

Christian and Muslim Children and Adolescent Victims' Armed Conflict Stress in Baloi and Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte, Mindanao

Cora Estenzo Lim

Abstract

The study investigated the effects of cultural group, gender, and developmental stage on the Christian and Muslim children and adolescent victims' experience of armed conflict stress. Utilizing a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial complete randomized design on 200 Christian and 200 Muslim children and adolescent victims of armed conflict, results showed that armed conflict stress was the general experience of all respondents. All main and interaction effects of the three variables cultural group, gender, and developmental stage significantly influenced the experience of stress among the respondents. Specifically, a significant 3-way interaction was shown in one significant interaction effect (stage and gender) among Christians and one significant main effect (stage) among Muslims. This means that among Christians, the effect of being a child or an adolescent on conflict stress varies depending on whether the child or adolescent victim is a male or a female. However, among Muslims, adolescents in general experience a higher conflict stress compared to children. Implications of the findings for the government, schools, the religious leaders, communities, and Filipino-Christian and Muslim families, are discussed.

Keywords: Armed conflict stress, Muslim and Christian children and adolescent victims, cultural group, gender, developmental stage

The author is the Chair of the Psychology Department of the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS), MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology, Iligan City. She is a Psychological Association of the Philippines (PAP) certified Clinical Psychologist, Social Psychologist and Industrial - Organizational Psychologist. She finished her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology and MA in Social and Community Psychology at Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, Philippines.

Rationale

Armed conflict in Mindanao is generally perceived as an encounter of cultures between Christians and Muslims. Various groups got involved in this conflict, which is actually about varied issues viewed from different angles at a broader dimension. But whichever way it is presented and viewed, the conflict in Mindanao is about Filipinos fighting and killing each other. It is about Christian-Filipinos against Muslim-Filipinos, or vice versa, Muslim-Filipinos against Christian-Filipinos. What is really tragic is that in all their violent encounters, the worst hit are the innocent, unarmed Muslim and Christian children and adolescent victims caught in the midst of all these clashes.

Given such a situation, one wonders how the violence has affected both Christian and Muslim children and adolescent victims, directly caught in these encounters. Specifically, the experience of armed conflict stress among these innocent children and adolescent victims in Baloi and Kauswagan, Mindanao, places where the encounters usually happen due to their strategic locations, is investigated.

In this study, armed conflict is considered a possible source of stress to the respondents. Specifically, the frequent fights between the government forces and the Muslim Filipino fighters in two strategic locations, Baloi and Kauswagan, Mindanao are known to be stressful, even possibly traumatic to both the Christian and Muslim children and adolescent victims. The stress in particular may stem from the perceived threat to one's safety in these areas. The presence of both Military and Muslim fighters in the said areas, the imposed triple red alerts and curfew hours, the frequent clashes between the two opposing groups, the reality of loved ones being killed and properties destroyed in these encounters, all of these may have brought tremendous stress, if not trauma, to the Muslim and Christian children and adolescents caught in the midst of this conflict.

The source of stress maybe similar to all victims but their perceptions of the stressor may vary. Hence, it is possible that the level of stress experienced by the respondents may also differ depending on some important variables such as physical and mental health, cultural background, gender, being a directly hit victim, (for instance, one's ancestral house was burned by the aggressors and/or a loved one was

killed in the midst of the fight between the two forces) or being an indirectly hit victim, (the victim may have experienced running away from the aggressors but one's self and loved ones as well as one's properties remained safe and intact), developmental stage as this may influence the maturity of the victims, and other possible factors.

In relation to these factors, this study aims to determine whether or not the Christian and Muslim children and adolescent victims from Baloi and Kauswagan experience stress caused by the ongoing armed conflict, the levels of conflict stress, and whether or not culture, gender and developmental stage influence the respondents' experience of stress.

Review of Literature

Stress. The endocrinologist Hans Selye first introduced the concept of stress way back in 1936. He emphasized the psychological aspect of stress. The measure of stress, then was based on the organism's bodily system, from alarm reaction to the stage of possible exhaustion in which the possible collapse of the organism's adaptive mechanism may occur. Stress, however, can be defined as any circumstance that threaten or is perceived to threaten one's well-being, and that thereby tax one's coping abilities (Weiten, 2000).

In psychological research, the application of the concept "stress" has accelerated tremendously. Even if there is an absence of stress-related physiological or endocrine factors, when an event or condition of the physical or social environment leads to avoidant, escapist, aggressive or problem-solving behavior intended to weaken or eliminate the offending condition, then stress is present. Likewise, the severity of stress depends not only on the nature of the stressor and the individual's resources—both personal and situational—but also on how the stressor is perceived and evaluated (Girdano & Everly, 1986).

Due to security reasons, three variables only possibly affecting the level of stress caused by Christian-Muslim conflict are considered by the researcher. These are the respondents' cultural group, that is, being a Christian or being a Maranao-Muslim; developmental stage, namely, being a child or an adolescent; and gender, being a male or a female.

Cultural Group and Conflict Stress. The unique situation in Mindanao may have caused tension between two cultural groups, Christians and Muslims. Christians, the dominant group, maybe perceived as a threat by the Muslims, which is the minority group. Dahrendorf's class conflict theory (Grabb, 1997), may partly explain this. Though Dahrendorf's theory focused on the consequence of postcapitalism which is characterized by diverse class structure and a fluid system of power relations, the consequences appear to be similar. Power in particular belongs to the more dominant group and this creates tension to the minority group whose adverse reactions may also create tension to the dominant group. Specifically, Christians are the group identified not only with the majority but with the more powerful government while the Maranao-Muslims are the group identified with the minority and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). It is highly possible that tension is created between the two groups. This is even highlighted during armed encounters between the military, identified with the Christians, and the MILF, identified with the Muslims, where the direct victims are the civilians, particularly the innocent Christian and Muslim children and adolescents. As a result, conflict stress may be experienced by both groups, particularly the directly hit victims. Which group however is more stressed by this conflict, is investigated in this research.

In this research, the respondents always described themselves as Maranao-Muslims rather than Muslims or pure believers of Allah. The Christians, though belonging in different Christian groups, identified themselves as Christians to emphasize that they are a group apart from the Maranao-Muslims in the area. The cultural identity alone can already bring certain culture related stress as pointed by de Silva (1999). As one of the variables investigated in this research, does being a Christian or Maranao-Muslim influence the victims' level of stress caused by Christian-Muslim conflict?

Developmental Stage and Conflict Stress or Stress brought about by Very Frightening Experiences. Another variable considered as possibly influencing the victims' level of stress caused by the conflict, is developmental stage. This is chosen based on the assumption that responses to the armed conflict may vary depending on the age and maturity level of the victims. In this research, for safety reasons (it was impossible to include the adults), the developmental stages covered were

childhood and adolescent stages only. Ages of the children ranged from 9 to 11 while the adolescents' age ranged from 13 to 16.

Adolescents are known to be very idealistic (Papalia, 1992) and this may effect their perceptions of the stressor. Children on the other hand have their own peculiar way of responding to a stressor of any kind not because they ignore the stressor but simply because they have their own way of perceiving and interpreting the world. Children likewise are also known to be resilient (Carandang, 2004).

These differences between children and adolescents may partly explain why stress reactions vary between children and adolescents. Pynoos (1994) and his colleagues examined the impact of stress on children and articulated the most detailed developmental model of potential effects of severe stress or trauma to children. Pynoos (1994) emphasized the role of retraumatizing effects on children being repeatedly exposed to original reminders of severe stress or trauma. However, Garmezy and Rutter (1985) who reviewed stress reactions in children after their having experienced severe stress concluded that in the majority of children, disturbances following a traumatic event are shortlived and argued that there was no need to establish a specific diagnostic category for stress reactions in children to parallel the category of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in adults. In contrast to Pynoos theory which puts emphasis on the seriousness of the effect of severe stress on children, Garmezy and Rutter's findings on the resiliency of children imply that age may be a factor to one's reaction to severe stress, with children being more resilient to stress, even conflict stress, compared to adolescents and adults.

These contrasting points of view are again reflected in two more contrasting views. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) cited children at being high risk for psychopathology following severe stress. However, in a related study by Pynoos et al, (1993) which may be a contradiction to his findings in 1994, age was not related to stress as shown in stress reaction index scores of his subjects.

These inconsistent findings and the researcher's initial observations with the Christian and Muslim youth in the area led to the inclusion of developmental stage as a variable in this research.

Gender and Severe Stress. The third variable considered as possibly influencing the experience of stress caused by armed conflict is gender. Gender may be associated with a person's sex. But while sex refers to the biological dimensions of being female or male, focusing on anatomical and genetic aspects of being female or male, gender refers to the sociocultural dimension of being female or male, emphasizing how people learn to think and behave as females or males (Halonen & Santrock, 1996). Likewise, gender differences between males and females refer to differences in their behaviors and mental processes (Lefton, 1991).

In terms of reactions following severe stress, girls tend to score higher than boys on self-report measures of anxiety, depression and stress reactions (Gibbs, 1989; Yule, 1992; Lonigan et al, 1991; Pynoos & Nader, 1993). Only a few unexplained exceptions were reported and it was unclear whether the differences were culturally or biologically determined (Yule, W., 1999).

These differences between males and females especially in terms of reactions to severe stress, as well as their unique experiences and expectations as males and females coming from the two cultural groups (e.g. the strong need to follow what pleases the family even if it means sacrifice of one's goals, the need to be loyal to the teachings of Islam, etc), led to the inclusion of gender as one of the variables possibly influencing the experience of stress caused by armed conflict among Christians and Maranao-Muslims in Baloi and Kauswagan, Mindanao. Indeed, do gender differences, that is, being a female or male, influence the children and adolescent victims' experience of stress caused by armed conflict?

To sum up, do the three variables, cultural group, developmental stage, and gender influence the experience of armed conflict stress among the respondents?

Conceptual Framework

The model proposed by the researcher is partly based on Lazarus and Folkman's cognitive theory of psychological stress and coping. Said theory states that a person and his environment are in a dynamic, mutually reciprocal and bi-directional relationship (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress in this specific situation is conceptualized as a relationship

between a person and his environment that is appraised by him as taxing or exceeding his resources and as endangering his well-being.

In this research, armed conflict is considered a source of stress to both Christian and Muslim children and adolescent victims. However, the cognitive appraisal of the victim is not measured. Likewise, if stress becomes too high or overwhelming, it may be categorized as trauma. This research therefore also patterns its framework to Herman's concept of psychological trauma where trauma is seen as an affliction of the powerless (Herman, 1992). The unarmed children and adolescent victims whose lives are threatened may be considered powerless caught in the middle of armed encounters between two powerful forces: the military and the MILF. Likewise, these children and adolescent victims' ordinary systems of care that usually give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning, maybe overwhelmed by traumatic events such as armed encounters between the military and the MILF.

Since these two places, Baloi and Kauswagan, have become battlefields of the military forces and the Muslim-Filipino fighters from time to time, the residents appear suspicious to strangers and are continuously on alert. During specific times when violent encounters do occur between the two forces, these places are usually declared on triple red alert. During these times, the residents are not at peace. They have to observe a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew. To go out of their houses during the curfew hours is considered very dangerous as they can be shot by any of the two opposing forces. The residents' freedom is curtailed and fear continuously grip them while living in their respective hometowns. As a result, living in these specific hometowns has become stressful to both Christian and Muslim residents, particularly the children and adolescent residents who are greatly dependent on adults to protect them. Those who had the choice had already left the place. Unfortunately, those residents who are so attached to their roots in these towns and those who are purely dependent on their livelihood in the said towns could not simply leave. They continue living in these municipalities and struggle to live a normal life together with their children and adolescent offspring. They are more careful and vigilant, and more prepared to take whatever the consequences living in these places entailed.

The main concern of this research is the children and adolescent victims' level of stress caused by armed conflict as possibly influenced by

their cultural group, developmental stage, and gender. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of this research.

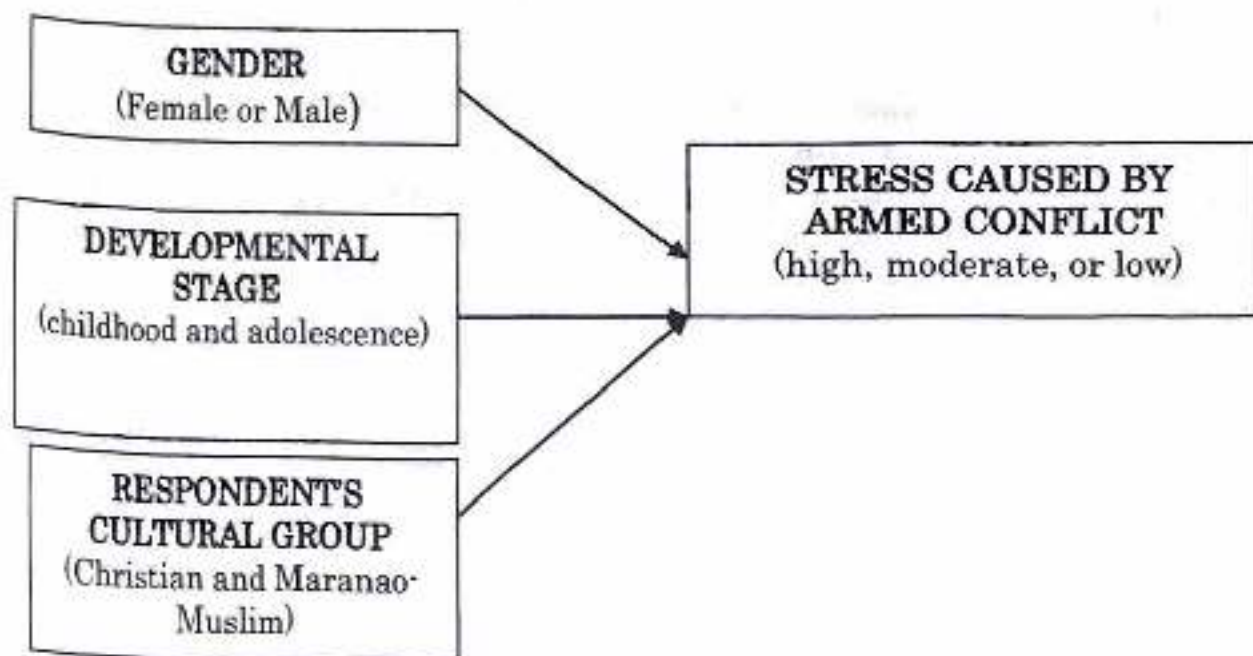


Figure 1. Respondents' cultural group, developmental stage, and gender influencing the degree of stress caused by armed conflict.

Two processes of Lazarus and Folkman's theory on stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) are considered crucial to stressful person-environment relationships and their immediate and long-term outcomes. These are cognitive appraisal and coping. This research, being Phase 1 of two related researches (Phase 2 focuses on coping), focuses only on conflict stress experienced by the children and adolescent victims of armed conflict.

Cognitive appraisal or evaluation is a process through which the person assesses whether a particular encounter with a specific situation or environment is relevant to that person's well-being and, if so, in what way (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cognitive appraisal is classified into two:

primary and secondary. In primary appraisal, the person assesses whether he or she has anything at stake in this encounter. What could be at stake are the person's values, commitment, goals and beliefs about oneself and the world that are considered precious or significant to that person in specific stressful transactions. In secondary appraisal, the person assesses what, if anything, can be done to overcome or prevent harm or to improve the prospects of benefit (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Cognitive appraisal, though not measured, can be shown in the respondent's perception of his situation as a resident in an area which has intermittently become a center of fights between the government Christian Filipino soldiers and Muslim-Filipino fighters. In figure 1, it is assumed that after evaluating the situation as a resident in a place that has become a battleground between Christians and Muslims from time to time, the respondent's stress level may vary depending on three variables—cultural group, developmental stage, and gender.

To sum up, this research explores the possible roles or functions of cultural group, developmental stage and gender in the respondents' level of stress caused by armed conflict. The respondents' evaluation of the situation as a resident in a stressful area may produce various stress levels depending on their cultural group, developmental stage and gender.

Statement of the Problem

1. Do children and adolescent victim residents of Baloi and Kauswagan experience armed conflict stress?
2. What are the levels of armed conflict stress as experienced by the children and adolescent victims?
3. Does culture/cultural group (Christian vs. Muslims) influence the victims' level of stress caused by the armed conflict?
4. Does gender (male vs. female) influence the victims' level of stress caused by the armed conflict?
5. Does developmental stage (children vs. adolescents) influence the victims' level of stress caused by the armed conflict?
6. Is there a significant interaction among cultural group, gender and developmental stage in the victims' experience of armed conflict stress?

Hypotheses

1. Culture/Cultural group does not influence the children and adolescent victims' level of armed conflict stress.
2. Gender does not influence the children and adolescent victims' level of armed conflict stress.
3. Developmental stage does not influence the victims' level of stress caused by the armed conflict.
4. There is no significant interaction among cultural group, gender and developmental stage in the victims' experience of armed conflict stress.

Method

Research Design. This research utilized the quantitative approach. Using a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial complete randomized group design, three independent variables, cultural group, developmental stage, and gender examined at two levels, and one dependent variable, armed conflict stress were investigated in the study.

Participants. The respondents, randomly sampled from Baloi and Kauswagan, totaled 400. Their actual distribution is reflected in Table 1.

Table 1. Cells and Sample Sizes Based on Respondents' Cultural Group, Gender, and Developmental Stage

	Christians		Maranao-Muslims		Subtotal	Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female		
Baloi						
Children	25	25	25	25	100	
Adolescents	25	25	25	25	100	
Subtotal	50	50	50	50		
Total	100		100			200
Kauswagan						
Children	25	25	25	25	100	
Adolescents	25	25	25	25	100	
Subtotal	50	50	50	50		
Total	100		100			200
Grand Total	200		200		400	

Measures

Information Bank. This was constructed in order to gather relevant personal data such as: age, gender, cultural group, school, year and section, and specific barangay in their place of residence.

Armed Conflict Stress Scale Questionnaire. Aimed to measure the degree of armed conflict stress, this consisted of statements describing actual experiences, feelings, thoughts, events and situations of the children and adolescent victims caught in the midst of the conflict between the military and the MILF. Respondent's perceptions of being a resident in a place which is usually a common site of violence between the military and the Muslim-Filipino fighters, were reflected in this questionnaire.

The statements for this scale included the literature and results of an open-ended interview conducted to armed conflict victims who shared similar characteristics with the target respondents of this research. Sixty victims, composed of Christian and Muslim male and female children and adolescents were interviewed on their feelings, thoughts and experiences, in general, when they were caught in the midst of the armed conflict.

In that open-ended survey, 33 statements describing Christian-Muslim conflict stress were generated. Only 27 items passed the pretest conducted to a group of 98 children and adolescent victims. Those items with very low mean scores (below 1.5) were discarded because they failed to detect armed conflict stress.

The factor analysis on the data from the same pretest sample yielded eight categories such as: the need for safety or security, preference for silence, vigilance, need for economic security, need to trust, presence of fear, need for inner peace or hope, and need for healing. These categories were finalized through the help of the researcher's fellow Psychology teachers in the University she is currently connected.

Statements were constructed in both directions and were followed by a 7-point rating scale. The scale ranged from 1 which had a verbal description equivalent of strongly disagree to 7 which meant strongly agree.

The highest score for positive statements was 7 and the lowest was 1. Negative statements were scored in reverse: 1 would get an equivalent of 7 and vice versa, 7 would get an equivalent of 1.

The Armed Conflict Stress Scale is an original instrument which attempts to measure specifically armed conflict stress. Though some measures may have been conducted already in the past to determine stress related to armed encounters, this specific Armed Conflict Stress Scale may be unique on its own as it is aimed specifically to measure armed conflict in Mindanao as experienced by Christian and Maranao-Muslim children and adolescent victims in Mindanao. Thus, it is quite difficult to correlate its results with other scales measuring stress caused specifically by armed conflict in other cultures. This limitation led the researcher to simply rely on the content validity of the scale. This was revealed in the categories of stress indicators that came out after the factor analysis such as: the need for safety and security among the victims, presence of fear, preference for silence, need to trust, need for economic security, vigilance, need for inner peace and hope as well as the need for healing. All these categories indicated presence of armed conflict stress among the respondents.

To measure the scale's reliability and internal consistency, a split-half reliability test of all items was conducted. This yielded an r of .70 which is significant at $p = .01$. This was followed by Cronbach's test of internal consistency per category which yielded the following alpha values (need for safety = .98, silence = .93, vigilance = .95, need for economic security = .97, need to trust = .95, fear = .96, need for inner peace = .95 and need for healing = .93).

Procedure

To avoid bias in this study, children and adolescent victim respondents were recruited in two areas: Baloi and Kauswagan. These places known for armed conflict, had both Christians and Maranao-Muslims as residents. Baloi was highly populated by Maranao-Muslims and Christian were a minority, whereas the other area, Kauswagan, was highly dominated by Christians and Maranao-Muslims were a minority. The recruitment in these two areas served to balance whatever extraneous variable that may be at work if the researcher would focus on one area alone.

In Kauswagan, it was relatively easy for the researcher, a Christian herself, to gather her data. But it was a real challenge to do the

data-gathering in Baloi. It was only through the help of her good friends that she got the mayor's permission to conduct her research in Baloi.

Although this researcher was granted permission by the mayor to conduct her study in Baloi, she was also warned not to go to specific places in Baloi that were considered unsafe.

The researcher's target areas however were the unsafe, remote areas of Baloi, Pacalondong and Momungan, in particular, where the actual bombings took place in early 2000s and where the military establishments are still active even at present. But security became an issue. However, a good Maranao-Muslim female friend who happens to be the school principal of Momungan, Baloi, volunteered to help her. It was through the help of this principal friend and the teachers under her that data gathering in Baloi was made possible.

After doing an initial interview with some key people as well as children and adolescents in Baloi and Kauswagan, which partly became the basis in the finalization of this research' questionnaire, an initial survey in schools was conducted by the researcher to identify possible children and adolescent participants of this research. After getting the consent of the children's parents and/or caretakers that these children may become participants of this study, random selection and recruitment followed soon. Only five (two children and three adolescents) out of the 400 identified student subjects did not make it as participants of this research. However, two other children and three adolescents easily replaced them. Thus, the targeted 400 participants composed of 200 children and 200 adolescents were still covered by the researcher.

Since the survey was conducted in schools, a letter of request to the school heads was also prepared by the researcher.

An introductory letter was written by the researcher to the respondents. A sample of the introductory letter was read by the teacher herself to the student respondents. This was done to encourage the respondents to participate and answer the questionnaires.

Even with these introductory letters that were distributed though, the researcher, together with the teachers, explained personally to the children and adolescent respondents in school the reasons why this specific research was conducted. They were also assured of the confidentiality of the research.

Everything written in the questionnaires such as direction and items, including the introductory letter and the information blank, were

translated from English into Cebuano by a native speaker then backtranslated into English by another native speaker. The Maranao translation of the questionnaires, however, was more tedious because the translations were done for both their English and Cebuano meanings. When finally an agreement was reached for their final Maranao translation, the final form of the tests was completed. This resulted to the production of the final bilingual form of the English-Cebuano questionnaires that were distributed to the Christian respondents as well as that of the English-Maranao questionnaires intended purposely for the Maranao-Muslim respondents.

To sum up, the survey instruments were put together in this order: Introductory Letter, Information Blank, and Armed Conflict Stress Scale Questionnaire. The distribution of the questionnaires was done in schools. Due to the sensitivity of the issues related to the questions, actual answering of the questionnaires by 9 to 11 year old children and 13 to 16 year old adolescent respondents were accomplished in schools under the supervision of the researcher, her assistants, and the teachers. This was done to ascertain that just in case questions or clarifications were asked by the respondents while answering the questionnaire, these questions or clarifications were answered right away. The purpose of this was to wipe away any doubt in the respondents' minds with regard to the purpose and nature of the study. While doing close supervision, respondents were likewise instructed to stay focused on answering the questionnaires individually.

In all questionnaires, coding was observed in order to maintain the respondents' anonymity and safety.

Data Analysis

Over-all mean was computed to determine the level of Christian-Muslim conflict stress. Means of each group per variable were also computed to give light on the level of stress per group. To determine the effect of cultural group, developmental stage and gender on the experience of conflict stress, 3-way ANOVA was used.

Results

Armed Conflict Stress as Experienced by the Respondents of this Study

An over-all mean of 5.33 on armed conflict stress indicates the presence of a high conflict stress among the 400 respondents in the study. When grouped according to variables investigated in the study, results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Means and Level of Christian-Muslim Conflict Stress by Cultural Group, Developmental Stage and Gender

Cultural Group	Developmental stage	Gender	Means	Stress level
Christian	Children		3.91	moderate
			3.95	moderate
	Adolescents	Male	3.89	moderate
		Female	4.01	moderate
		Male	3.93	moderate
		Female	3.74	moderate
Muslim	Children		6.73	very, very high
			6.64	very, very high
	Adolescents	Male	6.60	very, very high
		Female	6.68	very, very high
		Male	6.81	very, very high
		Female	6.81	very, very high
	Female	6.80	very, very high	

The Maranao-Muslims as a group experience the highest level of conflict stress ($X=6.73$) compared to the Christians ($X=3.91$). When compared to the Christians, based on developmental stage and gender, the Maranao-Muslims still is the group which is highly stressed.

The experience of conflict stress among the Muslim male adolescents was the highest compared to all the other subgroups. All the three factors (being a Muslim, and adolescent, and a male) combined together seem to contribute to the experience of higher level of conflict stress.

*Armed Conflict Stress as a Function of
Cultural Group, Developmental Stage and Gender*

Table 3 reflects the ANOVA results on the respondents' experience of Christian-Muslim conflict stress. A significant three-way interaction of the variables supersedes all the other significant interactions or main effects of variables.

Table 3. Summary Table for the (2 x 2 x 2) ANOVA by Cultural Group, Developmental Stage, and Gender (Conflict Stress)

Source of variation	df	Mean square	F
Cultural Group	1	561075.90	42110.72**
Developmental stage	1	270.60	20.31**
Gender	1	1306.82	98.08**
Group x stage	1	583.22	43.77**
Group x gender	1	897.00	67.32**
Stage x gender	1	68.06	5.10*
Group x stage X gender	1	607.62	45.60**
Residual	392	13.32	

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

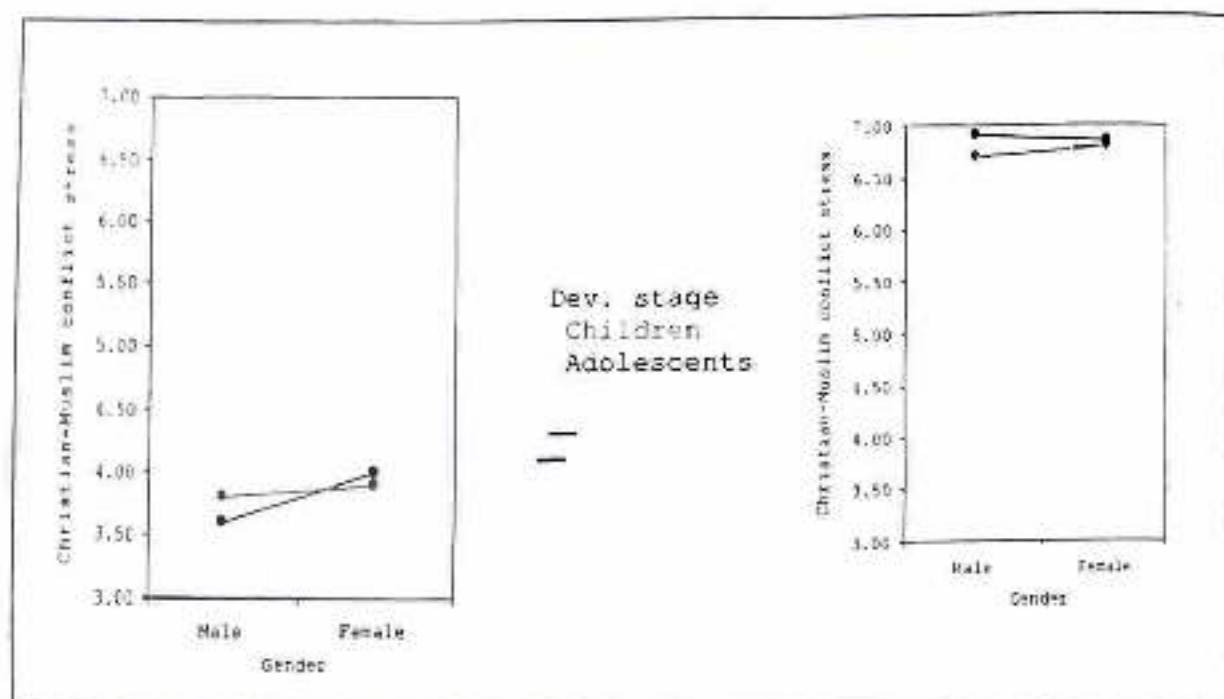


Figure 2. Shows the three way interaction effect of the variables on Christian-Muslim conflict stress.

Figure 2. A three-way interaction effect showing two graphs that reflect one interaction effect (developmental stage and gender) among Christians in graph 1, and one main effect (developmental stage) among Muslims in graph 2, on children and adolescent respondents' experience of Christian-Muslim conflict stress.

Discussion

Is the Experience Armed Conflict Stress or Trauma? Results show the presence of high armed conflict stress among the children and adolescent victims, both Christians and Muslims as a whole ($X=5.33$). Exposure to armed conflict, whether directly or indirectly, has brought tremendous stress to them. Indeed, during times of war, armed conflict does not choose its victims. Everyone, even the poor children and adolescents who are not directly involved in these actual encounters, is exposed to extreme stress. This is because armed encounters threaten one's very own existence, especially when one is caught unarmed in the middle of these violent encounters, just like what these innocent victims experienced. When one's very own existence is threatened, that can be traumatic to the individual (Herman, 1992).

Based on their own true to life experiences, no matter how careful a soldier or an MILF member may be during actual encounters, the guns cannot always choose whom to shoot, and the bullets, at the same time, cannot always choose whom to hit. As has always been the case, the innocent children and adolescent victims are not spared from accidents or deaths brought about by stray bullets. Says one wounded survivor, "*Lisud kaayo kung dunay encounter, di ka kahibalo nga naigo na diay ka.*" (It is very difficult during encounters because you do not know that you are already hit). This is just but one of the sad consequences during violent encounters between two opposing armed parties. Civilians get trapped in the midst of the fighting and suffer the consequences brought by these armed encounters. In the case of the children and adolescent respondents, some of them even experienced being used as hostages during the attack. "*Sus, katong nahostage ko sa MILF, wa ko kasabot sa akong gibati. Maayo na lang, naluwas pa gyud ko.*" (During that time when I was a hostage of the MILF, I could not understand what I felt then. Good I was still saved). The extreme stress experienced by the respondents may also stem from their experiences of witnessing their loved ones and so many innocent people seriously wounded as well as the actual burning or bombing of their properties or homes and their place in general. The worst above all for these children and adolescent respondents is the experience of witnessing their own loved ones who died during these encounters. "*Halos mamatay ko sa kaguol nga nakita gyud nako ang pagkaigo ug pagkamatay sa akong Papa.*" (I almost died in grief when I

saw my own father hit by a bullet and who died in the process). It is no wonder then that the armed conflict stress level is high. As a matter of fact, this type of stress maybe comparable to trauma (Herman, 1992) and may need to be treated by qualified psychologists.

Several symptoms of trauma are present in the respondents. As shown in the categories of stress indicators reflected in the scale, there is a strong need for safety and security among the respondents. "*Bisag asa pa ka puyo aning lugara, di ka kahibalo kung luwas na ka sa kakuyaw.*" (No matter where you stay in this area, you will never know whether you are free from danger or not). They also prefer to be silent and not get involved or take sides openly between the two forces for fear of their lives. "*Mas maayo pa maghilom na lang, para di maapil sa kagubot.*" (It is better to be silent, so that one does not get involved in anything that might endangers one's life). They are always alert. They are thinking that even after those encounters, anytime, they will be attacked. "*Halos di mi katulog sa pagbinantay lang.*" (We cannot really sleep just to keep watch). This type of vigilance may be comparable to hyper arousal which is an element of psychological trauma. This is due to the fact that the respondents never know the time of the attack or violent encounters. The likelihood of harm among the respondents is generally, always present and that includes physical violation or injury, exposure to extreme violence, or witnessing violent deaths. All these are indicators of trauma (Herman, 1992).

Other indicators of extreme stress that may be indicators of trauma are the respondents' lack of trust to strangers in general. "*Dili gyud angay nga mosalig sa bisag kinsa lang, labi na gyud kung di kaila. Espiya pa lang hinuon.*" (It is not good to trust people, especially people you do not know. They might be spies). There is also a constant presence of fear or terror in their communities. "*Hadlok kaayo mopuyo diri, galing lang, wa na juy laing kapaingnan.*" (It is so scary to stay here, but there is no other place to go). The need for inner peace and hope is also revealed. Likewise, after being exposed to these life-threatening events, there is now a need for healing among them at present. "*Hangtud karon, kumoton pa gyud akong kasing-kasing kada labay nako sa lugar nga nasunogan sa among balay. Ug hangtud karon, nagdumot pa ko sa mga nakasala, labi na sa mga military.*" (Up to this time, my heart still aches very deeply everytime I pass the place where our ancestral house was burned. And up to this time, I haven't forgiven the offenders yet, particularly the

military). Items reflecting a summary of these stressful experiences are all reflected in the conflict stress scale.

In sum, the violent encounters between the military and the MILF may be considered extraordinary because they tend to overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. They involve threats to life or a close personal encounter with violence and death. In the case of most respondents in this research, these violent encounters confront them with the extremities of helplessness and terror and even evoke the responses to a catastrophe. Likewise, these experiences of conflict stress of the respondents may reveal a common denominator of psychological trauma which is a feeling of intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation (Herman, 1992). "*Di ka kabalo unsay angay buhaton. Anang mga higayona, daw sa wala ka sa imong kaugalingon. Mawala gyud ka. Mora bag wa gyud kay mahimo bisag unsa pay imong buhaton.*" (You simply do not know what to do. During those times, you get to experience a lost state as if you are not in your right senses. You get lost. You get the feeling that no matter what you do, you cannot do anything).

These findings, it seems, point to the respondents' experiences that may range from stress to trauma. In particular, when it comes to cultural group variable with exception of females as a whole, and those with traumatic experiences during the encounters, Christians register only a moderate level of stress. This may mean that among them, the experience is truly stressful but not really traumatic. Among Muslims in general, however, the conflict stress registers at a very high level, and therefore, may be experiencing not just ordinary stress but psychological trauma instead. This may confirm one of Herman's elements of trauma which states that when stress is too high already that it threatens an individual's normal ways of coping, then the stress may be categorized as trauma (Herman, 1992). This may also imply that in situations that involved armed conflict or war between the military and the Muslim fighters, the Maranao-Muslims, whether children or adolescents, have a greater tendency to be stressed or traumatized compared to their Christian counterparts.

In a related research by Baterbonia & Zabate (2001) however among Muslim and Christian high school students in Kauswagan, it was found that anxiety was present in both groups and did not vary at all. So, whether or not they are Christians or Muslims is immaterial. Both groups

are equally anxious with regard to the violence brought about by the conflict (Baterbonia & Zabate, 2001).

The inconsistency of the findings may reveal some unique features of armed conflict. When lives are threatened, one's cultural group and ethnic identity may not matter anymore. Both groups may be equally anxious. However, when one belongs to an ethnic minority and is strongly identified with one of the groups that is involved in the actual battle, more stress factors may be at work during times of armed conflicts. This is confirmed in this research. The minority group, the Maranao-Muslims, are more stressed when compared to the dominant, majority group, the Christians. But then, since a three-way interaction exists, one should always consider the level of all the three variables, cultural group, gender and developmental stage, in interpreting the experience of conflict stress among the respondents.

The 3-way Interaction of Variables: Meaning and Significance. The three-way interaction shows that the experience of armed conflict stress among the respondents varies depending on whether they are Christians or Muslims, whether they are children or adolescents, and whether they are males or females. As shown in Figure 2, the following can be seen: a) the impact of being a child or an adolescent on a respondent's experience of conflict stress varies depending on whether a respondent is a male or a female among the Christians, and b) among the Muslims, adolescents experience a higher stress compared to the children. Specifically, among the subgroups, the highest to experience the Christian-Muslim conflict stress are the Maranao-Muslim male adolescent respondents.

Why the Maranao-Muslims as a Group? The Maranao-Muslims as a group experience the highest level of armed conflict stress ($X=6.73$) compared to the Christians ($X=3.91$). This may be partly attributed to the Muslims being an ethnic minority and less powerful as a group compared to the Christians which is a majority. Indeed, though the Maranao-Muslims have a very strong sense of ethnic identity, they are an ethnic minority in Mindanao's predominantly Christian population. Being an ethnic minority, the Maranao-Muslims may feel and may perceive themselves as being prejudiced, discriminated and overpowered by the Christians in general. These negative perceptions and feelings associated with being a minority seem to confirm Dahrendorf's class conflict theory.

Not only being Muslims expose themselves to extreme stress, being an adolescents and being males have compounded the respondents' experience of conflict stress.

In their real life situation as Muslim male adolescents, a very important factor contributing to the experience of a very high conflict stress is that they are strongly identified with the rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MILF is an organization composed of Muslims that generally aim to help their fellow Muslims but it appears to be offensive in their armed attacks to their targets, sometimes at the expense, not only of the Christian civilians but also of the Muslim civilians. "*Nakatabang ang MILF sa among mga Muslim kay mas nalig-on ang Islam pero, nakadaut pod kay di mi makalikay sa gubot.*" (The MILF has helped us, Muslims in the sense that it makes Islam strong but it is also destructive in the sense that we cannot get away from the conflict). Consequently, a feeling of ambivalence may occur among the Muslim male adolescents because while they are identified with the Muslim fighters, at the same time, they are trapped in the middle of the conflict. This strong identification with the MILF, identified as the rebel group by the Christians, though considered as defenders by the Muslims, does not save the Muslim male adolescents and the Muslims in general from being victimized during encounters.

This situation may have caused confusion and ambivalence among the Maranao-Muslim male adolescents. They are usually the first targets of MILF recruitment but if they have a choice, majority prefer not to go. Like most normal teenagers who want to enjoy life, they do not want to leave their loved ones. They do not like to go to the mountains and be actively involved in the armed conflict. This may also explain why as a subgroup, the Muslim male adolescents experience the highest level of conflict stress. It would seem that theirs is a noble calling that may be very difficult to refuse but, at the same time, it is a calling that is very dangerous and hard to accept.

Findings of this research may be related to the findings of Hilot and Uljer (2001) that Muslim college students in Iligan City seem tired with the Moro struggle. Respondents expressed a desire to put a stop to it and yet, they just cannot. This may be attributed to the danger and sacrifices associated with the struggle, aside from the college students' desire to live normal, quiet lives (Hilot & Uljer, 2001).

In summary, the general experience of the respondents was the presence of armed conflict stress. A 3-way interaction effect of culture, developmental stage, and gender significantly influenced the respondents' experience of conflict stress. As a group, Maranao-Muslims in general experienced greater conflict stress compared to Christians. Specifically, the Maranao-Muslim male adolescents experienced the highest conflict stress level.

Some Implications and Recommendations

The high level of armed conflict stress among the children and adolescent Christian and Maranao-Muslim victims maybe comparable to trauma. The high need for safety and security, preference for silence, the hypervigilance even during daytime, the presence of fear at all times, the need for inner peace and hope as reflected in the feeling of powerlessness, and the need for healing, all seem to point that conflict stress is comparable to trauma. However, between the two groups, the minority group appears to be the highly stressed group. This result maybe expected as the minority Maranao-Muslim group may have less influence and resources and may appear powerless compared to the majority Christian group. These results seem to align with Dahrendorf's class conflict theory.

Though not highlighted in the results due to the significant 3-way interaction, children consistently manifest less conflict stress compared to adolescents. This seems to confirm the theory on children's innate wisdom or ability to cope and their resiliency (Carandang, 2004).

As a whole, results show that conflict stress, which is comparable to trauma, whether mild or severe, is a function of various factors or variables. Its impact is particularly strong to the minority groups. Therapy may be of great help to the victims. But the greater challenge is thrown for the government to exert more effort to achieve peace in Mindanao. The focus should be on educating the people in Mindanao. It may probably take long but the initiators of change may eventually come from the people themselves not from without.

Peace programs offered in the universities in Mindanao should be strengthened. This may pave the way for a peaceful coexistence or dialogue between the Christians and Muslims in Mindanao. The creation

of more job opportunities for the Muslims, particularly for those who are active members of rebel groups maybe of help as well.

Scholarships for rebel returnees should also be strengthened. This may encourage the rebels to surrender their guns, return to their families, and accept the amnesty programs offered by the government. However, though some have returned, many still have remained loyal to the MILF because the government is perceived to be corrupt and untrustworthy.

Among all the variables investigated, culture is the highest contributor to the experience of armed conflict stresspointing to Maranao-Muslims as the ones experiencing the highest conflict stress. It may be helpful then if cultural minorities in this case, the Maranao-Muslims, especially the male adolescents, will be given special assistance, guidance and education by the government and religious leaders to equip them with the right education, proper skills and values.

Conclusion

Children and adolescent victims experienced high armed conflict stress as a whole. The stress maybe comparable to trauma and it varies depending on whether they are Christians or Muslims, children or adolescents, and males or females. Maranao-Muslims as a cultural group experience the highest armed conflict stress, particularly the Maranao-Muslim male adolescents.

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