

“I Didn’t Want to Die So I Joined Them”: Structuration and the Process of Becoming Boy Soldiers in Sierra Leone

RICHARD MACLURE

Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada

MYRIAM DENOY

Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada

Child soldiers are generally portrayed either as victims of structural forces that are beyond their control and comprehension or as knowing agents of mayhem in search of revolutionary change or personal gain. Yet these singular perspectives are bedevilled by their dialectical limitations, the one overlooking capacities of individual will, the other prone to discounting historical and socioeconomic contexts. In this paper, through the lens of structuration theory that postulates the interconnectedness of structure and agency, we examine how boys were transformed into armed and organized combatants in Sierra Leone’s recent civil war. Drawing from a series of interviews with a cohort of boys who fought with the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF), we map out their experiences and perspectives in a way that highlights the juxtaposition of profound social forces and the capacity for personal agency that underlay the process of becoming child soldiers. We conclude by ruminating on the challenges of rehabilitating and reintegrating former child soldiers in the impoverished circumstances of post-war Sierra Leone.

Introduction: Child Soldiers and the Conundrum of Structure and Agency

Violence and armed conflict are commonplace in the everyday lives of many of the world’s children. Not only have millions of young people been first-hand witnesses of war and the atrocities that invariably accompany armed aggression, but over the last decade increasing numbers of children have been drawn into combat as active belligerents. Severe societal turbulence, the collapse of states, the rise of

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Richard Maclure is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa (Canada), and specializes in youth rights and education in Africa and Latin America. Myriam Denoy is an assistant professor in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa, Canada. Her research and teaching interests centre on war and political violence, war-affected children, post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding, and gender and security.

Address correspondence to Richard Maclure, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, K1N 6N5, Canada. E-mail: rmaclure@uottawa.ca

warlordism, an increased availability of small arms and light weapons, and militaristic perceptions of children as proficient and obedient soldiers have all been identified as factors underlying the phenomenon of child soldiery.¹ Nowhere have such antecedents been more evident than in Sierra Leone where approximately 40,000 children (i.e., below the age of eighteen years as stipulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) were actively engaged as fighters in a savage ten-year civil war.² Besides innumerable media and advocacy group reports that provided graphic accounts of the actions and demeanor of child soldiers in the Sierra Leonean conflict,³ various scholarly inquiries have shed light on the nature of child soldiery in Sierra Leone and the conditions of societal collapse that propelled young people to become involved in the fighting.⁴ Most of these reports and studies tend to depict child soldiers either as hapless victims of structural forces beyond their control or as an assortment of misguided revolutionaries and “lumpen” delinquents who were knowing agents of terror and destruction.⁵ Although both of these broad perspectives capture parts of the truth about what happened to many children during the Sierra Leonean conflict, they are confounded by the dialectic of trying to explain ferocious human behaviour through divergent analytical frameworks—one that focuses on underlying historical and structural influences, the other that acknowledges the capacity of humans to act on the basis of independent deliberation and choice.

From the historical structuralist perspective, the involvement of children as active participants in fighting forces is seen as an inexorable derivative of the socio-cultural and economic environments in which they have grown up. In national contexts that have long been characterized by economic stagnation, widespread poverty, deteriorating or non-existent social services, and violent clashes between weak oligarchic states and regionally based forces of resistance, children can be easily drawn into activities that are essentially extensions of the tensions and violence inherent to their own social surroundings.⁶ In Sierra Leone there are compelling reasons to support this structuralist perspective. With its legacy of slave resettlement, colonialism, and post-independence governance that served mainly to enrich a kleptocratic urban elite, Sierra Leone was integrated into the world system in a way that ruined its economic potential, marginalized and impoverished the vast proportion of its mainly rural population, and generated extensive antagonism against those who dominated the country’s increasingly fragile “shadow” state.⁷ Throughout the 1980s, as governing elites increasingly relied on the police and military to maintain their tenuous positions of authority, violence came to be regarded as a way to dispense with political opponents, and to defend or challenge patrimonial monopolies of power and resources.⁸ In this context of fiscal and political misrule, with more than half the population under the age of eighteen, Sierra Leone offered limited prospects of good quality education and satisfying employment for young people.⁹ When the power of Sierra Leone’s oligarchic state imploded in the early 1990s, children and youth were easily drawn into a conflict that arose from poverty and misrule, and the rise of a rebel movement that proclaimed its intention to initiate a new sociopolitical order.¹⁰

Despite a clear association between state collapse and the phenomenon of child soldiery in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in the developing world, some observers have nonetheless balked at what they feel is an overly deterministic portrayal of child soldiers.¹¹ As Graca Machel has cautioned, to view child soldiers solely as victims of adverse circumstances is to ignore the capacity of youth, no matter how adversely affected, to exercise a measure of personal autonomy in their decisions and actions.¹² A rather different view, therefore, is that far from being in thrall to structures and

forces that they neither control nor comprehend, children who become involved in armed conflict are possessed with agency and frequently act with deliberation and awareness of the meaning and consequences of their actions. In contexts of stark resource disparities and systems of oligarchic governance that dispossess large swathes of a nation's citizenry, alienated youth are often prone to rebel against dominant political and economic institutions and to wreak revenge on those deemed to have benefited from or supported an exclusionary status quo. In so doing, by perpetrating violent actions and asserting power over others, and by accumulating resources through coercive means, youth often attain a sense of personal empowerment and heightened social status.¹³ During Sierra Leone's civil war, accounts of child soldiers frequently portrayed young people as committing atrocities with alacrity, fully aware of the effects of their actions.¹⁴ Yet here, too, in light of what is known about the deleterious socioeconomic circumstances of Sierra Leone prior to and during the civil war, it is difficult to interpret acts of excessive brutality perpetrated by children as outcomes of rational deliberation entirely divorced from their social environment.¹⁵

Clearly the conundrum of structure versus agency has confounded attempts to comprehensively explain the nature and conditions of child soldiery and how vulnerable children can become warriors who are capable of committing acts of unspeakable brutality. In an effort to overcome this difficulty, in this paper we propose the lens of structuration theory as a framework for examining the processes by which boys became soldiers with the rebel movement in the Sierra Leonean conflict. As outlined by Anthony Giddens, structuration rejects the notion of a dichotomy between structure and agency and instead articulates the connection between these two concepts as a basis for analyzing human behaviours in particular times and places.¹⁶ By examining the narratives of a cohort of former boy soldiers who were attached to the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the rebel force that fought against the Sierra Leonean government and terrorized a substantial proportion of the country's population, we aim to demonstrate how the exercise of free will, often manifested in extraordinary violence, but occasionally as well in subtle resistance, was bound up with the unique historical and sociocultural forces in which these boys were growing up.

The Study

This analysis of boy soldiers in Sierra Leone is part of a larger qualitative research project examining the life histories and circumstances of both boys' and girls' involvement in Sierra Leone's civil war, and the implications of their wartime experiences on their subsequent needs and their capacity to adjust to the current post-conflict situation.¹⁷ Given the gender differentiation of roles and experiences, both in the context of armed conflict and in more stable social contexts, we have examined the oral accounts of male and female child soldiers separately. In this paper we focus solely on the experiences of boy soldiers.¹⁸ For purposes of this inquiry into the experiences and perceptions of former boy soldiers, the field staff of our partner institution, Defence for Children International, Sierra Leone (DCI-SL), purposively selected a sample of thirty-six boys with whom they were in regular contact in the eastern, southern and northern Provinces and the western area of Sierra Leone. To be included in the study, participants were required to have been associated with an armed group in Sierra Leone (whether voluntarily or through coercion) while

under the age of eighteen. No stipulations were made regarding the length of time that boys were attached to an armed group or their assigned role within the group. In fact, all our male respondents had been recruited by the RUF when they were very young (ranging approximately between eight and thirteen years old), and most were not yet eighteen years old when they were demobilized following the end of hostilities. As well, all boys selected for the study had been affiliated with the RUF for periods ranging from a few months to approximately five years, and all had engaged in hostile activities, e.g., direct fighting, acts of terrorism, looting, spying, serving as bodyguards, and commanding other child soldiers.

Between May 2003 and February 2004 the research team conducted a series of interviews with these boys, most of whom were interviewed twice. Using an interview protocol that had been developed by the Canadian/Sierra Leonean research team, staff members of DCI-SL conducted a first round of semi-structured interviews with the boys in their own native languages (Krio, Mende, Temne, and Limba respectively). These interviews were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed and translated into English. These first transcripts enabled us to learn about the lives and family backgrounds of the boys prior to the war, the circumstances of their recruitment into the RUF, and their subsequent experiences with the rebels. Several months later, with the assistance of interpreters, one of the authors (Denov) conducted a second round of one-to-one interviews with the same boys. These interviews, which served to confirm and probe topics covered in the first round of interviewing, were likewise audio-taped, translated, and transcribed.

As with all self-report data, the interviews with the boys were invariably affected by their willingness to divulge personal information and experiences. In post-conflict Sierra Leone, the potential fear of stigmatization and recrimination may have prevented some boys from openly disclosing some of their experiences, and it may have goaded others into altering or exaggerating aspects of their stories. Apart from the sensitive nature of our inquiry, other factors that may occasionally have affected the validity and scope of the boys' recollections of their experiences were possible limitations of memory and lack of familiarity with the research team members. While the potential flaws of self-disclosure must therefore be taken into account when considering the boys' stories, it is also fair to say that such possible shortcomings were mitigated by close and trusting relationships developed between most of the respondents and the research team members. This was largely because of DCI-SL's reputation as a defender of children's rights in Sierra Leone and by the obvious fact that the non-Sierra Leonean researchers had no interest in seeking retribution for erstwhile acts of violence during the civil war. In fact, many of the respondents frequently visited the offices of the research team between interviews, and they continued to do so after the research fieldwork was completed. These friendly relationships greatly facilitated discussions about the boys' experiences of conflict and gave the research team ample opportunities to informally probe their stories and seek corroboration where possible.

Analysis of the translated interview transcripts was essentially a phenomenological process that involved careful reading and annotation of the collated information so as to ascertain the meaning and significance which the boys attributed to their experiences as child soldiers. Our annotations of the transcripts consisted of themes that we identified as recurring in the boys' narratives. After the first round of descriptive analysis, through the use of NVivo qualitative analysis software, clusters of verbatim text were regrouped according to thematic indices. We then once again

examined the thematically reorganized text in order to identify broad patterns of experiences and perspectives. Through this inductive analytical process, we were able to discern the relatively common stages of boys' immersion into the RUF's militarized social system. While the analysis showed that the process of gradual socialization into the rebel movement was not entirely uniform, it nonetheless helped to illuminate the juxtaposition of structural forces and individual agency that underlay boys' socialization into the RUF and their subsequent actions as child soldiers. The interview excerpts that we have included in this paper vividly capture how boys were immersed into the world of child soldiery.

The Making of Boy Soldiers: Coercive Persuasion, Desensitization, and Power

As described by the great majority of our respondents, immersion into the world of armed conflict as RUF combatants was the result of an intense process of coercive persuasion¹⁹ that often began with a wrenching personal experience and progressed through regular exposure to the paradoxical horrors and rewards of armed conflict. In tracing the stages of this progression, we highlight excerpts from our respondents' accounts of their experiences. It is through their personal stories that it becomes possible to discern how boys' perceptions and actions were shaped by the social relations of the RUF and, over the course of time, how through their individual actions they in turn helped to recreate and reinforce the aggressive power of the RUF.

Conscription

All of the boys interviewed for this study indicated that they had been abducted or forcibly conscripted into the RUF. Although in the early stages of the war the rebel movement did attract volunteers, many of them unemployed urban youth,²⁰ none of our respondents said that they had been willing to leave their families and communities to join the RUF, or that they had had a desire to take up arms before their affiliation with the rebel movement. Likewise, none indicated any genuine motivational interest in the putative revolutionary cause espoused by the RUF. Instead, all the boys whom we interviewed stated that they were press-ganged into joining the RUF, often under highly traumatic circumstances. Such unanimity inevitably raised concerns about the veracity of their accounts regarding initiation into the RUF. In a post-war context in which many former combatants were fearful of stigmatization and recrimination, it was natural that some might be reticent in truthfully narrating how they came to participate in hostilities and atrocities. Nevertheless, although we had little way of verifying or corroborating stories of abduction and a general reluctance to join the rebel army, many of our respondents did openly recount acts of wanton cruelty that they themselves had perpetrated during the war. In light of their openness in speaking of past experiences, including admissions among several boys of frightful acts that they had committed as RUF combatants, we had reason to assume that most, if not all, were honest in recounting how they were drawn into the social system of the RUF.²¹

For those who were indeed coerced into joining the RUF, there was little opportunity to opt out. Fear of the consequences of attempting to escape compelled them to remain with the rebels.

The rebels entered our farm and captured my father and mother and killed them in front of me. After killing both of my parents I was commanded to carry looted items on my head and follow them.

I was attacked at school and forced to join the movement . . . It was as if death had come to collect me.

The rebels attacked my village and I was separated from my parents . . . [They] threatened to kill me if I made any attempt to run away. I didn't want to die so I joined them.

After the initial shock of their first exposure to the rebels, the boys' sense of attachment was cultivated largely through psychological pressure and physical abuse. Having experienced a violent rupture of their own kin and community ties, children were continually reminded that their connections with family and home were severed and that they were now immersed in a new form of dependent relationship.

I was afraid being around these dangerous men with all kinds of weapons . . . I had no mom, no dad, sister or brother or other family members . . . I was alone for the first time in my life.

The rebels tried to make me forget about my family. They told me my parents were dead and that the commander should be my new dad . . . My commander took me wherever he went—this was to make me forget about my parents gradually.

Ensnared by a social organization held together by a system of draconian domination and patronage, boys quickly became dependent on armed commanders who offered a semblance of protection and opportunity in return for services of labour and combat.

Indoctrination and Training

Once conscripted into the RUF, boys were generally forced into a combined process of indoctrination and militaristic training. Indoctrination sessions, which consisted of periodical lectures on the necessity of overthrowing the government of Sierra Leone, were designed to encourage boys to be receptive to the rebel cause and fight on its behalf. Promises of political, social, and financial benefits for all RUF fighters were among the incentives parlayed through such lectures.

I was told . . . that if the rebels succeeded, Foday Sankoh [the leader of the RUF] would compensate each and every one of us with money. I was happy about this. [It] gave me confidence and trust to fight with the rebels.

Similar revolutionary rhetoric and pledges of a better future were directed informally and regularly at young recruits. Separated from their families, having experienced minimal educational and employment prospects, and now wholly dependent on their commanders for survival, many boys were enticed into thinking that their new clientelist ties within the RUF would enable them to personally obtain material wealth and increased social stature.

They said they were fighting for freedom and justice . . . to overthrow the government because . . . there was so much corruption. They told us to be patient and loyal to them. They said we were all going to occupy very important positions in the government at the end of the war . . . This gave us the motivation to fight.

Cut off from their own communal structures of support and mentorship, which often themselves had been shattered by rebel destruction, boys gradually came to regard their captors as sources of succour and guidance. The use of peer mentoring thus became an effective form of socialization that helped to overcome the shock and fear that many boys felt after their first experiences with the RUF. Mentors were those who had been attached to the rebels for a period of time and were considered sufficiently reliable to serve as role models, actively persuading other children to iterate the RUF's rhetoric of revolution and accede to its structures of clientalism and militarism. Over time, in part as a result of material rewards and expressions of encouragement and praise periodically dispensed by their commanders, many boys who had been captured and victimized by the rebel movement eventually came to identify themselves as full-fledged RUF combatants. With no possibility for regular social intercourse with anyone outside the boundaries of the RUF, the idea of the "enemy" shifted imperceptibly from those who had captured and abused them to those who were perceived to be opposed to the RUF.

[When I was first abducted] I was very conscious that I had been separated from my father and mother and that was not easy for me. But I saw many other children of my age or just a little older carrying guns . . . I said to myself, if these children can survive . . . why not me? We later became friends and they taught me how to operate an AK 47 rifle.

As indicated by this last statement, in addition to a systematic process of indoctrination and acculturation within the rebel forces, new recruits were also provided with training in the use of small arms. Strategically situated throughout most of the 1990s in the diamond-rich territories of eastern Sierra Leone, RUF leaders readily engaged in the global traffic of light weapons that enabled them to train and equip young children into becoming effective fighters.

We were trained by jogging over long distances. We were taught to assemble, load and shoot guns, dodge enemy fire, how to disarm captured enemies and how to lay ambush.

For some, learning how to engage in armed conflict was a relatively slow and methodical process. For others, weapons training was a ruthless "sink-or-swim" process, with only the most cursory demonstrations provided before they were led into combat. Either way, the end-game was to compel all male recruits to participate in armed struggle and perpetrate mayhem and terror on behalf of the rebel movement. In this way, the boys' agency was consummated as integral to the militarist structure of the RUF.

Terror and Desensitization

While indoctrination, peer mentoring, and basic military training were part and parcel of the acculturation of young male recruits into the social system of the RUF, this

was a process that was reinforced by an atmosphere of palpable terror. As recounted over and over by our male respondents, an aura of menace, repeatedly manifested through verbal abuse and acts of wanton cruelty, served as a basis of authority and social cohesion within the RUF. Similar to other accounts of child soldiers engaged in the Sierra Leonean conflict,²² our respondents spoke about violence as a feature of daily interaction that inculcated deep-seated fear and unquestioning compliance among young recruits. All our respondents claimed to have been physically abused by those who commanded them, particularly in the early stages of their recruitment. They likewise all witnessed outrageous forms of brutality that were clearly intended as public displays of horror.

The senior commander was horrible. He used to beat us with an iron cane.

I was feeling so afraid . . . I thought I was in the circle of death at any moment.

My commander captured a girl with her [baby] sister and her mother. He shot the mother and the little baby dead. He left the adolescent girl alive but told her to remove her dress and he raped her . . . we all had to watch.

In the face of persistent violence and threats of assault, mutilation, and death, a primary compulsion among all recruits was to survive. This meant obeying any and all commands.

Yet gradually the abhorrence and fright that boys experienced during their initial exposure to the RUF tended to diminish as the commonplace nature of violent behaviour gradually assumed a semblance of normality. Over time, terror gave way to acquiescence and desensitization. Immersed in a social environment that rationalized violence, cruelty came to be trivialized.

Killing happened every day and we all became used to it . . . It came to the point where you would come across a dead body near your door and you would just jump over it to get to your room.

[Killing] was an acceptable thing to do . . . we just considered it normal.

Displays of remorse, sadness, or shame following outrageous acts of violence were suppressed. Instead, brutality was encouraged and sometimes celebrated as a way to foster feckless loyalty to the RUF and to reinforce rank-and-file capacity to kill and mutilate.

[After committing violence] commanders told us to sing and laugh . . . to show that we were happy over a job well done. They did not want to see anyone showing sadness . . . It showed that [killing] was a good thing—we were brave enough to withstand killing and we were prepared to kill at all times.

For some boys, violence that had been frightening gradually came to be viewed not only as normal and acceptable, but as synonymous with excitement, and even skill.

I was good at shooting people even at distant positions . . . It normally made me feel good whenever I hit my target. All my friends and fellow soldiers admired my skill.

As they became inured to the violence surrounding them, most boys became effective soldiers who had little or no compunction over the suffering that they inflicted on others. All our respondents reported having participated frequently in frontline combat and in other forms of wartime aggression that included looting, burning villages, and the deliberate killing, maiming, and torturing of civilians.

I was given a lot of people to do the amputation operation on. We had very crude machetes . . . We refrained from using sharp ones because we believed that more pain would be inflicted if we used dull ones.

On one of our amputation days, I was given a lot of people to do the amputation operation on . . . We normally asked [victims] whether they wanted long or short sleeves. The long sleeve amputation was just above the wrist and the short sleeve was above the elbow. After I asked the man what sleeve he wanted, he begged that I kill him at once. But I considered killing not to have a very big effect because when once the person died, everything was finished. I had to give him short sleeves on both arms. He jumped after me, wailing . . . I felt so good at that time because I was superior.

[In killing] you become abnormal as if you have been drugged. Sometimes I walked around as if I was dreaming or living in a different world. After some time, [the violence] became part of me.

This last comment is telling. A critical factor contributing to the desensitization of boy soldiers during their prolonged exposure to violent aggression was the extensive use of hallucinatory drugs that were easily available and purchased largely from the proceeds of RUF diamond sales.²³ While information on the volume of illicit drug trafficking during the Sierra Leonean conflict is sketchy, there is ample evidence that the RUF regularly relied on drug use as a way to prepare children for combat.²⁴ The ingestion of alcohol, cocaine, and gun powder was a common practice.

Fighting with a gun is not easy because it puts so much pressure on the mind. So we needed to free the mind by taking drugs, and it worked.

We were always drugged before fighting . . . The tablets were so powerful that you didn't feel anything after taking it . . . After [taking the drugs] the officer would slap your back two or three times and say "good soldier."

The abundant use of alcohol and hallucinatory drugs unquestionably contributed to the desensitization of boys and their transition from disoriented and highly impressionable youngsters into effective combatants. Parallel to the trafficking of light weapons, the global commerce of illicit pharmacological stimuli served as an effective catalyst of war. By diminishing the trepidation of injury and death, drugs helped to inculcate the norms of violence and terror into the consciousness of boys and thus incited many of them to act in ways that reinforced the ferocity of the rebel movement.

Solidarity and Empowerment

Once under the control of the RUF, and as they gradually acquiesced to the rebel movement's system of warlord clientelism, most boys came to regard the RUF as a surrogate family and themselves as *bona fide* RUF fighters. This was a significant "arrival" point, for with their own family and community relations ruptured, their identity and subsequent actions became intertwined with the rebel forces. Besides engaging in combat and other forms of aggression, boys also performed an array of relatively benign group support tasks that varied according to their age, physical strength, and length of time attached to the rebel forces. The boys interviewed for this study reported being responsible periodically for manning military checkpoints, carrying out "domestic" chores (e.g., fetching firewood and water), serving as porters (carrying weapons, ammunition, looted goods, and wounded comrades), and acting as bodyguards to their older commanders. The assignment of roles and the performance of tasks that were essential for maintaining the viability of the rebel movement in turn contributed to the boys' sense of personal self-worth and the *esprit de corps* that developed among them.

Yet another way of reinforcing group solidarity and ensuring the boys' attachment to the rebels was through tattooing, which was generally performed as a collective act, often after a successful battle when the mood was upbeat.²⁵ Usually portraying words and images of brutality, tattoos reaffirmed both individual audacity and the RUF's ferocity as a fighting force. The rituals of tattooing not only symbolized the boys' allegiance to the RUF, but also served as a form of social control, demarcating clear boundaries between the "in group" (the RUF) to which they were bound, and the "enemy" (the *kamajors*, ECOMOG, and the Sierra Leonean army) who posed a threat to their existence.²⁶ Such was the symbolic power of tattoos, that as one of our tattooed respondents remarked on meeting an erstwhile compatriot long after the conflict had ended, "When I saw his tattoo and he saw mine, we sat and talked together for a long time."

The allocation of rewards and promotion was yet another method of strengthening solidarity and collective pride among RUF boy soldiers. Generally the more aggressive they were seen to be, the more destruction and looting they undertook, and the more children they abducted, the higher a male youth rose in the ranks of the RUF. Promotion to the rank of commander was deemed to be the pinnacle of success. A source of privilege as well as pride, to be a commander meant being allowed to lead units of other child combatants and to have sexual licence over women and girls.

I became a boss among the children I captured . . . I had my own group of children to organize and manage. I felt really proud to command the other kids. All of the kids admired me.

If you carried out amputations and were very brave in combat you were offered promotion . . . I became a commander and I had fifty children to command. As a commander, you got to choose the girl that you liked and wanted to be with. Girls were used as gifts. I had three wives.

Once I became a commander, I could choose any girl that I wanted [as a wife] . . . If they weren't willing to have sex with me . . . I would force them . . . I felt good. A woman is there to pleasure every man . . . Women

who were just captured were always afraid and so I knew that she [*sic*] would obey me. I felt more powerful because she was afraid of me.

As this last commentary indicates, a number of our respondents admitted that eventually they became infused with a profound sense of their own power. This sense of authority over others—new recruits, girls, and victims of their atrocities—was greatly reinforced by their possession and mastery of firearms.

I always felt powerful with my gun When you have a gun, you can force anyone to do anything for you. You can even capture five big men if you have a gun. Otherwise who was going to listen to me as a small boy? If you were without a gun you were shit.

The gun made everyone powerful. As long as you were armed even the older commanders were more careful in their treatment of you . . . You were only recognized as somebody if you were carrying a gun. When you had a gun, you felt that you were strong.

As the accounts of our respondents revealed, the process of becoming full-fledged child soldiers involved a progression from the status of frightened and disoriented recruits who were often forcibly taken from their homes and communities to that of ruthless destroyers who became steeped in a sense of collective purpose and power. It was a progression that effectively perpetuated a violent social system.

Resistance

Given the totalistic and coercive nature of the RUF, boys had little opportunity or even inclination to resist the relentless socialization process to which they were subjected. Yet as recounted by some of our respondents, through ingenuous reaction to the violence that typified social relations within the RUF, some boys did undertake acts of “deviance” and subtle resistance. Although forbidden to show remorse for brutality that they had either witnessed or perpetrated themselves, boys occasionally sought space away from constant surveillance so they could release their pent-up grief and fear, either alone or in small intimate groups.

We would go into the bush as if to go to the toilet, but once there, we would cry. We would wipe our eyes dry before we came back.

Other forms of “deviance” from normative rebel behaviour included sly evasion of enforced drug ingestion, non-lethal shooting in combat, the provision of succour and assistance to “enemy” civilians, and—by far the riskiest form of resistance—attempts to run away from the RUF in full knowledge of the painful or fatal consequences if caught.

We tried to escape twice . . . We were severely beaten for that.

We [*six*] all scattered . . . but we were caught. They executed three children right away. The other three of us were put in cells and were not fed. They told us that they would have killed us but that the only thing that saved us was that they needed the manpower. After this the RUF began to brand people to prevent escapes.

Overall, however, although some boys managed to preserve a moral compass and demonstrated genuine courage in attempting to foil the normative brutality of the RUF, resistance appears to have been extraordinarily difficult, largely because of constant social interaction and the scrutiny directed toward those who had not yet become fully desensitized and committed to the rebel forces. Among all of our respondents, none recounted any form of openly organized resistance within the RUF—hardly surprising in light of its ruthlessness and totalitarian control. In less violent circumstances social structures that are the cumulative products of human agency can also be sites of internal struggle and transformation.²⁷ Yet when contestation entails an ever-present risk of savage and arbitrary punishment, the likelihood of resistance by actors within the social system is minimal. Once enmeshed in the folds of the RUF, young people had very little margin to challenge or escape the structures of violence to which they had become connected.

Becoming Boy Soldiers: The Integration of Structure and Agency

Although the limited scope of this qualitative inquiry does not allow us to offer conclusive generalizations about the processes by which vast numbers of boys took up arms on all sides of the conflict in Sierra Leone, our interview data do coincide with the findings of similar empirical inquiries in Sierra Leone and elsewhere. As studies of child soldiers and other categories of disadvantaged youth have repeatedly shown, when systems of governance function to serve the interests of a privileged few, and when family and community structures are weakened as a result of impoverishment and civil strife, children can be easily attracted or co-opted to join forces of social disruption and violence that ostensibly aim to transform the status quo.²⁸ Unfortunately, however, in Sierra Leone, although the rebel RUF had begun as a movement of opposition to socioeconomic injustices perpetrated by a venal urban elite, it was itself an offshoot of the violent and politically opportunistic structures that it opposed. Its militarized and absolutist patron-client social system, coupled with its inherent ethos of dominating or destroying everything that stood in its way, both in towns and in rural areas, had the effect of atomizing families and organs of civil society, and rendering children highly susceptible to the coercive persuasion of its leaders.

In light of the narratives of our respondents, coupled with what is already well known about the antecedents of the conflict in Sierra Leone, the perspective of child soldiery as an inevitable outcome of tragic historical and socioeconomic forces would seem to be substantiated. Impoverished, poorly educated (if at all), and wholly dependent on established adult authority structures, children in Sierra Leone were clearly overwhelmed by these forces and easily succumbed to the dependency and violent forms of reciprocity imposed upon them by an alternative social system. While there is evidence that some children did willingly gravitate to the RUF in the earliest stages of the conflict, many more were forced to join after witnessing unspeakably brutal acts and the destruction of the social systems upon which they were naturally dependent for sustenance and development. With no moral and institutional buffers to withstand a social movement that defined itself by acts of violence and terror, sheer survival compelled young males to become the agents of practices that reinforced and reproduced the system into which they had been co-opted. The spate of small arms and the abundance of alcohol and hallucinatory drugs, made available from the proceeds of rebel-controlled diamond trafficking, greatly

facilitated the manipulation of these children and the diminishment of their capacities for comprehension and self-control.²⁹ Caught up by structures of predatory commerce and violence, children were easily socialized into the norms and behaviours that fomented and perpetuated these structures.

Nevertheless, one must be cautious about lapsing into a reductionist *cul de sac* that discounts youth capacity for reasoning and independence of action. After all, over a period of time within the RUF, the actions of many boys assumed an increasingly voluntarist nature. As some of our respondents attested, although they were coerced into joining the RUF, the occasion to kill and maim ultimately gave them a sense of power over others. Feelings of pride and satisfaction in exercising such power were not uncommon. For these boys, the thrill and sentiment of supremacy that arose from acts of wanton cruelty reflected their exhilaration at no longer being objects of terror and abuse themselves. Having experienced a cruel process of "initiation," they appear to have been fully aware of the misery they were inflicting on others, and clearly relished the corresponding power and sense of strong identity that derived from their acts of cruelty. An element of perverse, self-serving calculation underlay such behaviour that cannot simply be explained away as a function of larger social forces or mind-numbing indoctrination. Moreover, what is also evident is that other boys did not entirely succumb to the RUF's absolutist system of authority and violence. Some resisted, and while they did so often imperceptibly and in an *ad hoc* manner, they nonetheless engendered precarious risks to their own safety. These differences in boys' actions attest to the fact that their responses to abduction and coercion by the RUF were neither uniform nor linear. Some boys became perpetrators of excessive violence. Others strove to retain a degree of independence and compassion. Despite the powerful structural forces that impinged on them all, boys demonstrated diversity in their capacity to exercise agency and to make independent choices.

But here too one must be cautious about being drawn too far down the path of rationalist conjecture. While more research is required to fully delve into the distinction between rationality and irrationality among child soldiers, previous studies of coercive persuasion and the so-called Stockholm syndrome, in which terror-prone victims develop emotional fealty to their tormentors as a form of survival conditioning, reinforce interpretations of the unwitting desensitization of child soldiers and their subsequent participation in atrocities.³⁰ The behaviour of boy soldiers in Sierra Leone consisted essentially of the reactions of vulnerable youngsters caught up in a maelstrom of violent social forces that they did not control or fully comprehend. Growing up as dependents in patrimonial systems of authority and governance that were entrenched at all levels of society, denied access to adequate state services, and often wrenched from their home communities by rebel forces, child soldiers attached to the RUF were co-opted into a totalistic social system that required absolute fealty.

Clearly the mutually reinforcing duality of structure and agency underlay what happened to these young people and what they did. The militarist, patron-client social system of the RUF did not function as an entity that was somehow disembodied from its recruits, but in fact was sustained and reproduced by the actions of its membership. As Anthony Giddens has proposed in his theory of structuration, the structures of social systems, and the norms and values that reinforce them, are not separate from the agency of individuals, but are constantly enacted—and sometimes resisted—through myriad human actions.³¹ By the same token, while structures are

the outcomes of action, so in turn human action is bounded by historical and institutional conditionalities, and by unintended consequences. As we discerned in this study, while the process of becoming a child soldier involved a circular dynamic between agency and structure, it also revealed the differentiated and individualized ways in which this duality was played out.

The Challenge of Post-Conflict Rehabilitation and Reintegration

With the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone, the RUF abruptly ceased to exist. All children who had formed part of its rank-and-file were suddenly faced with the need to demobilize and to be reintegrated into norms and institutions from which they had been isolated, sometimes for years. While the end of mass killings and atrocities has been welcomed throughout Sierra Leone, the transition to community resettlement and political and socioeconomic renewal has been a painstaking process. As this and other studies of child soldiers have revealed, the war was a searing experience that severely damaged the psychological and social development of thousands of children. Although most young people who were demobilized from the RUF were eventually reunited with their families and communities, and while considerable national and international efforts have been devoted to the rehabilitation of communities, schools, and other social institutions, most former child soldiers in Sierra Leone continue to live in situations of profound adversity.

There is clearly no straightforward set of policies or procedures that can address the psychosocial needs of war-affected young people in Sierra Leone. Nevertheless, from a conceptual perspective, the interconnected duality of structure and agency provides insights into the challenge of attempting to rehabilitate and reintegrate young people into Sierra Leone's struggling post-war political economy. In a country that remains desparately poor, educational and occupational opportunities for young people require coordinated interventions of governmental and non-governmental organizations, and substantial resource inputs from national and international sources. Coalition building among a range of institutional actors is a *sine qua non* for enhancing the welfare of war-affected children. Yet coalition building and collaboratively planned interventions must heed the lessons of the juxtaposition of structure and agency in children's lives. If reforms of social and economic structures are to enhance the welfare of war-affected young people who continue to be marginalized, they should be based in part at least on needs and goals that are articulated by youth themselves. In effect, youth must be engaged directly in the deliberations and decisions that affect their social development. Equally important, substantive attention must be directed towards fostering structural reforms that can facilitate young people's capacity to make judicious choices and to act in peaceful and constructive ways that are beneficial to themselves and to their communities.

As the voices of former boy soldiers reveal, the actions and perceptions of youth are a function of their social environments. For all who are concerned about the plight of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, the pressing challenge is to transform social environments that for too long have persistently marginalized and exploited vast numbers of children and youth. For this to have any chance of being achieved, there is a need for transparent democratic governance, substantial resource investments, and the emergence of a vibrant civil society. This is a tall order for an impoverished war-torn country that cannot easily transform the effects of history and the predominance of political and economic

forces that have undermined the well-being of much of its population. It is likewise a major challenge for an international community that is prone to “donor fatigue.” Yet the stories of child soldiers should serve as a reminder of what can happen if efforts are not made to respect young people’s abilities and energies, and to include them as participants in decisions and actions that will affect their own futures.

Notes

1. Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, *Children: The Invisible Soldiers* (Stockholm: Radda Barnen, 1998); Julia Freedson, “The Impact of Conflict on Children: The Role of Small Arms,” *Disarmament Forum* 3 (2002) 37–44; Gary W. Ladd and Ed Cairns, “Children: Ethnic and Political Violence,” *Child Development* 67, no. 1 (1996): 14–18.

2. Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana, *Where are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their Lives During and After War* (Montreal: Rights and Democracy, 2004). In this paper we adhere to the definition of a child as “every human being below eighteen years” as stated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 1).

3. E.g., Human Rights Watch, “We’ll Kill You if You Cry: Sexual Violence in the Sierra Leone Conflict” 15, no. 1 (2003): “Special Report: Boy Soldiers,” *Newsweek*, 7 Aug. 1995.

4. Krijn Peters and Paul Richards, “Why We Fight: Voices of Youth Combatants in Sierra Leone,” *Africa* 68, no. 2 (1998): 183–199; Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rainforest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996).

5. Ibrahim Abdullah, Yusuf Bangura, Cecil Blake, Lansana Gberie, Lemuel Johnson, Kelfala Kallon, Safa Kemokai, Patrick Muana, Ishmail Rashid, and Alfred Zack-Williams, “Lumpen Youth Culture and Political Violence: Sierra Leoneans Debate the RUF and the Civil War,” *Africa Development* 22, nos. 3 & 4 (1997): 171–214.

6. James Garbarino, Kathleen Kostelny, and Nancy Dubrow, *No Place to Be a Child: Growing Up in a War Zone* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1991); Julia Maxted, “Children and Armed Conflict in Africa,” *Social Identities* 9, no. 1 (2003): 50–72; William P. Murphy, “Military Patrimonialism and Child Soldier Clientalism in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars,” *African Studies Review* 46, no. 2 (2003): 61–87.

7. William Reno, *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Alfred B. Zack-Williams, “Sierra Leone: The Political Economy of Civil War, 1991–98,” *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1999): 143–162.

8. Barry Riddell, “Urban Bias, Redistribution, and State Collapse: The Lessons of Sierra Leone,” in Reginald Cline-Cole and Elsbeth Robson, eds., *West African Worlds: Local and Regional Paths through “Development,” Modernity and Globalisation* (Toronto: Pearson Education, 2003).

9. Abdullah, et al., “Lumpen Youth Culture”; Angela MacIntyre, Emanuel Kwesi Aning, and Prosper Nii Nortey, “Politics, War and Youth Culture in Sierra Leone: An Alternative Interpretation,” *African Security Review* 11, no. 3 (2002): 213–228.

10. Murphy, “Military Patrimonialism.”

11. Yusuf Bangura, “Understanding the Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War: A Critique of Paul Richards’s *Fighting for the Rainforest*,” *Africa Development* 22, nos. 3 & 4 (1997): 33–34; Ed Cairns, *Children and Political Violence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Peters and Richards, “Why We Fight.”

12. Graca Machel, “The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: Report of the Expert of the Secretary-General, submitted pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 48/157, A/51/306, 26” (New York: United Nations, Aug. 1996).

13. Eileen Green, Wendy Mitchell, and Robin Bunton, “Conceptualizing Risk and Danger: An Analysis of Young People’s Perceptions of Risk,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 3 (2000): 109–126; M. Luisa Pombeni, Erich Kirchlner, and Augusto Palmonari, “Identification with Peers as a Strategy to Muddle through the Troubles of the Adolescent Years,” *Journal of Adolescence* 13 (1990): 351–369.

14. Human Rights Watch, “We’ll Kill You If You Cry”; Peters and Richards, “Why We Fight.”

15. Thandika Mkandawire, "The Terrible Toll of Post-Colonial Rebel Movements in Africa: Towards an Explanation of the Violence against the Peasantry," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 40, no. 2 (2002): 181–215.

16. Anthony Giddens, "Comments on the Theory of Structuration," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 13 (1983): 75–80; see also Vernon Gayle, "Structural and Cultural Approaches to Youth: Structuration Theory and Bridging the Gap," *Youth and Policy* 61, no. 1 (1998): 59–72. Closely intertwined with structuration theory is the notion of structured individualization that likewise encapsulates the idea of individual action integrally connected to broader structural forces. See Richard Maclure and Melvin Sotelo, "Youth Gangs in Nicaragua: Gang Membership as Structured Individualisation," *Journal of Youth Studies*, 7, no. 4 (2004): 417–432.

17. Sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the study has been conducted by the authors, who work at the University of Ottawa, in collaboration with colleagues who are affiliated with Defence for Children International, Sierra Leone (DCI-SL), a Sierra Leonean NGO.

18. Other publications will focus on the experiences and perspectives of girl child soldiers in Sierra Leone: Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure (forthcoming), "Engaging the Voices of Girls in the Aftermath of Sierra Leone's Conflict: Experiences and Perspectives in the Culture of Violence," *Anthropologica*; Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure (forthcoming) "Girls and Small Arms in Sierra Leone: Victimization, Participation and Resistance," in Vanessa Farr and Albrecht Schnabel, eds., *Gender Perspectives on Small Arms and Light Weapons* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press).

19. The notion of "coercive persuasion" has been normally referred to the technique of controlling POWs through means of rewards and punishments. See Andrew J. Pavlos, *The Cult Experience* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 51–52. Since many boys who were abducted by the RUF were subjected to a similar reward-and-punishment pattern of control, we find the term to be particularly apt in describing this process.

20. Mkandawire, "Post-Colonial Rebel Movements"; Peters and Richards, "Why We Fight."

21. Our interviewees nonetheless indicated that other children known to them did join the RUF of their own volition, some who were motivated by revolutionary ideals, others who hoped for material gain. This is similar to accounts in Krijn Peters, "Re-examining Voluntarism: Youth Combatants in Sierra Leone," Monograph no. 100 (London: Institute of Security Studies, 2004).

22. Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004).

23. Ian Smillie, Lansana Gberie, and Ralph Hazleton, *The Heart of the Matter: Sierra Leone, Diamonds, and Human Security* (Partnership Africa Canada: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/heartmatter>, 2000).

24. Christopher Clapham, *Sierra Leone: The Political Economy of Internal Conflict* (Netherlands Institute of International Relations: Conflict Research Unit, 2003); Peters and Richards, "Why We Fight."

25. In this respect, child soldiery was strikingly similar to urban youth gang membership; See Scott H. Decker and Barrik van Winkle, *Life in the Gang: Family, Friends, and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 75.

26. The *kamajors* were local game hunters who were used as scouts during government army patrols as early as 1991. From 1993, in response to continued attacks of the RUF and the inadequate protection of the rapidly expanded and undisciplined government army (the SLA), local communities began to organize civil defense groups to protect their villages. Drawn from the hunter tradition known in the South and East as *kamajo* and in the North as *tamaboro* and *kapra*, the *kamajor* movement was more or less organized as a guild to fight against the RUF; See Patrick Muana, "The Kamajoi Militia: Civil War, Internal Displacement and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency," *Africa Development* 22, nos. 3 & 4 (1997): 77–100. ECOMOG (the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group) was the Nigerian-led West-African intervention force that defended the Freetown peninsula against an RUF incursion and fought to reclaim major provincial centres from the RUF.

27. Giddens, "Theory of Structuration."

28. Abdullah, et al., “Lumpen Youth Culture”; Mkandawire, “Post-Colonial Rebel Movements”; Murphy, “Military Patrimonialism.”

29. While the RUF was renowned for its wanton cruelty, the forces that it opposed—the *kamajors*, ECOMOG, and government troops—by no means eschewed similar forms of brutality against children.

30. Pavlos, *Cult Experience*; See also Marc Galanter, *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

31. Giddens, “Theory of Structuration.”