

Exploring the Emotional Impact: Visual Narratives of 4-6 Year-Old Children Affected by the Russian-Ukrainian War

Doğa Başar Sarıipek^{1*}, Gökçe Cerev¹, Nurten Ebru Özdemir² and İrem Savcı Koroğlu³

¹Department of Labor Economics and Industrial Relations, Faculty of Political Sciences, Kocaeli University, 41001 Kocaeli, Turkey

²Department of Social Work, Faculty of Health Sciences, Bitlis Eren University, 13100 Bitlis, Turkey

³Poverty Studies Program, Social Sciences Institute, Kocaeli University, 41001 Kocaeli, Turkey

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the emotional impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on Ukrainian children aged 4-6 who have sought refuge in Turkey. The research aims to uncover the inner feelings and experiences of these young war victims through the analysis of visual narratives expressed in their drawings. This study systematically examines 23 drawings using content analysis, facilitated by the Maxqda 2020 program to ensure objectivity. Key themes identified include fear, danger, loss, and separation, alongside expressions of hope and peace. These findings underscore the critical need for accurate analysis of war-affected children's emotions to support their social integration and inform effective policy-making. The study contributes to the understanding of the psychological impact of war on children, offering valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners working in the fields of child welfare and trauma recovery.

Keywords: Children, emotional impact, migration, Ukraine, victimization, war

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 13 September 2024

Accepted: 02 May 2025

Published: 17 October 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.33.5.06>

E-mail addresses:

sariipek@kocaeli.edu.tr (Doğa Başar Sarıipek)

gokce.cerev@kocaeli.edu.tr (Gökçe Cerev)

neozdemir@beu.edu.tr (Nurten Ebru Özdemir)

iremsavci47@hotmail.com (İrem Savcı Koroğlu)

*Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

The Russian-Ukrainian war, a conflict that has profoundly reshaped the geopolitical landscape, has cast a long and dark shadow over countless lives, with young children among the most vulnerable and least understood victims. Despite international regulations governing human rights during times of war, extensive violations persist due to the adverse conditions that emerge.

The intricacies of warfare pose significant challenges to ensuring human rights protections, resulting in profound tragedies that extend beyond injuries and fatalities. War leads to mass displacement, health crises, food insecurity, disrupted education, homelessness, and deteriorated welfare systems, ultimately tearing apart families, cultures, and societies. Regrettably, children bear a heavy burden of these destructive consequences, enduring the environmental upheaval and devastation that exacerbate these adverse effects over time (Fronek, 2024; Fylkesnes et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2010; Guru, 2010; Masten & Narayan, 2012; Park, 2015).

The emotional and psychological toll of war on children is profound and multifaceted, affecting them in ways distinct from adults due to their dependency on care, stability, and secure attachments. In times of conflict, children often experience disrupted relationships with caregivers, as parents may become emotionally unavailable due to trauma, preoccupation with survival, or loss of life. Many children are placed in substitute care, with some even becoming “unaccompanied children,” completely devoid of adult protection (Barbara, 2006). These disruptions leave children vulnerable to long-term emotional and psychological scars, with impacts that may extend far beyond the cessation of hostilities.

War’s effects on children are particularly devastating during critical developmental periods. Interruptions to education, forced displacement or migration, or injuries sustained during conflict can profoundly

alter their life trajectories. A child who has lost access to schooling may miss out on foundational cognitive and social development, while those disabled in war may face compounded challenges, including social exclusion and restricted life opportunities (Barbara, 2006).

The psychological impact of war on children is pervasive, encompassing immediate stress responses, heightened risks for mental disorders, and persistent fears for personal and familial safety. These experiences starkly contrast with children’s developmental needs for security and predictability (Bürgin et al., 2022). Mental health and psychosocial interventions for war-affected children must address these issues holistically, integrating trauma-informed and resilience-oriented approaches. Such interventions emphasize the restoration of both external and internal security, recognizing that effective support must cater to the unique emotional and developmental needs of children (Bürgin et al., 2022).

While much of the existing literature has focused on the psychopathological outcomes of war, our research has expanded to consider children’s social, emotional, and behavioral adaptations in conflict settings. For example, Jensen and Shaw (1993) note that children’s cognitive immaturity and adaptive capacities may allow them to develop self-protective mechanisms in less intense wartime environments. However, massive exposure to trauma often overwhelms these defenses, highlighting the necessity for timely and culturally

sensitive interventions. A shift in focus from psychopathology to resilience and social awareness has opened new avenues for understanding how children cope with wartime adversities and for identifying interventions that support positive outcomes.

For those caught in the throes of war, migration often becomes an involuntary necessity, driven by the imperative to protect their children (Hvass & Wejse, 2017). In 2023 alone, a staggering 20 million children fled conflict zones for various reasons, underscoring the scale of the crisis (OCHA, 2023). This surge in migration has thrust the issue of “refugee children” into the spotlight, demanding urgent attention as a pressing social concern. The repercussions of this displacement will reverberate across social, cultural, educational, and healthcare domains in both the short and long term (Pearn, 2003).

The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine serves as a poignant illustration of the dire consequences endured by children, leading to the emergence of the “refugee children” phenomenon. Dating back to the historically tumultuous relationship between the two nations, tensions escalated into crisis in 2014 and culminated in war when Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022 (Sacchi, 2022). Marking one of the lengthiest direct military confrontations of our era, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has inflicted severe harm, particularly upon Ukrainian children (Fronek, 2024). Official reports indicate that during the third week of the war, 902 civilians, including 75 children, perished and compelling approximately

75,000 Ukrainians to seek refuge. This crisis ranks as the second-largest wartime tragedy in European history, following World War II. By 2023, the toll had risen to 9,701 civilian fatalities and 17,748 injuries. Distressingly, the impact on children is stark, with 555 young lives lost and 901 boys and 379 girls injured, highlighting the profound tragedy inflicted upon them (OHCHR, 2023). These grim statistics underscore the devastating toll of war on innocent children.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has escalated into an international crisis, extending beyond their borders to impact neighboring countries and, notably, Europe. Alongside blatant violations of basic human rights during the war, Ukrainian children have been subjected to various threats, including cultural erosion, human trafficking, organ trafficking, and drug trade, resulting in the disruption of family cohesion (Coynash, 2022; Saryono et al., 2022). Assessing the broader implications of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on children reveals migration as a significant outcome. Forced to flee their homeland, Ukrainian children grapple with challenges such as education, healthcare, and food scarcity in refugee camps. Those relocating to safer countries face additional hurdles, particularly adaptation issues (Graham, 2002). Russia's invasion of Ukraine precipitated a mass exodus of children, driven solely by the imperative of survival. Many sought asylum primarily in neighboring European nations like Poland, Hungary, Romania, and the Czech Republic, while others sought refuge in more distant locales such as Western

Europe, the USA, and Turkey. However, these migration decisions were fraught with peril, including the risks of death, exploitation by human traffickers, and involvement in organ trafficking (OHCHR, 2022).

As the war in Ukraine drags on, the needs of Ukrainian children are becoming increasingly pressing due to the escalating risks posed by the conflict. Their vulnerability to the war's effects, their longing for familial support, and their social requirements underscore the necessity for tailored policies addressing the repercussions of their migration experiences. Children bear a disproportionate burden of the war's disinformation within the social fabric, making it more challenging for them to cope with its adverse consequences compared to adults. Particularly, disabled children, economically disadvantaged children, those from single-parent households, and orphans experience heightened levels of victimization (Denov, 2010; Edward et al., 2020). Ukrainian children face similar challenges to other migrant children affected by war in general, including language barriers, social and cultural disparities, and insufficient local resources. Effectively addressing these issues requires a deep understanding of children's emotions and thoughts, coupled with accurate anticipation of their needs (Bosqui & Marshoud, 2018; Slone & Mann, 2016).

A comprehensive review of the literature reveals various studies concerning the broader society and the plight of children in the aftermath of the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

These studies predominantly focus on the healthcare and educational rights of children affected by the Russian-Ukrainian war (Armitage, 2023; Khen, 2023; Martyenanko, 2022), social issues (Badanta et al., 2024), health challenges faced by migrant children, and the psychological impact of these challenges (Birgün et al., 2022), as well as the victimization of children abducted by Russia (Fornek et al., 2023). Additionally, significant attention has been given to the role of UNICEF in safeguarding children's rights during wartime (Arlief & Tunggal, 2023), and the public health implications of migration resulting from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (Duszczuk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Sokan-Adeaga et al., 2023).

While existing literature has extensively examined and evaluated children affected by the Russian-Ukrainian war through various sources, direct inquiry into the emotions and thoughts of children at the primary level has been notably lacking. This study seeks to address this gap by directly identifying the feelings and thoughts of children aged 4-6 who are victims of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and have migrated to Turkey, using visual aids and employing Maxqda software for data analysis. This manuscript delves into the visual narratives created by children aged 4-6, providing a poignant window into their inner worlds. By exploring their drawings, paintings, and other visual expressions, we aim to uncover the emotional impact of the war on these young minds, offering valuable insights into their experiences, fears, and hopes.

Consequently, this study stands as a pioneering endeavor in terms of both data collection and methodology, filling a crucial void in the literature. Importantly, the primary source of information in this study is the children themselves, thus lending significant weight to its findings. The outcomes of this study serve as a valuable resource for informing policy development, particularly concerning children directly impacted by warfare.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, DESIGN, AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the relationship between various events by comparing established standards with defined issues, thereby elucidating the current circumstances. The rationale behind selecting the qualitative research model as the methodological framework lies in its capacity to uncover participants' attitudes, perspectives, perceptions, and experiences realistically and holistically within their natural environment. This approach is particularly effective in gaining a deeper and more comprehensive insight into the experiences of children aged 4-6 years amidst war conditions.

The theoretical basis of this research is grounded in Expressive Arts Therapy and Narrative Psychology. Expressive Arts Therapy emphasizes the use of creative processes—such as drawing, storytelling, and play—to help individuals express emotions and experiences that may be

difficult to articulate verbally, particularly in traumatic contexts (Klorer, 2000; Malchiodi, 2005). This approach aligns well with the study's aim to explore young children's experiences, as it allows for the expression of their internal worlds in developmentally appropriate ways.

Narrative Psychology, on the other hand, focuses on the stories people construct and tell about their lives, which shape their identity and perception of events (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2001). In this study, children's drawings are considered visual narratives that express their personal stories, emotions, and perceptions of the war. By interpreting these visual narratives, the study seeks to uncover the children's inner worlds, offering valuable insights into their psychological state and the effects of their experiences. This theory is relevant to the study as it highlights the importance of understanding how children narrate their experiences of war, which can provide insights into their coping mechanisms and the impact of such events on their psychological well-being. Integrating these theoretical perspectives within the qualitative framework enriches the study's ability to capture the nuanced and complex experiences of children in war-torn environments.

In sum, qualitative research, supported by Expressive Arts Therapy and Narrative Psychology, offers a robust foundation for exploring and understanding the intricate realities of children's lived experiences in contexts of conflict. By integrating these theories, the study frames children's

drawings not just as artistic expressions but as meaningful narratives that can be systematically analyzed to uncover deeper emotional and psychological truths about their experiences of war. This theoretical approach guides the content analysis methodology used in the study, allowing for a nuanced exploration of themes such as fear, hope, and loss in the visual narratives created by the children.

Aim and Question of the Research

This study aims to explore the emotions and experiences of children aged 4-6 years who have migrated to Turkey following their displacement due to the war sparked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. By shedding light on the feelings, desires, fears, and anxieties of these young victims, the research aims to inform the development of policies tailored to their specific needs and circumstances. It holds significance in both assessing the extent of trauma endured by children affected by war and in formulating appropriate and effective social policies.

To achieve this goal, the primary research question is formulated as follows:

1. What emotional responses and experiences have been elicited in 4-6-year-old children who were victims of war and subsequently migrated to Turkey as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict?
The sub-dimension questions guiding the research include:
2. What specific worries and anxieties are encountered by 4-6-year-old children

who have been affected by the Russian-Ukrainian war?

3. What are the expectations expressed by 4-6-year-old children who have experienced the effects of the Russian-Ukrainian war?
4. What objective assessments do 4-6-year-old children make regarding their experiences as victims of war resulting from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict?

Data Collection Tool of the Research

In this study, drawing was employed as a method of data collection, facilitating active and detailed expression of participants' emotions and experiences. Drawing serves as a crucial criterion for understanding children psychologically and pedagogically, offering insights into their intelligence, personality, immediate surroundings, and inner worlds. The dynamic relationship between drawing and children continuously shapes and defines each other, evolving. Drawing serves as a significant tool for children to articulate their feelings and thoughts, particularly for those with limited verbal communication skills. It provides a multidimensional means for children to communicate with the outside world (Artut, 2004; Matthews, 2003).

The drawing abilities of the 4-6-year-old children, comprising the participant cohort of this study, play a pivotal role in data collection. By the age of four, children begin to depict recognizable forms, progressing to purposeful drawings by age 5. By the time they reach 6 years old, their drawings exhibit increased realism

and thematic elements. Within this age group, the inclusion of details in drawings expands, accompanied by the emergence of emotional storytelling (Skybo et al., 2007). Pictures serve as a mode of communication, reflecting children's emotions, aiding in self-expression, and fostering self-confidence (Malchiodi, 2005). As children start verbalizing words, they often express their feelings through repetitive utterances. Similarly, those who incorporate shapes into their drawings delve into deeper emotional dimensions through repeated representation (Burkitt et al., 2005).

In children's artwork, particularly during the preschool years of ages 4 to 6, the subconscious impact of their experiences is frequently evident. During this developmental stage, emotions that may be challenging to articulate verbally are often more effectively conveyed through visual expression. The spontaneous nature of children's drawings often reveals profound emotions and offers insights into their perceptions of life, people, and their surroundings (Skybo et al., 2007). These perceptions serve as vital indicators in gauging the presence of positive emotions such as happiness, joy, and trust, or negative emotions such as unhappiness, pain, and insecurity, all of which may be influenced by the child's experiences (Cherney et al., 2006; Leslie et al., 2006).

Participants of the Study and the Implementation Environment

The participant group for this study was selected using the convenience sampling

method, chosen for its relevance to the research question and its effectiveness in accessing participants (Merriam, 2013). The sample consisted of 23 Ukrainian children aged 4 to 6 who had migrated to Turkey following their displacement due to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Necessary consent was obtained from the children's families, who were informed about the study through their instructors, and the research was conducted with the guidance of educator supervisors.

The study took place in the children's regular classroom setting to ensure a familiar and natural environment. To minimize disruptions to their daily routines, the research was carried out under normal classroom conditions, with only their teachers present during the implementation phase. The teachers, who were briefed beforehand by the researchers, facilitated the study to maintain consistency and prevent the children from experiencing any emotional disturbances.

During the implementation, each child was provided with blank paper and crayons and instructed to respond to the prompt, "What do you think about war?" by drawing a picture within a thirty-minute timeframe. This approach ensured uniformity in the data collection process. Each child produced a single drawing, resulting in a total of 23 drawings that corresponded to the number of participants.

The teachers reported no emotional changes in the children during the implementation phase, underscoring the effectiveness of conducting the study in

their natural classroom environment. By maintaining a familiar setting and avoiding external interference, the study ensured that the children could express their thoughts and emotions freely through their drawings, yielding authentic and meaningful data.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Analysis of Research Data

The study's data underwent analysis using the content analysis method, which involved consolidating and organizing the data based on common concepts and themes. Initially, the drawings were pre-analyzed, and researchers independently assessed their relevance to the subject matter. Following this evaluation, 23 drawings were deemed suitable for analysis. The MAXQDA 2020 qualitative analysis program was utilized to transcribe and interpret the obtained data.

In qualitative research, the concepts of validity and reliability are often debated, and no universally accepted method exists for assessing the quality of such studies (Harrison et al., 2020). To address potential biases in picture analysis, the researchers took steps to minimize subjective interpretation. Educators served as supervisors during the drawing phase, and no identifying information (such as names, genders, or ages) about the children who created the drawings was provided. Codes and themes were then developed independently to ensure data reliability. The level of agreement and disagreement between the drawings and the codes was assessed to determine reliability, with the agreement-to-disagreement ratio exceeding 70% (95% in this study), meeting the reliability criteria. The data analysis

process followed a four-stage standard method: coding, sorting, categorizing, and ensuring validity and reliability, in line with established approaches (Bengtsson, 2016).

Given these considerations, drawing was selected as the primary data collection tool for this study because it aligns closely with the research question and the developmental characteristics of the participants. This method effectively captures and conveys the inner experiences and perceptions of 4-6-year-old children. Furthermore, employing a method that directly engages with the participants' unique means of expression enhanced the study's validity and reliability by enabling an objective evaluation of the collected data.

Research Findings

Following content analysis, the research data were categorized into four main themes and five sub-themes. The themes identified in the study were (i) "emotions," (ii) "values," (iii) "colors," and (iv) "objects." The specific themes and sub-themes are outlined in Figure 1.

Upon analyzing the first theme, "emotions," in Figure 2, fear, danger, and hopes for salvation emerged as sub-themes in the research findings. The drawings frequently depicted fearful figures, explosions, and weapons, highlighting the omnipresent dangers of war. Particularly notable were the depictions of individuals fleeing from war vehicles/weapons in a state of fear. It is believed that the emotions depicted in children's drawings mirror their feelings and experiences.

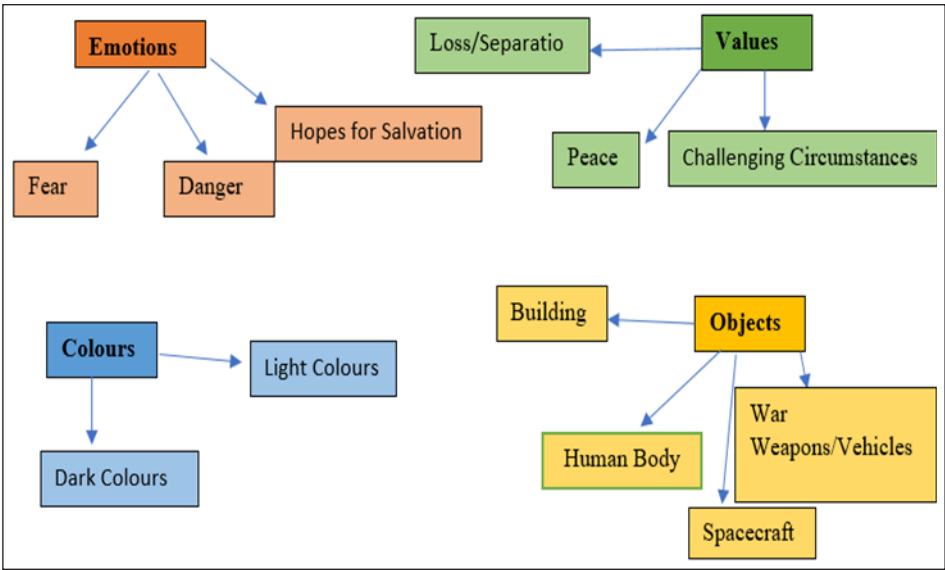


Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes



Figure 2. Theme (Emotions) examples

Emotions tend to be the predominant theme in children's drawings, often expressing feelings such as happiness, sadness, fear, or joy. Given that the drawings in this study centered on the theme of war, and the children originated from a war-torn environment, feelings of danger and fear were notably pronounced. However, the



Figure 3. Theme (Values) examples

presence of hope for the future in some drawings indicated the children's aspirations for a better tomorrow. This sentiment was exemplified by depictions of children boarding a ship and the inclusion of both Turkish and Ukrainian flags in the drawings, symbolizing optimism and the possibility of a brighter future.

Upon analyzing the theme of "Values," another significant aspect of the research, sub-themes including peace, loss, separation, and challenging circumstances were identified, as depicted in Figure 3. The breakdown of families, a lamentable consequence of war, results in the fragmentation of family units and the loss of parents or siblings among the children in the study. Depictions of individuals lying on the ground and children with sorrowful expressions in the drawings underscored this reality, suggesting that the children had experienced familial losses.

The inclusion of raindrops in drawings featuring individuals lying on the ground conveyed the children's profound emotional distress over this situation, with raindrops serving as symbols of sadness and grief. Additionally, the presence of doves in the drawings symbolized the longing for peace, while imagery depicting challenging circumstances formed the foundation of these peace aspirations. The children expressed a fervent desire for a swift resolution and a return to their previous way of life.

Upon examining the theme of "Objects" in the research, sub-themes including war weapons/vehicles, the human body, spacecraft, and buildings were identified, as illustrated in Figure 4. War weapons/vehicles such as tanks, rifles, and bombs depicted in the visuals symbolize the experiences the children have endured



Figure 4. Theme (Objects) examples

in the war environment. Additionally, images of children and human figures are frequently present in the drawings, with depictions of the human body revealing noteworthy details. Notably, some drawings featured missing fingers, indicating a lack of ambition or goal-setting among the children. In certain images, the eyes were drawn in the form of crosses, suggesting a suppression of emotions and a prohibition on crying. This suppression reflects the children's efforts to cope with the traumatic events they have witnessed.

Moreover, the absence of noses in some drawings suggests that the children may not have a strong sense of self-awareness or an understanding of their abilities, weaknesses, and potential. Another significant aspect of the visuals is the inclusion of astronaut suits and space vehicles, symbolizing the children's distant hopes for a peaceful future away from their current environment.

Furthermore, depictions of houses in the drawings reflect the children's feelings about home and life. Ruined and dark-colored houses indicate a lack of peace in their living environment, while the absence of house figures or scribbles over drawn houses suggests further turmoil. The children's inability to experience a peaceful home environment due to the war disruption and the fragmentation of their families underscores the profound impact of conflict on their lives.

The theme of "Colors" in the research was examined through two sub-themes: light colors and dark colors. As depicted in Figure 5, the colors depicted in the drawings serve as a reflection of the drawer's emotions, offering insight into their inner feelings and complementing the themes conveyed by other objects. The prevalence of dark colors, particularly brown and black, suggests that the children who created the



Figure 5. Theme (Colors) examples

drawings harbour fear and anxiety due to the ongoing war. Furthermore, the presence of red among the dark colors signifies feelings of anger intertwined with fear.

On the other hand, the use of green and yellow hues in the drawings signifies the children's hopeful outlook for the future amidst their challenging circumstances. The tones of the colors used in the drawings align with the emotions and values of the children, indicating a pervasive sense of trauma. Overall, the colors depicted in the drawings provide a poignant representation of the children's emotional states and experiences.

CONCLUSION

The prolonged conflict between Russia and Ukraine has led to widespread forced migration and extensive destruction, particularly in residential areas. Vulnerable

groups, especially women, older adults, persons with disabilities, and children, have been disproportionately affected. As the most significant armed confrontation in Europe since World War II, this conflict has triggered one of the largest waves of migration in the region and created substantial risks across various domains, including security, housing, healthcare, and children's rights.

In response to these challenges, there is an urgent need to develop policies aimed at alleviating the trauma experienced by children in war-torn areas. Understanding the full extent of the war's impact on children is crucial for crafting appropriate policies and gaining deeper insights into their plight. The protection of children's rights, as enshrined in numerous international legal frameworks, must guide these policy

efforts, particularly in addressing the needs of children affected by war.

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution by utilizing visual narratives to explore the emotional impact of war on young children by offering a comprehensive insight into the emotional responses and experiences of children displaced by the Russian-Ukrainian war. Unlike most social policy research, which often addresses children's problems indirectly through adult perspectives, this study uniquely engages with children's own viewpoints. Notably, this study also identifies hope as a significant and novel theme, contrasting with the predominantly negative emotional narratives emphasized in previous research. These results have both theoretical and practical implications, advancing understanding in the fields of childhood trauma and emotional resilience.

Directly addressing the study's core research question, fear and danger emerge as the dominant emotions, while some drawings reveal elements of hope and aspiration, reflecting the children's struggle between trauma and resilience. Themes of loss and a yearning for peace underscore the profound impact of familial and social fragmentation caused by displacement. The frequent use of dark tones, such as black and brown, along with imagery of weapons and destroyed buildings, vividly illustrates the children's internal struggles. Taken together, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of how war profoundly shapes the emotional and psychological landscapes of young children.

This study makes a significant contribution to Narrative Psychology Theory by illustrating how children's visual narratives function as critical mechanisms for meaning-making, identity formation, and emotional regulation in the context of war-related trauma. Narrative Psychology Theory posits that individuals construct their sense of self and interpret their lived experiences through personal and collective narratives, which serve as frameworks for identity construction and psychological adaptation (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2001). Prior research has underscored the role of verbal and written narratives in self-concept development and psychological well-being (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012; Polkinghorne, 1988). However, relatively few studies have examined non-verbal narrative expressions, particularly children's artistic depictions, as storytelling mechanisms in conflict zones.

By analyzing war-affected children's drawings, this study extends Narrative Psychology Theory by demonstrating that visual narratives serve as more than just reflections of trauma—they actively mediate the psychological processes of self-construction, agency, and emotional resilience. The children's artwork not only depicts their lived experiences but also narrates their internal struggles, fears, hopes, and desires, revealing a complex interplay between trauma and resilience. Notably, this study identifies hope as an emergent and distinct theme, diverging from traditional research that predominantly emphasizes negative emotional responses in war contexts. These findings challenge prevailing assumptions and suggest that,

even in dire circumstances, children engage in a form of narrative identity construction that fosters resilience and the possibility of a future beyond war.

Furthermore, this study addresses a methodological gap in Narrative Psychology by incorporating a qualitative, art-based research approach. While past studies have largely relied on interviews, written accounts, and retrospective narratives, this study highlights how children's drawings function as an alternative narrative medium, providing a more direct and unfiltered insight into their psychological states. The visual narratives captured in the artwork illustrate a dynamic interaction between individual agency and socio-cultural influences, aligning with Bruner's (1990) conceptualization of narrative as a meaning-making process. Through this lens, the study underscores the importance of non-verbal storytelling as a critical yet underexplored dimension of Narrative Psychology, offering empirical support for the theory's application beyond verbal discourse.

By expanding the scope of Narrative Psychology Theory to include children's artistic expressions as narrative tools, this study contributes both theoretically and methodologically to the field. The findings not only enhance our understanding of how children process and communicate trauma but also offer valuable insights for therapeutic interventions and policy-making aimed at supporting war-affected children.

The practical implications of this study are significant for policymakers and practitioners working with war-affected children. The findings highlight

the importance of addressing not only the immediate physical needs of displaced children but also their emotional and psychological well-being. Incorporating visual narrative techniques into assessments and interventions can provide a nuanced understanding of children's psychological states, enabling the development of targeted support strategies. Programs designed to assist these children should integrate methods that encourage emotional expression, such as art therapy, while preserving cultural and familial bonds to foster resilience and recovery.

Creating safe and supportive environments in host countries is essential for promoting the integration and healing of war-affected children. As demonstrated in this study, analyzing children's drawings offers valuable insights for formulating policies aimed at protecting and nurturing displaced children. Drawings allow children to express their emotions and thoughts more authentically than words, with the objects and themes depicted reflecting their past experiences and providing a bridge between their external and internal worlds. These expressions can reveal conflicts, desires, disappointments, fears, and hopes, making art-based approaches an invaluable tool for understanding and addressing their needs.

Policymakers and practitioners can incorporate art-based therapeutic techniques, such as Expressive Arts Therapy, to address the psychological and emotional challenges faced by these children. Educators and social workers can implement structured drawing sessions as both diagnostic and therapeutic tools to better understand and

support children's emotional well-being. International organizations like UNICEF and UNHCR can integrate visual narrative methods into their child welfare assessments to design culturally and emotionally relevant interventions.

To build on these findings, future studies should utilize larger and more diverse samples to validate the results and explore cross-cultural differences in the emotional expressions of war-affected children. Longitudinal research could examine how children's emotional states evolve, offering critical insights into the long-term impacts of war and migration. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches that combine visual data with interviews or focus groups could provide a more comprehensive understanding of children's experiences, supporting the development of holistic intervention strategies tailored to their unique needs.

War inflicts significant harm on children, not only on those directly experiencing the conflict but also on the future of the societies involved. The conflict sparked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine has turned numerous children into victims of war in a remarkably short time, with many forced to migrate to countries like Turkey. The study revealed that the children's drawings reflect not a singular issue but multiple traumatic experiences, including the breakdown of families, loss of loved ones, and displacement from their homes, all of which elicited profound emotional responses of fear, anxiety, and sadness.

Nevertheless, an important finding of the study was that, despite enduring

multifaceted traumatic events, the children expressed hopes for the future and a desire for a new, peaceful life, particularly outside the conflict-affected region. This suggests that with the implementation of appropriate policies, children can overcome the destructive effects of war and work toward a brighter future.

Ensuring the safety and well-being of children affected by war in the countries they relocate to, and safeguarding their mental and physical health, must be at the core of social policies. Efforts should focus on reinforcing family bonds, meeting fundamental humanitarian needs such as education and healthcare, and addressing emotional requirements. Preserving traditional cultures, religious beliefs, and customs, while implementing policies that instill hope, enhance safety, and expedite reintegration into society, is essential.

These policies should resonate with international public opinion and contribute to the overall well-being of the affected children. As Eglantyne Jebb aptly stated, "Every war is a war against children," underscoring the universal imperative to safeguard children's rights for the betterment of humanity's future (Fylkesnes et al., 2019). Therefore, the utmost priority should be placed on protecting and nurturing children, especially in environments ravaged by war.

Future research should expand on this study by including larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how the emotional impact of war evolves and how different interventions affect children's

well-being. Combining visual methods with other qualitative approaches, such as interviews or focus groups, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of children's experiences. Researchers should also investigate the impact of various interventions and support programs on the emotional health of war-affected children to identify best practices for policy development and implementation.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its valuable insights, this study has several limitations. The sample size of 23 children, although purposeful, is relatively small and may not fully represent the diverse experiences of all war-affected children. The use of a convenience sampling method limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, relying on drawings as the sole data source may not capture the full spectrum of children's emotional experiences, as some may express their feelings through other means. The study also does not account for variations in individual responses based on factors such as age, gender, or prior trauma.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to extend their sincere appreciation to all individuals and institutions who contributed to this study through their guidance, support, and encouragement.

REFERENCES

- Arlief, A., & Tunggal A. R. (2023). Unicef's protective role for child victims of war in Ukraine. *Mediasi Journal of International Relations*, 6(2), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.21111/mediasi.v6i2.11099>
- Armitage, R. (2022). War in Ukraine: The impacts on child health. *British Journal of General Practice*, 72(719), 272-273. <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp22X719621>
- Artut, K. (2004). Okul öncesi resim eğitiminde çocukların çizgisel gelişim düzeylerine ilişkin bir inceleme. *Çukurova Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 13(1), 223-234.
- Badanta, B., Blasco, M. M., Lucchetti, G., & Caballero, M. G. (2024). The social and health consequences of the war for Ukrainian children and adolescents: A rapid systematic review. *Public Health*, 226, 74-79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2023.10.044>
- Barbara J. S. (2006). Impact of war on children and imperative to end war. *Croatian Medical Journal*, 47(6), Article 891.
- Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *Nursingplus Open*, 2, 8-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.Npls.2016.01.001>
- Bosqui, T. J., & Marshoud, B. (2018). Mechanisms of change for interventions aimed at improving the wellbeing, mental health and resilience of children and adolescents affected by war and armed conflict: A systematic review of reviews. *Conflict and Health*, 12(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-018-0153-1>.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press.
- Bürgin, D., Anagnostopoulos, D., Vitiello, B., Sukale, T., Schmid, M., & Fegert, J. M. (2022). Impact of war and forced displacement on children's mental health—multilevel, needs-oriented, and trauma-informed approaches. *European child & adolescent psychiatry*, 31(6), 845-853. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-022-01974-z>
- Burkitt, E., Barret, M., & Davis, A. (2005). Drawings of emotionally characterized figures by children

- from different educational backgrounds. *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, 21(1), 71-83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1476-8070.2005.00424.x>
- Cherney, I. D., Seiwert, C. S., Dickey, T. M., & Flichtbeil, J. D. (2006). Children's drawings: A mirror to their minds. *Educational Psychology: An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology*, 26(1), 127-142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410500344167>
- Coynash, H. (2022). *Russian invaders abduct 16 year old son of a Zaporizhzhia regional head*. Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group. <https://khpgrg.org/en/1608810434>
- Denov, M. (2010). Coping with the trauma of war: Former child soldiers in post-conflict Sierra Leone. *International Social Work*, 53(6), 791-806. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872809358400>
- Duszczuk, M., & Kaczmarczyk, P. (2022). The war in Ukraine and migration to Poland: Outlook and challenges. *Intereconomics*, 57(3), 164-170. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-022-1053-6>
- Edward, T. R., Rizz, A. T., Simon, A., & Moro, M. R. (2020). Study on parent-to-child transmission related to Sri Lanka's civil war. *Soins, P'ediatric, Pu'ericulture*, 41(313), 29-31. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.spp.2020.02.007>
- Fronek, P., Rotabi-Casares, K. S., & Lypovetska, M. (2024). The taken children of Ukraine. *International Social Work*, 67(3), 602-615. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728231209474>
- Fylkesnes, Knag, G., Graham, George, Kirollos, Mariam, Salarkia, Keyan, Wong, & Nikki (2019). *Stop the war on children: Protecting children in 21st century conflict*. Save the Children International.
- Gao, Y., Li, L. P., Kim, J. H., Congdon, N., Lau, J., & Griffiths, S. (2010). The impact of parental migration on health status and health behaviours among left behind adolescent school children in China. *BMC Public Health*, 10(1), Article 56. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-10-56>
- Graham, J. M. (2002). Children and the New Zealand wars: An exploration. In J. Marten & R. Coles (Eds.) *Children and war: A historical anthology* (pp. 216-226). New York University Press.
- Guru, S. (2010). Social work and the war on terror. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(1), 272-289. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcn129>
- Harrison, R. L., Reilly, T. M., & Creswell, J. W. (2020). Methodological rigor in mixed methods: An application in management studies. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 14(4), 473-495. <https://doi.org/10.1177/155868981990058>
- Hvass, A. M., & Wejse, C. (2017). Systematic health screening of refugees after resettlement in recipient countries: A scoping review. *Annals of Human Biology*, 44, 475-483. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03014460.2017.1330897>
- Jensen, P. S., & Shaw, J. (1993). Children as victims of war: Current knowledge and future research needs. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 32(4), 697-708. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00004583-199307000-00001>
- Khen, H. M. E. (2023). Restoring children's right to education during and after war: The case of Ukraine. *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 31(1), 225-267. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-31010005>
- Klorer, P. G. (2000). *Expressive therapy with troubled children*. Jason Aronson
- Leslie, A., Knobe, J. P., & Cohen, A. (2006). Acting intentionally and the side-effect effect: Theory of mind and moral judgment. *Psychological Science*, 17(5), 421-427. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01722.x>
- Malchiodi, C. A. (Ed.). (2005). *Expressive therapies*. Guilford Press. <https://cdn2.psychologytoday.com/assets/attachments/231/malchiodi3.pdf>

- Martyenanko, K. H. (2022). *The impact of the war in Ukraine on children 2014-2022*. [Master dissertation, National Technical University of Ukraine]. National Technical University of Ukraine. <https://ela.kpi.ua/server/api/core/bitstreams/f7ac7a18-0389-4105-adf6-d1a20599d31f/content>
- Masten, A. S., & Narayan, J. A. (2012). Child development in the context of disaster, war, and terrorism: Pathways of risk and resilience. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 63(1), 227–257. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-120710-100356>
- Matthews, J. (2003). *Drawing and painting: Children and visual representation* (2nd ed.). Paul Chapman Publishing.
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(2), 100–122. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100>
- McLean, K. C., & Pasupathi, M. (2012). Processes of identity development: Where I am and how I got there. *Identity*, 12(1), 8–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2011.632363>
- Merriam, S. B. (2013). *Nitel araştırma desen ve uygulama için bir rehber*. Nobel Yayın Dağıtım.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. B. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.
- OCHA. (2023). *The humanitarian data exchange. Ukraine data explorer*. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. <https://www.unocha.org/ukraine>
- OHCHR. (2022). *Ukraine: Civilian United Nations human rights*. United High Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2022/05/ukraine-civilian-casualty-update-11-may-2022>
- OHCHR. (2023). *Ukraine: Civilian casualty update 24 September 2023 report*. United High Commissioner for Human Rights <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/09/ukraine-civilian-casualty-update-24-september-2023>
- Park, J. (2015). *Europe's migration crisis*. Council on Foreign Relations.
- Pearn, J. (2003). Children and war. *Journal of Pediatric and Child Health*, 39(3), 166–172. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1440-1754.2003.00124>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. State University of New York Press.
- Sacchi, C. (2022). Protection of perinatal mental health during the war in Ukraine. *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe*, 15, Article 100362. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2022.100362>
- Saryono, F. A., Kurniawati, L. D., Akbariah, A. A., Jabar, I. A., & Yulyanti, F. (2022). Sikap Politik Dan Hukum Internasional Indonesia terkait penyerangan Russia ke Ukraina [Indonesia's political and international legal stance regarding Russia's attack on Ukraine]. *Journal Citizenship Virtues*, 2(2), 386–398. <https://doi.org/10.37640/jcv.v2i2.1529>
- Skybo, T., Ryan-Wengwe, N., & Su, Y. (2007). Human figure drawings as a measure of children's emotional status: Critical review for practice. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, 22(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedn.2006.05.006>
- Slone, M., & Mann, S. (2016). Effects of war, terrorism and armed conflict on young children: A systematic review. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 47(6), 950–965. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-016-0626-7>
- Sokan-Adeaga, A. A., Sokan-Adeaga, M. A., Esan, D. T., Sokan-Adeaga, E. D., Oparaji, A. N., Aladeh, M., Balogun, F. A., & Oyeyemi, T. (2023). Review of the Russia-Ukraine war and its impact on public health. *Iranian Journal of War & Public Health*, 15(3), 295–303.