

Dima Zito

University of Wuppertal
Wuppertal, Germany
& Psychosoziales Zentrum für Flüchtlinge Düsseldorf
Düsseldorf, Germany
E-Mail: dima.zito@gmx.de

Survivors of the Killing – Child Soldiers as Refugees in Germany

“There are things I did, that are unspeakable. People I killed come to me in the night. What gives me the power to go on living is the idea of finding a way to make up for it somehow. And maybe of finding my mother again one day.”

Statement of a former child soldier, from a therapy memo by the author

Since 2003 I have been working as a social pedagogue and therapist at the Psychosocial Centre for Refugees in Düsseldorf. One of my responsibilities has been to coordinate the youth project. One group of young clients touched me particularly: former child soldiers.

They are an especially vulnerable group of young refugees, often unaccompanied minors,

- a) who have had (traumatic) experiences as victims, witnesses and perpetrators of extreme violence
- b) who are often not recognized as entitled to asylum and who often live in Germany in a situation of structural social exclusion and insecurity for years
- c) who have special difficulty in achieving adequate psychosocial support, as many institutions and professionals fear the complexity of demands (trauma, cultural diversity, active participation in violence)

Current status of research

In the German-speaking world several autobiographies of former child soldiers have been published (Beah 2007, Keitesi 2003 et al.) Scientific research concentrates on the situation of child soldiers or on reintegration projects in the countries of origin or on the international context.¹ There is only one short qualitative study on the situation of this target group in Germany (Ludwig 2003).

Research interest

My research interest focuses on three questions:

- 1.) Processing: How do people process experiences of extreme violence, such as being involved in armed groups and conflicts, as children or adolescents?
 - 2.) Structural Conditions: What impact do the living conditions of young refugees have?
 - 3.) Psychosocial Support: What recommendations for psychosocial work with former child soldiers can be given, based on the results of the study?
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Research design and methodology

To grasp the subjective perspective of the interviewees, it is necessary to use a preferably open approach. About 15 partially structured interviews with former child soldiers are to be carried out. Each interview is to consist of two sections: an open biographical-narrative section; followed by a framework of questions concerning the research interest (cf. Rosenthal 2005). The main focus will be the current living conditions (favourable or unfavourable external conditions) and the subjective interpretative patterns and action strategies of the adolescents. Their experiences before and during the war will also be taken into consideration in order to understand different coping strategies. The interviews will be evaluated analytically in accordance with their contents (cf. Gahleitner 2005).

In addition a series of expert interviews is to be conducted with professionals working in this field in order to determine the best praxis. As there are no statistics on child soldiers as refugees in Germany, the study is to be completed with a small quantitative investigation on child soldiers as clients of counselling centres for refugees.

Theoretical background / framework

The theoretical background of this research project is mainly formed by the expertise of psychotraumatology, e.g. the concept of sequential traumatisation (Keilson 1979 / 2005), concepts of intercultural competence (Auernheimer and also by international treaties such as the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

TISSA Conference

At the TISSA conference I will describe the status quo and the first results of my research project. At the Symposium of the distance learning unit *Cultural Diversity and Migration* I propose to discuss the current method of dealing with refugees in the European Union. Refugees clearly have to migrate for existential reasons - and their migration to Europe is explicitly unwanted and opposed with a series of measures. To my mind, an analysis of the structural exclusion of this group of migrants, is important to social work for several reasons, for example:

The policy of deterrence towards refugees creates social work's clients; people who are forced to live under circumstances of marginalization for years, in conditions which can lead to the development of psychosocial problems. Social work might dampen the impacts of this policy on individuals, seeking particular solutions for clients. If, however, the clients' problems are caused by structural conditions, than political analysis and societal change are necessary. One must also ask: What impact does this policy of exclusion towards a group have on society as a whole?

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