Summary of PhD Thesis

The Impact of Communication on Child Recruitment and Peacebuilding
An Empirical Analysis

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Abstract

Communication has played a crucial role in child recruitment and conflict escalation. Even so, it remains a vital tool for the reintegration of ex-child soldiers. In recent decades, the issue of child soldiering has gained immense global attention. Yet, much of the discourse surrounding this issue is built on two dominant narratives. First is the narrative of victimhood — a portrayal of child combatants as casualties of human aggression and ones that have lost significant aspects of their lives through no action of their own. The second is that of accountability—a narrative that rejects the concept of victimhood based on a conviction that child soldiers are monstrous perpetrators unworthy of pity nor forgiveness. Both descriptions seem rather extreme and often do not reflect the deeds and aspirations of many child soldiers. Nonetheless, the notion that a child with combat experience would live or work among civilians certainly raises legitimate concerns among the local population. These concerns, in many regards, are hijacked, magnified and built into media and academic discourses, which for the most part, labels child soldiers as inherently violent, lost and irredeemable to society. Representations like these have instilled fear and resentment in most post-war communities where a good number of ex-child soldiers are ostracised. This study explores the impact of communication on child recruitment and highlights how communication strategies can be used to build peace using local capacity and ex-child soldiers living in fragile and post-war nations. A mixed-method was applied to analyze and formulate the results of measurable data obtained from 300 respondents. Finding were subjected to content analysis, Likert scale and Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS). The result reveals that despite its wrong usages, communication remains a crucial element of peacebuilding and post-war recovery particularly because the parties in conflict cannot move towards a resolution without some forms of dialogue. It demonstrates that communication can reduce escalation, limit ethnic and religious tension, foster compromise among disputants and restart dialogue. It highlights how communication channels such as music, television, radio, theater, film, art, dance, and the internet can help reshape group identity, enhance tolerance, mutual understanding, and reduce violent behaviours among young people. Finally, the study offers a third narrative calling for the inclusion of ex-child soldiers in local peacebuilding initiatives using cooperative communication and the combined experiences and knowledge bank of peacebuilding practitioners and ex-child soldiers.

Key Words: Communication, Impact, Child Recruitment, Peacebuilding, Narratives.

Background of Study

1 Introduction

Around the world, communication has emerged as the dominant force of child recruitment. Governments and armed groups operating in conflict zones utilize persuasive and violent forms of communications to appeal and compel youngsters to join, sympathize or affiliate with their cause.[1] In particular, the use of radio, television, newspapers and electronic media is adopted to lure youngsters into their armies. This monopoly of pretence and trickery is equally used by ex-child combatants who often navigate the challenges of a post-conflict society. To that extent, they adopt the paradigm of effective speaking to maintain a complex identity that is characterized by the need to survive following an end to hostility. At home, they maintain a reformed and rueful profile to avoid retribution, discrimination and stigmatisation. In school, social gathering and religious centers, they concealed their identity and distanced themselves from the past. With NGOs, they adopt the image of traumatized victims — often seeking diverse forms of assistance using crafted languages that resonate with Western donors. Languages like "I was drugged, I was forced, I was too young and helpless to resist," are used to capture the hearts and minds of their sympathizers. Among their colleagues, however, they dressed in military gears and bragged about their combat victories – thus maintaining the status of a warrior.[2] Martins (1980: 8), refers to this as an exchange of information that affects the attitudes and behaviours of others. Severin and Tankard (1992), view this as a symbolic form of communication where reality is produced, maintained and transformed. Whether used for child recruitment by warlords or as a survival mechanism by ex-child soldiers, communication has, in many ways, the potential to create understanding, open dialogue and re-establish relationships between groups that have once opposed themselves in violent conflicts. Therefore, given that communication is central to human interaction, learning how to shape its use to strive for peace; is the starting point in achieving sustainable security in post-war communities. Hence, while exploring its impact on child recruitment, this study seeks new ways through which communication can facilitate durable peace and security.

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[1] The author is a former child soldier and the views shared in this thesis are a combination of his research work and lived experiences of conflict realities.

[2] Data obtained from a survey conducted in six conflict and post-conflict regions in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Research Questions

1) Does communication promote child recruitment?
2) Do the use of child soldiers prolong violent conflicts?
3) Do peace communication and youth empowerment decrease re-recruitment?
4) Can symbolic communication and indigenous rites guarantee a successful reintegration?
5) What is reintegration from the perspective of an ex-child soldier?

Hypothesis

H1: Communication promotes child recruitment

Roadmap of Thesis

The remaining chapters of the dissertation are structured in the following order: chapter 2 discusses and chronicled the child soldier discourse not as a third world problem, but rather, as that of a global phenomenon that has existed throughout human history. Chapter 3 examines the various communication techniques used to mobilize and recruit children. Chapter 4 describes the methodology and methods of the data collection process using qualitative and quantitative research approach to assemble and interpreter data obtained from 300 participants. Chapter 5 outlines the empirical findings of the study. Chapter 6 deconstruct the narrative of war and children vilification into that of peacebuilding and reintegration based on specific communication techniques that are vital for sustainable security. Chapter 6 also reveals that a compelling picture of nation-building emerges when former child soldiers are recognized not only as remorseless killers but also as leaders that have mastered the arts of survival and strategic decision-making, who have developed a high sense of intelligence and a reservoir of knowledge that is vital to post-war reconstructions. Chapter 7 offers the conclusion, recommendation, and limitations of the study. It also offers an insight into the researcher's future academic contributions on the child soldier question.

Methodology

Research Design

Polit and Beck (2004:49), refers to a research design as the overall strategy for obtaining the best possible answers to the questions being studied. Wood and Haber (1998:157), observed that a good design is guided by an overarching consideration to the extent that trustworthy and accurate answers are provided to the research questions. The study combines qualitative and quantitative inquiry to analyze the filed data.[3]

The Study Population

A research population refers to the total number of cases in a given study.[4] In our case, data for the study were obtained in six conflict and post conflict countries comprising a total of 300 participants between the ages of 7 to 80 years old. Polit and Beck (2004:290), defined a target population as those eligible to be considered for inclusion in a study. Hence, the principal respondents of this study are current and former child soldiers, military leaders, AU and UN Peacekeepers, humanitarian workers, street vendors, victims of war, refugees, government officials including Traditional and Religious Leaders.

Techniques and Methods

Data collection is the process by which quantifiable and non-quantifiable data are obtained and turn into descriptive or measurable variables of interest to evaluate outcomes, answer queries or test hypotheses.[5] As mentioned above, this study dwells on a mixed research design as its preferred method of data collection and presentation.

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[3] Creswell and Tashakkori (2007); Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), p.14; Gunasekare, (2013), p.1.
[4] Polit and Beck (2004), p.289
[5] Sandelowski (2000), p. 246-255

Procedures and Instruments

Closed ended-Survey and questionnaires

A survey questionnaire was formulated and distributed to the study participants. The questionnaire was divided into two key segments with one focusing on demographic data, and the other on questions that derived from the study aims. Questions were designed to investigate the impact of communication on child recruitment and peacebuilding in conflict and post-conflict nations. The closed-ended survey consisted of categorical and ratio questions like "yes/no," checkbox and multiple-choice.

Open ended-Survey

Open-ended surveys are synonymous with qualitative data with emphasis on observation, interviews, and focus groups discussions (Engel and Schutt 2014:206). Two main methods are preferred in this study. These are interviews (semi-structured) and direct observation (participatory observation).

Interviews

A semi-structured guide was constructed to obtain the descriptions and interpretation of meanings participants attributed to a phenomenon (Kvales, 2007; & Jorgensen, 1989). Participants were divided into sub-groups and each group had between ten to fifteen respondents during a focus group discussion. Each respondent was encouraged to speak freely without thought of retribution. Participants were reassured that their safety was a top priority. It was emphasized that the information provided, including their names and identities would be securely guided and never mentioned in the final transcripts. According to Pedroni and pimple (2001), a researchers' commitment to the fundamental principles of informed consent is appropriate in boosting public trust, without which, the research community cannot thrive. Each interview session, apart from those conducted in prison, lasted for an average of thirty to forty-five (30-45) minutes for one on one interviews with focus group discussions lasting sixty to ninety (60-90) minutes approximately.

Prison Interviews

The prison interviews started on a wrong note with the researcher being arrested by the Nigerian Army and put into a maximum prison for three nights on account of espionage despite having a written approval issued by the same army to conduct research in the region.[6] Following his release from Giwa Barrack prison, he was granted access to interview selected prisoners and wardens from the same prison, perhaps to save face or as a gesture of goodwill from the army authorities. The prison participants had endured acute malnutrition and severe beatings from prison-guards seeking confessions. During the interviews, each transcript was check and rechecked by a prison guard. Despite the restrictions, his three nights of detention prior to the approved interview, helped the researcher gain trust among the inmates who risked their safety to provide relevant details on the prison system. With a fatality rate of one to six adult male per day, and three to seven child death per day, his presence among the inmates provided an opportunity for them to narrate their experiences. The researcher was able to verify and cross-check the authenticity of these claims following severe wailing from tortured inmates and the death of a 90 years old man in the researcher's cell. The interviews with inmates lasted between three to five minutes. However, the researcher was given a secret memo containing remarkable details on the prison's activities and the number of inmates detained.

Direct Observation

Direct observation is a process of data collation in which the evaluator obtained information by watching the subject in a given environment (DeWalt, 2011). In our case, most observational data were collected a few miles away from active combat zones in Mali and Northern Nigeria. Under these strenuous conductions, the researcher documented the treatments of captured enemies, wounded soldiers, fatalities, movement of internally displaced peoples, incarceration of babies and children, prison conditions and recruitments. Nevertheless, this approach was exposed to some degree of limitations (Kumar, 2005) as the host participants, in this case, government or rebel troops pretended to be kind towards captured and suspected enemies upon realizing the researcher is watching them.

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[6] Maiduguri, Fieldwork 2013-16

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This section presents the analysis, interpretation and presentation of the research findings. All responses are aggregated using a Likert-type scale in the following order: (a) Disagreed (b) Strongly Disagreed (c) Neutral (d) Agreed (e) Strongly Agreed. Also, the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS), is used to analyze measurable data. Findings are based solely on the data obtained from the survey participants in six conflicts and post-conflict countries.

Research Question 1: Does communication promote child recruitment?

In this survey, 300 participants were asked whether communication promotes child recruitments? There were five answer choices: disagreed, strongly disagree, neutral, agreed and strongly agreed. Samples were measured using gender and countries to determine participants responses. From the data obtained, 24% disagreed and strongly disagreed that communication impacts child recruitment, 21% remained undecided, and 55% agreed and strongly agreed that communication promotes child recruitments.

Research Question 2: Do the use of child soldiers prolong violent conflicts?

In this survey, respondents were asked to evaluate the combat role of children and gauge their impact on conflict duration. This time, the researcher used gender and social status to demonstrates respondents' scores. The result reveals that 75% of male respondents agreed and strongly agreed while 84% of female respondents rejected that the use of child soldiers prolong violent conflicts.

Research Question 3: Can peace communication and youth empowerment decrease re-recruitment?

In this survey, I asked respondents whether peace communication and youth empowerment can decrease the re-recruitment of ex-child soldiers? I used participants' gender and level of Education to measure the responses. The result show that 19.7% of all respondents disagreed and strongly, 5.3% remain neutral, and 75% agreed and strongly agreed.

Research Question 4: Can symbolic communication and indigenous rites guarantee a successful reintegration?

The findings revealed that 68% of respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed, 5.4% were undecided and 27% agreed and strongly agreed that symbolic communication and traditional rites could guarantee the successful reintegration of child soldiers. This result, however, was influenced by the fact that symbolic communication had different meanings and significance to each group of participants. To traditional healers, it meant communicating with humans and the divine through indigenous wisdom — a process by which perpetrators undergoes customary justice and spiritual cleansings before readmission to society. To Muslims and Christians who represented 66% of all participants, it meant a return to God for redemption. This group of respondents viewed symbolic communication, in its traditional sense, as demonic and ungodly. Arguing that only Allah or Jesus has the power to renew a persons' soul through baptism and true repentance. Nevertheless, the results are different when the same question is put forward to the 25 ex-child soldiers who directly participated in a traditional cleansing ceremony.

Findings of symbolic communication and traditional purification rites

The data in this section was obtained in a trace study conducted by the researcher one year after a traditional cleaning rites had taken place.[7] In the survey below, we asked twenty-five FCS, all of whom had gone through the traditional healing and purification ceremonies, to evaluate the entire process from a first-person perspective. Furthermore, they were asked if the healing and etiquette aimed at reintegration were of any success to them. Listed below are the survey results:

Question A): Was the cleansing ceremony of any help to you?

In addressing this question, 4% of respondents maintained that the process made no difference in their lives while 84% said it was helpful to them. Also, 12% was undecided, but none indicated that the process was a waste of time. Further investigations reveal that some members of the neutral and no difference groups were expecting some form of material or monetary assistance to start up with their lives, while other were merely forced by community or family members to go through the process - rather than doing it through self-conviction.

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[7] Wratto (2016), pp. 49-60

Table 10: showing scores of participants' assessment on symbolic communication and indigenous purification for sustainable peacebuilding

Category	FQ	Percentages
No difference	1	4
Extremely Helpful	21	84
I would rather stay neutral	3	12
A waste of time	0	0
Total	**25**	**100**

Source: Fieldwork 2013-16

Question B): Would you advise a child soldier to go through a similar process?

From the data in the survey below, 72% of respondents agreed that more efforts should be made to encourage child soldiers to participate in the cleansing process. Even so, 24% maintained that their views meant nothing and cannot influence the decisions of other child soldiers. However, while 4% failed to respond to the above question, it was instructive to see most participants expressing willingness to encourage others go through the process.

Table 11: Showing respondent's scores on symbolic communication and indigenous purification for peacebuilding

Category	FQ	Percentages
Yes, I will encourage others	18	72
No, I will not advise others	0	0
I would rather stay neutral	1	4
My opinion does not matter	6	24
Total	**25**	**100**

Source: Fieldwork 2013-16

Hypothesis

The hypothesis was formulated around dependent and independent variables. The dependent variables are child recruitment and peacebuilding and the independent variable is communication. The alternative hypothesis of Chi-Square Test of Independence can be expressed as follow:

H1: Countries and gender are associated with the notion that communication promotes child recruitment.

Results

- The value of the test statistic is 50.204, and the corresponding P-value of the test statistic is $p = .000$
- Given that p-value is less than the chosen significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$),
- we shall reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is an association between communication and child recruitment.
- Based on this result, we can conclude and state the following: 50.204; $p = .000 < 0.05$

Scientific Contributions

The study argues that ex-child soldiers can play a crucial role in violence prevention based on the data obtained:

1) Ex-child soldiers can serve as negotiators – they are easily trusted by non-state actors, as demonstrated in the case of the researcher who was once a former child soldier.
2) The idea that they are uneducated should be re-evaluated - 33% of the 81 ex-child soldiers in this study had some form of degrees
3) Likewise, we should rethink the notion that this population is addicted to drugs
4) In this study, 17.5% of current and former child soldiers combined abstained from all forms of drugs and alcohol during, while 8.3% only use drugs after their military service.
5) As regards to violence, 43.2% of ex-child soldiers said they would never return to violence.
6) This population has equally made significant economic and humanitarian contributions in their communities and beyond.[8]

Recommendation - The Role of Media in Peacebuildng

1) The media can deconstruct the narratives of war and children vilification and turn them into narratives of peace and reintegration using the same effective communication techniques,
2) It can emphasize on the benefits that comes with peace rather than focus on the negative effects of war,
3) It can raise the legitimacy of groups and enhance the credibility of faction leaders working towards peaceful coexistance.
4) It can encourage parties to speak to each other, respond to grievances and propose solutions to the conflict at hand,
5) The media can move beyond the conflict and highlight concrete initiatives to end the violence based on the recommendation of the parties in conflict,
6) It can encourage policy makers to invest in skillset that would prepare ex-child soldiers to engage in knowledge-based economy.

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[8] See chapter 6