Psychology That Touches Your Heart

A review of

**Human Development and Political Violence**

by Colette Daiute


$90.00, hardcover; $26.99, paperback

Reviewed by

[Sherry Lynn Hatcher](#)

In *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*, Ruth Behar (1996) wrote, “When you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably” (p. 16). Such is one’s experience in reading *Human Development and Political Violence* by Colette Daiute, professor and head of the doctoral program in developmental psychology at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Daiute’s work is based on narratives, letters, fiction, and critiques authored by young people from a Dynamic Story-Telling by Youth workshop based in three countries and a “refugee community of the former Yugoslavia” (p. i), supplemented by “archival materials and researcher field notes” (p. i).

The stated goal of Daiute’s body of work (see also Daiute & Buteau, 2002) is to understand how youth who grow up in politically violent environments sustain normal development. Though in one sense Daiute’s work relates to the burgeoning field of developmental psychopathology (see Rolf, Masten, Cicchetti, Nuechterlein, & Weintraub,
Daiute argues that youth, even in the midst of political violence, can sustain a semblance of normative development:

> When I argue that we consider the normative nature of growing up in crisis situations, I do not imply that political crisis is optimal or acceptable as a developmental context, but that we must understand the full range of interactions to design research, practice and policy.
>  
> (p. xviii)

Daiute’s research employs multifaceted approaches to understanding the narratives of her young participants, and these stories are the centerpiece of this work. Much as Laurel Richardson (1997) stated in her breakthrough book on qualitative research, *Fields of Play*,

> By emotionally binding people together who have had the same experiences, whether in touch with each other or not, the collective story overcomes some of the isolation and alienation of contemporary life. . . . Once linked, the possibility for social action on behalf of the collective is present. (p. 33)

### Why Adolescents?

The choice of adolescents for this project makes sense in that youths are typically able to conceptualize ideas, use imagination, share feelings, and report self-observations in both autobiographical and fictional formats (see Hatcher, Hatcher, Berlin, Okla, & Richards, 1990). Particular aspects of Daiute’s work were presaged in the 1960s’ research of Adelson and O’Neil (1966), “Growth of Political Ideas in Adolescence: The Sense of Community.” They, too, studied youths across developmental stages cross-nationally and wrote,

> The adolescent years see a vast growth in the acquisition of political information, in which we include not only knowledge in the ordinary, substantive sense, but also the apprehension of consensus, a feeling for the common and prevailing ways of looking at political issues. (p. 304)

Consistent with Adelson and O’Neil’s (1966) outcomes, Daiute found, “With age there is more attunement to considerations of social processes and community” (p. 243). The 132 participants in Daiute’s sample live in four countries, each experiencing the “aftermath of the war in the former Yugoslavia” (p. 32): Bosnia-Herzegovina (37 participants), Croatia (39), Serbia (31), and a refugee community in the United States (New York; 25). About half
of the participants were engaged in active community involvement, and half were not. Approximately half were 12 to 18 years old, and the rest ranged from 19 to 27 years of age.

Although the assigned writing exercises did not specifically ask participants to discuss war, the youths were invited to reflect on themselves and their roles in society in a variety of tasks designed to “increase our understanding of human development in the context of political violence” (p. 32). The resulting stories and essays are compelling. As one girl poignantly queried in her essay, “How is it that different ethnic groups lived peacefully in Yugoslavia for so many years, then one day began killing their neighbors they didn’t even think of as different the day before?” (p. 41). Daiute firmly concludes, “An alternative view to the figure of child as victim or potential villain is a developmental view” (p. 12).

**Practice-Based Methodology at Its Best**

Daiute’s “practice-based” research has potential to do real good in the world with its goal of ascertaining “how young people positioned differently around a war make sense of their own experiences, connect to others’ experiences, and relate those experiences to societal issues and their own goals” (p. 61). Five- and six-hour workshops for participants were held over one to two days in community centers and were sponsored by nongovernmental organizations.

There were three categories of assignments: **inquiry genres** that included both predesigned survey questions and an invitation for participants to create original survey questions; **narrative genres** that requested stories about peer conflict, adult conflict, and a fictional narrative using “literary features to express what (youth) assume to be less acceptable in autobiographical contexts” (p. 145); and **advisory genres** that included writing letters to community leaders and workshop evaluations. Participants were invited to discuss and comment on both their own and others’ responses. As Daiute wrote, “These types of conversations create the sense of audience inherent in more apparently solo discursive activities, and, ideally, occur in increasingly frequent and supportive contexts to promote development” (p. 181).

Consulting young people about their experience and wisdom facilitates a sense of power and validation not always accorded them. As one participant expressed, in surprise, “So you will listen to what we say?” (p. 72). Daiute indeed listened attentively to participants, interpreting their responses on multiple levels that include nuanced psychological analyses of defense mechanisms and projected responses. Data were analyzed within and across participant groups, age groups, and geographies by quantitative and qualitative methods (see Daiute & Fine, 2003).

For example, youths in Bosnia-Herzegovina were seen as focusing on tensions in uncertain conditions (“It is truly difficult to use our public transportation and not to see
everyday conflicts between nervous citizens, retired people, drivers and conductors”; p. 93), whereas Serbian youths more typically emphasized ideological differences (“I need to create something new and express my rebelliousness against anything I consider unfair”; p. 110); Croatian youths spoke often of barriers to economic progress (“My two neighbors always fight over a piece of land. The problem is that the hens that belong to one of them always go to the piece of the land that belongs to the other neighbor”; p. 94); whereas immigrants to the United States reflected on feelings of isolation (“People should talk more about the war and other topics, that maybe all of them realized ‘you are not alone’”; p. 180).

Case Studies Most Affecting

In the Chapter 6, Daiute describes sociobiography as a “concept positing that individuals have unique perspectives in relation to the social and physical world” (p. 192). This chapter was my favorite for its inclusion of in-depth case studies. For example, a 16-year-old wrote the following: “The news was that a war was coming & everything that they wished & dreamed for, is going to be ruined. Everyone involved thought about it as a tragedy never again will they’re [sic] lives be the same” (pp. 187–188).

Here Daiute introduces us to a sampling of four young people from each of the geographies represented. The reader is treated to a full dataset for each young person’s contributions to the study (surveys, narratives, fictional account, and letters to public officials). The richness of this chapter left me wondering if it would have been useful to organize more of the book in this format because, at times, rather thick scholarly prose nearly crowds out the voices of the youths, whereas reading and processing those voices constitute, after all, the main point of this work.

A Peace Prize?

We are all likely familiar with the evocative, personal narratives collected for the Story Corps project (Isay, 2007). There is something about elaborated, personal narratives that conveys meaning to a readership in uniquely affecting ways. In the context of youths who have lived through war and trauma, one sees how their everyday concerns (clearly often displacements of societal issues) evidence strivings for optimism and normalcy. For example, one 16-year-old boy wrote, “I am okay with everybody; it’s not that I have never had a conflict with a peer, but there has never been any violence—just misunderstandings which could be solved through a conversation” (p. 209). Daiute sees such writings of youths as playing at “impos[ing] a sense of order on chaotic environments” (p. 225).
The result of this prescribed play includes suggestions from the youth who have survived a war-torn environment for improving both their own and future generations; it also includes ideas for peacemaking and “moving beyond difference” (p. 216). Some of their fictional writings suggest transformational solutions to societal strife. In all, Daiute’s methodology has the effect of what she calls “thaw[ing] frozen narratives” (p. 149) and allowing fresh conceptualizations for positive conflict resolution.

*Human Development and Political Violence* is a deeply inspiring work. Its modes of inquiry could be more widely shared, even as suggested by the author: “Future research could apply this developmental model to political (violence) systems beyond the Western Balkans in other regions in conflict over sovereignty, turf, and resources” (p. 246). Were such a plan to be actualized it could potentially merit a Peace Prize nomination. However, Daiute’s scholarly goal is a more modest one: “to illustrate the complex uses of discourse as the intersection of individual and social change” (p. 75). By consulting the next generation and affording them a role in public affairs, Daiute’s approach may offer a solution for peaceful resolutions of societal conflict from youths whose ideas touch one’s heart.

### References


