

An arts-based approach with youth born of genocidal rape in Rwanda: The river of life as an autobiographical mapping tool

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Abstract

Given the tragedy of war and genocide, words often cannot adequately capture the complexity of war-related experiences. Researchers are increasingly utilizing the arts to enable multiple forms of expression, as well as for its therapeutic and empowering qualities. This paper outlines the use of the “river of life,” an arts-based autobiographical mapping tool, conducted with 60 youth born of rape during the genocide against Tutsi in Rwanda who continue to live with this intergenerational legacy of sexual violence. The article begins with a review of current arts-based methods and their relevance for war-affected populations and an overview of the genocide, sexual violence, and the lived realities of children born of rape. We then outline the “river of life” mapping tool, where participants drew their life histories using the metaphor of a river, addressing the ebbs and flows of their lives and the obstacles and opportunities they encountered. Developed in collaboration with local researchers, participants were invited to share the meaning of their drawing with researchers, explaining key events throughout their life course, utilizing metaphors, and symbolism to convey their experiences. The article highlights how the “the river of life” facilitated key insights into the post-genocide experiences of children born of rape, and the long-term impacts at the family, community and societal levels, and proved to be especially helpful in enabling youth participants to process and communicate their histories of genocide and experiences of stigma and discrimination. The “river of life” was also reported by participants as having unintended positive effects, including closure and clarity in navigating their past and their futures. While not without limitations, we argue that this mapping tool represents an important addition to arts-based methods that can be used with populations who have experienced profound forms of violence and marginalization.

Keywords

arts-based research, Children and Youth, children born of war, sexual violence, genocide, Rwanda

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Introduction

Over the past several decades, the concepts of “truth telling” and disclosure have grown into theoretical and practical pillars of global post-conflict recovery interventions. And yet, there is a growing consensus among social scientists that those who endure violence do not always, only, or consistently view frank dialog, “open talk,” and disclosure about who did what to whom, as desirable (Eramian and Denov, 2018; Shaw, 2005). For researchers exploring contexts of war, genocide, and organized violence, there is the added challenge that words and narrative alone often cannot adequately capture the realities and complexity of conflict-related experiences (Green and Denov, 2018). As such, researchers are increasingly turning to the arts to enable multiple forms of participant expression, as well as for the therapeutic, restorative, and empowering qualities of arts-based techniques (Denov and Shevell, 2019; Leavy, 2020). Scholarship has begun to highlight the psychological benefits of using arts-based approaches within research, such as drawing, photography, or participatory video as they can provide a safer way to access traumatic memory, ultimately helping with traumatic recovery (Gantt and Tinnin, 2009).

This paper examines the use of an arts-based method that we refer to as the “river of life” used with a sample of 60 youth born of rape during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. The river of life (RoL) is an arts-based autobiographical mapping tool where participants can express their life narrative through drawing. The article begins with an overview of arts-based methods deemed successful when conducting research with war and genocide-affected populations. We then provide an overview of the research project led by the first author on children born of genocidal rape in Rwanda and how the research team came to use the “river of life” technique with this population. Following this, we illustrate participants’ perspectives on the challenges and opportunities they reported facing in post-genocide Rwanda through their “river of life” drawings and accompanying explanations of their art work. We highlight the ways in which employing the “river of life” technique helped not only to reveal key marked moments in their lives surrounding truth-telling and stigma, but also enabled participants to have their voices heard and tell their own life story. As an autobiographical mapping tool, the “river of life” ultimately allowed for greater control among participants in determining for themselves not only *what* to include in their life story, but also *how* to tell it through their individual choices of representation, such as metaphors and symbolism. Additionally, according to the youth participants, using the “river of life” resulted in unintended effects, namely in enabling them to assess, and navigate their pasts, as well as contemplate their futures. We argue that the “river of life” technique represents an important addition to the arsenal and toolbox of arts-based methods that can be used with populations who have experienced violence, social exclusion, and marginalization.

A review of arts-based approaches with populations affected by war and genocide

Researchers have continued to highlight the benefits of arts-based research approaches with populations affected by war and genocide – particularly children and youth. D’Amico et al. (2016) observed that arts-based methods have been found to be particularly effective in encouraging meaningful participation in children and youth, while at the same time, offering researchers and practitioners an entry point into gaining insight in relation to understanding the serious issues arising from living within the context of global adversity. War and genocide often lead to displacement and separation from families and community involvement and have a significant effect on children and youth’s developmental trajectory and well-being (Osofsky and Osofsky, 2018). Arts-based methods may allow children to express themselves in a developmentally appropriate, culturally adaptable manner

(Linds et al., in press). Existing research has also highlighted that arts-based methods may allow children and youth to represent their experiences in contexts of embodied empathy, promote activism and empowerment, and for the most part, as a successful intervention for children who may have limited vocabulary to express their feelings (Gangi and Barowsky, 2009; Harris, 2007; Moletsane et al., 2007). Arts-based approaches have the added value that they are participatory and less-directive—allowing greater ownership and control in the hands of participants (Bolton et al., 2001). They also can facilitate non-structured activity for the authentic expression of what is important and private to participants (Heath et al., 2009: 127). Jackson (2015) highlights the ways in which arts-based methods can open a back door to the inner self, bringing to light important concerns from individuals, which they cannot put into words. Additionally, these approaches may allow participants to distance themselves from sensitive issues in order to retreat from experiences that are highly personal and sensitive (Denov et al., 2012). It has also been argued that arts-based research with children can help to address power relations and challenge the position of the adult-researcher by providing child-participants with a common tool to access the research project and minimize the adult-researcher's potential "outsider" views (Akesson et al., 2014)

Within the toolbox of arts-based methods, several methods have been identified as particularly appropriate to work and research with marginalized children and youth, especially those affected by armed conflict. These include photovoice, digital story-telling, participatory video, drawing, and Image Theater. Photovoice is a community-based participatory research method that combines photography, community awareness building, group discussions, and social action. By giving cameras to participants, photovoice seeks to enable both individuals and groups, particularly those facing marginalization and disempowerment, to record and reflect on community strengths and challenges, through photography. Photovoice has been used with children and youth affected by war as a way for participants to identify features of their community that are of importance to them along with situations that need to be changed (Denov et al., 2012). Photovoice has been said to empower marginalized youth and "groups of people who do not normally get to speak" (Mitchell, 2011: 51) and "has been documented as a powerful tool to engage communities to enable a deeper understanding of the lives of marginalized youth" (Burke, 2008, as cited in D'Amico et al., 2016: 531).

Children and youth have increasingly available multimedia tools and a wide array of social network platforms, which can provide them opportunities to share their stories by using their own voices through digital storytelling. Digital storytelling is a "workshop-based process by which 'ordinary people' create their own short autobiographical films that can be streamed on the Web or broadcast on television" (Burgess, 2006: 207). This method draws on image editing software to merge digitized still photographs and narrative to create short, evocative, and informative multimedia pieces. This method merges video, photessays, and photovoice, digital storytelling, with the goal of generating intellectual engagement that is creative, socially oriented, and pedagogical (D'Amico et al., 2016: 537).

Participatory video is a group-based activity that develops participants' abilities by involving them in using video equipment creatively, to record themselves and the world around them, and to produce their own videos (Shaw and Robertson, 1997). Participatory video offers novel ways of collecting data, enabling new forms of analysis, presentation, and publication (Evans and Foster, 2009). The method has emerged as a key tool in putting together process and product in ways that provide avenues for marginalized communities to participate both in forms of critical self-analysis and ways of self-representation.

Additionally, various researchers have made use of live performance. Creative activities, such as drama, allow participants to transform themselves and represent others through role-play, movement, and storytelling (Moneta and Rousseau, 2008). Drama provides an innovative outlet to play with different identities while enacting stories, images, and emotions (Akesson et al., 2014). In

Image Theater, participants use their bodies as a visual language to convey their lived experience (Linds and Vettrano, 2008). One technique involves an individual telling a story as others silently use their bodies to visually represent a significant moment in the story. D'Amico et al. (2016) observe that the image or "tableau" can then be handled in different ways: fast-forwarding to the future or rewinding to events in the past, enabling a "manipulation" of time and space. The use of drama and Image Theater are regarded as effective tools for discovering shared symbolic systems and understandings (Veale, 2005). Moreover, drama transcripts are well suited to various forms of qualitative analysis such as thematic and discourse analysis (Veale, 2005).

Finally, other tools that are "low tech" such as drawing have been used with children and youth affected by armed conflict in order to better understand their experiences and the way that they see and understand the world (Green and Denov, 2018). As a form of knowledge production and sharing, visual images through drawing can sometimes be more accessible and powerful than academic text. Drawings require participants to reflect, contemplate, and conceptualize their responses to research inquiries. Drawings can also be used as an icebreaker allowing young people to provide information about significant experiences (Veale, 2005). Researchers and participants collaborate to analyze and make meaning from their drawings. As D'Amico et al. (2016) argue, such visual tools create an environment where children and youth may be more at ease, and therefore, may feel more capable of expressing themselves freely, and do not feel as much at risk of giving a "wrong" answer as they may experience in interviews. Additionally, drawings yield both visual and verbal data as participants provide interpretation to their works of art (Marsh et al., 2006; Rudenberg et al., 2001).

Researchers have also used "tree of life" drawings as a collective narrative mapping tool to help outline refugee youth and families' life histories or life narratives (Denborough, 2008; Hughes, 2014; Jacobs, 2018; Ncube, 2006). Initially developed through a partnership between Ncube-Mlilo and Denborough (Dulwich Centre Foundation), the tree of life has been flagged as a particularly advantageous strength-based approach in working with vulnerable youth in cross-cultural contexts. Through the "tree of life," participants identify what make them stronger by drawing their "roots" (e.g. their past, where they come from), their core or their trunk (e.g. skills, knowledge, abilities), their "branches" (e.g. extensions of their future selves and hopes for the future), their "leaves" (e.g. people of importance) and any kind of "fruits" (e.g. sources of support) (Jacobs, 2018). Combined as a group, these "trees" create a "forest" of empowering collective narratives of strengths and protective capacities. This approach was developed in an effort to adapt traditional mental health interventions to be better suited to contexts where a history of psychotherapy does not exist and biomedical "mental illness" is not a part of the cultural repertoire (Hughes, 2014).

While the promotion of arts-based approaches and active child participation in research are important, there have, nonetheless, been criticisms of such approaches becoming tokenistic and lacking meaningful or authentic representation. For example, researchers have underscored the potential limitations of promoting children's "voices," particularly in ignoring the impact of existing power imbalances that might be present in the research context and/or social setting, and how these might shape and constrain children's voices and active participation, especially in research settings (Spyrou, 2011). There is a need to reflect more critically on the role of the researcher in the process (James, 2007), as well as consider the ways in which child participation and children's voices may be constrained by norms and assumptions within their interactional context (Komulainen, 2007; Lee, 2001).

In addition to ensuring a critical reflexive approach, arts-based approaches must reflect local cultural practices, be meaningful for participants, and developed to meet the unique socio-historical context in which participants live. Scholars have highlighted the need for the contextualization of research methodologies in order to be relevant, appropriate, and to provide a more nuanced

understanding of the topic under study (Rousseau and Fried, 2001; Tsui, 2004). Rousseau and Fried (2001) argue that contextualization is especially important when working with marginalized populations, as their voices and perspectives have historically been excluded. Similarly, conducting cross-cultural research demands an approach that is context and culture-specific, tailoring methods to best fit with the population under study in order to honor their distinct cultural and contextual values and beliefs. Failure to do so runs the risk of “methodological ethnocentricity” whereby research studies may be premised on invalid and inappropriate assumptions and approaches (Skaff et al., 2002). These realities point to the importance of developing methodological tools that are grounded in the culture and context of research participants. In addition, the above-noted review of different arts-based methodologies suggests viable alternatives to the traditional interview research method, which privileges norms and practices of the Global North. The review also demonstrates how different art forms can be especially useful when managing the complexities inherent to conducting research with populations affected by war and genocide.

In this paper, we highlight the use of an arts-based approach with a group of youth born of genocidal rape in the aftermath of Rwanda’s Genocide against Tutsi. Merging drawing, and the tree of life approach, as well as relying upon our local research team to ensure its relevance to the context of Rwanda, our team employed the “river of life” – an arts-based autobiographical mapping tool – to explore the perspectives and experiences of this under-studied population of youth. Below, we first introduce this unique population of conflict-affected youth in the context of post-genocide Rwanda. We then discuss how our arts-based approach was developed, followed by the myriad of themes that emerged during data collection with youth participants. We conclude with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the “river of life” as an arts-based approach.

Children Born of Genocidal Rape in Rwanda

In a 100-day period, between April and July 1994, an estimated 500,000–800,000 Tutsi civilians and Tutsi sympathizers were massacred in Rwanda. In part attributed to its long and complex colonial history and radical polarization of power between traditional ethnic groups with their own long political history, Hutu military and civilian leaders incited the Hutu majority to eliminate its Tutsi population (Mamdani, 2001). As an integral and systemic component of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, an estimated 350,000 women and girls were raped or gang-raped, subjected to sexual mutilation and torture, or taken as sex slaves by the *Interahamwe* (Hutu militia) (Sharlach, 2000). While Tutsi women were the primary target for sexual violence, Hutu women who were married to Tutsi men or those who protected Tutsis were also targeted for rape and assault (Nowrojee, 1996). Hutu media outlets broadcasted hate propaganda before and during the genocide, heightening ethnic tensions by demonizing Tutsi women and propagating the belief that their sexuality was being used as a tool to infiltrate and control others, ultimately inciting attacks against them (Nowrojee, 1996). This propaganda was further reinforced by the colonial context, whereby Tutsi women were disproportionately favored and selected as wives by Europeans, fostering a deeply-rooted jealousy, and conspiracy that Tutsi women were sexually dangerous in “conquering Rwanda” (Williamson Sinalo, 2018: 92; Nowrojee, 1996: 17). Rape and gang rape of Tutsi women and girls often occurred in public spaces with the intended aim of degrading and humiliating Tutsi women in front of family and community members (Hamel, 2016).

While the number of children born of genocidal rape is impossible to assess, estimates range from 10,000 to 25,000 children (Hogwood et al., 2018; Zraly et al., 2013). Serving as potent reminders of their perpetrator fathers to their families and communities, these children report facing highly stigmatizing conditions and endure turbulent quests in navigating their identities (Denov et al., 2017; Denov and Kahn, 2019; Denov et al., 2020; Kahn and Denov, 2019). While the topic

has become increasingly documented, gaps in knowledge remain on the lived realities of these children (Carpenter, 2010; Mochmann, 2017). Furthermore, the voices and perspectives of the children themselves are often excluded from research and policy discussion. Given the sensitivity of the topic, research methodologies must be relevant, appropriate, and sensitive to contextual factors in order to minimize potential harm. Additionally, as a result of the general exclusion of their perspectives, it is imperative that research methods highlight the perspectives of children and youth born of conflict-related sexual violence.

Culture and context: Using the river of life with youth born of genocidal rape in Rwanda

Led by Denov, this qualitative research project has explored the lived realities of children born of conflict-related sexual violence and mothers in three countries: Uganda, Rwanda, and Cambodia. The Rwandan portion of the study received ethical approval from the Rwandan National Ethics Committee, and the Research Ethics Board of McGill University, Canada. The ethical implications of this research were considerable and required constant care, attention, and mitigation. Participants were being asked to share potentially traumatic events that could evoke varying levels of distress, and those who were still suffering from the trauma of armed conflict and/or difficult family histories may experience anxiety by speaking about it. The potential risks for emotional distress were reviewed with participants as part of the informed consent process prior to their participation. Informed consent and confidentiality were assured. Support structures in the form of referrals to local individuals and organizations were instituted. However, wanting to ensure support beyond standard ethical protocols, our research team instituted monthly group counseling sessions for youth participants following their participation in the study. Led by a local Rwandan psychologist, the group counseling was free of charge, and available to all youth participants for 8 months following data collection.

In Rwanda, qualitative data were collected between June and August 2016 with 60 youth born of genocidal rape. A snowball sampling procedure was used to engage participants through professional networks. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews designed with open-ended questions, and researchers used probing techniques to elicit detailed responses from participants. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Local researchers conducted interviews in Kinyarwanda, while Canadian researchers used English with simultaneous English-Kinyarwanda translation. Team members, who were from different disciplinary approaches – social work, psychology, human rights studies – used ongoing team discussions throughout process to encourage dialog, debate, and drew extensively on the views and perspectives of local youth researchers, an issue addressed further below.

Youth participation in Rwanda

Drawing upon a participatory approach, this research engaged three youth in Rwanda who were born of the genocide as co-researchers. The three youth, aged 23 at the time of data collection, were selected on the basis of their interest in the research and proven skills, and were provided with ongoing research training, support, and mentorship. The project was initially designed to engage youth in research design, and participant and community outreach. However, as the project advanced, the youth researchers expressed a desire to take on more responsibility and research tasks. In response to their engagement, initiative, and budding research skills, the youth researchers were provided with extensive training in data collection, and ultimately conducted interviews and focus groups with their peers. The youth researchers also analyzed data, and have been co-authors

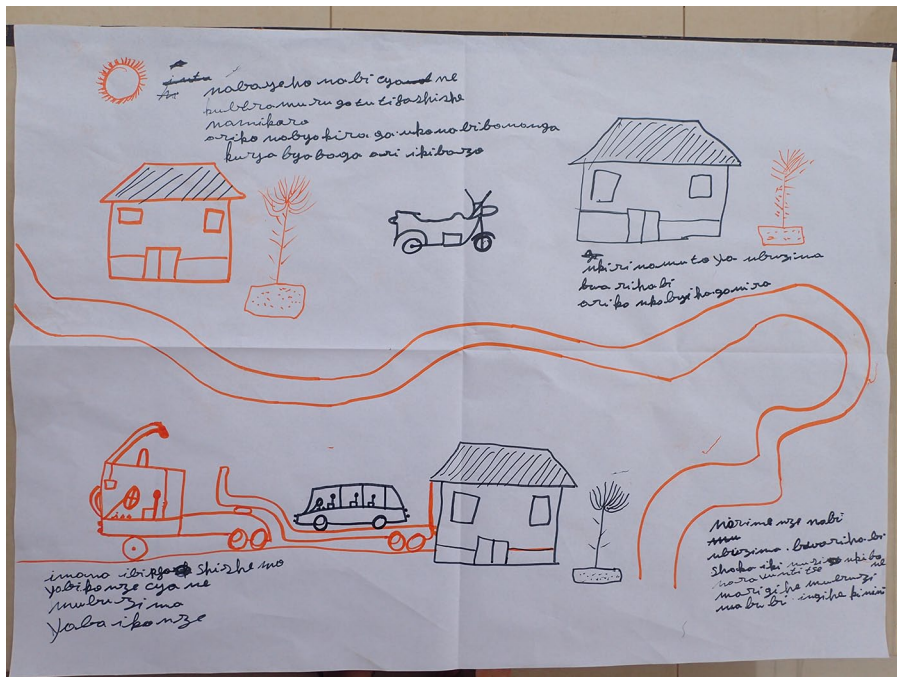


Figure 1. River of Life Drawing #1.

on publications. This approach to youth engagement builds upon previous participatory work (Denov, 2010; Veale et al., 2017), and recognizes young people's rights and capacities to act in competent and thoughtful ways. Inviting individuals born of the genocide to play a leading role in the study not only attempted to enhance the quality of the research, but also sought to be educational and empowering to those involved.

Choosing the “river of life” as an autobiographical mapping tool

Words and narrative alone are often unable to capture the complexities and horror of war and genocide (Denov and Shevell, 2019). This was noted during our initial “testing” of our interview guide, where participants appeared to struggle to find the words to convey their experiences, although what goes unsaid in interviews – in Rwanda and elsewhere – is often just as important as what is vocalized (Burnet, 2012). We therefore sought a method that would allow participants to express themselves in multiple forms, and beyond words (see Figures 1–3).

In each of the three countries that were part of the larger research project, arts-based research tools were designed and developed with local researchers over a period of months, to ensure relevance and appropriateness. For example, in northern Uganda, our research team used drawing and mask-making to elicit understandings of family relations and structures (Green & Denov, 2018). Developed through extensive discussion and planning with local partners in northern Uganda, drawing and mask-making were chosen as methods as they represented culturally appropriate and locally accepted ways of eliciting participants' perspectives on their lives and hopes for the future.

In an effort to share knowledge and lessons learned during the project in northern Uganda, members of the northern Ugandan research team traveled to and participated in the planning and training of local researchers in Rwanda. In discussions with the local research team in Rwanda, our team of

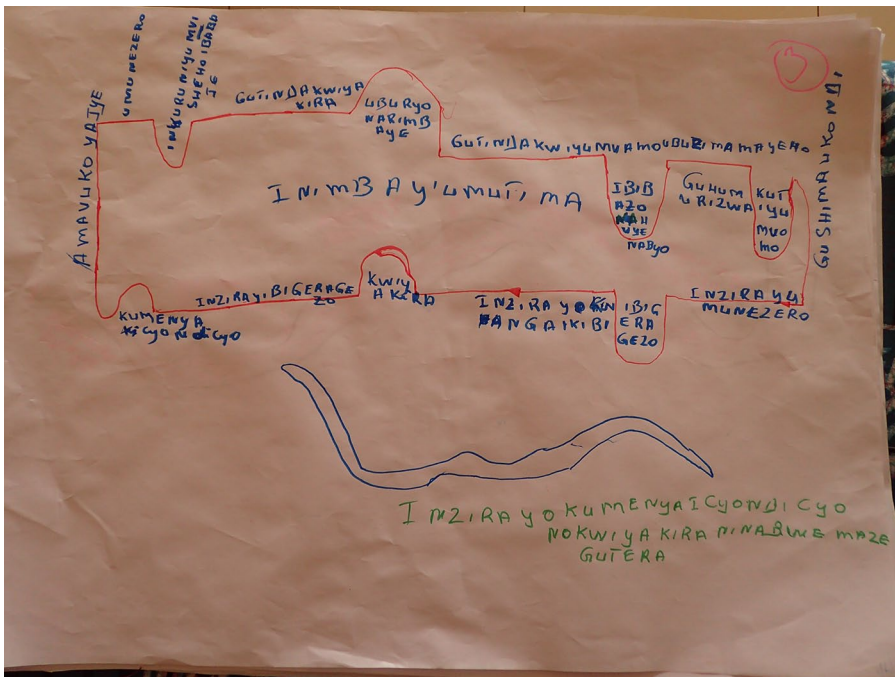


Figure 2. River of Life Drawing #2.

Ugandan researchers suggested that given the success of the mask-making process in eliciting participants' perspectives in northern Uganda, it could perhaps be used in Rwanda. Yet highlighting the importance of culture, context, and historical realities, the youth and adult members of the Rwandan research team were adamant that mask-making would not be appropriate in Rwanda. This was because during the genocide, perpetrators of violence often wore masks to hide their identities. As such, masks would be powerful and painful symbols and reminders of the violent past in Rwanda. The team therefore worked collectively during a series of meetings, discussions and workshops, to come up with artistic and culturally relevant methods that ensured participants' safety and freedom of expression. Many arts-based approaches were proposed and rigorously discussed and debated during these meetings and workshops. The Ugandan members of the research team who had much experience working with war-affected women and children, suggested using the "river of life" technique. In this auto-biographical mapping tool, participants are invited to draw their histories and life courses, using the metaphor of a river, showing the ebbs and flows of their life and any obstacles they faced in their path. Participants are then invited to share the meaning of their "river of life" drawing with researchers, which allows participants to explain key events and realities throughout their life course. After much discussion, dialog and reflection on multiple methods, as well as having Rwandan team members (who themselves were survivors of the genocide) "try out" methods themselves, our local research team in Rwanda, and particularly the Rwandan youth researchers, chose the "river of life" as the most appropriate method. They asserted that a visual representation of life experiences using the metaphor of a river could be a positive and meaningful experience and an accessible activity for the wide range of participant ages and backgrounds.

Participants were invited to draw a "river" of their life-course using pens and markers on a blank sheet of paper. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their past, and envision their future using

the metaphor of a river. Participants decided what to draw according to their own criteria and based upon what they felt would be important to share with the researchers. Drawings were made individually but participants worked in a shared space to create their “river of life.” After the drawings were completed, participants were invited to explain their river of life to the researcher during private interview discussions. Participants’ verbal explanations of their “river of life” were recorded with permission, and included in the overall qualitative data analysis. A grounded theory approach to data analysis was employed, whereby through careful reading and coding of transcripts, the researchers identified key themes that emerged from the data (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

River of life drawings: Marked moments and key themes

Participants’ “river of life” (ROL) drawings revealed marked moments that appeared to prompt a turning point in their lives. Furthermore, participants’ explanations of their drawings also highlighted key themes, and the significance of symbolism and metaphors in illustrating their lives. For participants, pivotal moments centered around learning the truth about their birth origins, as well as instances of rejection, stigma, discrimination, and abuse. ROL drawings highlighted the considerable challenges that participants faced as a group, and how these challenges impacted their identities and life trajectories. However, through their drawings, youth also demonstrated striking levels of capacity, strength, and hope for the future. These themes are further elaborated upon below.

Quests for “truth”: Discovery and acceptance

Seeking and discovering the “truth” about their birth origins has been found to be critical in the lives of children born of conflict-related sexual violence (Denov et al., 2017). Quests for the truth regarding their birth origins was reported by participants as a particularly trying process. This process typically unfolded with (a) initial experiences of confusion, void, and deception, (b) the moment of learning their true identities (either unwittingly or as a result of a deliberate pursuit for answers, and finally (c) challenges with reconciling and accepting what they had learned about their origins. Leading up to the moment of discovery, several youth recounted the pain and suffering they experienced while yearning for the truth about their birth origins. For many, seeking the truth came at a time where participants became conscious of the absence of a father in their lives:

“After I was three years old I started to be curious and I started to ask [my mother] what happened to my father. Where is my father? Is he still alive? Every time I tried to ask her, she didn’t respond. . . . Instead I could tell that she felt more pain because I asked her about the life of my father.” (Male participant)

The moment of discovering the “truth” about their birth origins was reported as a major turning point in the lives of participants. Notably, nearly all river of life drawings included a visual representation of the moment in which participants learned “their story,” particularly in relation to the circumstances of their conception during the genocide. The following quote captures learning the truth as a defining moment in their lives:

“Here I want to show my life before I knew my story. This point means when I learned my history from my mother, the way in which I was born. Here, I want to show how my life changed a lot and how I decided to accept my story and move forward. My drawing shows also how I felt sad to know how Rwandese women were raped during genocide. I was also sad to know that I don’t have the same father as my siblings.” (Female participant)

While a majority of participants initially described this process as a painful discovery, as it was often riddled with experiences of stigma, shame, and distrust, many expressed how this was pivotal in making meaning of their lives and instrumental in putting together the pieces of their identities. During interview discussions explaining their ROL drawings, youth participants elaborated on this marked moment, explaining the way in which they learned the truth, including who told them, the context, and their reactions:

“Here, is when I was called “interahamwe” by a child who was my neighbour. Here, I asked my mother: ‘What does that mean?’ and she cried and did not tell me anything and left. And until now she avoided telling me the truth but she knows that I know how I was born through other people.” (Female participant)

“Here, I was born and I did not have any problems. I grew and I was happy in my family. I was going to school but when I was in [grade 5] I started asking about my father because people were talking about him, saying he was a killer during genocide and he was in prison. . . . But my mother was not telling me the truth.” (Male participant)

Several participants underscored the importance of knowing the truth, even if it was accompanied by immediate negative implications. While initial reactions were typically characterized by sadness and shame, obtaining the truth about themselves reportedly allowed youth to piece together their life narratives and identities, ultimately leading toward hope and personal growth:

“And here when I reached the [grade 3] I started asking where my father was, but I did not get an answer. My sister told me the truth, then I was sad, it is why the line here is descending. And here, my mother told me in detail about my story and you see the line I drew, goes high because at least I knew the whole truth from my mother. Here, the drawing shows where I am now. I accepted myself and I have hope that my life will be better.” (Male participant)

Another participant explained how finally obtaining the information about her origins allowed her to determine how to adapt accordingly, recalibrate, and return to “normal”:

“When I was between seven and eleven years, I was in primary school and I had so many problems in my mind. Other children were talking about their fathers, but me I did not have one. I was asking my mom and she couldn’t even tell me the name of my father. When I reached secondary school, she took her time, we sat together and she explained to me in details what happened. Then I decided to accept it. This is why I feel my life is like normal.” (Female participant)

While some participants grew to accept their histories and birth origins, others recounted painful experiences of a lack of acceptance – with many experiencing a combination of both. The following quote from a participant’s explanation of their ROL drawings reveals a long winding road to acceptance:

“There is a place where [I’ve drawn] a dashed line. It’s the time when my mother told me the whole truth about what happened to her and this changed and affected me mentally. After I heard her story, I was too sad to understand and accept it, but I finally made the decision to comfort her and be honest with her in our daily life together.” (Male participant)

Rejection, stigma, and discrimination

Participants illustrated in their ROL drawings, and in the ensuing discussion with the interviewer, multiple instances of stigma and discrimination within the family and extended family, within their community, and among their peers. Such rejection and discrimination have been highlighted by Hilker (2012) in relation to “Hutsi” – Rwandans of mixed Hutu-Tutsi heritage. However, the

discrimination, demeaning insults, and other forms of harassment commonly reported by our youth participants, were directly related to being a child of a rapist and a “*génocidaire*”:

“My aunties from the side of my mom were harassing me saying that I am born from “interahamwe” and that I will be a useless person. . .” (Female participant)

“Here the part that hurts me the most is being called a son of a killer. . .” (Male participant)

Within the family, several youth described experiencing differential treatment between themselves as children born of genocidal rape and their siblings who were not born of rape. This form of familial discrimination took a number of different forms, including participants reporting excessive housework and other laborious activities, as well as the withholding of school fees, as compared to their siblings not born of rape:

“. . .It continued in the downward direction, which means another challenge of a bad situation I’ve faced. . .The husband of my mom came back from where he had gone to hide his life during the genocide, that was a bad life I had with him. . . Stigmatizing me, beating me. . .by that man. . .The river continues in an up and down direction, meaning the life I’ve been trying to know the reason why am not treated like others [my siblings] and in general like other children.” (Male participant)

Furthermore, multiple river of life drawings recounted experiences of rejection and expulsion, both from family traditions, as well as forceful eviction from the family dwelling itself:

“I was born in 1995 in a very hard situation. I was living with my mother and my aunt, but later my aunt [evicted] us. . .they were saying that she gave birth to a child from “interahamwe” and she had been told to abort [me] and she refused. They were experiencing trauma due to what happened to them during the genocide.” (Male participant)

Familial traditions surrounding heritage and inheritance were a particularly poignant source of stress for participants. In ROL drawings, exclusion from family inheritance was a prominent theme among participants:

“So, I got a portion of land which belonged to [my mother]. But members of family were not happy saying that I am a bastard I can’t get the land, and life was too difficult due to those conflicts.” (Male participant)

The rejection, stigma, and discrimination reportedly left participants with prolonged periods of sadness, isolation, confusion, and shame:

I’m not proud of any piece of [my life] because there is nothing good and charming about it. It’s only filled with anger moments, hunger-stricken times and individual questions that I still have no answers for. . . As a child, I had no happiness at all because I was told that I was born of genocidal rape and the anonymous father figure I would grow up looking up to and be proud of, was a criminal, a perpetrator, a rapist during 1994 genocide against Tutsi. It’s a shame, a pain that still lingers in my mind, I always walk with it and it’s hard to shake it off. (Male participant)

Additionally, a number of youth described severe challenges focusing on school and their studies as a result of the stigma and rejection they faced:

“Here I want to show how my performance at school was poor due to difficulties I was facing. And here I was sick.” (Male participant)

Sources of strength and support

In juxtaposition to the many obstacles these youth faced, in the context of their ROL drawings, youth also addressed and illustrated key sources of strength and support. Multiple youth participants included in their drawing the moments in which they began opening up and sharing their story with other youth born of the genocide, which reportedly helped to counter painful feelings of isolation, offering a rich source of empathy, understanding, and companionship:

“What makes me happy is meeting people [in this research project] that have the same questions as me, we share ideas. Seeing my country developing also makes me happy, so my life is mixed between sadness and happiness” (Male participant)

Furthermore, participation in the research study and in focus group discussions with other youth and the local researchers reportedly enabled participants to foster a network of support:

“When I met [local researcher], she counselled me and it helped me a lot. Then my sadness started decreasing. . . The good thing is that when we had conversation with [researcher] it was comforting because in my mind I thought I have another parent who is taking care of me.” (Female participant)

“Here is when I started enjoying life with others at school and other youth in this project.” (Female participant)

In outlining the moments of improvement and progress in their rivers of life, several youth described their mothers as a significant source of support. One eloquently described their mother as playing the role of both their mother and father in the father’s absence:

“I had friends that were coming to visit me and they were asking me why I never call him dad and I told them that I can’t have two dads, my mother is at the same time my father and my mother.” (Female participant)

However, mothers’ ability to provide support to their child was often compromised by their own challenges and trauma related to their experiences of the genocide and sexual violence. Participants explained the importance of their mothers first needing to get support themselves, before having the strength to lift their children up and support them:

“Here, my mom got a counsellor who helped her and she, in turn helped me as well. . .” (Female participant)

Others referred to other key sources of support within their extended family, explaining how they were instrumental in fostering acceptance:

“Here I went to live with my uncle and continued to study. Here I was morally helped a lot by my uncle and his wife. They used to always talk with me. They were open with me. Till now, I feel good with them, I no longer have headaches.” (Male participant)

Youth participants demonstrated a tremendous amount of self-confidence in bettering their lives and hopefulness for the future. This was evidenced in the positive mapping of their futures on their rivers, which was visually represented as improving or “going upwards.”

“The lines drawing my river started from a down to up direction. That means from God’s favor I have grown from the bad situation that I have been born in.” (Male participant)

Educational achievements served as a potent source of self-mastery, pride, and accomplishment. This was especially so in cases in which youth persevered following extensive failure and defeat within the school environment:

“Normally my studies were not going on well. . . I failed again my O-level high school national examination. After this bad moment I never gave up, but I tried to work hard again and finally I got success and I performed well in my senior (6) national examination. God’s miracle. . . I was offered a scholarship by the government to study at the University of Rwanda.” (Male participant)

School and the importance of education represented a clear theme across youth participants’ ROL drawings and subsequent explanations. Pells et al. (2014) highlight that the Rwandan government’s commitment to rapid reconstruction and development, such as universal access to education, has resulted in promising developments for young people, and has generated high aspirations for the future. Reflecting this, nearly all youth drawings included schooling as key markers, such as educational achievements (e.g. returning to school, passing exams, reaching a particular grade level) and points of interruption in schooling (e.g. lacking school fees, periods of illness, poverty, discouragement). The prevalence of school as key markers in participants’ ROL drawings reveal education as an opportunity for engendering hope, pride, confidence, and self-empowerment:

But God did a miracle and my uncle whom we didn’t anticipate came and paid for my school fees and finally I did finish my high school and I had a wonderful graduation with my beloved mother who was present that day; she was happy and proud. (Male participant)

Metaphors and symbolism: Mountains and valleys

Beyond enabling participants to determine their own expressive preferences, using the river of life tool appeared to enable greater agency among participants to decide how to portray themselves, convey their experiences and illustrate their life histories. Participants were not given any specific instructions on how to draw their lives, but rather were free to use their own schemas to determine for themselves how to illustrate their experiences and represent their lives. The result was a wide range of visual representations, although there were some consistencies across participants. A majority of youth participants employed potent metaphors and symbolism throughout their drawings to represent the challenges and opportunities they faced in their rivers of life.

One of the most prevailing metaphors across rivers of life drawings were the use of “mountains” and other environmental obstacles to represent the challenging periods in their life. Here, mountains reportedly symbolized a trying upward climb, with several participants using the steepness to indicate the severity of their situation:

“Here the reason why I drew it as a mountain it is because it is hard for me to go to school. You can find that I can spend like two weeks at home while others have gone to school because of lack of materials. And in this semester, I spent a month not going to school.” (Female participant)

Participants also used the orientation of their river’s line to indicate when life improved and when it declined, or when they felt they stumbled and fell into a valley. Symbols were often used to reflect the “ups and downs” of life:

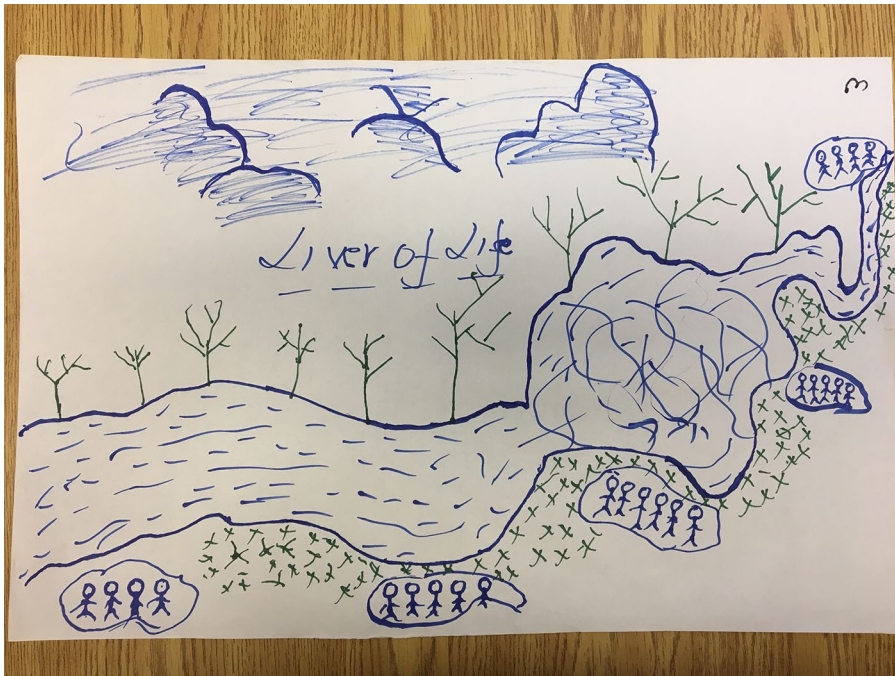


Figure 3. River of Life Drawing #3.

“And here, I started my secondary school and I could see how life was difficult at home. This is why you see that my line goes down. Here, my line goes up now, I accepted myself and I have hope that life can be better.” (Female participant)

Conclusion: The strengths and limitations of the river of life

Through participants’ explanations of their ROL drawings, this paper highlights youth participants’ perspectives on the challenges and opportunities they faced in post-genocide Rwanda. As an autobiographical mapping tool, the “river of life” can serve as a vital non-verbal form of expression that can be adapted to a particular context to complement more traditional research methodologies. In this research project, the ROL helped to answer key research questions surrounding the realities and experiences of youth born of genocidal rape.

Children born of conflict-related sexual violence have expressed a need to speak on their own behalf. As these youth born of genocidal rape in Rwanda asserted: *“We have to stand up and speak up for ourselves”* (Eramian and Denov, 2018: 14). Accordingly, methods must enable participants the freedom and agency to tell their stories in the way that they see fit. The river of life technique, and its open-ended approach, provided a tool for youth to tell their stories and what they shared, in a way that they deemed appropriate. As these youth expressed:

“My drawing shows my life, and nobody else can do it except myself” (Male participant).

“[The river of life] helped to know how I can interpret and express my testimony through drawing. It was good to be able to express my testimony without saying a lot of words by trying to be specific.” (Male participant)

As part of the project, participants were asked to assess the use of the ROL and its strengths and limitations. Using the river of life as a methodological tool in this context reportedly had positive and unintended consequences, namely in providing youth participants a sense of closure but also with goal-setting in paving the way toward their futures. The river of life activity reportedly allowed participants to explore past experiences and their current situation, but it also provided a platform for participants to contemplate their futures. Participants reported that the activity helped them to remember where they came from, in order to visualize where they wanted to go in the future:

“. . . At first I was wondering how is this river of life going to help me remember my past? How will it work out? But after starting drawing my river of life, I started thinking back, I started seeing the past and I didn't know how it worked, but I found myself thinking about the past. I think the river of life just helped me to see. . . . And I think, because whenever you remember where you are coming from, then it's like one of the tools that are going to help you to know where you are going. So, I think that the river of life just helped me to remember who I am, where I am coming from and on top of that know where I really want to go.”
(Male participant)

Using the river of life, participants were not only free to choose *how* to draw their experiences, but also *what* to draw. Participants had the authority to determine what to include and leave out, as well as where to begin and where to end. The river of life allowed for participants to privately and individually construct their life narrative according to their own volition, and use this as the foundation that framed the interview discussion. Not only can the river of life tool be used as a springboard for conducive and open dialog, but it can also help to mitigate the power imbalance between researcher and participant, an ethical dilemma that is inherent in the co-production of knowledge and research process (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009; Packard, 2008).

No methodology is without potential risks or limitations, and the river of life tool is no exception. It is essential that arts-based techniques are tailored and adapted to the culture and context where the research is occurring. Importantly, the surrounding political and unique context within which the violence occurred must also be thoughtfully considered and integrated into the research methodology. Given its success and appreciation by participants who were born of war in northern Uganda, our team initially thought that mask-making would, similarly, be a useful tool in Rwanda. However, our team discovered quite quickly that this was not the case. This highlights the reality that arts-based techniques, including the ROL, cannot necessarily be easily imported from one context and applied to another, but rather demands further contextualization in partnership with local team members. Ultimately, this experience demonstrates the importance of engaging local partners in the research process in order to draw on local knowledge and capacities, and shed light on the nuances within the local context.

A vital component of this study was the unique contributions of the youth researchers. The youth were instrumental in providing guidance regarding relevant research questions, research design, appropriate methods, and approaches to undertake during the course of the research. It was their intervention that ensured that the arts-based approach that our research team eventually took on was relevant to youth born of the genocide, and was appropriate in the post-genocide Rwandan context. Without the important contribution of the youth researchers, the research process could have risked unintended harm. This further speaks to the importance of participatory and arts-based approaches that include local actors and researchers to ensure local understandings are incorporated in the research design, methods, and process in order to maximize impact and relevance.

While the use of the river of life as a data collection tool may – in some instances – not be sufficient on its own or contextually appropriate, we argue that this method can be adapted cautiously and appropriately to be used to supplement and enrich data collected through more traditional means (e.g. interviews, focus groups) to enhance the validity of the research. Furthermore,

providing alternative and varied modes for participants affected by war and genocide to communicate and express themselves and may be relevant for other populations affected by violence, exclusion and marginalization.

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