ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Conceptualizing Peace: A Qualitative Study Among Afghan Adolescents Living in Intractable Conflict

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Purpose: Adolescents living in protracted conflict areas have mostly been perceived as passive recipients of the impact of events in their surroundings who are rarely considered agents of social transformation. But a growing body of research on adolescents' psychological development indicates that adolescents actively perceive concepts like peace and their roles and responsibilities toward creating conditions for peace. Applying the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory, this study focuses on understanding how adolescents from Afghanistan with lifelong exposure to intractable conflict conceptualize peace.

Methods: The study was conducted in the Bagrami, Paghman and Dih Sabz districts of Kabul City in Afghanistan. A semi-structured open-ended questionnaire was used to interview 63 male and female adolescents aged 13–19. The participants belonged to different ethnic groups, such as Pashtun, Hazara and Tajik. An inductive approach was applied to analyze the data using thematic analysis.

Results: Three distinct themes about peace emerged from the data: peace based on individual emotions, social relations, and larger societal structures. Peace for adolescents had both personal and inner and social or outer dimensions. Afghan adolescents' conceptualization of peace is primarily based on their interaction with the micro-system. Home and family provided perceived calmness and normalcy, which characterized peace as individual emotion. Social relations, often determined by good communication, community cohesiveness, and social support between family members, neighbours, and ethnic groups, constituted adolescents' concepts about peace. Adolescents also demonstrated awareness of larger societal structures, such as the role of community leaders and government in ensuring perceived safety and security, forming their concepts of peace.

Conclusion: Adolescents have meaningful voices capable of forming perceptions about peace. The microsystem of an adolescent's environment has a significant influence in the conceptualization of peace. This study contributes to expanding the knowledge on the underpinnings of peace by relating to developmental and peace psychology.

Keywords: perception of peace, thematic analysis, emotion, social relations, phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory

Introduction

Adolescents have often been overlooked as agents of social transformation in conflict settings. The available literature on adolescent development in conflict depicts them as passive receivers of the impact of events surrounding them. A growing body of research suggests the adolescent phase is a developmental period when socialization and identity formation is active,[1] making it an ideal time for conceptualizing issues like peace. Moreover, the adolescent phase is the only period in human development with a cognitive fluidity that ensures an increased capacity for abstract and propositional reasoning and perception formation.[2] Psychological factors like self-identity and one's position in the worldview impact perception.[3] Johnson et al examined adolescents' attitudes about peace and social justice in volatile parts of Tanzania.[4] The results yielded that while being exposed to instability and violence, certain factors such as positive life conditions, opportunities for self-development, purpose in life and self-identity help construct the meaning of peace. Similarly, Taylor et al conducted a study on the influence of adolescents' identity on their perception of peace,

trust and forgiveness in transitional post-accord societies.[5] The results showed that the strength of in-group social identity had a moderating role in forming the concepts of peace, forgiveness, and building trust between groups previously involved in the conflict. However, the literature does not inform much about the development process of adolescents exposed to intractable conflict and subsequent concept formation. Such a dearth of knowledge about conceptualizing issues like peace hinders the attempts at conflict transformation and peace-building in situations like Afghanistan. According to Bar-Tal et al, children and adolescents'[1] political socialization in the context of intractable conflict shape their political conduct as adults, including their views on peace and war.[6] Also notable is Bar-Tal's assertion that children and teenagers go through this socialization process earlier and quicker than was previously believed in the context of an intractable conflict. Moreover, previous generations transfer narratives of the ethos of conflict and collective memory to children and adolescents, supporting the continuous reproduction of conflict and violence.[7] It is, thus, imperative to understand the impact of intractable conflict on adolescents' socio-cognitive development phenomenon and, subsequently, their conceptualizations of peace.

The review of the existing studies showed that the Socio-Cognitive Development Approach has formed a theoretical basis for research on young people's construction of ideas regarding peace, conflict and violence. Cooper's pioneering study in 1965 adopted a cognitive-developmental approach.[8] To mould themselves into the current knowledge structures and adapt to their circumstances, young people are seen as actively seeking information and new experiences. The social-cognitive developmental paradigm used by Hakvoort[9] is comparable to Piaget's theory of cognitive development.[10] The study focuses on how children's conceptualization relates to their cognitive development or capacity for role-taking. Hakvoort elaborated, "It is not anticipated of young people to be able to distinguish between their perspective and that of others. So, it won't be until adolescence that there will be a distinction made between peace as the absence of war (i.e., positive peace) and peace as dynamic, interactive processes. (i.e., positive peace)"[9] Raviv, Oppenheimer and Bar-Tal propose that peace, like any other knowledge, is based on the personal construction of the idea determined by a legion of individual and environmental variables.[11] Peace researchers have emphasized the influence of socio-cultural structure on the evolution of ideas related to social phenomena such as peace and war.[12] Hashemi and Shahraray stressed that there are two ways socio-cultural context influences cognitive development.[12] First, it ascertains the content of the thought and, secondly, influences the thought process. Values develop as a result of interaction with socio-cultural context.

More recently, Velez conducted extensive studies on Colombian adolescents' process of making meaning about peace during the transition from conflict to peace.[1] He identified adolescents as having the potential to contribute in transitional settings and interpreting peace as beginning in the individual but depending on interpersonal relations and social environment. Fakhri and Buchori conducted a study on adolescents' intrapersonal peacefulness, which explained that despite the experiences of violence, the adolescents can construct an intrapersonal meaning of peace in a conducive cultural context.[13] Similarly, in studying Cypriot children's concept of peace, Ummanel explained that Greek Cypriot children related peace with space, environment and aesthetic perception.[14] In contrast, Turkish Cypriot children concentrated on behaviours, relations and emotions. Lopatovska et al studied Ukrainian adolescent's experiences of "Russia-Ukraine 2022 War" and elaborated that children's resilience supported by families, communities, their ability to talk to friends and maintaining a structure of daily life contributed in forming a sense of peace amidst the chaos of war.[15] Cairns et al found that older Irish adolescents had a multifaceted understanding of peace, relating it to the concepts of human rights, while younger children's perspectives aligned with previous studies which defined peace as the absence of conflict.[16] de Souza et al studied children's views on peace, war and violence in Southern Brazil.[17] Their study supported the perspective of peace as dependent on the social context and environment in which children and adolescents are placed. Shoshani's study on positive psychology's impact on adolescent's ideas of peace found that positive psychology-based interventions given to adolescents with exposure to conflict and violence by different social structures such as youth development organizations positively impacted their ideas of peace, which also increased their compassion and hopefulness about peace.[18] The results of these studies aligned with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory which posits that individuals are shaped by their interactions with their environment.[19] The studies based on ecological perspectives identify and analyze the factors within an individual's environment which may contribute to their perception of social phenomena. The Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems theory (PVEST) propagated by Spencer[20] asserts that the processing of phenomena and experiences is not limited to the impact on an individuals' self-esteem but

also influences meaning-making. PVEST emphasizes that it is not only the experience but also one's perception of experiences in various cultural contexts that influences how one perceives oneself. PVEST posits that individuals develop attitudes, behaviour, and identities as they process experiences in different contexts. A phenomenological approach provides insight into how adolescents attach meaning to their experiences to form perceptions about issues such as peace. The phenomenological approach and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provide a critical integration.[20,21] It situates development within multiple contexts, influencing concepts and behaviors related to peace and violence.[1] By highlighting individual interpretation, developmental outcomes are not merely treated as a result of context but rather the individual's response to their evolving cognitive capacities, changing biology and maturation.[21] PVEST highlights that youth process events and discourses in their immediate environment which includes family and social networks.[22] As Spencer explains people form societies, while societal structures, histories and processes contribute to psychological development.[20] Such a combination allows for the analysis of an individual's ability to understand societal expectations, stereotypes and biases while also acknowledging the role of developmental changes in social cognition, different levels of social content and stage-appropriate social experiences that differentially influence meaning making processes across the life course.[20,21] PVEST situates the self in the larger micro and macro systems and illuminates the impact of feedback from the environment particularly related to individual differences. Given the innovative cognitive processes that are linked with adolescence and the degree of recursive thinking that they enable, it is especially crucial to understand meaning-making processes during this stage of development.[2] This study takes a deeper look at adolescents' conceptualization of peace taking into consideration not just the social-cognitive perspective but also integrating a phenomenological approach which is about individual's meaning making about their experience.

Although the literature on the psychological effects of exposure to violence and armed conflict on children and young people has developed over many years, it is still significantly constrained.[23] The research on young people's concept of peace started in the 1960s when Alvik[24] and Cooper[8] conducted a pioneering study of children and adolescents understanding peace and war. However, the interest in this topic has waxed and waned with global political events.[25] The scarcity is profound in the case of adolescents living in intractable conflict situations like Afghanistan, where human development issues have received little attention.[26] This knowledge gap could have far-reaching consequences because half of Afghanistan's population is under eighteen.[27] The peace prospect of Afghanistan depends on how this group conceptualizes peace. To the best of our knowledge, most of the literature related to peace in Afghanistan discussed only the "peace process" and "peace deals", carried out at the elite level without any mention of the perceptions of the general population. This raises the question of whether the peace process and peace deals are representative of people's conceptualization of peace. And if the perception of peace of young people is not factored in, are such peace processes likely to last? As McEvoy-Levy[28] describes, the longevity of peace depends on how the young perceive it, whether the following generation accepts or rejects it, how they are socialized throughout the conflict or peace process, and how they view what that peace could accomplish.[29] The prioritization of various groups' expectations would lay a foundation for peace which would be more acceptable to people.[30] This study is based on the conviction that incorporating the perspectives of young people into peacebuilding efforts is one of the most effective ways of ensuring their support and participation in the peacebuilding process. Considering youth experiences and conceptualization of peace is pivotal because sidelining their perceptions and needs could prepare the ground for a renewed conflict.[31] Moreover, different forms of violence that occur in intractable conflict situations have a profound effect on adolescents which require intervention.[23] Their views are pivotal not only for promoting their psychological health but for the future transformation of intractable conflict into peacebuilding efforts. Adolescents are social and political actors whose perceptions about peace and conflict play a vital role in conflict and violence being repeated and reproduced.[32]

In an attempt to explore Afghan adolescents' conceptualization of peace, this study aimed to answer the research questions: 1) How do Afghan adolescents with lifelong experience of intractable conflict conceptualize peace? 2) How do their context and environment influence Afghan adolescents' conceptualizations of peace?

These research questions aim to provide an empirical basis to expand the knowledge on conceptualizations and the meaning of peace for adolescents. It will also add value to theories related to adolescents' cognitive and social identity development in developmental psychology.

Situating Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been in constant conflict and war since 1979 when Soviet troops invaded following the internal conflict between anti-communist Islamic guerrillas and the Afghan communist government.[33] While the Soviet forces tried to eliminate the Mujahideen rebels by bombing rural areas, the capital Kabul fell into chaos. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1989, the Soviet troops left, and a puritanical faction of Mujahideen who called themselves Taliban seized the capital Kabul and swiftly took control of the country.[34] The then Taliban government's refusal to fulfil the demands of the United States government to extradite Osama bin Laden further augmented the conflict in Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden, the leader of an Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda which had close ties with the Taliban, was accused of launching terrorist attacks against the United States, including the devastating strikes on 11th September, 2001.[35] Subsequently, United States special operation forces launched a series of military operations in Afghanistan and drove the Taliban from power. From 2001 to 2021, a U.S backed government was in control in Afghanistan and while the fighting with the Taliban continued and common people suffered the devastating effects of war. However, this government fell on 15th August 2021 when the United States and Allied forces decided to pull their troops out of the country. Although the invasion by another country has ended, the conflict and violence continue. There is a deep division along ethnic lines and, subsequently divisions based on language. The most prominent division is between people of Pashtun ethnicity who speak Pashto language and people of other ethnicity who speak other languages like Dari (referenced from interview data).

Materials and Methods

This study applied a qualitative research method. A qualitative method allows a framework within which participants can express their understandings in their terms while the researcher can benefit from the explanation of social and psychological behaviour which has not been previously understood.[36] When examining basic social and psychological processes, qualitative study offers a systematic approach to discovering significant aspects of human experience that remain inaccessible with traditional verification methods.[37] The usefulness of qualitative methods was particularly apparent when examining the phenomenon of peace represented in various ways in the literature. With this purpose, semi-structured interview guides with open-ended questions were developed to collect qualitative data. Research Assistants interviewed adolescent boys and girls in the Bagrami, Paghman, Dih Sabz districts of Kabul in Afghanistan. Male and female research assistants were recruited for field data collection, translation and transcription. Research Assistants were undergraduate students studying in universities in Kabul who were contacted through the social network of the lead researcher. The research assistants attended online training on qualitative data collection, conducting semi-structured interviews, principles of do no harm and practicing interviews with the lead researcher before collecting data. Wherever possible, the lead researcher conducted the interviews online while the research assistant supported them with translation. In a few cases where internet connectivity was impossible, the research assistants conducted the interview using a language preferred by the participant and transcribed and translated the data into English. The researcher provided remote support through daily briefings and addressed methodological issues during data collection.

Participants

Sixty-three adolescents aged 13–19 participated in the interviews, as shown in Table 1. Both male (n=35) and female (n=28) adolescents participated in the interviews. Interviews were conducted in their homes or schools, ensuring the participants' privacy. At least one guardian was present at a visible distance while the interviews were conducted. Participants and guardians were given informed consent forms. The contents of the form were also read by research assistants to ensure that they understood major points such as voluntary participation, their right not to answer any particular question and their right to leave the interview at any point. The participants and the guardians were both informed before the interview that their responses would be anonymized and published as research data. The participants and guardians were also assured that their identities would remain fully confidential and their names and other identifying details would not be disclosed anywhere. To anonymize the identity of the participants, each participant was assigned a code while storing the data. Research assistants used their personal and social networks to contact the potential

Table I Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=63)

Demographic Variables	n	%
Gender		
Male	35	55.5
Female	28	44.5
Age		
13–15 years	12	19.0
15–17 years	24	38.1
17–19 years	27	42.9
Education		
Uneducated	15	23.8
Primary school	19	30.2
Secondary school	15	23.8
High school	14	22.2

participants. The majority of the participants came from middle or lower socio-economic backgrounds. The participants had a range of educational backgrounds. Six boys and nine girls had never been to a school or attended any literacy or educational programs. Of the sixty-three adolescents, fifty-four reported directly experiencing or witnessing conflict and violence. The details on demographics and educational background are presented in the tables below. Table 1 presents the demographic details of participants by sex, age and educational background:

The participants of the study included both males and females. The team tried to balance the number of participants according to their sex. It was, however, challenging to approach adolescent girls for an interview while adolescent males were eager to participate. Thus, boys slightly outnumber girls in the study.

For the convenience of the data analysis process, the age range of the participants was divided into three categories. Adolescents aged 13 to 15 were considered younger, while those aged 16 to 17 and 18 to 19 were considered older. The mean age of the participants was 16 years.

Table 1 presented above also presents the educational background of the participants. Six boys and nine girls had never attended a school or formal educational program. The number of boys who had attended secondary and high school was higher than girls. The research assistants were able to contact the participants with various levels of educational backgrounds.

The research team included adolescents from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. During the sampling process, the team made the best efforts to include ethnically diverse participants, representing the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan as presented in Table 2:

However, owing to various limitations, the participants mainly represented Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik and two other communities who spoke Pashto and Dari languages. Kabul has a diverse population of people from different ethnic groups who hail from various provinces. This diversity allowed the inclusion of various ethnic groups in a particular geographical location within Kabul.

Procedure

The Ethical review committee of the Department of Psychology, School of Philosophy of Wuhan University approved this research. The Ethical approval for the study was also obtained from Jahan University in Afghanistan where the data

Table 2 Ethnicity of the Participants (N=63)

Ethnicity	Male	Female
Pashto	17	14
Hazara	9	9
Tajik	7	4
Pashayi	2	0
Uzbek	0	1
Total	35	28

was collected for the study. The data collection began in April 2022 and lasted until August 2022 in different districts of Kabul, Afghanistan. Consent forms were given to the participants and their parents or guardians with a detailed explanation of the study. Only participants whose parents and guardians gave written consent for the interview were included in the further step. Due to the idiographic approach taken in this study, the researchers were justified in choosing a small sample size that allowed for in-depth analysis of each case while also allowing individual cases to have a discernible voice within the study. Random sampling method was applied for selection of participants. According to Robinson random sampling is the practice of choosing cases using some sort of random selection mechanism from a list of all or most cases within a targeted sample population.[38] Participants were randomly selected based on their age. The research assistants approached the schools and community leaders of the targeted communities who guided them in finding the individuals who met the age criteria of adolescents. At schools, the teachers first informed the students meeting the criteria about the research and whoever voiced their agreement to participate were further contacted by Research Assistants. The Research Assistants then met their parents and guardians to seek their consent and fix the date and time for interview in their presence. In communities, the Research Assistants visited the potential participants at their homes and talked to their parents or guardians seeking consent for participation and requested their presence during the interview. Participants were interviewed individually in a private setting, ensuring their privacy and safety throughout the interview. The interviews lasted between 30–50 minutes. A semi-structured interview questionnaire was used for collecting the data. The questionnaire included 13 main questions and other probing questions. The questionnaire was designed based on the research questions of this study and the related literature. A pilot study was conducted among six adolescents (3 male and 3 female) in Kabul before the questionnaire was used for main data collection. These interviews have not been included in the main data analysis but they helped in determining whether the questions yielded required answers and established the trustworthiness of the semi-structured questionnaire. Furthermore, basing the questionnaire on existing literature provided clues to researchers about which questions were "good to ask" for getting the information required to answer research questions. Such a triangulation helped in determining the rigor of the instrument used for data collection. Besides demographic details, the interview covered topics such as the adolescent's experience of conflict or violence, perspective on the situation in Afghanistan, participant's descriptions of peace, their opinion on contribution to peace and the possibility of peace in Afghanistan. Each participant has been given a pseudonym while quoting the data in the findings section, and all possible measures have been followed to conceal the identity of the participants.

Analytic procedure

The interviews were conducted in Pashto or Dari language depending on the ethnicity and language preference of the participant. Most of the interviews were conducted online where the research assistant (male research assistant for male participant and female research assistant for female participant) would place the video or audio call in the participant's presence. The interviewer would ask questions in English, and the research assistant translated it to the participant. The response of the participant was then translated into English by a research assistant. English version of the interview was coded using thematic analysis methods.

The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis is a tool in qualitative research methods that yields patterns through codes from interview data.[39] The researcher read each interview multiple times. The initial reading included coding the general topics related to research questions. Next, specific parts of the interviews were identified and excerpted to reread. These excerpts were coded again for details on the conceptualization of peace. The researcher coded each interview separately. The codes were inductively analyzed and grouped into larger themes. The team discussed these themes to ensure coherency, distinctiveness and salience within the data set.[39] This method was considered the most appropriate because the study aimed to use an inductive approach to identify adolescents' concepts and meanings they assigned to peace. The focus was on the participant's perspectives on peace rather than the researcher's interpretation of the topic. However, to an extent, the study is guided by a social constructivist outlook, meaning that the knowledge we gain about the world has to be processed through human consciousness, where the influence of subjective knowledge cannot be ruled out.[40] The researcher is aware that despite best efforts to present the adolescents' perspective as objectively as possible, there could be an influence of the researcher's subjective perception and personal background in interpreting the results. The concept of peace is viewed as a portion of the social world constructed mentally, influencing people's convictions about the world, attitudes and behavior. Thus, adolescents' conceptualization of peace is analyzed with their relation to social context and reality. Findings from all the interviews have been presented in the results. While citing the excerpts selectively, the pseudonym, age and gender has been mentioned in the results section. All the names used for quoting the interview excerpts are pseudonyms.

Results

The main question asked during the interview was, "What does peace mean to you? Or How would you describe peace"?. Based on the thematic analysis of the responses, Afghan adolescents' conceptualization of peace was identified as having three distinct themes: peace based on individual emotions, peace based on social relations and peace based on larger societal structures. For analysis, adolescents aged 13–15 will be considered younger adolescents, and ages 16–19 will be considered older adolescents. Each finding will be presented with a distinction between these two groups. While 11% of the younger adolescents connected the meaning of peace to negative peace as the absence of conflict, war or violence, older adolescents refuted the notion of the absence of violence as peace. The findings are presented according to the major identified themes in Table 3 below:

Peace Based on Individual Emotions

Peace was often described as positive emotions such as happiness, joy, satisfaction and hopefulness. Adolescents believe peace is the emotion felt within oneself, but the conditions surrounding an individual influence the emotion. Younger adolescents described peace in terms of happiness, laughter and feeling good. Older adolescents aged 17–19 mentioned inner calmness, hopefulness for the future and a feeling of normalcy. The older adolescents often described "having composure" as peace. Home and its surroundings were often mentioned as the only place where the participants experienced the peace they described.

Table 3 Description of Identified Themes and Prevalence Within the Data (N=63)

Themes	Description of Themes	Prevalence
Peace based on individual emotion	Peace is an inner experience felt by an individual. Calmness, happiness, hopefulness, and balance were attributes of individual emotions related to peace	83%
Peace based on social relations	Peace depends on the dynamics of relationships with others. Peace comes from good relationships with family members, relatives, friends, neighbours and teachers. Peace is built by maintaining good interaction between these relations	89%
Peace based on larger social structures	Peace comes from individual's perception of his or her position in society, ethnic group, one's worldview and feelings of safety and security provided by community and government. It includes social context, family condition and one's surroundings.	92%

My father plays cricket with us sometimes and tells us stories of heroes. It makes me feel happy when I am with him. I think it also makes me feel peaceful when I am happy and excited. Like when I am happy, I am not scared, and I do not feel bad, making me feel easy. I think that is peace. (Asim, 13 y/o, Male)

For me feeling that I am in control of myself would be peace. If I have a composure and I feel calm that is peace. But you know it also depends on where you are. You can easily feel like this when you are at home and with family. But outside you are not in control of yourself because you are scared of being harmed anytime, even when buying fruits in the bazaar. So you see it is important to feel calm and composed to feel peace. (Haroon, 17 y/o, Female)

In Afghanistan, our home is the only place where we feel a sense of peace. The environment of our home and the surrounding keeps us at ease where we feel the most secure. At home, I do not need to feel scared or worried. I do not need to be always alert, like when I go out. That is peace for me. (Nagma, 18 y/o, Female)

There was no bombing or conflict in our community for many years. Ours was one of the safest neighbourhoods in Kabul. Although there was conflict and risk of bombings in the rest of the city, our neighbourhood was, you know, you could say calm which also made us feel calm and at peace. We did not need to feel worried all the time. It was so calm that you could barely hear a sound after people went to work in the mornings. I can describe that as peace. (Sayed, 18 y/o Male)

Afghan women will feel peace in their hearts if they can do everyday things that people do, like going to school and working to earn a living without fearing anyone saying anything. You know a sense of normalcy that you have a routine you can follow like ordinary people. But Afghan women are constantly being judged. It is worse if you are from Dari speaking ethnic group. Every man will think of her as not having a good character. Only when such a mentality is eradicated will women and girls feel peace. (Aafhak, 19 y/o, Female)

Younger and older adolescents first located peace within themselves but often referred to their surroundings and context. The first associations of peace were linked to their immediate reality and the emotion it elicited. Peace was often related to a place which triggered emotions like happiness, feeling good and feeling hopeful. Different types of emotions connected to peace were mentioned throughout the interview. Some emotions resulted from the events in the surrounding environment, while others were mentioned depending on the individual's internal state. Some emotions related to peace depended on other agents of socialization in the adolescent's surroundings. These emotions depended on one factor in the adolescent's ecology with which they interacted regularly.

The need for belonging and emotions like love and affection was also mentioned as necessary components to experience peace, which indicates the possibility of peace being interpreted based on the third level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Love and affection were mentioned as something that should prevail even in conflict. The younger adolescents mainly mentioned the need for love and affection between close family and friends as sources of peace, while older adolescents expanded their sphere of emotion to love for their community and nation.

The older participants were aware of freedom as a human right and a necessary condition for peace. Internet access has allowed adolescents to form a worldview with freedom. It has allowed adolescents to constantly compare their situation to the information they consume about other countries. The adolescents often talked about a country where there was freedom and, as a result, was peaceful.

I think it is important to be allowed to say what you want. If you keep all your thoughts and opinions inside, it starts feeling very heavy. It feels like something is pulling you down like when you carry heavy things and try to move. But people here can get killed if they spoke things that others don't like. It disturbs your peace. (Abdullah, 18 y/o, Male)

Furthermore, the sense of freedom necessary to experience peace was closely linked to ethnic identity. The participants from minority ethnic groups mentioned feeling restricted because of their ethnic identity and the language they use. Afghanistan has a multi-ethnic population and perceived freedom varied based on their experience of belonging to different ethnic groups. The participants from the Hazara ethnic group mentioned feeling restricted in following their traditions and way of life, which impacts their perceived freedom.

I am a Hazara. Our traditions are different from other groups like Pashtun, and we look different from other people. My elders tell me not to venture too far into the city where no people of my ethnicity are because of fear of being harmed. This makes me feel like I have less freedom than my schoolmates who are not Hazara. (Mirza, 16 y/o, Male)

I am preparing to go to medical school after high school. But I have been told not to make my Hazara identity too obvious in the application because there is a risk of being kicked out of the application process. Such is the discrimination that we face. It makes me very restless; it affects our sense of freedom. How do we feel peace at such a point? (Shabnum, 17 y/o, Female)

The participants from Tajik ethnic groups had similar experiences with restrictions and a sense of freedom. The Tajik participants often mentioned how speaking their language, Dari, is a cause of insecurity for them, affecting individual experiences of peace. The participants reported that their families often cautioned them to be mindful of the dangers surrounding them when leaving their house for school or work. Such experiences were reported to impede a sense of freedom, impacting participants' perception of peace.

Peace Based on Social Relation

Social relations formed a vital part of peace described by the adolescents. Younger and older Afghan adolescents situated their experience of peace on their relationships with others, such as family members, friends, relatives, ethnic groups and social networks. Younger adolescents and female participants linked a sense of security felt in the presence of family, friends and relatives to peace. The theme of interpersonal relations recurred across most of the interviews as a deterministic component of peace. Afghan societies are largely collectivistic where many generations live together in a family. The ideal relationship between family members was explained as being harmonious, balanced, supportive of each other, and most importantly having opportunities for dialogue to prevent disputes and misunderstandings between family members.

I feel peace when I am with my family because I know they will protect me from danger. When there is chaos outside the home, we can stay in the home where our fathers and brothers make us feel safe. We must maintain a good environment in our home with love and affection among family members. (Safa, 13 y/o, Female)

We Afghans have big families. It is normal to have disagreements when many people live together. Sometimes I think Afghanistan has so much conflict because different kinds of people live in the same country. There are Pashtuns and then there are Tajiks, Hazara and other people who speak Dari. There are disagreements between them but there is no space to resolve the disagreements. I think we need opportunity to speak to each other and have good relations. It could make us feel less threatened in the presence of each other which would bring peace among people like talking could solve disagreements in the house. (Mirza, 18 y/o, Male)

A good relationship with neighbors and people around us makes us feel at peace. (Arif, 17 y/o, Male)

In Afghanistan, there is so much insecurity and instability outside. The only place where we can feel peace is with our families inside our homes. (Hafiza, 18 y/o Female)

A close relation with neighbors, friends and other people of our community is important because we live around them so we are responsible to make each other feel secure and peaceful. (Imran, 19 y/o Male)

The adolescents' free association with peace reflected the collectivistic social fabrics of Afghan society, such as feeling happy around another person, valuing other person's needs, playing with friends and siblings, sharing food with neighbours when needed and older siblings taking care of younger ones. The adolescents mainly associated peace with harmonious social relations and community cohesion. Younger adolescents described peace as not fighting with neighbours and listening to friends when they are sad, while older adolescents mentioned maintaining a harmonious relationship with neighbours and friends, building trust between people, forgiving each other for mistakes, showing support for neighbours during difficult times like death in a family and helping each other in need. The adolescents elaborated on how they view interpersonal relations as a basis for experiencing peace. Fiza (14 y/o, Female), who lives with a single mother and six siblings, explained:

Sometimes my mother needs to go away for work. If she has to go away for a long time, the neighbourhood grandma feeds my baby brothers and sisters food. I know that I can trust her if we have needs or problems. This grandma makes me feel safe and secure because I know she will help us in need. (Fiza, 14 y/o, Female)

According to the adolescents, "Peace cannot persist in you if you do not feel good about someone around you." Younger adolescents explained, "You cannot feel peace if you have fights with your brothers and sisters or friends". Older adolescents explained, "If you cannot trust your neighbor or if you have a doubt that your neighbor can harm you then you will feel disturbed and that will take away your peace."

Older adolescents of 17–19 years also mentioned tolerance of "other people" as a necessary trait of peace. The mention of "other people" indicated that the older adolescents had developed an understanding of the existence of outer groups which were different from their own. Older adolescents expressed an awareness of language and ethnicity-based divisions in Afghan society and mentioned tolerance to each other as a trait essential for maintaining peace by developing interpersonal relations.

We need tolerance with people who do not speak our language and belong to different groups. Pashto-speaking people and Dari-speaking people do not like each other. But peace will never be between us if we do not tolerate each other's presence in our communities and neighbourhoods. (Anwar, 19 y/o Male)

I think we should forget what was done many years ago and try to compromise with each other to have good relations in the future. Dari [speaking] people and Pashto [speaking] people still do not like each other because of the fights many years ago when even my great-grandfather was not born. We have all suffered from conflict, so we should not fight with each other anymore. We should be friends no matter which ethnic groups they belong. (Sabnam, 19 y/o, Female)

The older adolescents had a clear opinion that even if there is no harmony between these ethnic groups, there should be tolerance. They believed that tolerance would create a foundation for a harmonious relationship. Peace had collective dynamics attached to its meaning, reflected in adolescents' opinions that peace needs a collaborative effort.

Most participants mentioned learning about peace from their interaction with older family members or hearing them talk about peace and social issues. A few participants mentioned that "peace" is regarded as a basic necessity because many traditional Afghan greetings and blessings given by elders include the word peace.

My grandfather often told us the story of his youth before the Russians attacked us in 1979. He said there were no big threats in the streets. We were like any other country with normal things to do like work and study. He said there was no chaos in the streets of Kabul like now. That is my first memory of hearing about the idea of peace. (Anwar, 18, Male)

Verbally, Afghans use the word 'peace' a lot, but in reality, our lives have no peace. If someone dies, they will say, 'May peace be upon him or her'. When elders give blessings, they say may you have peace. But in fact there is no peace. We need to be always careful and alert even when we are sleeping. If peace were upon me, I would not have to feel scared to step out of the house. (Arush, 17, Female)

Peace Based on Larger Societal Structures

Younger and older adolescents mentioned the government when discussing whose responsibility it would be to ensure the peace they described. The older adolescents mentioned their roles and the roles of community leaders and authorities in ensuring a sense of security which would enhance the experience of peace. In this sense, adolescents embedded peace in stability and safety provided by larger social structures.

The government needs to provide security in the country so people feel safe on the streets. The fear of being harmed at any time must be reduced to experience the calm and normalcy needed to feel at peace. If we needed to go out after dark, our mothers and sisters needed to pray for our safe return home. Such an insecurity needs to be eliminated for an experience of peace and one person cannot do it. It has to be done by government or authorities. (Nawaz, 18, Male)

> I think we are all responsible for peace. If there are misunderstandings within the community, we should try to resolve it before it becomes a big fight. It is like when you have dispute with your friend. If I fight with someone, it might affect the whole neighbourhood. So each person is responsible for peace. (Shabana, 16, Female)

The older adolescents mentioned human rights, personal security and stability as a need which is pivotal to peace. The older adolescents had an awareness of the ongoing conflict in the country. Three of the older male adolescents also compared security situation of Afghanistan with other countries without war to emphasize how security is a basic need for peace. They also mentioned that instability is not good for experiencing peace because it affects their sense of security. Many participants had experienced displacement. Of 63 participants 49% reported having been displaced from their homes at least once. Some of them reported living in camps for internally displaced people or with relatives. 13% of participants reported having been a refugee in another country. Thus, community leaders and authorities were mentioned as being responsible for perceived permanence, providing them with a sense of stability necessary for peace.

> This conflict is the only thing that is stable in this country. Everything changed, but conflict remained. My grandmother says fish cannot see water because water is always there. It is the same for us with conflict, except it makes us feel insecure. It has taken away any little sense of normalcy from us. This situation can be changed for a peaceful future only if big people decide we need peace (Asim, 19 y/o, Male)

> We hear stories of other countries where they do not need to worry about returning home alive once they leave their home. My uncle works in Saudi Arabia. He told us they could even go out after dark and the lights are on in the street. That must feel so good. People there must have a lot of peace. (Mohsin, 19 y/o Male)

Older adolescents also described a consciousness about themselves and their position in the world as a component defining peace. Eight participants mentioned "world" and "foreign countries", which suggested that they positioned Afghanistan in an international context related to peace. They compared the situation of their country with those which did not have an active conflict and related it to the emotions they felt.

> My father once worked in Dubai. He said that in Dubai, people drive their cars and go to work or school and never need to think if they would come back alive. In Kabul, if we go to market, we need to be even more scared because they often bomb the markets. I feel like…you know…compared to us, they must feel so calm all the time. That kind of feeling must be what peace feels like. (Raza, 17 y/o, Male)

> My family lived as refugees outside Afghanistan for a few years. We had many problems there, but we did not need to worry if we would get killed by a bomb while walking on the streets or in the market like in Afghanistan. Although there was discrimination, we had ways to feel satisfied and sleep at night. We had other problems like my father could not find work regularly. Still, we were hopeful that tomorrow would be better. We could go to sleep thinking that tomorrow there were options we could find. It kept us hopeful. That was my experience of peace. (Fatima, 18 y/o, Female)

The older adolescents were aware of human rights as a condition necessary for peace and that government and authorities were responsible for ensuring human rights. The internet access has given adolescents an opportunity to form a worldview with freedom. It has allowed the adolescents to constantly compare their own situation to the information they consume about other countries. They often mentioned about country where there was freedom and as a result were peaceful.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that peace, often mentioned as "Sola" or "Sohl" in the Pashto language and "Sohla" in the Dari language (excerpted from interviews), is a multifaceted concept for Afghan adolescents. The findings from the data indicate that Afghan adolescents' conceptualization of peace consisted of three major themes: peace based on individual emotions, peace based on social relations and peace based on larger societal structures. Each dimension has an intricate relationship with the others. The first dimension depicts peace as being based on adolescents' experience within them or their inner experiences, such as calmness, normalcy or balance. Analyzing the findings using PVEST as propagated by Spencer,[21,22] Afghan adolescents' conceptualization of peace is influenced by people and experiences in family, peer

groups and other agents of socialization such as neighbours and people of their ethnic group. Adolescents first learn about peace from their immediate environment, the microsystem described in Ecological Systems theory. Afghan adolescents' micro-system consisted of close family members such as parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family members like uncle, aunts and cousins because they live together in extended families, often in the same household. The micro-system provided an opportunity for both male and female adolescents to learn about peace, especially from listening to the discussions and dialogues between elder members of the family. The duration between dinner and bedtime is an important period of socialization in Afghan families when elder members, especially male members would, discuss various issues. Adolescents listen to such conversations about social and political issues, often involving peace discussions. This helps in shaping adolescents' conceptualizations of peace.

The micro-system has the strongest influence in shaping their conceptualization of peace because of adolescents' level of interaction with their immediate environment. Home provided a sense of calmness and normalcy in an otherwise hostile environment. The participants reported this environment as being important for the experience of inner peace. Peace as an individual experience of calm or balance was related to the ability to regulate one's emotions. This aligns with the explanation of Cohrs, Christie, White and Das[41] that an individual's positive experiences contribute to personal and interpersonal peace. Such a conceptualization of peace is especially significant because 47% of the total population of Afghanistan is under 15 years of age, and 63.7% is below 25 years of age.[26] Afghan adolescents' conceptualization of peace as individual positive experiences amidst their exposure to the intractable conflict could be a driving factor in transforming the direction of conflict towards non-violent peace-building approaches. The female participants strongly emphasized home as the only place where they experienced the calm and a sense of normalcy required; they described it as "peace" because there is a restriction of movement placed on women and girls to venture outside of their homes. Because of the freedom that males have, their micro-system is broader than the girls in Afghan society. The participants particularly focused on the need for freedom as the significant underpinning of peace. Freedom mainly pertained to freedom of choice and movement. An interpretation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs would place the "need for freedom" higher up in the pyramid with "self-esteem" while "need for security" would fall lower.[42] However, the emphasis on the need for freedom as a requisite for peace than safety and security can be analyzed as adolescents' adaptation to the intractable conflict of Afghanistan. As Hadjipavlou[43] argued, people tend to adapt to the conflict and the status quo as a survival mechanism, especially when the conflict is ubiquitous. Moreover, the emphasis on freedom as a component of peace signifies Afghan adolescents' willingness in taking charge of the decisions they make in the future that affects their lives. Some participant's, especially younger adolescent's, definition of peace as opposed to violence aligned with the popular definition of negative peace as propagated by Galtung.[44] The younger adolescents' perception of peace aligns with Lourenco's[45] study, which also found that younger adolescents describe peace as the opposite of war. But the themes with more positive connotations, like solidarity, cohesion and friendship, recurred more often than the absence of violence in older adolescents' definition of peace. This finding aligns with Hakvoort and Oppenheimer's[46] study, which stated that beyond ages 12 or 13, adolescents' conceptualization of peace extends beyond the narrow definition of peace as the absence of war or conflict. Adolescents' conceptualization of peace is affected not only by cognitive development as maturing individuals but also by their socio-cultural context.[47]

The second major theme to emerge was peace in social relations. When discussing the issues related to peace, Afghan adolescents focused on their relationship with people close to them and the community in general. The adolescents often mentioned good communication with family, friends, neighbours and other community members, respect for others, supporting in need, resolving differences without aggression and building mutual understanding, which are all related to social relations. The meso-system, a network of relationships between different micro-systems,[48] is mainly constructed of interaction between Afghan adolescents' immediate family and neighbours, religious leaders, community leaders and members of the ethnic group. Especially the male adolescents formed their perspectives of peace by observing interactions between various factors of the meso-system. The male adolescents have mentioned that they learn about concepts such as peace through discussions that their elders have in family and in social settings such as coffee shops or post-prayer gatherings on Fridays when men go to the Mosque to pray. The numerous restrictions placed on females compared to males make their experience of social interaction different even though they come from the same socio-cultural backgrounds. For example, the young male participants have more exposure to different levels of ecologies

because they are allowed to have freedom of movement outside their homes. The adolescents' conceptualization of peace depended on the dynamics of their relations with others around them.

Moreover, positioning peace at the interpersonal level regarding social relations is a protective coping strategy to deal with protracted conflict surrounding adolescents.[1,49] Adolescents' conceptualization of peace in terms of social relations can be interpreted as an indicator of the value system embedded in their social norms. The emphasis on interpersonal relations is due to the traditional Afghan culture, which places high value on collectivism and harmonious relationship between individuals. This meaning of peace which values social relations, could be a motivating factor to engage in peaceful behaviors at the everyday level. The older adolescent's emphasis on peace as respecting everyone despite their ethnic identities and language, supporting relatives and neighbors in need and resolving differences without aggression is especially significant given the deep divisions in Afghanistan regarding social and ethnic identities and language. In societies affected by intractable conflict, young people's views of peace, which values social relations and cohesion, are pivotal in transcending existing societal distrust and fear that threatens peaceful existence.[50] Such meaning-making of Afghan adolescents signifies the value they place in social relations for peace.

The third major theme of peace based on the larger social structures mainly emerged from adolescents' opinions on their position in society and community and the perceived safety and security from societal structures. The larger social environment described by the adolescents is compared to the exo-system, which is comprised of systems that impact an individual's development by interacting with structures in the micro-system.[48] The collectivistic nature of Afghan society provides impetus to the cognitive development process of adolescents which ascertains the content of their thought including concepts of peace. Values about peace develop as a result of the influence of such socio-cultural structures. Adolescent's interaction with socio-cultural contexts accelerates the evolution of ideas related to social phenomena like peace. As ascertained by Bar-Tal, political socialization process of adolescents occur earlier in adolescents exposed to intractable conflict which also means that they are able to perceive and process information received from socio-cultural environment regarding ideas of peace by this age. Furthermore, previous generation's transfer of narratives and collective memory about ethos of peace to adolescents act as building blocks for the construction of their concepts of peace. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the data shows most adolescents first learnt about the concept of peace from the stories narrated to them by their elders about their own experiences of peace before 1970s when Afghanistan had not yet plunged into an intractable conflict.

The older adolescents mentioned that "feeling protected" or "feeling safe" in their environment despite the persistent conflict and violence was necessary for peace. The older adolescents had formed perspectives about the role of community leaders, security systems of government and the responsibilities of higher authorities to provide the feeling of safety, but they also expressed pessimism towards such possibility because of persistent conflict, violence and corruption. The Afghan adolescents here manifested their capacity to think more critically and abstractly to consider the role of systems and government as influential in their experience of individual peace.[51] Their conceptualization of peace was also related to structural peace as adolescents mentioned "stopping ethnicity-based discrimination", "reducing poverty-based crimes such as petty thefts" and corruption elimination as impacting their concept. Many participants also described incidences of injustice, impunity and lawlessness in the country as a significant obstacle to peace-building and detrimental to their individual experience of peace. Understanding adolescent's conceptualization of peace is further necessary to identify and address the differences between older generations given the gerontocracy that still dictates many aspects of social norms and politics in Afghanistan. The adolescents often mentioned that it is not socially acceptable to express differing views before the elders, which also applies to their opinions on issues of peace-building in Afghanistan. For example, the adolescents emphasized extending friendships with individuals belonging to a different ethnic group to create social tolerance and harmony, but the older generations are against easing restrictions on ethnic mix-ups. The adolescent's social experiences and interaction with larger ecological structures such as community, ethnic groups and government provided impetus in forming concepts of peace. Consequently, the conceptualization of peace is determined by the social cognitive development process and socio-cultural context.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this study which is important to be noted. This study was conducted in Kabul city of Afghanistan, considered an urban area. The social realities of adolescents living in this area could differ from those living in rural Afghanistan. So, this study's findings might not apply to adolescents belonging to a different social background or context. Although the conflict was prevalent in Afghanistan, and Kabul has been seized numerous times throughout history, the participating adolescents grew up when Kabul was relatively safer than the rural areas. So, their perception might not reflect those of adolescents from other areas of the country.

The interviews were conducted in Pashto and Dari languages and translated into English. Although research assistants were fluent in English, the possibility of colloquial and contextual meanings of words and expressions being missed cannot be ruled out entirely.

Since conflict constituted a large part of their daily realities, this study solely focused on examining concepts of peace in adolescents. The questions asked during the interviews did not include questions about their perception of violence. So, there could have been limitations in the adolescent's expression of their thoughts when they had to talk about a topic that was not frequent in their environment.

Despite the limitations, this study sheds light on concepts of peace in a group whose voices have seldom been heard. Future studies on concepts of peace should focus on adolescents from various social and cultural backgrounds to enhance the knowledge of adolescents' conceptualization of peace. A more elaborative study focusing on various themes identified as concepts of peace in this study would contribute to developing a holistic understanding of adolescents' conceptualization of peace. Quantitative research on the impact of social relations on the conceptualization of peace could be beneficial in extending knowledge about the socialization and cognitive development of adolescents.

Conclusion

Afghan adolescents have a multi-dimensional, dynamic and relational conceptualization of peace. The microsystem of an adolescent's environment has a significant influence in the conceptualization of peace. Afghan adolescents with lifelong experience of intractable conflict conceptualize peace in terms of individual emotions, social relations and larger societal structures. While the concept of peace is shaped by intrapersonal experiences such as calmness and balance, the interaction with agents of socialization within the periphery of their social relation influence the evolution of ideas of peace. Adolescents imbibe the information received from larger socio-cultural structures which advances and morphs into autonomous conceptions of peace. The study results have made it apparent that adolescents are active agents in social environments and could be potential actors in conflict transformation with meaningful views about peace. Afghan adolescents' conceptualization of peace strengthens the developmental psychology perspective that adolescence is a period of cognitive fluidity when interactions with environmental factors shape their social cognition. The results of this study can have practical implications in developing youth-targeted peace programs, peace education curricula, youth-related policy development, and initiating conflict transformation process in intractable conflict and post-conflict contexts. The successful implementation of youth-targeted peace programs depends on whether or not the programs reflect the opinions of youth and if the targeted youth can relate themselves to such programs. Thus, we have a strong conviction that the results of this research will be beneficial for youth-related program planning and implementation.

Data Sharing Statement

The relevant data has been included within the manuscript. The raw data from the transcripts of individual interview are not available publicly because of confidentiality and privacy concerns. However, data can be made available upon request to interested researchers by contacting the corresponding authors.

Ethics Statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethics Committee of School of Philosophy, Wuhan University, China and Jahan University, Kabul, Afghanistan. Participants who were interested, and their parents or guardians who provided consent to participate in the present study signed informed consent.

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