

Children as Tools of War: Seeking Global Solutions Through Theoretical Analysis

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Abstract

In this paper on child soldiers, the author compares and contrasts two structures—neoliberal institutionalism and social constructivism—as methods for reducing or eliminating the role of children in modern war. He concludes that a response must incorporate a broader base of efforts, including child rehabilitation and a diminution in arms trafficking, acting as supplements to pre-existing international law if the growing problem is to be dealt with effectively.

Résumé

Cet article sur les enfants soldats compare et met en opposition deux structures – le institutionnalisme néolibéral et le constructivisme social – comme méthodes pour réduire ou éliminer le rôle des enfants dans la guerre moderne. Il conclut qu'une réponse doit incorporer une plus large base d'efforts, y compris la réadaptation d'enfant et une diminution dans le trafic d'armes, agissant en tant que suppléments au droit international préexistant si le problème croissant sera traité efficacement.

Especially in the last twenty years, armed conflict has seen a drastic increase in the involvement of children under the age of eighteen, and by some estimates, over 300,000 children are now playing an active role in warfare.¹ In response to this growing problem, the international community has developed a number of legal measures that are designed to prevent children from becoming directly involved in armed conflict. While most people would agree that the actions taken thus far have been a step in the right direction, many argue that the primarily legalistic response of the international community has not and cannot effectively deal with the totality of the problem of children serving as tools of war.

This paper examines the issue of children in armed conflict, comparing the theoretical perspectives of neoliberal institutionalism and social constructivism to determine which of the two offers better insight into how to arrive at effective global solutions to the child soldier problem. A neoliberal institutionalist approach offers tangible options for dealing with the issue, contending that international institutions

can facilitate the international cooperation necessary to combat the problem of child soldiers. Social constructivism, while in many cases advocating the exact same policy options as neoliberal institutionalism, focuses on the broader importance of ideas, identities and norms in effecting change. Although neither perspective offers a complete solution to the growing problem, given the vast complexity of the child soldier issue, social constructivism seems to offer a more comprehensive and valuable approach than the more simplistic account of neoliberal institutionalism.

CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT: A GROWING PROBLEM

Although the phenomenon of children playing an active role in warfare is certainly not

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¹ Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, *Children: The Invisible Soldiers* (Växjö, Sweden: Rädda Barnen, 1996), 19.

new,² the problem has certainly become more accentuated in recent years. Quite clearly, the international community must react quickly to prevent the unnecessary death and suffering of millions of children. This paper will follow the near-universal acceptance of age eighteen as the line of demarcation between children and adults. Although, in many areas of the world, people are deemed to be intellectually and emotionally mature at earlier ages, eighteen years of age appears to be the most widely accepted point at which individuals are no longer considered children. As Ilene Cohn and Guy Goodwin-Gill point out, the vast majority of countries in all regions of the world have set eighteen years as the voting age, and "participation in the political process is...a reasonably accurate indicator of the moment at which the community as political body recognizes the intellectual maturity of the individual."³ Though still an arbitrary figure, eighteen years at least provides a common measuring stick for addressing the problem of child soldiers, and indeed it has been accepted by nearly all researchers in the field, and incorporated into their statistical data.⁴

Before one can adequately assess exactly *what* responses to the child soldier problem could plausibly effect change on a global level, one must first examine the problem itself, and why it has become such a serious issue in recent years. One need not look far to realize that children are increasingly playing a direct role in warfare. Indeed, in the past twenty years, the issue has gained prominence on the international agenda as an increasing number of NGOs and journalists have worked to bring vivid images of child soldiers to audiences around the world. But the question remains: why has the problem of child soldiers recently become so pronounced?

Perhaps the most obvious reason for the increasing involvement of children in armed conflict is that the very nature of war-

fare has been rapidly evolving in recent years. As Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin note, "'traditional' armed conflicts between states are now the exception rather than the rule,"⁵ and "[i]n the world today, armed conflict is predominantly in the form of internal rather than international armed conflicts and many...child soldiers are serving in armed opposition groups."⁶ In her 1999 work, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Mary Kaldor uses the term "new wars" to describe the manner in which conflict has evolved:

the new wars involve a blurring of the distinctions between war (usually defined as violence between states or organized political groups for political motives), organized crime (violence undertaken by privately organized groups for private purposes, usually financial gain), and large-scale violations of human rights (violence undertaken by states or politically organized groups against individuals).⁷

The varieties of conflict children are most often involved in are typified by the "blurred distinctions" outlined by Kaldor, not traditionally defined interstate conflict,⁸ and one must constantly be mindful of this fact in order to ensure that the problem of child soldiers is addressed in its entirety. Accordingly, this paper will consider children's involvement in a variety of different types of armed conflict, rather than simply in terms of a narrowly defined concept of "war."

Clearly, armed conflict has changed considerably in recent years, for a number of reasons. Importantly, the continued proliferation of small arms has been a critical factor in defining the role of children in this new type of warfare. As a result of the recent proliferation of inexpensive small arms, children are now able to contribute to warfare on a level comparable to adults, as there is indeed "no physical barrier to their serv-

² Ibid, 20.

³ Ilene Cohn and Guy Goodwin-Gill, *Child Soldiers: The Role of Children in Armed Conflict* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 7.

⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵ Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, 20.

⁶ Ibid, 160.

⁷ Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 2.

⁸ James Garbarino, Kathleen Kostltny and Nancy Dubrow, *No Place to Be a Child: Growing Up in a War Zone* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1991), 1.

ing from an early age as combatants,"⁹ which was the case in earlier years. As Carol Thompson observes, "in the last 20 years, modern technology has provided weapons which weigh less than seven pounds, cost about US\$6, and can be stripped, reassembled, loaded and fired by an illiterate child of 10."¹⁰ The type of warfare typical of the last few decades has not been characterized by the high technology used by the US military¹¹; rather, over 90% of casualties in recent conflicts are attributable to small arms.¹² If one wishes to address the roots of the child soldier problem, the proliferation of small arms simply cannot be ignored.

Though the proliferation of small arms *facilitates* children serving as tools of war, the mere presence of such weapons does not *cause* (para)military groups to use children in their ranks. While the majority of child soldiers are adolescents, "many are ten years of age or younger. Increasingly, however, adults are deliberately conscripting or taking children as combatants or soldiers."¹³ At least on the surface, there must be some distinct attributes held by children that appear, on some level, militarily desirable to commanders of armed groups. One such perceived "edge" that child soldiers could offer is outlined by Carol Thompson, who notes that "both [boys and girls] have been used as cannon fodder (for example, Liberia, Uganda) advanced as the first wave of infantry-style assaults *with the purpose of inhibiting the enemy, who may be reluctant to fire at children* [emphasis added]."¹⁴ Romeo Dallaire, in a lecture given in Fredericton on September 25, 2003, recalled how one of his soldiers was faced with a situation in Somalia during which he was fired upon by young children using AK-47s. In that par-

ticular scenario, Dallaire noted, the soldier in question experienced almost unimaginable emotional and moral torment at the prospect of having to return fire at "innocent" children. Ultimately, however, the soldier had to protect those around him, including a church full of villagers; he fired back.¹⁵

Additionally, some commanders prefer using children as soldiers because they are "more obedient, do not question orders and are easier to manipulate than adult soldiers."¹⁶ However, this does not necessarily lead to an increase in military effectiveness, and "if this message could be spread more widely, all sorts of armed forces might be encouraged to consider improvements to their recruiting methods..."¹⁷ As the scenario recounted by Romeo Dallaire suggests, while children might seem to be an effective tool against the enemy's moral state of mind, the military outcome of the situation was not affected by the rebel group's use of children as frontline soldiers. Alarming, however, children are increasingly being used in active combat at younger and younger ages,¹⁸ which demonstrates that the military inefficiency of child soldiers has not been communicated to commanders of armed groups around the world.

In many of today's armed conflicts, children are not simply forced into service on the frontlines; rather, a large number of children *choose* to take part in political violence.¹⁹ Whether "through a process of stimulation, victimization or simply a desire for status or other rewards,"²⁰ children can and do often participate in armed conflict on their own accord, fighting for a cause "that is portrayed as being in their political and

⁹ Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, 21.

¹⁰ Carol B. Thompson, "Beyond Civil Society: Child Soldiers as Citizens in Mozambique," *Review of African Political Economy* 80 (1999), 191.

¹¹ Jo De Berry, "Child Soldiers and the Convention on the Rights of the Child," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 575 (2001), 93.

¹² Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, 21.

¹³ Steven Hick, "The Political Economy of War-Affected Children," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 575 (2001), 114.

¹⁴ Carol B. Thompson, 191.

¹⁵ Romeo Dallaire, "War-Affected Children," University of New Brunswick, Wu Centre, Fredericton, 25 Sept. 2003.

¹⁶ Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, 154.

¹⁷ Ibid, 172.

¹⁸ Ananda S. Millard, "Children in Armed Conflicts: Transcending Legal Responses," *Security Dialogue* 32 (2001), 187.

¹⁹ Ilene Cohn and Guy Goodwin-Gill, 168.

²⁰ Edward Cairns, *Children and Political Violence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996), 132.

economic best interests."²¹ For example, in Sierra Leone, child soldiers explained that one of the reasons they had decided to join armed groups was that they were unable to cope with the economic realities they faced due to lack of education.²² Evidently, "children are not always *passive* victims,"²³ and the global responses to the problem of child soldiers must reflect this reality.

Finally, in order to determine appropriate global responses to the child soldier problem, one must be aware of the manner in which participation in armed conflict affects children. Contemporary armed conflict involves and injures more young people than ever before, and the global community must consider itself obligated to ensure that this problem is addressed immediately.²⁴ As Claire Breen notes, "the social cost of child soldiers [is] very high because...children [do not] gain an education, skills, or any knowledge they would normally acquire by staying with their families."²⁵ As the adage goes, children are definitely more impressionable than adults. For children, the social costs of warfare are indeed considerable, but perhaps more damaging than any loss of future economic security is the intense psychological cost of growing up amidst a constant flurry of violence and turmoil. In the West, criminal and otherwise socially unacceptable behavior is routinely traced back to its roots in an unhealthy childhood—perhaps a serial killer was abused as a child, or something to that effect. With hundreds of thousands of

children now living through much more destabilizing conditions, one cannot but fear the future consequences of this recent trend of children's increased involvement in armed conflict.

While the most disturbing cases of children serving as tools of war can be found in rebel groups in remote areas of the world, one must strive to keep the truly global nature of the problem in perspective. The majority of recent scholarly research relating to children and armed conflict has, quite rightly, been directed toward eliminating the use of child soldiers by rebel groups in developing nations, but "it must be remembered that there are still many state-run armies around the world that include children in their ranks."²⁶ As Roger Rosenblatt notes, this is still a fundamental problem in the international community, for "[a] kid fighting with a bunch of rebels is far more apt to know why he is doing it than a recruit of a national guard."²⁷ Even in North America, attitudes and practices have a long way to go if the problem of child soldiers is ever to be addressed in any meaningful way, as children who are only sixteen years of age are still allowed to participate in military training on a limited scale. In general, however, every example of the child soldier phenomenon is entirely unique, and global responses must be versatile enough to handle the vast disparities evident in individual circumstances.

THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE CHILD SOLDIER PROBLEM

For the most part, the international community has thus far reacted to the problem of child soldiers in a legalistic manner. The primary international agreements that seek to address the problem of child soldiers are the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),²⁸ and its addendum of eleven years later, the Optional Protocol to the

²¹ Jo De Berry, 98.

²² Krijn Peters and Paul Richards, "Fighting with Open Eyes: Youth Combatants Talking About War in Sierra Leone," In Celia Petty and Patrick Bracken, eds., *Rethinking the Trauma of War* (New York: Save the Children, 1998), 76-111.

²³ Edward Cairns, 133.

²⁴ For a detailed and informative breakdown of some of the ways children are adversely affected by participation in armed conflict, see Robert Beasley, "Hidden Casualties of Conflict," in Amnesty International, *In the Firing Line: War and Children's Rights* (London: Amnesty International, 1997), 32.

²⁵ Claire Breen, "The Role of NGOs in the Formulation of and Compliance with the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict," *Human Rights Quarterly* 25 (2003), 470.

²⁶ Edward Cairns, 136.

²⁷ Roger Rosenblatt, *Children of War* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press / Doubleday, 1983), 101.

²⁸ The complete text of the Convention is available online at <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>.

CRC.²⁹ Under Article 38 of the CRC, nearly any use of children in warfare is prohibited, and the legal age for military recruitment is set at fifteen years. In the Optional Protocol, which was implemented largely in response to pressure from children's rights advocates and NGOs,³⁰ the minimum recruiting age was increased to eighteen, in accordance with the CRC's definition of a child as anyone under age eighteen. Although there have been certain areas of contention, the Optional Protocol has been ratified by "every functioning government but the United States."³¹ As described by Amnesty International,

The most widely supported of all international treaties, the Convention [on the Rights of the Child] offers a message of hope for future protection of children's rights. But this hope will only be translated into a reality for the millions of children caught up in the world's wars if it is accompanied by a change in public, political and military attitudes.³²

Clearly, however, this CRC (and even the Optional Protocol) is not enough in itself; it must be coupled with a worldwide effort to effect a shift in global norms in order to truly be effective.

Unfortunately, the problem of child soldiers is particularly evident in intra-state conflict, in areas of the world that have seen dramatic destabilization and the erosion of traditional social and political structures. That is, many of the groups that recruit and utilize children as tools of war are non-state actors, often rebels, acting against the very state governments that have signed on to international agreements. Furthermore, many argue that such agreements do not have sufficient detection or enforcement mechanisms, and as such do not adequately promote compliance (hence the terms "conven-

tion" and "optional"). Lisa Hughes, in her 2000 article "Can International Law Protect Child Soldiers?," highlights the striking paradox of the child soldier problem: "In recent decades, international legal protection for children has reached new heights and the opportunities and reasons for their exploitation have increased as well."³³ As she makes clear, "[l]aws presume order and some sort of structure in society,"³⁴ but order can be seen as the absolute antithesis of the context in which children normally become involved in armed conflict (e.g. civil war).

NEOLIBERAL INSTITUTIONALIST APPROACHES

One of the dominant streams of international relations theory in the past century has been Liberalism, in any of a number of different variants. Perhaps the most widely accepted of those is neoliberal institutionalism, which was initially brought forth by Robert Keohane.³⁵ According to a traditional realist perspective, the anarchic nature of the world system of states causes individual states to act out of complete self interest at all times, resulting in a dominant focus on survival; that is, states will not act in any manner that would put them at risk of being subsumed by other states at any future time. Accordingly, realists accept international cooperation as extraordinarily difficult to achieve, because states will avoid cooperation if any other states would benefit more, in relative terms, from such cooperation.

Neoliberal institutionalists, while accepting the realist assumptions about anarchy and self-interest,³⁶ contend that cooperation is possible under certain circumstances. Unlike realists, neoliberal institutionalists believe that states will cooperate if they are able to achieve absolute gains in their position through cooperation. Particu-

²⁹ The Optional Protocol can be viewed online in its entirety at <http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu2/6/crc/treaties/opac.htm>.

³⁰ Claire Breen.

³¹ Lisa Hughes, "Can International Law Protect Child Soldiers?" *Peace Review* 12 (2000), 401. The only other country not to sign is Somalia.

³² Amnesty International, Introduction, *In the Firing Line: War and Children's Rights* (London: Amnesty International, 1997), 1.

³³ Lisa Hughes, 405.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 404.

³⁵ The theory of neoliberal institutionalism was introduced by Keohane in his work *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1984).

³⁶ Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization* 42.3 (1988), 492.

larly, neoliberal institutionalists argue that international institutions can mitigate the effects of anarchy, thereby making it possible for states to cooperate for mutual advantage.³⁷ Robert Keohane argues that "cooperation can under some conditions develop on the basis of complimentary interests, and that institutions, broadly defined, affect the patterns of cooperation that emerge."³⁸

As previously mentioned, realists believe that anarchy causes states to be primarily concerned with survival; for neoliberal institutionalists, on the other hand, the anarchic structure of world politics results in a great deal of uncertainty, and as such, cheating is the state's primary concern.³⁹ That is, states are preoccupied with the prospect of other states failing to follow up on promises made in good faith. International institutions, by reducing the amount of uncertainty in the system, cause states to become more willing to cooperate in order to advance their interests. Finally, neoliberal institutionalists believe that states are the most important actors in the international system, as realists do, but they also believe that other actors can play a role.⁴⁰

Although practical responses to international problems are almost never defined in theoretical terms, the initiatives that have been undertaken with respect to the child soldier problem certainly fit the characteristics of a neoliberal institutionalist response. Neoliberal institutionalists would contend that international institutions, such as the United Nations (out of which came the CRC), and international law, play an important role in enabling states to cooperate. Steven Hick, for instance, exemplifies the aspirations many neoliberal institutionalists would have with regards to the child soldier problem. As he declares, "[a]n international policy shift is required to meet the

challenges of growing and protracted armed conflicts [emphasis added]."⁴¹

Quite clearly, since 1989, there has been a major policy shift in the international arena regarding child soldiers, and the action so far has been largely neoliberal institutionalist in character. This does not mean, however, that neoliberal institutionalists would not push for more action; rather, they would certainly agree that more action is needed. One area in which neoliberal institutionalists would call for greater action is with the newly-developed International Criminal Court (ICC). Without effective enforcement and detection mechanisms, the ICC is lacking in certain regards, but according to neoliberal institutionalism, the ICC can, as an international institution, facilitate international cooperation. As Steven Hick notes,

In the former Yugoslavia, the International Tribunal attempted to prosecute people on specific charges of rape and sexual assault. Despite estimates of up to 20,000 victims, the tribunals were able to indict only eight people. Even with this dismal result, the judgments represent a historic precedent in prosecuting sexual violence within armed conflicts.⁴²

Accordingly, with an air of optimism, Hick states that "[t]he International Criminal Court also has the potential to be an innovative and effectual tool to protect the rights of children."⁴³

Likewise, Erroll Mendes is optimistic about arriving at legal and institutional solutions to the global problem of child soldiers. The concept of "universal jurisdiction," whereby *individuals* can be charged for war crimes⁴⁴ from within any state in the world, greatly increases the efficacy of international law, allowing it to serve as a proper deterrent of those who would use children as tools of war. The remaining

³⁷ Alice Ba and Matthew J. Hoffman, "Making and Remaking the World for IR 101: A Resource for Teaching Social Constructivism in Introductory Classes," *International Studies Perspectives* 4 (2003): 24.

³⁸ Robert O. Keohane, 9.

³⁹ Joseph M. Grieco, 487.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 492.

⁴¹ Steven Hick, 107.

⁴² Ibid, 116.

⁴³ Ibid, 119.

⁴⁴ Under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 15 years or using them to participate actively in hostilities in both international and non-international armed conflicts is considered to be a war crime.

roadblock, Mendes concedes, is the *detection* and *monitoring* of potential cases in which children are serving on the frontlines of conflict, which is most often in areas of the world that are most difficult to monitor.⁴⁵

As far as the future goes, neoliberal institutionalists would first and foremost call for the strengthening of existing international agreements pertaining to the use of children as tools of war. Specifically, seeing as the United States has not yet signed on to the Convention on the Rights of the Child—which has done major damage to the enforceability of non-compliance—neoliberal institutionalists would likely call for increased pressure on the United States to catch up with the rest of the world.

Additionally, neoliberal institutionalists would probably be aware of the drawbacks of the Optional Protocol, and seek for similar corrective action on that front. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child falls shy of that for which its advocates initially argued.⁴⁶ Instead of completely raising the minimum age for military service to eighteen, Article 2 of the Optional Protocol simply prohibits *compulsory* military service; as such, Canada and other countries are still able to recruit individuals below the age of eighteen on a *voluntary* basis, provided that such volunteers do not play a direct role in combat. Clearly, even the progress that has been made so far would not be deemed adequate by most neoliberal institutionalists, so further action through international institutions would be required to facilitate interstate cooperation on the issue of child soldiers.

There are four major difficulties with a neoliberal institutionalist approach to the issue of children and armed conflict. First of all, as proponents of neoliberal institutionalism concede, international institutions are still, for the most part, ineffectual. In world politics, "there is no common government to enforce rules, and by the standards of domestic society, international in-

stitutions are weak."⁴⁷ As of yet, international law and institutions have clearly not exerted decisive power in the case of the child soldier problem, either as a deterrent or as a means for justice after the fact.

Second, neoliberal institutionalism does not consider all aspects of the child soldier problem (many of which have been outlined above), and assumes that the problem can, for the most part, be dealt with through large-scale international "solutions." As Alice Ba and Matthew Hoffman point out, "neoliberal approaches are limited in that they...do not capture all that is taking place."⁴⁸ Specifically, in the case of child soldiers, neoliberal institutionalist "solutions" fail to take into account the role that small arms proliferation has played in exacerbating the child soldier problem, or the fact that sometimes children *choose* to participate in armed conflict. Instead, the neoliberal approach often involves viewing children as passive victims that must be saved through legal protections.

Third, in most cases in which children are used as tools of war, states are not the most important actors in the equation. One cannot forget that in nearly all instances where children are pulled into war there is one commonality. At some level, the political community surrounding these children has broken down.... In other words, the pretext upon which international law is based, the nation-state, may have crumbled.⁴⁹

Whereas most neoliberal institutionalist responses to the child soldier problem, such as the CRC, have focused on states agreeing not to do certain things, in actuality, non-state actors must be the focus of any viable attempt to deal with the child soldier problem.

Fourth, neoliberal institutionalism is limited in that it is not fully able to explain, and prescribe action which would cause, *change* in the international system, especially with regards to state identities and inter-

⁴⁵ Erroll Mendes, "Global Governance, Economy and Law: Waiting for Justice," Dr. Abdul Lodhi Memorial Lecture in Human Rights, St. Thomas University, Brian Mulroney Hall, Fredericton, 18 Mar. 2004.

⁴⁶ Claire Breen, 453-481.

⁴⁷ Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation Under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions," *World Politics* 38 (1985), 226.

⁴⁸ Alice Ba and Matthew J. Hoffman, 24.

⁴⁹ Lisa Hughes, 404.

ests.⁵⁰ A comprehensive solution to the problem of children serving as tools of war necessitates changes in interests and identities, for states, non-state actors, and individuals. Only if such actors begin to see the use of child soldiers as contrary to their interests can one expect children to stop being employed as tools of war. Neoliberal institutionalism relies on a static model of international relations that does not account for the complex realities of the issue of children and armed conflict.

Neoliberal institutionalist approaches to the child soldier problem, like those outlined above, have certainly been steps in the direction of limiting the use of children as tools of war. As Lisa Hughes notes, "although they may be imperfect, legal protections [now] do exist, in increasing number, to protect children who might be drawn into military service."⁵¹

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND CHILD SOLDIERS: A MULTI-PRONGED ATTACK?

In recent years, social constructivism has become the main theoretical challenger to the mainstream theories of international relations, especially neorealism and neoliberalism.⁵² Social constructivism focuses on the importance of norms and ideas in international relations, with the main tenet of social constructivist thought being "the interdependent relationship between actors and their social context, and the power of ideas"⁵³ more generally. From a social constructivist perspective, the nature of actors (specifically states) cannot be described without reference to their contextual basis. For example, constructivists accept the realist and liberal notion that anarchy exists in the international system, but they do not believe that the mere presence of anarchy leads to the logical conclusions of suspicion and competition as determinants of state

behaviour, as proposed by neorealists and neoliberals.⁵⁴

Like liberals, social constructivists believe that "there exist wide ranges of actors who are important players in world politics,"⁵⁵ and in fact, the social constructivist approach can and often does subsume neorealist or neoliberal responses to particular problems in international relations.⁵⁶ Constructivists may, for example, concede that, in many cases, states do act in a manner that could be explained straightforwardly by realist assumptions, but they do not believe that means that states are *naturally* inclined to act in such a fashion. Rather, if states act in a realist manner, they do so because they exist in a social context that fosters a realist approach, and by acting according to realist assumptions, states further reinforce their identities as realist actors, while concurrently shaping their social context to continue to be conducive to realist behavior.

Because of their fixed assumptions about state behavior, neorealism and neoliberalism do not effectively explain change in the international system. As Andreas Antoniadis notes, "if one excludes the approach that the 'universe' of world politics is divinely given and once and for all fixed, constructivism, as far as we know, is the only remaining explanation of the structure and function of this 'universe.'"⁵⁷ Constructivism, as Edward Newman observes, "embraces a vision of change, and challenges the solely materialistic theories of IR"⁵⁸ by focusing on the role of ideas, identities, and norms.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46.2 (1992), 391-425.

⁵⁵ Alice Ba and Matthew J. Hoffman, 20.

⁵⁶ Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Competing Paradigms or Birds of a Feather? Constructivism and Neoliberal Institutionalism Compared," *International Studies Quarterly* 44 (2000), 98.

⁵⁷ Andreas Antoniadis, "Epistemic Communities, Epistemes, and the Construction of (World) Politics," *Global Society* 17.1 (2003), 21.

⁵⁸ Edward Newman, "Human Security and Constructivism," *International Studies Perspectives* 2 (2001), 248.

⁵⁹ Alice Ba and Matthew J. Hoffman, 15.

⁵⁰ Alice Ba and Matthew J. Hoffman, 24.

⁵¹ Claire Hughes, 401.

⁵² Alice Ba and Matthew J. Hoffman, 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16.

Social constructivism has considerable intuitive appeal, but it can often be difficult to apply directly to problems in international relations, especially in terms of prescribing courses of action to deal with such problems. With respect to the problem of children and armed conflict, however, one can reasonably assume that social constructivists would contend that a global normative shift would be necessary to ensure compliance with any rules pertaining to the use of child soldiers. Norms, broadly defined, are ideas that express "shared (social) understandings of standards for behavior."⁶⁰ Without a doubt, "norms matter. They do not necessarily determine outcomes but they do help define and limit a range of acceptable policy choices and reformulate understandings of interest."⁶¹ Ultimately, a global shift in norms is necessary for achieving any real solution to the child soldier problem. In order to achieve such a shift, a variety of actors would have to interact in a manner that would change the collective international understanding of children serving as tools of war, so as to alter the identities and interests of the actors that might utilize child soldiers. At the same time, the very children who potentially might become child soldiers must not endure social conditions that would lead them to believe that picking up an assault rifle would be in their best interests.

Perhaps the most tangible answer to the child soldier problem that can be offered by a social constructivist approach is the strong involvement of epistemic communities pertaining to the issue. Peter Haas broadly defines the term 'epistemic community' as "a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area."⁶² Epistemic communities can consist of scholars, field

workers, and a number of other individuals with a similar worldview and understanding relating to a particular area of concern.

Aside from states, institutions, and other actors, *ideas* play an important role in realm of (international) politics, and in the case of child soldiers, the international system is definitely in need of more ideas. As noted above, the problem of children serving in armed conflict has been greatly exacerbated in recent decades. The international community has made concerted efforts to respond to the problem, but clearly not enough has been done. Because "[d]ecision makers are most likely to turn to epistemic communities under conditions of uncertainty,"⁶³ now would appear to be the key time for epistemic communities to begin seriously challenging established norms about the use of children in warfare.

In general, epistemic communities utilize "a number of methods and practices...to achieve [their international] targets: the organization of conferences, seminars, press conferences, public discussions, lectures, and so on."⁶⁴ For global norms about the use of children in warfare to change, similar methods must be employed, but in tandem with a number of other methods. Because social constructivism realizes that a vast number of actors play an important role in international relations, one can only assume that a social constructivist approach would involve as many of these actors as possible, including those targeted by neoliberal institutionalists. As such, a social constructivist perspective on the child soldier problem would advocate for nearly all of the same legal-institutional responses favored by neoliberal institutionalists, but *along* with initiatives for the dissemination of knowledge on a wide scale.

Probably the most troubling aspect of a social constructivist approach to the child soldier problem is the nature of the theory itself. Social constructivism is highly indeterminate, so *any* prescription for action from a constructivist perspective cannot be completely trusted as a practical course of

⁶⁰ A. Klotz, "Norms Reconstituting Interests: Global Racial Equality and U.S. Sanctions Against South Africa," *International Organization* 29 (1995): 451.

⁶¹ Alice Ba and Matthew J. Hoffman, 26.

⁶² Peter Haas, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination," *International Organization* 46.1 (1992), 3.

⁶³ Ibid, 21.

⁶⁴ Andreas Antoniadis, 33.

action. For example, "the concept of influence in epistemic approaches cannot be reduced to a simple cause-and-effect relationship,"⁶⁵ and the same can be said for social constructivism more broadly. Jennifer Sterling-Folker is even more wary of a constructivist approach, arguing that social constructivism cannot be seen as a new field of IR theoretical inquiry because it fails to offer a paradigmatic alternative to liberal IR theory and neoliberal institutionalism in particular. This failure can be traced largely to theoretical misapplication. When the goal is to explain social change, constructivists have generally not followed through on the historical indeterminacy implied by the approach itself.⁶⁶

This problem of theoretical misapplication is even more pronounced when attempting to use social constructivism in a prescriptive manner.

Overall, constructivism allows for the broad-based approach that is necessary to fully deal with the problem of child soldiers on a global scale. Any possible solutions must be able to account for the complexity of the issue itself, and social constructivism at least offers the possibility of doing so.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? A THEORETICAL COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS

To this point, as previously mentioned, the international community has responded to the problem of children serving as tools of war in a primarily legalistic and institutional fashion. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol to the CRC are both legal instruments that, among other things, seek to prevent children from being recruited as soldiers in armed conflict. Though their ratification by virtually all of the world's countries represents a significant degree of global acceptance of the norms which the instruments embody, they have not been effective thus far. One might argue that "the primarily legalistic approach that dominates the international debate about

child soldiers is based on a limited understanding of the issues at hand,"⁶⁷ or, on the contrary, that such an approach is without question a step in the right direction. Regardless, one cannot deny that to this point "[t]he international community has not been successful in preventing the targeting, abduction, and suffering of war-affected children."⁶⁸ As Ilene Cohn and Guy Goodwin-Gill argue, all areas of international law pertaining to child soldiers would benefit from upgrading.⁶⁹ As it stands now, "the [perceived] non-application of international humanitarian law means that it is harder to hold the armed opposition groups to any rules: if the government does not accept that humanitarian law applies why should they?"⁷⁰

As a result of the clear shortcomings of the approach the international community has taken so far, one cannot deny that much more is necessary than the mere adoption of international agreements by states. Obviously, a more broad-based approach is essential to address the inherent complexities of the child soldier problem, and, despite its shortcomings, social constructivism seems to offer the tools necessary to bring such an approach to the issue. Specifically, at this juncture, epistemic communities may be able to offer the ideas that are necessary for the international community to move forward, for "when traditional policy patterns fail to function [as has been the case with respect to child soldiers], the demand from decision makers for 'specialized' information, advice and guidance becomes vital and urgent."⁷¹

Before one reaches any concrete conclusions about either neoliberal institutionalism or social constructivism, one must realize that *both* theoretical approaches have one key drawback: they fail to completely

⁶⁷ Ananda S. Millard, 187.

⁶⁸ Carmen Sorger and Eric Hoskins, "Protecting the Most Vulnerable: War-Affected Children," in Rob McRae and Don Hubert, eds., *Human Security and the New Diplomacy: Protecting People, Promoting Peace* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2001), 144.

⁶⁹ Ilene Cohn and Guy Goodwin-Gill, 177.

⁷⁰ Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, 25.

⁷¹ Andreas Antoniadis, 32.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 38.

⁶⁶ Jennifer Sterling-Folker, 98.

take into account the importance of specific responses for specific contexts; perhaps a truly "global" response to the problem of child soldiers is simply a pipe dream. As Carmen Harger and Eric Hoskins note, "local solutions to local problems will continue to be a critical part of preventing the targeting of children trapped in the midst of conflict."⁷²

Perhaps both neoliberal institutionalists and social constructivists have allowed their judgment to be clouded by "liberal optimism," but regardless, "culturally appropriate responses must be developed,"⁷³ directed not only toward those who would brutally kidnap and force children into combat, but also at the children who *voluntarily* serve on the frontlines of conflict. According to Edward Cairns "researchers tend to assume a universal decontextualized model of child development... That is, researchers tend to forget that childhood, adolescence and adulthood are socially defined statuses which include social expectations that differ across cultures."⁷⁴

Some have argued that the CRC, "through its acceptance by diverse cultures around the world, makes a compelling case for the universality of these standards."⁷⁵ Clearly, however, cultural specificity has been, and will continue to be, an obstacle for those seeking global solutions to the child soldier problem; only by being ever mindful of how international responses engage with local contexts will instruments like the CRC move "from its position of universal idealism to practical implementation."⁷⁶

In sum, though neoliberal institutionalism offers fairly tangible, practical solutions to deal with the problem of children serving as tools of war, it fails to match the breadth of social constructivism, which *does* allow for a broad-based, multi-pronged "attack" on the child soldier dilemma. A neoliberal institutionalist approach relies heavily on international law and institutions, and it assumes that states are the most important

actors. In the case of child soldiers, "it is often the state that is to blame."⁷⁷ Furthermore, "[g]overnments involved in civil wars are quite often unable to ensure that their opponents uphold legal standards."⁷⁸ In order to effectively deal with the problem of child soldiers, global dissemination of knowledge, with the ultimate goal of effecting a normative shift, is of the utmost importance.⁷⁹

In order to arrive at the best possible global solution to the child soldier problem, one must look beyond simple agreements between states to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers. As Steven Hick suggests, "[t]ighter controls need to be placed on the international flow of weapons, and a halt must be put to the illicit trafficking in diamonds, narcotics, and other products that fuel so many conflicts."⁸⁰ As well, more researchers must focus on the reintegration and rehabilitation of war-affected children into society after their wartime activities end, because until the problem of child soldiers is totally eliminated, such research will be absolutely necessary.⁸¹ Basically, "[w]e must find alternative ways to examine and respond to the problem, ways which will supplement the achievements made by international law."⁸²

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⁷² Carmen Sorger and Eric Hoskins, 145.

⁷³ Ilene Cohn and Guy Goodwin-Gill, 176.

⁷⁴ Edward Cairns, 166.

⁷⁵ Dan Seymour, 89.

⁷⁶ Ilene Cohn and Guy Goodwin-Gill, 102.

⁷⁷ Jo De Berry, 98.

⁷⁸ Amanda S. Millard, 190.

⁷⁹ Ilene Cohn and Guy Goodwin-Gill, 180-181.

⁸⁰ Steven Hick, 119.

⁸¹ Amanda S. Millard, 198.

⁸² Ibid, 192.

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