Civil Conflict, Stress and Children

Kerry Gibson
Institute of African Studies
University of the Witwatersrand

The South African political crisis of 1985/6 has created a sense of urgency around the need to conduct research into the psychological effects of its stressful events. The probable detrimental effects of an environment of civil conflict on children has constituted an area of particular concern. This is reflected in the fears voiced by township residents for their children (see Richman, 1986); in media reports which illustrate the events to which children are being exposed (see Jacobs and Hollinghead, 1985, for a summary of relevant press reports); and by clinicians in their work with the childhood 'victims' of these stressful events (Swartz, et al, 1986).

The alarm elicited by this concern, tends to suggest the need for an immediate reaction in the form of active

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research in the area. But as well-intentioned as this immediate reaction might be, it must be noted that relevant South African research requires more than the research of relevant fields or topics. Relevant research also requires the less hasty consideration of important theoretical and conceptual alternatives. Thus, perhaps, the appropriate starting point for research into the effects of civil conflict on children is not in the amassing of samples and coding of symptoms, but rather in a careful examination of the concepts and theories which underly the practice of stress research. This paper will attempt to provide some critical discussion of the concept of stress and to offer some suggestions for an alternative approach to the subject. The implications of a revised model of stress for research into the effects of civil unrest on children will then briefly be discussed.

The suggestions offered in this paper have been formulated on the basis of a review of broad approaches within the general field of stress research. These approaches were expanded through an examination of the literature which deals specifically with the effects of civil unrest on children. This has emerged from countries such as Northern Ireland, (Fraser, 1974; Fields, 1976; Harbison and Harbison, 1980; and others) Israel (Breznitz, 1980; Raviv and Klingman, 1983; and others) and the South American

States (Allodi, 1980; Bozzolo and Kordon, 1985; and others). In view of the necessity for basing this discussion on research which has emerged in contexts other than the South African situation is must be borne in mind that the suggestions made for a research approach in this article are intended to be of a speculative rather than a prescriptive nature.

The Development of the Concept of Stress

As Mason (1975) notes:

> "Perhaps the single most remarkable historical fact concerning the term stress is its persistent widespread usage in biology and medicine in spite of almost chaotic disagreement over its definition." (p. 6).

In order to achieve some clarity within the confusion of the stress field it may be useful to examine some of the primary areas of debate which have emerged over the years in this field. This debate has arisen both from within the conventional psychiatric and psychological approach which has dominated stress research and, more recently, from without, by theorists who are currently questioning the parameters of these traditional conceptualisations.

Early researchers in this field appeared primarily concerned with pragmatic issues such as the reliability of studies,

improvement of research techniques and with the accumulation of data. Against this background, much of the earlier debate in the stress field focused on methodological difficulties in stress research such as the selection of settings (discussed in Laux and Vossel, 1982), the reliability of reporting events in the past (Casey et al, 1967) and the difficulties of defining separate stressful events (Garmezy and Rutter, 1985). In view of the dominance of these concerns, little attention was paid to the concept of stress itself. This remained conceptually at the level of an unexplained correlational relationship between psychological symptoms and events.

It was only in the 1970's with the emergence of the dynamic interactionist approach in the field of psychology that the conceptual understanding of stress itself began to receive significant theoretical attention. Two major debates within the stress field helped to shape the development of a new conceptual understanding of stress. The first of these debates concerned the redefinition of the environment as a subjective, as opposed to an objective experience. Thus events in the environment were understood to be mediated through a subjective process of appraisal. The second debate concerned the shift away from a static perception of the relationship between the individual and the environment, towards the perception of stress as a process within a dynamic, changing relationship. The basic tenets of this

interactive stress process have been outlined as follows by Endler and Magnusson (1976 in Endler and Edwards, 1982):

i) Behaviour is a function of a continuous and bi-directional process of person-situation interaction.

ii) The individual is an international active agent in this process.

iii) Motivational, emotional and cognitive variables play important determining roles on the person side of the interaction.

iv) The psychological meaning that the situation has for the person is an essential determining factor in their behaviour.

In terms of these tenets, Endler and Edwards (1982) clarify the concept of stress as a process of reciprocity of causation in the stress field.

People impinge on their environment, receive feedback from their efforts and are confronted with a more or less potent environment. In other words, interactionism at its best attempts to examine the real life interchanges between people and their environment over time.

This theoretical approach has a number of important implications for the study of stress. Firstly, it highlights the importance of the relationship between the person and the environment in the stress process. Secondly,

it allows for the recognition of such factors as individual vulnerabilities and coping skills. Finally, this approach also allows for the incorporation of contextual factors such as family or social conditions into the conception of stress production.

Thus, debate in the stress field can be traced through what are essentially technical and design oriented concerns, to the point where there appears to be a challenge to the conceptualisation of stress itself. Researchers such as Lazarus and Launier (1978) have heralded the dynamic interactionist approach as a major paradigm shift in stress theory and note its clear advantages over the earlier static correlational approaches to the subject. At this point, however, it may be useful to take up a critical attitude even to this new innovation in stress research.

Critique of the Current Conceptions of Stress

In order to evaluate the status and validity of current stress theory from a critical point of view, it is necessary to begin by briefly outlining a theoretical framework from which it might be possible to examine and challenge the assumptions behind the existing research approaches. This theoretical framework will include an examination of the role of science in the context of a broader understanding of the concept of ideology. This understanding will be used as

the basis for making some suggestions for the construction of an alternative theoretical understanding of stress which incorporates the methods of previous approaches and attempts to remedy some of their weaknesses.

There has long been a recognition of, and interest in, cultural practices, values and ideologies. Yet, strangely, while this has been the focus of attention for many social science researchers (who would argue that these form the basis of many of our 'common sense' assumptions about the world) there has been a tendency for these same social scientists to exempt themselves from the processes about which they write. The question which needs to be asked is: Is science somehow separate from the ideologies which influence the human thought and action? This question is a vital one insofar as a negative answer has implications for the need to assess the validity of stress theory, not simply as a scientific process, but also as an ideology.

Let me begin this discussion by defining the term ideology as I intend to use it. Like Young (1980) I refer to the tacit beliefs which define people's perceptions of themselves, groups, relationships and institutions in society. In this sense the conception of ideology used in this thesis is distinct from its use in the sense of sets of political ideologies which are consciously recognised and articulated.

The dominant theme in stress research, as in other fields of social science research, has been the tendency to perceive science as being above and beyond the effects of ideology. In order to justify this claim, particular research methods (which are in turn backed up by particular conceptual frameworks) have been adopted. These conceptual and research justifications for science constitute the basis of what has come to be known as the natural scientific or 'positivist' approach to the social sciences. Positivists would argue that science (which uncovers facts), is incompatible with ideology (which creates ideological beliefs). They would further argue that the only way 'science' can protect itself from the contaminating effects of ideology, is by remaining objective and neutral in order to exclude the irrationalities of individual researchers for the purpose of extracting universal laws about human behaviour (Ingleby, 1980).

These stated aims have a number of important implications for how researchers go about collecting information and their interpretation of this data, which may be outlined as follows (Ingleby, 1981):

i) The scientific researcher aims to collect observations in a <u>rigorous and detached</u> fashion. Thus the researcher uses experimental or field methods to extract clearly observable 'facts' about human

behaviour. This emphasis is evident in our earlier outline of the debates in the stress research field.

ii) The emphasis is on research reliability. In other words, the ability to duplicate the study and obtain similar results. Thus subjects and the variety of other variables are defined in a precise and replicable form. This has further implications for the kind of data it becomes appropriate to elicit (i.e. quantitative rather than qualitative data in terms of which it is more difficult to achieve replication). Once again the effects of this research structure are most clearly evident in the static correlational approach which essentially identifies easily measurable and observable stressors and their reactions.

iii) A division is maintained between the subject and object of the research. In other words, researchers should not allow their perceptions to intrude on the 'facts' before them. Their perceptions include the influence of prior theory; thus the researchers attempt to gather information that will constitute a theory rather than using data to substantiate a theory. The effects of this enforced neutrality of the researcher are clearly evident in the relative paucity of conceptual questioning in the field of stress.

iv) Data which is collected under the previous rules is then interpreted mechanistically in a manner which mimics the cause and effect relationships of natural science, and these are understood to be neutral. In other words, if X variable is correlated with Y variable there is understood to be a causal relationship between them. It was this assumption which reinforced the continued usage of the static correlational approach in stress research, e.g. in the life event research where events and symptoms are correlated on the assumption of a causal relationship between them (see Holmes and Rahe, 1967).

In a common sense way these safeguards would appear sufficient to protect research against the distorting effects of ideology. But is it not possible that these so-called 'protections' against ideology themselves constitute an ideology which is all the more powerful because of its stated neutrality? This concept is elucidated by Ingleby (1981) who refers to Kuhn's notion of science being marked by shifting paradigms. These paradigms may be defined as "whole systems of prejudice about what constitutes useful and respectable data, what forms theories should take, what sort of language scientists should use, etc." (Ingleby, 1981, p. 25). Kuhn argues that once a paradigm is formed, our conception of nature is forced and moulded into its shape.

It is the argument of this paper, firstly, that the dominant paradigm within which much of the research on stress has been conducted, constitutes an ideology in itself and secondly, that the evolution of the dynamic interactionist approach does not represent so much a radical shift in paradigm as suggested by Lazarus and Launier (1978) but a shift within a paradigm.

In order to substantiate the first argument it is necessary to examine critically the assumptions of the positivist approach in stress research in order to elucidate the ideology which underlies it.

Young (1980) summarizes some of the more important assumptions of this approach as follows:

i) It is possible to understand society on the basis of its observable manifestations. In other words, there is a recognition of the external and objective character of society as what is really happening. This assumption is clearly evident in the dominant focus of stress research on 'objective and observable' stressors such as life events (e.g. Holmes and Rahe, 1967) and disasters (e.g. Erikson, 1976).

ii) The basic unit of society is understood to be the individual who is seen as an intentional participant whose acts are explained mainly in terms of intrapsychic determinants.

iii) Society is understood to consist entirely of a summation of actions of the individuals who belong to it and is constituted through their participation. Thus the focus of the research literature has been on individual experience of stress, or groups of individuals.

iv) Social behaviour is assumed to be understandable in a mechanistic sense of cause and effect. Thus individual psychic experiences may be seen to mediate events, but outcomes can be predicted, given adequate knowledge of objective variables involved. Hence the predominant concerns of stress researchers have predictably been with methods of refining data collection.

At first glance it may appear that the dynamic interactionist approach has moved beyond these limiting assumptions. Its new regard for conceptualisation and recognition of an interactional relationship between stress and the individual can be seen to represent a marked improvement from the simple process of uni-directionality which was earlier assumed. But if we examine it more closely it becomes clear that the shift towards a dynamic interactionist approach in stress theory is still well within this positivist framework. The essential belief in the validity of objective neutral research remains evident in methods of data collection. Further, the objectivity of reality remains implicit, insofar as the concept of

appraisal does not so much alter the understanding of objective reality, as remove it from the external to the internal world. Secondly, and most significantly, society itself is assumed to parallel the actions and thoughts of the individuals within it and is not examined in the broader sense of its own dynamics and institutions. Finally, the subject is still seen as the intentional individual.

Young (1980) takes a critical position in relation to these assumptions arguing that they serve to subtly limit discussion within the stress discourse to a single level of determinants. They skew the focus of stress research towards empirically observed interaction and organize these observations around the rationality and volition of the individual actor. By doing so, he argues, they ignore the social forces embedded in the political economy and lead away from questions about the nature of society itself. In other words, they serve both to naturalise and individualise the stress process. The objectification of science as a method further reifies its representation of these 'facts', thus inhibiting the emergence of alternative understandings of the role of social and ideological factors in the effects of stress. This reinforces belief in the immutability and efficacy of existing social arrangements. Thus, as Young points out, in spite of the apparent neutrality and objectivity of stress research (or rather because of it), there is a line beyond which the analysis of stress cannot go without obscuring the processes which reproduce the

society's characteristic structure and thus represent a threat to the status quo of which the researchers themselves are a part.

A Model of Stress

With a recognition of the ideological limitations of current conceptions of stress, it is now possible to use this understanding to make some suggestions for an alternative model of stress. Dawes (1986), in his discussion of the need for relevant research in South Africa, notes the value of not simply rejecting research conducted in a less critical context. Rather, he suggests the value of utilising this research in a new theoretical context.

In the light of this suggestion, a useful starting point for the construction of this model of stress may be given by the insights provided by the dynamic interactionist approach. Drawing from this model, the first thing we need to recognise is that stress is not simply a function of 'events' but also ongoing factors such as social conditions and personality structure. Turton (1986) is clearly utilising the advantages of the dynamic interactionist approach when he notes that:

> "Since these variables (social conditions and personality structure) play such important roles in the development of stress, they should not be

> conceptualised as external to 'the' stress process but as elements of the stress processes." (p. 289).

However, it is at this point that we need to go beyond the structures of the positivist paradigm to assert, as Turton (1986) does, that these variables themselves are conditioned by broader factors such as socio-economic status, gender, employment conditions and personal history. Turton quotes Kessler (1979, in Turton, 1986) in order to substantiate this point. Kessler found that evidence of distress after exposure to life events was more likely to be manifested by women and poorer persons than by men and people of higher socio-economic status. Turton then takes these variables further, noting that women have been found to be poorer in coping skills and self-esteem than men. The context for this can be found in the socialisation of girls as opposed to boys which differs due to the structures and values of the social and economic systems. In other words, it is not sufficient simply to include these additional factors as stressors in themselves but also to consider their own determinants such as people's social, economic and political positions in society and the structure and values of this society.

Thus, Turton is proposing a more analytic model than the dynamic interactionist approach (which is still constituted largely on a descriptive level), which can relate the relationship between the stressor and the person to a wider

social context. Firstly, he follows the dynamic interactionists in moving away from the perception of social and psychological factors as mediators in the stress process, positing instead their integral involvement in the production of stress.

> "... four sets of factors, namely levels of advantage, exposure to life events, interpersonal relationships and intrapersonal strengths and weaknesses, jointly produce an experience or non-experience of stress." (Turton, 1986, p. 294).

He then outlines a feedback process between these experiences and the person, whereby the experience of stress will affect the person's conditions, interpersonal relationships, life events and intrapersonal factors. Turton then proceeds to emphasise a vital point, which removes the theorist from the limits of the positivist approach: that is, the importance of the location of this process in the environment, social history and personal history of the person who is undergoing the stressful experiences. One factor which Turton (1986) does not emphasise, and perhaps deserves specific mention, is the feedback process in relation to this level of determinants. In other words the possible long-term effects of social stressors on the actual institutions of society via the subject of the stress.

The mechanisms of this model of stress are outlined in diagramatic form in Figure One.

In terms of this model it is clear that stress needs to be examined on at least three levels. Firstly, it needs to be examined at the level of specific stressors and individual psychiatric effects. But to end an exploration at this level of stressor would be misleading. It is then necessary to situate the first level within the immediate context of stressors on level two in terms of intra-personal, interpersonal and immediate social and economic stressors. Thirdly, it is necessary to relate this level of stress to its determinants which constitute a third level of stressor in terms of people's values and beliefs, personal history and position in the social and economic structures. These can in turn be related to the broader structures of society.

Similarly, it is clear from this model that the effects of stress cannot be understood simply in terms of 'psychological effects' but must also be examined in terms of their intra-personal, interpersonal, social and economic effects. In the long term we may also consider their effects in terms of values, position in the social structure and understanding of personal history. Thus the social and economic structures of the society may themselves feel the 'effects' of stressful experiences.

From this description it is clear that this model transcends the limitations of the positivist approach insofar as it

allows us to examine a stress process beyond the level of the individual as a social phenomenon; is constructed in theory which can explain rather than simply describe stress; and moves us away from a mechanistic approach in outlining a process rather than a simple cause and effect relationship between stressors and reactions.

Implications for Researching the Effects of Civil Conflict on Children

The model of stress discussed in the previous section has important implications for the conceptualisation of the scope of valid research areas in the field of the effects of civil conflict on children. These different research areas are clearly inter-linked, but for the purposes of clarity, I will attempt to delineate them separately.

The stressors facing children in civil conflict situations

i) Immediate stressful events. These may include direct stressors such as the effects of detention of assault on children, or less direct stressors including events such as the detention of a family member, witnessing violence or participation in violence. Although one of these events would seldom occur in isolation, the

differences between them must be understood to have significance in terms of their effects.

ii) Intrapersonal, interpersonal and social and economic factors which themselves serve as stressors and mediate the experience of the immediate stressor. These mediating factors would include such factors as temperament, gender, intelligence, developmental age, family relationships and circumstances and the level of social support in the community.

iii) The determinants of these stressors in the context of the social and economic structures of society.

The effects of these stressors on children

i) The psychiatric and psychological effects on individual children in the form of acute and chronic stress syndromes.

ii) The long-term personality effects on individual children.

iii) The effects on interpersonal and group relations.

iv) The effects on immediate social and economic conditions.

v) The effects on the values and beliefs of a community.

vi) The effects on the broader social and economic structures of society.

Within the range of areas outlined above, the contextualisation of stress perhaps requires further elaboration. Perhaps the most important suggestion to be made in this regard is the need to utilise a critical social theory as a framework in which to discuss the effects of civil conflict on children. This theoretical framework would then provide a basis for making social sense of the knowledge gleaned through researching individual psychological stress reactions. The use of a critical social theory opens up further areas for research and discussion which have not yet received sufficient attention. Firstly, it may be useful for researchers in this area to provide some discussion of the determinants of civil unrest conditions themselves, insofar as they reflect the underlying economic and social conditions of a society. Within this framework, it might then be possible to examine the overt political and social attitudes which maintain civil strife and perhaps also serve to provide the stressful events of this context with meaning for individuals. Practically, this suggests that more useful research into the effects of a stressor would acknowledge the meaning which a community attributes to the event. Allied to this, research would also clearly need to examine the extent of the role played by the political awareness of children under these conditions.

Secondly, it may be useful for the researcher to examine the effects of civil conflict conditions not only in relation to the immediate stressful events of civil conflict, but also in terms of the ongoing history of stresses arising out of economic and political hardships which are their inevitable precursor. These need to be considered in terms of their direct effects on individuals as well as their more subtle manifestation in factors such as the quality of family life or schooling which affect children's vulnerablilty to stress. Finally, it may also be useful for the researcher to bear in mind the role of the less obvious manifestations of the social and economic structures of the society, in the form of the ideological socialisation of vulnerability factors through temperament or gender.

The suggestions made here only offer some indicators for a recognition of the complexity of research in the area of the effect of civil conflict on children. Clearly there are many more areas requiring investigation. One suggestion, however, which emerges more strongly, is that while it may be useful in practical terms to study the effects of civil unrest as they manifest in individual children's psychological reactions, this cannot be divorced conceptually from the broad social and economic conditions which are their determinants.

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