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Violence and Vulnerability: Children's Strategies and the Logic of Violence in Burundi

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This study explores how children in conflict-affected Burundi deal with violence in their everyday lives. Focusing on schools as a context in which children are prepared for further roles in society, child-centred, qualitative and mixed-methods research was conducted at 36 primary schools throughout Burundi. Findings reveal that children use a variety of strategies to deal with violence they encounter. These strategies reflect a learned 'logic of violence', matching dynamics of violence and vulnerability in society at large. Children's strategies are ultimately aimed at reducing vulnerability to (future) violence and indicative of the omnipresence of violence and uncertainty in Burundi. © 2019 The Authors. Children & Society published by National Children's Bureau and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

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Introduction

Research has shown that children are often aware of political tensions and violence in their society (Boyden, 2003; Denov and Akesson, 2016; Leonard, 2007; Moss, 2013). Moreover, some studies have shown that children who grow up amidst violence, may learn to reproduce this violence (Bandura, 1973). For instance, Debos showed how youth in Chad incorporate collective, shared ways of understanding and dealing with the violence prevalent in their society in their life trajectories and career choices (2011). The ways in which children and youth learn to deal with (the threat of) violence in an overall context of uncertainty allows for both change and continuity: learned strategies may resist, prevent or limit (the use of) violence but they can also make anew, and thus reproduce or further entrench social structures that enable and legitimise violence taking place, thereby perpetuating crisis and uncertainty (Berckmoes, 2014, 2015). To better understand this process, this study focuses on children's understandings and strategies to deal with violence in Burundi, a country that has been mired in cyclical violence since its independence in 1962 (Baghdadli and others, 2008; Berckmoes, 2014, 2015; Lemarchand, 1994; Uvin, 2009).

Burundi is a small country located in the Great Lakes region, surrounded by Rwanda, Tanzania and DR Congo. It was formerly colonised by Germany and later Belgium, during which 'the colonial administrations codified socioeconomic differences and status in ways that privileged' the Tutsi, a particular ethnic group, vis-à-vis other ethnic groups such as the Hutu and Twa (Anders and Lester, 2015: 740, Lemarchand, 1994). Politically motivated (mass

violence, often along ethnic lines, subsequently occurred in 1965, 1969, 1972, 1988 and 1991, leading to different groups of refugees leaving and returning to the country in different capacities over time (Anders and Lester, 2015: 740; Berckmoes, 2014, 2015). In 1993, a 12-year civil war started which left Burundi devastated and faced with the formidable task of reviving a shattered economy, rebuilding social services and forging national unity on the ruins of — particularly, ethnic — divisions. Up to this day, ethnic tensions and conflict persist, and Burundi continues to be one of the poorest countries in the world (see Baghdadi and others, 2008). Since 2010, political tensions have been rising, and in 2015, this led to a political crisis that is still ongoing (Van Acker, 2015, 2016). This study aims to understand how primary school-aged children who grow up in such a context, affected by chronic or recurring violence, understand and engage with violence they encounter (see also Wells and others, 2014).

The study, for which fieldwork was conducted in the year prior to the 2015 crisis, focused on children's experiences with direct, interpersonal violence, in the school setting. Schools are a primary institution in the socialisation of new members of society. As such, schools do not only reflect societal dynamics; they also have the explicit task of preparing learners to take part in these dynamics (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2010). School environments can have a positive and mitigating influence on children's exposure and responses to violence (Foster and Brooks-Gunn, 2015), but they may also act as a catalyst, for example, by presenting partial or contested views on history (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000).

Moreover, in Burundi, education and schools are 'a long-standing source of inequality, tension and conflict' (Verwimp and Van Bavel, 2013: 391; Vinck and others, 2015). Inequalities, as expressed in school access and completion rates, persist notably along the lines of wealth, gender and geographical location (Cieslik and others, 2014; Verwimp and Van Bavel, 2013). In Burundi's past, schools have also been linked to direct violence: particularly during the mass violence in 1972 and 1988 when educated members of Hutu background, including school-going youth, were targeted (Malkki, 1994). Other students were sometimes involved in the perpetration of this violence. During the research, concerns that schools were being politicised through the manipulation of grades based on political affiliations, the political appointment of staff, the use of school grounds for political activities and intolerance toward teachers based on political and regional affiliations were widespread, and as researchers, we shared those concerns (see Sobhani, 2014).

Below, we first discuss our research approach and then explore the direct, interpersonal violence children in Burundi encounter in their school environments. We subsequently analyse children's perceptions of and strategies to deal with this violence and their attempts to reduce their vulnerability to it. Ultimately, we argue that children appear to strategise their actions in relation to larger social structures, revealing a learned *logic of violence* reflective of what other scholars have termed the symbolic and structural dimensions of violence (Galting, 1990).

Research approach and ethical considerations

To investigate what children learn in relation to violence, we use the work of Bandura (1973) and elements of two distinct, yet partly overlapping theories by Bourdieu (1990) and Bronfenbrenner (1979). Violence in this study is broadly conceptualised as direct, interpersonal acts of emotional, sexual or physical force, yet as we will show, children in Burundi do not consider all acts of force as violence per se. The work of Albert Bandura formed the starting point of our thinking. Bandura developed a conceptual model to understand individual and communal violence (1973). He argued and demonstrated in experiments that children learn aggressive behaviour by imitating, or 'modelling', the behaviour of others. Of these others, especially those with more status and power were seen to be most influential

on children's behaviour. Bandura's model has received critique, however, for neglecting children's own agency in processing the violence they observe, and — given the artificial setting in which the theory was tested — its lack of ecological validity (see, among others, Cumberbatch and Howitt, 1989; Durkin, 1995; Hart and Kritsonis, 2006).

In an attempt to overcome these critiques on Bandura's work, we build on Bronfenbrenner's socioecological model, which allows for more complexity in children's learning and behaviour (cf. Berckmoes and others, 2017, Pells and others, 2018). It sees children's development as deriving from children's agentic interactions with their immediate and more remote environments, ranging from micro- to macrosystem levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These system levels are conceived of as nested layers that differ in proximity and strength of influence on the individual child. Schools can be seen as one of the main proximal microsystems that influence children's development (Thomas and others, 2016). We subsequently find Bourdieu's theory of practice (1990) helpful as it sheds light on how norms and rules available in the ecological environment can serve as interpretative resources for strategic action. In the context of this study, we seek to understand the underlying norms and rules children draw upon in the ways they deal with the direct violence they encounter. In other words, by exploring patterns in children's practices with regard to direct, interpersonal violence in the school environment, we aim to identify a logic of practice — or, a *logic of violence* (cf. Debos, 2011). We conceptualise the latter as the collective, shared ways of understanding and dealing with violence in a specific sociocultural context.

This study is based on a collaborative project between the University of Amsterdam and UNICEF (2014–2016) in which 12 graduate students from the University of Amsterdam and the University of Burundi (henceforward field researchers), including the first and third author, conducted qualitative or mixed-method fieldwork research to complete a master in International Development Studies or Psychology. Data have been collected over the course of two years, through stints of approximately three months at primary schools, each research with its own focus (e.g. on masculinity, sexual violence, livelihood perspectives, visions on peace, etc.) The central topic for all projects, however, was children's experiences and strategies vis-à-vis violence, explored from a common theoretical foundation (outlined above). This article is a synthesis of the overarching findings and themes that emerged from the qualitative data generated during each individual project, and presents the development of our thinking based on our empirical data and group discussions. The quotes used stem from the 12 master theses and are used to illustrate our overall argument.

Fieldwork was carried out at primary schools in Bujumbura Mairie, Bujumbura Rurale, Bubanza, Rumonge, Makamba, Rutana and Gitega provinces. The research locations comprised rural and urban areas and were selected in collaboration with local partners to include diverse and under-researched areas while also ensuring safety for the researchers and their interlocutors. Over the course of the project, political tensions and new outbreaks of violence were on the rise (cf. Van Acker, 2015, 2016). With elections planned for May 2015, the potential for pre-electoral violence was particularly taken into account in identifying diverse but relatively safe spaces for research.

In total, 36 primary schools were included. Data were collected primarily among children between 9 and 16 years in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades. The wide age range is caused by high repetition rates and late school enrolment. To identify pupils, the field researchers combined purposive and snowball sampling techniques, seeking to create diverse samples in terms of gender, background and socioeconomic status. The field researchers did not specifically target victims of violence, but they were part of our sample: many children shared experiences of when they were personally exposed to violence. To contextualise our findings, interviews were also conducted with older youth and adult stakeholders, among whom were

teachers, school directors, child protection specialists and parents. Altogether, in the 12 field studies, more than 1600 respondents participated.

Research methods and techniques were tailored to research with children (Christensen and James, 2008; Punch, 2002). They included classroom observations, participatory methods such as making drawings, walking tours and interviews. Generally, the field researchers started with observations in and around schools, also to initiate contact. Child-sensitive group interviews helped to address the topic of violence in non-threatening ways, for example, through vignettes, and ice breakers and games aimed at making participation in the research enjoyable. For more in-depth conversations, the field researchers organised individual interviews, taking place at school or at children's homes, whichever they preferred. The primary language used to communicate with children was Kirundi, the national language, and in one case study Swahili. Five of the 12 field researchers spoke the local language fluently, the others worked with Kirundi-French/English interpreters. Translations posed a specific challenge since there is no single word for 'violence' in Kirundi: only words that designate specific forms of violence (e.g. sexual, domestic). This hampered an exploration of children's conceptions of violence without imposing some definitions. Some field researchers operationalised violence as '*ikintu kikubabaza*': things that hurt you. Interviews were audio-recorded if possible and transcriptions were anonymised.

Approval for the overall project was sought and obtained from the Ministry of Community Development. Research plans of the student projects were also approved by academic supervisors of the University of Amsterdam or the University of Burundi, and were in line with UNICEF's guidelines for ethical research with children (Graham and others, 2013). All research protocols were evaluated by a reference group established locally by UNICEF. In the field locations, official permission was sought from the local administration, school directors and teachers. Lastly, the field researchers explained the purpose of the research to the children, the nature of the issues that would be discussed and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Children were encouraged to speak freely, ask questions, to not answer questions if they did not want to, and we (field researchers) explained that they could always ask for a break or quit without any consequences. When the field researchers witnessed children being exposed to violence, they made this a topic of discussion with both pupils, teachers and caregivers. Due to this kind of questioning, children did not appear to consider us as condoning the violence that took place in our presence. Through our collaboration with Fondation TPO, which specialises in psychosocial support, field researchers were equipped to connect children to, however, limitedly available, supportive services when needed. In practice, none of the field researchers needed to connect children to these services.

Children's experiences and perceptions of direct violence

Children identified two types of perpetrators of direct violence, namely adults — given our focus on school, most mentioned were teachers — and peers. When asked about the kinds of violence encountered, children mentioned incidents and people that emotionally or physically hurt them. They also mentioned their own acts of force against peers, such as gossip, calling names and physical violence.

Children described, and the field researchers frequently observed, beatings by hand and with a cane, having ears pulled, being forced to kneel down while lifting rocks above the head and doing painful physical exercises.

Teachers hit us in the hands with sticks, which prevents us from taking notes. One day, the director beat me until I lost consciousness. Other teachers also ask us to kneel or we get stroked with slats or

sticks to the head. They pull our ears in case we fail to solve exercises written on the blackboard.

(Group discussion, 5th grade)

Notably, in adult–child relationships, children did not consistently consider acts of emotional or physical force to be violence. Corporal punishments for instance were commonly used at schools and, despite harsh practices, often not considered violence. Both teachers and children would use words like ‘educating’ and ‘correcting’ to describe these practices that involved force and could hurt physically. A boy explained that receiving a beating after having made a mistake is part of good teaching: ‘teaching in a good way is when you do something and you cannot find it [the answer], they come, they beat you, but after, they show you how you can do it’ (11 years). Another girl stated that she likes her teacher ‘because she beats me when I do something stupid’ (6 years).

Generally, children differentiated between two types of beating: beating *for a reason* and beating *for no reason*. Furthermore, children had elaborate ideas concerning the ‘amount’ of force that was appropriate for a certain type of mistake or act, as the following quotes illustrate:

It depends. If we have made mistakes, or done stupid, here there are no problems [with beatings]. But sometimes there are those teachers who can beat you without any, without any reason (. . .).

(Group discussion, 6th grade)

A teacher can come and beat you, it’s normal just because you made a mistake, he can just beat you... But sometimes he can just beat you in a harsh way and that can be even so bad, to the point where there can be peace broken between him and your family, even yourself as a student, you can give up going to school because you hate that teacher.

(Boy, 9 years)

In situations like in these examples, children felt corporal punishments could have severe negative effects on them, and might best be considered violence.

Most teachers were aware of the government’s recommendations to avoid the use of corporal punishments. When prompted, some teachers denounced these practices, but mostly in relation to their (supposed) ineffectiveness: ‘*inkeni ishikira igufa ntishikira ingreso*’ (the cane does not touch the soul but only the body) was a commonly used expression. Many children shared this view, stating that they get used to being beaten and do not change their ways as a result:

We can be beaten, but that doesn’t automatically mean that you will change your habits or that you will be polite. Because instead of being corrected or instead of being someone good the way they want it, you can be someone who is less pure than before. Because you will say, no, right now I have the habit of being beaten, that’s fine. That doesn’t work.

(Girl, 14 years)

As the girl quoted above explains, some children held that not only would their behaviour not change after being beaten, they might paradoxically start behaving worse because they no longer care about the punishment they could receive. A form of physical force by adults that children systematically categorised as violence was sexual violence. Children described it as a cruelty and form of deception. Sexual violence was feared particularly by girls, and especially when commuting to and from school. Several children and teachers stated that it was not uncommon for teachers to seek opportunities to initiate or enforce sexual relations with pupils. According to children, these ‘offers’ of preferential treatment by a teacher could be hard to resist, especially for weak learners and pupils who struggle with poverty. While the children in our sample did not mention having personally experienced sexual violence,

parents and professionals involved in child protection argued the problem is extensive and underreported.

With regards to incidents of direct violence between children in and around schools, we (field researchers) regularly heard of and observed children push each other off school benches, cause peers to trip and fall, give beatings with hands, sticks or footwear and throw rocks. Children explained most conflicts and use of force between peers as trivial, isolated and related to boredom. However, they also mentioned that children could steal school materials or food because of poverty and jealousy, making theft and damaging of materials a common explanation for conflicts:

My classmate took a cover from my copybook. I asked him to give it back and we started to quarrel. And then he took a pen and stabbed me in my leg so I was bleeding. And when he was walking away, he threw a stone at me.

(Boy, 14 years)

Children also mentioned that conflicts in the community, for example, about land ownership could trigger animosities and interpersonal violence between children at school.

A gendered analysis of children's experiences and perceptions of direct, interpersonal violence in the school environment reveals a prevalent pattern: girls mostly use verbal instead of physical violence, where boys more commonly used physical force (cf. Brabant and others, 2016: 245–6). Girls accused other girls of things like being pregnant, engaging in prostitution and using black magic to obtain good grades: 'They tell me I am cursed, I am poor, handicapped, and also a thief and other lies, saying I am a prostitute...' (Girl, 5th grade). The girls who did enact physical force, like beating, scratching and biting, mostly only did so in confrontation with boys. For boys, verbal and emotional violence served mainly to provoke other boys to escalate a situation into physical fights. Insults such as 'weak', 'sissy' and 'you're a dog' (a strong Burundian insult) pushed boys to defend their sense of honour and use physical violence. One young boy explained: 'you can do it [use violence] because you are angry, because of anger, because you feel like fighting him, so we fight' (age unknown). More than once boys narrated that violent incidents ended with one of the fighting parties needing medical care: 'we began to fight and the boys beat so much on my head using a stick, so they had to take me to the hospital' (Boy, 13 years).

The most hurtful type of violence in the perception of both boys and girls was gossip, shaming and name calling. They suggested that these forms of violence could lead to ostracising and (self-)exclusion, such as dropping out of school:

Ooh! I feel anger in my heart during a class – I even fail at exams because [classmates] insult me. They would be thinking badly of me and I feel sad in my heart and have no desire to study.

(Girl, 15 years)

While most incidents of interpersonal violence were described as being isolated incidents, some children appeared to be more at risk than others for (repeated) attacks, including bullying (see also Horton, 2011). Many children argued that poverty, appearance, disabilities, region of origin and ethnic or religious background influenced degrees of vulnerability to violence (cf. Brabant and others, 2016). For instance, pupils from poor families complained that peers did not want to play or share a desk with them, or mocked them for their hunger-induced fatigue. This hampered their school attendance, concentration and academic success, which could also increase chances of violent encounters with teachers. In general, poor pupils were easily recognisable because of the state (or lack) of their uniform. Other children were victimised due to their appearance: children were mocked for being albino, 'too dark,' 'too fat' or 'too skinny,' the latter being widely associated with sickness and HIV/Aids. There

were also children who said that they were targeted because of their region of origin. Some expressed being shamed for being 'returnees' that is, having (recently) returned from exile. In a few, albeit rare, cases we (field researchers) heard of parents pointing to ethnic differences, discouraging their children from socialising with children from another ethnic group. A government official in Rumonge province explained:

When we are small, we all play together. But after some time, you take your friend home and then your parents will explain to you that you have to stop being friends with this person. They [children] don't stop [the friendship] immediately, but after a while, that comes. Inevitably.

Interestingly, the researchers have not heard this same sentiment being voiced by a child, which could potentially point at intergenerational differences and thus a (future) change of social patterns. The above described experiences and perceptions of direct violence indicate that whether or not children in Burundi perceived acts of (physical or emotional) force as violence depends on several contextual factors. These factors, together with children's gender identity, influence the strategies children are able to use to deal with the direct, interpersonal violence they encounter in the school environment. We discuss this learned *logic of violence* in the next section.

Children's practices

While interpersonal violence in schools in Burundi may not be more common or uncommon than in other parts of the world, it is worth mentioning that children considered the presence of violence in and around schools self-evident (see also Parkes, 2015). Hence, their strategies to deal with violence appear to depart from the idea that complete avoidance is impossible (cf. Efevbera and others, 2017: 103).

Our fieldwork data revealed five strategies children employ to deal with violence. The first strategy is the use of violence in response to violence. This strategy was only observed in conflicts that involved peers. Children stated that they were taught not to provoke others, but they commonly reacted to being insulted or beaten by peers with physical force. It was perceived as a simple and justified way for addressing victimisation and 'correct' the other for provoking violence (see also Pells and others, 2018: 30):

I could see he is not doing a good thing. I have to beat him, I have to remove the devil inside of him. I beat him and that's how I correct him.

(Boy, 14 years)

Furthermore, children said that not responding to violence with violence would leave them more vulnerable to future violence. The absence of such a response might portray the child as an 'easy target' where the perpetrator need not fear retaliation. Peer pressure also plays a role in children's decisions about whether or not to employ this strategy: it could sometimes lead children into violent retaliation even when they knew that 'winning' — in terms of coming out as the strongest party — is out of the question. The following quote exemplifies this:

I am afraid sometimes whenever you will be with your friends, they will not consider you as their friend anymore because you didn't fight. So sometimes [I fight because] I don't want to lose my friends.

(Boy, 11 years)

Openly giving into negative emotions such as anger, nevertheless, could also be seen as weak. Children often expressed that in public, remaining calm was very important. The same counts for expressing sadness in public. For instance, one girl explained: 'when they beat me

at school, I don't cry. But if they beat me here at home, I cry' (7 years). Children who use violence to deal with violence could thus be considered both 'dominant' and 'weak' at the same time: they could physically force and hurt you, but they also lost their calm. Moreover, getting involved in violent situations, even as the aggressor, meant that they themselves were frequently getting hurt as well.

A second strategy children use when they are provoked or involved in a conflict with peers, is to calm down and try to resolve the situation peacefully. This non-violent problem-solving generally involved attempts to settle disputes through mediation by a third party; another peer. Some children opt for this second strategy because they have been seriously injured in a previous fight, as was the case for the 13-year-old boy whom we quoted earlier because he had to go to the hospital after a fight (page 8): 'ever since [that fight], I will never fight again', he said. Others explained a non-violent response as resulting from a repulsion to violence because of the past experiences with violence, for instance at home. Children also seemed convinced that each child has a natural disposition that leads one to prefer either the first or the second strategy. Competing notions of masculinity appeared to play a role in this. For instance, a 16-year-old boy said that to be 'a real man' one should not fight: 'you see him through his words, he doesn't need to be strong or a fighter'. Another boy, upon explaining a physical confrontation with his older sister, stated that he had to use violence precisely *because* he is a man: 'it was just because I know that I am a man, I am a boy and she is a girl, I had to do it' (15 years). This underlines the gendered norms that inform children's behaviours.

A third strategy children use to deal with violence, concerns involving teachers or other adults to intervene when violence between peers occurs. Children said that they were generally told to do so, but they only opted for this strategy when they deemed an already violent situation outside of their realm of control. For example, when school materials were stolen or bullying became protracted, or in the case of injuries that need medical attention. In general, however, children rarely used this strategy. They preferred to turn to peers for help (i.e. the second strategy). Some children said that they did not want to appear weak and unable to defend themselves, others were worried that engaging a teacher would be interpreted as snitching, thus damaging their relationships with their peers. This could lead to becoming the victim of future violence. Another reason they gave was feelings of embarrassment and concerns for being judged by others:

Teacher usually says that if somebody has a problem, or his friend, we have to tell him [the teacher], but some of us we'll never talk to him. I feel ashamed talking to the teacher if someone is insulting me.

(Boy, 14 years)

Lastly, several children believed that their teachers would not handle the situation adequately, as they frequently observed that teachers responded to a request for help with the use of force. The quote below illustrates this in relation to learning difficulties:

I am afraid to tell the teacher. I think that when I ask for extra help, the teacher may think that I did not pay attention. So that is why I don't ask it.

(Girl, 12 years)

In other words, involving adults could make things worse. In the interest of predictability, many children therefore preferred solving their issues among themselves.

A fourth strategy concerns children's attempts to prevent victimisation by avoiding potentially violent situations altogether. One boy mentioned: 'we should just do what they [teachers] say, so that they cannot beat us' (11 years). Especially girls were expected to deal with

violence in this way. For instance, girls mentioned avoiding all contact with boys only to prevent boys from potentially lashing out. Or, when they are late, girls would not go to school if going to school meant they had to walk alone. In such a case, if something negative would happen, the girl would likely be blamed: 'it may also be your fault because you should not come late' (Girls in group discussion).

The fifth strategy used by children when confronted with violence involves accepting the violence one encounters. A young boy explained: 'In order not to be beaten [again], we, we, we don't speak about it [...] we keep silent' (age unknown). Although the previous four strategies mentioned were only seen in the context of conflicts and violence between peers, this strategy also pertained to situations in which the violence was perpetrated by teachers or other adults. Children explained that they expected that signs of resistance would worsen their situation and render them vulnerable to more and perhaps worse forms of violence, with possibly negative long-term consequences:

We cannot do anything, we are silent because we cannot oppose beatings because if you do, it is considered rude behaviour to the teacher. Then you would have to bring your parent or [you] may even be expelled from school.

(Group interview)

Children who employed this strategy, regularly stated that they continued to struggle with feelings of anger, frustration and revenge. They would try not to reveal these emotions for fear of appearing weak, but they acknowledged that it could lead to sudden outbursts of anger and (sometimes) violence (i.e. the first strategy).

In sum, the use of the above-mentioned five strategies was patterned in ways that reflect gender differences and power asymmetries between children and adults. For instance, boys were commonly seen and expected to use the first strategy (respond with violence), whereas for girls, this would be the fourth strategy (avoidance). The fifth strategy (acceptance) was mostly used by both boys and girls in confrontations with teachers (adults), or other more powerful social actors. The data yielded no clear patterns in the use of strategies in relation to children's place of origin, background or socioeconomic situation, but children did mention differences in disposition related to intellectual and physical capabilities of individual children. Notably, however, all five strategies children in Burundi use to deal with the violence they encounter in and around schools, appear ultimately geared towards reducing their vulnerability to (further and future) violence.

Discussion: A learned logic of violence

Schools both reflect societal dynamics and socialise children to take part in the wider society. This was also demonstrated by, for instance, Williams, who showed how Rwandan youth learn about processes of inclusion and exclusion in their society through their school environments (2018, see also Parkes, 2015). In this study, we focused on children's perceptions of and strategies to deal with direct, interpersonal violence, whereby we borrowed from theories developed by Bandura (1973), Bourdieu (1990) and Bronfenbrenner (1979). We showed that children in Burundi experience direct, interpersonal violence in their school environments as self-evident and display various strategised responses to it. We distinguished five strategies that together reveal a collective, shared way of understanding and dealing with violence: a learned *logic of violence*, geared at reducing one's vulnerability to further or worse forms of violence. We argue that this logic of violence illustrates the connections that children make between everyday encounters with direct, interpersonal violence in the school environment and the wider social structures of Burundian society in the general context of

(political) uncertainty, omnipresent violence and ever-looming possibilities of victimisation (cf. Berckmoes, 2014, 2015, see also Pells and others, 2018: 32).

Vulnerability is contextual and relational: it depends 'on particular relationships and circumstances' (Clark, 2007: 291). As such, vulnerability is intimately related to social hierarchies and structural factors like poverty, ethnicity and gender, rendering some more vulnerable than others (Parkes, 2015; see also Brabant and others, 2016). Following Valentine, we recognise the 'social embeddedness' of agency which means our focus is not just on 'how children shape and are shaped by school, and the power of adults over children, but also the differences in power and privilege between children in school environments' (2011: 354). It is the latter that showcases children's awareness of social hierarchies and vulnerabilities, or forms of violence that are not direct or interpersonal, which other scholars have referred to as cultural or structural (Galtung, 1990). Indeed, the children in our study seemed very much aware of the hierarchies that pattern vulnerability to violence in Burundian society and the strategies they use to engage with violence demonstrate how children develop elaborate ideas on markers of vulnerability and that they aim to prevent or remedy these through their actions.

For example, despite the severity of physical violence, children deemed gossip and humiliating insults worse forms of violence. We relate this, first, to the visceral, embodied experience of this emotional violence that excludes them from the group (see Thornberg, 2015). This does not mean that this type of violence has only individual implications: 'bullying may say less about the aggressive tendencies of those involved than it does about the relations of power that are dominant within society' (Horton, 2011: 269). Second, gossip and insults can negatively affect one's position in the social hierarchy and thus open the door to further victimisation. In addition, bad reputations have the potential to spread across system levels, rendering children vulnerable in social contexts beyond the school. Therefore, we would argue that children's strong dislike of gossip and humiliating insults also portrays a long-term perspective on their position in society: they are aware of the social fact that in Burundi, relatively isolated people, such as single mothers, widows or orphaned children, are especially vulnerable to (further) violence (Seckinelgin and others, 2010).

Another, more indirect, example of children's deep understanding of their position in society in the longer term is their strong ambition to do well in school. Choosing to accept the violence they encounter (strategy 5) due to fears of being expelled or having to drop out can be understood in relation to the devastated economic situation in Burundi where, to many, not obtaining a diploma is a sure promise of life in poverty (Berckmoes and White, 2014; Sommers and Uvin, 2011). In turn, poverty makes one vulnerable to further forms of violence, which is why many children opt to accept the violence they encounter to prevent endangering their educational and economic future.

Our findings illustrate that children categorised only certain types of emotional or physical force as violence, depending on which social actor perpetrated it, for what reason and whether the use or amount of force was deemed appropriate. Precisely how children understand the use of force they are confronted with, shapes their way of dealing with it (see also Pells and others, 2018: 32). For example, as mentioned in the above, when exercised by a more powerful social actor, such as teachers, or in response to previously perpetrated violence, children often saw the violence as legitimate or acceptable. This may be interpreted as a sign of the normalisation of violence. At the same time, this also reflects wider societal patterns in Burundi, where violence is widely regarded as an acceptable means of authority, both in microsystems such as schools (Crombach and Elbert, 2014: 1042), in communities and in national politics (Van Acker, 2016). Our findings may also be seen as reconfirming

the perceived and experienced importance of social hierarchy with regard to how social positions inform how violence and vulnerability take shape (see Pells and others, 2018).

The strategies children (can) employ when dealing with violence are shaped by two crucial elements: social asymmetries, or power differences and gendered norms and values. As such 'children actively make meaning of their experiences and develop strategies for responding to violence. However, these are constrained by the economic, social and cultural contexts in which children their families and their communities are living' (Pells and others, 2018: 33, see Valentine, 2011). In this sense, the extent to which different norms and values can function as resources for action is unevenly distributed (cf. Bourdieu, 1990). For instance, the use of force (the first strategy) may generally be normative behaviour for boys, but not vis-à-vis adults, and girls are primarily expected to avoid situations in which violence may occur (the fourth strategy).

Numerous studies have discussed vulnerability in relation to childhood and children. An often heard critique on these studies is the assumed link between children and vulnerability (cf. Cheney, 2010; Boyden, 2003, see also Bordonaro and Payne, 2012), which is set against children's agency (cf. Wihstutz, 2011). Our findings, however, question this dichotomy: for example, although children were vulnerable in being exposed to violence, they were also perpetrators of (peer) violence (Korbin, 2003, cf. Avgitidou and Stamou, 2013). And, children who frequently engaged in violence were seen as dangerous and vulnerable at the same time: committing violence thus acts as a double-edged sword (cf. Debos, 2011). In the context of Burundi, a country marked by protracted crisis, recurring conflict along ethnic lines, an often absent possibility of recourse to justice and impunity, children's strategies reveal that there is a strong link between the enactment of violence and vulnerability. Also, the fifth strategy we discussed (accepting (some) violence to prevent worse) is demonstrative for how children learn to be submissive, while it also underlines their agentive ways of avoiding future trouble. In Burundi, children's learned logic of violence thus demonstrates both how children tend to make anew and thus reproduce certain social norms, while at the same time, there is 'the *potential* for individual agency to disrupt them' (Valentine, 2011: 355, our emphasis). In this sense, the logic of violence that Burundian children learn showcases both their vulnerabilities and their agentive ways of coping with these (cf. Akello, Reis and Richters, 2010: 219, see Bordonaro and Payne, 2012).

This study has several limitations. First, the 12 fieldwork studies were designed to capture thematic complementarity and diversity in the sample. Field researchers recorded thick descriptions of cases and situated these within their specific, multi-systemic contexts. Given this approach, comparative analyses across space and time are not feasible. Yet, it allowed us to cover large ground and speaks to the robustness of the general patterns we found in terms of different perceptions of and strategies to deal with violence. Second, although the field researchers explicitly adopted a child-centred approach, research with children is unavoidably biased in favour of adult researchers, as the latter make final decisions throughout the data collection, interpretation and writing phase (Christensen and James, 2008). Also, many of the interactions with children took place via (adult) interpreters. This asymmetrical relationship may have affected our findings because children may have shaped their stories to not 'get in trouble' with more powerful social actors. Similarly, some interlocutors, especially adults, maintained that the field researchers came to inspect the work of teachers or were scouting for new development projects. The field researchers tried to address these misunderstandings by stressing their independent positions as researchers.

Conclusion

In this article, we were inspired by the work of Bandura (1973) to understand the effects of children's coming of age in Burundi, a society marked with violence. Using the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), we conceptualise children as active agents, engaged in several interconnected system levels of society at the same time. The fieldwork took place in the school environment, an important microsystem, where the focus was on children's experiences and perceptions of direct, interpersonal violence. Following Bourdieu (1990), we have further developed the concept *logic of violence* (cf. Debos, 2011) to elucidate how children in Burundi learn to take part in their conflict-affected society. Combining insights from Bronfenbrenner and Bourdieu thus helped us to conceptualise children as active and strategic agents, without neglecting the fact that children's coming of age includes their engagement with social patterns created by earlier generations.

Focussing on the school environment, we have identified five different strategies children employ in the face of the direct, interpersonal violence they encounter. Remarkably, all of these are ultimately geared towards reducing vulnerability to further violence. We understand this strong link between violence and vulnerability as related to the importance of social hierarchy in two ways: first whether or not acts of force are perceived as legitimate or as 'violence', and second in terms of the strategies or resources, one can use to engage with the violence. Departing from Bandura's work, the research we focused on children within their ecological environments. This enabled insight into how children's strategic responses are profoundly shaped by their own gender identity and the social position of the perpetrator of the violence. As such, children's logic of violence indicates their understanding of the social structures and inequalities that reflect the structural dimensions of violence in their society.

Unfortunately, while the learned logic of violence helps children reduce their own vulnerability to violence, it simultaneously seems to allow for its reproduction: children's strategies to deal with violence perpetuate the existing social hierarchies that have patterned recurrent outbreaks of violence in Burundi (cf. Berckmoes, 2014, 2015). Children's logic of violence reflects that they learn from an early age that more powerful social actors, such as teachers, can legitimately use force to coerce particular others, such as pupils without uniforms, or girls. Within the overall context of uncertainty in Burundi, children's strategies to reduce their vulnerability to violence then tend to entail a reproduction of social hierarchies and inequalities that follow older patterns of conflict. This highlights the need to focus on children, and without seeing them as a problem, enhance efforts to support them in an active remaking and (re)producing of a sociality that moves away from negative patterns created by earlier generations.

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Conflict of interest

None.

Authors' contribution

R. Reis (RR) and L.H. Berckmoes (LB) designed the overall study; T.D. Hendriks (TH) and M. Sostakova (MS) and 10 other graduate students, supervised by LB, carried out fieldwork and wrote a BA/MA thesis on their individual findings. Based on these reports and the raw data, LB, MS and RR wrote a synthesis report, which served as the starting point for further analysis and development into this article by TH, LB and RR.

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