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Narratives of agency and capability from two adolescent girls in post-conflict Liberia

Elizabeth J. Levey, MD^{a,b,c,*}, Lance D. Laird, ThD^d, Anne E. Becker, MD, PhD, MPH^{a,b,e}, Benjamin L. Harris, MD^f, G. Gondah Lekpeh, MD^f, Claire E. Oppenheim, MPH^g, David C. Henderson, MD^{d,g}, and Christina P.C. Borba, PhD, MPH^{d,g}

^aThe Chester M. Pierce, MD Division of Global Psychiatry, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA 02114, USA

^bDepartment of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA 02115, USA

^cDepartment of Psychiatry, University of Illinois College of Medicine, Chicago, IL 60612, USA

^dDepartment of Psychiatry, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, MA 02118, USA

^eHarvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA 02115, USA

^fA.M. Dogliotti College of Medicine, University of Liberia, Monrovia, Liberia

^gDepartment of Psychiatry, Boston Medical Center, Boston, MA 02118, USA

Abstract

Between 1989 and 2003, Liberia experienced a brutal civil war characterized by ethnic killings, sexual violence and the use of child soldiers. Five years after the war ended, half the population of Liberia was under 18 years old. Understanding the needs of these youth is thus essential to the recovery of the nation. This study focuses on the narratives of two female adolescents, selected from 75 in-depth individual interviews with post-conflict Liberian youth conducted in 2012. A narrative analysis approach was employed to examine each interview for multiple layers of meaning. The aim of the study was to elucidate factors that may enable post-conflict youth to reclaim a sense of agency and return to normal developmental tasks. The study explores the ways in which these youth navigate complicated power dynamics in the post-conflict setting and how gender impacts their experiences of their own agency and capability. The dynamics between the participants and the interviewer are explored to further illustrate how power dynamics manifest.

*Corresponding Author: Elizabeth J. Levey. elevey@partners.org, Address: 151 Merrimac St, 4th, Floor, Boston, MA 02114, USA, Telephone: (617) 419-0178.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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These narratives support the involvement of youth in projects that help others as an avenue for promoting agency and resilience for themselves.

Keywords

Agency; capability; Liberia; post-conflict; youth

INTRODUCTION

In the post-conflict setting, societies struggle to re-establish order while at the same time responding to the health consequences of the trauma experienced by their populations. In addition to medical issues, these consequences include mental health and psychosocial problems, which can disrupt child development (Boothby, Strang, & Wessels, 2006; Boyden, 2000; Stichick, 2001; Tol, Reis, Susanty, & de Jong, 2010). In order to resume their normal developmental trajectories, children need a subjective sense of wellbeing and safety and absence of unmanageable stress (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Betancourt et al., 2011; Cortes & Buchanan, 2007; Werner, 1989).

Researchers have demonstrated that collective trauma, the shared history of violence and fear in post-conflict societies, is influenced by social memory (Hinton & Hinton, 2015; Kevers, Rober, Derluyn, & De Haene, 2016). What people remember about an experience is impacted by the social narrative, which continues to develop after the violent events have concluded (Kevers et al., 2016). The social narrative is both explicit and implicit, including what is unspoken. The meaning of an event and its traumatic impact thus continues to be elaborated as memories of it are re-worked in a social context. Studies of the children of Holocaust survivors have shown that children can suffer the effects of a trauma without experiencing it directly (Hinton & Hinton, 2015; Zilberfein, 1995). Thus, in addition to their own memories of the conflict, children in post-conflict societies absorb and fashion an evolving narrative as they grow up (Hinton & Hinton, 2015).

A few studies have examined protective factors supporting resilience specifically in children in post-conflict settings. Individual factors linked to resilience include agency, meaning-making, self-esteem, self-acceptance, empathy, affect regulation, hope, spirituality, and morality (Betancourt et al., 2011; Cortes & Buchanan, 2007; Ebina & Yamazaki, 2008). Social contextual factors include family unity, good parenting, and community cohesion (Betancourt et al., 2011).

Between 1989 and 2003, Liberia experienced a brutal civil war characterized by ethnic killings, sexual violence and the use of child soldiers. Over the span of fewer than two decades of civil war and political unrest, the gross domestic product fell by 91% (Radelet, 2007). Infrastructure was destroyed, schools and other public and private institutions closed, and trust was eroded between neighbors, many of whom found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict (Pruthi, 2011). Thus in post-conflict Liberia, resources are scarce while need is ubiquitous.

Five years after the war ended, 50% of the Liberian population was under the age of 18 (LISGIS, 2009). There were an estimated 340,000 orphans in Liberia, or 18% of the total child population of the country (LISGIS, 2009). During the war, 80% of schools closed (UNICEF, 2015). From 2008–2012, the primary school attendance rate was only 32% for boys and 28% for girls; the secondary school attendance rate was 14% for both (UNICEF, 2015). In 2016, 60% of children enrolled in secondary school were attending private school (World Bank, 2017b).

Commissioned by the Ministry of Health in 2009, the Liberia Needs Assessment Survey sought to characterize and quantify the mental health burden of the war using a mixed methods approach (Borba et al., 2016; Levey et al., 2013). Key informants, including parents, teachers, healthcare providers, and other community leaders, were asked to describe the most emotionally disturbing events or experiences to have affected young Liberians; they suggested that needs included professional mental health services for some children, as well as greater community support (Levey et al., 2013).

After identifying significant concerns for children in the key informant assessment, the investigators designed a qualitative study consisting of in-depth interviews with Liberian youth to learn about their experiences during and after the conflict and assess protective factors. In a previous analysis of these interview data, a number of individual characteristics were found to be associated with better psychosocial functioning and greater self-narrative coherence in the overall study population, including agency, emotion regulation, cognitive flexibility, meaning-making, and social intelligence (Levey et al., 2016). Agency was essential to the development of the other factors. Early caregiving relationships were also found to be protective; the loss of a primary caregiver had a significant impact on social and emotional health (Levey, Oppenheim, Lange, Plasky, Harris, Lekpeh, et al., 2017). In the Liberian context, youth demonstrated agency by working for change and taking action rather than becoming passive and viewing themselves as victims (Levey et al., 2016).

Amartya Sen has used the concept of a person's "capability" to refer to the freedom to achieve a set of functions the person has "reason to value" (Sen, 1992). This includes functions that directly enhance the person's own wellbeing as well as those that do not but that the person nonetheless values because they impact the wellbeing of others or contribute to the greater good of society. Agency refers to the person's subjective sense that she can control her own actions and shape her experience in the world and the actions she takes to realize this (Sen, 1992, 1999).

In the context of the "entrenched deprivation" of extreme poverty and lack of opportunity, capabilities are limited by contextual factors outside of the individual's control (Sen, 1992). This relates to Paul Farmer's characterization of structural violence, which limits the individual's freedom to achieve functions she has reason to value by exposing her to context-specific risks to her health and safety (Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac, & Keshavjee, 2006; Panter-Brick, 2014). For example, she cannot get an education or help others in her community to pursue theirs if she is in bed suffering from malaria, which only limits her because she happens to live in an area where malaria has not been eradicated. Facing multiple daily threats to their health and safety, many individuals lose motivation to pursue

functions they have reason to value given what seem to be insurmountable obstacles (Sen, 1992).

How an individual relates to her capabilities and their limitations is informed by cultural norms and values around power, which are shaped in important ways by war and the post-conflict recovery process. During war, dominant power is associated with the ability to fight and kill. In the post-conflict setting, those who were involved in fighting and killing experience vulnerability and stigma (Tripp, 2015). Individuals need the capability to successfully compete for scarce resources, but demonstrating too much physical or economic power evokes suspicion (Moran, 2010). War leaves the impression that power is a zero-sum game, and therefore one person's capabilities threaten to limit another's.

Boys and girls experienced the war differently, and gender relations in Liberia changed during and after the war. Historically, women in sub-Saharan Africa rarely assumed roles with political, economic and social power and did so without the prestige given to male roles (Alpers, 1984; Greene, 2013). During the war, men were forced to fight or flee, and many were killed in either case. As a result, women became the heads of the household and the primary breadwinners in many families (Tripp, 2015). This new experience of their own power, as well as visible societal changes like the election of a female president, have given women a greater sense that they have a voice in the post-war democracy (Tripp, 2015). At the same time, old attitudes persist, and genderbased violence has continued post-conflict (Abramowitz & Moran, 2012; Fleshman, 2010).

The goal of the present study is to examine two narratives to gain a deeper understanding of how girls develop resilience in post-conflict Liberia, with a particular focus on the expression of capability and vulnerability. Examining the stories of these post-conflict youth will inform our understanding of how caring for and being cared for by others impact their ability to resume normal developmental tasks, create meaning, and work to develop a coherent self narrative (Riessman, 2012).

METHODS

Participants and Procedures

The methods for this study have been described in detail in a previous publication (Levey et al., 2016). Briefly, 75 adolescents (38 girls, 37 boys) ages 13–18 were recruited from schools and community centers in Monrovia, Liberia. Thirty-four were recruited from public school, 11 from private school, and 30 were recruited with help from community leaders in places where youth gather. The schools were identified with the help of the Ministry of Education and were selected to represent distinct geographic areas around Monrovia. In-depth interviewing was chosen as the data collection method in order to best capture the personal narratives of individual youth (Hennink, 2011). Participants were asked to talk about school, family, peers, war experiences, other frightening experiences, experiences with substance use, and future plans. The interview guide was revised after each interview to refine and deepen the questions. Interviews were conducted by the principal investigator together with a Liberian medical student, who acted as both a linguistic and cultural interpreter. Interviews were digitally recorded, and notes were taken by the interviewers

regarding participants' affect and non-verbal communication during the interview. The interviews were transcribed by Liberians living in the United States. Oversight, guidance and approval were provided by the University of Liberia Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Partners Healthcare IRB.

The two interviews that are the subject of this manuscript were selected from the sample of 75 interviews. These interviews were chosen because the participants had experiences of loss and separation from family during and after the war that were representative of the overall data set. However, they were unique in the extent to which they demonstrated a sense of agency by planning for the future and expressing confidence in their ability to carry out their plans. As will be described in greater detail below, these participants presented themselves as having something to offer to their community, their nation, and, implicitly, to the interviewer. This contrasted with most other interviews, in which the participants focused on their own immediate needs and their wish to be taken care of, often explicitly, by the interviewer (Levey et al., 2016). This was reflected in the thematic coding, where these two interviews were coded for agency more than any other interviews, and among female participants, they were coded most for other-focused thinking and behavior.

Analysis

Narrative analysis was employed to examine each interview for multiple layers of meaning (Riessman, 1993, 2012). The audio recordings were reviewed, and the transcripts were verified. Portions of the interviews that illustrated the findings of the study were identified. These sections were divided into functional elements and annotated with comments about pauses, emphasis and tone (Riessman, 1993). Each excerpt was analyzed in the context of the whole interview. The two interviews were then compared in their descriptions of receiving and providing care as well as experiences of capability and vulnerability.

FINDINGS

Description of interviewer and participants

The first author and primary interviewer is a Caucasian, female child and adolescent psychiatrist from the United States. At the time the interviews were conducted, she was a psychiatry resident. While she had previous experience working in West Africa, these interviews were conducted during her first visit to Liberia. The level of need she observed was intense and at times overwhelming. For this reason, she was struck by the two interviews detailed in this manuscript because the expression of need was more nuanced and the requests of her were subtler.

The two female students, Angelica and Tracy (their names have been changed to protect confidentiality), whose interviews are the focus of this manuscript, were both recruited from a private senior high school. In their cases, the other children in their families also attended private school. However, when families could not afford to send all of their children to private school, they would often choose their daughters, whom they felt needed protection and were at greater risk of becoming pregnant or harmed in some way in the government schools (Levey et al., 2016). For this reason, the private school had more female than male

students. Among this group, these two girls stood out for their confidence, activism, future planning and reflective capacity. Both girls describe their concern for vulnerable groups in their communities, which seems rooted in their sense of relative privilege.

Angelica is an 18-year-old girl in the twelfth grade. She was born in a rural area in the interior of the country. When she was seven months old, her parents, who could not afford to care for the children they already had, gave her up for adoption to a single woman living in Monrovia. The woman has never married and has no biological children but has adopted seven children; Angelica is the fifth. Her adoptive mother works for a large international organization and is based abroad. She comes home about twice each year. Angelica lives with her grandmother, her uncle, and her two younger siblings. Her biological family lives in the interior of the country. On certain occasions when her mother is home, she has invited them to visit. Angelica also has periodic contact with them that she does not share with her adoptive mother because she does not want her to be hurt or angry. Angelica refers to a neighbor who works as a nurse as her “play mother.” She is the person in whom Angelica confides. When she was in the tenth grade, Angelica started an organization to do outreach to individuals in her community who are relatively less fortunate, particularly adolescent mothers. Angelica is polite and soft-spoken. She laughs demurely but conveys a quiet determination.

Tracy is an 18-year-old girl in the tenth grade. She has four older brothers. She is her mother’s youngest child and only daughter. Shortly after she was born, her father began a relationship with his second wife. Initially, they all lived together, but later her father and stepmother moved into a separate house. They have three children together. Tracy’s father runs a successful business. His wives and children help with the business, and he pays for their education. Several years ago, a financial disagreement between her parents turned violent. Her father struck her mother on the head with a metal rod, and her mother has had persistent headaches ever since. Her father also has health problems. He has had multiple abdominal surgeries, and Tracy and her siblings worry about whether he will live long enough for all of them to complete their education. During the war, Tracy’s brothers were taken from their home and forced to fight; they all survived and returned home after the war. Tracy wants to become a medical doctor because she is concerned that Liberian children are dying and there are not enough physicians to meet the need in the country. Tracy speaks loudly and emphatically. She conveys confidence. While she speaks in a serious tone, she has a keen sense of humor and knows when she will get a laugh from her listener.

Angelica’s story

Angelica speaks about the difficulties faced by other girls in her community. She describes her desire to help and the limitations she faces in doing so:

I am a young person who have the dream
of helping those that are in need.
And in doing that
I don’t have the hand to do it myself.

So what I started doing,
from my tenth grade time,
I decided to establish an organization
and this organization is intended
to talk to those less fortunate Liberians.
For example, teenage mothers
who felt that they have born [children],
and they have no importance in society.
This organization is called [name redacted].
The meaning of [name redacted]
is “distinguished individuals”.
So with that I have tried,
in my weak way,
but because of lack of resources,
so I am finding it difficult.
But what I have started doing
was that to go into
the various communities
and ask who are those
that are going to schools?
And I went to those people
that are in need[...]
For me,
I have the opportunity
and I need them to have the opportunity like me.
So the only thing I can do
is to encourage them to know
that their voices can be heard out there
and they can go and ask for help.
They should not feel ashamed
that they are not used to society.

Here Angelica is saying that she wants to help girls who have not had the opportunities she has had; they are “not used to society.” The phrase “not used to” appeared in multiple interviews. Participants used it to mean feeling unfamiliar and uncomfortable, as well as excluded and left out, as if to say that it is also society that is not used to and cannot incorporate them (Levey, Oppenheim, Lange, Plasky, Harris, Kekulah, et al., 2017). She is demonstrating both that she has the capability to help and that her capabilities are limited (“in my weak way”). She also makes an indirect appeal to the interviewer for help (“because of lack of resources, so I am finding it difficult”).

Angelica explains how her mother inspired her to care for others. She feels an obligation to take care of them because she is one of them. To assuage her guilt about being chosen while they were left behind, she “need[s] them to have the opportunity” that she has. Angelica’s mother adopted her as an infant. For several years, her adoptive mother has spent most of her time working abroad, returning home for a few weeks each year. Taking care of other people, as her mother does, is a way that Angelica identifies with her mother and thereby maintains a feeling of closeness during these long separations:

What inspired me was that
 when I was growing up,
 my mother is a very good lady.
 She really does not have it,
 but the little she have,
 she loves to help people,
 and I used to admire
 the way people appreciate her
 when she does good[...]
 Because I was so active
 and the people saw
 how much interest I had
 in the organization,
 so they made me the head of
 [another] school.
 I used to talk to those
 big big women,
 and they admire me.
 You know,
 they say I am small,

but I talk sense into them.

Angelica “admire[s] the way people appreciate her [mother]” for the work she does, and others admire Angelica for her own work. Angelica identifies with her mother, “a very good lady” in order to feel capable and respected by “big big women.” Culturally, size connotes power and importance. Angelica expresses concern about others whose voices are not being heard, and because she tells us “I am small,” we can infer that she also worries about her own voice being heard. She tries to ensure this by being like her mother, who has a strong and respected voice. Staying close to her mother in this way helps Angelica to manage her sense of distance from her mother, whom she needs to help her navigate the world of big people.

In addition to all of the challenges they are facing in their society and their families, these girls are also trying to make sense of confusing and isolating feelings within themselves. They are trying to understand what these feelings mean about who they are and what they should do with their lives. Angelica wants to be an adult in order to be taken seriously and feel powerful. She has to reconcile herself to the limitations of still being a young person herself:

So what I decided,
frankly, when I was coming up,
I decided to become a nurse,
but later when I reached
the senior high class, 10th grade,
I decided to become a journalist.
But I was suffering from indecision
because I wanted to do sociology.
I wanted to-
wanted to work with children
and young people,
but I was advised
that you can do one.
At least if I do journalism, you focus on one,
and don't be all over.
Then you can start from there.
But since I noticed that
I couldn't help people
because I do not have the resources.

So what I decided to do was to work with young people
in my community.
Like for the youth in my community,
all the voluntary jobs,
I am there
because I told them
I prefer working for free
and feel pleased than working for money, and I am not pleased,
and others are not helped.
So I volunteer in my community,
and we clean up,
and I lobby around
to get myself involved
with so many organizations.

Because she is “small,” Angelica “do[es] not have the resources.” However, she is uncertain about how to become big. She suggests that she needs to focus and choose a path, but she remains undecided between multiple options: nursing, journalism, and sociology. She also feels compelled “to get [her]self involved with so many organizations.” She senses that her innate capabilities are limited by contextual factors, and she is anxious about this, which makes it difficult for her to choose a path.

Angelica believes that the best way to help others is through education, enabling people to help themselves. In this way, she is attempting to connect with the interviewer, whom she knows to be a physician with many years of education. While she does not directly say this, it also corresponds with her own experience of needing to take care of herself when, for example, her mother is away and she has conflict with her uncle and grandmother. It is as though she is trying to prepare the people she helps for this reality in life:

I have a saying that says,
‘A successful man is a man
who give someone a future.’
That’s how I feel
that if you give someone a future,
you have done
the greatest thing for them.
I also have a belief

that if you are my friend
and I come to you
and you give me thirty or twenty-five dollars
and you say that
you are helping me,
you are not helping me,
but if you can educate me,
then you are helping me,
and that will be one of the greatest help
that you have given me.
Because it will never leave me
until I die,
and it will help
my generation to come.
Those are my beliefs.
And because of that
my grandmother is always scared for me
and says that I love to go around big people,
acting like big woman.
But my uncle told her
that it is good for me,
that I should continue it
but she shouldn't disturb me
to tell me not to do it.
So, when my uncle talk to her,
she decided to leave me.
She only encourages me now
that when I go on the field
to talk to people or go for programs,
I shouldn't come late.

Angelica's uncle and her grandmother disagree about how children grow up and how to balance risk and caution. Angelica says that she "love[s] to go around big people," meaning

that she takes risks by interacting with capable people in order to increase her own capability. Her uncle supports her, but her grandmother thinks it is too dangerous. In this vignette, she suggests that the conflict has been resolved, but it resurfaces later.

Angelica tries to avoid conflict and competition between her caregivers. She explains that she has minimal contact with her biological parents because she does not want to hurt her adoptive mother's feelings, and when she does talk to her biological parents, she does not tell her adoptive mother:

I can feel shame to go to [my biological parents]

because I don't want

for my mother to feel bad

that I am going around them.

So once in a while

I communicate with them

I don't make my mother to know.

I don't want her to feel funny

that I want to go away from her[...]

I talk to them,

and I also told them

that I will not like for them

to be coming around fast.

My mother came,

I think it was two years now she came,

and she brought food,

and everybody was happy to see her

and she went back.

So maybe the next time she comes back

everybody will be happy

because I will be graduating.

So my grandmother told me

that she will call them

for the graduation,

and until present

I am still thinking

how I will give my speech.
Because I have to appreciate everybody
and I don't want my mother to feel bad
so I am still thinking
how I will give my speech
and how I will appreciate them.

Angelica idealizes her mother and the work that she does, and she hides her relationship with her biological family because she worries that it will damage her relationship with her mother, which further distances her from both. Angelica feels alone with her struggles. When her needs are unmet, she does not feel that she can ask for help. This happens at school when she takes difficult courses and feels intimidated:

I used to feel that these people are all,
let's say bigger than me
because I know they will bluff
and do other things
so I used to be myself
because it's not up to them,
and I can't go around them.
So I used to be thinking
about how I can put myself together.
I used to be afraid of some of the teachers.
because one of the instructors
he was teaching a very hard course.
And that course
we don't really do well in it.
But that man,
when he enters class,
he does not laugh...
Even if I have not seen the man enter class,
my heart will get caught,
and I will be disturbed that whole time.
and to that extent,
I will not make good grades in his lesson.

Angelica wants to be a big person. When big people are impressed with her and encourage her, she feels she is on her way to becoming big herself. But when big people “bluff,” puff themselves up, and look down on her menacingly with their bigness, she feels small and vulnerable. She wants to “put [her]self together,” feel big, and present herself as a big person, but when she feels small and weak, her dreams of being big are threatened.

Angelica struggles with conflicting loyalty between her adoptive and biological families, and she also experiences conflict within her adoptive family. When she goes out at night, her grandmother gets angry. Sometimes her uncle supports her, but other times he punishes her. He informs her mother, who sides with him. Angelica explains, “she can believe it because she’s not here.” She feels misunderstood by her family. At the same time, she separates herself from her peers. She does not identify with them but sees them as in need of her help:

I learned that young people
make themselves vulnerable
to so many things
for little of nothing.
Young people get into prostitution
at the end of the day;
they will not get anything from there.
Young people drink alcohol
and it’s not good.
I have tasted it to know.
I drink it sometimes,
but whenever I drink it,
I will get weak in my body.
I normally listen
to Mary Lauren Brown program
because I love to listen to radio.
So it was once
when they were teaching about alcohol,
what it do to people,
and I decided to take it in
to know what it would do to me too.
So, they said when you drink alcohol
it will hard for you to think well.

You will be a person
with high temper.
Because it will disturb you.
It will not put you together well.
And at the end of the day
if you drink it excessively,
you might become impotent.
And it's a whole lot of things.
So I decided to take it
to get to know.
So, over the time,
the time I took it in for
whenever I drink it,
I will get weak.
Not that I will not be able to walk,
I will be walking,
I will do my normal thing,
but the way I can normally feel
in my body,
I will not feel like that.
Even if it comes
for me to compose
it will take time
before my mind is relax.
So I decide to do it
because I want experience.
At the end of the day,
I am going to talk it
to another person
and if it's not true,
I will look ugly to the person.
So when I am talking

it should be the fact
since I am going out there
to young people
to talk to them,
those things are going to be involved.
So I should tell them
the aim and objectives of alcohol.

Angelica tries drinking alcohol, something many adolescents do to feel big. She discovers, however, that “it will not put you together well.” It does not make her feel big and in control but rather more vulnerable. She describes herself as a kind of cultural observer studying the behavior of adolescents. In order to advise others about alcohol use, Angelica explains that she “decided to take it in to know what it would do to [her] too.” In this way, Angelica identifies with the interviewer, a researcher, a big person, rather than an irresponsible adolescent..

Angelica tells an inconsistent story about the war. She remembers hearing gunshots and worrying that she was going to die, but then she also says that the war did not affect her. Angelica explains that she was frightened, but her mother told her that the first war was worse. Then Angelica seems to decide that what she experienced was not so bad, as though she cannot have a different experience from her mother:

It was very very much tough
because it was my first time
to see dead body.
It was my first time
to hear gun shots.
We witnessed the show,
that’s one thing to be fun
but to hear the real one,
ah, I was confused.
And I always used to feel scary
because I have never experienced that.
And my mother told me say,
she said, ‘You see nothing,
because if you were living in 1990,
you would know that was the real one.’

Because it was all over,
and we are lucky.
God bless us that
where we were,
on the old road,
and the war never affected us.
But, the army people,
you could see them passing,
and, you know,
these things used to get me afraid.

Angelica presents a narrative of being unaffected by the war but also reports that she was afraid for her life. These stories contradict each other, suggesting that, as she says, Angelica is “confused” about her war experience, which was colored by her mother’s assertions that the war was “nothing” punctuated by her own experience of moments of terror. Whether she acknowledges feeling scared and alone or tries to deny her experience and becomes confused, she is left feeling small and vulnerable.

After emphasizing independence, at the end of the interview, Angelica talks about the woman on whom she depends. When Angelica wants to confide in someone, she goes to a woman in the community whom she calls her “play mother,” meaning that she is like a mother to her. This protects her relationship with her mother from any anger or frustration that she is not there. Angelica does not need her because she has her play mother:

I have my play mother
because my grandmother is a Congo woman [known for being tough].
And for her
the way my play mother
can sit and talk with me about issues,
she won’t do that.
She will say “that friskiness”
so I decided to get close [to my play mother].
I normally love to get around older people
to get the experience,
to get more information.
My play mother is a nurse
and I go to her every day.

I will open all her nursing books.
I will be asking her
so that I can know some things.
I could be of help to someone just in case someone is in need,
could get first aid
until we can reach to the hospital.
She's the one I'm close to,
very close to.

In describing her relationship with her play mother, Angelica departs from her narrative of independence, from which she derives her sense of capability. At the end of the interview, she returns to this narrative and reasserts her independence by describing her process for making decisions. She will make up her own mind and then elicit feedback from others:

One thing God has done for me
I have always been a person
that can analyze things.
When I have a problem,
I will look at the good side and the bad side.
I first make my decision
and then I go out there
and ask people,
if they in their shoes,
how will they respond to it.
I don't ask just one person.
And I will ask two or three persons
what are their decisions.
Any one they say
will be all right.
I try to go by it
and make my own decisions.

It is important to Angelica to feel autonomous and not be overly influenced by others, which would threaten her agency. She seeks input from multiple sources in a way that allows her to feel more independent from each source. At home, Angelica often feels that her preferences are not respected and her actions are not understood. Thus, she is attempting to demonstrate to the interviewer and to herself that she is indeed a thoughtful, logical person who makes

good decisions. She wants a big person, the interviewer, to recognize her as becoming big herself, capable of helping those who are smaller.

Tracy's story

Tracy's narrative also highlights capability and vulnerability. Rather than locating capability in autonomy, she focuses on what she needs from others and how it impacts her capability and agency. She points out instances of injustice, both at school and in her family. In this way, she defends her agency from those who would try to limit it. Even if she is not successful in the instances she describes, relating these vignettes in the interview is an attempt to reclaim her agency. At school, teachers want students to pay for their grades. They give Tracy a lower grade than she has earned, and they give other students higher grades than they earn if they pay the teachers:

We try our best to study hard
to make our grades,
but when we make our grades,
they find means of taking money from us.
It will not be like--
the principal is not in favor of it,
but they find means of taking money for it.
They don't know,
[they say] we are not studying;
we are studying!
But I can't study and make 70
and someone who doesn't study make—
he give them 80!
And I see on my card
that I have 70.
Why I supposed to have 70
and give my friend 80,
when she don't study?
I know that she make 60,
and I make 80.
Whenever I see stuff like that,
is not that,
I will ask the teacher,

and he will just say,
'let bygones be bygones,'
but it's not fair.

The idea of "letting bygones be bygones" is one that Tracy returns to a number of times throughout the interview, at school and at home. As this teacher uses it, it is an excuse for doing what he wants. The teacher implies that Tracy's concerns are unimportant. He does not defend his behavior, but he dismisses her objections. She counters by saying that her experience matters, and she should not have to tolerate unfair treatment.

Tracy is also concerned about the suffering of those around her. She believes that others are not going into the medical field at a time when Liberians are facing so many health threats and the need for medical care is increasing. She wants to become a doctor in order to care for ill children and save their lives. She presents herself as different from many of her peers who prefer to work in business, while at the same time saying that she is like the interviewer:

I want to be a doctor.
I want to be a doctor
for society,
and I pray
God will give me
the strength and the courage.
The reason I want to do that,
let's see,
most of our people are dying
and you find out
people are not going to that side [medical field].
Most people,
they all want to go
to the accounting side,
to be a banker,
to do business management.
People are escaping from that.
So I want to do that
to save our young children from dying.
Most people are not doing that,

the doctor cause,
to take care of people.
Most people are not there.
So that's why.

Tracy presents the situation in grave terms: "[people] are dying too much." Others just take care of themselves, letting bygones be bygones and going into banking; Tracy is going to do something about it. She explains that there are three different pediatric wards in the hospital, which are given the nicknames of different countries. There is "Iraq... where the children die," "China," where they are also very ill and some die, and "America," where "they will be healthy." She wants to work in "China" because that is where she believes she can have the greatest impact:

Young children dying of sickness.
Nowadays we are not safe,
people are getting sickness.
So many sickness in the air
that you are creating,
people create for themselves.
People die,
the air quality is disgusting.
Everything is not fine.
We are getting sick, and we are dying.
Even now,
I will go to [the hospital]. My brother just,
He just be there.
They got the Iraq,
they got the China,
and they got America,
And they got London.
The Iraq is where the children die.
You see the children dead of bones,
skeletons.
You see the children cry.
If you go to China,

you see the children—
 You see young babies are dying.
 They don't even record the deaths because they are dying too much.
 You feel sorry for them
 because they don't have much people to take care of them.
 You see most people dying[...]
 If given the chance,
 I will like to work [in] China[...]
 China is where
 you are from Iraq
 and you are getting better,
 so I bring you to China.
 From China,
 I bring you to America.
 After that,
 I discharge you to go home...
 if I will be with
 the ones who are too much sick,
 I will feel for them.
 I won't like to watch them die.
 I will pity them,
 so I don't want to be with them.
 Either I will cry for them
 or have pity for them.
 So I will just have to be in China.

Tracy wants to maximize her capabilities by placing herself in the right context. This is one way that she manages the tension between taking care of herself and serving others. The interviewer asks Tracy about the origin of the names for the various units in the hospital, and she explains that she heard them used in the hospital when she was there as a visitor:

Actually,
 I went there
 and make my own interview
 because my brother's wife

just had a baby.
They discharged her yesterday.
She came home.
Two months baby.
I went to visit, started going around.
When I saw Iraq
I feel bad.
I started crying.
My brother's wife said,
"Why you cry?"
I said,
"Because babies are dying."
They come around with boxes
and asking if there are none dead.
They will pick up
the dead body
and carry it.
So when I ask my brother,
"What do you call that?"
he told me
that place is Iraq,
that's China,
and this is America,
and that's London.

Tracy says that she made her "own interview," emphasizing the word "own," with reference to her being interviewed for this study. In this way, Tracy identifies with the interviewer, an adult, who is powerful and a healer. She is telling the interviewer that they are alike. Tracy does not simply say that she wants to become a physician; she is also saying that she knows what she has to do in order to become a physician, and she is doing it.

Tracy returns to the idea of "letting bygones be bygones" when she tells the story of her father invoking it against her mother when her father's friend tried to cheat her mother in business.

Tracy struggles with how to view the situation:

My mother is not well
She having a headache
Because she had a quarrel
with my father
and he hit her
with an iron on her head.
So she's always sick
and her eyes get red[...]
He did it out of anger
And he regretted later.
I ask my mother
and she said it was about goods
that were belonging to my mother,
and my father's friend said
the goods were his.
So my father said
'Let bygones be bygones,'
and my mother said,
'I can't accept this.
This is disadvantage for me.'
So my father said,
'I said, "let bygones be bygones."
You are arguing with me.'
My mother said, 'No.'
Regardless,
It hurt her a lot.
If someone wants to take your property,
you can't just say,
okay, you can have it.
She was hurt by it.
So father got pissed off
because it was his friend.

Then they started to fight,
and then he took the iron
and knocked it on my mom[...]
He was not wrong,
but on the others side
we see that man was taking advantage
of my mother.
Even now, we don't allow this.
Even when this man say,
'Let bygones be bygones,'
you see that on the other side
he is taking advantage of you because you know that
he and your husband
are best friends
and want to take advantage of you[...]
So for her husband to say,
'Let bygones be bygones,'
it will hurt you.
Even though you will forget.
But it will hurt you.
He will always want to do it.
And then say,
'Let bygones be bygones.'
He will always like to do it, over and over.

Tracy presents two competing perspectives on the conflict between her parents: her father's view of "letting bygones be bygones" and her mother's view that he was allowing his friend to "take advantage." She repeats these perspectives several times as she tells the story. Tracy will not go so far as to take a stand against her father, the man, and the one who had more power in the situation, both financially and physically, but it is clear where her sympathy lies. While she says that her father "was not wrong," Tracy agrees that her mother was being taken advantage of and was right to stand up for herself. Otherwise her father's friend would have continued to take advantage of her, "over and over." Her mother had to fight in the face of vulnerability, or her capability to take care of herself would have been further diminished. Tracy takes her mother's side, but she also "lets bygones be bygones" in order to maintain her relationship with him.

Tracy speaks openly about her needs from both of her parents. She and her siblings depend on her father financially, and this makes her worry that she will not be able to complete her education if he dies:

He say that we should pray
that [he] stay alive
taking care of our fees
because 'I don't know how long
God may carry me.'
My father is old,
And most people,
Nowadays,
Don't reach seventy.
So he may have the fate,
Or he may not have the fate. He says,
'I may not be strong enough
to take care of your fees.'
My father has taken
several operations on his stomach.
But he stays strong.
He is just praying
that he is alive and strong
to help us with our school fees.

Tracy presents her father as vulnerable, and therefore her financial dependency makes her vulnerable as well. Tracy has four brothers; she is the only girl in her family. She views this as an added vulnerability for her financial future, which is understandable, given the price her mother paid for being financially dependent on her father. She has to be prepared to take care of herself:

As a girl child
you need to be strong
and also business-minded.
You should know some business
that will bring some money.
Even if it will not be sufficient,

at least bring some money,
and then maybe
you can get help with the rest.

Tracy returns multiple times to the idea of finding balance between helping others and taking care of herself. Earlier she said that she wants to become a doctor in order to take care of people because children are dying while most of her fellow students choose to study business instead of medicine. When she says here that she needs to be “business-minded,” she is speaking to the other side, the need to take care of herself.

The issue of finding balance also applies to power. Some power is needed in order to take care of oneself and do good in the world, but seeking political power leads to greater vulnerability and can even decrease capability. Tracy is therefore cautious about power. She will run for student council, but she prefers to be the secretary rather than the president because the president attracts a lot of jealousy, and he is scapegoated for problems he does not cause:

If you are a president
it involves a lot of things.
Some may say you are of good
and some may say you are good
because you are doing the right things.
Some may say you pick and choose.
So you hear a lot
of words from people.
So you have to have high morals
and a patient mind.
If you don't have patience
you will lose your temper on them.
Somebody will get you talking
Because they feel you are nothing
but rather a student like themselves.
You are not their parent.
You are not their instructor.
They will say you are not the president
of this school.
You can't suspend them.

So you can do nothing.

Tracy offers further examples of the stress her brother experienced when he ran for political office, as well as the stress she believes President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf experienced. She saw the President at the market. People were calling her names and carrying signs with derogatory messages: “When she saw it, she got back in her car and left. She was dry; she reduced [lost weight] because there were so many worries.” With this story, Tracy demonstrates how power can make someone a target.

When asked to describe herself, Tracy shares a personal experience that forces her to decide how much to conform and how much to fight for her right to be uniquely herself. Tracy believes that she should have been a boy but that because her mother had four sons and desperately wanted a daughter, she prayed for Tracy to be a girl, and so she was. Inside, however, she has always felt like a boy. She used to dress like a boy, and she was aggressive in standing up for herself, sometimes getting into physical fights with boys. Recently, though, Tracy has decided that she should act more like a girl. She describes this as a kind of growing up process. Acting like a boy and fighting was fun when she was a child, but becoming an adult means adhering more closely to gender norms. In this way, Tracy talks about how she manages the tension between what she wants and what is expected of her:

My friends say

I love to act like a man.

Before I never used to dress like woman.

I used to wear my tshirt

and my trouser.

I never used to wear earrings

and did everything

like a boy child

and was too hard headed.

My mom tells me that

I am changing now

and resisting the man behavior.

I used to play ball

because I acted like a man

but I am not a man

so I stop.

I feel I supposed to be man

and not a woman

but my mom cry too much

for a girl child.
When she tells me the story I laugh.
She said that she went to hospital
and told the doctor
to abort the pregnancy
because she thought it was another boy.
My father told the doctor
to give her sleeping tablets
and the doctor gave it to her.
So when she realized
the pregnancy was too big
and when she give birth
I was born as a girl
and it was a very big celebration
in our community
My friends say that I am too rough.
I can fight with men as well
because I am strong.
I can challenge men
and we fight
and argue and talk
all the street talks.
Sometimes they are shock
and they are like it
this woman talking like this?
I talk the same way they talk
and shake myself the same way
and we will turn any way they want[...]
I will have to take care of my children
and my husband.
If I behave that way to my husband
he will leave me

because he will feel
 that I am standing out to him.
 He may leave me
 and find another woman
 so I will be the loser
 and the victim of the whole thing
 so I need to act responsible
 and to be able to take care
 of my home in the future.
 [My parents] say I am changing,
 and I say life is stages
 so people change.

Here Tracy considers different ways of taking care of herself. There is taking care of herself in the sense of doing what she wants to do (“act like a man”) and in the sense of meeting her responsibilities (“I need to act responsible to be able to take care of my home”). Being a man in Liberia means having more power and greater capability to take care of oneself, but she realizes that acting like a man does not make her a man and may in fact make her more vulnerable. She worries about a future husband leaving her, the way her father left her mother, and being “the loser and the victim.” Tracy’s mother stood up for herself, but Tracy wonders whether this is a risk she can afford to take, or whether it is better to “let bygones be bygones.” She says this all very matter-of-factly, “life is stages so people change,” in a way that belies the sense of loss she likely feels at having to give up this part of herself.

When she is mistreated by her stepmother, who favors her own daughter over Tracy, she is again confronted with the dilemma of whether to address the problem and risk angering her stepmother or to let bygones be bygones. After struggling with this for a long time, Tracy eventually shares it with her father:

The reason I left [my father’s house]
 is because [my stepmother] was always
 in fear of her daughter.
 Whenever her daughter did something,
 she will always back her daughter,
 and make me to be
 the victim in the case.
 If I ask her for money to buy soup,
 she will give me five dollar

and when her daughter asks,
 she will give her fifteen dollars.
 When the school having a program,
 they say we should buy books,
 she will buy for her daughter
 and not buy for me,
 and when I ask her
 how does her daughter
 have the books,
 she will say that she doesn't know where she got it from.
 I was fed up
 and I had to express my feelings to her.
 I told my father,
 and he said why I did not tell him
 all these were happening,
 and I told him I don't love to bring problems
 between people.
 Because if I lodge my complaint to you,
 she will say
 I'm trying to bring problems between you and her.
 I will not be
 the kind of person
 to bring problems between you[...]

"Bringing problems" suggests not "letting bygones be bygones." In this way, Tracy is caught between identifying with her father, who wanted to let bygones be bygones, and bringing problems, as her mother did, which led her to suffer at her father's hands. She feels secure in the knowledge that she has her mother's support, which makes it easier for her to acknowledge her vulnerability:

There is no one like my mother.
 You can't say,
 someone will love me
 past my mother.
 When I was with my stepmother

my mom used to send me soup
and buy me books,
cream and everything that I wanted.
So I felt it was better
to go and work for my mother
instead of being here
so that's how I decided
and went back to mother.

During the war, Tracy's family experienced many awful things, including the kidnapping of her brothers by rebel forces, but Tracy felt protected by her mother, who seemed to know how to handle things. The safety of her mother's protection made it possible for her to recognize the vulnerability she felt:

We still have some [bullet holes] from
the war in our house.
During the war,
the rebels came to take things from the shop
and my mom said, "No."
My mom is a very brave woman,
and she told them that
they didn't have anything
in the shop to take.
My brother was fighting
during the war as well[...]
All of my brothers
were taken to go and fight, but thank God
all of them came back safely[...]
[My brothers] said it was very terrible,
and even if they said it wasn't terrible,
I would know they were lying
because I knew what I went through[...]
One woman we knew,
her brother had [fire]arm and protected us.
The war was tough,

but we had food
 because my mom is someone that knows
 how to keep things so we used to find food
 and eat whether it's sweet or not
 we didn't care but just ate[...]

During war,
 you don't close the house
 you just leave everything open, and
 when the rebels come they spoil everything.

They will come
 and start to shoot
 so you will be afraid to even go
 and open the door for them
 before you get shot,
 so it's like lucky ticket [unpredictable].

Tracy speaks directly about difficult experiences, for example, acknowledging that the war was “terrible.” Tracy says, “My mom is a very brave woman,” who “knows how to keep things” and provide food, and explains how she protected her family from soldiers.

Overall, Tracy experiences herself as having the capability to take care of herself. When she faces a conflict between standing up for justice and doing what is most pragmatic, she considers how to maintain her capability to take care of herself and others. Acknowledging vulnerability can be a way to get help when needed and can protect capability

DISCUSSION

In the stories narrated in these two interviews, the participants present themselves as agents acting on behalf of other Liberians facing more precarious circumstances. Angelica is trying to help adolescent mothers complete their education; Tracy wants to become a doctor to save children from dying. Their capabilities are limited because they live in Liberia, one of the five poorest countries in the world (World Bank, 2017a), and at the same time they are relatively privileged locally within their Liberian communities and capable of things others are not. They convey this sense of capability and vulnerability throughout their interviews.

In this post-conflict nation, people are trying to make sense of traumatic experiences. Many other children portrayed themselves as victims, not working or going to school or trying to make connections but passively waiting for “a helping hand,” someone who would appear and give them money and take care of them (Levey et al., 2016). In contrast, these girls stood out for how they presented themselves to the interviewer. They did not directly ask for

help for themselves; instead they described their efforts to help others. Angelica talks about becoming big, which means that she wants to feel like she is not in the dependent position but rather that others depend on her. Tracy explains that others tell her to “let bygones be bygones,” which conflicts with her desire to articulate her own internal sense of justice, both in her family when she feels mistreated by her stepmother and in the classroom when teachers ask for bribes.

This unique way of presenting themselves serves multiple functions. Each is engaged in a delicate dance of demonstrating her capabilities, pointing out their limitations, which leave her vulnerable to direct obstacles, conflicts around dependency and others’ expectations, and aligning herself with the interviewer to indicate that she should be seen as an ally and not a threat. As Tracy explains, being identified as a leader, whether president of the country or the student council, can make you vulnerable to scrutiny and attack. The challenges they face parallel those faced by Liberian society in securing peace. Allowing international peacekeepers to replace the military, the fledgling democracy must demonstrate that it is strong enough to protect the people from another coup without consolidating power in a way that would threaten the democratic process (Moran, 2010; Paris & Sisk, 2009).

While there are key differences between Angelica and Tracy, both have important capabilities and convey a sense of their own agency. In comparison to the United States and other Western countries, Liberia is a more sociocentric society (Aronsson & Andersson, 1996; Okeke, Draguns, Sheku, & Allen, 1999). In more individualistic societies, youth often express agency by rebelling against social norms and refusing to conform to others’ expectations (Frank, 2006; Jenkins, 2001). By taking care of others, Angelica and Tracy are demonstrating their agency in an acceptable way, while addressing their social obligation to help others who seem to lack agency.

The two girls differ in how they manage feelings of vulnerability. Angelica tells stories of circumstances in which she felt vulnerable, including when she was punished by her caregivers and when she felt afraid during the war. These stories are kept separate; she shares them only when asked specifically about her home life and about what happened during the war. In contrast, Tracy speaks directly about the tension between her sense of capability and vulnerability, including conflicts within her family and inferior treatment by her stepmother.

Angelica and Tracy also manage their dependency needs differently. Both girls come from families with multiple mothers; Angelica has her biological mother, her adoptive mother, her grandmother, and her “play mother,” and Tracy has her mother and her stepmother. Angelica does not mention her play mother until the end of the interview when asked who she will talk to if she has a problem. In this way, she preserves her independence, which is the basis for her sense of agency. In contrast, Tracy describes her relationship with her mother as constant and stable. The fact that she can depend on her is a source of strength for Tracy. It leaves her vulnerable but also enhances her capabilities.

Additionally, the girls experience limits to their capability to define themselves from the pressure of others’ expectations. Angelica handles the problem of expectations by trying to

conform to them. Her path to helping others comes directly from her identification with her mother: “What inspired me was that, when I was growing up, my mother was a very good lady.” Angelica needs to reassure herself about her connection to her mother because of the reality that she rarely sees her.

Tracy describes a more active process of deciding whom to be. With four older brothers, she saw the things to which her brothers were exposed, like being conscripted as child soldiers, but she was shielded from them to a degree. This made her aware of the dangers around her but left her lacking the capabilities to address them. She felt like a boy when she was a child, which gave her a sense of empowerment. As an adult, she feels she must give this up and conform to stereotypical gender roles. Interestingly, though, she wants to become a doctor, rather than a nurse, the more stereotypically female medical role in Liberia. This may be a way for her to retain some of the maleness she experienced as a child, and the capabilities associated with it, in a society with significant gender inequality (CEDAW, 2014; Fleshman, 2010).

Both girls attempt to connect themselves to the interviewer, whom they observe to be a young, female physician from the United States. She has come to interview them about their experiences, to give them a voice, and, implicitly, to help them. They respond by relating narratives of how they, too, help others. Angelica explains that the greatest gift you can give to someone is not money but education, something of which the interviewer, a physician, has evidently had a great deal and presumably values. When Tracy explains that she made her “own interview,” she is referencing the interview situation and identifying with the interviewer. By telling the interviewer that she wants to be a doctor to save children’s lives and make them healthy like in “America,” she furthers the identification. They also try to represent themselves to the interviewer as both capable and vulnerable by demonstrating how much they are able to do and the ways in which they are thwarted by lack of resources and unsympathetic authority figures. The implication, never stated directly, is that if the interviewer could give them some resources and help them make their case to parents and teachers who are not listening to them, this would make all the difference.

Youth in the post-conflict setting face many challenges to their sense of agency (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Cortes & Buchanan, 2007; Levey et al., 2016). Developing an integrated sense of identity is an even greater challenge, particularly when agency is threatened by ongoing structural violence. The stories of these two adolescents highlight the importance of maintaining agency and suggest possible pathways for doing so. For Angelica and Tracy, their focus on helping others supports their belief in their own capabilities and allows them to express power in a way they believe will be acceptable in their post-conflict context.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of these narratives offers greater insight into the process of developing and maintaining resilience for young Liberians and the challenging power dynamics they must navigate. While attempting to demonstrate their own capabilities, they must be careful not to evoke jealousy or suspicion, which are easily triggered in the post-conflict setting. These dynamics apply at school and at home, and they were evident in the interviews themselves.

An important way these girls were able to manage this tension was by describing how they used their capabilities to help others.

These narratives suggest that involving youth in projects that help others could be a way of promoting agency and resilience for themselves. Programs in which children in school mentor children who are not in school, or older children mentor younger children, for example, could be a step toward helping those in the greatest need, augmenting agency for those who are providing the help, and rebuilding fractured communities.

Finally, Angelica and Tracy advocate for educational opportunities for girls and women. Having had such opportunities themselves has shaped their own sense of agency and made them advocates for the underserved in their communities. Angelica is particularly interested in helping adolescent mothers resume their education, empowering these women and their children and initiating a positive cycle.

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