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Of Tigers, Ghosts and Snakes: Children's Social Cognition in the Context of Conflict in Eastern Sri Lanka

Jo Boyden[1]

This paper is based on field research with Tamil children and adolescents in the war-affected district of Batticaloa in eastern Sri Lanka. It examines young people's experiences of conflict in terms of their social worlds and their relations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), finding both to be permeated with ambiguity and dissonance. According to established understandings of social cognitive development this would suggest a significant threat to children's social perception, awareness and skills. Yet, it is found that these children and adolescents hold unexpectedly secure values of sociality. In light of this evidence, the paper raises various questions about the adequacy of current theoretical perspectives on social cognition from psychology and anthropology. In particular, it re-evaluates the common emphasis upon the critical importance of mutuality and durability in the socio-cultural dimension for effective cognitive development

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[1] Jo Boyden is the Director of the Young Lives Research Project at the Department of International Development, Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford.

Introduction

This paper is about the social context of children's learning. It focuses on young people's social cognitive development, or their understanding of social phenomena and processes. Drawing on fieldwork with Tamil civilians in Batticaloa, a district in eastern Sri Lanka, the central task is to examine the impacts of armed conflict on young people's experiences of the social world with a view to exploring how this influences their social awareness, values and competencies.[i] This exploration strikes at the heart of theoretical assumptions in the literature about the conditions of sociality young humans require in order to flourish cognitively. While scholarship highlights continuity, mutuality and affect in social relations and consistency between the ideational realm and lived experience, our research in Batticaloa found children to be living with high levels of socio-emotional dissonance. Making sense of the social world and using this knowledge to formulate social values, awareness and skills is complex at the best of times. But given the highly charged emotional environment, discordant social circumstances and contingent meanings young people in Batticaloa have had to contend with, developing these attributes in such contexts of conflict is likely to be challenging in the extreme. The evidence of relative stability of ideals of sociality among boys and girls in the district, despite these difficult conditions, raises questions about some of these conventional theoretical paradigms in the literature on cognition.

The civil war in Sri Lanka has its origins in the 1930s when sections of the Tamil-speaking community were over-represented in the colonial administration. Since Independence Sinhalese-dominated governments have introduced a number of discriminatory measures limiting Tamil political representation, curbing access to education and land and inhibiting the use of the Tamil language, while the Tamils have consistently sought a share in power within the legislature, an aim that is refuted by the Sinhalese. With time, the demands of the Tamil community have become more extensive and the means of achieving and resisting these demands, more violent. At present the most prominent Tamil group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), is calling for a separate state, Tamil Eelam, in the north and east of the island.

Batticaloa is one of the regions of eastern Sri Lanka implicated in this secessionist bid and when we were there the LTTE had gained a strong foothold in the area. The district was first drawn into the conflict in the early 1980s when Tamils working on tea estates in the central highlands fled there following communal attacks. During the 1980s, the police and special task force units, the SLA, Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF), the LTTE and several other Tamil paramilitary units were all actively engaged in combat in the area. In 1990 the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) occupied the district, which was subsequently cordoned off from the rest of the island in an attempt to contain the secessionist movement and cut off essential supplies to the LTTE. There followed numerous episodes of extreme violence stretching over many years. Even though at the time of our field research a ceasefire had been agreed nationally, civilians were still experiencing serious effects of conflict in countless ways.

Theoretical Perspectives on Social Cognition

In order to use (provisional) findings on social cognitive development in war from Batticaloa to illuminate important questions about conventional thinking on this subject, it is first necessary to reflect on the key ideas and lines of enquiry in the literature on cognition. There is a considerable body of work within cultural, psychological and cognitive anthropology and in developmental, cognitive and cultural psychology that seeks to explain the processes involved in socio-cognitive development. Research in this field has generated a range of powerful theoretical paradigms. In briefly drawing on this literature here, I am not attempting to provide a critique, summary or overview, but to highlight some of the core concepts and theoretical perspectives employed in this research insofar as they are relevant to a discussion of the impacts of war on processes of social cognitive development in children.

Historically, anthropologists were not particularly interested in the means by which the young develop cognitively and, in effect, viewed the child as importing a cognitive system "ready-made" from previous generations (Bloch, 1985: 21). The driving force in cognition was thought to reside outside the individual in the collective representations of peoples who share a common history, material culture and social system. These representations were defined in terms of culture, which was generally understood as socially learned ideas and behaviours (Strauss & Quinn, 1997: 6). Attention was given to identifying the processes by which cultures were replicated in the minds of young people via socialisation in the beliefs, values, norms and practices of their society. This prompted close examination of symbolic systems, language, rites of passage and other modes of cultural transmission.

Much of this work was motivated by the intention to explain historical predispositions towards particular beliefs, values and practices in particular settings in terms of culture and society rather than genetic heritage. In identifying the locus of continuity and change in socio-cultural worlds, considerable weight was given to the durability of social systems and to "connectedness" and "coherence" as intrinsic properties of culture, particularly in the ideational dimension (Le Vine, 1984: 72). In a seminal piece on the properties of culture, Robert Le Vine (ibid) argues that the psychological efficacy of folk cultures lies in their combination of models *of* reality with models *for* reality (normative statements about what ought to be). Especially significant for the present discussion, he maintains that this combination of descriptive and normative is a prominent feature of cultural models of child care and child rearing:

> Such models express deep seated preferences for virtues such as obedience and independence though these are often formulated as beliefs describing attributes of children and the nature of their development. The fusion of what is and ought to be in a single vision...seems to be at the heart of what gives distinctive cultural ideologies their singular psychological power, their intimate linkages with individual emotion and motivation (ibid: 78).

Anthropological perspectives on culture have changed somewhat since Le Vine's piece was written, but one of the main contributions the discipline continues to make to the field of cognition is its attention to the compelling force of collective systems, structures and processes. From a conceptualisation of culture as meaning-making, Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn (1997) talk of meanings as being:

> …momentary states that are produced through the interaction of two sorts of relatively stable structures – intrapersonal mental structures (schemas, understanding or assumptions) and extrapersonal, world structures. Schemas are networks of strongly connected cognitive elements that represent the generic concepts stored in memory (ibid: 6).

Thus, meanings are, in their view, both psychological (cognitive-emotional) as well as "the products of current events in the public world interacting with mental structures which are in turn the product of previous such interactions with the public world" (ibid: 6). At the same time, this complex interaction between extra personal and intra-personal realms ensures "the force and stability of cultural meanings and their possibilities for variation and change" (ibid: 8), such that more or less the same meanings are liable to recur again and again because of the relative stability of the world and of individual schemas. The authors go on to argue for the neural basis for associative learning, in that cultural understandings are in their view durable in individuals because they "rest on neural connections that are not easily undone" (ibid: 90). Hence, "growing up in an environment of a given cultured shape brings with it a distinctive pattern of experiences and corresponding neural changes. These neural changes determine the pathways through which activation spreads until a particular response is evoked" (ibid: 90). From this explanation it can be understood that Strauss and Quinn have sought to perpetuate the view of cultures as relatively stable and enduring.

In contrast to anthropological approaches, psychological paradigms have concentrated on the manner in which the individual subject builds cognitive capacity and have tended to focus on early childhood, when developmental change is most significant and conspicuous. In all but the most reductionist of psychological models, the underlying premise is that individual cognition is a consequence of pre-linguistic analytical processes that are derived from interactions with the environment (Bloch, 1985: 27). Mind and environment are regarded as being in a dialectical, mutually constituting, relationship, as Robert Hinde highlights, "In living, we create the environment in which we live. By living, we influence that environment.... We shall not fully understand the impact of the environment on our behaviour, or of our behaviour on the environment, unless we come to terms with the dialectical relations between them" (Hinde, 1998: 11). A focus on the social and cultural rather than material properties of the environment stems from the fact that humans are biologically delineated as social beings and respond to other humans on the basis of specific attributes like language, symbolic communication, intentionality and feelings. An emphasis on the dialectical relation between mind and environment is not to suggest mechanistic, cause-and-effect, relations

between specific features of the environment and cognitive states, as it is agreed that there are many processes mediating cognitive outcomes of environmental stimuli.

Constructivists in particular challenge the notion of young humans as passive receptors of environmental forces, "Our knowledge…is not a simple image of what is 'out there', but is the result of the mind selecting, interpreting and recreating sensory experience" (Schaffer, 2006: 37). Thus, children are both "producers as well as products of history" (Toren 1996), in the sense that they play a fundamental role not simply in their own development but also in constructing the environment for their development (Bloch, 1985; Cole, 1996; Gauvain, 2001; Hirschfeld, 2002; Rogoff, 1991; Wood, 1998). Jean Piaget, the most influential thinker in the field of constructivism, regarded the child as a solitary, autonomous individual whose interaction with the world would lead him or her to spontaneously develop general skills and strategies that could then be applied across logically similar problems (Cole, Gay, Glick, & Sharp, 1971). However, under the influence of Soviet psychologists Lev Vygotsky and Alexei Leont'ev, more recent interactionist theories in psychology have come to view matters of cognition in terms of deep-rooted preferences built up over time in particular socio-cultural contexts in a way that is quite similar to anthropological models. They argue that socially organised human activity is foundational in cognitive development (Gardner, 1984). From this perspective, "activity" includes not only the task at hand but also people, interpersonal relations, goal-directed behaviour, and shared understandings, in the sense of:

> …people engaged in sociocultural endeavours with other people, working with and extending cultural tools and practices inherited from previous generations. As groups of people develop through their shared involvement, they also contribute to transforming the cultural tools, practices and institutions of the activities in which they engage (Rogoff and Chavajay, 1995: 871).

Within anthropology Pierre Bourdieu has been particularly influential in creating a similar view of cognition, in which he argues that it is established through interaction with an environment that is itself culturally organised. He advanced the notion of the habitus as a way of explaining the durability of predispositions to certain behaviours encouraged through social engagement:

> The habitus is the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g. of language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in the organisms (which one can, if one wishes, call individuals) lastingly subjected to the same conditionings, and hence placed in the same material conditions of existence (Bourdieu, 2003: 85).

Bourdieu elaborated the concept further by distinguishing between class habitus, which is, "the system of dispositions (partially) common to products of the same structures"

(ibid: 85) and subjective habitus, or, "a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action" (ibid: 86). This dual conceptualisation provided an understanding of habitus as embodied practice in which, "people have a sense of how to behave and thus take for granted their own ideas and practices as right, as the only proper way of being in the world" (Toren, 1996).

Broadly speaking, learning is viewed as embedded within everyday repertoires of practice whereby children take part in activities that encourage certain skills in accordance with folk theories and objectives of development. Boys and girls participate in activities to do with eating, sleeping, grooming and other critical dimensions of life that are socially valued for specific genders, age and status groups and in doing so build the associated competencies (Lave, 1988; Rogoff, 1991). Children are directed not only in how they should behave, but also in how they should behave where. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) conceptualise learning in terms of a "community of practice", which embodies certain beliefs and behaviors to be acquired. As the novice moves from the periphery of this community to its centre, s/he becomes more active and engaged within the culture and begins to assume the role of expert, in what they call the process of "legitimate peripheral participation".

A second crucial aspect of the conceptualisation of "activity" in socio-cultural theories of psychology is that learning occurs in the context of interpersonal relations and shared understandings between the child novice and more experienced others (Cole, 1997; Gauvain, 2001; Goody, 1995; Rogoff, 1991; Wood, 1998: 102). In other words, children "learn through interaction with more mature beings who are very interested in them and provide guidance and context" (Wood 1998: 295). Again, Vygotsky (1978) was particularly influential in establishing the centrality of this relational aspect of learning. He argued that the development of the higher order mental processes implicated in building competencies such as social knowledge takes place in the "zone of proximal development," this being the point in development at which the novice has not fully mastered a competence but is able to successfully use and internalise it with the assistance and support of more mature partners. Hence, in effect, this conception refers to the difference between what a child can do independently and what s/he can accomplish with guidance from others, the zone of proximal development being the locus of cognitive change. Vygotsky's work has led many scholars to characterise learning as a cooperative process. Prominence is given to the cooperative relationships underlying the management, care and training of the young, many focusing on the mother-infant dyad as having the greatest capacity to invoke cognitive change (Giddens, 1984).

Vygotsky's model has been criticised for the vagueness of its conception and for its disregard of the developmental aspects of childhood, as children's cognitive functioning and relations with more experienced social actors inevitably change as they grow older. It has also been found wanting for underplaying individual differences among children (Schaffer, 2000: 127). In employing the notion of scaffolding Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) have attempted to tie down the specific mechanisms whereby the child novice and the more experienced partner cooperate in shared problem-solving as a basis for learning. In this approach, the novice is exposed to a procedure or event that is unfamiliar to him/her, with the mentor supporting the novice in carrying out those elements of the procedure that is within his/her capacity and "scaffolding" the rest.

The degree and nature of scaffolding is contingent upon children's aptitude for the task, in the sense that the amount of support in achieving the task is adjusted in relation to the novice's level of proficiency. In this process, the child assumes ever-increasing responsibility for the learning process and for internalising aspects of shared tasks as part of his/her repertoire of competencies. In a similar vein, Barbara Rogoff (1991) has used the metaphor of apprenticeship to indicate how the young advance their social and cognitive skills through guided participation in the practices of their community. The appeal of this metaphor for Rogoff is that "it focuses our attention on the active role of children in organizing development, the active support and use of other people in social interaction and arrangements of tasks and activities, and the socioculturally ordered nature of the institutional contexts, technologies, and goals of cognitive activities" (ibid: 39).

It is significant that in both anthropological and psychological theories, the human interactions underpinning cognitive development are regarded as being based on mutual interest and peaceful transaction. Observing that infants respond differently to their mothers than to objects, Colwyn Trevarthen (1980) concluded that sustained interaction between humans involves some kind of psychological adjustment. He conceptualised this in terms of inter-subjectivity, a notion that call attention to mutuality and communication as the basis of learning:

> According to the sociocultural view of development, intersubjectivity creates opportunities for individual cognitive development through the process of social exchange. In other words, through the establishment of and participation in communication that involves mutual understanding (intersubjectivity), children have the opportunity to develop individual cognitive skill. This happens because in order to achieve shared understanding partners must modify their own understanding as they come to understand each other's perspective or point of view. These modifications form the basis of individual cognitive development in social context as they expand children's current understanding beyond what they initially brought to the interaction (Gauvain, 2001: 80).

In highlighting the importance to learning of interdependence, cooperative relations and inter-subjectivity, some scholars also stress the emotive and affective dimensions of social cognition as enhancing internalisation of skills and values (ibid: 36; Damasio, 1998 and 2000; Gardner, 1984: 268; Hirschfeld, 2002; Ingham, 1996; Wood, 1998: 295;). Antonio Damasio (1998: 41) for example expounds the "somatic-marker hypothesis," whereby a connectedness is perceived in biological mechanisms of reason and emotion reasoning. Hence, in his view "emotion is integral to the processes of reasoning and decision making" (ibid: 41), especially in relation to personal and social decisions. Similarly, David Wood (citing research by Judy Dunn, 1996) argues that children often display their most advanced levels of reasoning "in situations that matter to them and that arouse their attention and emotion" (1998: 162), although at the same time conceding that strong emotions can also serve to cloud reason and provoke intellectual regression. These kinds of ideas may have particular relevance for research on children's social cognitive

development in societies at war since emotional arousal is often heightened during conflict and at the same time, emotional attachments are frequently fragmented or contested.

Anthropologists have now begun to give far greater attention to the specific processes whereby children acquire culture, as opposed to merely how children are socialised into cultures. This work is taking place in the context of revised understandings of both cognition and culture and the relationship between them. Lawrence Hirschfeld, for example, regards cultural environments as being "spatially discontinuous, fragmented, fluid, contested, and ever transforming worlds" (Hirschfeld, 2002: 616) "comprised of multiple contesting competing sub-cultural environments" (ibid: 615). Thus, in his view, children do not simply learn by mimicking but are "adept at acquiring adult culture and less obviously at creating their own cultures" (ibid: 616), bringing specialised cognitive skills and domain-specific programmes to bear in the process. In a more recent article written with Dan Sperber (Sperber and Hirschfeld, 2004: 40), Hirschfeld calls attention to the growing body of evidence that the cognitive system is comprised of modular devices that are dedicated to specific tasks, such as face recognition or language acquisition. "Most of these devices (especially those organizing higher-level conceptual content) can be seen as 'learning instincts' fostering and guiding the acquisition of knowledge and skills in specific domains" (ibid: 40-41).

Attribution of mental states is a core task that children must master in order to be competent actors in their social worlds. They need the intuition, knowledge and skills to manage relationships, fulfil roles as members of a community and participate in the institutions and activities of that community. Becoming knowledgeable and skilled social actors relies, in turn, on an appreciation of the norms and values of sociality that apply in a given context, an awareness of the properties of self and other, and a sense of difference from social others. To achieve this understanding, boys and girls require a "theory of mind." Essentially, a theory of mind entails the "ability to reason about other people and their states of mind" (Wood, 1998:162) or the "capacity to interpret behaviour in terms of mental states like belief and desire" (Sperber & Hirschfeld, 2004: 41). It means being able to see things from another's point of view and intuitively gauge the intentions of other human beings.

Thus, recent scholarship in the social sciences has called attention to the dynamic, multifaceted and porous quality of cultures, as well as the active, constructive and domain-specific character of children's learning. It has also identified theory of mind as a central prerequisite to effective engagement in social worlds. However, be that as it may, the environments envisaged by cognitive theorists, and the environments in which most of the empirical research on cognitive development has been located, tend to be comparatively peaceful. As well, important insights about children's 'learning instincts' described by scholars like Sperber and Hirschfeld have yet to be taken up in a consistent manner. This seems to have led to assumptions about the centrality to children's learning of relative coherence in the ideational realm, constancy of social experience and practice and learning processes that are somehow contained within relatively stable relationships of inter-dependence and positive affect. In this way, learning is generally envisioned as being predicated on comparatively durable cultural and social systems and structures and a notional social contract between older and younger generations founded in mutuality

and trust. Hence, these paradigms appear to suggest, by inference if not explicitly, that there may be limits to the amount of flux and contradiction children can deal with in their social lives before the development of attributes like inter-subjectivity and a theory of mind become compromised.

The question is the extent to which these conditions feature during war. In this regard, it is worth noting that another major contribution of anthropology has been the conceptualisation of war itself. In disciplines like psychology and psychiatry the tendency has been to think of war as an atypical state, in terms of catastrophe, destruction and socio-cultural disintegration, with an emphasis on individual, pathological responses to violence and stress (Boyden and de Berry, 2004). Anthropology, on the other hand, has conceptualised war in terms of historical socio-cultural and structural antecedents, systemic change and transformation. Anthropologists highlight the order that prevails within the disorder of war and the culturally encoded meanings that structure and regulate individual and collective experience during violence and discord (Colson, 1989; Davis, 1992). This kind of analysis offers one account of how cultures and customs might endure the devastating processes of war and hence goes some way to explain the surprising psychological and cognitive stability that can often be observed in children living in such settings. At the same time, the evidence from a highly inconstant, incoherent and ambiguous setting such as Batticaloa might require us to rethink assumptions of constancy in cognition.

Conflict and Social Dissonance

Not having conducted research in Sri Lanka before, although being aware that the war in that country is normally described as an ethnic conflict, I had imagined prior to going into the field that ethnicity would provide the core logic framing the social worlds of Tamil children in Batticaloa. Bearing in mind the long and distinctive history of Sri Lanka's two dominant ethnic groups, the nationalist sentiment they express and the militancy that has characterised their interaction in recent decades, it seemed reasonable to deduce that ethnicity would comprise the most prominent signifier of social identity and allegiance among Tamils and the basis of both social trust and coherence in collective beliefs and values. Throughout the conflict, ethnic (and religious) identity has been manipulated by various leaders for political ends. The efficacy of ethnic categories and claims has been heightened by myths of origin, racial purity and territorial entitlement (Jayawardhana, 1987; Sriskandarajah, 2002), the atrocities, casualties and other losses of war further sharpening both ethnic division and racial hatred. At first glance this appeared to be a powerful basis for a relatively clear-cut dichotomy between Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese in the light of which ethnic allegiance and associated social identity would likely entail considerable certainty.

Batticaloa has long been populated by a diversity of ethnic and religious groups, with Hindu Tamils forming the majority and Muslims and Christian Tamils a significant minority—virtually all Sinhalese having left the area during the worst fighting. While there has been hostility between Muslims and Tamils, the violence between Tamils and Sinhalese has been the most acute. Tamil civilians were regarded as LTTE sympathisers

or cadres by the SLA, who mounted regular aerial bombardments, mortar strikes and shelling on villages throughout the district during the most intensive fighting. The LTTE launched reprisal attacks, further escalating the violence. Large numbers of civilians were killed and disappearances, detentions, torture and rape were also commonplace. During attacks, civilians would frequently take refuge with relatives, in public buildings, IDP camps, or in the forest, where they would often hide for months at a time. It is claimed locally that there were around 60,000 displaced people in the district at one point. Many of those who fled to the forest died of starvation, snakebites, untreated injuries, or disease, while a significant proportion of those who sought refuge in churches, schools or the local university were slaughtered in SLA raids.

To the extent that ethnicity is salient, there definitely was a distinct Tamil ethnicity in Batticaloa, a notable sense of Tamil pride and a "communal perception of suffering, oppression and injustice" (Alison, 2004:4) built around a multitude of grievances against the SLA, the IPKF and the Sinhalese more generally. These perceptions were heightened by LTTE politico-military rhetoric, which championed traditional Tamil culture and values, celebrated the sacrifices the organisation had made for the Tamil cause and ennobled suicide bombers and other cadres who had been killed in action against the SLA as martyrs to the cause (Spencer, 2000: 126). But our findings cautioned against essentialising ethnicity as the prime organising principle of the social order in this setting, and confirmed the argument that ethnic and other social categories are socially constructed in particular contexts and hence historically dynamic and changing (Allen & Eade, 1999: 34; Turton 1991: 7). It was apparent that the meta-narrative of ethnic hatred and allegiance that dominated at the national level was written over a far more complex and dynamic configuration amongst Tamils locally. Despite the militant rhetoric, everyday experience of ethnic allegiance turned out to be contingent upon caste, class and religion, as much as upon opportunism and political expediency. Each of these attributes and circumstances generated loyalties and animosities of their own—many of which ran counter to broader ethnic allegiances.

A range of security measures were imposed during the conflict to prevent civilians and LTTE cadre from crossing the government-LTTE line of control. Curfews, pass restrictions, checkpoints, embargoes on fuel and military monitoring of civilian movement, separated different civilian populations both physically and socially. As a consequence of these measures and military advances and losses during the conflict, Batticaloa had at the time of fieldwork become a patchwork of government and LTTE dominated enclaves, bordered by "grey" areas in which neither side prevailed. Among other things, complexities in religious association clouded the binary distinction between Buddhist Sinhalese and Tamil Hindus. There were sizeable Christian and Muslim populations in the district. Due to mutual antagonism, Tamils (both Christian and Hindu) and Muslims generally lived apart, either in ethnically homogeneous villages or in distinct neighbourhoods within the larger towns. At the same time, this antipathy between Muslims and Tamils, together with LTTE acceptance of Hinduism among civilians in areas under its control and unease among many Christians about being too closely allied to the LTTE, had resulted in Muslims and Christians becoming concentrated in government-controlled enclaves. Tamil hostility towards Muslims was in large degree due to the perception that Muslims were in cahoots with the Sinhalese. During the early 1990s there were regular episodes of inter-communal looting and violence between

Muslims and Tamils, most notably in "grey" areas where neither side was in ascendance. Some of these incidents resulted in massacres. At the same time, Muslim animosities towards the LTTE were strong, and some Christians were also highly ambivalent about and fearful of the organisation. Thus, even with the relaxation of the security measures following the Ceasefire and the resultant increase in transit between government and LTTE areas, many civilians in government areas–Muslims and most Christians–still feared to enter LTTE zones.

Paradoxically, while the politicisation of the social landscape during the conflict entrenched discord between ethno-religious groups, it also drew them into complex interdependencies. For example, Hindu Tamils fleeing from SLA attacks in LTTE areas would often take sanctuary in Christian Churches, possibly because they perceived that Christians were less likely to be attacked. At the same time, some officials of the Christian church were either pro-LTTE or able to retain a relatively neutral role during the conflict and in this way managed to negotiate with LTTE leaders to ensure access of civilians in LTTE areas to emergency health care provided by international organisations.

Similarly, the security measures that prevented everyday economic activity across enclave boundaries forced opposing groups into uneasy economic alliances. The embargoes on productive goods, medicines and foodstuffs and security driven limitations on sea fishing also played a part in this process as there was widespread destitution amongst Tamils. During the embargoes, Muslim intermediaries maintained an essential supply chain to Tamils living in LTTE enclaves by smuggling banned items across the Government-LTTE line of control. Also, quite a few Muslims residing in government-controlled areas owned land in LTTE areas and worked it by share-cropping with Tamil civilians who lived there. In an area long starved of investment this was an important source of employment for Tamils. Possibly of greater economic significance, though, was the role of Muslim intermediaries who were crucial to the labour migration system which enabled large numbers of Tamil women in particular to obtain employment as domestics in the Gulf States. This economic dependence on Muslims was a source of resentment for some of the Tamils we spoke to, who complained of being charged exorbitant prices for embargoed goods and exploited by Muslim landowners in share-cropping arrangements and by Muslim brokers who facilitated labour migration.

In addition to high levels of inter-group fission, there was considerable friction within the Tamil community itself. Tamil political affiliations in Batticaloa had long been volatile, political and military factionalism constituting a major structural fault line that cut across the ethnic divide. During the 1980s the power of the LTTE was frequently challenged by rival Tamil para-military groups collaborating with Government forces. Between 1987 and 1989 in particular there were many clashes between the LTTE and Tamil groups who assisted the IPKF in identifying, tracking down and killing LTTE cadres. The SLA is reported to have subsequently 'franchised out' local level intelligence and terror operations against the LTTE to these same groups (Good, 2003; Goodhand, 2001). However, at the time of field research the LTTE ostensibly enjoyed political hegemony among Tamils in Batticaloa, as virtually all the rival groups had been either severely weakened or assimilated into the organisation. Even so, complicity with the SLA by the Tamil organisations left a bitter legacy of mistrust within the Tamil community, kindled by ongoing disappearances and assassinations of suspects by the LTTE.

Despite the LTTE's success locally at this time, there existed serious discord within the organisation at the national level which effectively saw those from the Eastern region of Batticaloa-Amparai pitted against the northerners from Jaffna and the Vanni. LTTE rhetoric had long opposed the use of caste as a basis for assigning power within the organisation. Nevertheless, in practice the LTTE had always been dominated by higher caste and comparatively well-connected northern Tamils, such that civilians and even many of the leaders and cadres from Batticaloa were becoming increasingly discontent about their marginalisation within the organisation.

This discontent was fuelled by LTTE practice at that time. The organisation appeared to be using the relative freedom of mobility and trading during the ceasefire to expand its power and build up the strength of its forces. Batticaloa-Amparai was an important source of foot soldiers, unskilled labour and tax income for the organisation nationally and yet the region tended to be treated by the leadership in Jaffna and the Vanni as a political and military backwater. The LTTE's military and economic might was perceived by many in Batticaloa as being achieved by preying on Batticaloa Tamils. People complained to us that as the rank and file of the organisation, easterners were far more likely than northerners to become casualties of combat. While we were there, this division between east and north was beginning to crystallise into a formal split between competing LTTE factions as the local LTTE leader in Batticaloa, 'Colonel' Karuna, became increasingly assertive in challenging the leadership.

Even with the discord created by ethno-religious and political differences, ultimately the most acute source of tension among Tamil civilians at the time of our research was connected with LTTE rule. The locus of LTTE direct authority in the district lay in the forested interior, while the government ostensibly controlled the more urbanised and wealthier coastal belt, where around 80 percent of the population lived. In zones of direct LTTE administration, planning, trade, labour and services were all controlled by the organisation, even though the government paid for services. Villages were presided over by ruling councils made up of loyal LTTE supporters selected by local cadres and these adjudicated in all but the more serious disputes, the latter being dealt with by the LTTE itself. Male and female cadres resided in separate military camps that were dispersed throughout the area and patrolled roads, ran checkpoints and a range of other resources and facilities.

Civilians in LTTE enclaves expressed broad support for the organisation's political objectives and acceptance that this was the one body within the national polity prepared to fight for the protection of the Tamil minority and to achieve their self-government. Nevertheless, loyalty towards the LTTE was rarely a simple matter of volition and the organisation's power over Tamil civilians was maintained through an intricate mix of natural sympathy with the movement's aims, threat and outright force. Indeed, the LTTE bore down so heavily on communities in its Batticaloa enclaves that, in the post-ceasefire phase at least, fear of the movement seemed more palpable than hostility towards the SLA. Some Tamil civilians regarded the organisation's oppressive political and fiscal regime as a necessary corollary of the armed political struggle. But others, normally speaking in private, expressed their deep disquiet about the means and methods by which the LTTE exerted power in the East, even whilst often conceding support for its overall objectives. Moreover, as Margaret Trawick has argued, the violent

methods employed by the LTTE were an affront to many Tamils in the East: "Whether Saiva (Hindu) or Christian, they believed that killing was deeply sinful, and the Tigers, however righteous their cause, however evil their enemy, took this sin on themselves whenever they took a life" (2007: 131).

One cause for complaint amongst civilians was the LTTE's taxation system. The war was an extremely costly endeavour and a drain on an economy that had been severely curtailed for years and the LTTE imposed taxes (commonly termed a "voluntary contribution") on Tamil salaries everywhere so as to ensure its aggrandisement during the Ceasefire. In areas directly under its control, the organisation also taxed the production and distribution of goods. This taxation proved a major disincentive to private investment in the region as well as a terrible burden to a population already impoverished by decades of violence, displacement and economic neglect.

Women in one village complained about the iniquitous system, citing the example of taxes on firewood. They were obliged to give a portion of all the wood they collected in the forests to the LTTE, but at the same time, if they needed large quantities of wood themselves—to fire bricks for instance—had to purchase it from the organisation, a tractor load costing a full 7,500 Rupees, which at that time was a large sum by local standards. Whereas the LTTE justified taxation as essential for the maintenance of its military capacity, civilians protested that the returns locally were low. While LTTE recapitalisation of Batticaloa following the ceasefire remained sluggish, the presence of the organisation in the area was at the same time an obstacle to the development of government services and infrastructure. Resentment was fuelled further by the fact that the more senior LTTE officials in the area resided in relatively substantial brick dwellings and enjoyed a comfortable standard of living in contrast to that of civilians.

Civilians in LTTE areas experienced numerous strictures in their daily lives and were under inordinate pressure to support the organisation's military and political efforts. Aside from the informal taxation, they were subject to kidnapping and ransom claims as well as mandatory participation in meetings, rallies and other political events and this caused a great deal of anger and fear. Most seriously, there was the expectation that each and every household would provide at least one pubertal or post-pubertal child, boy or girl, for combat.[ii] By forcibly recruiting young people from Batticaloa, the LTTE was able to swell its ranks and enhance its bargaining power in negotiations with the government. At the same time, it was through this forced recruitment of the young that the organisation succeeded in sustaining a climate of fear among civilians and secured their compliance with its many edicts.

While we were wary of touching on the subject for fear of putting respondents at risk, the issue of abduction tended to emerge spontaneously in our discussions, especially during the seasonal recruitment drive (between September and October) when it was foremost in everyone's mind.[iii] We asked a group of parents in one village, "Which are the more difficult to raise, boys or girls?" Two women responded immediately by saying that it is harder to raise girls because of the cost of dowry. But then a man interjected, disagreeing vehemently, saying that boys and girls were equally difficult to raise, since they were equally liable to be abducted. This assertion led to a loud debate. The group began to talk about instances of abductions, telling us about the children in the village that had been taken recently and pointing out who in the room had lost someone: son,

daughter, niece, nephew, cousin or grandchild. Many of the children had disappeared without trace.

Stories of great personal pain were revealed: the son who was abducted in spite of a serious injury he had incurred when he fell from a tree earlier that same day; the elderly woman who was left with no one to care for her when her granddaughter was taken; the girl whose brother was captured and whose mother subsequently fell into a deep depression and eventually died; the couple whose eldest son had been killed whilst fighting for the LTTE and who watched helplessly as their only remaining child was taken from them. Of particular concern to the group was the young girl who had been abducted shortly after her first menstruation, before she had completed her confinement [*thodakky*]. Not having been able to fulfil this rite of seclusion, fears were expressed that she would be highly susceptible to sickness.

In the general climate of violence and suspicion that pervaded the LTTE-controlled parts of Batticaloa, countless disputes and grievances surfaced at the individual level. These often centred on acts of complicity or betrayal committed by civilians against neighbours or kin. These, very localised, animosities commonly arose from the different manner in which different families engaged in the conflict, particularly in their relationship with the LTTE. The ties between the LTTE and the civilian population of Batticaloa were multifaceted and imbued with contradiction, uncertainty and fear.

As LTTE pressure exerted on civilians was stepped up, so some families sought to protect themselves and their own by diverting unwanted attention to others. This was revealed above all in the strategies used by adults to protect their children from abduction and forced recruitment, which sometimes had a highly corrosive effect on the social fabric. As one woman remarked, “neighbours don't have the custom of helping each other here. They inform about other people's children to keep their own safe.” And a man in the same focus group commented: “we're frightened of each other and of spies who might tell the movement even about this conversation.” Similar observations were made in another village, where the social consequences of these practices were illustrated by one woman with reference to her younger brother. She explained that because her brother excelled at school he was picked out by a neighbour for his potential as an LTTE cadre, as a result of which he was later seized in a round up. She went on to describe the wider implications of LTTE demands for educated cadres for her community:

We don’t have proper teachers or anyone to guide us in our village. None of our children are properly educated and there is no one to lead us. You need to be educated to be a leader. One educated man came here but we got rid of him because he was recruiting for the movement. They are looking for educated people; that’s why we don’t encourage our children to do really well at school.

The LTTE lived in close proximity with civilians in Batticaloa and the organisation had become embedded in local communities through numerous ties of kinship or friendship between cadres and civilians and the presence of LTTE sympathisers and informers everywhere. This increased apprehension about the ability of the organisation to penetrate and control all aspects of civilian life and destroyed trust. There was also resentment at the uneven rewards accruing to local people in accordance

with their relations with the LTTE. Indeed, most civilians were reticent to talk about the organisation, whether in public or private. Not even using the designation LTTE directly, most would allude to the organisation euphemistically as "the movement" [*Iyakkam*]. This designation is used to refer to the LTTE in other parts of Sri Lanka and there was no doubt about which body was being referred to, but, it was explained to us that, in this particular context, the imprecision of this term and the general vagueness of practically all references to the LTTE provided an important margin of safety for civilians.

Snakes, Ghosts and the LTTE

Against this backdrop of violence, fear and shifting and conflicting politico-military allegiances, we piloted methods that would enable researchers to examine children's perspectives on their psycho-emotional, social and material well-being and the environmental factors that mediate these processes (Armstrong et al., 2005). The social context of children's learning was not the focus of the research, but the topic emerged almost incidentally as a by-product. Findings on children's social worlds were pervasive throughout our enquiries and were too powerful to be ignored, especially in light of current theoretical assumptions and debates in the literature. As with many other studies of children in war, the chief constraint of this research was our inability to undertake long term and detailed ethnographic work. The main consequence of this was an inevitable emphasis on children's perceptions, attitudes and values, rather than specific social cognitive competencies. Additionally, the lack of longitudinal data rendered it impossible to identify the particular child development effects of the conflict.

We worked with boys and girls in middle to late childhood, aged roughly between 10 and 16 years. The age of our respondents may have been important in several respects. As Lawrence Hirschfeld (2002: 612) points out, most cultures expect a significant degree of cultural competency shortly after adolescence, with young people of around that age displaying elaborate and culturally specific ways of making meaning and modes of behaviour. Hence, even if one considers childhood and adolescence to be largely social constructions, logically, one would expect this age group to have significant mastery of cultural precepts and values. We did try to work with younger children, but found that they were not able to engage with the process in a manner that yielded effective data. There may have been a number of reasons for this, including the effects of growing up with war, which included a reduction in education access. Also, there are likely to have been methodological issues at stake and had we been able to devote more time to fieldwork, we would have been able to build closer relationships with our respondents and use observation and other more informal techniques that might have led to better communication and greater understanding on our part.

We were not aiming to research the inner worlds of individuals but collective norms and values, and thus administered collective methods with groups of children. The intention was to learn about children's everyday experiences, what criteria they used for defining well-being and what institutional, human and spiritual resources they accessed for guidance and support, especially in situations of crisis. To ensure the safety of our respondents, avoid intrusive questioning and accommodate practical constraints, we did

not address issues of social identity, allegiance or betrayal directly. Instead, we explored children's social worlds more broadly through discussions of who boys and girls liked to be with, who they turned to for advice and help, who they shared their secrets with, and who cared for them. This dialogue led in some sessions to an exploration of who they feared and disliked also. We asked our respondents to draw and discuss maps depicting their physical and social worlds. These were intended to include information on the households and other venues they visited regularly and the reasons for these visits. We also sought to understand their worries and concerns and what gave them contentment or reassurance.

In conversations about children's concerns there emerged a mix of seemingly mundane preoccupations of the kind one might expect to find in poor rural communities in that part of Sri Lanka and less common anxieties that were more directly related to the conflict. In time, however, it became clear that even the everyday problems were exacerbated by the conflict. Snake bites, elephant attacks and ghosts [*pey*] were frequent topics of discussion and a major source of anxiety for many children, as were family disputes and harsh disciplining by parents. The number of venomous snakes in Batticaloa appears to have grown significantly with the war as ongoing measures to control the snake population were hampered by the violence and security measures. At the same time, the number of deaths due to snakebites increased greatly as curfews and checkpoints and the depletion of health services and public transport made it difficult to get treatment in time. The risk of being bitten was especially great during the rainy season when snakes would move to raised ground and into dwellings to escape the floodwaters. Fearing attack by Sri Lankan government forces, villagers would often seek refuge in the forest where the risks of snakebite increased greatly. Many of the children we spoke to had been bitten, some several times, and one 9-year old girl in our respondent group was bitten and died the night after we left her village.

Children also talked a lot about ghosts, which were said to lurk near graveyards, in the forests and near paths. Parents would try to discourage children from walking or cycling alone on footpaths where ghosts were believed to be present. And children explained that they felt safer going about in pairs or in groups when passing by such places. Indeed, when we tried to explore parents' ideas about ghosts more closely, it seemed as though they used anxieties about this phenomenon as a way of constraining children's mobility and preventing them from wandering off alone. It appeared as though this was an important safety measure in a setting where fear of ghosts might prevent children from leaving their communities, especially given that children travelling alone or at night were more likely to draw the attention of the LTTE.

In addition to everyday problems, like snake bites and punishment by parents, one of the most prominent findings from our research was the invasive and shadowy influence of the LTTE in children's lives. Our respondents alluded constantly to the movement, whether directly or through inference. Some of these references were positive, as when one group of girls and boys talked excitedly about the recent visit of a prominent LTTE leader who had flown into their village in a helicopter and made a powerful speech about the struggle for recognition and autonomy for the Tamil people. Similar such affirmations of the LTTE were given by children in other contexts. In a focus group, boys spoke with approval about how the movement had defended the rights

of the Tamil community and highlighted the friendliness of LTTE cadres in a nearby camp who had given them informal lessons in the use of guns. One of these boys had an elder brother in the movement who had commissioned a local seamstress to make him a pair of pleated trousers in the style of the LTTE uniform. He was very proud of these trousers and wore them practically every day. Other children observed how membership of the LTTE provided an opportunity to escape the tedium of home life, especially when there was strife.

From these discussions it became evident that recruitment was not always forced. Although Miranda Alison (2004) found that personal motivations linked to losses of war, such as death of a family member or displacement, were a significant contributory factor in the voluntary enlistment of women, these kinds of issues were not mentioned by our young respondents. This echoes the observation of Margaret Trawick. In her estimation many of those who joined did so because they believed this would afford them a greater degree of protection, while others simply wished to reunite with "friends from childhood or beloved and admired older siblings" (2007: 130). Two of the boys we spoke to had recently tried to join the movement "for fun." They had stayed for a week in a local LTTE camp but when they felt they had had enough, were allowed to leave. They told us, "We wouldn't go again. If the movement takes us, we will have to go but we won't go alone." Two other boys, aged around 10, explained that they intended to volunteer as soon as they were old enough, encouraged by the fact that the older brother of one of them was already in the movement and was apparently enjoying the life immensely. In a different village, we were told that a 15-year-old girl enlisted so as to be able to remain near the man she had become betrothed to, who had recently been abducted. Adults voiced concern at the positive attitude of some children towards enlistment, highlighting that they appeared to be unaware of the risks involved. They also spoke with considerable discomfort about the fact that during family disputes or when they were unhappy about something children would sometimes threaten to enlist.

Several of children commented on improvements the LTTE had made to life in its Batticaloa enclaves, highlighting advances in education and law and order in particular. Education was highly valued among children and adults alike. Schools in Batticaloa were funded and staffed by the Sri Lankan government and during the war standards and coverage had declined sharply through disinvestment and the reluctance of teachers to work in LTTE areas. The LTTE apparently prized education and during the Ceasefire negotiated with the government to have a number of new schools built in the area as well as stepping up school access more generally. Allegedly, the organisation maintained a rigorous monitoring system whereby children reported regularly on teacher absences, those teachers with a poor record being admonished by the LTTE. Apparently, this had raised teacher attendance significantly.

Religious adherence, dress code, alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking, inter-personal relations and crime were all subject to close LTTE regulation in areas it governed. Although the LTTE claims to be a secular movement, we were told that the organisation actively promoted Hinduism amongst local civilians with rules about observance of religious festivals and regular worship at temples. As one girl explained, "We never go to the temple, even though it is close. The movement says we should go to the temple to pray. We only go during special festivals, but the movement says we should

go every Friday." LTTE constraints on alcohol consumption were viewed very favourably by both boys and girls since children would often suffer from alcohol-induced violence. Our respondents alluded to drunken brawls in public places, and alcohol-related violence within the home and between neighbouring families, most of which was perpetrated by men during festivals or following the payment of wages.

It seemed as though children would frequently become caught up in these incidents, as when they tried to intervene to end a fight between their parents, when a drunken father would turn on them, or when they were jeered at by men hanging around in market places. They described how they would take detours on their way to and from school so as to avoid the places where men typically gathered to drink. In one village where alcohol was being sold illicitly boys and girls described how some adults use "filthy words," threaten others and break things in the home when they were drunk. They explained that many families had guns and that these were sometimes used during domestic disputes. What arose in these discussions was that an LTTE prohibition on the production and consumption of alcohol during the conflict had led to a decrease in alcohol use and associated harassment and violence against both women and children. And the ongoing LTTE presence in the area meant that fear of punishment acted as a deterrent against such behaviour. Several of the women we interviewed made the same point, one remarking, "They banned liquor, so men don't drink. Some men do still drink. Earlier there was a lot of fighting on the road and children got hurt. Now men drink in their homes because they're afraid of the movement, so things are a bit calmer."

Burglary and theft also troubled our respondents, especially the theft of livestock, which were often tended by boys. This is another area in which LTTE intervention had seemingly had a positive impact, as illustrated by a discussion we had with a group of adolescent boys:

> A: We're frightened that thieves will come and cut us. Thieves often come and take our goats.
>
> B: A thief came once. One person came to take things and two other men waited outside, watching. Lots of people chased him. They caught him and handed him over to the movement people. We take people who have robbed us to the movement and they punish them for us.
>
> C: We go to the security division if there are any problems in the village or when neighbours quarrel. They come and sort things out.
>
> A: The movement moves well with the people. [All nodded in agreement at this last comment]

In Batticaloa, the phrase "moving well with others" [*makaludan nanraga palaguhirahal*] was used often to signify an individual who is well integrated, hospitable and generally adept socially. Hence, its use in this context with reference to the LTTE was presumably intended to imply that the organisation engaged in a positive manner with civilians.

Notwithstanding the many affirmative views about the LTTE expressed by our respondents, the ongoing abduction (and enticement) of both boys and girls revealed a far more sinister side to the organisation's relationship with young Tamils. Children were pivotal to the movement's military strategy during the Ceasefire and at the time of our fieldwork in the district childhood was a contested social space in which civilians vied with LTTE cadres for control over their young. For civilians the stakes were particularly high given that many of the recruits had disappeared or been killed. Short of healthy adult volunteers for combat, the movement had decided on forced recruitment of adolescent boys and girls as the most effective means of consolidating its military power. The organisation maintained a list of eligible children and would lay in waiting until they reached sufficient maturity and strength to fight. Ultimately, parents and children were unable to prevent the abductions but, even so, would do all within their limited powers to avoid it.

As the accounts of abductions unfolded, so we were told of the various attempts by families to keep their young safe. When the movement took her two eldest children, one woman delivered her youngest and only remaining child, a son, into the care of a local orphanage. Another family with a teenage daughter fled the district in the middle of the night. Since the LTTE apparently preferred its female cadres to be single and did not recruit married women by force, some parents had married their daughters off early, shortly after puberty, as a preventative measure. These seizures seldom took place in public places or during the daytime as this would involve witnesses. Nevertheless, we were told that young people were monitored continuously during the daytime as they went about their daily business, going to school, buying goods in the market and tending animals in the fields, by cadres on duty at checkpoints. There were very few schools in the area and very little transport, so to get to and from classes boys and girls would often have to cycle or walk on paths that passed by military camps and LTTE offices, or through checkpoints. Because the LTTE was known to watch for eligible children as they travelled to school, many teenagers simply stopped attending. One girl explained how, when she learned through a friend in the movement that she was on the LTTE's list, she had remained in hiding for over a month. Since the greatest risk of abduction was at night, children who were likely targets would commonly sleep in the forest during recruitment drives. Some of the better-off families were able to protect their young by sending them to boarding school in government-controlled areas, where the risk was lower.[iv]

Unsurprisingly, the boys and girls we spoke to were very preoccupied about abduction, this being especially apparent in the sessions we held during the recruitment season. We did not seek to talk in a direct manner about the issue, but anxiety about abductions emerged indirectly in discussions about psychosocial well-being and the causes and effects of ill-being in the young. We asked our respondents to draw body maps indicating their perceptions of ill-being, the part of the body or organ that was most affected, the symptoms or effects and the causes. In this exercise "thinking too much" [athihamaha sinthikkurathu] was identified as a condition that was both commonplace and distressing. The main physical symptoms were said to be severe head or chest pain, but laziness and withdrawal from friendships and other social activities were also mentioned: a child who is "thinking too much' will "be alone, will not talk to other children, or play with them." When girls in one group were asked what circumstance

might cause this, they replied initially, “death of a loved one”. Considering the issue further, however, one young teenager added:

> I think about my parents being unhappy; they shouldn't be unhappy, but they are often unhappy. Parents worry about the movement catching their children, or their children becoming sick. The movement has many children from this village. Parents think they should leave their children with relatives in other villages: in Batticaloa, Colombo. This is sad for parents. Some parents go with their children.

The body map exercise was repeated with different groups of children in several communities. It became apparent not simply that “thinking too much” was a common complaint amongst young Tamils, but that abduction was a principal cause.

Thus, for all the support shown by Tamil civilians for the LTTE, there was something profoundly menacing about the manner in which the organisation preyed on local communities for funds, its use of local informers, its regulation of personal conduct and inter-personal relations and its militarization of children. This was apparent in the oblique and muted way in which people spoke about the movement and in the grievances they aired about it. Certainly there had been improvements since the ceasefire and levels of armed violence had diminished dramatically. And the LTTE offered the one route out of Sinhalese domination. But, all the same, the constraints on civilian life and threat of child abduction hung like a shadow over all of the communities that we visited in the LTTE areas; in this sense, the manner in which the movement engaged with civilians was a powerful force undermining social trust and the ideology of Tamil unity.

Children’s Social Worlds

As well as learning about young people’s ambivalence towards the LTTE, one of the other major findings from our research concerned the extremely constrained nature of children’s social and geographic landscape. The limited coverage of their social relationships was revealed in social maps drawn by both boys and girls and in exercises aimed at identifying who mattered in their lives and who they turned to for advice and support. Indeed, obtaining information on children's social worlds was the single greatest challenge of the piloting we did in Batticaloa. Seeing this initially as a methodological problem, we implemented several methods for this purpose, continuously trying to improve the quality and quantity of findings. In each instance, the information on young people's social networks and relationships was sparse as compared to the amount of data on other issues. In the end, we concluded that this was not simply a methodological issue but a finding in itself. The finding was especially noteworthy given the age of our respondents, and the image conveyed by much of the child development literature that during adolescence young people begin to expand their social horizons well beyond the family and build strong peer networks in particular.

To some extent the restricted social worlds of boys and girls could be explained by traditional residence patterns which had become entrenched with the reduction in physical mobility during the war. Indeed, Margaret Trawick noted that, "In their interviews and conversations with me, the most frequent and serious complaints from young people entailed loss of control over personal mobility" (2007: 134). Houses or paddy land being the preferred medium for dowry in Batticaloa's rural hinterland, civilians inhabited small villages or hamlets in which matrilineal kin lived in clusters, frequently around a common compound. During the war, these communities had become relatively self-sufficient economically as compared to the more urbanised coast. Years of poverty, conflict, displacement and containment, together with the harsh LTTE rule, must also have played a significant part in depleting the social networks and institutional affiliations of the young. The majority of the Tamil civilians living in LTTE areas were highland (or "upcountry") settlers in the district. The highlanders were originally from Tamil Nadu in Southern India and were first brought into Sri Lanka by the British to work on tea plantations in the highlands. Already poor, upcountry Tamils arrived in Batticaloa as forced migrants. In the end, the majority settled on un-irrigated land in economically marginal areas in the hinterland that were only partially claimed from the forests and distant from local markets and infrastructure.

The isolation and the fact that the forests provided cover for troops, all suited the LTTE. But these conditions were far less propitious for civilians. Because the LTTE established their regional headquarters in the area, this heightened the risks to local inhabitants. A significant number of families experienced multiple dislocations during the years of armed violence, shifting from village to village, or moving regularly in and out of the forest in search of safety. These waves of migration were often undertaken at no notice and hence resulted in family members becoming separated as they ran for safety, some becoming lost, some being killed and others staying behind through infirmity. Frequently civilians would remain in hiding in the forest for weeks or months at a time.

Even when the violence subsided, travel beyond the confines of the home was rendered perilous by the checkpoints and curfews. Nevertheless, at the same time, with little land of their own and with the decline in local production due to the conflict, civilians became heavily reliant on labour migration. Because it was so difficult to pass through checkpoints, many of the migrants would return home only intermittently. The displacements, deaths, disappearances and labour migration, compounded by ongoing processes of family discord and abandonment and fragmented land tenure, caused the dispersion of kin in many cases. Most noticeable was the separation of generations, maternal grandparents often remaining close to land in different villages or districts from their adult offspring and grandchildren so as to protect it from incursion. With transport costs, checkpoints and transport shortages this meant that family visits were infrequent at best.

Consistent with this pattern, close family members were pivotal in children's social worlds. The two generations of the maternal sibling group, its children and marriage partners, were represented by our respondents as the strongest social unit at the local level, grandparents seldom being included. Friendships and other significant relationships were generally confined to this unit and to unrelated neighbours living close by. The children referred often to the importance of siblings in their lives but tended to

cite their maternal cousins as their firmest and most trusted friends. Living in close proximity, they would spend a great deal of time with their cousins, playing and going to school together, visiting and eating in each other's homes.

Marked gender distinctions were apparent in mobility and social interaction. These distinctions were linked to both gendered ideas about safety and propriety in personal conduct, as well as to the gendered division of labour and burden of childhood work. Girls would go to school and run errands and were sometimes allowed to play at lagoons but otherwise were largely confined to the house and surrounding compound or to the homes of neighbours. Restraints on girls beyond puberty were more evident, possibly because of customary restrictions on their social interaction but also very likely because of the risk of abduction. They would help their mothers in domestic chores like washing pots, sweeping, chopping firewood, drawing water and cooking, as well as caring for younger brothers and sisters. Girls reported that their work was more likely to be continuous than that of boys, who generally had more time for recreation. In their maps, girls would normally focus on their home and on those houses in the immediate vicinity, especially those they visited often.

Boy's maps tended to include a larger number of houses and wider range of more dispersed locations than girls', reflecting the fact that they had more opportunities to go to the market and many of their work responsibilities, like cutting wood or guarding the paddy from birds, would take them outside the community altogether. While the boys acknowledged that they had greater freedom than girls, they also pointed that straying far from their homes and villages increased the risk of elephant attacks and scrutiny by LTTE cadres at checkpoints.

In this much depleted social world, the "who matters' exercise"[v] tended to focus on the immediate family and yielded far less information on relationships with peers and others. Mothers featured consistently in all discussions about love, mentoring, guidance, learning, friendship and basic social and emotional support, especially with girls. It was explained that mothers would sing to their children and tell them stories, this giving great pleasure. One group of girls talked at length about how their mothers would worry when the family had no money and would teach them good habits. They explained that even without being told, "mothers know why their children are sad." There was also some discussion of siblings. In one village boys and girls affirmed that they very much liked having older sisters, since they would help with school work and show them how to do various work-related tasks. They would also intervene to help them when they were being scolded by their mothers. Elder brothers were cited as giving them money when they went out to work and accompanying them and keeping them safe on journeys.

Fathers on the other hand appeared as distant figures in their children's lives, sometimes emerging as important only in relation to the income they contributed to the household or the assistance given with homework. The bias towards the mother most probably reflected the traditional gendered division of labour, with men working outside the home and women working within the domestic sphere and assuming the primary responsibility for raising children. It was explained that it was the mother who nursed or took children to hospital when they were ill, bought and washed their clothes, fed and bathed the younger ones and ensured that they were ready for school each day. Mothers advised their offspring on matters like the importance of studying hard at school and

attending regularly. If needed, they would obtain help with childcare from elder daughters, sisters and other women in the immediate kin group rather than from husbands. But the distancing of fathers from their children was likely also connected with the war. Many of the male LTTE cadres were living in camps at some distance from their homes. Moreover, a significant proportion of men had been killed or disappeared during the fighting, and together with high rates of abandonment of women, this had resulted in large concentrations of single parent households in many villages. And, as noted, with the economic problems resulting from war, civilian families had become highly dependent on income remitted by men who worked as seasonal migrant labourers in quarries, rice mills, brick kilns and similar enterprises in other parts of the district or further afield. Fathers were often absent from the home for weeks or months at a time. Some of the households without men contained two generations – a mother and her children – and some three, a grandmother, her daughter and children.

A smaller, but significant, proportion of migrant labourers were women and teenage girls who obtained longer term domestic work overseas, mainly in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States.[vi] Although female migrants included some married women, most were single parents—widows, women who had been abandoned, or whose husbands had disappeared or been killed during the war. In one area, we learned that 50 mothers from a total of 235 households spread over three villages were working abroad. Some of the offspring of these women were living with relatives, but there were twenty-five households that consisted solely of child-headed sibling groups and several of these were not receiving remittances from their mothers. With women's labour migration, and particularly in the small number of cases where migrants had ceased to be in contact with their children, lived reality challenged the ideal of the primordial role of mothers. Among the many dimensions of a daughter's relationship with her mother, girls would talk about their mothers combing their hair as being customary and of great importance to them. Older sisters or grandmothers might undertake this task in the mother's absence but were regarded as a poor substitute. One girl whose hair had been cropped short (unique amongst the girls participating in the discussion) explained that she done this because her mother was working in the Middle East and there was no alternative female relative to comb it for her.

Ideals of Sociality

The strong ties of affect between mothers and their offspring appeared particularly significant when considered in relation to another issue that emerged, this being the highly consistent and positive ideas about sociality expressed by our child respondents. The gulf between the ideals of sociality and the lived social world, which was severely inhibited by barriers to mobility, as well as by high mortality, complicity with the LTTE, child abduction, and other facets of war, was striking. Information on social values and competencies first came to light when we administered an adapted version of a method developed by Jon Hubbard of the Center for Victims of Torture for researching emic perspectives on well-being. We applied this method with a small number of adults and several groups of children in five villages. The intention was to identify the criteria by

which concepts of well-being and ill-being were defined. The term "well-being" was found to correspond closely with the Tamil phrase "*nallam irukka*", and this turned out to be a meaningful everyday concept for both children and adults. Working with individual children, but in single sex groups, we requested our respondents to think of a boy or girl they knew who, in their view, was doing well in life. They were then asked to think of the things about this child that indicated to them that he or she was doing well, the specific phrasing of the question being, "What is it about the person that tells you that they are doing well?" The fact that the question related to real children who were known to the participants meant that the characteristics/concepts of well-being accessed through the activity were attainable and realistic, rather than abstract ideals.

This exercise generated a lot of data that were highly consistent thematically, the criteria of well-being falling into three broad clusters. The first of these clusters involved competencies associated with self-regulation, commonly identified through the phrase "good habits". These centered on personal hygiene (for example, keeping clean, washing regularly), health and fitness (such as playing games, getting good nourishment, drinking boiled water), respect for others (not using bad language, not scolding others) and diligence in school work (studying hard). Interestingly, obedience featured far more often in discussions with adults, whereas children laid greater emphasis on good habits. The second cluster was comprised of cognitive competencies and/or school performance (for example, getting good grades, being clever in studies, doing well at school).

The third cluster focused on inter-personal skills, which incorporated elements of both sociability and affect. Sociability was characterised in several ways, such as helping with housework, but was often expressed through use of the phrase "moves well with others." This was employed generically to encapsulate a range of attributes, such as being popular with others, respecting elders, or playing well with other children. Whatever the specific ascription underlying this concept, "moving well with others" featured regularly in our discussions and clearly represented a significant marker of personal accomplishment in the social domain. In terms of affect, the manifestation of *anbu* (selfless love) seemed to be extremely important to the children. This attribute was cited most often in descriptions of relations between peers and between a mother and her children. Exploration of how a child might show *anbu* in different social situations led to one explanation that in school he or she would typically share food or school utensils. [vii]

It was apparent from our discussions with the children that their conception of well-being relied heavily on the quality of social relations and on the ability of an individual to relate effectively to others. By the same token, there was agreement that children who were not doing well or experienced ill-being stood out and were easily identified by the fact that they tended to remain alone during the school break, and generally had few friends. Since the children sat in groups as they worked through their ideas, there may have been some copying; this might explain some of the convergence in views. Nevertheless, the exercise was repeated in different villages with different groups of children who, to our knowledge, were not in contact with each other during intervals between sessions. From this we concluded that it is more likely that the coherence of constructs across the various groups indicated that norms and values of sociality were widely shared and embedded amongst children within the region. This would not have been particularly surprising had the social circumstances been different, since in most

settings children have already assembled the dominant social values of their community even before reaching middle childhood. But the constancy of social values was more notable and quite surprising given the social turmoil undergone by civilians in Batticaloa in recent decades, and most notably the mismatch between the rhetoric of Tamil unity and the reality of betrayals, kidnappings, family separation and loss. This apparent incongruity led me to question how children formulate their sense of sociality in circumstances of war, during which emotional attachments, social relations and social institutions frequently appear very unstable.

The limitations on our field research prevented detailed observation and reconstruction of how Tamil children in Batticaloa's LTTE enclaves built social attitudes, values and competencies. However, even in the absence of such empirical evidence, there exist three plausible explanations for the stability of values around sociality and social competencies among children which reveal some consistency with arguments about children's socio-cognitive development in the literature. Most fundamentally perhaps was the way in which social relations had become reduced to a small network of kin and friends who lived in close proximity to each other and interacted continuously on a basis of trust. The love and constancy of the maternal sibling group in the face of the social dissonance and the multitude of transformations, losses and hostilities associated with the conflict appears to have provided emotional force and meaning for young people in terms of their understandings of the social world.

There was also the strong conservative discourse centring on gender, generation and power within the family that prevailed in Tamil communities, which Joke Schrijvers (1999: 312) has formulated as a reaction to the social changes bought about by the war. This emphasis on traditional values and culture was a powerful source of stability in the ideational realm. The LTTE played a crucial part in this process. Known at one level to champion secular values and equality between male and female cadres (Alison, 2004), LTTE rhetoric in Batticaloa had at the same time appropriated traditional socio-moral principles, reproducing an idealised template for Tamil culture and society which was underpinned by expectations of religious fealty, loyalty to the political cause and punishment for personal transgressions. Informal social codes developed over generations had become overlaid by more formal ones prescribed by the LTTE as a means of preserving Tamil culture and social unity and guaranteeing law, order and obedience among civilians. The losses of war rendered the discourse all the more compelling. Jonathon Spencer highlights how LTTE rhetoric emphasised the suffering of the Tamil population and called Tamil civilians to serve their cause through austerity and self-sacrifice, applying moral pressure through "a highly elaborated culture of martyrdom…around the figures of its dead cadres" (Spencer, 2000: 126). In this way, "…even those Tamils who might prefer to distance themselves from the LTTE and its mission, in the ravaged villages of the East coast or in the refugee camps, are hardly likely to deny their own suffering, not least as this is the one point of collective reference which can still bring people together"(ibid: 134).

Parents seemed to play a significant part in bringing children in line with these cultural precepts, as exemplified by their role in instilling 'good habits' and school effort and the multitude of techniques they would use to restrain and discipline the young. Boys and girls talked a lot about how parents would punish them for failing to do homework,

getting bad grades, skiving off school and similar misdemeanors. Punishments were meted out by both fathers and mothers, and typically included beatings, deprivation of food, being made to kneel in the sun for lengthy periods and similar practices. Sometimes threats were used, as when parents exploited children's fear of ghosts to warn them against going out alone at night or taking a particular route. Corporal punishment was a cause of much distress to our young respondents, "Children worry when they get a beating. They sit alone. All of us get beatings." During a body-mapping exercise, we asked a group of boys, "What makes you feel sad?" and they responded by saying they would feel sad when their parents scolded them (leg injuries from beatings were indicated on the map).

Beatings by the mother were a particular source of distress. One group of children explained that when they were beaten they would cry and sometimes refuse to eat, or at least would pretend not to eat. They admitted that occasionally they would seek revenge for beatings by stealing from their parents or threatening to join the LTTE. Intervening to stop punishment was noted by children as one of the more important ways in which grandparents, aunts and uncles might support them. For their part, adults argued that disciplining the young was a necessary responsibility of parenthood (in particular motherhood) and the most effective way of ensuring obedience and "good habits" in children. Thus, a group of women in one village stated that it is the parents' duty to scold their children. "We tell our children not to go to the well but sometimes they disobey us so we must punish them. We also punish them when they don't go to school or do their homework."

Conclusion

From the evidence we obtained during the methods piloting, children's social worlds in Batticaloa's LTTE enclaves seemed to have become seriously compromised in several crucial ways, the war and LTTE rule seemingly playing a significant contribution to this situation. We found their peer networks to be highly restricted and inter-generational relations significantly undermined. By way of illustration, I note how boys and girls struggled to identify friendships beyond the close confines of the maternal kin group, children's apparent emotional isolation from fathers, the distress they showed in relation to adult drunkenness and violence and the harsh treatment frequently meted out by parents, together with the high levels of family separation, adult migration and mortality. Above all, though, it was the ever-present menace of abduction and the associated risk of betrayal by neighbours that undermined inter-generational trust and destabilised relations between civilians and the LTTE.

There was much paradox and considerable social complexity in this circumstance. In the context of war and oppressive LTTE rule and with the related shortage of adult males to fill the ranks of foot soldiers, childhood had become a highly politicised and contested social space in Batticaloa. Children were pivotal to relations between civilians and the LTTE and in a way their social experience and the ambivalence of their social perceptions symbolised the highly ambiguous and conflictual nature of these relations. Thus, whilst on the one hand the LTTE appealed to civilian loyalty by ensuring the

reinstatement of local services and calling on the collective suffering of Tamils and the martyrdom for the cause of cadres killed in battle, on the other they held civilians to account by force through child abduction and the threat of abduction. Parents and kin were powerless to protect the young from forced recruitment, this being a cause not simply of considerable fear in civilians but also possible loss of adult authority over the young. At the same time, by intervening to impose law and order and mediating religious, family and community life, the LTTE had effectively assumed the moral high ground over adult civilians, even whilst carrying out acts of extreme violence that contravened fundamental values stressed by both the Hindu and Christian faiths. Children were well aware of the defencelessness of adults in the face of the superior might of the LTTE and invoked the higher moral authority of the LTTE in relation to adult misdemeanours in an extremely positive manner; in this way, the LTTE commanded respect from the young

The evidence of the socio-emotional dissonance experienced by young people in Batticaloa and of their ambivalence towards both adults and the LTTE is strong. However, this evidence also needs to be interpreted in light of the more idealised social perspectives of our young respondents. These were revealed in the frequent expressions of love for mothers and elder siblings; the close alliances with maternal kin; the importance attached to affective bonds and 'moving well with others' as a basis for well-being; and the affirmative attitudes many young people articulated with regard to the LTTE. The central question is, in what way does the complexity and ambiguity in lived socio-emotional reality and the apparent disconnection between this reality and the ideational realm affect the development of a theory of mind and related social competencies and values? In the face of the violence of everyday social life, can the relative coherence in the ideational realm really be attributed to deep-rooted predispositions embedded in collective representations or repertoires of practice, as some of the literature would have us believe? Or is it, as others maintain, that the child novice is so expert at bringing specialised cognitive skills and domain-specific programmes to bear in their learning that management of social dissonance is a rather mundane matter?

On the basis of our limited research I could not pretend to offer conclusive responses to these questions. However, in reflecting on our findings three issues come to the fore. First, the evidence we obtained brings into question some of the assumptions in the literature about the nature of inter-subjectivity, and the power of mutual interest and cooperation in social cognitive development. Social scientists may not be right in assuming that social cognition is reliant on relations between the child novice and more experienced actors (adults or peers) that are characterised by affect, peaceful transaction, identification with agents of socialisation, and the like; especially when considering older children. Anthropologists who have very confidently deconstructed and in many cases rejected traditional concepts of tribe, community, household, family, gender, and accept childhood to be a social construction nevertheless seem to stop at de-construction of generational concepts and traditional ideologies of inter-generational relations as expressed in the literature.

Similarly, tendencies in scholarship to homogenise and reify children as a social category have the effect of negating the extraordinary differences of power within childhood and the associated potential for discord between peers. And the focus on early childhood within psychology limits the explanatory reach of developmental theory in

regards to the evolving capacities of children and young people as they reach middle to late childhood. Work by Lena Alanen, Berry Mayall and colleagues (2001) and by Judith Rich Harris (1998) has begun to question assumptions about inter-generational relations and the role of adults in children's learning and adaptation. However, there has been very little, if any, research on the social cognitive effects of inter-personal conflict and power differences within childhood and youth cohorts. Clearly there is a need to re-examine assumptions of constancy and predictability in the social relations surrounding the care and training of the young and for greater understanding of the complex, multifaceted and dynamic processes of social interaction and engagement involved in relations both across and within generations and how these play out in the social cognitive development. One of the most poignant examples of this complexity in Batticaloa was the ambiguous relationship between daughters and mothers. In this, expressions of love by children were countered by fear of corporal punishment and separation through labour migration, whilst on the other hand mothers had the power to chastise or marry daughters off and yet also depended on their domestic work and acknowledged anxiety that they might escape to join the LTTE.

A second, related, issue has to do with the role of emotions in social cognitive development. War is an emotionally-charged environment in which socio-emotional bonds and trust are often attenuated and social and moral codes challenged and undermined. Despite the important work of Antonio Damasio and others in this field, the place of emotion in socio-cognitive development is another relatively under-developed area of research, as noted by David Wood: "contemporary theories of cognition and intellectual growth have not been framed to explain if, and if so, how the nature of emotional experiences impacts on cognition and understanding" (Wood, 1998: 162). Even though it is likely that very few childhood experiences are absolute in their emotional message**,** the proposition that children may remain perfectly adept at building a theory of mind despite the emotional turmoil of war is very challenging for research. Yet, this is precisely what the children we engaged with in our research seemed able to achieve. This raises the possibility that discord may even enhance social learning through heightened awareness of the contingent and fragmented nature of emotional attachments and the cognitive demands associated with processing highly complex and ambiguous social information.

Thirdly, it seems relevant to question the extent to which social cognitive development in the young depends on a high level of coherence either within the ideational sphere or between lived experience and the ideational realm. This question poses a challenge to Le Vine's assertion about how the fusion of what is and ought to be in a single vision provides "distinctive cultural ideologies their singular psychological power, their intimate linkages with individual emotion and motivation" (1984: 78). The evidence from Batticaloa would appear to suggest that expectations of what ought to be can be very different to the experience of what is and that even so this does not necessarily disrupt the ideational realm.

Social scientists have been trying to determine the locus and processes of social cognitive development for some time, with no apparent resolution to debates about the specific contributions of socio-genetic heritage, collective socio-cultural forces and individual effort. In light of this endeavour, it is worth bearing in mind that research and

debates within social anthropology and psychology run in parallel with scholarship in other disciplines, such as genetics, neuroscience and evolutionary anthropology. Some social scientists make good use of theory and evidence generated in these latter fields (see for instance the 1995 volume edited by Esther Goody), but even so, there is a need for greater learning across disciplines. I cite just one example here. Resonating with the work of Sperber and Hirschfeld, a recent study by Esther Herrmann (2007) and colleagues at the Maz Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig suggests that higher order social skills are uniquely human.

By comparing chimps and orang-utans in sanctuaries in Africa and Indonesia with humans aged 2 ½ (when their skills in physical coordination are broadly similar to adult chimps) she found the performance of humans in physical and spatial intelligence to be similar to chimps and a little better than orang-utans. But the toddlers performed far more effectively than chimps and orang-utans in communication and social understanding, their social learning skills being particularly developed with regard to theory of mind. The researchers argue that this supports the cultural intelligence hypothesis that humans have evolved specialised socio-cognitive skills which enable them to be competent actors in social worlds and participate in cultural reproduction. In examining social environments that are imbued with dissonance and ambiguity, the particular contribution of research with children growing up in war might be a greater understanding of the robustness of these socio-cognitive processes and their specific associations with mutuality and communication and other phenomena in the collective life of humans.

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[i] The fieldwork underpinning the paper was conducted as part of two separate studies, one focusing on beneficiary participation in humanitarian interventions (Boyden, J., Kaiser, T. and Springett, S. (2002)) and the other, on methods for assessing children's psychosocial well-being (Armstrong, M., Boyden, J., Galappatti, A. and Hart, J. (2005)). The research took place during a temporary ceasefire and concentrated mainly on LTTE-controlled areas. Names of respondents and communities have been excluded for reasons of confidentiality and anonymity. I would like to thank Jason Hart for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this paper. His observations and insights were extremely valuable and enabled me to strengthen the piece in important ways; any errors or omissions being of my own making.

[ii] As well, there have been many reports in Batticaloa over the past few years of the LTTE taking civilians hostage for ransom.

[iii] At this time of year, LTTE cadres would sometimes enter a village at night and take all the children in the appropriate age group away in a lorry.

[iv] However, we were informed by some that in practice this tactic is pointless because when families fail to deliver up a child, the father is often taken instead. Since this can have serious economic repercussions, many families feel obliged to allow the LTTE to take their children.

[v] This exercise was administered with the intention of aiding exploration of children's social worlds. Questions such as "Who do you like to be with?" and "Who helps you when you are in trouble?" were intended to prompt discussion that would lead to exploration of children's social networks and the quality of their relationships generally. The exercise resulted in discussions about family relationships in particular.

[vi] Overseas migration from Batticaloa is facilitated by Muslim agents. Migrant labour involves a major financial outlay to the Muslim agent and many personal risks.

[vii] Margaret Trawick notes that *anbu* characterises the ideal attitude of the LTTE towards the people (2007: 81)

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