Abstract and Keywords

This chapter outlines distinct ways in which political conflict may become associated with identity construction: in the context of politically framed events involving violence and injustice, youth must grapple with the meanings of these experiences while protecting themselves from some of their devastating implications. Their varied attempts at meaning-making can thus be viewed as understandable responses to the threats associated with these experiences and as being adaptive in light of the unique circumstances afforded by the specific sociopolitical features. Also important, youths’ ways of grappling with war experiences implicate identity work, with unique consequences for their enduring understandings of themselves. The authors’ analysis suggests that, in grappling with these experiences, youths may initiate identity pathways that, while protective in the short-term, can undermine identity development in the long run. Thus, thinking about identity processes in relation to how youths make sense of their war experiences can illuminate the developmental sequelae of political conflict.

Keywords: Identity development, political conflict, war, narrative, risk and resilience

For many youth growing up in the midst of war or political conflict, experiences with violence and injustice are an everyday reality. Hundreds of thousands of adolescents around the world witness acts of violence and discrimination and endure the threat of violence against members of their communities and their families; others may themselves participate in various forms of violence and armed struggle. Understandably, given the danger and fear implicated in war and violence exposure, research to date has primarily been based on a trauma model that has focused on the negative psychosocial impact of such events, whereas less attention has been devoted to investigating other developmental sequelae of such experiences. In general, this body of research has identified connections between adolescents’ exposure to political violence and a variety of psychological outcomes characteristic of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomatology including feelings of distress, anxiety, and arousal, as well as avoidance and numbing (for comprehensive reviews, see Barber & Schluterman, 2009; Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Betancourt & Khan, 2008).

Nevertheless, research has also demonstrated that the negative psychosocial impact of political conflict is not inevitable. Indeed, although some researchers have posited a “dose–response” relation between exposure to political violence and psychological maladjustment (e.g., Jones & Kafetsios, 2005), many studies have failed to reveal such a pattern of association (Barber & Schluterman, 2009). For this reason, considerable effort has been devoted to identifying the factors accounting for variability in youths’ responses; this effort, in turn, led to the critical recognition that the psychological impact of war-related events is significantly moderated by the subjective meanings that individuals attach to those experiences (e.g., Ozer, Best, Lipsey, & Weiss, 2003). Moreover, and especially germane to identity-relevant processes, many researchers have moved away from conceptions of youth as passive victims of war-related events, instead acknowledging youths’ active role as agents who strive to make sense of their experiences. As a consequence, youths’ own understandings of their experiences with political conflict have been increasingly considered in studies examining the impact of war-related events—a shift in focus that opened the door to examining the relations between political conflict and identity development.
Within the trauma literature, researchers have noted that experiences of violence and injustice not only have the potential to be highly distressing, but can also lead individuals to question their fundamental assumptions about themselves and their place in the world (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Ozer & Weiss, 2004). In this respect, the threat invoked by trauma often leads to preoccupation with questions surrounding how and why the events occurred: “Why are they doing this? Why is this happening to us?” More broadly, research has shown that negative emotional experiences that violate expectations are especially likely to initiate an active search for meaning (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012). All of this implies that exposure to political violence and injustice may exert prospective effects on youths’ understandings of themselves and identity development.

As has been amply illustrated in a number of chapters in this volume, as well as in previous discussions (e.g., Hammack, 2008; 2010; McLean & Pasupathi, 2012), the study of identity has been characterized by epistemological and methodological diversity. To date, the most common framework for examining identity development in the context of war and political conflict has focused on the construction of polarized collective identities emerging out of oppositional group processes. This research, which has proceeded from social-identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and taken a group processes perspective (e.g., Bar-Tal, 2007; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998), has effectively demonstrated that political conflict can significantly shape identity processes while also pointing to the complex mixture of risks and benefits associated with this particular form of identity. However, as we explain later, polarized collective identities appear to be especially likely to arise in the context of intractable conflicts that are historically based and rooted in a competition for territorial control or political recognition (Bar-Tal, 2007). But political conflicts around the world vary widely in their defining features, presenting different types of threats and distinct affordances. Importantly, also, there is evidence suggesting that adolescents’ subjective responses to war depend on the unique features of the political conflict within which they are embedded, as well as on youths’ specific positioning within that conflict (e.g., Muldoon, Cassidy, & McCullough, 2009; Straker, Mendelsohn, Moosa, & Tudin, 1996). Research has also shown that youth make sense of their experiences with political conflicts in widely different ways (Barber, 2009; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010).

Inasmuch as grappling with everyday experiences can be seen as having implications for identity formation, it is likely that youth’s different forms of meaning-making initiate distinct pathways for identity construction. We thus propose that understanding the effects of political violence on identity development may require a broader framework, one that goes beyond the notion of collective identities and examines the multiplicity of forms of identity construction that arise in the midst of different types of conflicts. In this chapter, we take a developmental perspective (e.g., McLean & Pasupathi, 2012) and focus on youths’ individual engagement with their social and political environment and the varied identity-relevant meanings they construct about these experiences. In the following sections, we outline some of the distinct ways in which political conflict may become associated with identity construction and discuss how each may be understandable and even adaptive in light of the circumstances in which they are formed but that, in the longer term, may nevertheless pose developmental risks.

Us Versus Them: The Construction of Polarized Collective Identities

Individuals typically see themselves as defined in multiple ways by their social commitments and group memberships; each of these various social identities can be personally significant and provide a framework for making sense of experiences, depending on the context (Sen, 2006). However, in the context of war, collective identities that distinguish between groups in conflict (e.g., Palestinians and Israelis; Catholics and Protestants) tend to become unusually self-definitional, partly because they are institutionalized and actively propagated as societies engage in special efforts to maintain them (Bar-Tal, 2007; Sen, 2006). Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory provides a framework for understanding how the salience of such social identities can contribute to the development of ingroup bias. Specifically, they theorized that once group memberships are formed, the very act of categorizing oneself as a member of a group is linked to efforts to achieve positive ingroup distinctiveness. Thus, especially under some circumstances (i.e., when individuals strongly identify with an ingroup and the context provides opportunities for group comparison), group members tend to discriminate in favor of the ingroup and develop relatively positive ingroup perceptions.

In line with this theory, but more specific to the context of political conflict, Bar-Tal (2000) has outlined a set of societal beliefs that tend to be particularly characteristic of groups that are locked in intractable conflict and that ultimately lead to polarized collective identities. These include a belief in the justness of one’s ingroup goals along
with a simultaneous negation or delegitimization of the outgroup's perspective, as well as a positive collective self-image (e.g., as courageous, fair, and humane) that is juxtaposed against a negative view of the outgroup. As group-based identities become increasingly salient as a result of these processes, a sense of patriotism and unity with one's ingroup also contribute to social cohesiveness. Bar-Tal (2007) also emphasize that this ethos of conflict and the ensuing polarized patterns of identity development may be particularly likely to emerge in the context of historically grounded intractable conflicts. Although acknowledging that each conflict has its unique context, contents, and characteristics, Bar-Tal suggests that intractable historical conflicts share some common dynamics inasmuch as they are not only protracted but are often perceived by all parties as irresolvable and as central to their existence. Historically intractable conflicts also tend to reach beyond the political sphere and touch on many aspects of public and cultural life, coloring the construction of history, art, and other forms of public and ideological discourse. Such conditions support the construction and maintenance of polarized collective identities, which in turn serve as a coherent means for coping with and giving meaning to the unique challenges posed by this type of conflict.

Although this framework was originally posited to operate at the level of the group, researchers (e.g., Daiute, 2010; Hammack, 2011) have recognized that youth do not passively reproduce the ethos of conflict propagated in their cultures, but rather engage with and selectively appropriate aspects of the polarized societal discourse as they strive to make sense of events in which they and members of their families and communities become the targets of violence and injustice. It is noteworthy, however, that in spite of youths' capacity to contest and question their societies' perspectives on conflict, their interpretations of their own experiences tend to replicate, to a considerable extent, the predominant polarized societal discourse, thus underscoring the degree to which the realities of political violence place constraints on agency.

To illustrate, consider the following two excerpts from interviews of Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian youth (respectively), conducted in the context of their participation in an intergroup contact program (from Hammack, 2011):

I think the first thing, they should stop the terrorist attacks against us. The whole thing started because of the terrorist acts against us.... They actually started it. They fired first. They were the first to use suicide bombers.... Of course, I think that I'm right—that my country's right. Everybody thinks that his country's right. Let's start from the first thing [Palestinian youth participating in the program] say, when they say, "I am from Palestine." I mean, there is no such country named Palestine. You can check the UN. There is no country written in the UN notebook called Palestine! There is such country called Israel. So he can say, "I'm a Palestinian from Israel." But when you say, "Hi. I'm from Palestine." "Jerusalem, Palestine" or something, it hurts the people that are from Israel and are from Jerusalem.... This is the problem: they don't have a country, and they feel like they have it. And they're speaking like there is no Israel! (pp. 135-136)

We don't have anything. We don't have zoos, parks, nothing.... And it's a terrible life. It's like a jail. You can't do anything. Even in jail, people don't worry about their food. But us, we're worried about our food, how we're going to drink water. The Israelis control everything in our lives.... And now, the new, what's called the new separation wall, makes a big difference. Smaller jail. Every time, smaller and smaller. They're trying to cage us in. Until we just disappear.... [On discussing his motivations to participate in intergroup contact] I want to show all the people that Palestinians are suffering. The Israelis occupied our land. They don't have any rights, no human rights. They use all the ways to torture us. Plus, freedom fighters are not terrorists because they are fighting for the country, and we don't have an army. I want to show all the people, Israelis, Americans, Jews, any nationality, I want to show them all what Palestinians are actually going through, how much we suffer.... I feel that I'm going to explode.... I don't know, it makes me angry.... would kill any Israeli, I don't care. Being Palestinian, and living the Palestinian life, going through hundreds of checkpoints, getting beaten by soldiers. (pp. 190–192, 195)

Both of these examples illustrate the ways in which youth may draw on societal discourses about war to make sense of their own experiences of political conflict and thus inform their understandings of themselves and others. Both narratives reflect many of the societal beliefs that Bar-Tal describes as characteristic of intractable conflict. In the case of the Jewish-Israeli youth, his emotional and cognitive experiences in the context of the intergroup contact program are colored by his beliefs that Israel has a unique legal and political status that Palestine does not. In turn, the Palestinian adolescent interprets the actions of Israelis as maliciously aimed at "[caging] us in" and
“[torturing] us,” evoking powerful reactions of anger and indignation. When considered in juxtaposition to each other, the mutual exclusivity of these two viewpoints on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is apparent. In each case, we see the delegitimization of outgroup members' goals and perspectives that serve to highlight the unique validity of the ingroup position, as well as negative stereotyping of the outgroup.

Such group-based ideological commitments may serve psychologically protective functions for youth who are faced with the grim realities of armed conflict. Indeed, past research has revealed that youth who are exposed to armed conflict may experience less distress when they are able to construct coherent meanings about political violence through the lens of their cultural belief systems. For example, Punamaki (1996) demonstrated that, among Jewish-Israeli youth, patriotism and ideological commitment (i.e., a belief in the justification of war and a readiness to participate in it) attenuated the association between war experiences and adolescents’ anxiety and depression. She argued that teens’ ability to find meaning in war-related events and incorporate them into their life experiences served to mitigate the negative consequences of this exposure. Kostelnky and Garbarino (1994) also revealed similar findings for Palestinian youth and noted that the buffering effects of ideological commitments appeared to be uniquely operative during adolescence (rather than earlier in childhood), when identity-relevant processes become increasingly salient to youths’ understandings of their experiences.

In addition to serving psychologically protective functions for individuals, the construction of an ethos of conflict that uniquely legitimizes the aims of one’s ingroup serves important functions for societies at war by justifying their conflict actions and promoting ingroup solidarity and patriotism (Bar-Tal, 2007). Related to this, Hammack (2010; 2011) has argued that the construction of polarized identities can undergird efforts to protect collective rights in the face of injustices. For example, the salience of Palestinian identities may serve as a tool to support the struggle for independence. From this standpoint, political conflict is not viewed as a wholly negative phenomenon but rather as a means whereby oppressed or marginalized groups can achieve social change. Indeed, the identity politics movement is premised on the importance of salient minority identities (e.g., as women, ethnic minorities) in supporting efforts to achieve equality with dominant groups (Taylor, 1994).

In his analysis of the narratives of Palestinian youth, Barber (2009) provides an illustration of the constructive processes underlying these patterns by demonstrating the ways in which Palestinian adolescents be their experiences of conflict to identity-relevant meaning systems and, indeed, derive a sense of competence and growth from their involvement in these events. In this way, his work highlights how the construction of polarized identities can undergird efforts to protect one’s collective rights in the face of perceived injustices (Hammack, 2011). Consider the following example from an adolescent Palestinian boy, reporting on his experiences during the first intifada (Barber, 2009):

My emotions took me. Where? I didn't know. I just wanted to fight and help end our suffering. We wanted this occupation to end. I can't describe, believe me, I just can't describe what a wonderful feeling it was to share with my people in the struggle against the occupation. (p. 299)

This narrative makes evident that, for this youth, his experiences of political conflict are tightly tied to his sense of collective identity and his desire to address perceived injustices against his people. Barber and Olsen (2009) revealed that activism was uniquely related to political engagement, volunteerism, and social initiative for Palestinian boys. In this sense, deriving a sense of meaning from experiences of political conflict may protect youth against the feelings of powerlessness and lack of control that may occur as a result of failing to find meaning in war. Indeed, for Palestinian (but not Israeli) youth, Slone (2009) found that greater exposure to violence was associated with less distress. Hammack (2010) speculated that identity-relevant processes may partially account for this pattern inasmuch as resistance-based meaning systems may act as a buffer, particularly for Palestinian adolescents.

Despite these individual- and societal-level benefits of youths’ tendency to draw personally significant meanings from their experiences of political conflict, other research suggests that the construction of these meanings may also confer various forms of risk. Specifically, it has been noted that adaptive processes of identity development imply a certain fluidity that allows youth to maintain multifaceted and flexible self-views that can accommodate changing circumstances and experiences; in the long term, such flexible patterns of self-understanding are linked to both well-being and maturity (McAdams, 1993; Pals, 2006). For this reason, the construction of rigid collective identities that are bound up with experiences of political conflict may also pose risks for individual development.
Bar-Tal’s (2007) work highlights that these identities emerge as a consequence of societal beliefs that help to meet the individual and collective challenges posed by political conflict. However, to the extent that these identities become reified, they might eventually become straightjackets that outlive their usefulness (Appiah, 1994). For example, although the identity-relevant meaning systems that characterize the experience of some Palestinian youth may serve an important function by supporting struggle aimed at achieving political goals and providing a buffer against psychological distress, it is possible that they may also interfere with the development of broader and more flexible notions of self that are not so fundamentally bound up with the negatively interdependent collective identities characteristic of intractable conflict.

In addition to these individual-level psychological risks, it is widely recognized that the construction of polarized identities in the context of armed conflicts can serve as important barriers to peacemaking and may serve to perpetuate cycles of violence. Specifically, once constructed, polarized identities tend to maintain, reproduce, and even exacerbate the ethos of conflict that led to them in the first place (Bar-Tal, 2007). It is not difficult to see why; in all of the narratives in this section, when youth speculate about the perspectives of outgroup members, they tend to be described as malicious, senseless, or misinformed. It is worth noting that these biases may also be manifested in more subtle ways. Specifically, Wainryb and Pasupathi (2010) have called attention to the stark imbalance in the extent to which youth exposed to violence represent the psychological experiences of ingroup and outgroup members. Specifically, in youth’s accounts, the actions of ingroup members are made comprehensible via references to their legitimate goals, understandings, and emotions, whereas the perspectives of outgroup members are rarely elaborated. Although these patterns do not reflect blatant forms of dehumanization (i.e., depicting the other as subhuman or animalistic; Bandura, 2002), the tendency to overlook or invalidate outgroup members’ internal experience nevertheless suggests a lack of empathy that may facilitate moral exclusion and the perpetration of violence against others, thereby perpetuating cycles of conflict (Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010; see also Moshman, 2007).

Taken as a whole, a substantial body of research makes clear that the group-based ideological commitments that are constructed out of youths’ experiences of armed conflict may serve as both benefits and burdens to societies (Hammack, 2010) and also constitute sources of both individual resilience and risk. Specifically, whereas polarized collective identities may undergird resistance and liberation for groups that feel oppressed and serve to protect youth against the distress associated with exposure to violence and injustice, they may also lead to Manichean processes that serve to justify violence against others and perpetuate conflict, in addition to constraining individual identity-related possibilities for youth.

In considering these associations between political conflict and identity development, researchers have typically focused on distinctions between the construction of collective ideologies that lead to polarized identities and, alternatively, the absence of such meanings. Yet we contend that there are at least two distinctive ways in which youth can neglect to draw meaning from their experiences of war: whereas some youth may engage in avoidant strategies that disrupt their ability to draw self-relevant meanings from their experiences, other adolescents may actively search for meaning in their experiences, but nevertheless fail to find it. Whereas the first strategy may be more psychologically protective in the short term, we suggest that each of these patterns may be linked to distinctive problematic developmental outcomes in the longer term. In the following sections, we discuss each in turn.

**Diffused Identities: Political Violence and the Disruption of Youths’ Meaning-Making Capacities**

In the immediate aftermath of trauma, feelings of numbness and disconnection are a common psychological response to the extreme stress and terror that may accompany these events. In conjunction with these feelings, many victims of trauma also report engaging in other forms of avoidance, such as concrete behavioral strategies aimed at avoiding physical or psychological reminders of traumatic experiences or reliance on drugs or alcohol to cope with emotional reactions (e.g., Kerig, Bennett, Thompson, & Becker, 2012). Research has shown that such avoidant reactions and other symptoms of PTSD are relatively common among youth exposed to high levels of political violence, especially when youth struggle to make sense of political conflict or experience particularly distressing events, such as family disruptions or direct witnessing of injuries or deaths (Jones & Kafetsios, 2005; Quta, Punamaki, & El Sarraj, 2008). Psychological avoidance may also be a relatively common coping strategy among youth combatants who have themselves perpetrated violence against others (Wainryb, 2011).
In the short-term, some of these forms of psychological avoidance may be adaptive as a mechanism for coping with the overwhelming emotions implicated by experiences with armed conflict (Jones, 2002; Punamaki, Muhammed, & Abdulrahman, 2004) and perhaps especially in circumstances in which youth themselves have engaged in actions that cause irreparable harm to another person (Betancourt et al., 2010; Klasen et al., 2010) and thus pose threats to their positive understandings of themselves (Wainryb, 2011). Indeed, the therapeutic literature makes clear that, particularly as long as youth continue to face threats to their security (e.g., refugee claimants whose cases have not yet been resolved; adolescents who continue to live under unstable conditions), youth may not feel an adequate sense of safety and trust to feel prepared to acknowledge and grapple with these aspects of their experiences (e.g., Rousseau, 2011; Rousseau & Measham, 2007).

However, psychological avoidance and numbing may be linked to problematic developmental consequences when these symptoms persist over time, manifest themselves in extreme ways (e.g., dissociation), or become generalized into an overall interpersonal style. More specifically, inasmuch as these tendencies may result in the blunting of normative emotional responses to events, when taken to the extreme, they may result in acquired (or “secondary”) psychopathic characteristics, such as a lack of empathy and remorse (Kerig et al., 2012). In turn, this emotional detachment has been linked to problematic outcomes, such as increased risk-taking, aggression, and juvenile delinquency (Allwood, Bell, & Horan, 2011; Kerig & Becker, 2010; Punamaki, 2009).

Arguably, if such processes of psychological avoidance and numbing in response to war-related traumas become enduring and generalized, they may also result in profound disruptions in youths’ identity development that may partially account for the problematic outcomes associated with these patterns. Under normal circumstances, as youth construct understandings of their experiences, their narrative accounts are rich in references to their motivations, cognitions, and emotions that imbue experiences with personally relevant meaning (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010); by the adolescent years, youth also show evidence of drawing connections between important events in their lives and their broader understandings of themselves and their relationships with others (McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010). Thus, youths’ narrative accounts of their experiences are crucial contexts for the development of identity, inasmuch as they provide opportunities for reflecting on the psychological worlds of self and other and making sense of personally experienced events.

Importantly, it is these very processes that may be disrupted by patterns of emotional numbing and avoidance that occur in the aftermath of trauma. For example, consider the following two narratives. The first is told by a former Colombian child soldier who was asked to describe an experience in which his actions caused harm to another person (Wainryb, 2011; see also Recchia & Wainryb, 2011); the second is told by a Sudanese adolescent describing his experience in a refugee camp (Lustig, Weine, Saxe, & Beardslee, 2004):

So that, so that day, when they ordered me to kill someone and so—we went, we left like, like three and—we got there and, and, we killed a cop and, then we left, well, the guerrilla told me to kill someone, so they ordered me, then we got there and, and, we killed a cop and then we re- turned to—returned to our camp. (p. 62)

This is about life in Kakuma [Refugee Camp], up until now. Also if you went outside and hung around, sometimes you’d get problems there. They would stalk you and kill you, and beat you, or take your things. Like this guy, the tall guy [referring to a current housemate], was coming from the Ethiopian market. He tried to cross a certain place. They stopped him and asked what he had in his pocket. He said, “I don’t have anything.” They beat him here [pointing to his head] with a gun, and then he ran away, but they left him because he didn’t have anything. He was very small then. So all these things happened in Kakuma. There was insecurity. (p. 38)

What is most remarkable about these accounts is what is absent; both narratives are almost devoid of references to goals, emotions, and cognitions. In the first account, the narrator does not describe why he was ordered to kill the cop, why he obeyed, or how he felt about doing so. Similarly, in the second account, the motivations of all actors are sparsely described, and, despite the horrifying nature of these events, the emotional experience of the victim is utterly absent. More broadly, both narratives lack the coherence and self-relevant meaning that generally typify adolescents’ accounts of personally significant events.

It is not clear the extent to which this numbing of agency results from a more passive blunting of psychological experience or youths’ more active attempts to avoid exploring the psychological implications of their actions.
Regardless, when generalized across events and persisting over time, this numbing of agency may become a source of serious concern with respect to identity development because it implies that these young people are unable to draw links between their own behavior and their sense of who they are. Consequently, these youth may also fail to draw clear connections between their past and present selves, as well as to project themselves into the future. Furthermore, even when these patterns of psychological and emotional numbing are circumscribed to youths’ understandings of their war-related experiences, they may nevertheless interfere in significant ways with youths’ abilities to reconcile such events with their broader understandings of themselves and thus interfere with the process of recovery. In these respects, such disruptions of a process fundamental to meaning-making and identity development may partially explain why emotional and psychological numbing are ultimately linked to dysregulated, aggressive behavior and poor psychosocial adjustment (Fonagy, 2003; Wainryb, Komolova, & Florsheim, 2010).

Taken together, these findings suggest that, for some youth, exposure to war-related violence may result in identity diffusion due to the ways in which trauma may interfere with the very processes undergirding the narrative construction of meaning. In the following section, we explore the implications for identity development when youth do engage in active attempts to make sense of their experiences in light of their self-understandings, but ultimately fail to do so.

**Powerlessness in the Face of the Incomprehensibility of Political Conflict: Searching for but Failing to Find Meaning in War**

When discussing meaning-making in the context of therapeutic trauma work, Rousseau and Measham (2007) stress the importance of considering the absurdity that is often a central aspect of traumatic experiences: “reestabishing fragments of meaning must be anchored to a recognition of the radical doubt that these people have experienced when faced with a universe without any purpose” (p. 284). Indeed, by definition, traumatic events are those that shake the foundations of our belief systems about ourselves and our worlds (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; see also Bonanno, 2013). However, the extent to which experiences of armed conflict result in trauma depends on how youth interpret events in the context of their own goals, histories, and ideological commitments. As noted earlier, past research has revealed that when youth search for but fail to find personally significant meaning in their experiences of armed conflict, they are at particular risk for experiencing distress (Barber, 2009; Jones, 2002). This distress can be partially accounted for by the fact that, under these conditions, youth may experience war-related violence as frightening, jarring, and dissonant with the ways in which they perceive themselves. To illustrate, consider the following two examples of Bosnian youth describing their experiences of conflict (from Barber, 2009, and Weine, Klebic, Celik, & Bicic, 2009, respectively):

I couldn’t understand the situation the way it was. It was without any meaning. My parents didn’t know and they didn’t know what to tell me, why this was happening, what is going to become of us, are we going to be alive. (p. 296)

When the war started we were too young to understand what was going on and why, but not too young to feel pain, to be scared and hopeless. Maybe we were not too young to understand but we did not have anyone to teach us more about our neighbors, about history, about who we are. My Serbian classmates, kids that I grew up with, were carrying weapons. In one day they became complete strangers. In some ways I became a stranger to myself, too. My life and the lives of my family members were in danger because of our names and religion. I never knew those things mattered, which means that I did not know many things about myself, too. (p. 269)

It is worth noting that the relative prevalence of such failures to find meaning in conflict might depend on the specific sociopolitical realities faced by youth in the context of particular conflicts. For example, in a comparative analysis, Barber (2009) demonstrates that, in contrast to Palestinian youth, it may be difficult for Bosnian youth to make sense of their conflict experiences in light of historical explanations or political commitments. Indeed, Jones (2002) also provides converging evidence of the psychological risks associated with youths’ attempts to make sense of the Bosnian conflict. Her data revealed that youths’ engagement with the conflict (i.e., attempting to understand why it took place, what it was about) was linked to lower psychological well-being among both bosnian and Serbian youth. In interpreting these findings, she noted that both groups of youth felt alienated from politics and had few opportunities for meaningful participation in the conflict (e.g., via political activism); the families of both
Serbian and Bosnian youth expressed a sense of powerlessness and insignificance in the face of conflict. Under these circumstances, engagement with the conflict appears to be linked to a sense of threat and lack of control that results from attempting to come to grips with the apparent senseless and absurdity of their war-related experiences of violence and injustice, youth are engaged in questioning their previous assumptions about themselves and their worlds, but arrive at few satisfying answers.

Both Barber (2009) and Jones (2002) underscore that perception of one’s own helplessness may be a characteristic feature of this pattern of meaning-making. In her analysis of the narrative accounts of child soldiers, Wainryb (2011) observed a pattern among some youth combatants that seemed to reflect a similar sense of constrained agency. The following example is drawn from an interview with a sixteen-year-old boy (Wainryb, 2011):

Well—once the comandante he ordered, he ordered me and another guy—to go kill a man in a plantation—because he had cows, all of that, he had cattle, so he ordered us to kill him because he didn’t, he didn’t give any of the cows he had—so he ordered us to kill him. And we killed him, and we had to take him, we took him and buried him. We tied him up and we—and we killed him over there where all our compañeros were. [Interviewer:] What else do you remember? The comandante like—he ordered me to kill him and I was afraid and—he said to me that if I didn’t kill him that—that they will kill me and so I had to do it—so I was all—all scared—thinking that they would kill me too. [Interviewer:] And how old were you when that happened? I was—I was about 9 years old. (p. 286)

Although this narrator does not elaborate fully on his own psychological experience, he nevertheless conveys a clear sense of coercion, fear, and diminished control. In contrast to the earlier examples, this pattern is particularly striking in that this adolescent was asked to describe an instance in which he himself engaged in a hurtful behavior.

We argue that this sense of powerlessness that emerges from youths’ failed attempts to make sense of their conflict experiences in light of their self-understandings and sense of agency may have important implications for identity development that are distinct from those described in relation to the avoidance of meaning making. To reiterate, earlier, we described a process whereby youths’ experiences with violence can result in the disruption of narrative processes of identity development, in that youth did not consider the identity implications of their conflict experiences for their understandings of themselves. In contrast, the pattern described in the present section is such that youth are actively considering connections between their self-understandings and their conflict experiences, but failing to identify such connections. Consequently, this perceived disconnect may result in youths’ experiences being characterized by a sense of passive victimhood and diminished control.

This pattern is likely to be particularly problematic when it is generalized into an overall interpretive style dominated by a sense of incomprehensibility, fear, and helplessness. In other words, although it may emerge from youths’ experiences of political violence, for some adolescents it may become the lens through which they make sense of their everyday experiences. An example of this type of generalization is hinted at in the following account of a peer conflict, as narrated by a Bosnian adolescent (from Daiute, 2010):

[A] boy from another class put a firecracker in my rucksack which was on my back. I didn’t even notice that until other students started to laugh and move away from me. Then I realized that my books were burning, so I threw the rucksack onto the ground, and ran away because I was scared. I was very angry and scared because I didn’t find it to be funny, but rather dangerous. The worst thing was that the other students either ran away or laughed; none of them defended me, nobody said anything to that boy. (p. 64)

If youth internalize a prevailing sense of themselves as victims of uncontrollable circumstances or the senseless aggressive or unjust actions of others, in the long-term, we argue that this interpretive style may interfere with an experiential ownership of their own choices and actions. For example, in the following account, an internally displaced Colombian adolescent describes an experience in which he harmed a peer (Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010). Colombia has been disrupted by violent wars for more than fifty years, with guerrilla and paramilitary groups fighting against the government and against each other. As a result of the widespread and often random violence, approximately 2 million children have been forcibly displaced from their homes, relocating to slums on the outskirts of large cities that are themselves plagued by instability, violence, and poverty. Thus, despite substantial differences between the Bosnian and Colombian conflicts, the latter context may also be characterized by the sort
Youths’ Constructions of Meanings About Experiences with Political Conflict

of unpredictable and incomprehensible violence and injustice that resists the construction of coherent ideological meanings (from Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2008; see also Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010):

I remember a time when we were in the classroom and the teacher left. Then I tried to hurt one of my best friends with a rope that was hanging from the roof. I put it around his neck and started pulling. I don’t know why I did it. Everybody saw that, and they called the principal... and she began to scold me and she told me that she might expel me from school. And then she told me that I was useless, and after that everybody avoided me and they made me feel like I don’t belong in there. And so I felt really bad, I cried. (p. 178)

What is particularly salient in this account is the narrator’s apparent conflation of victim and perpetrator roles. Although he describes (but is unable to explain) his own harmful actions against his friend, his account focuses on his own pain and humiliation at becoming the target of others’ disapproval. When this relatively elaborated understanding of his own victimization is considered alongside the apparent incomprehensibility of his hurtful behavior, this narrative seems to suggest a uniquely impoverished understanding of his own capacity for choice and action. In the long term, then, it is possible that this sense of constraint may ultimately interfere with a sense of self-directedness and future orientation, as well as a somewhat narrow self-focus and the selective blaming of others for conflict or its consequences. Partially in line with these speculations, McCouch (2009) found that, among Bosnian youth, a negative sense of the future explained the association between exposure to violence and later criminal activity. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, to date, almost no studies have delved into these particular questions, and so more research is needed to test these claims.

In sum, when adolescents experience themselves as victims of incomprehensible acts of political violence and injustice, this may be associated with both short- and long-term psychological risks, including the potential for disrupted trajectories of identity development. Yet simultaneously, it may also be the case that this pattern of failing to make sense of experiences of political conflict may have the consequence of circumventing some of the problematic implications for identity development that may result when youth do draw connections between their conflict experiences and their understandings of themselves.

In the following section, we introduce an alternative pathway that may characterize the experiences of youth who observe or become victims of systematic and deliberate violence that comes from within their own society (e.g., by their own government). We propose that, under these circumstances, rather than failing to construct meaning from their experiences, political violence may challenge youths’ understandings of their societies in ways that may serve to degrade their collective ideological commitments.

Systemic Violence from Within: Political Conflict and the Abandonment of Collective Identities

In this section, we wish to raise the possibility that, under some circumstances, rather than increasing the salience of collective identities, war-related violence and injustice may result in a sense of social fragmentation and disillusionment that is essentially the opposite of the processes articulated earlier. This may be particularly likely to occur when governments and societal institutions are viewed as turning against their own citizens, as in the instances of state-sponsored terrorism, abductions, and torture that characterized the conflicts in 1970s Argentina and Pinochet-era Chile, as well as other Latin American countries. In these sociopolitical contexts, although various groups of citizens (e.g., left wing activists) may potentially develop collective identities in opposition to repressive forces in their societies, youths’ experiences of organized and calculated terror and violence at the hands of their own governments may also challenge their previously constructed meanings about their own societies. Although no research has directly examined this issue, Latin American scholars writing in the aftermath of these conflicts describe sociological and psychological trends that are suggestive of such a pattern (e.g., Barrero-Cuellar, 2011; Berezin, 1998).

We can only speculate about how this disintegration of solidarity and collective meanings may influence patterns of identity development. It may result in a sort of fatalism whereby youth conclude that nothing can be trusted and that meaningful action is not possible; in this respect, this type of violence may result in a process similar to that described earlier for youth who search for and fail to find meaning in their war-related experiences. Alternatively, it might lead to a form of “everyone for himself” detachment that works against a sense of ingroup solidarity. Indeed, similar theoretical propositions have been made with respect to children and adolescents exposed to community violence (Arsenio & Gold, 2006) and war-related violence (Punamaki, 2009). Specifically, these authors have
suggested that exposure to violence and injustice may lead youth to view social relationships as characterized by a lack of caring and by coercion, perceive that opportunities are limited by systemic inequalities, and suspect that others are not willing or capable of protecting them from such harm or unfairness. Under these circumstances, youth are likely to cease thinking of social cohesion and justice-oriented action as organizing features of their daily interactions, but rather view power and domination as more central concerns for understanding and functioning in their world (Wainryb & Recchia, 2013). As a consequence, then, it seems possible that a generalized sense of mistrust in social systems and institutions may be constructed out of such experiences. For this reason, it is also plausible that these processes may result in behaviors reflecting a disregard for laws and institutions, including bribery and revenge-based actions (e.g., “taking the law into your own hands”).

Again, we reiterate that these propositions are all speculative and remain to be tested empirically. Nevertheless, these possibilities suggest that youth may draw connections between their war-related experiences and understandings of self that are not premised on polarized distinctions between ingroups and outgroups. In the following section, we discuss another way political conflict may impact youths’ understandings of themselves. Specifically, we suggest that youths’ self-understandings may become encapsulated by their experiences in war, such that these experiences become self-definitional and preclude alternative identity-related possibilities.

Essentialized Identities: Becoming Defined by Experiences of War

As noted earlier, youth who become involved in political conflict as combatants are faced with particularly salient challenges to their views of themselves (see also Wainryb & Kerig, 2013). Certainly, being victimized by another person or group of people can lead adolescents to question their basic sense of trust in their own worthiness (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). However, adolescents who have engaged in violent or unjust acts against others are faced with the unique difficulty of reconciling their own hurtful behavior with their understandings of themselves as people who are capable of doing good as well as harm. When these acts result in harms, such as the death or serious injury of another person, that are largely irreparable, these psychological conflicts may be particularly devastating. Under these circumstances, some youth may engage in avoidant strategies, such as emotional and psychological numbing, that protect them from considering the implications of their actions for their understandings of themselves. However, inasmuch as youth do engage in efforts to reconcile their actions with their self-understandings, this process may have especially profound implications for adolescents’ understandings of themselves. Consider the following example of a narrative told by a former youth combatant in Colombia (from Wainryb, 2011):

So the day that I hurt a person was the day that they killed my cousins. We were fighting the Autodefensas Campesinas, and in the battle three of my cousins died. That day we captured—we killed 25 paracos [members of the paramilitary], we captured 10, and the comandante’s order was to dismember them and to send the pieces to each of their families. And that day was when—from the rage of having seen my cousins killed by those same people we had caught—I was so enraged that I started out by removing the fingers off a person with a power-saw, I cut the fingers off both hands, then an arm, I cut off the arm all around until I got to the shoulders, then I started out with the feet, I removed everything until I cut off his head, I took off his tongue, and I cut off the eyes, and I sent it all to his mom. That day I will never forget and I always carry this burden. Being here I remember it and sometimes I feel like crying for having done this to a person. And a few days later I thought about it and said to myself—how will be my death, will it be like that or how. (p. 289)

In this account, this youth describes a horrifying experience that is clearly linked to an ongoing sense of guilt and pain. Unlike the earlier example that reflected processes of psychological and emotional numbing, this boy is clearly engaged in trying to make sense of his previous behavior; his overwhelming rage at the death of his cousins is central to his explanation of his actions. In this respect, there is little that is self-protective about this account; he has come face to face with a dark and angry part of himself. Equally salient in his account is his inability to reconcile these actions with some alternative current and future self. He appears to be haunted by his actions in a way that suggests that they are inescapable, and even that they have some enduring and causal meaning in relation to his future self.

This account implies that this youth’s interpretations of his experiences of conflict are linked to a highly negative view of himself. However, not all experiences of war may be construed in such negative ways. To the extent that
Youths’ Constructions of Meanings About Experiences with Political Conflict

Youth develop crystallized understandings of themselves as defined by their conflict experiences, even positive essentialized self-views have the potential to interfere with adolescents’ capacity to move beyond conflict and consider alternative future selves. These issues are articulated clearly by a former youth combatant in South Africa, in the period following the election of a democratic government in 1994 (from Langa & Eagle, 2008):

When we were fighting they [the community] used to respect us. They used to respect, he carries guns and he protects us [so] we can sleep well. You walk in the street they [the community] ask you: “are you hungry? They will give you food. Are you okay? They will give you money, because they know you are protecting them. You see. Then after the violence each and every individual started to look at their own lives which are normal. I can understand but now we tend to be a laughter, we tend to be a joke. When you are passing by they say: “look at him—you know—look at him, he doesn’t even have shoes.” Shoes are torn up and whatsoever. He was running up and down and protecting; now you are a laughing thing now when you pass by… you become what? You become an enemy of your own community, which you were protecting. (p. 167)

In some ways, this account is distinct from the instance presented earlier, in that this youth does not focus on being psychologically troubled by his conflict experiences and associates his former role as a combatant with a sense of masculinity and prestige. Indeed, it has been noted that such participatory combatant roles may provide marginalized youth with a potent source of self-efficacy and competence that they cannot easily hope to obtain via more usual routes in their communities (Perez-Sales, 2010; Langa & Eagle, 2008). Similar to Palestinian youth, “young lions” in South Africa were able to draw on politically relevant meaning systems (i.e., the need to act as agents of political change by struggling and defending one’s community against repressive security forces) to give meaning to their experiences. Nevertheless, in the postconflict period, the identities developed by these South African youth in the context of political conflict appeared to interfere with the development of positive, alternative self-conceptions that were less bound up with experiences of war.

These problems are also compounded by the fact that many such youth have not developed the skills and qualifications that are crucial for success in the postwar period. For example, due to their military involvement, many leave school at an early age. Thus, they tend to lack access to the opportunities that could provide a route to meaningful roles and alternative self-understandings. In the case of South African youth, given high rates of unemployment, marginalization, and a sense of emasculation, some former combatants have experienced tumultuous and sometimes violent family relationships. Some youth also resorted to violent crime, explaining such involvement as a legitimate response to marginalization and exclusion (Gear, 2002; Langa & Eagle, 2008).

Kostelny and Garbarino (1994) note similar challenges among some Irish Republican Army (IRA) members in Northern Ireland, whose identities constructed in the context of conflict continued to contribute to the perpetuation of violence even in the postwar period. In both Northern Ireland and South Africa (as well as elsewhere), these problems have been exacerbated by the stigmatization of former combatants as deviant and dangerous individuals, thus further limiting their opportunities for meaningful participation in their communities (Gear, 2002; Harland, Barclay, & McNamie, 2006). Consider this last extract from an interview with a former Colombian youth combatant, in which he clearly conveys these impediments to developing more positive, alternative self-conceptions (from Perez-Sales, 2010):

My profession is killing people. The only thing I know how to do is kill. Now, I am tired of that, I want a job. My family is happy that I’ve changed, but there is unemployment. My life has been horrible. I’ve had to kill and dismember… I want a quiet life now…. I have children, but there is hunger, brother. There is no chance for those who want to reinsert themselves in the system here. Everyone wants to kill you… Marihuana is my only friend (laughing). (p. 409)

As noted earlier, past research reveals that adaptive processes of identity development are characterized by a flexibility that stands in contrast to the rigidified nature of these self-understandings. Thus, inasmuch as youths’ identities become shackled to their war-related experiences, this may serve to limit growth, leading to lower well-being and maturity (McAdams, 1993; Pals, 2006).

Taken together, the examples in this section emphasize the psychological risks associated with youths’ essentialized understandings of themselves in relation to their war-related experiences. In many circumstances, these identities are highly negative and are linked to a substantial degree of psychological distress. Nevertheless,
even when these encapsulated identities are more positive, youth are faced with both psychological and practical barriers to the development of alternative self-conceptions, as well as their ability to flexibly project themselves into the future. In this respect, these identities may also be linked to the continuation of violence and delinquent behavior in the postwar period.

In the following section, we discuss one final way in which experiences of political conflict may impact on processes of identity development; when youth exposed to conflict relocate to new societies as immigrants or refugees. Although the challenges facing these adolescents may overlap to some extent with the processes outlined in this section (in that discrimination against these youth may threaten their positive self-views and pose constraints to their self-development), their pathways are also unique, inasmuch as it becomes necessary for them to negotiate the tension between their extant identities and their efforts to adapt to a new culture.

**Facing an Identity Dilemma: Negotiating Between Collective Identities in the Aftermath of War**

Similar to many war-affected youth who remain in their home countries, youth who relocate to a new society in response to persecution and threat may develop salient collective identities. This may in part be because a group’s history of intimidation and discrimination may imbue that group’s identity with a unique value that renders membership precious—thus, refugee groups may have a marked desire to retain parts of their cultural identifications in diaspora (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2008). But, to a large extent, too, the salience of the collective identity is a result of external forces that are uniquely associated with refugee status because youths and families seeking refugee status are repeatedly required to conceive of and present themselves in terms of a single group identity in order to be protected and helped toward safety (Dummett, 2001). Therefore, to some extent, this collective identity may be forced on individuals who might not otherwise see it as central to them, inasmuch as they require legal protection.

At the same time, successful adaptation to the new country requires refugee youth to adopt new habits, attitudes, and alliances—some of which may conflict with the remnants of their former culture. To make things worse, in the midst of their efforts to negotiate between multiple collective identities, refugee youth often experience discrimination—not necessarily the type of discrimination addressed by legal institutions, but rather the more ambiguous interpersonal encounters, termed “racial microaggressions,” that highlight a person’s sense of him- or herself as a member of a particular group, often in negative ways (e.g., Sue, Capodilupo, Tórino, Buccheri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquín, 2007). These encounters, which may be more prevalent and insidious than legal discrimination in their impact on individuals, may push refugee youths into a denigrated and devalued group identity. Consider the following two examples of events described by Bosnian refugee youth, after immigrating to the United States (from Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2008):

Well yeah. I mean, I remember one time, it was... these girls in class and I was like, oh you know, they were saying like, “oh that’s weird, because, you know, she’s from a different country. She doesn’t... and our American culture”... w, how um, how I can’t like communicate with them and, how, you know, my parents don’t drive, you know, a nice car...

I actually have one more thing that happened at the college. With uh, but it was after the uh Trolley Square shooting [a mass shooting that occurred at a local mall and was deemed the responsibility of a youth from the refugee community]. I had class next morning and this girl that was sitting in front of me... somebody was talking about the Trolley shooting and then um she said “well, yeah that’s what will happen when you let the immigrants coming to this country.” So that kinda, you know, I mean... everybody is the same but she said “yeah, I don’t care where he is from. That will happen when you let immigrants coming to this country.”

Differential treatment on the basis of group membership is always intrinsically reductive inasmuch as in being discriminated against as a member of a particular group people are denied the complexity of their individual identities and are treated as simply “an X.” The reductiveness and potential dangers of everyday discrimination may, however, be exaggerated for youths who are negotiating multiple identities. The contents of the experiences recounted in the narratives here pose a complex dilemma to refugee youth who are being told that they are incompetent at fitting in and a threat to society. In a group of people who might be expected to want to retain a sense of themselves as Bosnian but also construct a sense of themselves as American, these experiences make...
that duality problematic. They render that Bosnian identity a devalued one and also implicitly juxtapose it with the impossible, unattainable American identity. It is worth noting, too, that although these incidents may look like typical schoolchild unkindness, the explicit group-based devaluing may evoke greater distress for refugee youth who have a history of group-based discrimination and persecution (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2008).

Research suggests that the well-being of refugee youth is most clearly promoted when they can hold and integrate multiple group affiliations (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Cameron, Rutland, Brown, & Douch, 2006). Such a process is often fraught with difficulties because youth must inevitably face conflicts between the set of identities related to their countries and cultures of origin and the new possibilities in the receiving country. Experiences of everyday discrimination may interfere further with the adaptive development of multiple collective identities, since the way refugee youth construct the meaning of such experiences may have implications for their ability to think of themselves in positive, multifaceted ways. Ultimately, the way youth resolve these issues may be important not only for their own individual well-being (Mahalingam, 2006; Scott & Scott, 1989), but also for dynamics between immigrant groups and other groups within society (Dummett, 2001).

**Conclusion**

The variety of meaning-making strategies described in this chapter draws attention to and illustrates the vast heterogeneity of youth experiences growing up in the midst of political conflict. We have argued that polarized collective identities are most likely to be constructed when youth are able to draw on personally relevant meaning systems to make sense of their experiences of violence and injustice; intractable conflicts may be particularly likely to provide the conditions that are conducive to developing such identities. In contrast, for youth who experience extreme stress and terror or who perpetrate violence themselves, especially when they fail to make sense of the conflict, we have proposed that processes of identity development may become diffused as a consequence of adolescents’ reliance on psychological avoidance and numbing as a coping strategy. In turn, other youth who search for but fail to find personally relevant meaning from political violence may experience a sense of helplessness and lack of control; this pathway may be particularly likely in contexts when conflicts are more difficult to connect to historical or political meaning systems and perhaps also when youth lack access to meaningful ways of participating in conflict. Next, we speculated that when systemic violence comes from within youths’ own societies and is directed by governments at their own citizens, for some youth, collective identities may be abandoned, resulting in a sense of social fragmentation and disillusionment. Subsequently, we argued that when youth combatants engage in efforts to reconcile their perpetration of irreparable harm with their self-understandings, this may result in the construction of essentialized identities that are bound up with youths’ war-related experiences; this process may be compounded by a lack of meaningful opportunities for youth to develop more positive self-conceptions in the postwar period. Finally, we underscored the unique identity challenges faced by refugee youth as they attempt to adapt to life in a new society where they often become the victims of discrimination.

In the context of politically framed events involving diverse instantiations of hostility, aggression, and discrimination, youth arguably have the need to grapple with the meanings of these experiences while at the same time protecting themselves from some of the devastating implications of the violence and injustice they suffered and the violence that they may have themselves perpetrated. Each of the forms of meaning-making presented in this chapter can thus be thought of as an understandable response to the threats associated with these experiences and the complex needs they give rise to; each of them can be understood as being adaptive in light of the unique circumstances afforded by the specific sociopolitical features and also as posing unique developmental risks.

Importantly, also, each of these ways of grappling with experiences of political conflict (including those attempts at sidestepping or avoiding certain meanings) implicates identity work. In other words, each of the ways in which youths make sense of their experiences with political conflict is likely to have unique consequences for their enduring understandings of themselves. Indeed, it is often thought (e.g., Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011; McAdams, 1993) that identity creation relies on stories of an autobiographical nature—the kind of “life stories” that implicate active reflection on self-defining events from one’s personal past and the drawing of explicit connections between one’s past and current and future self. However, the propositions outlined in this chapter are premised on the assumption (see also Bamberg, 2007; McLean & Pasupathi, 2012) that youths also engage in
identity exploration and construction via narration about less deep and momentous, more mundane, events: This is because the very act of grappling with what everyday events mean tends to shape the conclusions that youths draw about themselves and the kind of world they inhabit. Therefore, even if an account of being insulted by girls at school may not end up becoming the sort of self-defining episode that these youths might ultimately choose to include in their autobiographical life stories, such narration may nevertheless become integrally connected with their sense of who they are. So when an adolescent makes sense of disparate events in her everyday life by resorting to explanations or metaphors that invoke, as an example, a view of a righteous and self-sacrificing ingroup and a selfish and uncompromising outgroup, she is implicitly engaged in creating a certain type of identity, even if she isn’t drawing explicit autobiographical connections (see also Pasupathi, this volume).

Also relevant to our proposition about the significant identity implications of meaning-making in this context is the broad understanding that grappling with the meaning of an experience is not something that happens at a single point in time. Rather, the storying of an experience can be—and often is—done over and over again and its meaning continues to be reframed within the context of a person’s ongoing life. Youth are thus likely to revisit and rethink the meanings and implications of any one event at different times (see also Dekel & Bonanno, 2013; Pasupathi, 2013). And although, in general, the ways in which people initially narrate an event shape and constrain how they will remember and understand that event and what they will come believe about themselves in relation to it, the retelling of experiences can also become an avenue for change (McAdams, 1993; Pasupathi, 2001).

In this respect, the extent to which each of these specific forms of meaning-making is problematic will depend in a large measure on their stability and generality. Stability refers to the extent to which any one way of making sense of experiences with political conflict or violence persists relatively unchanged over time or gives way to other ways of constructing themselves in the world. Thus we might worry less if, for example, avoidant or polarized forms of identity constructed in the context of ongoing conflict give way to more elaborated or balanced strategies once the political conflict has subsided than if they persist relatively unchanged over time. A related and equally important question refers to the extent to which the unique ways in which youths make sense of their experiences are circumscribed to their thinking about themselves (and others) around experiences of political violence or become more generalized to grappling with diverse and disparate experiences. It is plausible, for example, that some youth might be able to find ways of accommodating different views of themselves and might thus move relatively freely or flexibly between, for example, polarized or helpless and victimized constructions of themselves vis-à-vis conflicts of a political nature and more balanced or agentic ways of thinking of themselves in relation to conflicts of an interpersonal nature. For others, the ways in which they have constructed themselves in relation to situations of political violence may occlude or preclude other possible views of themselves both concurrently and over time—a problem that may be most marked for essentialized constructions of identity that become encapsulated within a narrow swath of experience.

In reference to victims of trauma, Rousseau and Measham (2007) have argued that the process of recovery tends to be characterized by the reestablishment of oscillation between different strategies for grappling and coping with traumatic events, whereas a continued and exclusive reliance on one strategy is seen as more problematic: “Gaining even the slightest ability to move back and forth between two opposing strategies is seen as a key moment in which an individual or group begins to emerge from a predominantly inward-looking state of stupor or disconnection or begins to contain a process previously characterized by being overwhelmed by uncontrollable traumatic experiences” (p. 281; see also Bonanno, 2013). We suggest that this point also extends to the implications of these problematic forms of narrative construction for youths’ identity development. Thus it may be crucial to support youths’ ability to establish more balanced and less rigid understandings of themselves and to envision future selves that are connected to the personal past but are not unduly constrained by their own previous actions (see Perez-Sales, 2010; Wainryb, 2011).

In this respect, the narrative accounts that youth produce about their own experiences of political conflict may be not only a key to understanding their identity-relevant struggles, but also a context for putting things right again, precisely because it is in the process of constructing and reconstructing accounts of their experiences that a newer, perhaps more elaborated, balanced, or complex sense of identity may emerge. This process might ideally be accomplished via the creation of narrative accounts in conjunction with others, especially parents and other supportive adults, because it is through such joint narration that young people, especially, can garner new perspectives on actions and events, create different meanings, and change their initial understandings. But in contexts of ongoing political conflict and violence, and the often resulting processes of dislocation and
displacement, adults are less likely to be available for eliciting or listening to their accounts or offering much perspective or containment. Furthermore, even when available, adults are quite likely to experience the conflict through a lens similar to that of their children (e.g., Rousseau & Jamil, 2010). Thus, the assistance these youths will require to successfully navigate this task may need to come as part of broader psychosocial interventions provided to them in the aftermath of conflict (see also Wainryb, 2011).

In general, the therapeutic literature (e.g., Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010; Briere & Lanktree, 2012) suggests that encouraging youths to recount their own experiences in ways that help them reconstruct the events and elaborate on their own emotions, goals, intentions, and thoughts might work against numbing and diffusion, provided that these explorations are conducted in a supportive context characterized by safety and trust. Similarly, strategies that encourage youth to remain open to reinterpreting the meaning of past experiences over time might be generally helpful for youth for whom certain experiences precipitated rigidified constructions of self. This might include encouraging youth to retell their stories in a way that helps them consider distortions and unexamined beliefs formed during a traumatic event not necessarily as wrong but as understandable reactions to overwhelming circumstances and ultimately helps them to appreciate the complexity of events, to question negative assumptions about self, and to work toward accepting themselves as complex human beings. And, finally, in the context of encouraging youth to retell their stories in an effort to promote development, it may also be important to recognize the limits of redemptive storytelling (Breen & McLean, 2013; McAdams, 2006; Pals & McAdams, 2004). Indeed, encouraging youths to recount their experiences in ways that result in more elaborated, balanced, and growth-promoting identity forms should not necessarily entail encouraging them to transform their gruesome and deeply hurtful experiences into positive or redeeming ones because some events may never get completely “resolved.” Therefore a more appropriate goal may be to help youths retell their stories in ways that release them from the grip of these events and allow them to integrate their past experiences with some broader possibilities for future action.

And yet, even as the distinct ways in which youth construct identity in the context of experiences with political conflict suggest somewhat distinct strategies for scaffolding growth, it is also important to consider that even very deliberate outside efforts at intervention specifically designed for addressing the identity-related consequences of youths’ exposure to political conflict may be met with unique difficulties and challenges. At the very least, we emphasize that much more research is needed before we can fully understand the specific features that may be required of potential interventions geared at addressing the distinct identity-laden implications of exposure to political conflict. Indeed, the little extant research suggests that interventions with a decided intuitive appeal may not work as desired and may in fact produce undesirable results. For example, in his research on American intervention programs for Israeli and Palestinian youth that aim to transcend mutually polarized identities and promote, instead, the construction of a shared cosmopolitan identity, Hammack (2011) reveals that, for a substantial proportion of youth, participation in such programs was ultimately associated with an accentuation of polarized identities. In other words, despite their best efforts, his analysis implies that some interventions may actually result in identity change that is the opposite of that which is desired and anticipated. Similarly, ongoing research in our lab (Ttwai, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, in progress) suggests that, under specific conditions, encouraging youths who have been hurt by another to broaden their own view of themselves as victims by considering the perspective of the person who hurt them tends to actually reinforce the narrow self-view as victim, increase anger, and give rise to more negative views of the other and the relationship. Accordingly, in the absence of further research, and given the imperative to avoid doing harm, we urge extreme caution in translating this set of propositions into actual interventions.

In sum, in this chapter, we have proposed that thinking about identity processes conceived in relation to how youths variously make sense of their war-related experiences can help us better understand the developmental sequelae of political conflict. In many respects, the propositions we have outlined are consistent with recent scholarship that challenges the one-sided view of war-affected youths as helpless victims, replacing it with a view of young people as continuously engaged in making sense of the sociopolitical realities in which they participate (e.g., Barber, 2009; Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006; Daiute, 2010; Franks, 2011; Hammack, 2011; Wessells, 2006). Critically, we also underscore that youths’ capacity to make sense of their own experiences is not necessarily associated, exclusively and in an uncomplicated fashion, with optimal identity growth (Recchia & Wainryb, 2011; Wainryb, 2010; 2011). Rather, the analyses outlined in this chapter suggest that, in grappling with their war-related experiences, youths may initiate identity pathways that, although protective in the short term, can ultimately constrain and even undermine development in the long run (see also Hammack, 2011; Wainryb &
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