Two Plus Two Does Not Equal Four: (Non-) Childist Calls for Sahrawi Statehood

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If properly engaged, children provide astute answers to complex political questions. In most conflict zones, children constitute the demographic majority. If scholars and pollsters only measure adults' opinions, they ignore majority opinion. This is the norm, however (e.g., Warshel 2019), and even the term 'public opinion' is a misnomer for so-called adult opinion (Livingstone, 2001).

Nevertheless, many excellent scholars of conflict and post-conflict and ethnographers of political violence do not sample or directly observe children, especially young children.[1] While also vital, at best they only interact with those above tween age or as old as eighteen and above (e.g., Shepler 2014; Hromadžić 2015). The younger the child, the more their opinions tend to be overlooked or interpreted with skepticism. Alternatively, scholars may fail to engage children effectively even when they are included; seemingly out of normative and "childist" practices (e.g., Pierce and Allen 1975; Young-Bruehl 2013), they stereotypically presume children are unable to participate in a research process cogently.[2]

In order to discuss Sahrawi children's nationalist yearnings for independent statehood I adopt a childhood studies approach that takes children's opinions seriously. Going further, I deploy an alternative childist approach (e.g., Wall 2019) by elevating their opinions and associated actions to explore potential impacts on wider societal relations and structures within the context of the conflict for control over Western Sahara. The conflict is fought between Morocco, who currently governs the majority of the territory, and the Sahrawi, under the POLISARIO Front leadership (the Sahrawi national liberation movement).

For many years, political science and international relations scholars of elite-level peace-making focused on adult inefficacy in signing peace accords, arguing that 'no change' occurred since a ceasefire between the parties was agreed upon in 1991. Correctly describing the peace process as "stymied" and "stalemated" (e.g. Zoubir 2007; Roussellier 2014), these scholars, however, wrongly concluded there was nothing to study about the conflict or by corollary, peace process, other than to offer an "anatomy" of it (Jensen 2005).

As a scholar of socialization and peacebuilding focused on mechanisms for engendering grassroots support for peace-making and post-conflict peace sustainment and trained instead in the study of communication and media and sampling children and youth, I argued that everything had changed (e.g. Warshel 2016). An entirely new generation existed, one who grew up in a wholly different context. In contrast to the prior generation who grew up amid the 1975-1991 war that ended in the

ceasefire, including some among the Sahrawi who fled the territory under bombardment, the current Sahrawi generation grew up amid a period comprised of promises for change and an expectation for a referendum to determine the fate of the territory. However, after some 25 years, Morocco only offered an "Autonomy Plan," providing sub-state autonomy subsumed under the Kingdom of Morocco but not sovereign rights separate from it.

To discuss children coming of age amid this latter phase, I zoom into a particularly apt example from Azzuz,[3] a five-year-old I interviewed in 2009. His story foregrounds the Western Sahara conflict's unfolding stages: Youth repeatedly threatened a return to armed conflict in my conversations with them. They still sought and seek independence, including if it meant pursuing other routes to achieve said end (See also Mundy and Zunes 2014).

Methodological Backdoor and Policy Backdoor Eliciting Methods

I explored nationalist sentiments of young people like Azzuz through methodologies and methods that effectively engage children and yield data from which internally valid conclusions about their political opinions and associated cultural practices can be drawn. As tools, these helped me to triangulate meaning from their responses to posed questions and behaviors I observed, moderating for shortcomings in their emerging communication skills. Effectively "disaggregat[ing] so-called 'cognition' from culture" (Warshel 2018, 10), I determined the meanings they made and how they perceived their present-day conflict contexts and envisioned a future peace.

Drawing, in particular, from participatory communication and participatory anthropology methodologies and methods, I employed artifacts like toys as interview elicitation methods. These artifacts' visual, auditory, and tactile nature organically served as conversation prompts, offering "methodological backdoors" to start, mediate, and maintain conversation (Warshel 2019, 2021).[5] Use of these artifacts, in combination with methods allowing children to respond through gesture, dance, and drawing, bridged responses and ensured that I interpreted the meaning of what each child intended correctly. The result was also the procurement of what I refer to as "policy backdoors" (Warshel 2019, 2021) or the making available of data that otherwise could not necessarily be collected and interpreted with which hopefully better decisions about the conflict over Western Sahara might be made.

The Context of the Conflict Over Western Sahara

I have been conducting field research with young Sahrawis and Moroccans since 2009. By way of dominant ethnopolitical features of identity — on which their nations and associated national imaginings have been predicated — I characterize Sahrawis using "world system categories" (Warshel 2021a) as people contemporarily positioned into the category of a "stateless nation" seeking independence. They are Muslims and speak the Hassaniya dialect of Arabic, and typically

also Spanish. I characterize Moroccans as contemporarily positioned into a "statebearing nation," possessing the material equivalent of their nationalist imaginings: Morocco. They are also Muslim but speak the Darija dialect of Arabic and typically also French.

Following Moroccan efforts to "'reclaim'" the territory of Western Sahara in 1975, a war ensued between them and the POLISARIO, and at the start, also Mauritania. Each claimed all or part of the territory (Mundy and Zunes 2010). The result was the 'conquest'/'occupation'/'return' and annexation by Morocco of roughly four-fifths of the territory by 1977 (Mundy and Zunes 2010). Regarded as an indivisible part of the nation, the territory is seen by Morocco as an integral part of the state. POLISARIO, for its part, obtained control of the remaining one-fifth of the territory, which today they and Sahrawis more broadly, refer to as the "liberated territories" (in opposition to the territory under Moroccan control they regard as the "occupied territories"). Mauritania withdrew any claims to the territory early into the war.

The POLISARIO movement was founded in 1973. Since then, they continue to seek sovereign rule over the territory. Continuing that struggle, the Sahrawi seek materialization of their nation through an independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) located on the territory. Instead, under POLISARIO leadership, they operate the SADR non-state political institution out of refugee camps inside southern Algeria (Warshel 2021b).

From the Sahrawi perspective, Western Sahara constitutes an example of a failed decolonization process. As 'natives' of the territory Spain withdrew from (then located south of the French Protectorate in Morocco), they regard themselves as its rightful owners. On the eve of its departure, intending to hold a referendum to determine to whom to cede Spanish Sahara, Spain took a census of the population. That referendum was never held then or since.

(Non-) Childist Calls for Sahrawi Statehood

In my research with young Sahrawis and Moroccans, I have been finding that nationalist sentiments are strong. This includes, among the former, Sahrawi citizens of Morocco, or Sahrawi-Moroccans, and Sahrawi citizens of the non-state SADR political institution, or those who form a majority of the Sahrawi refugee population. The centrality of a state, or rather, its absence, appears to figure deep in their consciousness. This is best symbolized by the regularly heard chant, "no alternative but self-determination" ("*la badeel la badeel, an taqrir al-masir*"[6]), accompanied by two fingers held up like a peace or victory sign.

In my efforts to understand such political opinions and associated constructions of Sahrawi ethnopolitical and civic identity, I discuss Azzuz's story below. I offer it to theorize what can be learned by adopting an alternative positive childist approach, using appropriate methodologies and, correspondingly, non-childist interpretations that take expressions like his seriously.

Two Plus Two Equals Two "No Alternatives but Sahrawi Self-Determination"

Azzuz is a Sahrawi with Moroccan citizenship who lives in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara/Morocco's Southern Provinces. In an interview with Azzuz, I asked him to count to five. Normally,[4] asking a child to perform such a mathematical exercise might seem meaningless, but not in Azzuz's case. Azzuz subverted mathematical norms in protest. Using his fingers, he recited out loud to me, "one" ("*wahed*"), and rather than following that up with "two," he stated "no-alternative" ("*la badeel*"). Then he proceeded from there to count "three" ("*thalathi*"), "four" ("*arba*"), and "five" ("*hamsa*").

Testing him further, I held up two fingers on both hands and asked Azzuz, "How many is this?" ("*kam hatha?*"). Rather than answering "four" ("*arba*"), code switching and using the Darija Arabic term for "two" he learned in his Moroccan school, he proclaimed "two no-alternatives" ("*jouj la badeel*")!

Buttressing this point, Azzuz's family recounted to me that in the framework of his formal education, earlier on, his Darija Arabic-speaking Muslim Moroccan teacher warned he would not learn math. He did not seem to "understand" that two fingers, *not three*, stand for the number two. As she explained it, in class, he would read off "one" (holding up one finger to her), "no-alternative" (holding up two), "two" (holding up three fingers), "three" (holding up four) and "four" (holding up five).

As I interpret it using communication methodologies, at five years old, Azzuz was already well familiar with the "sign" (Burke 1996) for the "no alternative but self-determination" slogan: two fingers held up like a peace or victory sign and its associated chant.

Sahrawi Public Opinion

As I have written elsewhere, expressions such as these do not constitute a naïve understanding of the world (Warshel 2021a) or an under-developed cognitive mathematical capacity. Rather, Azzuz's seemingly childish or child-like constructions, as captured through child-adapted participatory research techniques, provided a view into the symbolic meaning-making system that takes just a few years for children who grow up within one specific world system categorical context to learn and co-construct.

Regardless of key Moroccan state socialization forces at play to the contrary, Azzuz countered. Owing to Moroccan state policies encouraging migration of Darija-speaking Moroccan Muslims to southern communities like the cities of Samra and Laayoune/El Aaiún, where significant Sahrawi populations reside, local communities and Moroccan-run schools have become/been

made 'mixed'. Sahrawis are now presumed to be demographically minoritized, with intergroup contact with their Darija-speaking counterparts being a normative factor potentially influencing socialization. Where television is concerned, children like Azzuz are surrounded by pan-Arab global television, SADR TV, and Morocco's Laayoune TV. The latter, created by Morocco to target "Hassani" audiences as a reaction against SADR TV, per interviews I conducted with its Sahrawi staff, is circumscribed. Regardless of such potential agents of socialization, Azzuz's performance of his Sahrawi nationality nevertheless evoked its separateness from Morocco. Despite officially being '"hailed"' (Althusser 1971) by the state as an "Hassani" ethnopolitical subject-in-the-making, he dialogically countered with his "Sahrawi" national identity and worldview.

From a world-systems perspective, I also note that Azzuz's expressions were in keeping with that which I would hypothetically expect from a stateless nation-in-the-making, namely, a child growing up within his specific conflict context. By contrast, a Moroccan child of a different ethnopolitical identity, such as a Muslim Darija Arabic-speaking Moroccan child, would not chant the slogan accompanying the sign Azzuz gestured, let alone even likely express awareness of it, as my ongoing research so far finds.

Comparatively, as I have found in research I conducted with other children contemporarily positioned into the category of stateless nation like Palestinians, their performative practices are in keeping with community-level glocalization of the world system by people institutionally positioned into one world system category rather than another (Warshel 2021a). In Azzuz's case, he is positioned as a stateless nation, living in the city of Smara, inside "occupied territories" under Moroccan "occupation," from where he translates both the sign and the specifically Darija word for "two" into a protest term for independence.

Adult scholars, seemingly only seeing adults like themselves, discussed the "stalemate" but ignored the facts on the ground that children like Azzuz constituted. The Sahrawi normative stance that Western Sahara has yet to be decolonized, alongside an outcome goal of a referendum to enact independence, in accordance with the UN's address of what it characterizes as a non-self-governing territory and Africa's last colony, held discursive resonance. The 'proof' of that meaning was evidenced in Azzuz's selection of "no-alternatives" as the sign, expressing the meaning of two fingers and trumping math. I theorize that such political opinions, and in the case of Azzuz, cultural practices, provided illustrations of nascent Sahrawi public opinion.

To that end, even from age five, using what appears to be 'child's play,' Azzuz seems to have argued that there remains no alternative — but a referendum on self-determination — and the creation of an independent SADR in Western Sahara, for its children and its adults, alike. Had opinions of young Sahrawis like Azzuz been taken seriously, the negative reaction to Morocco's

"Autonomy Plan" and ultimately, the resumption of the armed conflict might have been better understood and predicted.

Notes

[1] Among the former, see Zunes and Mundy (2010). Among the latter, see Moran (2013) and Wilson (2016).

[2] cf. preschoolers sampled by Connolly and Healy 2004; and a handful of children below age 10 interviewed in Crivello and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010.

[3] Azzuz is a pseudonym.

[4] I write 'normally' because Azzuz's response might be assumed meaningless if one eschews qualitative methods like negative case analysis. By comparison, I argue, an individual behaving in the same manner as other members of their society/'group' demonstrates culture as practice.

[5] See Warshel 2019 and 2021a for information about my child-adapted methods and methodologies and their utility. See Warshel 2018 and 2022 for related discussions also derived through my research with young people across Sub-Saharan and North Africa and the Middle East.

[6] Italicized font indicates words originally spoken in Arabic.

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Yael Warshel (https://ica-cam.org/in-the-spotlight/yael-warshel/) is an award-winning expert on young people and media in global conflict zones and peace communication. She is Founding Director of the Children, Media, and Conflict Zones Lab, Vice President of the American Institute for Maghrib Studies, Assistant Professor of Communications and African Studies, and Research Associate of the Rock Ethics Institute at Penn State. There, she co-leads the *Human Rights and Forced Migration* initiative, developed from her fieldwork about Western Sahara. She is working on her third book, *When Conflict is Real: Reimagining the Study of Children, Youth, and Media in International and Global Conflict Zones* (contracted with Stanford University Press), and is author of the three-time award-winning monograph, *Experiencing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Children, Peace Communication and Socialization* (Cambridge University Press).

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