Destruction of the Innocents(ce) and a Call to Conscious Action

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Abstract: This article begins with a discussion of changing understandings of children and childhood. Conceptualizations of children and childhood have varied over time and place. Although children were once viewed as innocent, they are increasingly regarded as players in a power struggle with their parents or, in the case of children seeking refuge in the U.S. from other countries, as threats to established political, economic, and moral conventions or as potential consumers of public services who lack any basis for such entitlement. The author argues for the rectification of the structural inequities that underlay society's adverse treatment of children and urges therapists to become more conscious of their potential role as political actors to highlight children's vulnerability and need for protection.

Keywords: *child; political action; refugees; therapists; trauma.*

Introduction

The body of a small boy, only three years old, washed ashore on Turkey's beach. Aylan Kurdi had escaped together with his family, in search of a new life, safe from the ravages of war-torn Syria (Cole, 2017; Smith, 2015).

Aylan's photo put a face to the ever-increasing numbers of faceless refugees. The numbers could not arouse sympathy, but Aylan's photo did, underscoring families' pain and suffering even in their efforts to shield each other from the raging battles of the Kurdish forces and the Islamic state insurgents (Cole, 2017; Smith, 2015). Perhaps the photo aroused compassion because Aylan looked so much like any child might, dressed in a t-shirt and shorts (Cole, 2017; O'Grady & Noack, 2019), or perhaps because we were able to see his face. But that compassion was short-lived, if the gradually decreasing level of donations to campaigns for Syrian refugees is any indication (Cole, 2017).

Only a few years later, the body of 23-month-old Valeria from El Salvador was found together with that of her father, Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez, both drowned in their attempt to cross the Rio Grande River into the United States from Mexico (Ahmed & Semple, 2019). Valeria, the U.S.' version of little Aylan (O'Grady & Noack, 2019).

Increased cries for law and order followed these events. Even after the photo of little Aylan went viral, Zoltan Kovacs, a Hungarian government spokesperson, called for more order to control the surge of migrants, ignoring that most were refugees fleeing from the dangers of war and persecution (Smith, 2015). European governments moved to close their borders and reduce the size their rescue missions in the Mediterranean (O'Grady & Noack, 2019). U.S. and Mexican politicians offered expressions of sadness and regret at the deaths of Valeria and her father, even as the U.S. administration sought to limit the number of individuals permitted to file asylum claims each day (O'Grady & Noack, 2019), even as the immigration detention centers holding families and children were denounced for their inhumane conditions (Kanno-Youngs, 2019; O'Grady & Noack, 2019), even as it remained—and continues to remain—unclear how many of the more than 5,000 young children separated from their parents at the U.S-Mexico border have not yet been returned to their families (Associated Press, 2019).

What does this say about how we view children? About how we understand childhood?

Images of Children and Childhood

Conceptualizations of children and childhood have varied over time and place (Malkki & Martin, 2006). Although being a child is a function of biology, ideas about when childhood begins and ends and beliefs about the nature of childhood are rooted in values, culture, and history (Trask, 2010). Indeed, it has been argued that the concept of childhood is a function of adults' moral and political agendas, their own imaginaries, rather than the children (Cannella, 2002; James & Prout, 1990; Jenks, 2005).

We have often conceived of childhood as a place of near-perfect harmony, a time of freedom and play and children as innocent and natural. Our idealization of childhood is reflected back to us in J. M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (2011) that served as the basis of a Disney film (Budd & Cook, 2002; Geronimi et al., 1995) and in the paintings by Romantic artists Reynolds and Gainsborough, that situate their children in natural settings (Taylor, 2011). It has been suggested that the sentimentalization of children and childhood is particularly noticeable among those in the middle- and upper-classes, who may view their children as sources of self-validation and pride (Elkind, 1981; Zelizer, 1985). Indeed, this representation of "child" as innocent and natural and of childhood as a time of freedom is one of the many aspects of the cultural collective (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994; De Vries, 2009).

Our image of the child abounds in dualities and contradictions. The mystic child may represent wisdom, but the young age of the child reflects ignorance (De Vries, 2009). The child holds the strength of the life-urge, but at the same time, is vulnerable and in need of protection. And there exist more ominous and serious aspects as well. The birth of a child-king was once thought to necessitate its murder to ensure the life of its father (De Vries, 2009). The first-born child in Carthage was sometimes offered as a sacrifice in the belief that the offering of the child would ensure good fortune, good health, and general fertility (De Vries, 2009).

These dimensions of the child are notable in our own history. Until the late seventeenth century, the United States conceived of children as miniature adults with responsibilities to their families and to society (Beales, 1985). Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century industrialization led to the placement of children in indentured apprenticeships and the recruitment of children into factory labor, often for long hours and under dangerous conditions (Suransky, 1982). These inhumane and draconian conditions ultimately prompted a transformation in the perception of children as

laborers to children as young individuals in need of protection (Finkelstein, 1985; Kurth-Schai, 1988; Suransky, 1982).

More recent literature relating to children and child development suggests that there has been in the U.S. an increasing emphasis on fostering individualism and independence in children (Trask, 2010). However, a study of parenting magazines found that many of their published articles characterized parent-child relationships as a power struggle and reflected an assumption that a child's will is the root of social deviance, requiring intervention so that the child's behavior will ultimately conform to acceptable standards of conduct (Hoffman, 2003). And, although one can debate the source of child aggression—dysfunctional family, violent environment, or an evil nature—children can and do commit serious crimes and societal response not infrequently holds them accountable as if they were adults (Angell, 2004; Scialabba, 2016).

Child Separation and Trauma in the Political Arena

But what of the children who arrived at the U.S. border, with or without their parents? What of the infants and young children who have been separated from their parents, some so young that they cannot say their names or those of their parents, who have been held in detention facilities or deposited onto the caseloads of social service agencies? How do we see them?

An online survey conducted in June 2018 by the Economist/YouGov asked respondents to indicate their preference for how the government should address situations involving families that crossed the U.S. border without legal documentation (O'Neil, 2018). Less than one-half (43%) indicated that families should be held together in detention centers until the date of their immigration hearing. Eleven percent preferred that the adults be arrested and jailed and that the children be sent to shelters managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. An additional 8% indicated that the adults should be jailed and the youth sent to juvenile detention centers and be tried on criminal charges. This suggests that close to one-fifth (19%) of the respondents supported the separation of children from their families and almost one-tenth viewed the children, regardless of their age, as criminally culpable, essentially no different from adults with respect to their level of agency or responsibility. A Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted from June 16 to June 19, 2018 found that 28% of the 1,422 adults polled supported Trump's policy of separating families at the border (Ipsos/Reuters, 2018; Lynch & Cornwell, 2018).

Although it is a minority of survey respondents who indicated support for the separation of children from their families, it is not an insignificant proportion of those who participated in the surveys. How, we might ask, could they find favor with such a practice?

Perhaps, we might posit, they do not understand the harmful effects of such separation. Many of the children likely experienced trauma even before their separation, including violence or famine (Coyle, 2018). In the short term following the separation, the children may be terrified, not understanding why they have been separated from their parents. For younger children especially, the trauma of being removed from their parent(s) may have long-lasting effects; these traumatic attachment memories will last into their adulthood and may lead to the development of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety (Coyle, 2018; Miller et al., 2018).

Or, perhaps these individuals perceive the children as threats to established political, economic, and moral conventions, as potential consumers of public services who lack any basis for such entitlement. Perhaps these children are perceived as a social problem, entitled to any form of assistance only if that investment can be justified economically (Zelizer, 1985).

Or, perhaps these survey respondents have projected on to these small children an expectation of independence and individualism, not knowing or not understanding that such an expectation of a young child is not developmentally appropriate and that the U.S. ideal of an individualistic, independent child is not universally embraced (Bornstein, 2012).

The seeming lack of acknowledgement and dismissal of the emotional trauma suffered by refugee children and their families, regardless of the underlying reasons, necessarily raises several questions. Do these attitudes signal a shift in how our collective cultural unconsciousness perceives children and childhood? Are children now to be feared and scorned, their deaths dismissed as the consequence of parents too selfish to utilize legal means of immigration? And, if this is the case, how do we, as therapists, help to preserve the breadth of the child image?

Awakening Consciousness: Therapists as Political Actors

All parts of the universe are interrelated and we are all interconnected (Markell, 2002). As Capra and Stendl-Rast (1992, p. 166) observed, this interconnectedness "has implications for all aspects of social concern." These children are, by virtue of this interconnectedness, our

concern and how they are treated and how we respond to how they are treated has implications for all of us.

Therapists do not often conceive of themselves as political actors, although on an individual basis they may vote, write to their representatives, or otherwise participate in a political process. However, even seemingly innocuous actions are themselves political and may have far-reaching impact. Consider the willingness of Dora Kalff, a sandplay therapist, to host a Tibetan refugee following China's occupation of Tibet (Kalff, 2003). Her actions serve as positive example of how individual acts, perhaps conceived of as nonpolitical, may hold political dimensions and bring about change.

Martin Kalff describes how a Tibetan monk came to live with them for a period of eight years after his mother was asked to take on one of the 1,000 Tibetan refugees that Switzerland had welcomed (Kalff, 2003). Martin explains the impact of this one decision:

> *It was through this [housing of the Tibetan monk] that she gradually began to have close contact with a variety of Tibetan teachers. We were visited by the teacher of the Dalai Lama, Trichang Rinpoche, and later by the Dalai Lama himself. For Mother this simultaneously awakened an awareness of the rich symbolism of Tibetan Buddhism and a deep compassion for all creatures. This greatly enriched her understanding of the psychic processes of her clients and worked to further deepen her therapeutic work.*

> *Sandplay soon became internationally known (Kalff, 2003, p. ix).*

In welcoming the Tibetan monk into her home, Dora Kalff implicitly acknowledged the status of the Tibetan refugees and the aggressive acts of China. We do not know whether she considered her act to be one of kindness or a political statement as well. However, her example challenges us to think consciously about the potential political implications of our actions and to examine the possible effects that they may facilitate.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic underscores our both our vulnerability and interconnectedness as individuals and as communities. Rather than drawing us together as a global community intent on minimizing the destructive impact of the virus, some governmental leaders have, unfortunately, politicized infection with and treatment for the virus, as well the amelioration of its devastating effects (Barnes, 2020; Philo, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Indeed, as the health agency chief of the United Nations

perceptively noted, "unity is the 'only option' to defeat the disease (United Nations, 2020).

The pandemic has necessitated the implementation of a "pause," allowing us to rethink our understandings and priorities (New York State, 2020). With this pause comes the potential for a reassessment of our assumptions and a revisioning of the future. Importantly, this must include a reevaluation of the predicaments that we have created for children and a rectification of the structural inequities and violence that prompted the creation of those predicaments.

Conclusion

As therapists, we have opportunities each day to demonstrate our interconnectedness and unity with the larger world, as we provide a free and protected space to our individual clients and as we outreach to communities impacted by natural and man-made disasters (Freedle & Echsner, 2018; Freedle et al., 2018). We hold the power, as individuals and as part of a collective, to remind and demonstrate to others through our consciously-made actions that children remain vulnerable and in need of our protection. For some, this may flow from who they are as individuals or represent an extension of their role as therapists. Indeed, such advocacy is consistent with the ethical standards of the social work profession, that call on social workers to advocate for their clients and promote social change and social justice (National Association of Social Workers, 2008) and of psychologists, who are advised to avoid harm to clients and others (American Psychological Association, 2016). For others, this response may represent, as well, a political statement.

> As the I Ching comments:
> *It flows on and on, and merely fills up all of the places through which it flows; it does not shrink from any dangerous spot nor from any plunge, and nothing can make it lose its own essential nature. It remains true to itself under all conditions. Thus likewise, if one is sincere when confronted with difficulties, the heart can penetrate the meaning of the situations. And once we have gained inner mastery of a problem, it will come about naturally that the action we take will succeed ("The I Ching", 1971, p. 115).*

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