
**International Journal of Children's Spirituality**
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713425284

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Online Publication Date: 01 February 2009

**To cite this Article** Roberts, Ron, Beirevi, Majda and Baker, Tracy(2009)'Children's understanding of the war in Iraq: views from Britain and Bosnia',International Journal of Children's Spirituality,14:1,17 — 30
**To link to this Article: DOI:** 10.1080/13644360802658701
**URL:** http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13644360802658701

*International Journal of Children's Spirituality*
Vol. 14, No. 1, February 2009, 17–30

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

# Children's understanding of the war in Iraq: views from Britain and Bosnia

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(*Received December 2007; final version received November 2008*)

Sixty-one children (aged 9–17) from the United Kingdom (31) and Bosnia (30) were interviewed about the war in Iraq. Significant differences emerged in their views of the war. The Bosnian children were more affected by the Iraq War, more aware of who is involved in it, had different views about its causes, viewed the consequences of the war with greater gravity, and expressed a greater desire to end war and have peace. Two factors which might account for these differences – recent Bosnian history and the nature of media representations of the war in the two countries – are discussed.

**Keywords:** war; Bosnia; children's perspectives; United Kingdom



## Introduction

In this paper we present the results of an empirical investigation of children's and early adolescents' understanding of the Iraq War and their emotional reactions to it. We have chosen to examine children in two countries, the United Kingdom and Bosnia. The United Kingdom has not experienced war on its soil during the lifetime of the children interviewed, though it has fought in more international wars in the past 50 years than any other nation (Sloboda and Doherty 2007). For Bosnian children the situation is very different, following three years of warfare in the 1990s (1992–95). Such a comparison we contend will enable us to develop a deeper understanding of how children's reasoning is related to the socio-cultural context in which they live, as well as the processes by which social representations of war are taken up and circulated in a society (see Moscovici and Duveen [2000] for a more detailed discussion of the theory of social representations).

Children's views of the Iraq War are important for several reasons. Firstly, all too frequently it is children who shoulder the burden of modern warfare, since civilians, rather than military personnel, are the principal victims (Ferguson 2006), so that now, some 80–90% of casualties are non-combatants, most of them children and women (Otunnu 2002; Williams 2006). In the decade between 1993 and 2003, for example, approximately two million children were killed and a further six million injured or permanently disabled in war zones (Williams 2006). Secondly, Iraq is a country with a young population – almost 40% of the country is below 15 years of age (UNDP 2005), and many young people have lost their lives as a result of the invasion. The Iraq Living Conditions Survey (UNDP 2005) found that children below 18 years of age accounted for 12% of the war-related deaths. The same survey reported that 1 in 20

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ISSN 1364-436X print/ISSN 1469-8455 online

DOI: 10.1080/13644360802658701
http://www.informaworld.com

under-fives in the country are currently living in homes damaged by military activity or looting, with up to 62% exposed to the sound of gunfire within the vicinity of their homes several times a week. Finally, from a children's-rights perspective, we contend that young people have a right to voice their opinion on matters that directly concern them and that such views should be included in any broader public debate about such matters.

## Effects of war on children

Studies of children in relation to war have largely adopted one of two approaches – either to concentrate on the psychological damage war (and its consequences) inflicts on children or else to consider children as active agents and interpreters of conflict (either their own direct experience or how they understand the meanings of war and peace). In the first approach a number of studies – conducted in the aftermath of the Balkan wars, Middle East conflicts and Rwanda – have shown that the multiple traumas of war, separation from family, bereavement, direct exposure to war and combat and extreme poverty or deprivation are associated with very high levels of psychological morbidity (notably post-traumatic stress disorder, in some cases as high as 90%) (e.g. Garbarino, Kostelney and Dubrow 1991; Zivcic 1993; Kuterovac, Dyregrov and Stuvland 1994; Gupta et al. 1996; Maksoud and Aber 1996; Thabet and Vostanis 1999; Laor, Wolmer and Cohen 2001; Bhutta 2002; Smith et al. 2002; Goldstein, Wampler and Wise 2005; Hasanović, Sinanović and Pavlović 2005; Thabet 2006). Children who are at a distance from war may also feel its effects, with research suggesting that adverse emotional reactions and post-traumatic stress symptoms may also arise from exposure to media (print and television) representations of conflict (Pfefferbaum et al. 2003). In addition to these effects war and sanctions leave the home environments of many children depleted of toys, books and other essentials that provide opportunities for self-directed learning and achievement (Unicef 2003). A recent Save the Children (2006) report indicated that 37% of the 115 million children around the world who do not receive primary education live in conflict-affected countries. Finally there are the gendered consequences of war which may see children drafted into combat (In Rwanda 1,800 children have been held on charges of genocide [Palmer 2002], and an undisclosed number have been detained at Guantanamo Bay [Human Rights Watch 2004]), or vulnerable to sexual assault (80% of the girls who fled Kigali during the Rwandan genocide had been raped [Human Rights Watch 2003]).

## Children's attitudes to war

Available data then paints a picture of children psychologically traumatised through exposure to war (Jensen and Shaw 1993). However, several authors point out that living through war may not necessarily result in functional impairment (e.g. Sack, Him and Dickason 1999) and argue that it is important to see children as active interpretive agents. In a study of Israeli children, Punamāki (1996) argued that ideological commitment, perhaps by imparting a sense of meaning to events, could offer some protection against increased anxiety and insecurity, whilst Kos and Derviškadić-Jovanović (1998) consider that the psychological consequences of warfare on children have been overstated and that children's perception and social construction of the world can be accommodated within the normal range of human feelings and memories. They comment:

> Positive influences of war on personality, values, relations and behaviour are rarely quoted. The war experience can, however, enrich one's personality as any difficulty in life can. It can encourage empathy and positive social behaviour, enhance coping capacities and social maturity. Many well-adjusted Bosnian adolescents reported that the war experiences, related losses and the adversities of asylum life mobilised their strength and enhanced their personal and moral development. (4)

These authors note that mental health professionals have, to date, paid little attention to understanding how children exposed to war actually function – or to how and what they think. Thus the possibilities for spiritual growth and learning attendant upon the horrors of war have been overlooked. Hoffman and Bizman (1996) also note that children are rarely asked for their views. In a noteworthy exception Hakvoort, Hägglund and Oppenheimer (1998) conducted interviews with Dutch and Swedish children, eliciting their views on war, peace and strategies to attain peace. Many equated peace with the absence of war and described the process of attaining peace as the responsibility of powerful people who could 'talk with their soldiers' and negotiate with other leaders. What is striking here is that the children singularly omitted to consider force as a strategy for producing peace – rather they saw peace as arising from social interaction and communication with others. Furthermore, the older children (those aged 13–17 years) employed more sophisticated value systems in conceptualising peacemaking. In Hakvoort and Hägglund's (2001) eyes, the older children had shifted from a negative conception of peace (i.e. the absence of war) to a broader, more positive conception, embracing ideas such as democracy, equality, tolerance, and ending discrimination. Some of these more positive conceptions of peace were also found in McLernon, Ferguson and Cairns' (1997) study of Northern Irish children, shortly after the ceasefire announcements of 1994. Differences between the Swedish and Dutch children were also manifest, with Swedish children adopting a more international orientation to peace making (e.g. positive international relations, global meetings, conferences, and trade exchanges), and the Dutch children employing more abstract ideals (e.g. democracy and equality). Hakvoort, Hägglund and Oppenheimer (1998) relate these differences to the distinct historical experiences of war in the two societies.

Hakvoort and Hägglund (2001) contend children's conceptions of war and reactions to it, like much of children's development, are located within the cultural and historical context in which they live. This is illustrated by a study conducted by Tarifa and Kloep (1996) with Swedish and Albanian children. When asked whether they thought war might occur in their country, Swedish children were more likely to say they were very afraid that war might happen, and Albanian children were more likely to say that they were not at all afraid of war in their country. Swedish children were also more likely than Albanian children to cite war as a primary source of fear. What is striking about these findings is that Albania is much more likely to experience war than Sweden – given its location and the volatility of political events in the region (Tarifa and Kloep 1996).

As far as children are concerned, in addition to the cultural context within which meanings of war are situated and constructed there are developmental considerations. Concepts of war developmentally precede those of peace – owing to the greater ease with which concrete referents can be made e.g. to guns, weapons, soldiers, etc. (Jagodić 2000). As children's capacity for self-representation grows, at about eight years of age the negative consequences of war are increasingly recognised (Hakvoort 1996, cited in Jagodić 2000). Beyond these years, older children were more likely to construe war as a consequence of mutually incompatible interests (Alvik 1968).

Actual representations of war and peace aside, children's attitudes towards war are heavily influenced by the socialising agents of school, parents, peers, media, role models and of course their own experience. Hoffman and Bizman (1996), for example, reported that adolescents in comparison with elementary-school children were more likely to view the causes of the Arab-Israeli war as stable over time – a possible consequence of their own increasing knowledge of the historical conflict they themselves were living through. As Brown (1995) notes the manner in which all these influences are exerted are far from straightforward.

Our present study is focused on children from Bosnia and children from the United Kingdom. The current study therefore follows in the tradition of seeing children as active interpretive agents and seeks to ascertain their views on the war in Iraq, to explore their views on how to change the world and to establish how they construct the nature, causes and consequences of the war. We seek to situate these views in the context of the children's principal sources of information about the war and the national and cultural context from which they view it. What follows is a study of children's 'common sense' about the Iraq War, situated within Moscovici's theory of social representations (Moscovici and Duveen 2000). The relative recency of the war in Bosnia will allow us to examine the ways in which recent experiences of war in a society affect children's reasoning about war in that society.



## Method

### *Participants*

Sixty-one children from two age groups were interviewed; 31 from the United Kingdom (UK), whose troops are directly involved in the Iraq War and 30 from a post-conflict society – Bosnia (BiH). The mean age of all children in the younger age group was 9.88 years (UK = 9.93, range = 9–12; BiH = 9.83, range = 9.5–10) and for the older group 14.95 years (UK = 15.82, range = 14–17; BiH = 13.97, range = 13–15). Amongst the younger children there were eight females and six males in the UK group, compared with nine females and six males in the Bosnian group. Amongst the older children, the UK group comprised 11 females and six males, whilst the Bosnian group was more evenly split, with eight females and seven males. Of the children in the younger age group, six of the UK children had familial connections with the armed forces. Amongst the Bosnian sample, all of the older group ($n$ = 15) had been born either before or during the period of the Bosnian War.

### *Interview questions/materials*

The children were asked questions in six areas: (1) what they knew about the war/why they thought the war took place (2) who was involved (3) their sources of information about the war[1] (4) the effects of the war on themselves (5) how they thought the war would affect the world and finally (6) what they would like to see changed in the world.

### *Procedure*

In the United Kingdom, approaches were initially made to schools to recruit children into the study. In all 10 schools were approached – all declined. Consequently participants were recruited through a snowballing technique, beginning with neighbours and friends of one of the investigators (TB). All children had parental consent

to participate, and ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the university ethics committee. Interviews took place in Surrey in the United Kingdom during February and March 2006. Interviews in Bosnia were conducted within a single school in Sarajevo during December 2005, following consent from the head of the school. A digital audio recorder was used to record the children's answers, which were then transcribed for further detailed analysis. Responses from the Bosnian interviews given here have been translated from Bosnian into English by one of the authors (MB).

### *Analyses*

Transcripts of the interviews were content analysed, including searches for anticipated and emergent themes (Banister et al. 1994). Major themes were identified through colour coding, and a codebook was produced. Data were reviewed in a continuous process of immersion and crystallization – with passages relating to each theme collected together (Crabtree and Miller 1999). Once final themes were decided, we made developmental comparisons between the children within each country and cross-cultural comparisons across each age group. As all cross-tabulations have a single degree of freedom, statistical analyses were undertaken with Fischer's exact test. Below we principally describe the cross-cultural comparisons that were statistically significant and judged to be thematically important.



## Results

### *Cross-national comparisons*

*Area 1: knowledge about the war / reasons for war*

Of the younger children from the United Kingdom, six (42.9%) described the war in terms of the US/UK coalition acting benevolently (e.g. bringing democracy to Iraq, preventing Saddam Hussein from attacking Iraqis). One girl aged 12 remarked:

> Well that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and he was killing all his people – he was like a dictator and the Americans went in and the British went in with them and tried to stop it.

None of the children from Bosnia described the war in these terms ($p = 0.006$). The Bosnian children were, however, significantly more likely to describe the war in terms of people being killed or injured ($n = 8$: 53.3%), terms not used by any of the UK children ($p = 0.015$):

> I know lots of that, mostly from the papers. There is a lot of bloodshed there. People are getting killed because they are defending their homeland Iraq, but Americans keep attacking. I do not know if it finished already. (14-year-old boy, Bosnia)

Amongst the older children a noticeable difference was that none of the UK sample described the US/UK coalition as responsible for the war, whereas eight (53.3%) of the Bosnian children did ($p = 0.0006$). Several cited the coalition's desire to secure Iraq's oil resources. In the words of one 14-year-old Bosnian boy:

> Oil, money. America wants to be powerful. Oil is the basis of that war. America wants it, and Iraq doesn't want to give them it because it is their national treasure.

And:

> Americans say it is a fight against terrorism, but in fact they want oil resource that Iraq has. (14-year-old girl, Bosnia)

*Area 2: Who is involved in the war?*

Amongst the younger groups, the UK children were significantly more likely ($n = 8$, 57.1% vs $n = 2$, 13.3%, $p = 0.021$) to cite British/UK/English involvement in the war. This was also true for the older children ($n = 15$, 88.2% vs $n = 3$, 20%, $p = 0.006$). The older Bosnian children were more likely than their British counterparts to mention American ($n = 15$, 100% vs $n = 12$, 70.6%, $p = 0.046$) and Iraqi ($n = 12$, 80% vs $n = 6$, 35.3%, $p = 0.016$) involvement. Of particular interest, several older children in the UK named specific individuals (for Bush $n = 6$, 35.3%, $p = 0.046$), for Blair $n = 4$, 23.5%, $p = 0.10$) as being involved in the war. None of the Bosnian children in either age group did this.



*Area 3a: Have any of your parents/grandparents/teachers/friends said anything about the war? (If yes) what have they said?*

No significant numerical differences were observed amongst the younger children ($p = 0.27$), although a higher proportion of the Bosnian children ($n = 9$, 60%, vs $n = 5$, 35.7%) indicated that their parents/grandparents had spoken about the war. Differences between the UK and Bosnian children in the content of parental conversations noted were evident. Quite a few of the older Bosnian children noted discussions at home about the war:

> It is not a war against terrorism, that terrorism scare is blown out of proportion. It is because of the money. (14-year-old girl, Bosnia)

> Well we say that this war is not needed, because we know what a horrible war we had here before. When there is an action to send aid, we always do that. But, that war is stupid, it shouldn't have happened. They should have resolved that peacefully. With the war nothing can be solved, there are only victims. (14-year-old boy, Bosnia)

With the UK children, the topic of the conversations were somewhat different:

> I think we once had a conversation about it over dinner, about the whole thing. My mum says we are losing troops and we should let them sort themselves out. We stayed in there too long, we're dragging it out and we are losing our troops. (17-year-old boy, UK)

> Its been mentioned a few times but not talked about too much. (17-year-old girl, UK)

Amongst older children, British children were more likely than Bosnian ones to have heard their teacher(s) say something about the war ($n = 13$, 76.5%, vs $n = 6$, 40%, $p = 0.07$).

*Area 3b: Have you heard about the war on the television? (If Yes) What have you heard?*

On this question younger British children were more likely ($n = 9$, 64.3%, vs $n = 3$, 20%, $p = 0.025$) than younger Bosnian children to have heard about the war on the TV:

> Yeah, on the news about the car bombings – loads of cars blowing up and 103, its 103 isn't it? Soldiers have died – our soldiers. (12-year-old girl, UK)

Some of this reflected a distorted view of the relationship between the events of 9/11 and the Iraq War:

> Yes a lot, I say there was a picture of the man in the plane destroying the building and apparently he's up in the mountains in Iraq. (nine-year-old boy, UK)

This view, probably referring to Osama Bin Laden, and purported links between Al-Qaeda and the Iraqi regime in the 9/11 attacks, is similar to those widely held by people in the US just prior to the war's instigation (Chomsky 2005) – itself a testament to the role of the media in influencing beliefs about the Iraqi regime.

Some children volunteered information from other media sources, including the newspapers and the Internet:

> No, but I read it on Internet and looked at the pictures from there. Because in the newspapers here they only give a short summary. I saw pictures of people, destroyed buildings. (14-year-old boy, Bosnia)



*Area 4: Has the war had an effect on you in any way?*

Stark differences were observed in answer to this question, which were very revealing of the cultural settings within which the children reside and within which war is interpreted. An overwhelming majority of the Bosnian children both younger ($n$ = 10, 66.6%, $p$ = 0.066) and older ($n$ = 9, 60%, $p$ = 0.0017) commented on feeling sad about the war:

> Yes it did. I am sorry for people who get killed and those who die, and many are in danger; then people don't have anything to eat and they are very poor. (10-year-old boy, Bosnia)

> I am sad because of that, because many Muslims there get killed and die. I don't want any wars. (10-year-old girl, Bosnia)

> I am sorry for innocent people that get killed and they didn't do anything. Just because of some others. (14-year-old girl, Bosnia)

In contrast, only four (28.6%) of the younger UK children felt sad about the war – and all of these had familial connections with the UK military. Amongst older UK children only one reported feeling sad (6.7%). For several of the older Bosnian children ($n$ = 6, 40%) the war in Iraq evoked feelings about the Bosnian War. As indicated earlier all of the children in this age group were alive during the war and many had been evacuated:[2]

> Yes, it did. When I see what pictures they send us, they show on the news I cannot but remember our war. Even though I wasn't here I was in Germany for five years, but I know how it was here, from news, and these war criminals stories. Even though I wasn't here I can feel like I was going through it all. (15-year-old boy, Bosnia)

> Well, of course that I was sad, because I immediately remember what they were doing to us 10 years ago. Nobody deserves that. (14-year-old girl, Bosnia)

*Area 5: Will fighting affect the world?*

The most frequent response was that the war would make things worse. This was a more frequent response amongst Bosnians, both young ($n = 14$, 93.3% vs $n = 7$, 50%, $p = 0.014$) and old ($n = 14$, 93.3% vs $n = 9$, 52.9%, $p = 0.018$):

> It will be probably worse in the world. Because America will probably win, and then other world powers will think they can attack anyone if they want. (14-year-old girl, Bosnia)

> It does affect. If it continues like this it will be a nuclear war. I am sure someone will drop atomic bomb and pollute the whole world. It will be the worst! (14-year-old boy, Bosnia)

> Yes, I think people have seen how it was a pointless war, it was not really needed, and they have just fought for no reason, so I think people will see, what's happened and see that wars are useless. (14-year-old girl, UK)

Many children in particular the older ones ($n = 8$, 57.1%, UK, vs $n = 9$, 60%, Bosnia) also spoke about the war involving other countries. Amongst younger children only those from the UK made this suggestion ($n = 5$, 35.7%, vs $n = 0$, $p = 0.017$).



*Area 6: If you could change one or two things about the world, what would they be?*

Children from both the United Kingdom and Bosnia offered a range of ideas for changing the world. One British girl remarked:

> Probably ban guns and I'd probably get rid of the nuclear weapons, because there is no reason to have them, its stupid, we're only going to kill ourselves. (16-year-old girl, UK)

By far the most popular response was to 'stop fighting' and 'stop war'. Bosnian children were more likely to make these proposals, particularly amongst the older children ($n = 12$, 80%, vs $n = 6$, 35.3%, $p = 0.016$). They were also more likely to refer explicitly to having or creating peace:

> To influence people in a way to stop the war, so that people never go to war again, and to not think about the war. To make peace in the whole world. (14-year-old girl, Bosnia)

> I wish there was no war, and that everybody joins some peace community, something like European Union. So that everybody is one country. We should all look after each other, not fight against each other. (14-year-old boy, Bosnia)

> Bosnia and Herzegovina should send a letter or something to America, to stop that, because we want peace. (15-year-old boy, Bosnia)

These latter remarks are a clear reflection of the political and historical context in Bosnia, where many have aspirations for their country to be integrated within the European Union – perhaps for economic development, or perhaps as a protection against any future outbreak of war.

## Discussion

These interviews inform us about the social construction of the Iraq War in British and Bosnian society. In doing so they provide '*… insights into the norms, values and attitudes*

*a particular society holds*' (Hakvoort and Hägglund 2001, 329). Surveying the results of all the interviews undertaken, the Bosnian children appeared to be more affected by the war in Iraq and were more aware of who is involved in it. In addition they had different views about its causes; they also viewed the consequences of the war with more gravity and expressed a greater desire to end war and have peace. How are we to understand these differences between Bosnian and British children? What are likely to be the principal causal factors underlying them? Two factors seem likely – recent Bosnian and British history and the nature and role of the media in both countries. We will now consider these.

Children in Bosnia belong to a society that in the recent past has been traumatised by war. Most children there have had some member of their immediate or extended family killed in the Bosnian War. The children interviewed here were all Bosnian Muslims – a people who were the principal target of a war prosecuted by Serbian forces.[3] Through their own experiences (in the case of the older children), their home life and their media, they have been socialised to be aware of the real destructive and horrific nature of warfare and its physical and human consequences. Bosnian interviewees referred to 'innocent people being killed', 'homes destroyed', and the 'violation of' people's 'human rights'. Their accounts remind us that every war may evoke painful memories for those who have and are still experiencing the consequences of previous wars. Although at the time of the interviews 11 years had passed since the ending of the Bosnian War, the children born during that period, as well as those who were born shortly after, are still suffering the consequences. There are vivid and constant reminders of war in the lives of children; large numbers still live in refugee camps and children are still killed by landmines.[4] The homes of many remain damaged by war, a part of the disfigured urban landscape of Bosnia's towns and cities where the scars of bullets and shells abound. In addition, the media provides a constant flood of images reminding people of the war. A sample of television news in Bosnia during August and September 2006, for example, included: newly discovered mass graves, identification of bodies, stories about war criminals and protests by families of victims or war veterans. Inevitably, these images will provoke discussion within families and raise questions among children.

This means that Bosnia has a cultural repository – a repertoire of images and social representations of warfare (and its consequences) that are invariably negative. Bosnian children can draw upon these dramatic and traumatic first hand representations to anchor and objectify (Moscovici and Hewstone 1983) their understanding of the war in Iraq. They may also feel solidarity with Iraqis because of their own current negative perception of the West and because Iraqis too are Muslims. Within the United Kingdom, children have no such direct experience, do not as readily identify, because of our recent history as aggressors, with victims of war. Furthermore people in Britain have been actively discouraged by the media from inferring a religious/cultural dimension to the war. Consequently UK children lack access to such representations which could more easily socialise them against warfare. For some UK children the war had a positive focus, nine of whom cited the benevolence of the coalition forces in explaining the reasons for war. The UK children were more likely to draw on media (television) representations for their knowledge about the war (considered by many scholars to be subject to considerable distortion – see, for example, Miller 2004) and to personify the war in terms of Bush and Blair. Weapons of mass destruction ($n = 8$), Osama Bin Laden ($n = 4$) and Iraqi aggression ($n = 1$) were all cited as reasons for going to war. The Bosnian children did not cite any of these. Many older

Bosnian children were also informed by the media about the war in Iraq, however their strong identification with the victims of war suggests that the media representations in Bosnia are interpreted in relation to their own store of knowledge about war – both their own experiences as refugees or as a result of discussions within the family among people who had lived through war and lost loved ones.

Younger British children were less likely to engage in conversations about the war with their parents than were younger Bosnian children. The relative absence of dialogue may help to explain the British children's misconceptions. Within the family, parents may provide a framework for young children's incipient views of international politics. Kos and Derviškadić-Jovanović (1998), for example, emphasise the critical role of natural social interactions in making sense of war and recovering from it. As a result of Western inaction in the Bosnian War, many Bosnians felt abandoned and now feel disenchanted with Western ideals. Perhaps it is inevitable that this will be communicated to their children, several of whom in this study were able to question the United States' professed motives for the Iraq War. The British children, even those who have family in the armed forces are unable to draw on these same interpretive repertoires. Making sense of the war for them maybe more difficult – faced as they are with a familial loyalty to the military or to their country but possible unease about the UK forces' role as aggressors in Iraq.

Though no explicit analysis of children's responses by gender was undertaken it is perhaps significant that the UK sample – particularly the older group contained a higher proportion of females. In previous research (e.g. Miljević-Ridički and Lugomer-Armano 1994) girls have tended to be less supportive (and less knowledgeable) of war, compared with boys. However, it has also been suggested that they tend to grasp the concept of peace earlier and conceptualise it in a more sophisticated way than boys (Hakvoort and Oppenheimer 1993). Such factors, if operating here, would have acted to reduce differences between the UK and Bosnian children, and so cannot be considered as an artefactual or confounding explanation of the observed results, in which large differences were observed.



## Limitations

We make no claims here that the children interviewed constitute a random sample of their respective populations. In an ideal world we would have had comparable sampling procedures in both countries. Unfortunately the difficulty in gaining access to UK children rendered this impossible. Indeed we content that this very difficulty points to something tangible and real in British society pertaining to attitudes to war and the socialisation of children. If children are not permitted to talk with academic researchers – how easy will it be for them to articulate their concerns about war and peace from within the classroom? This alone is clearly a matter for further research work. Nevertheless it remains the case that the systematic nature of the differences observed are striking, and we believe they are informative of important differences in the views of children from the two countries. One objection that could be raised is that several of the UK children have familial connections with the armed forces and may be viewing the conflict in terms of their own specific interests. However even if these children are subject to a specific bias owing to their service connections we believe that this does not unduly distort the results presented or our interpretations. First of all because these children constitute a minority of the UK sample (less than 20%), secondly the consistent nature and magnitude of the differences found cannot be

explained on the basis of the responses of these six children. We noted, for example, that none of the UK children expressed any sadness about the war *except* for those with service connections. Thirdly as these were all younger children their presence in the sample cannot be used to explain differences between older Bosnian and British children – which were substantial. In addition, we believe the nature and pattern of media exposure is likely to be similar for all of the UK children and it is this exposure that we argue is a major determinant behind the observed differences. The age groups of the two national groups are not identical, though there is only any noticeable divergence in the older groups, with the UK sample being almost two years older on average. Again, available data from other studies (e.g. Hakvoort et al. 1998) would suggest older children are more able to conceptualise peace in relatively sophisticated terms. Thus we might have expected, all other factors being equal, that the UK children might be more forthcoming about strategies to bring about peaceful resolution. The age differences as exist cannot simply explain why Bosnian children viewed the consequences of the Iraq War with greater gravity and expressed a greater desire to end war and have peace. One possibility, indeed likelihood, is that the older British children – through the socialising influences we have discussed above – have been more strongly pushed toward a pro-war perspective, possibly because they are nearing the age at which they could enlist in the armed forces. The influence of media advertising for armed-services recruitment warrants further investigation. These limitations considered, it remains our major contention that British and Bosnian children view the Iraq War through different cultural lenses, that existing social representations steer them to a view of the world which interprets other theatres of warfare in a manner congruent with each nations' history. Liu and Hilton (2005) argue that shared historical representations such as are active here – for example Bosnians as victims of ethnic mass murder and Britain as 'world policeman' – are important in positioning ethnic, national and supranational identities and accordingly function to condition the people of nations to adopt particular political stances in dealing with current events.

Although the differences we have highlighted here are striking it should be remembered that many children in the United Kingdom have made vocal protests against the Iraq War (Rai 2002; Curtis 2003). Interestingly, coverage of this in the British press has focused primarily on the susceptibility of young people to adult manipulation and their competence to exercise political judgments (Such, Walker and Walker 2005) – concerns which are absent when it comes to evaluating the effect on children of UK government propaganda in favour of the war. Behind this concern may be a fear that the growth of children's political awareness heralds a loss of adult control and authority. Neither should it be thought that Bosnian children's moral reasoning has escaped unscathed from the war in that country (Garrod et al. 2003). Nevertheless there remains the distinct possibility that the greater empathy, awareness and critical examination of the professed motives for the Iraq War evident in the views of the Bosnian children reflect a more keenly developed spiritual stance in that society toward the destructiveness of war.

## Conclusions

The findings in the present study draw attention to national differences in the socialisation of children, and the familial, cultural, physical and historical 'embeddedness' of representations of war. They highlight the powerful role and capacity of both the media and historical legacy to shape individual thought. They provide us with further

knowledge about social influence and how knowledge is disseminated in a society and suggest clear links between micro- and macro-social influences (Moscovici and Duveen 2000). Perhaps most importantly they show us that alternative constructions of warfare are always available.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Harriet Tenenbaum for assistance with references and design and to all those who participated in the study.

## Notes

1. Several questions were put to the children, enquiring whether any of their parents/grandparents/teachers/friends, respectively, had said anything about the war and if so, what. In addition they were asked whether they had heard about the war on the television?
2. They were between three and five years of age when the war ended.
3. Bosnia brought a charge of genocide to the International Criminal Court against Serbia.
4. An estimated one million mines and 30,000 minefields remain in Bosnia (Save the Children Norway 2005).



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