FINAL HEAD: **The content and meaning of war experiences: A qualitative study of trauma and resilience among Liberian young refugees in Ghana**

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Abstract

Adolescence is an important developmental period for social relationships, identity formation and future planning. Traumatic experiences, such as war and persecution, may interfere with optimal development, including the future orientation of adolescents. The present study examines how young adult war survivors construct, make sense of, and narrate their future goals, plans, and expectations. The participants were 13 Liberian 25-35-year old male and female refugees living in Ghana. This qualitative study is based on semi-structured interviews with prompting questions. By applying a phenomenological approach the interview transcripts were categorized into themes and subthemes about future orientations. Results revealed three main themes, two of them desired a positive future orientation, indicating optimism and determination to improve one's own life and to contribute to a flourishing nation and to peacebuilding. The third theme illustrated a failure to reconstruct war-shattered lives and involved pessimistic views of the future. The results are discussed in relation to peacebuilding and the developmental challenges of young adults as war survivors.

Keywords: war trauma, refugees, young adults, qualitative study, future orientation

Introduction

War experiences can have far reaching impacts on human development, often interfering with age-salient developmental tasks. Adolescence is the prime time for creating new social relationships, building identity and constructing plans for the future (Dahl 2014; Blakmore & Mills 2014). Research is available on mental health problems, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety and depression among war-affected adolescents (Attanayake et al., 2009; Slone & Mann, 2016), but is lacking on more normative developmental tasks, such as future goals and plans. Yet, adolescents' ability to seek future opportunities and advance towards valued and attainable goals is pivotal for good mental health and optimal development (Lindstrom, Johnson, Blum, & Cheng, 2014; Nurmi, 2005). The present qualitative study analyses the future orientation of young Liberian adults who experienced civil war as children and adolescents, and who currently live as refugees in Ghana.

Adolescent Future Orientation

Future orientation refers to prospective representations, thoughts and emotions about preferred human relations, profession, values and lifestyle (Seginer, 2000; Steinberg et al. 2009; Stoddard, Zimmerman, & Bauermaster, 2011). In adolescence, future orientation is a core developmental task, incorporating complex motivational, planning and evaluation processes (Nurmi, 1991). Motivational processes involve individual interests, expectations and goal-oriented objectives regarding the future. Longitudinal research has established that goal-oriented objectives that match the adolescent's core motivational value system predict good adjustment and psychological wellbeing (MacLeod, Coates, & Hetherton 2007; Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997). Salmela-Aro (1996) argued that self-defining goals in particular help adolescents to resolve multiple life challenges and are therefore highly important for psychological wellbeing and other developmental domains.

Optimal planning of the future is based on anticipatory knowledge, i.e. adolescents are

seeking and gathering information from their own earlier experiences, sharing their plans with peers, learning from each other and following respected role models (Seginer, 2008; Stoddard & Pierce, 2015). Planning is a cognitively sophisticated process that demands the ability to mentally visualize necessary steps, predict possible obstacles and make alternative plans in order to attain the valued future goals. Successful plans typically involve personal meanings and values and are based on socially shared important experiences (Leodari & Gonida, 2008; Nurmi, 1991).

Finally, evaluation of the general practicability of executing the goals and plans is crucial for successful future orientation (Harvey & Dasborough, 2006; Nurmi 1991). Feelings of optimism, hope and satisfaction show a balance between opportunities and plans, while fears, pessimism and withdrawal indicate an imbalance between them, illustrated by low resources and obstacles. Research shows that adolescents with a positive image about themselves and an optimistic attitude towards their future invest more in planning and goal attainment and show more realistic expectations than those with pessimistic attitudes (Iovu, Hărăguș, & Roth, 2016; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2008).

Factors Influencing Future Orientation

The majority of research on adolescent future orientation has focused on the role of family relations, socio-economic stressors, and individual characteristics (Esteves, Scoloveno, Mahat, Yarcheski, & Scoloveno, 2013; Harley 2015; Stoddard & Pierce, 2015; Rialon 2011). Only very few studies have considered how war and political violence might influence adolescents' construction of their future (Ben-zur & Almog, 2013).

The family remains an invaluable resource for adolescents making decisions about important life choices (Brody et al. 2004, Kerpelman et al. 2008). Family support seems to be especially important for economically disadvantaged youth in their construction of positive future plans (Esteves et al., 2013; McCabe & Barnett, 2000). A review confirmed that

adolescents who experience a strong supportive social network and family affiliation show higher hopes for the future in disadvantaged socio-economic conditions (Esteves et al., 2013). A follow-up study among poor North American early adolescents, revealed that a high level of instrumental and emotional family support increased optimistic future expectations. High peer support, in turn, did not significantly predict optimistic future expectations, but negative peer relationships decreased them (Dubow, Arnett, Smith, & Ippolito 2001).

Some research is available showing a negative family atmosphere or abusive family relationships to be detrimental for adolescents' sense of optimism and hope towards the future. Research among Israeli Arab families confirmed that adolescents' experiences of abuse, violence and aggression were associated with hopelessness, pessimism and negative expectations of the future (Haj-Yahia, 2001), and the abused adolescents showed high hopelessness and low self-esteem, both underlying the negative future orientation (Haj-Yahia, Musleh, & Haj-Yahia 2002).

Research is discrepant about the negative impacts of poverty, disadvantaged living environment and economic recession on adolescent future orientation. Some studies suggest that poor socio-economic standing and a lack of opportunities and resources, together with everyday stressors, interfered with adolescents' constructive and optimistic future orientation (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Harris, Duncan, & Boisjoly, 2002). Typically, adolescents from economically disadvantaged homes show low aspirations for future plans and feel incapable of imagining a future in hopeful terms (Mullan et al. 2002). They can be constantly concerned about their parents' joblessness, which contributes to their own meagre future prospects (Putell & McLoyd, 2013). Yet, a longitudinal study revealed that more than a half of poor African American adolescents held feelings of hope and optimism towards the future, while less than a half reported strong feelings of hopelessness (Bolland, Lian, & Formichella, 2005). Optimism as a personal characteristic and a group value is generally considered decisive

for favourable future orientation. Elder and Russell (2000) argued, however, that optimism and pessimism may function differently in disadvantaged and advantaged conditions. They found that optimistic adolescents were looking for promising opportunities especially when their conditions were detrimental, whereas pessimistic adolescents showed hopelessness especially when they had strong social affiliations with similarly disadvantaged peers.

Concerning war and military violence, research shows predominately negative impacts on adolescents' future orientation. Israeli adolescents who were exposed to missile attacks and perceived a high threat to life during the Second Lebanon War showed high levels of fear and hopelessness concerning their future, while those who perceived the war as a challenge showed high-risk taking tendencies (Ben-Zur & Almog, 2013). Research also reveals that adolescents who suffer from trauma-related mental health problems, especially posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), showed negative and pessimistic future orientation (Rialon, 2011; Schwarzwald, Weisenberg, Solmon, & Waysman, 1997).

Future Orientation and Mental health

Successful achievement of future goals, plans and expectations are considered important for adolescents' mental health, cognitive skills such as problem solving and effective attention, social-emotional development such as emotion regulation, and intimate and peer affiliation (Dahl, 2014; Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997). Ample evidence confirms that pessimistic future orientation increases mental health and behavioral problems such as depression or substance abuse, while optimistic, high-motivated and well-planned future orientation is associated with good mental health and wellbeing. A study showed that African American adolescents who showed high expectations and an optimistic attitude towards their future, manifested a low level of violent behavior (Stoddard et al., 2011), lower propensity to engage in delinquency and substance abuse, and low levels of school problems and dropping out (Bolland, 2003; Chen & Vazsonyi, 2011, 2013; Jackman & MacPhee, 2017).

Optimistic future orientation can even protect adolescents from negative developmental trends and promote their social adjustment and mental health. Hopeful and optimistic attitudes towards the future were found to mitigate between stressful life events and depression and behavioural risks, including drug abuse (Lindström Johnson et al., 2014; McDade et al., 2011). A longitudinal study confirmed that hopeful future expectations predicted optimal developmental trajectories, indicated by competence, confidence, commitment to and caring of others, and good mental health. (Schmid et al., 2011; Schmid, Phelps, & Lerner, 2011). To support these findings, a randomized control study showed that an intervention aimed at enhancing positive and hopeful expectations and effective planning for the future managed to decrease antisocial behaviour and substance abuse among disadvantaged youth (Lindstrom Johnson, Jones, & Cheng, 2015). In a context of war, research confirms that psychosocial interventions (multi-ethnic youth clubs) were effective in empowering and activating war-affected youth, for example through integrating and processing painful experiences and increasing hopefulness towards the future (Ispanovic Radojkovevedic, 2003).

Aims of the Study

An ability to set and evaluate realistic goals and plans for the future is important in adolescence and young adulthood. Hopeful and optimistic future orientation also relates to good adjustment and mental health. The present study assumes that the optimal elements of future orientation would be especially relevant in conditions of war and armed violence. The participants of the present study are young Liberian adults with histories of war atrocities, loss and of being a refugee. The aim is to examine how they construct, make sense of and narrate their future aspirations, goals and plans, conceptualized as future orientation. In order to understand the context in which the young adults plan and evaluate their future, the study describes their typical war experiences.

Methodology

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 13 young adult Liberian refugees living in Ghana. They were six women and seven men of 25-35-years of age. Four had completed high school, three had attained a bachelor's university degree, and one had no formal education. Five were high school dropouts.

The participants were recruited in a refugee camp in the Central Region of Ghana. A convenient snowballing sampling procedure was applied by approaching the camp manager and headmistress of a vocational school to access potential participants, and then asking the interviewees about their possible networks. The aim was to reach an equal number of men and women, and that guided the selection. The sample size was considered sufficient to generate an in-depth degree of variation of the participants' narration of their earlier war experiences and what these had meant, and details of their motivations, goals, plans, and expectations of the future.

The fieldwork and data registration were conducted according to the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments and the American Psychological Association's ethical recommendations. The Ghana Refugee Board provided their approval of the study methodology and methods. The first author who is a psychologist was responsible for the fieldwork and he informed the possible participants about the study aims, confidentiality and ethical rules, and conducted the interviews. The participants gave their oral consent, recorded as a part of the interview procedure. The interviews were conducted in the school environment in rooms that provided privacy.

The Interviews

The semi-structured interview method was chosen because it allows participants to reveal stories, memories, feelings and behaviors, and to speak about their subjective experience

(Moustakas, 1994; Siverstein et al., 2006). The first author conducted all interviews in English which is the official language of Liberia. Interviews began with a short background chat, aimed at making the participants feel comfortable to share their experiences and aspirations.

The participants spoke about their own future goals and plans as part of a modified semi-structured life-history interview with open ended questions, with prompting further questions. The questions covered childhood and family memories, important life-events, and war experiences in Liberia. The part relating to future orientation started with general questions, such as: "How do you see the time ahead?" The discussion then proceeded with prompting questions, for instance: "You are now 24yrs old; let us imagine yourself in ten years. Can you describe to me the person you will be?";"What do you do as a profession, how do you feel and think, what are the major differences in your current and future lives", or: "Where do you live, with whom and what do you dream about?"

Rationale for Qualitative Study and Scoring Procedure

The interviews were transcribed and subjected to detailed qualitative content analysis, based on a phenomenological approach that emphasizes participants' personal knowledge and subjectivity as a source of information, and the importance of cultural perspectives and interpretations (Davidsen, 2013; Hyncer, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). Listening to the war-survivors themselves allows insights to be gained into their motivations, goals, plans and actions concerning the future. Concretely, the aim was to identify the main themes composed of multiple subthemes of future orientation that were closely based on the narratives of the young Liberian adults. The phenomenological content analysis proceeded across three stages.

(1) The first author read all the 13 transcribed interviews repeatedly in order to familiarize himself with their general expressions, messages and content. He then selected all text samples referring to future motivation, goals, plans, hopes and fears, conceptualized as future orientation. Similarly, war experiences were identified in order to describe the context of future

orientation. The whole interview was the unit of analysis to identify relevant material about the future, not only the responses to the specific questions and prompts in relation to future orientation. For instance, in discussing the meanings of war and its impacts on life, the participants sometimes spoke about their thoughts and feelings concerning future dreams and obstacles.

(2) The two authors then independently identified subthemes in these text samples extracted from the interviews. Appendix I shows examples of the ways of identifying subthemes by underlying them in the text samples. It is noteworthy that the same content of future orientation often incorporated multiple different subthemes. The two authors then named the subthemes according to content, messages found in the narratives and considerations about the future. The identified subthemes closely corresponded to the original text, as they attempted to reflect unique personal and cultural aspirations, experiences, interpretations and meanings.

(3) Thereafter the two authors compared and negotiated the contents and meanings of their independently defined subthemes and agreed on specific separate final subthemes.

(4) Finally, the first author grouped the agreed subthemes into main themes which indicated the specific nature of future orientation, and again the names and contents of the final themes were mutually agreed. The subthemes that were very similar were combined in order to show the structure and content of the themes more precisely. To retain the validity of the reported material and transmit the voices of the participants, quotes from the participants are reported in the results.

Results

Context of the Study

The two Liberian civil wars lasted for thirteen years and resulted in high death tolls and created many refugees. The participants of this study are part of the 50 000 Liberians who escaped from the civil wars to Ghana. The first (1989-1997) began with a coup by Samuel Doe

against the administration of William Tolbert, and ended with Charles Taylor taking power; the second war (1999-2003) began with the emergence of the Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebel group and ended with the signing of a peace treaty in Accra, Ghana in 2003. During the civil wars 270 000 civilians were brutally murdered (Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2008), and 86% of rural and 78% of urban households either became internally displaced or refugees in neighboring countries (SENAC, 2006). The wars have had devastating long-term effects. According to the United Nations Human Development Index, Liberia belongs to the group of countries with very low human development prospects, based on access to education, life expectancy, and gross national income (Human Development Report, 2015).

The camp where the participants of the study lived was established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1990 as a safe haven for Liberians who fled their country during the first and second civil wars. Liberian refugees struggled to cope with daily challenges, including inadequate transportation, poor sanitation, poor health, lack of clean water, and lack of employment and educational opportunities (Wehlah & Akotia, 2000). The conditions further deteriorated partly due to UNHCR's official cessation of Liberian refugee status in Ghana in 2010, and the subsequent withdrawal of all humanitarian agencies that had earlier provided material support to the refugee camp.

Examples of War Experiences

The young adult war survivors recounted multiple, predominantly horrifying memories and stories of their childhood and adolescence during the wars. Below we provide short descriptions of typical war experiences that participants talked about in order to help understanding of the context in which the young Liberian adults constructed and gave meanings to their future orientation.

The war experiences commonly involved scenes of killing, rape and torture, accompanied with intolerable pain and humiliation, both physical and psychological. These memories were very vivid, intrusive, and haunting. The memories of war were often sensorimotor or procedural, as young adults described how they had to flee and were running and hiding for their lives. The following narrative illustrated the severity and life-threatening nature of the horrors.

"The rebels were killing people according to their ethnic background. When we were escaping, we run into the rebels held territory. They ask us to speak their language, failure to speak means you are an enemy to the revolution. Luckily, we were able to speak although were not from the same ethnic group. However, they gave all the people I was escaping with, 25 lashes at their back. They asked us to lie on a bench to receive the lashes. They used cartridge belts to lash us. When they finished, we could not walk uprightly. We were feeling severe pains."

"The journey to the place of safety was bad and constantly felt under threat. We had hardly any food nor water and everyone was either suffering from cold, coughs or cholera. I saw many dead bodies and injured people on my way which still horrifies me till today. I still have nightmares about the near-death encounter with the rebels. I lost contact with the rest of my family and till date I do not know whether they are dead or alive".

The loss of people close to them was often the most painful experience that had multiple consequences and caused a deep feeling of being left alone in an unsafe and hostile world. Many young adults remembered the killing and persecution of family members and commented on the important impacts of these experiences on their future planning, human relationships and world view.

"We were in my grandfather's village with my family when the war broke out. One evening I left with my senior brother to fetch water upon return I saw my parents in a pool of blood in the compound gruesomely murder by the rebels. We were also caught and beaten mercilessly with my brother left for dead. I was fingered in my private parts and raped by the rebels. I was just fortunate to be saved by the peace keeping force. My life is now filled with sorrow and pains because of the death of my parents."

Themes of Future Orientation

The participants were asked about their future and their expectations, hopes, fears and images of a future life were explored. Their responses reflected goals, dreams, wisdom and beliefs about what is possible and how much one can influence the future. The results revealed three main themes, each composed of 4-5 subthemes, summarized in Table 1. The main themes were labelled as "Anything that does not kill, strengthens", "Passion to contribute to flourishing nation" and "Down in the mouth".

Anything that does not kill you, strengthens. The core message of this theme is resilience, reflecting the conviction that despite, or even because of, war atrocities and hardships the future must be brighter. Painful and traumatic war experiences have stirred up a determination to transform one's life into something better and to enhance optimism and hope. Thus, the participants explained that they have consciously chosen a future orientation that involves strong motivation, clear planning and empowerment in order to compensate or neutralize their traumatic war experiences. They shared a strong belief that their life-threatening experiences and suffering had strengthened them, increased their awareness and enabled them to cope better with new challenges. The suffering was teaching them how to move towards deeper wisdom and maturity, as one participant explained: *"I lived through the terror of war and survived the threat that surrounded me. Therefore, I can take everything that comes my way"*

The optimism about future life and the determination to achieve one's goals was shown in multiple ways. Participants said that they adopted a new philosophy of life, that of optimism, instead of dwelling on their suffering. They were determined not to allow their traumatic past to rob them of a hopeful future and made all possible efforts to struggle for positive aspirations and against everything that was doom and gloom.

"At first, I thought that the world was unfair after I went through all those experience at a tender age and being in camp without any hope. Fortunately, I got the opportunity to enrol in a vocational school and my views about life started changing. I believe everything happen for a reason and so instead of the experience to break me down, it has made me strong to persevere and achieve something for my future. I now look at the future with a sense of hope and will work towards a brighter future".

The goal orientation and motivation to alter one's life for the better was thus based on experiences of war and of being a refugee. The participants stated that accepting the present reality of life is the most important step on the road of recovery from the painful tragedies, family separation and losses in the civil war. They felt strongly that their new goals and plans had benefited them and made them capable of improving the conditions of their lives. Thus, they see light at the end of the tunnel. The following example reveals the determination of one participant:

"My main aim is to complete the vocational training. Now I see myself as a rich successful businesswoman, helping the needy in my country. Although ten years back, I was struggling and going through bad experiences. However, I do believe that I am on the path to improving my life, with discipline and determination I will make it. I assure you I will become a role model for the youth in my community."

The young adults endorsing the theme "Anything that does not kill you, strengthens" showed a strong conviction that the war experiences and hardships had given them a sense of

determination and willpower that can inspire them to greater heights and to do well in life. A participant stated succinctly: *"Therefore, our future is our hands, and we are the ones to alter it and change our life story."*

Passion to contribute to a flourishing nation. Participants showed a strong belief that the responsibility of the just, sustainable, and peaceful development of their nation, Liberia, rests on their shoulders. They emphasized that each citizen should contribute his or her quota to build the country anew, and this is especially true for a nation that was submerged in bloody strife. They aimed at national reconstruction in ways that will guarantee equal opportunities to all and a fundamental meaning to life. They wanted to contribute to these common goals and make a difference.

The topical subthemes were political and social activism, dedication to humanity and to give voice to those who suffer and are exploited. Participants dreamt of becoming social activists and had made a conscious choice to fulfil this aim. Their war experiences had contributed to their determination to struggle and assume leadership, challenge the current political order in their country, and to gain a new social equality. The participants firmly believed that the youth must struggle against marginalization and exclusion of any person or ethnic group. Their tasks are to assume practical human values so that political governance guarantees everybody the opportunity to make choices and enjoy the satisfaction of basic needs.

"My uttermost dream as I said I wanted to be a servant to people that was my dream. To make the voice of those people suffering somewhere to come out and I should be the medium for those voices to come out. So, I have that passion to go down there to the unheard voices or people who have been denied access to certain things for me to be of help to them. Like an activist for them or a voice to the voiceless. I am hopeful about the future of my country and strong desire to achieve greatness. The future is there for me to

explore as an unrepentant optimist my experience will not hold me back to pursue this goal."

"This hardship I experienced at early stage of my life has kept me focused and I would have died if I have listened to my friends to join Charles Taylor's small boy army. It has also made me to always go to the aid of the needed and be the voice for the voiceless. I am motivated and empowered by what I went through to fight for change in my society and country as a whole to bring a change in their lives. I believe development must be extended to all. That is the basic issue that human needs must be accessible to all. My view towards the future is positively resolute and encourage to do my bit to bring change in my country. That never again will we sink into this dark abyss."

Importantly, peace building and reconciliation were envisioned as the precondition of civil society and human rights. Participants provided concrete means of rebuilding their nation in peaceful terms. They wanted to go back to Liberia and educate people about the necessity of peaceful coexistence and harmony. This general awareness and practical reconciliation would prevent politicians from committing atrocities in a bid to satisfy their political ambition.

"We should live in peace and forgive. We should not be misled by politicians because most of the wars are caused by politicians when they want power to satisfy their selfish ambition. I want to be a civil educationist to teach people on how bad wars can be. I want to teach people what it means to be a citizen of one's nation and what meaningful contribution you can make to the sustainable development of your nation. Not things that will stir up strife and bring your country into flames and backwardness".

"Right now, my uttermost ambition and goal for life is to see Liberia come back to light because I have noticed Liberia has been brain drained and starting from scratch is not

an easy task. Lots of things have happened and things have gone to zero. So, we have to pick up from that place and put Liberia back up. So, in order to do that, I need to gather people and myself to training and for that reason, I decided to go on a training as a facilitator on an organization known as Europe Inter Agency for Peace and stay as a facilitator and peace educationist and then to areas I was trained for conflict resolutions in Ghana here. I was trained by some expatriates too".

The commitment to nation building involved many practical motivations, such as undergoing vocational training in order to return to the homeland and empower people. The participants evaluated that people with the requisite skills can positively contribute to their war-devastated society and become rulers of their destiny. The participants' desire to help others to improve their conditions was often the most important purpose of their lives. A participant stated this as follows:

"I am now going through vocational training and when I finish, I will like to go back and give back to society. I will like to train young girls who were in my situation to help equip them with employable skills so that they will be in control of their lives. Rather falling prey for the ills of society. That is my widow's mite, that I can contribute to help rebuild my country."

Down in the mouth. This theme reflects negative future orientations that are strongly influenced by past traumatic war experiences. The young adults felt that their unjust and painful past was holding them back and they were the real hostages of the Liberian civil wars. They expressed despair about the failed potential and inability to improve their circumstances. Some young adults described their life situation as being like a slide into the abyss or as being stripped from any resources or means to transform their dire situation to a hopeful time. They found it difficult to lift their head above their current circumstance and were pessimistic about the future. They felt very insecure, feared their future, and showed increasing despondency. The

daily failures and frustrations were leading to their diminished sense of self-worth. The participants felt strongly that they do not have control over their present life, and thus also the future is not in their hands. Their narratives reflected a sense of giving up and submitting everything to a cruel destiny.

"My life has become dull. Right now, I do not know where to start from or where my life will end up. Anything I can find, does not give me reason to stay alive. My family is gone, all dead or I don't know if some are alive. Is only God who knows what I will become in future? I have no sense or plan for the future".

"There is nothing going on in my life. I am really frustrated as I cannot help it. I feel like crying. Everything in my life is blank and I cannot see my way clear. Where do I start, I do not know what the future holds for me?"

War-related loss of people they had been close to had a profound impact on young adults' lives, including future planning. They felt a loss of guidance, support and natural affiliations that they had enjoyed in their home country. These losses seemed to become especially painful when planning and dreaming about future professions, lifestyle or prospects.

"Where is my support coming from. My family is gone and here I am struggling alone at the camp. Growing up in Liberia my dream was to become a medical doctor but now all I see is doom and gloom over my life. I hate to admit it but that is the reality. I do not see my life or situation changing in the near future."

Discussion

This study aimed to understand the contents and meanings of future orientation among young Liberian adults who had experienced the atrocities of civil wars and were living currently as refugees in Ghana. The findings revealed three main themes, one of them illustrating negative and pessimistic views of the future, bitterness and a feeling of being lost due to their

potential having been robbed by the war. War experiences also strongly shaped the two positive themes of the future. In one, war and its terrible deeds had made these youths invincible and therefore they trusted their own strengths and resources to manage present and also future challenges. They saw multiple opportunities ahead of them. The other positive theme illustrates another experience of these young adults: their cruel and unjust experience of wars had evoked an urgent passion to join in the rebuilding their own nation and of humanity.

Empowered Future

It is noteworthy that seemingly similar traumatic, humiliating and sad experiences made some of these young adults despair concerning their future and the possibilities for influencing their lives, while others, on the contrary, expressed high hopes, ambition, and a determination to achieve a desirable future for both themselves and their country. The latter young Liberian war survivors emphasized that exactly because of their war experiences and hardships they had consciously chosen optimism concerning their future. The experience of survival was very formative to their identity, world views, and future orientation. In different ways they explained that the main lesson was that surviving the horrors made them invincible and strong: "*Anything that does not kill, strengthens.*" A refugee camp as a living environment is not highly promising or stimulating, and yet the inner worlds of these young adults did not reflect their sometimes-miserable reality. Instead, they regarded the current negative determinants of their lives as exactly the reason to improve their circumstances and to fight against hopelessness.

These findings are in line with the views of Ingleby (2005) who reckoned that a large number of war-affected people show remarkable capabilities to function well in their lives. Although the traumatic war experiences dramatically altered the childhood dreams of our participants, they also inspired them to work hard to change their circumstances and destiny, and to create opportunities also for other people. These optimistic views of the future typically also involved the reconstruction of self-confidence, worth as a human being, and

meaningfulness of life. Research is lacking about the ways that childhood war experiences may influence identity formation or personality development. Instead, there are personal accounts revealing adolescents' attempts to transfer from war-shattered victims into survivors with social affiliation and personal growth (Barber et al., 2013; Punamäki, 2006). According to resilience research, positive views of the future, the meaningfulness of life, and a sense of belonging are important elements of empowerment and growth after trauma (Masten & Wright, 2010; Ungern, 2013). In our study, the young Liberian adults expressed that by enhancing positive and optimistic goals they could formulate concrete well-defined plans for their own and their nation's future.

The determination to transform one's own life for the better made it possible to plan to contribute to national goals and build a flourishing civil society in Liberia. The youths' willingness to participate involved solid plans and an evaluation of their possibilities to contribute to reconciliation.   Characteristically these young war survivors expressed their desire and plans to become advocates, teachers and human rights activists in order to build civil society and justice. Many were preparing to become agents of social transformation and to invest in national reconciliation and peacebuilding. This is consistent with earlier observations, for instance, a study among young Sierra Leonean ex-combatants revealed that they wanted to become educated, assume leadership positions, and help in the development and progress of their country (Betancourt et al, 2008). Yet, war-affected civilians are usually voiceless and unrepresented in the reconciliation process and official peace negotiations, which undermines peacebuilding efforts. Traumatized war victims are sometimes even considered a hindrance to national progress and development (Brewer et al., 2014). On the contrary, the young Liberian war survivors interviewed in this study joined the ambitions of youth globally, in directing their energy towards helping construct social justice and increase awareness and solidarity in the process of transforming society from conflict to peace, and people from being oppressed to

being activists (Hagemann 1992). They valued the sense of purpose in pursuing their own and national goals towards equality and peace.

It is noteworthy that there are two Liberian Nobel Peace Prize laureates: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf the first democratically elected female head-of-state in Africa, and Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee. They played a key role in achieving the peace agreement between the Liberian parties to the conflict who were largely serving the interest of ruthless warlords. They led and helped mobilise and organise a coalition of women across ethnic and religious dividing lines as a way of challenging the Liberian leaders to agree to engage in peace talks in Ghana in 2003. Their nonviolent struggle for peace brought an end to the last devastating civil war and helped restore the country to functional order, including a free and fair election. The struggle of the multi-ethnic coalition for a peaceful Liberia helped pave the way for women's full participation in peacebuilding and work, and enabled equal opportunities for all to influence developments at all levels of society. The participants of our study did not refer to the Nobel Peace Prize laureates in their consideration of nation building, but the South African freedom fighter and later president Nelson Mandela had inspired the young Liberian war survivors.

War-devastated Future

The overly negative theme of future orientation, "Down in the mouth" incorporated very gloomy views and disillusionment with other people, oneself and political reality. The traumatic and horrifying experiences during the civil wars in Liberia often formed the justification for these negative views. When thinking of the future, the participants vividly remembered their personal humiliation and physiological and psychological vulnerability, the cruelty of their fellow citizens, and constant threats to their lives. They also reasoned that their loss of parents and teachers, on whom they had depended, had had a devastating impact on them, and thus they had lost guidance for their entire lives. Research emphasizes the importance of family and other significant adults in helping adolescents in their construction of future plans

(Esteves et al., 2013; Brody et al. 2004, Kerpelman et al. 2008). Young Liberian adults in this study described the loss of people dear to them and who they had been close to as a highly traumatic war experience, and an analysis of their future orientation further shows that they also meant they had lost valuable resources that they would need in their important life decisions.

The result of young war survivors' uncertainty, pessimism and gloomy attitudes towards life and people concurs with Israeli studies of the aftermath of Middle Eastern wars (Ben-Zur & Almong, 2013; Rialon, 2011). Similarly, Israeli youth who suffered PTSD as a consequence of war trauma were deeply scarred due to the troubled past and felt helpless in facing everyday challenges and demands of the future. Also, Sierra Leonean refugee adolescents showed severe exhaustion in their highly stressful post-war conditions and had lost their self-confidence and self-esteem as a consequence of war atrocities, which underlined their hopelessness and perceived lack of future prospects (Kline & Mone, 2003). In conditions of natural disaster (the Tsunami) Sri Lankan adolescents were found to be filled with feelings of sadness, pessimism and worries about the future (Wickraman & Kaspa, 2007).

Limitations of the Study

This study deserves criticism for limited generalizability of the results and scope of the analyses. Interviews were limited to young Liberian adults living in one refugee camp and participating in a vocational school in Ghana. To satisfy generalizability requirements the sample should include Liberian refugees living in other professional and social environments. The results of this study are based on a convenience sample which in turn depends on people's willingness to help. The qualitative approach aimed at deepening understanding of future orientations among young war survivors, but due to the considerable investment in individual interviews, only a small group could be studied. Our results cannot be widely generalized but

can give ideas about various ways in which youth with an experience of severe childhood war trauma construct their future as refugees.

The analysis could be more extensive and ambitious, for instance by including mixed methods (combining qualitative and quantitative approaches). This could also provide the possibility of reporting on the prevalence of the three identified future orientations. The age range of our convenience sample was large, as the younger participants would have been between 5 -9 years during the civil wars, and older participants were already adolescents at this time. The age range itself deserves examination when sampling, and it would be informative to analyse the different developmental impacts on future orientation among war-survivors of different ages. Gender differences may also be relevant to the ways in which war trauma may affect future orientation, but our analysis was not thorough enough to contribute to that knowledge. Finally, further studies with mixed methods could examine the importance of different war experiences and current social status, for example due to family reunions.

Conclusion

Our study demonstrated both highly negative and highly positive contents of young Liberian war survivors' perceptions of their future lives, with the positive dominating. Their messages are important for professionals working with war-affected children and youth, politicians reconstructing post-conflict societies, and maybe for the victims and survivors themselves. The high sense of optimism, engagement, and vision of their own and their nation's future found among war survivors, has the potential to be highly valuable in reconstruction, reconciliation and nation building. Trauma research has recognized the potential for resilience and strength and has emphasised survivors' desire to find meaningful ways to cope with war trauma, hardships, and atrocities. Our results contribute to that by showing young refugees were not helpless and passive victims without capabilities and inspiration for the future. Yet, the findings recognize also the lack of opportunities, limited or no access to education and extreme

deprivation at the refugee camp. Adolescents who were able to survive the torrent of the civil war represent the future generation of Liberia. Therefore, greater attention must be given to their future potential in order to allow them to better their lives and the future of their nation.

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Table 1. Themes and Subthemes of Future Prospects

Themes	Subthemes
Anything that does not kill, strengthens	Determination to transform life for the better
	Optimistic about life, envision a brighter future and deep hope
	Resilience to gain mental growth due to hardships or despite ordeal
	Motivation, goal orientation and empowerment
Passion to contribute to flourishing nation	Commitment to helping others and community building
	Political, civil rights and social activism
	Dedication to serve humanity due to own experience
	Peace building and reconciliation
Down in the mouth	Pessimistic view of the future
	Gloomy view of life and own experiences
	No future vision available
	Disillusement of ideals: dependency, low self-esteem and fear
	Disruption of future aspirations due to hardship

Appendix I Content analysis of subthemes, and content categories of participants' future prospects.

Data: Adolescence responses	Subcategories	Content categories
* <u>Am hopeful and confident about the future</u>. Although what I went through was <u>not a pleasant experience but am spurred on by this to work towards systematic change in my country</u>. I want to help the people in need as well as the society and my neighbourhood. I have resolved to dedicate my life to serve humanity because I understand what it means to be in need. <u>The experiences of the war have driving me into this direction to help those in need. I know what it means for a person to tell me that they have not eaten for days. I have that obligation to be of service to mankind</u>	- Optimism about life, envision a brighter future and deep hope - Determination to transform life to better -Commitment to helping others and community building -Dedication to serve humanity due to own experience	**Anything that does not kill you, strengthens** **Passion to contribute to flourishing nation**
* I believe the <u>best possible things is about to happen to me. I have this strong will towards a hopeful future even if it's not likely</u>. Right now, my uttermost ambition and <u>goal for life is to see Liberia come back to light because I have noticed Liberia has been brain drained and starting from scratch</u> is not an easy task. Lots of things have happened and things have gone to zero. So we have to pick up from that place and put Liberia back up. <u>So in order to do that, I need to gather people and myself to training and for that reason, I decided to go on a training as a facilitator on an organization known as Europe</u> Inter Agency for Peace, and stay as a facilitator and peace educationist and then to areas I was trained for conflict resolutions in Ghana here. I was trained by some expatriates too.	- Motivation, goal orientation and empowerment - Optimism about life, envision a brighter future and deep hope - Political, civil rights and social activism - Peace building and reconciliation	**Anything that does not kill you, strengthens** **Passion to contribute to flourishing nation**
*With what I witnessed during the war I should be engaging in reckless behavior <u>to ruin my life but it has motivated to be buoyant about life believing that good things will happen to me in the future.</u>	- Determination to transform life for the better	**Anything that does not kill, strenghtens you** **Passion to contribute to**

We should live in peace and forgive. We should not be misled by politicians because most of the wars are caused by politicians when they want power to satisfy their selfish ambition. I want to be a civil educationist to teach people on how bad wars can be. I want to teach people what it means to be a citizen of one's nation and what meaningful contribution you can make to the sustainable development of your nation. Not things that will stir up strife and bring your country into flames and backwardness.	- Peace building and reconciliation - Commitment to helping others and community building - Political, civil rights and social activism	**flourishing nation**
*At first, I thought that the world was unfair after I went through all those experiences at a tender age and being in the camp without any hope until the vocational school started. I believe that everything happened for a reason and so instead of the experiences to break me down and get lost in the world of pain; it has rather made me strong and solidify my perseverance to achieve something greater for my future. I am now a firm believer of hopeful future.	- Determination to transform life for the better - Resilience to gain mental growth due to hardships or despite ordeal - Motivation, goal orientation and empowerment	**Anything that does not kill, strenghtens you**
*My uttermost dream as I said I wanted to be a servant to people that was my dream. To make the voice of those people suffering somewhere to come out and I should be the medium for those voices to come out. So I have that passion to go down there to the unheard voices or people who have been denied access to certain things for me to be of help to them. Like an activist for them or a voice to the voiceless. I hopeful about the future of my country and strong desire to achieve greatness. The future is there for me to explore as an unrepentant optimist my experience will not hold me back to pursue this goal.	- Commitment to helping others and community building - Dedication to serve humanity due to own experience - Political, civil rights and social activism	**Passion to contribute to own nation and humanity**

*My life has become dull. <u>Right now I do not know where to start from or where my life will end me.</u> Anything I find, I do to keep living. My family is gone, all dead or I don't know if some are alive. Is only God who knows what I will become in future? <u>I have no sense or plan for the future</u>.

- Gloomy views about life and own experiences

Down in the mouth

-No future visions available

*What is the essence of life without your family. I have no idea of their whereabout. It has been a life of struggle, pain and sorrow without the protection and support of your family. <u>Am now stuck here at the refugee camp living by the day without any means of improving my life. With the way am struggle i do not see any hope of the future, am just here so whatever comes my way i will take it.</u>

-Disruptions of future aspirations due to hardships

Down in the mouth

-No future visions available

*What wicked and unfair world. I have to <u>experience all this horror at a tender age and now i can see any hope towards the future</u>. Where is the support coming from. My family is gone and here struggling at the camp. <u>Growing up in Liberia my dream was to become a medical doctor but now all i see is doom and gloom over my life</u>. I hate to admit it but that is the reality. I do not see my life or situation changing in the near future.

-Disruptions of future aspirations due to hardships

Down in the mouth

-Pessimistic look about future

-No future visions available

-Gloomy views of life and own experiences