to adverse situations. It lacks a critical analysis of why it is that certain children experience more hardship, suffering, abuse and exploitation than others. However, even – and perhaps especially – in times of conflict, governments, communities, parents and sometimes children themselves, make considered, strategic decisions in order to maximise opportunities for survival as well as economic, political, social and spiritual gain. They make social choices and these choices are not made arbitrarily. Literature on the needs and circumstances of separated children rarely considers the nature and importance of these choices and the impact they may have on the determination of which children become separated and how they manage this separation. However, doing so is essential to understanding children’s experience of war and separation.

Conclusion

The academic and agency literature on the care and protection of separated children in emergencies highlights some important issues for consideration in the design of policies and programmes to assist them. In particular, attention to the needs of children at different ages, the importance of at least one nurturing and reliable relationship, and the influence of children’s individual characteristics on the way in which they experience separation are significant factors. These and other identified factors have to date provided a way of understanding the circumstances of separated children and a basis upon which to intervene on their behalf.

However, there are certain limitations to this research. Foremost among these is the lack of attention to the context in which children have been raised and the differential impacts contextual variations may have on child development. The assumption inherent in the vast majority of the literature is that children’s experience of parental separation will have the same meaning in all contexts. Yet ethnographic evidence from many different societies suggests that this assumption may be mistaken: in communities where delegated parenting is the norm, child rearing tasks are distributed among a large sibling and family group, and exclusive parental care is extremely rare. In these circumstances, children may rely as much, or more, on their siblings for nurture and support as they do on their parents. Furthermore, they may be very mobile and accustomed to living in households that do not include their parents. In this context, concepts of family and parent–child relationships may be very different from what is generally assumed in the literature on separated children.

Interventions to assist separated children must understand and engage with local conceptions of child development and existing childcare arrangements. Supporting indigenous practices means recognising that

they are often heavily prescribed and governed by specific social norms. Lack of recognition of the particularities of community childcare practices can have serious implications for the care and protection of separated children. By imposing systems of support that appear to outsiders to fit the local context, but which in reality may not recognise the specific content of existing practices, agencies can undermine traditional support mechanisms for children. Past ways of caring for children in crisis may be rejected in favour of new, externally imposed arrangements. These interventions may function well in the midst of an emergency, but may be difficult to sustain in the long term. In these circumstances, children may face risks from which they have been traditionally protected.

Much more research is required on the daily lives of children in different cultures and communities so that policies and programmes are appropriate to their needs and circumstances. Existing interventions for separated children should be monitored and evaluated in order to determine to what extent children's best interests are being met. This process should engage with all members of the community and, most especially, with children.

Notes

1. A few exceptions to this rule include the studies that have been conducted with separated boys from the north of Somalia (Rousseau et al. 1998) and south Sudan (Zutt 1994; Rädä Barnen 1994).

References

- Ainsworth, M. 1967. *Infancy in Uganda: Infant Care and the Growth of Love*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Aptekar, L. 1988. *Street Children of Cali*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 1991. 'Are Colombian Street Children Neglected? The Contributions of Ethnographic and Ethnohistorical Approaches to the Study of Children.' *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 22: 326–49.
- Ashabranner, B. and Ashabranner, M. 1987. *Into a Strange Land: Unaccompanied Refugee Youth in America*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.
- Baker, N. 1982. 'Substitute Care for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors.' *Child Welfare* 61: 353–63.
- Baker, R., Panter-Brick, C. and Todd, A. 1997. 'Homeless Street Boys in Nepal: Their Demography and Lifestyle.' *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 28: 129–46.
- Barker, G. and Knaul, F. 2000. *Urban Girls: Empowerment in Especially Difficult Circumstances*. London: Intermediate Technology Development Group.
- Boothby, N. 1984. 'The Care and Placement of Unaccompanied Children in Emergencies.' Ed.D. thesis, Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Bowlby, J. 1973. *Separation, Anxiety and Anger in Attachment and Loss*. Vol. 2. New York: Basic Books.
- Boyden, J. and Mann, G. 2000. 'Children's Risk, Resilience and Coping in Extreme

- Situations.' Background paper to the Consultation on Children in Adversity, Oxford, 9–12 September.
- Cohen, C. and Hendler, N. 1997. *Nta Nzu Itagira Inkigi: No Home Without Foundation: A Portrait of Child Headed Households in Rwanda*. New York: Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.
- Connolly, M. 1990. 'Adrift in the City: A Comparative Study of Street Children in Bogota, Colombia and Guatemala City.' In N. Boxill, ed., *Homeless Children: the Watchers and the Waiters*. New York: The Haworth Press.
- Dembele, N.U. (n.d.). 'Gender Differentiation: a Case Study of Bambara Children, Bugula, Southern Mali.' <http://www.ecdgroup.com/cn/cn20case.htm>.
- Djeddah, C. (n.d.). 'Wars and Unaccompanied Children in Africa: Who They Are and Major Health Implications.' http://www.ipafrance.net/pubs/inchines/inch8_2/djed.htm.
- Ennew, J. 1994. 'Parentless Friends: a Cross-Cultural Examination of Networks Among Street Children and Street Youth.' In F. Nestmann and K. Hurelmann, eds, *Social Networks and Social Support in Childhood and Adolescence*. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Eunson, P. 1996. 'Children in War: the Role of Child-to-Child Activities in the Therapy and Care of Displaced Unaccompanied Children.' Unpublished paper.
- Felsman, J.K. 1989. 'Risk and Resiliency in Childhood: the Lives of Street Children.' In T. Dugan and R. Coles, eds, *The Child in Our Times: Studies in the Development of Resiliency*. New York: Bruner/Mazel.
- Freud, A. and Burlingham, D. 1943. *War and Children*. New York: Ernst Willard.
- Garbarino, J. and Kostelny, K. 1996. 'What Do We Need to Know to Understand Children in War and Community Violence?' In R. Apfel and B. Simon, eds, *Minefields in their Hearts: the Mental Health of Children in War and Community Violence*. New Haven, USA: Yale University Press.
- Garbarino, J., Kostelny, K. and Dubrow, N. 1991. *No Place to be a Child: Growing Up in a War Zone*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Goldberg, S. 1977. 'Infant Development and Mother–Infant Interaction in Urban Zambia.' In P.H. Leiderman, S.R. Tulkin and A. Rosenfeld, eds, *Economic Change and Infant Care in an East African Agricultural Community*. New York: Academic Press.
- Göncü, A. 1999. 'Children's and Researchers' Engagement in the World.' In A. Göncü, ed., *Children's Engagement in the World: Sociocultural Perspectives*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Goyos, J.M. 1997. 'Identifying Resiliency Factors in Adult "Pedro Pan" Children: a Retrospective Study.' Ph.D. thesis, Barry University.
- Harkness, S. and Super, C. 1991. 'East Africa.' In J. Hawes and N.R. Hiner, eds, *Children in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- . 1992. 'Shared Care in East Africa: Sociocultural Origins and Developmental Consequences.' In M. Lamb, K. Sternberg, C. Hwang and A. Broberg, eds, *Childcare in Context: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Konner, M. 1977. 'Infancy Among the Kalahari Desert San.' In P.H. Leiderman, S.R. Tulkin and A. Rosenfeld, eds, *Culture and Infancy: Variations in the Human Experience*. New York: Academic Press.
- Leiderman, P.H. and Leiderman, G.F. 1977. 'Economic Change and Infant Care in an East African Agricultural Community.' In P.H. Leiderman, S.R. Tulkin and A. Rosenfeld, eds, *Culture and Infancy: Variations in the Human Experience*. New York: Academic Press.

- LeVine, R.A., Levine, S., Dixon, S., Richman, A., Leiderman, P.H. and Keefer, C. 1994. *Child Care and Culture: Lessons From Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Machel, G. 1996. *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. New York: UNICEF.
- Machel, G. 2000. *The Machel Review: A Critical Analysis of Progress Made and Obstacles Encountered in Increasing Protection for War-Affected Children*. New York, NY: UNIFEM, Government of Norway, UNICEF and the Government of Canada.
- Mead, M. 1968. *Growing up in New Guinea*. New York: Dell.
- Mensch, B.S., Bruce, J. and Greene, M. 1998. *The Uncharted Passage: Girls' Adolescence in the Developing World*. New York: Population Council.
- Nsamenang, B. 1992a. 'Early Childhood Care and Education in Cameroon.' In M. Lamb, K. Sternberg, C. Hwang and A. Broberg, eds, *Childcare in Context: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Hillsdale, NJ, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- . 1992b. 'Perceptions of Parenting Among the Nso of Cameroon.' In B. Hewlett, ed., *Father-Child Relations: Cultural and Biosocial Relations*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Patel, S. 1990. 'Street Children, Hotel Boys and Children of Pavement Dwellers and Construction Workers in Bombay – How They Meet Their Daily Needs.' *Environment and Urbanization* 2: 9–26.
- Petty, C. and Jareg, E. 1998. 'Conflict, Poverty and Family Separation: the Problem of Institutional Care.' In P. Bracken and C. Petty, eds, *Rethinking the Trauma of War*. London: Free Association Books.
- Rädda Barnen. 1994. *The Unaccompanied Minors of Southern Sudan: A Rädda Barnen Report*. Stockholm: Rädda Barnen.
- Ressler, E., Boothby, N. and Steinbock, D. 1988. *Unaccompanied Children: Care and Protection in Wars, Natural Disasters and Refugee Movements*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rogoff, B., Mistry, J., Göncü, A. and Mosier, C. 1993. *Guided Participation in Cultural Activity by Toddlers and Caregivers*. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development. Chicago, USA: University of Chicago Press.
- Rousseau, C., Said, T.M., Gagné, M.-J. and Bibeau, G. 1998. 'Resilience in Unaccompanied Minors from the North of Somalia.' *Psychoanalytic Review* 85: 615–37.
- Swart, J. 1990. *Malunde: the Street Children of Hillbrow*. Cape Town: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Tietjen, A.M. 1989. 'The Ecology of Children's Social Support Networks.' In D. Belle, ed., *Children's Social Networks and Social Supports*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Tolfree, D. 1995. *Roofs and Roots: the Care of Separated Children in the Developing World*. London: Save the Children Fund UK and Arena.
- UNHCR. 2000. *ARC Resource Pack on Separated Children*. Geneva: UNHCR.
- . 2001. *Refugees*. Geneva: UNHCR.
- UNHCR (PTSS/Community Services). 1994. *Working with Unaccompanied Minors in the Community: A Family Based Approach*. Geneva: UNHCR.
- Verma, S. 1999. 'Socialization for Survival: Developmental Issues Among Working Street Children in India.' In M. Raffaelli and R. Larson, eds, *Homeless and Working Youth Around the World: Exploring Developmental Issues*. New York: Jossey-Bass.
- Watson-Gegeo, K.A. and Gegeo, D.W. 1991. 'The Role of Sibling Interaction in Child Socialization.' In P.G. Zukow, ed., *Sibling Interaction Across Cultures: Theoretical and Mental Health Issues*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

- Weisner, T. 1987. 'Socialization for Parenthood in Sibling Caretaking Societies.' In J.B. Lancaster, J. Altmann, A. Rossi and L. Sherrod, eds, *Parenting Across the Lifespan: Biosocial Dimensions*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- . 1989. 'Cultural and Universal Aspects of Social Support for Children: Evidence from the Abaluyia of Kenya.' In D. Belle, ed., *Children's Social Networks and Social Supports*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- . 1997. 'Support for Children and the African Family Crisis.' In T. Weisner, C. Bradley and P. Kilbride, eds, *African Families and the Crisis of Social Change*. Westport, USA: Bergin and Garvey.
- Weisner, T. and Gallimore, R. 1977. 'My Brother's Keeper: Child and Sibling Caretaking.' *Current Anthropology* 18: 169–80.
- Weisner, T.S. 1984. 'The Social Ecology of Childhood: a Cross-Cultural View.' In M. Lewis, ed., *Beyond the Dyad*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Wenger, M. 1989. 'Work, Play and Social Relationships Among Children in a Giriama Community.' In D. Belle, ed., *Children's Social Networks and Social Supports*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Werner, E. 1990. 'Protective Factors and Individual Resilience.' In S.J. Meisels and J.P. Shonkoff, eds, *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Werner, E. and Smith, R. 1982. *Vulnerable But Invincible: a Study of Resilient Children*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Whiting, B. and Edwards, C. 1988. *Children of Different Worlds: the Formation of Social Behaviour*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Whiting, B. and Whiting, J., eds, 1963. *Six Cultures: Studies of Child Rearing*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Wolff, P., Dawitt, Y. and Zere, B. 1995. 'The Solumna Orphanage: An Historical Survey.' *Social Science and Medicine* 40 (8): 1133–9.
- Zutt, J. 1994. *Children of War: Wandering Alone in Southern Sudan*. New York: UNICEF.