Resilience, reintegration and reintegration among former forcibly recruited children and youth in the Acholi region, northern Uganda

Introduction

In the Acholi region of northern Uganda, The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) violently abducted more than 60.000 children and youth during the twenty-year long war with President Museveni's Government forces. Based on 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork from 2012-2016 with 42 narrative life-story interviews, 42 follow-up interviews and participant observation among 36 forcibly LRA recruited children and youth who are now adults, experiences of war, poverty, daily torture, killings and sexual violence emerged - including stories of the first time that for instance Vivian, Janus, Genesis and Martin killed another human being. Ways into war, war-related adversity and its psychological effects are widely and well-documented. Qualitative research, however, which explores how children and youth associated with armed forces survive such violent experiences and keep on going in the long aftermath of war is less common. Thus, this thesis takes an experience-near approach to qualitatively explore the question *"How do you keep on going?"*

Theoretically, the thesis first and foremost rests on resilience theory and research, which continuously serves as the overarching theoretical and experimental backdrop against which the data from Acholiland are analyzed: At times the empirical data call for branching out theoretically and analytically, exploring sub-theoretical contributions of appetitive aggression theory, emotion regulation studies, dissociation theory, and studies of children and youth associated with armed forces.

Findings

In five contributions, the thesis unfolds how most of the Acholi women and men in the study turned to *avoidant* coping via responses such as silencing, suppression of vulnerable emotions, distraction (Contribution 2, and 4), and dissociation (Contribution 3) to survive during the war and in a collective effort to keep on going after the war. In addition, via the cases of two former LRA commanders followed closely over 4 years, the thesis explores how their appetitive aggression responses and under-researched bodily urges to kill complicate reintegration processes more than one decade after returning home from the LRA in post-war Acholiland - and how this is experienced among other homecoming soldiers around the world (Contribution 5).

Implications

Through a dialogue between psychology and anthropology, and an analytical movement between the empirical data and related theories, the thesis fleshes out how the lived experience of war and its aftermath among the Acholi women and men in this study challenges persistent consensus in both trauma and resilience theory and research: For instance, the avoidant coping responses displayed in the ethnographic data problematizes the widely held perception that avoidant coping is a symptom of trauma-related psychopathology, and that the verbalization of trauma promotes well-being and rehabilitation.

Furthermore, the point of how killing and aggression become adaptive responses that enable seven-year-old Genesis, and several like him, to survive and stay sane through a long war, does not resonate well with widely held consensus about what resilience, or positive adaptation, is, and poses pertinent questions of whether resilience is defined based on an individualistic or a collective perspective, and how such definitions are situated (Contribution 5) as well as it points to bodily and emotional issues completely overlooked in demobilization, reconciliation, and reintegration processes.

The thesis argues that, when writing about children and youth associated with armed forces, our assessment of their adaptation to a lethal environment and whether this adaptation is resilient or not, our responsibility grows to transparently and critically reflect on how our assessments and offered interventions resonate with emic notions of suffering and ways of coping with such suffering that are rendered locally appropriate. I introduce the concept "Forced Resilience" (Contribution 1) to help situate trauma and resilience studies concerned with children and youth associated with armed forces and the lethal environments they experience and navigate in. With "Forced Resilience" I wish to underline how the experiences of an extremely violent war-affected childhood do not hinder resilience, but severely limits the chances of survival and thus the variety of survival and coping responses available in the lethal environments of armed forces: Such environments force children and youth into imaginative and creative escapes to survive and become more than what their past, whether additional or integrated, and many present analyses in academia, offer children, youth and communities in finding ways out of war.

To conclude, in the LRA context and in the fragile pursuits of social harmony in postwar Acholiland, *context sensitivity* as the ability to perceive what a life-threatening or delicate situation demands and then responding in appropriate ways is absolutely essential to physical and social survival for everyone, who has survived the war - whether forcibly recruited - or not. Based on the extensive data, those that seem to succeed the most in reaching their own success criteria of moving on and surviving as well as possible (Vigh, 2007) are the Acholi women and men who master great flexibility and a wide

coping repertoire, when tending to their emotion regulation responses, their social navigation and their coping strategies more broadly. It is important to stress, however, when poverty strikes in combination with war and physical immobility such as forced encampment, even the broadest repertoire and endless coping flexibility can fall short.

Conclusions by the former forcibly recruited children and youth and what are the most important factors that enable them to "keep on going"

1) A home or community environment that allows for safety and social acceptance, or that at least does not expose the former violently mobilized Acholi to violent stigmatization and exclusion from social and material resources in the community.

2) The level of poverty/resources available; "poverty is what kills us every day".

3) Whether one is able to "settle one's mind" and "not overthink," which relates to emotional regulatory flexibility.

4) Spirituality/locus of control/self-efficacy. Whether one feels protected by God and thus trusts that things will turn out alright, or whether one is more prone to rely on one's own resources for things to turn out well seems less important as long as one actually believes in a positive way forward

5) Living with oneself – living with others. An evaluation of how well life goes in the Acholi region of northern Uganda, is closely connected to notions of whether one is a proper man/woman in the Acholi cosmology. This is defined by how well one gets along with others and whether one has established a family, and how well one takes care of the family.

Recommendations for peace-processes and capacity building in fragile states

1) The fact that appetitive aggression studies document the prevalence of an appetite for violence in both children soldier, ex-combatants, and veteran populations points to the fact that issues of appetitive aggression are absolutely poignant to address in interventions targeting rehabilitation from war-related trauma and re-integration and reconciliation processes of former child soldiers, ex-combatants and veterans into their home communities.

2) The individual, social and moral implications of appetitive aggression illuminated in this research call for a careful approach to communicating with former child soldiers, ex-combatants and veterans - and their families and surrounding communities. Clearly, not only former ex-combatants from the civil war in northern Uganda struggle with reintegrating back into civil society; so do soldiers in state armies in for instance Europe and the US (Howell,

2012; Litz, et al., 2009). We need to develop comprehensive ways of dealing with the taboos related to war, aggression and to the "unspeakable joyful-slaughter" (Bourke, 1999). Loved ones and home-communities are unlikely to accept that violent activities and war-experiences can entail positive emotions and even create a longing in the demobilized/veteran population. If addressed, this should be done with empathic caution and enough time set aside for difficult conversations.

3) DDR programs must take emic, spiritual notions into account when interacting with participants in addressing issues of aggression.

4) An emic, experience-near and holistic approach *must* be part of finding answers to these issues in psychotraumatology and resilience research, and in development research and interventions. Apply qualitative ethnographic approaches in order to complement top-down etic approaches.

5) In some contexts, avoidant coping contributes to healing trauma – it can then be harmful to export trauma-focused treatment models that promote verbalization. Therefore,

6) evaluations of responses to adversity and trauma need to be made contextually, emically and with respect *after* listening to the field and the human beings in it – interventions should be based on carefully learning from the people we aim to help: How can we strengthen the initiatives and resilient responses already in place?

7) Abandon project-timeframes that run for 2-3 years. It seems counter-productive to the sustainability of livelihoods, time-frames and people´s lives would benefit from 10-year timeframes - or atleast obligatory follow-up studies 5 years after.

8) Holistic approaches in development research and interventions should integrate business-partners and start-ups: The grand solution is not education for all - the pressing issue that threatens global security is resources and job-opportunities. You cannot feed your children with your education when there are no jobs after graduation.