

The Effects of State Terrorism and Exile on Indigenous Guatemalan Refugee Children: A Mental Health Assessment and an Analysis of Children's Narratives

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MILLER, KENNETH E. *The Effects of State Terrorism and Exile on Indigenous Guatemalan Refugee Children: A Mental Health Assessment and an Analysis of Children's Narratives*. *CHILD DEVELOPMENT*, 1996, 67, 89-106. This study examined the mental health and psychosocial development of 58 Guatemalan Mayan Indian children living in 2 refugee camps in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Conventional assessment instruments were adapted for use in this unique context, and semistructured interviews were utilized to gather phenomenological data from children regarding various developmental, sociocultural, and political topics. Data are presented that show minimal evidence of psychological trauma in this sample, and various factors are suggested to account for this finding. In addition, data are presented showing a positive relationship between children's mental health and the health status (physical and mental) of their mothers. In particular, a strong association was found between depressive symptomatology in girls and poor health status in their mothers. Qualitative data from the interviews are presented, focusing on children's understandings of why their families fled Guatemala, the nature and causes of the violence, and their thoughts and feelings regarding the prospect of returning to Guatemala at some future point.

Research on refugee children's mental health has focused primarily on children who are en route to or currently living in countries of permanent resettlement (Allodi, 1989; Ba Thien & Malapert, 1988; Kinzie, Sack, Angell, Manson, & Rath, 1986; Muecke & Sassi, 1992; Tobin & Friedman, 1984). In contrast, there is relatively little information available on the experience of children who have fled political violence in their homeland for the relative safety of refugee camps in which they await changes in the political climate of their home country that will permit a safe return. The present study addressed this empirical gap by examining the mental health and psychosocial de-

velopment of Guatemalan Mayan Indian children living in two refugee camps in the Mexican state of Chiapas. The fieldwork on which this paper is based was conducted between March and October of 1993, during which time the author and a colleague lived for part of each week in two refugee camps while working with camp school teachers, themselves members of the refugee community, on the adaptation and implementation of a primary mental health project for children (Miller & Billings, 1994). Results from the mental health assessment are presented, along with a qualitative analysis of semistructured interviews focusing on children's understanding of the violence that drove

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90 Child Development

their families into exile, and that continues to prevent the refugees from returning *en masse* to Guatemala.

Differences between Countries of Permanent Resettlement versus Refugee Camps

The differences between living in a country of permanent resettlement and a refugee camp are considerable. For example, whereas issues of cross-cultural adaptation and integration are paramount in the former context (Berry, 1991; Tobin & Friedman, 1984), they are considerably less so in the latter, where refugees often regard their experience of exile as temporary, and where the closed community characteristic of refugee camps precludes any significant degree of integration into the host country.

Whereas refugees in countries of permanent resettlement often find themselves living a great distance away from the violence of their homeland, refugee camps are generally set up in close proximity to the violent regions from which the refugees have fled. This can result in a state of continued vulnerability, such as that experienced by the Kurds in northern Iraq, or the Cambodians who lived for years in refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodia border, only a short distance from the extremely violent Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese armies (Mayotte, 1992). Similarly, Guatemalan refugees living in camps along the Mexico-Guatemala border experienced a period of extreme vulnerability during the early 1980s, during which time the Guatemalan army made repeated incursions across the border, intimidating and in several cases killing camp residents (Aguayo, Christensen, O'Dogherty, & Varesse, 1989; Manz, 1988).

Another distinction between countries of permanent resettlement and refugee camps concerns the different levels of access that refugees in these two contexts are likely to have to physical and mental health services, as well as to legal and educational resources. While many countries of permanent resettlement offer a wide variety of such services to political refugees, material and psychosocial assistance in most refugee camps is typically limited to the provision of basic medical attention and foodstuffs and, where possible, primary level schooling for children.

Previous Research

Studies of children living in refugee camps have generally focused on the assessment of psychiatric symptomatology (Fels-

man, Leong, Johnson, & Felsman, 1990; McCallin, 1988; Tsoi, Yu, & Lieh-Mak, 1986), with the goal of examining the relation between children's mental health and such predictor variables as exposure to political violence, the presence or absence of parents and other family members, and other stressors associated with the experience of exile. Although still very sparse, the available data do suggest that children who go into exile unaccompanied by other family members tend to fare significantly worse than their accompanied peers in terms of manifest psychological distress (Boothby, 1988; Felsman et al., 1990; Tsoi et al., 1986). Separation from family members in the context of exile not only presents children with profound experiences of loss, but also deprives them of important intrafamilial coping resources as they confront the various stresses associated with leaving home and adjusting to life in the artificial environment of the refugee camp. A second finding, based more on clinical observation than empirical study, points to the importance of traditional spiritual practices in helping children make sense of and come to terms with the destruction and loss produced by political violence and exile (Boothby, 1988).

Although refugee camps are normally intended to serve as places of temporary respite while conditions are resolved that will permit either a voluntary repatriation or permanent resettlement, in reality it is not uncommon for refugees to spend many years living in camps, where life is characterized by uncertainty regarding the future and where access to basic resources is highly limited. For children born in the camps during these prolonged stays, as well as for children who arrived at the camps as infants, the world of the refugee camp may be the only world with which they are intimately familiar. While research on refugee children who have recently gone into exile highlights the importance of attending to issues of loss (e.g., of family members, friends, home, community, etc.) and cultural bereavement (Ba Thien & Malapert, 1988; Eisenbruch, 1988), the applicability of these findings for children who have spent their entire childhood in refugee camps is questionable. Unlike recently exiled children who have had to leave behind a world of friends, community, culture, and perhaps family members, children born in refugee camps, like those who arrived at the camps as infants, have not directly experienced this profound set of losses. To date, however, there are no pub-

lished studies that specifically examine the mental health needs and problems of "second generation" refugee children growing up in camps. Consequently, we know very little about such issues as the extent to which, and via what pathways, these children may be adversely affected by the psychological impact of political violence and exile on their parents and older siblings.

In sum, despite a growing literature on the effects of political violence and exile on children's mental health and psychosocial development, there is a relative paucity of data regarding the psychological experience of children living in refugee camps. In particular, minimal attention has been paid to the mental health needs and problems of second generation refugee children, despite the fact that a generation of children is growing up in refugee camps around the world. The present study, by using both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the mental health and psychosocial development of indigenous Guatemalan children living in refugee camps in southern Mexico, addresses these empirical gaps.

Background of the Guatemalan Refugees in Chiapas

In 1978, the Guatemalan army initiated one of the most brutal counterinsurgency campaigns in Latin American history. Hoping to silence growing popular demands for substantive changes in the oppressive economic and sociopolitical status quo,¹ and reacting to the growing threat of an armed guerrilla insurgency, the military engaged in a government-orchestrated program of extraordinary repression. While the violence was pervasive throughout the country, it reached genocidal levels in the mountainous highlands (the *altiplano*), home to both the guerrillas and the majority of the country's approximately 5 million Mayan Indians (who constitute an estimated 55% of the country's total population and represent the second largest indigenous population in Latin America). By 1985, the army had com-

pletely destroyed over 440 rural villages, killing tens of thousands of innocent civilians and "disappearing" thousands more (Barry, 1992; Manz, 1988).

As word of the massacres spread, people began fleeing their ancestral villages for the relative safety of less conflictive zones. In addition to creating a massive population of internally displaced communities, the violence also led a half million Guatemalans to go into exile (Barry, 1992). The majority fled north and west into the neighboring Mexican state of Chiapas, from which many continued their journey further north to Mexico City and the United States. Of the estimated 100,000–200,000 Guatemalans who remained in Chiapas, approximately 46,000 found shelter in refugee camps funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and administered by the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR).² In 1984, the Mexican government forcibly relocated 16,000 refugees from the state of Chiapas, where the original camps were located, to the neighboring state of Campeche, and further east to Quintana Roo. There are currently 126 camps scattered throughout eastern Chiapas along the Guatemalan border, ranging in size from 10 or so families to several thousand residents. An estimated 60% of the 26,000 Guatemalans in these camps are children under the age of 16 (Aguayo et al., 1989).

The Refugee Camps

The two camps in which data were collected differ according to such variables as size, ethnic composition, region of origin in Guatemala of camp residents, openness to outsiders, rate of bilingualism (i.e., the extent to which camp residents speak Spanish in addition to an indigenous language), availability of nearby wage labor, and access to land on which to grow corn and other dietary staples. In many ways (e.g., ethnicity, political structure, education system), Camp A is fairly typical of the larger camps in eastern Chiapas; it does, however, have the rep-

¹ Guatemala has the most unequal land distribution in Latin America. Approximately 70% of the available land is in the hands of just 2% of the population, leaving most rural families with insufficient land for subsistence farming (Comisión de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala, 1986; Krauss, 1991). In addition to creating a large and easily exploited rural labor pool, this grossly unbalanced land distribution has led to pervasive poverty throughout the country. In rural areas, where poverty is particularly severe, an estimated 82% of children are malnourished (Ronstrom, 1989). All forms of peaceful protest and social activism have historically been met with violent repression by the Guatemalan military and police.

² The remaining Guatemalans in Mexico are scattered throughout the country, many living without legal documentation in Mexico City, and thousands more living anonymously in small villages and towns in the southern state of Chiapas, near the Guatemalan border.

92 Child Development

utation of being particularly unreceptive to outsiders. Camp B is typical of many of the smaller camps in southeastern Chiapas in terms of its internal organization, the ethnicity of the residents, and their region of origin within Guatemala. Camp B is widely regarded as a warm and hospitable community where visitors are made to feel welcome. Our access to the two communities was greatly facilitated by contacts we had developed with nongovernmental organizations working in the camps.

Camp A is home to approximately 200 families, the majority them Chuj-speaking Mayans from neighboring villages in the northern part of Huehuetenango, a region bordering Mexico that was heavily affected by the extreme violence of the early 1980s. The camp, which resembles a peaceful, sprawling village nestled in the mountains, is located half a day's walk from the Guatemalan border. The climate is moderate, with alternating dry and rainy seasons. A small amount of land is available for the refugees of Camp A to work; however, it is insufficient to meet the dietary needs of the community, and there is a consequent reliance on the supplementary foodstuffs provided by COMAR. Despite these supplementary provisions, an estimated 50% of the infants and toddlers in Camp A are malnourished, the majority of them mildly so. While some members of Camp A are considering returning to Guatemala this year, the majority of families plan to wait until conditions inside Guatemala improve substantially. Many stated that their houses in Guatemala had been burned down by the army, and that their lands have been occupied by new owners.

Camp B is located further south in Chiapas. The climate is subtropical, and the burning sun combined with a drought during the summer of 1992 spoiled the limited crop of corn planted by the refugees. The spoiled crop and the decreasing amount of foodstuffs provided by COMAR have contributed to many residents of Camp B talking of returning to Guatemala in the near future. Many spoke of being charged unreasonably high prices by local Mexicans for the rental of land parcels, and stated that opportunities for wage labor are scarce. Camp B is small, with just 30 families. I was unable to locate statistics regarding the rate of child malnutrition in Camp B, though given the similarity in diets between the two camps, I would estimate it to be approximately equal to that in Camp A. The majority of the refugees in

Camp B are Jacalteco Indians from northwestern Guatemala, many of them from the same village. Soldiers arrived at this village in January of 1982 and killed 16 people, later burning the victims' houses. Within a day of this massacre, many of the residents of this village had fled with the few belongings they could carry toward the Mexican border.

Of the 58 children in this study, one child lost a parent to the violence, while another lost six older siblings, all of whom were killed during a single army attack on the family's village. Four children lost one or more grandparents to military violence, and several children lost one or more uncles. Because these violence-related deaths occurred either before the children in the study were born or during their infancy, they have few if any memories of their murdered relatives.

Children in both camps work extremely hard. Many attend primary school during the morning, while afternoons are spent attending to a multitude of chores. For boys, a primary task is the collection of firewood in nearby mountains. The work is laborious and time consuming, but as it is often done in pairs, it is also a time for socializing. For girls, caring for younger siblings, cooking, cleaning the house, washing dishes, washing clothes, and grinding corn for tortillas are common tasks. While some chores are done by children of both sexes (e.g., feeding the family's animals), other tasks are more gender specific (e.g., washing clothes). Despite the considerable time spent on daily chores, however, children can often be seen playing in the afternoon and evening. They play a variety of games, ranging from card games (popular among adolescent males), to checkers and tag, to making imitation tortillas out of mud (girls) and playing soccer (boys).

The Present Study

Eleven years have passed since most of the refugees left Guatemala. Many of the children in the present study were born in the camps, while others left Guatemala as infants and are too young to recall the long and perilous journey to Mexico. The majority of these children have witnessed no political violence, either because they left Guatemala with their families before the army arrived at their village, or because they were born in Mexico. Despite their lack of direct exposure to or recollection of the violence that drove their families into exile, most of the children in this study are familiar

with the violence of *la guerra* (the war). As I discuss below, there is an adult discourse within the camps on the violence of the past, which has made it a salient entity in many of these children's lives. This salience is evident in the recurrent images of senseless military violence that appear in children's drawings and stories of life in Guatemala, it is apparent in the fear expressed by some children that Guatemalan soldiers might enter the camp at night and kill them, and it can be seen in the vocabulary of the children, who at a young age readily speak of such things as torture, massacres, and war when describing the violence that drove their families out of Guatemala.

In this article, I examine three central and closely related foci of the interviews I conducted with the children in this study. These include: (1) the understandings children have developed regarding why they are living in exile, (2) children's understandings of the nature and cause of the violence that led to their families leaving Guatemala, and (3) children's feelings and thoughts regarding the much talked about prospect of returning to Guatemala sometime in the near future. As I listened to children recount for me stories of massacres, torture, and disappearances in Guatemala, it became clear to me that a broader, more subtle focus was in order as well. I began to listen for the ways in which the violence of the past, as well as the ongoing repression in Guatemala, continue to shape and color the everyday lives of these children in ways not immediately apparent.

In addition to this qualitative analysis, two hypotheses related to the questionnaire-based mental health assessment are examined in this article. First, it was predicted that low levels of psychological trauma would be found in this sample. This hypothesis did not assume an absence of psychopathology among the children in the camps, only an absence of psychological distress indicative of traumatization. Given the extraordinary violence that precipitated the refugees' exodus from Guatemala, the destruction caused by that violence, the history of repeated incursions by Guatemalan soldiers into the camps in the early 1980s, and the close proximity of the camps to the ongoing repression in Guatemala, it initially seemed plausible to expect that many children in the camps would manifest symptoms of severe stress. On the other hand, because the children in this present study were either born in Mexico or left Guatemala at a

very young age, most have not been exposed to potentially traumatic incidents of political violence. While the older children in the sample endured the perilous flight to Mexico as infants or toddlers, they made the journey with their parents, siblings, and other relatives; consequently, they did not experience separation from their primary caretakers or from other nuclear family members, a critical factor in mediating children's responses to the stressful experience of going into exile (Allodi, 1980; Boothby, 1988; Kinzie et al., 1986). Finally, because many communities stayed together during the flight from Guatemala and have subsequently resettled in the same refugee camps, traditional patterns of social support (e.g., of extended family members, friends, and neighbors) are available to help children cope with the stresses of life in the camps, and to recover from the potentially traumatic experience of the original flight from Guatemala. Taken together, the presence of these factors seemed to argue against the likelihood of finding high levels of trauma among children in the camps.

A second hypothesis predicted that a positive association would be found between children's scores on the behavior problem checklist and the scores of their mothers on a checklist assessing symptoms of physical and psychological distress. This hypothesis was based on the expectation that the violence of the past and the painful losses associated with exile would *indirectly* affect children born and/or raised in the camps, via the impact of these stressors on children's primary caretakers. The focus on the health status of children's mothers reflects the fact that women are normally the primary caretakers of young children in contemporary Mayan culture; consequently, it was assumed that children's psychological well-being would more likely be affected by the physical and mental health status of their mothers, with whom they have greater contact on a daily basis, than that of their fathers. While it is recognized that fathers' physical and emotional health status may have a significant impact on their children's psychological well-being, the reality of limited resources (i.e., time, funding, manpower) necessitated limiting the focus of the study exclusively to the health status of one parent.

As indicated above, women are generally the primary caretakers of children until middle childhood, at which point boys tend to spend increasingly greater amounts of

94 Child Development

time with their older brothers and fathers working in the fields, while girls tend to stay at home working with their mothers and helping care for younger siblings. In light of this developmental trend, it was further hypothesized that mothers' mental and physical health would be more strongly associated with the psychological well-being of their daughters than that of their sons. That is, it was felt that because girls in middle childhood and early adolescence spend more time than boys with their mothers, they would consequently be more vulnerable to the adverse psychological effects of exposure to their mothers' psychological and physical distress.

Method

Subjects

The children in this study ranged in age from 7 to 16 years (mean = 11.22, SD = 1.81). Behavior Problem Checklists were completed by the mothers of 58 children (34 boys and 24 girls), and semistructured interviews were conducted with a subgroup of 40 of these children (21 boys and 19 girls). Given our limited time in the camps and the difficulty that a random sampling procedure would have entailed in this context, a convenience sample was utilized for both the quantitative and qualitative assessments. An attempt was made, however, to include a roughly equal number of males and females, as well as older and younger children. Subjects were recruited with the assistance of the schoolteachers in the two communities, who selected students (and ex-students) based on the demographic variables of age and sex. Participation was strictly voluntary; however, very few children opted not to be interviewed, and most seemed to enjoy the interview and the opportunities for drawing and coloring that it provided (i.e., during the Kinetic Family Drawing and a drawing of "Life in Guatemala").

Measures

Child Behavior Checklist.—To date, no mental health assessment measure has been standardized for use with indigenous Guatemalan children. In light of the growing popularity of the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) in cross-cultural research (e.g., Auerbach & Lerner, 1991; Koot & Verhulst, 1991), in particular its successful utilization in studies of Latin American children (Bralio, Seguel, & Montenegro, 1987; Rubio-Stipec, Bird, Canino, & Gould, 1990), the CBCL was selected for use in the present study. An additional com-

elling feature of the CBCL is the recent identification of a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Scale contained within the CBCL (Wolfe, Gentile, & Wolfe, 1989).

Because the CBCL had to be administered orally due to the extremely low literacy rate among women in the camps, it was necessary to create a shortened version of the measure in order to keep the length of administration manageable. In collaboration with two members of the refugee community, both schoolteachers, we first dropped those items deemed either inappropriate or incomprehensible to members of the community. In cases where the original CBCL utilizes more than one item to assess a particular symptom (e.g., suicidality), only the most salient of these items was retained. An attempt was made to retain items thought likely to cluster into syndromes of anxiety, aggression, somatization, depression, and social withdrawal; in addition, nine of the PTSD scale items were retained, and an additional item, "easily startled," was added to the final version to assess the presence of a heightened startle response, a core symptom of PTSD.

Because the majority of the women in Camp A spoke insufficient Spanish to complete the Spanish form of the CBCL, it was necessary to create a translated version in Chuj. While theoretically a written language, no one in the camp was literate in Chuj; consequently, a tape-recorded Chuj version of the CBCL was created using the back-translation method described by Brislin (1970). The 40-item Chuj and Spanish versions of the measure were then piloted on a small group of women. Four additional items were dropped because they were consistently poorly understood, resulting in a final 36-item version of the CBCL (see Table 1). The Chuj version was administered by tape recorder, with a bilingual assistant present to provide additional assistance where needed and to translate the women's responses from Chuj to Spanish.

Internal consistency of the modified CBCL is acceptable ($\alpha = .819$), and interrater reliability between mothers and teachers on a group of 10 children was .51, slightly higher than parent-teacher reliability scores for the original CBCL (Verhulst & Akkerhuis, 1989). The women's detailed responses to many of the CBCL items strongly indicated that they were correctly understanding the items, suggesting that the measure had a high degree of content validity.

TABLE 1
MEANS AND MODAL SCORES FOR THE 36 CBCL ITEMS

	Mean	Mode
1. Argues a lot ^a .....	.58	.00
2. Can't concentrate ^a .....	.46	.00
3. Can't sit still, restless ^b .....	.76	.00
4. Cries a lot .....	.27	.00
5. Cruel to animals .....	.36	.00
6. Disobedient at home ^b .....	.61	1.00
7. Doesn't eat well ^c .....	.50	.00
8. Doesn't get along with other children ^b .....	.19	.00
9. Easily jealous ^b .....	.48	.00
10. Feels or complains that no one loves him/her .....	.17	.00
11. Feels worthless or inferior .....	.19	.00
12. Gets in many fights ^b .....	.42	.00
13. Likes to be alone ^c .....	.29	.00
14. Lying or cheating .....	.15	.00
15. Nervous, highstrung, or tense ^a .....	.56	.00
16. Nightmares ^a .....	.51	.00
17. Overtired ^c .....	.61	.00
18. Physically attacks people ^b .....	.27	.00
19. Poor schoolwork ^b .....	.39	.00
20. Self-conscious or early embarrassed .....	.73	1.00
21. Shy or timid .....	.56	.00
22. Sleeps more than most children during the day or night .....	.20	.00
23. Sleeps less than most children .....	.12	.00
24. Temper tantrums or hot temper ^b .....	.66	.00
25. Swearing or obscene language ^b .....	.49	.00
26. Talks about killing self .....	.04	.00
27. Bites fingernails .....	.04	.00
28. Trouble sleeping ^a .....	.19	.00
29. Underactive, slow moving, or lacks energy ^c .....	.37	.00
30. Unhappy, sad, or depressed ^{a,c} .....	.15	.00
31. Wets the bed .....	.02	.00
32. Worrying .....	.25	.00
33. Stomachaches or cramps ^{a,b} .....	.92	1.00
34. Headaches ^a .....	.78	1.00
35. Vomiting, throwing up ^a .....	.49	.00
36. Easily startled ^{*a} .....	.73	1.00

* This item is not included in the original CBCL.

^a Items included in the PTSD scale (Wolfe et al., 1989).

^b Items included in the Aggression scale.

^c Items included in the Depression scale.

The Women's Health Questionnaire

The Women's Health Questionnaire was adapted for this study from a mental health screening instrument developed by Pablo Farias and his colleagues at the *Centro de Investigaciones en Salud de Comitán*, in Chiapas, Mexico. The WHQ has 18 items, and assesses symptoms of somatic as well as psychological distress. Like the CBCL, the WHQ requires respondents to indicate whether they currently experience each of the items rarely or never, occasionally, or frequently. The back-translation of the WHQ and its subsequent administration involved the same procedures employed with the CBCL.

Internal consistency of the WHQ is acceptable ($\alpha = .82$). Content validity is assumed based on women's responses to the various items, which indicated that they clearly understood the intended meaning of each question. Further information on the WHQ, as well as a full analysis of the data it provided regarding refugee women's physical and psychological well-being, will be forthcoming (Billings & Miller, work in progress).

The Children's Interview

The children's interview consists of a series of open-ended questions covering several themes, including school, peers and

96 Child Development

friendships, chores, familial social support, sibling relationships, painful emotions (specifically fear and sadness) and ways children coped with these emotions, thoughts about the future, ethnicity, children's understanding of why their family left Guatemala, images of Guatemala (i.e., how did children picture Guatemala, and where did these images come from?), the violence in Guatemala and how children learned about it, and children's thoughts and feelings regarding the prospect of a return to Guatemala. While the same basic set of questions was asked of all the children interviewed, the interview structure was flexible, so that if a child wished to pursue a particular train of thought or raised an interesting issue, this was explored with no particular constraint. The interviews generally lasted about 1½ hours.

Children in both camps were generally proficient in Spanish; however, a translator was used with a small number of girls in Camp A. Given the timidity of females in Camp A in mixed-sex interactions, it was not ideal to have the interview be conducted by a male interviewer as well as a male translator. However, the lack of an available female translator made this an unfortunate necessity.

Results

CBCL Analyses

A factor analysis of the adapted CBCL yielded only three factors with three or more items with loadings of at least .40, which together accounted for 36% of the total variance. The internal consistency of these factors or scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha; items were retained that had an item-total correlation of .40 or greater and that increased the alpha coefficient for the scale (i.e., those items were retained that contributed to each scale's internal consistency). Two scales were eventually retained that yielded alpha coefficients of .81 and .75, respectively. The first scale, Aggression, contains 10 items, while the second scale, Depression, contains six items (see Table 1).

Responses to the CBCL were scored as follows: rarely or never = 0, sometimes = 1, and frequently = 2. The mean for the sample was 14.33, with a standard deviation of

6.93. Mean scores for the 36 items ranged from .02 to .91, with an average of .39 (see Table 1). A two-tailed *t* test did not reveal any significant difference between boys' and girls' scores ($t = .84$, $df = 58$, N.S.), nor was age associated with CBCL scores for either boys ($r = .06$, N.S.) or girls ($r = .08$, N.S.)³. Significant differences were found between camps on the CBCL, with the mean score for Camp A (15.48, $SD = 6.86$) being somewhat higher than the mean for Camp B (11.00, $SD = 6.18$; $t = 2.23$, $df = 56$, $p < .05$). This difference was apparent on the Aggression scale as well ($t = 1.99$, $p = .05$). However, no difference was found between camps on the Depression scale.

Concerning the first hypothesis predicting low levels of psychological trauma, the factor analysis did not yield any factor suggestive of trauma as defined by the PTSD criteria. A reliability analysis of the nine items that form part of Wolfe et al.'s 20-item PTSD scale yielded an alpha coefficient of .38, in comparison with the alpha of .89 attained by Wolfe et al. using their full PTSD scale. While the low alpha found in this study may reflect the reduced number of PTSD items used in the present analysis, it may also suggest that no constellation of trauma-related symptoms was present in this sample. When the additional item, *easily startled*, was added to the reliability analysis, the alpha coefficient increased only to .39.

Additional evidence suggesting low levels of trauma is found in the mean and modal scores of those items identified by Wolfe et al. as belonging to the CBCL PTSD scale, as well as the additional item, *easily startled*. As can be seen in Table 1, the modal scores for the PTSD items was 0, indicating that these items were rated as rarely or never being present for the majority of the children in the sample. Mean item scores range from .19 to .94, with the highest scores, headaches (.78) and stomachaches (.91), associated with items reflecting somatic distress not specific to psychic trauma. On the other hand, the mean score for the item *easily startled* was .72, comparable to the mean item scores endorsed by parents of sexually abused children in Wolfe et al.'s (1989) study. However, it should be noted that only two children

³ Because few residents of Camp A knew their date of birth, it was not feasible to group children according to age in order to examine age differences on the CBCL. A correlational analysis permitted an examination of the overall direction of association between age and CBCL scores without requiring an exact knowledge of children's ages.

were rated as often being easily startled. Perhaps more importantly, however, this item did not correlate with other anxiety-related items to suggest the presence of a post-traumatic anxiety symptom cluster. Overall, the data support the hypothesis predicting low levels of trauma, as defined by the PTSD criteria, in the present sample. Trauma-related symptoms were manifest relatively infrequently, and no cluster of post-trauma symptoms was identified in the analyses.

The second hypothesis predicted a positive correlation between children's scores on the CBCL and their mothers' scores on the WHQ. Further, it was hypothesized that the association between CBCL and WHQ scores would be stronger for girls than boys. In the first analysis, the relation between combined male and female CBCL scores and the WHQ was examined. A Pearson product-moment correlation yielded a coefficient of $r = .24$ ($p = .09$), suggesting a moderate association between children's scores on the CBCL and their mothers' scores on the WHQ. The fact that this correlation did not reach statistical significance, however, suggests the presence of a relational trend rather than a definite association. Broken down by sex, girls' CBCL scores correlated at $r = .33$ with the WHQ ($p = .12$), while boys' scores correlated at $r = .21$ with the WHQ ($p = .27$). A Fischer's Z test revealed no significant difference between these two correlations ($Z = .23$, N.S.), thus failing to provide support for the hypothesis regarding a sex difference in the relation between the CBCL and the WHQ.

An analysis of the relation between specific CBCL scales and the WHQ yielded results that partially support the hypothesis regarding a sex difference in the CBCL-WHQ association. Looking first at the depression scale for the combined male and female sample, the correlation with the WHQ was $r =$

$.34$ ($p = .01$), indicating a moderately strong relation between depressive symptomatology in children and their mothers' physical and psychological health status. Broken down by sex, girls' depression scores correlated at $r = .51$ with the WHQ ($p = .01$), suggesting a fairly strong association. In contrast, boys' depression scores correlated with the WHQ at $r = .25$ (N.S.), a moderate, though not statistically significant correlation. Despite the large absolute value of the difference between these two correlations, however, a Fischer Z test revealed that the difference was not statistically significant ($Z = 1.01$, $p = .16$). Children's scores on the Aggression scale of the CBCL were not significantly correlated with their mothers' scores on the WHQ, either with boys' and girls' data combined ($r = .08$, $p = .58$), or separated by sex (boys: $r = .01$, $p = .93$; girls: $r = .23$, $p = .36$).

In sum, the hypothesis regarding a positive correlation between CBCL and WHQ scores was generally supported, though the correlation was only moderate. However, children's scores on the depression scale were significantly correlated with their mothers' WHQ scores. Broken down by sex, this association was very strong for girls, while only moderate for boys.

While a full analysis of the data from the WHQ is beyond the scope of the present paper and will be presented in a forthcoming article (Billings & Miller, work in progress), it should be noted here that a significantly disproportionate number of women who had lost relatives to the violence (including extended as well as nuclear family members) scored in the high and middle ranges of the WHQ, $\chi^2 = 10.61$, $p < .01$. No significant correlations were found between women's scores on the WHQ and number of children in the home ($r = -.20$, N.S.), total number of children ($r = .15$, N.S.), or number of deceased children ($r = .21$, N.S.).⁴

⁴ A post-hoc analysis revealed a consistent pattern of underreporting on a subset of the Women's Health Questionnaire data gathered by one of the male schoolteachers who assisted with collecting data for this study. A discussion of the cultural factors associated with this finding is forthcoming (Billings & Miller, work in progress). Analyses of the relation between children's mental health and the health status of their mothers were conducted with this subset of data excluded. The results of these analyses indicate that all of the relations of interest still hold. Women's health status is significantly and inversely related to depressive symptomatology in their daughters ($r = .49$, $p < .05$) but not their sons ($r = .16$, N.S.). The relation between women's health and their children's overall mental health (total CBCL score) is somewhat stronger with the biased data excluded, and reaches statistical significance ($r = .38$, $p < .05$). Broken down by sex, this finding holds true for girls ($r = .58$, $p < .05$) but not for boys ($r = .32$, N.S.). These findings support the hypothesis that women's health status, in this population, impacts more powerfully on the emotional well-being of their daughters than it does on that of their sons.

98 Child Development

Discussion of CBCL Analyses

In contrast to other studies of refugee children that have found high levels of PTSD (Arroyo & Eth, 1985; Kinzie et al., 1986, 1989), there was little evidence of psychic trauma in the present sample. Unlike the children in those other studies, however, many of whom had endured severely traumatic forms of political violence and, in some cases, prolonged separation from family members, most of the children in the present study have not been directly exposed to political violence, nor have they been separated from their primary caretakers. While several of the children experienced the highly stressful flight from Guatemala during their infancy or preschool years, there is no evidence that this experience has had an enduring traumatic impact on their mental health.

The lack of evidence of psychological trauma in this study does not mean that early experiences of fleeing Guatemala and living hidden for weeks, and in some cases months, in the mountains during the torrential rainy season were not psychologically traumatic for some, perhaps many, children. Rather than suggesting the absence of earlier traumatization, the results reported in this study indicate merely the lack of *present* trauma in this sample. There is little doubt that the journey of exile was highly stressful for most families, a fact that was confirmed anecdotally in my conversations with adults in the two communities.

In speculating as to what variables might have functioned to assist children in recovering from the earlier stresses associated with the flight from Guatemala, several factors are apparent in addition to the presumably critical role played by the continual presence of parents and older siblings as stress-buffers (Allodi, 1980; Kinzie et al., 1986). First, many of the refugees fled with extended family members as well as other members of their communities, and have reconstituted neighborhoods (*barrios*) within the camps consisting of members of their original communities in Guatemala. Thus, a sense of continuity and community has been preserved despite the massive dislocation. Second, the geographical isolation of the camps impedes integration into local Mexican society, while at the same time fostering a sense of internal cohesion and community within the camps. These two factors have permitted the rearticulation in exile of traditional patterns of social support (e.g., of ex-

tended family members, friends, and neighbors) that are available to children as well as to their primary caretakers (i.e., thus providing children with indirect social support). The stress-buffering role of community-based social support within the refugee camp context has also been identified by Tsoi et al. (1986) in their work with Vietnamese refugee children in Hong Kong.

Finally, the primary schools in each of the camps appear to play an important role in facilitating healthy psychosocial and cognitive development in children. In addition to creating a supportive and cognitively challenging social environment, the schools offer children opportunities for self-esteem enhancement via mastery of academic tasks and intellectual concepts. More recently, the teachers in Camp A have taken on the important task of helping children make sense of the violence that caused their families to go into exile. The recent history of Guatemala is being taught from the perspective of the oppressed, in contrast to the version of history traditionally taught in Guatemalan schools and perpetuated in the popular media. By providing children with a sociopolitical and historical framework within which to make sense of the oppression their families and communities have suffered, the camp teachers are helping the children make meaning out of the experience of exile and the senseless violence that preceded it. The psychological value of this work is underscored by the findings of psychologists who have worked with children in contexts of political repression; these studies have found that the availability of an ideology or a sociopolitical framework that allows children to make sense of their experience of political oppression promotes psychological resiliency and facilitates active rather than passive coping (Dawes, 1990; Punamäki & Suleiman, 1990; Straker, 1988).

It is important to recognize certain limitations to the present assessment. First, psychic trauma was assessed with a highly modified version of a measure not originally developed to assess childhood traumatization. While Wolfe et al. (1989) did identify a PTSD scale that proved internally consistent, they did not assess the validity of their scale by comparing scores on the CBCL PTSD scale to independently made DSM III-R diagnoses or to another measure specifically designed to assess PTSD symptomatology. Second, there is still a limited amount of data regarding cross-cultural variations in posttraumatic stress reactions in

children. Psychological research on indigenous Guatemalans is minimal, and our understanding of the ways in which psychological distress is understood and expressed within Mayan culture is very limited. Anthropological research suggests that overt expressions of emotional distress are discouraged among indigenous Guatemalans (Zur, 1990), a finding supported by my own observations both in Guatemala and in the refugee camps. As Zur (1990) points out, the absence of PTSD symptomatology in indigenous Guatemalan children may indicate not the absence of psychological trauma, but rather the inhibition of trauma-related symptoms.

Despite these caveats, I am inclined to regard the results of the present CBCL-based trauma assessment as valid, given their consistency with my own observations of and interviews with children in the camps. I observed few behavioral or affective symptoms suggestive of psychic trauma and, in fact, was struck in both camps by the number of playful, socially interactive children I saw. Particularly in Camp B, one constantly heard the laughter of children playing in the camp's central clearing. No children reported being bothered by nightmares on a regular basis, although occasional nightmares of being persecuted by soldiers were described by some children. I saw no evidence of repetitive post-traumatic play and no games involving soldiers or guerrillas engaged in acts of violence, nor did I note intense startle reactions in any of the children I interviewed or observed at play. Given the lack of exposure to traumatic stimuli in much of this sample, as well as the various factors discussed above that may have facilitated healthy psychological development among those children who made the stressful journey into Mexico, the lack of trauma in this assessment is not unexpected.

Findings suggesting a positive relation between children's mental health and the physical and mental health of their mothers are generally consistent with other research on the mental health of children in situations of political violence (Fraser, 1974; Punamäki, 1989). The strong relation between girls', but not boys', scores on the depression scale of the CBCL and their mothers' scores on the WHQ supports the hypothesis that developmental norms that keep girls close to their mothers while removing boys from the home to work in the fields and to gather firewood may play a critical role in exposing girls more than boys to the adverse effects

of their mothers' physical and emotional distress. The lack of statistical significance of the difference between the two correlations, despite the large absolute value of that difference, may well be related to the small size of the sample.

While a detailed discussion of women's mental health as measured by the WHQ is beyond the scope of this paper, and will be presented in a subsequent article (Billings & Miller, work in progress), it should be noted that the women in this study manifested consistently high levels of enduring physical and psychological distress. Themes of sadness and loss related to the experience of exile and feelings of frustration and helplessness regarding the chronic poverty that prevented them from being able to provide adequately for their children were recurrent in the women's responses to the WHQ. Somatic distress was also very common, with headaches and stomachaches being an almost normal feature of daily life for many women.

The fact that a significantly disproportionate number of women who had lost relatives to the violence scored in the high and middle ranges of the WHQ suggests that the loss of one or more nuclear or extended family members was a contributing factor in women's experience of somatic and emotional distress. It may be speculated that the political violence of the past indirectly affects children in part through the impact it has had on the physical and emotional well-being of their mothers, who in addition to confronting daily the profound deprivations that characterize life in the refugee camps, must live with and make sense of the painful losses resulting from the violence and subsequent exile. As mentioned above, the decision to assess only mothers' physical and mental health status, rather than also examining the health status of fathers, was the result of finite resources. At this point, it is unknown whether a similar phenomenon exists in which fathers' health status is more closely associated with that of their sons than their daughters, given the gradual shift of boys from the home to the fields and the corresponding increase in time spent with their fathers.

A brief note is warranted on the labeling of the CBCL scales in this study. As Achenbach and Edelbrock (1983) note, the labeling of any particular factor or scale is to some extent an arbitrary process. With regard to the Depression scale, the six items that make

100 Child Development

up the scale may potentially reflect, at least in part, the effects of malnutrition (tires easily, weak, sleeps a lot, sad, likes to be alone, and eats poorly). If so, the term *depression* may lend an overly psychological air to a set of behavioral and affective symptoms reflecting an underlying physiological state related to nutritional status. Lacking further data regarding children's nutritional status, however, I have opted for the term *depression*. Clearly, the six items in the scale only suggest the presence of a depressed state, and are insufficient to indicate clinical depression as diagnosed using the criteria set forth in the DSM IV.

The Child Interviews

In the interviews I conducted with children in the refugee camps between March and October of 1992, I hoped to find out what sort of narratives they had developed and what kinds of stories they had created to help them make sense out of the extraordinary violence that drove their families into exile 11 years ago. I was interested in discovering the various understandings children had developed to explain why they were living in exile, and where this information had come from. What did they know of the violence of the recent past, or of the ongoing repression that continues to prevent the refugees from returning to their homeland? Were they frightened by the close proximity of the camps to the Guatemalan border, and by the fact that Guatemalan soldiers have entered the camps several times in the past, in several cases wounding or killing refugees? Finally, with the Mexican and Guatemalan governments as well as the United Nations placing increasing pressure on the refugees to repatriate, how might the children feel about the prospect of a return? What images did they have of Guatemala that might affect their desire to either stay in Mexico or return to their homeland?

In the following sections, data are presented that address these questions. First, I discuss the sources of children's knowledge of the violence and the flight out of Guatemala. I then examine the understandings children have developed regarding *why* their families left Guatemala, and explore their ideas regarding the *causes* of the violence that drove their families into exile. Finally, children's thoughts and feelings regarding the prospect of a return to Guatemala are presented and are related to the nature of their perception of the current political climate in their homeland.

The Source of Children's Knowledge

Much of what children in the camps know about the violence in Guatemala they have learned through conversations with their parents, older siblings, and other adults in the community. While some children reported that their parents preferred not to discuss the violence of the past, most described their parents as being quite willing to talk with them not only about the violence but also about the journey to Mexico and the early years of life in exile. In general, those children who gave the more detailed and accurate accounts of both *la guerra* (the war or violence) and *la salida* (the departure) indicated that they came from homes in which discussions of these topics occurred with some frequency.

Parents, however, are not the only source of information about *la guerra* and *la salida*. As mentioned earlier, teachers have recently begun to educate children about the recent history and current political situation in Guatemala, using a newly published social science textbook written from the perspective of the oppressed and marginalized sectors of Guatemala. In response to a growing recognition among schoolteachers of the importance of helping children understand why they are living in exile, several teachers used the International Day of the Child in April 1992 to organize a series of cultural and historical events, including several sociodramas in which children enacted scenes of the violence that caused their communities to flee and of the difficulties encountered during the journey to Mexico.

Finally, children learn about events in Guatemala, both past and present, by listening to the adult discourse within the camps on the violence in Guatemala—discussions among adults regarding the violence that drove the refugees into exile 11 years ago, as well as the lower-intensity violence of the present that prevents them from returning home. While this discourse does not generally include children as active participants, they are often present, sitting quietly nearby and listening attentively as adults recount the burning of their villages by soldiers, discuss the status of negotiations between the Guatemalan government and the Permanent Commissions (elected representatives of the refugee community) regarding a return to Guatemala, or express concern at the recent increase in the forced recruitment of young Indian males by the Guatemalan army. Visitors arrive from Guatemala and report the latest news, and chil-

dren are as likely as not to be within earshot. Most houses have only one or two rooms, separated by walls made of long sticks or loosely connected planks, so that even children not physically present while their parents and other adults speak of political topics can easily absorb the content of these nearby discussions.

Leaving Guatemala: Images of Violence

Children's explanations of why their families were forced to leave Guatemala varied somewhat by age and sex, with older boys tending to give the most detailed and complex explanations. In general, however, most of the children understood that their families left because of "*la guerra*" (the war) or "*los soldados*" (the soldiers). Ramon, age 12, was 2 years old when his family fled to Mexico. He offered this explanation for the departure:

My family left because of the war, or of the fear because they had heard that the soldiers were coming to different villages to kill people. Because of that, most of the people fled from the village, although some stayed. Those who stayed, nothing happened to them, except for some who were killed when they were going to fetch firewood or were carrying corn, and the soldiers arrived in their path.

Mario, a 10-year-old boy whose family left Guatemala several weeks after he was born, also said his family left because of the war: "You see, the soldiers were killing many *campesinos* [peasants]. This continued even when one ran away When we left Guatemala, they were killing many people. They killed many of us and we left running."

Flore, a 10-year-old girl, said her family left because people in the community feared that the soldiers would soon arrive in their village: "My family left because they were afraid that the soldiers could come and kill them. The whole community left. It was chaotic. Some fled together, others were separated. They were all fleeing so rapidly, not everyone could stay together."

In explaining why his family left Guatemala, Juan, age 12, described the massacre at the farming community of San Francisco that took place on July 17, 1982. On that day, soldiers killed over 300 people after raping many of the women and mutilating their bodies. Word of this terrifying massacre spread quickly, and as Juan indicates, many communities, including his own, fled into exile very shortly thereafter:

People came to our village to buy corn, because we grew much corn there, the soil is good. But one day when people were on their way to the village, they stood upon a hill from which you can see the village of San Francisco. They saw that the houses were burning and the people were screaming, so they turned around and returned. They packed their suitcases and had to cross the border. People said the soldiers would soon come to our village . . . so the people had to leave quickly.

Only two of the children I interviewed had clear memories of the frightening journey out of Guatemala. One, a bright and articulate 14-year-old male, described standing on a hill with his family late at night, a short distance from the village they had just abandoned, watching their house go up in flames (the soldiers burned many of the houses in the village that night). Another teenager, 13-year-old Mateo, combined his own memories with stories told to him by his father, as he described his family's departure from their village in northeastern Guatemala:

Yes, I remember a little bit of the journey to Mexico. We came with our parents carrying our things. The soldiers shot a man in the back. They followed us into the mountains, and grabbed those who could not run fast enough. My father carried me, and we ran quickly. Those who stayed behind died, and those who could not run fast enough died. My father says they killed many women, and then they grabbed their babies and killed them with poles.

Of the 40 children interviewed, only two made no mention of the violence in their explanations of why their families left Guatemala. Both were young girls. One said she did not know why her family had gone into exile, and the other stated that there was no fruit or corn in Guatemala, and that her family had come to Mexico in hopes of finding better crops. (In fact, her family left because of the violence.)

Overall, it is clear that children understand that their families were forced to leave Guatemala because of the violence of the army. While several children mentioned the guerrillas as combatants in *la guerra*, they clearly identified the army as responsible for the mass killings and other human rights abuses. As I suggested above, older children tended to provide more elaborate accounts of the violence and of their families' journey to Mexico. However, just as important as age in determining the complexity and detail of

102 Child Development

children's explanations was the extent to which their parents talked about the violence at home. Regardless of their age, children whose parents spoke little to them of the violence tended to offer brief explanations for *la salida* and were generally unable to elaborate further. In contrast, children whose parents felt comfortable talking with them about the violence and the subsequent flight often gave detailed and historically accurate accounts.

The Reasons for the Violence

While many children were able to provide detailed narratives and graphic drawings of massacres and other forms of military violence, few could offer any explanation for why the army had killed so many people. The modal responses were "I don't know" and "They were following orders given by the government." While the latter response is reasonably accurate, it begs the question of why the government would want the army to torture and kill its own citizens. The majority of children could not make sense of why their government would order such actions. On the other hand, a few of the older boys understood that the violence was connected to a struggle over land and other resources. One 13-year-old boy stated that "The army kills people so it can take over their land. They fight over the land." Another boy, 12 years old, said that "They say that the boss [i.e., the owner of the plantation] went to complain about the peasants and the soldiers came to kill them. The boss went to complain because the peasants were looking for firewood on his plantation, and because of this he went to the Guatemalan authorities and so the soldiers came to kill the people."

While most children could not provide causal explanations for the violence, there was a general consensus that the victims of the violence were impoverished Indians and not *ladinos*. Although in fact a large sector of the Guatemalan population consists of poor *ladinos*, children in the camps equated the term *ladino* with wealth and *indigena* (indigenous) with poverty. Santiago, age 12, observed that "Indians don't have much money. *Ladinos*, yes, they have money, they are rich and have animals, clothing and cars. The Indians, we have our plot of land, that is all." Despite this perception of a division between rich *ladinos* and impoverished Indians, few children understood the violence as a functional means of maintaining unjust social and economic relations. In their

drawings and verbal narratives, children expressed a common perception of the violence as a senselessly destructive phenomenon perpetuated by an inexplicably cruel army.

The Prospect of a Return

In January of 1993, approximately 2,500 Guatemalans who had been living in refugee camps in the three border states of Chiapas, Campeche, and Quintana Roo traveled together to Guatemala, in the first of several small-scale returns known collectively as the *pro-retorno* (the "first return"). While there are plans for the *pro-retorno* to continue, subsequent trips have been canceled due to the highly problematic political climate prevailing in Guatemala. Moreover, the great majority of the refugees in Mexico have chosen not to participate in the *pro-retorno*. In the two camps in which I worked, many adults explained their decision not to return at this point by pointing to the ongoing military repression in Guatemala and the failure of the civilian government to significantly curb human rights abuses. As indicated earlier in this paper, however, a recent drought and the marked decrease in foodstuffs supplied by COMAR have led many families in Camp B to consider participating in one of the coming return trips planned as part of the *pro-retorno*. While a few families in Camp A are also hoping to return in the near future, the majority plan to wait for conditions to change such that a safe return can be more reliably assured.

Children's thoughts and feelings regarding the possibility of a return to Guatemala were largely mediated by two factors: first, the extent to which they believed the violence of the past had ceased or continued to be an ongoing threat, and second, the intentions of their parents to either participate in the *pro-retorno* or remain in Mexico for the foreseeable future. These two factors are not independent of one another; many children seemed to interpret their parents' desire to return soon or continue living in Mexico as an index of the political situation in Guatemala. Several children whose families were planning to return in the near future thought the repressive violence had ended, and that the army, while still in control, would not harm the returning refugees. This belief was often tempered by a concern that while the situation might have improved in Guatemala, perhaps the army was not very trustworthy. This ambivalence was reflected in the drawings children in Camp B did in re-

sponse to the question, "What will you see on the journey back to Guatemala?"⁵ The drawings typically included buses full of refugees returning home under a sunny, blue sky, surrounded by frightening looking soldiers on the ground and in helicopters. The children's descriptions of their drawings are revealing: "Soldiers are watching, but nothing will happen to the refugees when they arrive. The people are still afraid, though, because the soldiers kill" (Ana, age 11). "Flowers, houses, cars returning. The people are frightened, they're afraid of the soldiers, afraid that what happened before might happen again" (Mario, age 13).

In contrast, most of the children whose parents were not planning to participate in the *pro-retorno* believed either that the violence had not ended, making a return unsafe at this point, or that the army, while currently abstaining from repressive actions, would likely revert to the violence of the past once the refugees had returned. Walter, 10 years old, expressed the latter view: "I think we should wait a while longer. The army could massacre more people. The soldiers could get enraged and go after us again."

In Camp A, where most families are not planning to participate in the *pro-retorno*, many children expressed a desire to return to Guatemala at some point in the future, but not until the violence of *la guerra* has ended. For example, 12-year-old Juana said, "I'd like to keep living here in Mexico. If there is peace in Guatemala, I want to return, but now I am afraid to go back. Perhaps some day there will suddenly be peace, but I don't know." Alejandro, age 12, stated that "If we go back to Guatemala now, we'll die because of the war. We don't want to return yet because of the massacres, but if there is peace one day, perhaps we will return."

A common theme in many children's explanations of their desire to return to Guatemala was the importance of *nuestra tierra*, or "our land." The importance of land to the children and their families can rightly be understood literally, as the wish of landless *campesinos* to own their own parcel of land on which to grow food and cash crops; however, *nuestra tierra* also refers to the *homeland*, the country in which one is no longer a stranger, no longer a guest whose welcome

has worn thin. Andrés, 12 years old, spoke of the frustrating interactions he and his friends have had with local Mexican children: "They stay away from us, they don't want to talk with us. Perhaps they are afraid, I don't know. I don't know what they are thinking. When this happens, it makes me want to go home." Reflecting on the future and the possibility of someday returning to Guatemala, Andrés continued, "I think I'd like to live in Mexico because of the war in Guatemala. But if the war ends, then we'll return. That is where our land is."

Flore, a 10-year-old girl, expressed a similar feeling: "In the future I'd like to live in Guatemala. It's better there, because we have land there. Here, every three or four years they kick us out and we have to move to a different location. It's a lot of work carrying all of our things."

Very few children expressed a desire to remain in Mexico if peace should come to Guatemala. However, two girls, ages 10 and 11, made clear that they had little interest in the idea of going to live in an unfamiliar country about which they had heard frightening tales of violence. In a joint interview, they first explained their desire to live in Mexico as a result of the ongoing violence in Guatemala; later, however, they abandoned this rationale and made clear their identification with Mexico: "We want to live here, because in Guatemala the people lose a great deal. The soldiers kill them, the soldiers rob their things. [If there is peace in Guatemala, would you want to return then?] No, we want to stay in Mexico. We want to be Mexicans."

In sum, most of the children interviewed expressed a desire to return to Guatemala at some point in the future. However, there was a clear division between those children whose parents were planning to participate in the *pro-retorno* and those whose parents intended to remain in Mexico for a while longer; while the former generally believed that the army would not harm the returning refugees, children in the latter group believed that the army could not be trusted, and that ongoing violence made a safe return impossible at present. The optimistic view of those children who may soon be returning to Guatemala likely reflects the perceptions of their parents, who would not

⁵ The idea of using this question as the basis for children's drawings came from the Comité del Distrito Federal, a nongovernmental organization that works with Guatemalan refugees in Mexico City and, more recently, in Chiapas as well.

return if they believed the violence would place their families in grave danger. However, the children's optimistic outlook may also reflect a way of coping with the anxiety associated with the prospect of returning to a country about which they have heard very frightening stories. By choosing to believe that the political climate in Guatemala has improved substantially, these children may be attempting to minimize the fear that a more accurate perception might evoke.

Conclusion

If an accurate knowledge of the violence helps children to make sense of their lives (i.e., by explaining why they are growing up in exile), this knowledge does not come without a price. Several children reported having occasional nightmares of soldiers entering the camp to kill them, and many spoke of being afraid of soldiers at night, and sometimes during the day as well. Lucia, age 10, said, "Sometimes I am afraid of soldiers. Sometimes during the day, I think they are going to arrive here to kill the people." I asked two brothers, ages 10 and 12, if they ever felt afraid that Guatemalan soldiers might come to the camp. One said, "Sure, yes. I feel that way at night." His older brother, however, said that for him, this fear was more pervasive: "I feel that way all the time. Because if they come during the day, we should be very afraid, because what if they choose to kill us?"

While acknowledging that Guatemalan soldiers have not entered the camps in which they are currently living, many of the children interviewed continue to harbor the fear that this may yet occur. Their fear, of course, is not irrational. In addition to their many incursions into the camps in the early 1980s, in March of 1993 Guatemalan soldiers crossed into Chiapas in pursuit of a group of refugees who had fled Guatemala the month before (*Guatemalan Human Rights Commission/USA*, March 15, 1993).

On the other hand, just as North American children may feel quite frightened at night and forget about their fears the following morning, the children in the refugee camps show little sign of their nocturnal fears during the day. For those children like Lucia whose fear of soldiers is not limited to the night, this fear nonetheless does not seem to interfere noticeably with their daily functioning. The children in this study have somehow incorporated into their daily lives the reality of the nearby violence and their

sense of vulnerability to incursions by Guatemalan soldiers. They go about their business of playing, laughing, fighting with their siblings over uncompleted chores or broken toys, attending school, and working at home and in the fields. If asked, they will acknowledge their fears, but they do not dwell on them and generally prefer to speak of happier, less frightening things. They have developed a vocabulary that reflects the violence of their homeland, a necessity if they are to be able to speak accurately about their own history. However, most of these children are more eager to talk about a favorite game, or which are the best hills for gathering firewood, or how to make tortillas out of mud than they are interested in discussing themes of political violence, past or present. Observing them at play, in school, or working at their chores, one is not struck by symptoms of psychopathology or psychological impairment. On the contrary, there is a resilience among the children that appears to reflect a fundamental capacity for survival and recuperation in their families and in the broader community in which they live.

We should not be surprised by this resiliency. Many of the factors identified by Lösel and Bliesner (cited in Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubray, 1991) as being associated with resilience among children growing up in difficult circumstances are present to varying degrees in the refugee camps. Such factors include actively trying to cope with stress; experiences of self-efficacy; a stable emotional relationship; an open, supportive educational climate; and social support from people outside the family. It is suggested here that the strong sense of community in the camps, the multiple nuclear and extended familial relationships available to children, and the opportunity to attend school have all played a critical role in facilitating healthy psychosocial and cognitive development among the children in this study. With regard to the psychological value of actively coping with stress, it should be noted that the refugees are not passively awaiting an improvement in the political climate of Guatemala that will permit them a safe return. Via their elected representatives in the Permanent Commissions, the refugees have been actively engaged in a dialogue with Guatemalan government in which they have set forth the conditions they deem necessary for a massive return to occur. This form of active, organized political behavior may represent a kind of *collective* coping, a refusal to remain passively

victimized while in exile. It would be interesting for future research to examine the psychological ramifications on the individual level of collective forms of active coping such as that described here. To date, research on the psychological value of active versus passive coping styles has focused exclusively on the efficacy of individual coping styles.

To speak of resilience, however, is not to imply a complete absence of psychological distress. No population of children is completely free of psychopathology, and the identification in this study of symptom clusters reflecting externalizing and depressive symptomatology clearly suggests that children in the refugee camps do experience symptoms of psychological distress. However, the low mean scores on the majority of the 36 CBCL items suggest that these symptoms are relatively infrequent and generally do not impair children's functioning on a day-to-day basis. The positive association between girls' score on the depression scale and their mothers' score on the WHQ does not imply high levels of depression among girls; it simply demonstrates that girls are more like to manifest symptoms of depression when their mothers are experiencing high levels of physical and psychological distress.

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106 Child Development

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