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Heather Heckel on Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection by Michael Wessells. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006. 284 pp.

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Abstract

A review of:

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Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection by Michael Wessells. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006. 284 pp.

Through transnational activism, U.N. recognition, international standard setting, as well as popular media such as Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* and the film *Blood Diamond*, the issue of child soldiers has recently become a widely recognized global concern. In Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection, activist and psychologist Michael Wessells provides an unusually well written and organized study of the diverse experiences of the more than 300,000 child soldiers in the world today.

Wessells persuasively argues that academic and popular understandings of child soldiers has previously been quite limited—by both a lack of comprehensive research and the tendency of activists and the media to over-simplify the issue with depictions of child soldiers as either powerless victims or as predatory killers. He then compellingly challenges these stereotypes through a systematic analysis of existing research supplemented by globally diverse case studies and by his own broad collection of interviews with youth from his decade long direct-service work with child soldiers. His consideration of important variations in child soldiering, such as the experiences of girls, children who choose to join versus forced recruitment, children's ages or the length of time spent in fighting, and diversity across combat groups clearly proves his argument that child soldiering is a complex and nuanced issue.

Wessells structures the book to follow the experiences of a child soldier from entry into an armed force to life inside a combat group—covering such issues as HIV, abuse, sexual violence, and psychological consequences. With each usefully sub-titled section, he weaves in short case studies with the children's own voices, enabling the reader to connect the research with real world situations. He continues with discussions of the challenging processes of demobilizing youth and returning them to civilian life. He concludes with a call for action and with multiple recommendations for preventing the use of child soldiers including strengthening of U.N. and International Criminal Court capacity, inclusion of youth voices in development initiatives and expanded research into violence prevention programs.

The book offers several useful insights. First, Wessells' overarching argument is for researchers and practitioners to recognize the complexity of child soldiers' experiences and to develop prevention and response systems that address this diversity. Second, he demonstrates the need to include the youth, their communities, and local leadership in any effective program. He emphasizes children's agency, suggesting that youth make choices that matter even within the context of forced soldiering. Third, he cautions against the dangers of imposing Western assumptions and practices on other cultures, particularly in efforts to treat former soldiers. Finally, he presents several lists of best practices that offer guidance, not only for those working with child soldiers, but for anyone addressing post-conflict or development concerns.

While providing a unique and extremely informative guide, the book could pursue some areas in more depth. First, Wessells seems to quickly dismiss what might be important relevant research on gangs and inner-city youth (8). Gangs are armed groups and some have political objectives—such as control over territory or electoral influence. More importantly, experiences of youth within large gangs seem strikingly similar to those of many child soldiers; and studying both could further understanding of youths and organized violence.

Second, this work, like most child rights research, struggles with practically distinguishing children from young adults. The sheer complexity of child soldiering, as presented by Wessells, suggests that global age standards may not be as universally applicable as one might hope. Should post-war services be provided to a seventeen year-old who served for three months, but not to an eighteen year-old who served since age eleven, but at the time of demobilization was an “adult”? Should a seventeen year-old be forgiven for violent acts while an eighteen year-old is tried for war crimes? Given cases of children joining movements seemingly by choice, such as the anti-Apartheid struggle, is it always inappropriate for a person under eighteen to take up arms? And, are those standards that outsiders have the right to set, or should local and individual perspectives be considered?

Finally, Wessells concludes with recommendations regarding how the international community can more effectively prevent the use of child soldiers and/or provide post-conflict services. His suggestions are clearly delineated from the research he has provided. However, one is left feeling a bit overwhelmed and wondering how feasible prevention really is. In his case studies, some key logistical concerns are under-addressed, such as how much these programs cost, what staffing is required, or how one could realistically overcome ongoing violence or failed compliance by military leaders? Wessells concludes with a call to action to his readers, asking whether we will “commit ourselves to the protection of our most precious heritage, our children” (257). To help his readers become advocates, it would have been helpful to include a resource list of child rights agencies and their websites along with his comprehensive bibliography.

This book would be very useful to any practitioner or professor dealing with child rights, post-conflict studies, or development efforts. International relations professors could combine this book with recent popular media on child soldiers to present an engaging case study of a modern global challenge. Finally, this book is so well-written that anyone interested in the topic would find it compelling.

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