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## Age Differences in Children's Perceptions of War

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This study explored differences in children's perceptions of war among three age groups. A qualitative research design was adopted. In-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 50 children recruited from two mid-western university towns in the U.S. Comparisons of perception differences also were made between Taiwanese American (TA) children and non-Taiwanese American (NTA) children on the basis of different age groups. Age was found to be an important factor influencing children's perceptions of war. In general, children in the youngest age group described war mainly in terms of war activities and weapons. Those in the middle and oldest age groups were much more likely than the youngest children to include consequences and causes of war in their descriptions. Individual differences also were discussed. The results of this study indicated a strong similarity between TA and NTA children's descriptions of war; however, a few differences also were identified, some of which seemed to be related to TA children's unique cultural background. Piaget's cognitive development theory and Symbolic Interactionism were adopted to explain and understand the differences found in age groups and ethnic groups. Implications for practice and future research are suggested.

**KEY WORDS:** age, children, ethnicity, perception, war

*"War can only be avoided if the people of the world are humbled and they settle their differences and set an example for their children."—14-year-old boy*

Contemporary armed warfare has changed from being a battle between militaries to being a battle that includes civilians (Goldson, 1996). A 1996 UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) report, *Impact of armed conflict on children*, has indicated that in recent decades, "the proportion of war victims who are civilians has leaped dramatically from 5% to over 90%" (Machel, 1996, p. 9). Jensen (1996) noted that the concept of "child victims" includes not only killed and wounded children, but also many kinds of child survivors suffering from psychosocial distress by living under the conditions of war. Numerous empirical studies have reported the negative consequences of war on the physical and psychological well-being of children in the war zone (Zahr, 1996).

How are children outside of war zones affected by war? Research evidence indicates that negative consequences of war occur even for children not directly involved in war or living in a war zone (Figley, 1993). In their qualitative study of children's reactions to international conflict, Myers-Bowman, Walker, and Myers-Walls (2000) discovered that American children who were observers far away from the war, mentioned feeling afraid, worried, sad, angry and confused at about the same rate as Yugoslavian children who were directly involved in war. Another vivid example came from Taiwan. One article (Kuly, 2002, p.38) published on December 15, 2002 in China Times has reported that among the "Ten most frequently asked questions by kids" in Taiwan, "*Teacher, why is there war?*" was one of them. Clearly, we can see that many of these children demonstrated confusion and frustration about why there is war.

No matter in the war zone or not, children can be affected by war in many ways. Knowing these devastating war effects on children, what can we do to help? For prevention purposes, scholars suggest that education for peace is crucial (Bellamy, 2002; Firer, 2002; Machel, 1996; Vriens, 1999). In order to decide what the appropriate content and process of the education for peace should be, we need to study the developmental course by which children and adolescents come to understand the concept of war and peace, as well as the societal and individual variables that may shape the development of this understanding (Oppenheimer, Bar-Tal, & Raviv, 1999). Adults' interpretations of what to teach to children about this topic may not reflect the developmental and contextual needs of children, therefore, examining what children understand about these concepts from children's own perspective is the first and necessary step to reach that educational goal.

Little is known regarding the fundamental knowledge on children's and adolescents' developing perceptions of war and peace (Hakvoort, 1996). Most of the peace and war research related to this topic adopted Piagetian developmental theory, and "age" is the major explanatory variable for the observed variations among children's perceptions (Hakvoort, 1996; Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998). Many studies evidenced that older children and adolescents demonstrate a higher level of understanding of the concepts of war and peace than younger ones. This higher level of understanding reflects the developmental progress from concrete to abstract reasoning of the concepts. For example, Rosell (1968) discovered that Swedish children's associations and definitions of war changed during the age interval from 8 to 14 years. The most obvious change is children's definition of war as 'conflict' increases greatly with age. Using Piaget's theory, Rosell explained when children reach the formal-operational stage (11-12 years), they develop the capacity of reciprocal reasoning, which enables them to perceive a conflict behind war.

Covell, Rose-Krasnor and Fletcher (1994) also found "a unilinear developmental progression in understanding the concept of war and peace" (p. 717) with 156 Canadian children and adolescents aged 7 to 18 years. While most of the younger groups predominantly reflected a concrete (i.e., blood and dead bodies) or general level (i.e., a conflict between nations or fighting among people) of understanding of war, the older two groups (13-15 and 16-18 of age) more often gave abstract level (i.e., war as an expression of incompatible goals) responses. The percentage of children giving concrete level explanations of war decreased with age, whereas the percentage of children offering abstract level explanations of war increased with age beginning at the ages of 13-15 years.

However, several contradictory findings did not support the above results. Hakvoort and Oppenheimer (1993) examined 101 Dutch children and adolescents between 8 and 16 and no developmental changes could be observed for conceptions of war from the data. At all ages, war was primarily associated with the

concrete aspects of war such as war weapons, war activities and war participants such as soldiers and the army. The older participants (14- to 16 year-olds) mentioned the abstract and norm-related aspects of war only when they were asked about strategies to attain peace. Mercer (1974) also reported that little evidence for age-related variations with respect to war and peace could be detected and most answers emphasized the concrete aspects of war with a sample of 2400 12- to 17-year-old children and adolescents in Scotland.

Possible explanations for this discrepancy may include methodological reasons. For example, there is a lack of unified operational definitions for 'abstract aspects of war' across studies. Also, different age ranges were included in the studies. Another possible explanation for divergent findings may be due to a 'decalage' phenomenon based on Piaget's theory: children and adolescents who have reached the formal-operational stage "do not apply the cognitive structure of the formal-operational stage, but only that of the concrete-operational stage" (Rosell, 1968, p. 273, for more details see Pinard & Laurendeau, 1969). More research is needed to conclude if there is an age-related shift from concrete to abstract thinking (i.e., reflecting increasing cognitive abilities) in children's and adolescents' conceptions of war.

Furthermore, there are different age variations from various studies regarding the onset of children's understanding of war and peace. For example, Cooper (1965) studied 5 to 16 year old English children and reported that "coherent utterances on the subjects of war and peace first occur around the age of six years" (p. 3). Tephly (1985) interviewed 49 American children and concluded that most young children are already aware of what war is, especially at ages 5 and up. Tephly's findings seem to suggest that the first verbal association of the concept of war starts a little bit earlier for these American children than for those English children in Cooper's sample 20 years ago. How do children understand these concepts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The study that included the youngest children (3-year-olds) in this field of research was conducted by Myers-Bowman, Walker, and Myers-Walls (2005). The results indicated that at age 3, some young children demonstrated understanding of the concepts of war and peace, though they might not be able to verbalize much. For example, one 3-year-old American boy said "Soldiers shoot" in responding to the war question. To explain this age variation in different countries, Covell (1999) suggested that the impact of the sociocultural contexts in which children are being reared needs to be examined.

International comparative studies to examine children's and adolescents' perceptions of war and peace are few (Cooper, 1965; Dinklage & Ziller, 1989; Hakvoort & Hagglund, 2001; Hakvoort, Hagglund, & Oppenheimer, 1998; McLernon & Cairns, 2001). Among those studies, some supported that across nations/culture, children and adolescents differ more in their perceptions of peace than in their perceptions of war. Hakvoort and Hagglund (2001) reported that both Dutch and Swedish children described war using the core contents of war objects, war activities and negative consequences. The only difference was that Dutch children and adolescents mentioned war objects more frequently than Swedish participants. This lack of variation in the content of war may indicate that war is perceived similarly in these two countries. McLernon and Cairns (2001) examined the drawings of children from areas of high and low political violence in Northern Ireland and one area with no violence in England. However, no significant effects for area were found in children's pictures of war.

In contrast, Cooper (1965) compared English children with Japanese children on their associations to the word 'war'. Japanese children emphasized more on the war weapons, were more international looking, and were less concerned with war activities and the effects of war than English children in corresponding age groups. Similarly, Dinklage and Ziller (1989) asked a total of 80 children from Germany and the U.S. to

bring one photograph to represent war. For the meaning of war, significantly more German children than the American children associated war with ‘destruction’ and ‘negative consequences of war.’ The authors interpreted the results as the reflection of cognitive differences between two countries with one being a participant in war and another a distant observer. The results seem to indicate that children of countries with very different geographical locations or sociocultural backgrounds tend to differ in their conceptions of war, such as between western and eastern culture (e.g., England versus Japan), and between different war experiences (e.g., Germany versus U.S.). More cross-cultural research is necessary to explain the discrepancies among findings.

In this study, a qualitative research design is used to allow for rich descriptions of children’s perceptions of war among a total of 50 American children. The present study is unique because it compares children’s perceptions of war for 23 Taiwanese American (TA) children and 27 Non-Taiwanese (NTA) children in different age groups. Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes that the “mentalist definitions people make in their unique situations are the most useful explanatory variables in understanding human and social behavior” (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979, p. 49). Under such premise, the unique political situation of Taiwan may influence how Taiwanese people perceive war. Taiwan is a small country which is under the constant military threat of another much more powerful country-Communist China. The author assumed that immigrant Taiwanese American parents who grew up under such a political context might possess and express to their American-born children different perceptions of war from those of native American parents, thus the comparison of possible perception differences between ethnic groups deserved to be explored.

Overall, the main purpose of this present study is to explore potential perception differences of war with regard to age for American children as a whole and between ethnic groups (TA versus NTA). Knowledge gaps derived from this study can be useful for educators, family service practitioners and family life educators in designing sound programs and curricula for helping parents, teachers and other adults discuss war and peace issues with children at different age and from different family/cultural backgrounds. Results of this study also provide implications for researchers and theorists in continuing the theorizing process in order to systematically guide and integrate future research in this area.

The central research question is “What are the perception differences with regard to age?” and followed by a set of sub-questions listed below:

- Do the oldest TA children describe war differently from the oldest NTA children? If they do, what are the differences?
- Do middle age TA children describe war differently from middle age NTA children? If they do, what are the differences?
- Do the youngest TA children describe war differently from the youngest NTA children? If they do, what are the differences?

## Method

### Sample

Twenty-three Taiwanese American (TA) children and 27 non-Taiwanese American (NTA) children

recruited from the states of Kansas and Indiana in the United States participated in this study. Three age groups based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development were created for comparison of their descriptions of war. The three groups are 3 to 8 year olds (n=14), 9 to 12 year olds (n= 20) and 13 to 17 year olds (n=13). The ages of TA children ranged from 4 to 17 years, with a mean age of 10.8. All TA children in the sample were second generation Taiwanese immigrants. The ages of NTA children ranged from 3 to 15 years, with a mean age of 8.5. The NTA sample is predominantly Caucasian with some representation of other ethnic groups but no Taiwanese and Asian American children. However, data analyses indicated that three 3-year-old NTA children's answers did not show understanding of the concept of war; therefore, their answers were not included in the final calculation of the percentages of the war themes.

### **Procedure**

Data were collected from the summer of 2002 through March 2003 before the United States started the war with Iraq. A variety of strategies were used to make contacts with the parents. The researchers called or wrote letters to after-school programs, clubs, and childcare locations to ask for permission to come to the facility to explain the purpose of the study and invite parents to allow their child(ren) to participate. Other opportunities to make contacts with parents were through personal leads, schools and church connections. Parents responded positively were contacted with follow-up calls to set up a time and a place that was most convenient to them for their child(ren) to be interviewed.

A structured interview procedure was selected as the primary method of data collection. The individual interview started with asking the children to draw pictures of war and peace. Following the drawings, the participants were asked a series of open-ended questions which allowed them to fully express their views. These included children's answers to the following questions: "Do you know what war is? What can you tell me about war? If someone who didn't know anything about it asked you about war, what would you say? Can you name other words that people sometimes use that mean the same thing as war? What happens in war? Who is (involved) in war? Why is there war? How does war start? How does war end? What happens because of war? Do you think that war is good or bad? Why? Is there anything else you would like to say about war and peace?" The whole interviewing process usually took about 30 to 90 minutes depending on the child's age and interest. Each of the interview sessions was audio taped and were transcribed verbatim by the interviewer.

### **Analysis**

In this study, age comparisons were made using qualitative *cross-case analysis*. Miles and Huberman (1994) indicated that using cross-case analysis with multiple comparison cases/groups could deepen understanding and explanation of the phenomenon under study.

Two researchers coded all the interviews separately. One researcher is the author of this paper, and the other one is an associate professor at Family Studies and is very familiar with the topic and the qualitative data analysis. The analytic procedure included the following steps: 1. Developing preliminary coding themes and categories: Each of us started with following Creswell's (1998) suggestion of reading through all collected information to obtain a sense of the overall data. We wrote memos and reflective notes in the margins of the text as an initial sorting-out process before developing coding categories. Next, we picked several cases and examined each by "reading, reading, and reading once more" (Marshall &

Rossman, 1999, p. 153) through the interview transcription, and tried to identify “recurring regularities” as well as irregularities within the children’s and adolescents’ answers to the war questions (Patton, 1990, p. 403). An initial list of themes and categories was established through the prolonged attention to those data. One example to illustrate how data were sorted into different categories was provided below:

**Interviewer:** Do you know what war is? What can you tell me about war?

**Child (9-year-old boy):** Well, like when one side (whatever country is) is not giving as much oil or something, or bombing another country, one country starts to get mad and they try to catch those people and there is a war.

In this example, “one side” was coded into the category of “Fights between countries/groups/sides”; “not giving as much oil or something” into “Causes of war”; “bombing” into “War activities”; and “get mad” into “Negative emotions”.

2. Coding the data: We began to color code different categories and take this list back to the data (Creswell, 1994; Tesch, 1990). Thematic segments from children’s answers that fitted into different categories were hand-coded using color pencils on transcripts. For example, thematic segments such as fighting, shooting, bombing, killing, hurting, stabbing were all coded into the category of “War activities.” This preliminary coding scheme was used to work back and forth between the data and the creating categories to see if newly emerged categories needed to be supplemented.

3. Establishing major categories and subcategories: Finally, the originally developed categories and themes were reduced and grouped into fewer categories to be used in the end (Creswell, 1998). For example, the categories of “war damages to Human” and “war damages to properties (buildings, houses)” became two subcategories under one larger category of “War consequences” to represent a broader concept.

Throughout the entire analysis process, we met regularly to compare emerging themes and coding schemes, to discuss the criteria for collapsing categories, and to verify the consistency of placing data into categories. This procedure served as a validity check for the analysis. Multiple themes defining war were generated from the 47 transcripts and frequency counts were assigned to each theme. Qualitative data were transformed into quantitative data by calculating the percentages of specific themes being included in children’s answers. For example, in the middle age group, for the major theme of “Weapons”, 10 out of the total 20 middle age children have mentioned some sorts of weapons in their answers, such as gun, sword, tank, bombs, and bullet. As a result, the major theme of “weapons” was mentioned by 50% of the middle age children. The utilization of frequency counts was for the purpose of comparing and contrasting the presence of themes in the answers of different age groups and ethnic groups, and was not intended to imply statistical differences between groups.

## Results

Based on the answers from the interview questions, developmental differences among 3 age groups and two ethnic groups are presented. Frequencies of major themes about war identified in the answers of these groups were summarized in Table 1 and Table 2:

**Table 1 Percentages (%) of Major Themes for Age Groups**

Major Themes	3-8	9-12	13-17
	N=14	N=20	N=13
War is (a positive description)	93	95	100
War is not (a negative description: people <i>not</i> getting along, <i>not</i> liking each other...)	43	70	69
War activities: Fighting/killing/shooting	93	95	92
Weapons	57	50	38
War consequences			
Humans: get killed/get wounded/get hurt	43	90	85
Damages to buildings/properties/houses	7	50	62
Negative emotions	43	65	69
Fights between countries/groups/sides	29	75	69
Causes of war			
Aggressive attack	29	45	92
Self-defense or for peace/freedom/justice	0	25	15
Mutual causes	14	35	38
People			
President/government/soldiers/army	14	40	54
Everyone/innocent people/families	29	40	62
Specific countries	0	30	15
How war ends			
Win-lose	14	60	38
Defeated/killed each other	29	15	15
Negative judgment	14	45	46
Other solutions	14	25	31

**Table 2 Percentages (%) of Major Themes for Age and Ethnicity**

Major Themes	3-8		9-12		13-17	
	TA	NTA	TA	NTA	TA	NTA
	N=5	N=9	N=9	N=11	N=9	N=4
War is (a positive description)	80	100	100	91	100	100
War is not (a negative description: people <i>not</i> getting along, <i>not</i> liking each other...)	20	44	67	55	78	50
War activities: Fighting/killing/shooting	80	100	100	91	89	100
Weapons	40	67	44	55	44	25
War consequences						
Humans: get killed/get wounded/get hurt	20	56	100	82	78	100
Damages to buildings/properties/houses	0	11	56	45	56	75
Negative emotions	20	56	56	73	56	100
Fights between countries/groups/sides	20	33	67	82	89	25
Causes of war						
Aggressive attack	20	33	67	27	89	100
Self-defense or for peace/freedom/justice	0	0	33	18	11	25
Mutual causes	0	22	33	36	44	25
People						
President/government/soldiers/army	20	11	44	36	56	50
Everyone/innocent people/families	20	33	56	27	56	75
Specific countries	0	0	22	36	0	50
How war ends						
Win-lose	0	22	56	64	44	25
Defeated/killed each other	20	33	22	9	11	25
Negative judgment	0	22	33	55	33	75
Other solutions	0	22	22	27	33	25

### Children in the Youngest Age Group (3 to 8 year olds)

The youngest children often included fewer themes in their response than the older children did. The average number of the themes generated from the youngest age group was 5.3, compared to 9.3 from the middle age group and 10.2 from the oldest age group (The average number of the themes was calculated first, by counting the total themes each child has mentioned in his/her answers, and then total the number of themes of all children in specific age groups and divided with the number of children). However, the greatest variation about the range of the number of themes appeared in this group. It ranged from only one theme in the answers of a 4 year old to 14 themes found in a 6-year-old child's responses. As mentioned earlier in the method section of this paper, children age 3 in this study did not show evidence of understanding the concept of war. The 4 year olds gave one to two themes to describe what war is. In this research, it was not until children were 5 to 6 years old, that some of them included a variety of themes in their answers about war.

Most children in the youngest age group talked about what war is mainly surrounding the themes of *war activities* and *weapons*. The youngest children were more likely to associate war with *weapons* than the older children, and not surprisingly, the differences were minor with the middle age group than with the oldest age group (57%, 50% and 38%, respectively). In addition, a greater percentage of the youngest children than the older children indicated that war ends with both sides killing or defeating each other (29%, compared to 15% in the older age groups). For example, a 7-year-old boy said that war ends when "they really kill each other and one dies and the other one dies (and he went on and on with that)." Very few of the youngest children talked about the damage of war to buildings, properties and houses, and none of them perceived the causes of war in terms of self-defense or for peace/freedom. This is not surprising, because they are more abstract concepts to catch than those of the weapons or fights.

One unique theme emphasized in the youngest children's answers was the association of war with *bad guys or bad people* (50%, compared to 0% in the middle age group and 8% in the oldest age group). A 5-year-old girl said that there is war because "bad people want to fight you." And a 7-year-old boy indicated, "Bad people [are involved in war]. Bad people that like to fight. It's very bad."

Furthermore, the youngest children often expressed greater confusion about the causes of war and the process of war (e.g., how war starts and how war ends) than the children in the older age groups. Over 50% of these youngest children either said they "don't know" or did not give an answer to the questions regarding why there is war, how war starts and how it ends. In contrast, only 10% of the children in the middle age group said they "don't know" how war starts and why there is war. And only one child in the oldest age group indicated, "I don't know" about how war starts and ends.

### TA and NTA Comparison in the Youngest Age Group

There were more NTA children than TA children in the youngest age group (n=9 and 5, respectively), and there were more older NTA children than TA children as well (the mean age for the youngest TA group was 4.8, compared to 5.9 in the youngest NTA group). The youngest TA children provided one to eight themes in their descriptions of war, and "fighting" is the most dominant word in their answers. A range of three to fourteen themes were identified in the youngest NTA children's responses. The percentage of almost every major theme was found to be greater for NTA children than for TA children. In addition,

several themes that were included in the youngest NTA children's answers were not found in the responses of their TA counterparts, such as war damage to property, mutual cause of war, the win-lose dimension of war, negative judgment, and other solutions.

### **Children in the Middle Age Group (9 to 12 year olds)**

Children in the middle age group also described war in terms of war activities such as fighting, killing, and shooting, but added additional dominant themes. Unlike their younger counterparts in the study, this group of children was more likely to associate war with the *consequence of war* than with weapons. A greater percentage of children in the middle age group than in the younger age group emphasized the war consequences of people getting killed, hurt or wounded in their answers (90% and 43%, respectively). In addition, within this category, the answers were found to be more complex and comprehensive for the middle age children than for the younger children. Almost all the younger children included people being killed as the sole consequence of war, with only one child adding property damage. Not surprisingly, most children in the middle age group often included two to three consequences of war. For example, an 11-year-old boy described when there is war "a lot of people lose their lives...", but also indicated that "a lot of money lost in the war...a lot of families lose one of their family members..." "they [people] lose food, water and shelter."

Similarly, while over 50% of the younger children could not answer how war ends, all children in the middle age group provided an answer. Most children in the middle age group were more likely to say that war ends when one side wins and one side loses than to say that both sides defeat each other. Additionally, more descriptions about the ways of how war ends were reflected in the answers of the children in the middle age group than those of in the youngest age group. These descriptions seem to suggest that children in the middle age group provided a perspective that war could end by people taking positive actions. For example, children said that war ends "when they are nice to each other again," "when somebody tells them a good reason," "when two people make friends. They put each other in each other's shoes," "when people apologize," "when people find peace in their hearts, when they reach down deep inside," and "by a whole bunch of people who think they are doing wrong and they are able to stop it."

Children in the middle age group also were more likely than the younger children to describe war as a conflict or fight between two or more countries or sides, which encompassed an international or a global perspective (75%, compared to 29% in the youngest age group).

### **TA and NTA Comparison in the Middle Age Group**

In the middle age group, the number of TA and NTA children was close ( $n=9$  and 11, respectively) with a mean age of 10.2 for both groups. In this middle age group, there were many shared war themes between TA children's answers and NTA children's answers, and the frequencies of major war themes in each group were very similar. However, in the category of "causes of war", the middle age TA children emphasized the theme of *aggressive attack* more often than the middle age NTA children (67% and 27%, respectively). A greater percentage of TA than NTA middle age children stressed *war impact on civilians*. In contrast, NTA children were more likely than TA children to express a *negative judgment* about war in general.

### Children in the Oldest Age Group (13 to 17 year olds)

Ninety-two percent of the children in the oldest age group also associated war with war activities like fighting and shooting, but the oldest children also included *consequences and causes of war* instead of weapons as the next most common themes reflected in their descriptions of war. Similar to children in the middle age group, the adolescents also emphasized the war consequences of people being killed or shot, but they were more likely to describe the theme of war impact specifically on *civilians* than the younger children did. Furthermore, a few children in the oldest age group also talked about the possible *long-term traumatic effect of war* on people, which was not included in the answers of the younger children. For example, a 15-year-old boy indicated that because of war, “People die. Families get emotionally hurt. And sometimes they feel like they can’t go on.”

Regarding the cause of war, 92% of the children in the oldest age group (compared to 29% in the youngest age group and 45% in the middle age group) described war as an *aggressive attack* caused by the ambitious/greedy motive of a leader or a country. In addition, more children in the oldest age group than in the middle age group said that war ends *when a compromise or a treaty was made*, a theme that described beyond the win-lose ending of war which was indicated by most children in the middle age group. Not surprisingly, this theme was not found in the answers of children in the youngest age group. The following examples illustrated this finding:

**Interviewer:** How does war end?

**Child 1 (13-year-old girl):** When a compromise is made on all the sides, and they’re talking about it.

**Child 2 (14-year-old boy):** When a treaty is formed, or compromised or when both sides withdraw their military, and when a treaty is formed, no troops can invade their land.

Another unique answer, though different from those above, is presented below to also demonstrate the complex mind of an adolescent.

**Child 3 (16-year-old boy):** It ends when people are able to trust their government and other people in the world and reach the higher understanding of life.

In general, children in the oldest age group included themes and frequencies similar to children in the middle age group, but added extra richness and complexity in the contents. For instance, when children were asked at the end of the interview if there is anything else they would like to say about war and peace, almost all the youngest children said, “No,” or provided an irrelevant answer. For example, a 5-year-old girl said, “Well, it’s not about war and peace, but I have a baby brother.” A 6-year-old boy said, “No, because I’m getting tired of being here.” Another 6-year-old boy indicated, “I would like to tell you what I want my job to be. I would like to talk with the Lego people and make Legos.” In the middle age group, all but one child answered “no” to the question. The only child who had more to say about war and peace was a 10-year-old girl. She answered, “That there should be more peace, and no war. People should love each other, accept what they have and there should be no war.” In contrast to the younger age groups, 38% of the children in the oldest age group had more to say about war and peace. Some thoughtful comments offered by these oldest children are provided below:

**Interviewer:** Is there anything else you would like to say about war and peace?

**Child 1 (14-year-old boy):** I really think that war is pretty pointless, and it can be avoided easily, but some people just aren’t willing to, and I think it’s the adults’ responsibility to raise their children not to

be prejudiced against other cultures, and countries should also have better education, and make it affordable for everybody, so that they can also avoid mistakes. ‘Cause a lot of people who are clueless make the wrong decisions, and I think it’s their duties as people to become educated for the past and the histories to avoid mistakes. One more thing, instead of being bent on fighting a war, we should focus more on ending it. That’s it !

Child 2 (16-year-old boy): I guess I am really hoping that this war doesn’t happen. I think it’s ridiculous. We need to really focus on domestic issues because there’s so much going on in the United States instead. I mean so many more people die of AIDS than people would ever die of terrorists’ attacks. They need to really look at what they are focusing on and re-shift that focus to what really matters.

### TA and NTA Comparison in the Oldest Age Group

There are more TA than NTA children in the oldest age group (n=9 and 4, respectively). In this group, the mean age of TA children is 14.6 and the mean age of NTA children 13.8. The oldest NTA children mentioned *negative emotions* as one of the most dominant theme in their answers instead of the theme of *a fight between two countries/sides* as dominated in the TA group. The oldest NTA children also were more likely than the oldest TA children to express a *negative judgment* about war. In addition, the oldest NTA children named *specific countries* in their descriptions about war, but this same theme was not found in any of the oldest TA children’s answers.

In summary, younger children described war mainly in terms of war activities and weapons, whereas, older children were much more likely than the younger children to include consequences and causes of war in their descriptions. In general, older children were able to include more war themes, to express less confusion about the cause and process of war, to give answers which were more complex and comprehensive, to understand war from more than one perspective/dimension, to exhibit less categorical thinking, and to provide answers which were more thoughtful and abstract than those of the younger children. An example to summarize qualitatively the age differences in understanding war among three age groups using the theme of “consequence of war” was provided in Table 3:

**Table 3 Perception differences for Age Groups**

Age groups	Consequence of war	Children’s narratives
The youngest age group	Simple answers about people getting killed or hurt and only one out of the 14 children adding property damage	“Um...People start getting dead. A lot of people get dead. Um...I don’t know.”
The middle age group	Mentioning more complicate and various kinds of loses such as people getting killed or hurt and loses of money, food, shelter, houses, cities, family members, etc	“A lot of things get destroyed. Um... some families die, and if they want to repair the town, they need a lot of money.”
The oldest age group	More sophisticate and abstract descriptions about loses of human lives, property damage, economic decline, as well as long-term traumatic effect of war on people	“People die, and others live and remember the things that they saw the rest of their lives...People cry for the rest of their lives and they never find themselves at peace and other people never forget it.”

Comparisons between TA and NTA children were made on the basis of different age groups. In general, across all age groups, strong similarities of the major war themes were identified between TA and NTA children. Differences also existed; especially in the categories of *negative emotions* and *negative judgment* which were consistently evident across all three age groups.

## Discussion

### Age and Perceptions of War

In general, children's descriptions of war encompassed a wide range of themes. However, a strong resemblance in the major themes across all age groups was the identification of war with *war activities*, such as fighting, shooting, killing and hurting. Over 90% of children and adolescents in each age group emphasized this theme. Beyond this theme, there were marked age differences regarding the major themes in children's perceptions of war. The differences were greater between the youngest children and the older children than between the middle age children and the oldest age children. The results suggest that the youngest and older children's answers differed both in quantity (the number of themes) and quality (the level of abstractness and complexity); however, the middle children's and adolescents' descriptions of war differed more in quality than in quantity.

Several patterns emerged from data. First, the youngest children depicted war predominantly based on the concrete images of war such as war activities and war weapons. This pattern was congruent with previous studies that investigated young children's concepts of war (Cooper, 1965; Covell et al, 1994; McLernon & Cairns, 2000; Rodd, 1985; Tephly, 1985). Punamaki (1999) indicated that young children's reasoning about war and peace is based on immediate experiences from their environment, and "accordingly they describe or draw war in the form of concrete war scenes" (p. 133). Children at age 3 in this study did not show an understanding of the concept of war. This is inconsistent with the findings found in the study conducted by Myers-Bowman and colleagues (2005). It may be that there were not many 3 year olds in this study to detect the case or more probably it is a rare case for children at age 3 to be able to understand war. This suggests the importance of paying attention to individual differences. Children at age 6 and up in this study were able to articulate an understanding of war with a wide range of themes besides war activities and weapons. This finding is somewhat in accordance with Cooper's (1965) results. However, the majority of the youngest children, especially under age 7, often indicated confusion about the causes and processes of war. Similar results also were found in studies conducted by Rodd (1985) and Tephly (1985) with pre-school children.

The second pattern was that, in general, the middle children and adolescents demonstrate a higher level of understanding of the concept of war than the youngest children do. Previous researchers also have identified this pattern (Engestrom, 1978; Haavelsrud, 1970; Rosell, 1968; Trebjesanin et al., 2000). This finding can be explained using Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Children's thinking in Piaget's preoperational stage appears unidimensional, and focuses on a single perceptual aspect of an object or event at a time (Bukatko & Daehler, 1995; Peters & Willis, 1978). With age, through the process of assimilation and accommodation with the new experiences and new information that appears in the children's environment, children's "thinking and reasoning changes and they progress from one cognitive stage to

another” (Peters & Willis, 1978, p. 25). Therefore, older children in the later developmental stages are able to perceive war with increasingly differentiated ideas and concepts (Covell et al., 1994).

However, we need take into consideration the importance of individual differences. The findings in this study also suggest that the cognitive development of a few of the youngest children has advanced beyond the preoperational stage. These children included more themes in their answers than some of the older children did. For example, 14 themes were identified in a 6-year-old boy’s descriptions of war. There also were a few children in the youngest age group who could provide an answer as to why there is war, which requires the ability of a concrete operational child who could logically reason about events and relationships (Bukatko & Daehler, 1995).

Piaget is criticized to have underestimated some of the cognitive skills of preschool children (Santrock, 1997). These 6 to 7 year olds in this study demonstrated what appear to be concrete operational skills. One possible explanation for the advanced cognitive development of these youngest children may be attributed to the interactions within their social cultural environment, especially with parents. Most of these advanced youngest children indicated that they have talked to their parents about war. According to Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspective, children’s cognitive growth can be fostered if children engage in social interactions with more mature, competent partners and work on tasks that are within the child’s zone of proximal development (Sigelman & Shaffer, 1995). Nevertheless, researchers also pointed out other possible factors, both biological and environmental, that may attribute to the variability in children’s cognitive development, such as socioeconomic status (Peters & Willis, 1978). These may explain the advanced cognitive development of a few of the youngest children in this study. Future research is suggested to look into these factors.

The third pattern found in this study was that, in general, the differences between the answers of the middle age children and those of the adolescents resided less in how many themes were included in their responses, than in the quality and reasoning about war. The middle age children and adolescents described war using similar themes and with relatively similar frequency. However, grouping answers into categories and using frequency counts does not demonstrate the sophistication and abstractness of an answer. Therefore, a close examination and analysis of the quality of the narratives of children’s and adolescents’ answers is necessary to make better differentiation. For example, while the majority of the children said that war is bad, most middle age children gave reasons to why it is bad on the concrete consequences of war such as “people could die or get hurt.” In contrast, while most adolescents also addressed this concrete aspect, some of them added abstract and hypothetical consequences of war such as “the world will not be in peace” and logical reasoning such as “things may not be resolved because of war.” The result is consistent with Piaget’s notions (Piaget, 1967; Santrock, 1997), that in general, the middle age (concrete operational) children’s reasoning of war tended to focus on concrete issues and their own experiences, whereas the adolescents (in the formal operations stage) in the oldest age group displayed a higher capacity for abstract and hypothetical reasoning of the concept of war.

### **Age, Ethnicity, and Perceptions of War**

In addition to the marked age differences in children’s descriptions of war, a few variations between the answers of TA and NTA children in each age group also were identified. In the youngest age group, the percentage of almost every major theme was found to be greater for NTA children than for TA children. In

addition, several themes that were included in the youngest NTA children's answers were not found in the responses of their TA counterparts. These findings were not surprising if we considered the different age distributions between these two groups. Only five of the TA children were 3-8 year olds and four of them were either equal to or under age 5 and only one was 6 years old. Whereas, there were nine 3-8 year olds NTA children and several of them were 7 year olds. Therefore, it is not clear whether ethnicity influenced the youngest children's perceptions of war, because of the difference in age distribution.

In the middle age group, there were many shared war themes between TA children's answers and NTA children's answers, and the frequencies of major war themes in each group were very similar. However, the middle age TA children emphasized the theme of *aggressive attack* and *war effects on civilians* more often than the middle age NTA children. In contrast, the middle age NTA children were more likely than the middle age TA children to express a *negative judgment* about war in general. The TA and NTA adolescents shared most dominant themes but the NTA adolescents emphasized more on the *negative emotions* and *negative judgments* of war than did the TA adolescents. As we can see from the results, one consistent ethnic difference found across all age groups is that, in contrast to TA children, the NTA children were more likely to associate war with *negative emotions* and *negative judgment* before being directly asked about whether war is good or bad. This difference may be explained by the influence of a traditional Chinese upbringing of the TA children. An important aspect of Chinese culture is the emphasis on harmony and hierarchy. The interpersonal communication pattern for most Chinese people expects the respect for older people, and avoids direct confrontation, open criticism and expressing anger or displeasure (Slonim, 1991). The theory of Symbolic Interactionism assumes what occurs in the child's mind is largely a function of what occurs in the social interactions the child has within his/her sociocultural environment (Burr et al., 1979). It is very likely for TA parents, who came to the U.S. as first generation immigrants, to keep some of this traditional style. Therefore, it also is very possible for TA children to be taught with these values and practice this communication style in their daily lives. Therefore, they have not been encouraged to pass judgment or emphasize the aspect of negative emotions in an interview with a Taiwanese adult interviewer, especially when they were not directly asked to give their opinions.

In contrast, the mainstream U.S. culture seems to value individualism. The concepts of independence and autonomy also are central in the upbringing of children (Hammer & Turner, 1996; McDermott, 2001). According to McDermott, in the dominant U. S. culture, the individual is the "primary unit in society" (p. 79). Seeking harmony with personal processes is considered more important than group harmony. Under such a value system, children are expected and encouraged to express their own opinions and address emotions openly and freely. Therefore, it is not surprising that negative emotions and negative judgment were mentioned more frequently by NTA than TA children before being directly asked about whether war is good or bad.

However, it is important to note that there are individual differences among TA parents regarding socializing their children. Although all of them are first generation Taiwanese immigrants, the degree and rate for adaptation and acculturation to the dominant culture varies. Thus, Taiwanese American families may "represent a wide range of cultural values from the very traditional Chinese to the very Americanized" (Chen, 1998, p. 204). This may explain why several TA children also included the themes of negative emotion and negative judgment in their descriptions of war, even though it was less often than did the NTA children.

In addition, an analysis (not included in this paper) on the answers of children who could remember what their parents had told them about war seemed to suggest another sociocultural factor to explain the difference between ethnic groups on negative judgment on war. A greater percentage of NTA children than TA children reported that their parents had told them that war is bad (parents' negative judgment). The possible reasons for the low number of TA parents' negative judgment of war may be that for them, war is a big controversial issue. This prohibited them from giving a straightforward judgment about war. This may be related to Taiwan's history. During various foreign invasions of Taiwan, Taiwanese people had to fight back for the sake of the country's survival and dignity. Therefore, for most Taiwanese people, the issue is not whether war is good or bad, but sometimes it is inevitable, out of self-defense. This is similar to Cooper's (1965) statement about causes and justifications for conflict: "the recognition of aggressive motives goes an acceptance of the justification of war" (p. 5). In addition, the current issue in Taiwan is how many Taiwanese people will support the declaration of Taiwan's independence, despite the threat of war from Mainland China. To my knowledge, there's a mixture of opinions among Taiwanese Americans regarding this issue. Therefore, it is possible that when TA parents did talk to their children about war, they were less likely to pass a direct negative judgment of war than to provide information or to answer children's questions.

In conclusion, the in-depth analyses of children's descriptions of war in this study increased our knowledge on what children understand about war. Age was found to be an important factor influencing children's understanding of the concept of war. The youngest children's descriptions of war differed from those of middle and oldest children both in the number of themes and in the level of complexity and abstractness of the themes. Piaget's cognitive development theory was adopted to explain the differences. Individual differences also were discussed. Differences between TA and NTA children's descriptions of war in each age group may be due to the difference in age distribution and sociocultural factors. Most children were very aware of the activities involved in war and the negative consequences of war, but were confused about the causes and processes of war.

### **Implications for practice and future research**

One contribution of this study is to include pre-school children to investigate the developmental origins of the understanding of the concept of war. The results of this study suggest that children as young as 4 years old demonstrated understanding of the concept of war through drawings, even though they were not able to verbalize much. Most 5 to 6 year olds were able to verbalize ideas about war. The implication for educators is to help parents realize that children develop ideas about war at a young age and there is individual difference. Rodd (1985) pointed out that adults' habit of insulating children from destructive events in society may not alleviate children's anxiety, but rather postpone children's realistic understanding of the social events. Vriens (1999) also suggested that the basis of peace education lies in early childhood and should start as early as possible. Educators and practitioners could help parents make decisions about whether they would like to talk to their young children about the issues of war and peace. Practitioners also should discuss with parents about when, how and what to say to their young children. Observing and listening to what children know about the issues of war and peace provides important clues for parents to decide when to initiate the talk, so that mentioning or discussing war with children would not be to

introduce an unknown concept (Tephly, 1985), thus the discussion can be comprehended by young children.

The results of the study also strongly suggest that age played an important role in influencing children's understanding of the concept of war. The implication for educators is they need to help parents be aware that discussion of peace and war issues should be performed in a way that is developmentally appropriate for each child. Educators and practitioners should familiarize themselves with a core body of knowledge based on related research and share those with parents. For example, when discussing war issues with young children, it would be appropriate to recommend talking about the concrete aspects of war instead of the abstract concepts. The young and middle age children need help with the confusion they had about why there is war and how war starts and how it ends. The adolescents were most concerned about the causes of war and they could benefit from parents listening to their philosophy regarding the attributions for war and from exchanging ideas with parents.

In addition, practitioners need to pay special attention to the sociocultural background of the families when discussing war issues with families and children. Besides ethnicity, other sociocultural factors such as children's religious background and parent's military experiences also may influence how children give meanings to the concepts of war and peace. It is, therefore, important to investigate these factors in future research as well.

Furthermore, most of the studies that investigate age differences all have been cross-sectional in design. Little is known about how children's understanding of war develops over time. Longitudinal studies are needed to observe the developmental changes in children's understanding of the concepts of war and peace.

Another direction for future research is to replicate the present study with Taiwanese American children from third or fourth generation immigrant families to compare how Chinese culture plays a role in influencing children's perceptions of war. Furthermore, research on children's perceptions of war and peace has never been conducted with the Chinese population – the world's largest population. It would be interesting to know whether Chinese children in various social, political, and economic settings are different or similar in their descriptions of war and peace, and how different or similar their answers are compared with other non-Chinese populations (Bond, 1991). To answer these questions, future research is suggested to compare children's descriptions of war and peace collected from China, Hong Kong, Singapore, or Taiwan as well as from other countries in the world.

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# 兒童對於戰爭的知覺概念—年齡差異之探討

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本研究旨在描述與比較三個不同年齡層的兒童對於戰爭的知覺概念。研究設計採用質性研究法，共有五十位三到十七歲的兒童接受深度訪談。他們主要來自於兩個美國中西部大學城。本文除了檢視年齡變項對於兒童知覺差異的影響，亦就不同年齡層，比較台裔美籍兒童與非台裔美籍兒童對於戰爭的知覺概念有何異同。本研究發現年齡是影響兒童對戰爭知覺差異的主要因素，從兒童的回答中分析出許多對於戰爭概念的主題與類別。總括而言，低年齡組的兒童描述戰爭主要以其活動與武器等具體事項為主，而中、高年齡組的兒童則會加入較抽象的概念如戰爭發生的原因與後果等，亦討論到所出現的個別差異。台裔美籍兒童與非台裔美籍兒童對於戰爭概念的描述非常相似，但是仍然存在一些可能因為文化背景而產生的差異。本研究應用認知發展理論和符號理論來解釋及討論所發現的組間差異。最後，根據研究結果對於未來實務與學術研究發展的方向提出建議。

**關鍵詞：**年齡、兒童、知覺、種族、戰爭