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EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Thania Isabelle Paffenholz,
Inclusive Peace, Switzerland

*CORRESPONDENCE
Sabine Lee
✉ s.lee@bham.ac.uk

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Editorial: Children born of war: Challenges and opportunities at the intersection of war tension and post-war justice and reconstruction

Sabine Lee[1]*, Heide Glaesmer[2] and Susan A. Bartels[3]

[1]Department of History, School of History and Cultures, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom, [2]Abteilung fur Medizinische Psychologie und Medizinische Soziologie, Leipzig University, Leipzig, Lower Saxony, Germany, [3]Department of Emergency Medicine, Queen's University, Kingston, ON, Canada

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Children born of war: Challenges and opportunities at the intersection of war tension and post-war justice and reconstruction

Introduction

Children born of War (CBOW) are children fathered by foreign and often enemy soldiers and born to local mothers during and in the immediate aftermath of armed conflict. CBOW have long been overlooked as a distinct war-affected group with specific lived experiences and therefore also distinct support needs; both the scholarly community and humanitarian and political actors tasked with supporting war-affected populations tended to focus on the mothers of CBOW, many of whom were survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (Carpenter, 2010). Yet, CBOW themselves, often conceived in exploitative, abusive, and sometimes violent relations (Carpenter, 2007), face significant challenges in childhood, youth and often into adulthood as a consequence of multiple intersecting adversities, including discrimination and stigmatization as well as adverse economic and social circumstances (Mochmann and Larsen, 2008; Glaesmer et al., 2012; Lee and Glaesmer, 2021).

After initial conceptual and empirical studies in the early 2000s (e.g. Carpenter, 2000, 2007, 2010; Grieg, 2001; Ericsson and Simonsen, 2005), in recent years a wealth of case studies relating to CBOW and their mothers in different geopolitical and historical contexts have led to much richer empirical data and a better understanding of the experiences of CBOW. Our Research Topic is a reflection of some of those recent research developments; it is also a reflection—in this relatively young research field—of the strength of research among early-stage researchers, many of whom are single or lead authors in the papers published here. Furthermore, the Research Topic reflects where, geographically and historically, some of the foci of international scholarship have been: Sub-Saharan Africa and the Second World War in Europe.

The strength of CBOW research is evident in several of the Special Issue's papers, some of which specifically explore the relationship between CBOW and their mothers and fathers. For instance, within the context of exploring children born in captivity linked to the Lord's

Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, Kiconco draws on extensive fieldwork in the Kitgum area of Acholi in Northern Uganda, to interrogate (re)integration politics and practices of receptor communities while also identifying patterns of exclusion and alienation as well as significant levels of stigmatization of children born in LRA captivity. Evidence clearly links these ongoing stigmatization experiences to persistent discriminatory patriarchal socio-cultural practices.

Apio, while taking these experiences of stigma and discrimination as the starting point of her research, argues that descriptions and perceptions of suffering and disadvantage are a one-sided and limit our understanding of the life course experiences of children born in captivity. She instead argues for a stronger focus on CBOW's attempts at overcoming adversity. Her mixed-methods study used the Child and Youth Resilience Measure as a self-reported determination of socio-ecological resilience among 35 CBOW youth in Northern Uganda and combined it with semi-structured interviews of a cross section of respondents. Apio analysis evidences a more nuanced picture of the way CBOW youth have dealt with experiences of stigma, rejection, ill health, poverty, and lack of economic opportunities, strongly indicating that a better understanding of the variance in resilience could hold the key to more effectively tailored support of CBOW in fragile post-conflict settings.

De Nutte et al. explore a topic that has long been recognized by humanitarian actors as central to the experiences of CBOW but has not found significant academic attention: disclosure about the CBOW provenance. Based on a series of interviews with six mothers and four fathers of children born in captivity, they explore both the parents' agency in their choices to reveal to their children, their kinship group, and their local communities the circumstances of the children's conception in captivity, while also highlighting the relational and cultural contexts that might constrain this agency. Interrogating these choices in view of the age of the child at the point of considering disclosure, the emotional impact of disclosure, identity belonging and possible future stigmatization, the paper confirms the complexity of trauma communication in this case of socially negotiated choice.

Ojok paper moves beyond the context of family, kinship group, and local community when he discusses the way children born in captivity are integrated through local primary schools in Northern Uganda. Using classroom observation to understand school policies about the integration of war-affected children more broadly and drawing on writing tasks to understand the way in which CBOW experience the implementation of these policies, Ojok argues that schools play a core role in the integration of CBOW into post-conflict societies given that in schools CBOW are both confronted with traumatic memories of the past but also experience healing if an intrinsic support structure is built to facilitate their learning and simultaneous recovery. On the basis of his case study, however, it is also evident that the school amplifies experiences—both positive and negative. Children who have experienced disadvantage—among others CBOW—respond particularly positively to a caring and nurturing environment; but conversely, they are particularly sensitive to school experiences of exclusion and stigma.

Wagner et al. in their comparative paper explore a different group of CBOW, namely peacekeeper-fathered children (PKFC) in two different peacekeeping contexts: Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Using a large mixed-methods study in which interactions between local women and girls and male peacekeepers in both countries were explored through the Research Topic of more than 5,000 self-interpreted micronarratives, they approached a question that CBOW researchers had raised but not yet answered satisfactorily, namely how do PKFC fit into the CBOW research paradigm, given the differences between armed conflict, post-war occupation, and peace support operations. Their findings demonstrate that the impact of being born as a PKFC in many respects closely resembles the experiences of CBOW in other contexts; they encounter exclusion, discrimination, and stigmatization, economic, as well as educational and social disadvantage. Therefore, Wagner et al. conclude that the inclusion of PKFC in the research and programming framework that addresses support needs of CBOW is justified and that troop-contributing countries of peace support missions ought to be included in legal and other frameworks that develop support structures for CBOW.

Moving from contemporary and recent conflict settings to historical conflicts, four papers deal with CBOW of the Second World War, the post-war occupations, and the Vietnam War. Children—understood not as persons of a particular age or developmental stage, but as offspring of a particular set of parents—in these contexts are of a more advanced chronological age and therefore research can take a more longitudinal approach.

Lee et al. interrogate the life courses of Vietnamese Amerasians by comparing the experiences of those Amerasians who stayed in Vietnam vs. those who emigrated to the US as part of several resettlement initiatives of the U.S. government. Analyzing over 370 micronarratives of Amerasians in both countries, they compare participants' self-coded perceptions to identify statistically different experiences and then use thematic analysis to complement those quantitative findings. Respondents in Vietnam declared a stronger desire to look for biological roots and confirmed that these roots impacted on their identity; in contrast Amerasians in the U.S. linked their provenance more strongly to physical and mental health challenges. Poverty was a core theme in almost all narratives, but the research also found that participants' interactions with their environment was strongly impacted by ethnicity with African American parentage amplifying stigmatization.

The remaining papers in this Research Focus explore a range of themes relating to the post-war occupations of Germany and Austria, and the children fathered by occupation soldiers. In a longitudinal study on Austrian so-called "occupation children", Schretter and Stelzl-Marx use archival and published sources as well as oral history interviews to scrutinize the changes in the way political actors and those involved in developing and implementing social policies have changed their attitudes and prioritizations of policies vis-à-vis this war-affected population over the last 75 years. They identify three phases, with CBOW initially being perceived as a (social and economic) burden for Austrian post-war society; later CBOW were hardly noticed as they were assumed to have integrated into mainstream Austrian society, only to be rediscovered, from the 1990s onwards, as the CBOW themselves became more vocal about their distinct experiences of discrimination, stigmatization and their decade-long search for their provenance in order to understand better their own roots and identity. Schretter and Stelzl-Marx argue that challenges and opportunities in the integration of these children have been tied to changes in social values and morals as well as to collective processes of coming to terms with the war and post-war period.

In their research on experiences of children of the post-war occupation, Mitreuter et al. take identity and belonging as a starting point, issues that have featured prominently in the narratives of CBOW in all historical and geopolitical contexts. In their content analysis of 122 open-ended questions among German CBOW they identify several dominant themes. Most significant among the narrative descriptors were loneliness and lack of belonging, followed by lack of emotional bonds and a sense of belonging. In addition, CBOW spoke frequently about what is often referred to in CBOW literature as a 'wall of silence' or 'conspiracy of silence' – the challenge of disclosure and the impact that non-disclosure has on the CBOW. In contrast, the research also identified instances of positive familiar relationships that led to a sense of belonging often in situations where caregivers had been open and transparent about the CBOW's provenance.

Picking up the theme of the long-term impact of being a CBOW, the final paper of our Research Topic engages with a theme of relevance to participatory researchers generally and to those working with CBOW in particular – namely the impact of research on those who support our knowledge creation through their participation in academic research. Kaiser and Glaesmer followed up their original study of German children born of the post-WWII occupation with a survey that investigated the impact of study participation on the research subjects. Utilizing a mixed-methods paper-pencil survey of 65 participants including the standardized Reactions to Research Participation Questionnaire (RRPQ) as well as questions on expectations toward participation, Kaiser and Glaesmer found that although participation itself was sometimes associated with negative emotions, participants' overall experience was positive; this was because initial expectations of study participation were met with new ways of dealing with the challenges of being a CBOW.

Taken together, the articles give a sense of the breadth and depth of research on CBOW, especially as it is driven by the next generation of CBOW researchers who have formed determined, well-trained, and multi-disciplinary group of academics building on the earlier disciplinary and interdisciplinary work. The papers illustrate the complexity of CBOW experiences as well as the significance of research to underpin tailored responses to foster post-traumatic growth and assist healing among CBOW.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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