



From Child to Genocide Perpetrator: Narrative Identity Analysis Among Genocide Prisoners Incarcerated in Muhanga Prison, Rwanda

This article was published in the following Dove Press journal:
Psychology Research and Behavior Management

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Background: This article focuses on the narrative identity of eight convicted genocide perpetrators in Rwanda, who participated in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. Narrative identity is the internalised and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his life. This study focused on the key autobiographical memories, present day experiences and the anticipated future of genocide perpetrators by exploring the self-perception of genocide perpetrators, in the context of their psychosocial rehabilitation.

Methods: The Biographic Narrative Interpretive Methods (BNIM) were used for the collection and analysis of life stories of the eight genocide prisoners in Muhanga Prison.

Results: The narratives of the respondents converged into five main themes: (a) the childhood experience of abandonment, (b) the process of ethnic self-discovery and positioning, (c) the perpetrator narrative, (d) the imprisoned self and (e) the imagined future self. Two main feelings from their narratives were outlined. Those feelings were the feeling of the abandoned and the feeling of the abandoner in the context of making sense and meaning out of their lives. Results revealed that the positioning of genocide perpetrators through their narratives can influence positively or negatively their rehabilitation. What is important in this article is the exploration of the account of the self-perception of the convicted genocide perpetrators throughout pre- and post-genocide Rwanda and the way they project their future self. Two main feelings from their narratives were outlined: the feeling of the abandoned and the feeling of the abandoner in the context of making sense and meaning out of their lives. Results revealed that positioning of genocide perpetrators through their narratives can influence positively or negatively their rehabilitation.

Conclusion: Genocide perpetrators in the context of Rwanda continuously work on ways to acknowledge, rationalise or justify those acts as part of their biography. Interventions enabling their self-discovery can have a positive impact on their self as prisoners, their families and the community at large in post-genocide Rwanda.

Keywords: narrative identity, self-perception, genocide, Rwanda, genocide perpetrator, imprisonment

Introduction

The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda,¹ happened after a several decades of ethnically and geographically rooted political tensions and violence. The mass killings of the 1994 genocide against Tutsi began on 7 April 1994, but the planning and training of Hutu militias had started long before this date. The roadblocks emerged everywhere in Kigali, initiated by the Forces Armées Rwandaises (FAR) soldiers and occupied by the Interahamwe¹ (In kinyarwanda, Interahamwe can be translated as “those who fight together”). The Interahamwe was formed around 1990 as the youth wing of the National

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Republican Movement for Democracy and Development (MRND) the then-ruling party of Rwanda, and enjoyed the backing of the government. It was the youth militia that played a significant role in the execution of the genocide.) militias carrying machetes.²⁻⁴ Leading the mass killing against Tutsi. By the morning of the 7th of April, the genocide was well on the way and quickly reached other regions in the country. The local authorities who supported the genocide ideology were rapidly activating their local citizens to participate in the process of eradicating all Tutsi in their region, promising them land and resources. The genocide could continue without any international interference, as the focus of attention from the United Nations Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) turned to an emergency rescuing of only expatriates and after the ten Belgian Peacekeepers of the mission were tortured and killed, the UN Security Council reduced their mission from 2500 to 270 troops, working as observers without the mandate to intervene militarily.⁵ Over a period of three months, approximately one million people were killed in a period of three months.⁶⁻⁸

What characterises the genocide in Rwanda, is the unprecedented high level of participation by the civilian population and the intimate nature of the violence. Low-tech weapons were used in the, often, face-to-face killings, such as machetes, clubs and hoes. Directly after the liberation of Rwanda by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), officially on the 4th of July 1994, thousands of suspected genocide perpetrators were arrested and provisionally detained. In mid-1998, at the height of arrests, approximately 130,000 people were incarcerated in prisons and communal lockups, most of them charged with genocide or related crimes.⁹⁻¹¹

By collecting and analyzing the life stories of eight prisoners incarcerated for genocide crimes, this study tries to unravel the personal meaning making process of this particular group. The meaning making process includes how they construe, understand or make sense of their life experiences, their relationships and of their sense-of-self. The interviews took place between March and December 2016 and led to a deeper understanding of how individuals craft narratives from key autobiographical memories, tell these stories internally and to others, and ultimately apply these stories to knowledge of self, the 'other' and the world in general.¹² The theoretical underpinning of this study lies in McAdams' narrative identity theory, in which narrative identity is the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life.¹³ The theory implies that apart from a few physical characteristics, we cannot "see" an

identity, we are only able to "see" it through an internalised and evolving story of the self which includes main characters, transecting plots, key scenes and an imagined ending. This story represents how the person reconstructs the personal past and anticipates the future.^{13,14}

Ordinary Citizens Becoming Genocide Perpetrators

Multiple scholars, from a variety of disciplines including history, sociology, psychology, criminology and political sciences, have studied the origins of mass violence. Generally, there is a lineage of scholarship that tries to explain the processes leading up to genocide by focusing on the macro-level. This typically includes the historical, political and economic landscape of the country or region where the genocide took place, the transformations over time and political ideologies that emerged.¹⁵⁻¹⁸ Another line of academic work, though strongly interconnected with the macro-level analysis, tries to understand genocidal acts² (Referring to the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (in short: Genocide Convention), genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.) from the individual and grassroots perspective, the so-called micro-level.^{15,19} Studies taking the micro-level perspective often examine the motivation of 'ordinary citizens' to engage in violent acts. Did these ordinary citizens lose their minds or were they just acting "normally" under the given circumstances? This micro-level studies frequently center around the following elements: contextual influence and circumstances; individual disposition and personal features; social pressure; combat socialization; fear and hatred and economic and/or capital transactions.²⁰⁻²³

While studies that take the micro-level angle are gaining more prominence, using interviews, and in particular a life story approach, maintains a rather exceptional method. It is in the past decade that the number of studies that work within the framework of oral history, including the preservation and interpretation of voices and memories of people, communities and participants in historical events, steadily increases. This line of work provides new insights in the experiences

and meaning making processes of survivors, perpetrators, bystanders, rescuers and fellow members of the society concerning the genocidal violence that has been committed.^{24,25}

In the context of Rwanda, interviews with genocide perpetrators about their motivation to participate in the genocide have been, among others, collected by journalist Jean Hatzfeld,² political scientists Scott Straus²⁶ and Lee Ann Fujii,^{27,28} jurist Kjell Anderson²⁹ and criminologists Aletta Smeulers and Hoex.³⁰ Historian Erin Jessee is one of the few researchers who collected life studies among convicted genocide perpetrators in Rwanda. While Jessee's work can be considered extremely valuable due to number of in depth accounts she has gathered³¹ and the multifaceted narratives she collected from different perspectives including officials, memorial staff, genocide survivors, genocide perpetrators and old and new returnees,³ (Old returnees (abatahutse) refer to Tutsi who came back to Rwanda in the directly after the genocide and new returnees (abahungutse) are Hutu that fled Rwanda during and after the genocide and came back to Rwanda at a later stage.) the narratives mainly center around the way the respondents use history to make sense of their experiences of genocide and its aftermath and how their historical interpretations influence their support for sustainable peace in Rwanda. The purpose of these life stories was not to go into other personal life experiences outside (the process leading up to) the genocide and its aftermath and does not give an insight in the sense-of-self, or self-perception of genocide perpetrators. The work of Jessee, together with other academic works that are trying to understand motivations of individual perpetrators to participate in acts of genocide, is accompanied with the likelihood of merely identifying the person as a genocide perpetrator, without taking into consideration the different components of his or her multifaceted identity, including being someone's child, partner, parent, sibling and friend, and other life experiences that construe one's sense-of-self. Apart from the story content, addressing the structure and form of a narrative was very important, because it expresses the identity, perceptions, and values of the person expressing the story.³² Therefore, this particular article focuses on the key autobiographical memories, present day experiences and the anticipated future of genocide perpetrators by exploring the self-perception of genocide perpetrators, in the context of their psychosocial rehabilitation.

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted among genocide perpetrators from Muhanga Prison. Both authors were working for Prison Fellowship Rwanda⁴ (Prison Fellowship Rwanda (PFR) is a faith based non-profit organization that works in partnership with national and international partners, and volunteers to foster reconciliation, peace building, healing initiatives and development in Rwanda in the wake of the 1994 genocide against Tutsi and its aftermath. The ultimate objective of PFR is to contribute to national reconciliation process. Since its inception in 1995, PFR activities expanded beyond the prisons into communities, focusing on instilling action-based practical reconciliation among Rwandans directly or indirectly affected by the genocide as well as other crimes.) and the authors received the authorisation from the Rwanda Correctional Service (RCS) to conduct research in prison. The respondents were purposively selected based on accessibility and willingness to participate in the research as well as those who were openly accepting their responsibilities in genocide crimes. Another criterion was to be above 18 years old while the genocide took place and to be married. The respondents had all attended the Community-Based Sociotherapy Programme (CBSP) implemented in Muhanga Prison from 2014 to 2016 in which both authors worked. Community-based Sociotherapy is a psychosocial, healing and peace-building programme that operates at the grassroots level, whereby the group is used as therapeutic medium and an open environment for discussion and the formation of peer-support structures.^{33,34} Therefore, the respondents were familiar with both authors and a relationship of trust with the interviewees was already partly built. The interviews were conducted in Kinyarwanda, at the same venue where sociotherapy sessions were held, to maximize interviewees feeling comfortable. It was a private space, where interviews could not be overheard by others. Respondents were aged 50 and older and consisted of six men and two women. The life story approach supported the contextualization and connection of the respondents meaning making efforts to the particular socio-cultural setting.

To ensure the respondents freedom to express themselves during the interviews, the authors used the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) for the data collection.^{35,36} The method contains three interview sessions. The first session used the SQUIN technique

(Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative), whereby only one very open question was used, and the respondent had as much time as need to answer the question. This approach is designed to elicit the whole life story of the respondents in the way they choose to share it.^{36,37} In the first interview questions for clarification are not posed to the respondent to ensure a non-directive and non-judgmental stance by the interviewers. The first interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 3 hours per respondent. Based on the transcriptions of each interview, the investigators identified key phrases from which they asked narrative-seeking questions in the second session. The second interview took between two and four hours. The criteria for selecting questions for the second interview referred mainly to the level of emotional importance or non-importance to the interviewee. In the second interview the researchers asked the respondents to elaborate on these experiences and what these experiences meant for the way they understand themselves. However, the authors asked additional questions regarding episodes in life that were not given much attention in the first interview. The questions that were brought into the second session were “internal” to the respondents’ accounts and based on the previous interview.^{35,36} All socio-demographic information, mainly the names of the interviewees, was anonymized and pseudonyms were used. The stories were the narratives of genocide perpetrators and were not in any way verified through other sources including the documentation of the courts. This study therefore did not aim at finding a judicial truth, instead, the stories, as shared below, are narratives of the self in front of others.

Narrative analysis was used to analyse the stories collected. Four main themes were identified in their narratives including (a) the experience of abandonment, (b) the process of ethnic self-discovery and positioning, (c) the perpetrator narrative, (d) the imprisoned and the imagined future self. Based on these themes, the responses from eight interviewees were analysed and compared in order to bring out their commonalities and differences.

Ethical Consideration

This qualitative study was conducted among genocide perpetrators from Muhanga Prison. Both authors were working for Prison Fellowship Rwanda and received the authorisation from the Rwanda Correctional Service (RCS) to conduct research in prison. Informed consent forms were obtained from the respondents before they were interviewed. More emphasis was put on this in the

section on methodology. Confidentiality and privacy were maintained and the participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time without providing any reason.

Results

The Experience of Abandonment

In the first session, a question that enabled the open life history was asked, whereby they could just narrate their life story. There were four respondents who stated that they had a good childhood (*kurerwa neza*) and they more or less skipped their childhood experiences in the first session. The four who stated to have had negative childhood experiences, emphasized their childhood experiences during the first session. The good childhood was in the second session generally described as growing up with both parents and not living in a situation of extreme poverty. The four respondents with negative experiences, all grew up with only one of their parents and a stepfather or stepmother. All four of them tried to “escape” childhood by starting the work outside of their homes or getting married at a very early age.

‘I didn’t experience joy in my life. My stepmother was the main source of everything bad in my life. When she was preparing food, she gave it only to her own children. One day my stepmother said to me: ‘Christine, listen to me, your mother died and you didn’t bury her. When the rain will fall, it will uncover the body of your mother.’ I started wondering how I would be able to bury my mother’s body; I was still very young. Later I realized my stepmother just wanted to hurt me all the time.’⁵(Christine, sub-session 2.)

All four respondents grew up with just one parent and referred to a lack of affection and love during their childhood. Particularly respondents that were being raised by their biological father after that their biological mother died or separated with their father, were in search for identifying with their distant or absent parent(s). In the way they narrated this part of the self, they created an internalized image of the parent who was physically distant or absent to them and tried to relate to this image. Christine, Jean Marie and Félicien all grew up with their fathers and stepmothers. The respondents experienced feelings of rejection and abandonment in their childhood which had a prominent influence on their sense of self. They expressed that their needs as a child were not met in the families in which they grew up. What comes forward in this study, is that this sense of abandonment is actually experienced as a reoccurring episode in the lives of the

respondents. For example, Immaculée is no longer being visited by her family. Since her imprisonment, her husband who was imprisoned before her, has never visited her.

‘I don’t know why they don’t visit me. We didn’t have a conflict. Maybe my husband married another wife. I am confused. I visited him many times when he was in prison. I remained faithful to him and didn’t get pregnant. I don’t know what caused him to avoid visiting me. It doesn’t affect me. I was expecting it. It was a consequence of my sin. God didn’t commit the sin, it was from me. I committed the sin.’⁶(Immaculée sub-session 1.)

The narrative of Immaculée contains a strong feeling of guilt in relation to the crime she committed. This implies that the sense of abandonment she is experiencing reflects the crime she committed. However, the fact that she did not abandon her husband while he was in prison, potentially indicates that she does experience a sense of unfairness, or she believes that she needs to be punished for what she did in more severely compared to her husband.⁷ (⁷In the first sub-session, Immaculée expressed that she had denounced the children of her neighbour to the Interahamwe and this led them to be killed.) Generally, the percentage of women participating in the genocide was much lower compared to men. Statistics of 2004, estimate that 3.4% of the Rwandan prison population was comprised of female genocide perpetrators at that time, approximately 3000 women.¹¹ Prior studies conducted on the participation of women in the genocide in Rwanda confirmed that genocide crimes are mostly committed by men, especially when it comes to the actual physical acts of violence, rape and killings. The same studies found that women are considered to be more “gender-consonant” and include mainly looting or denouncement.³⁸ This finding is in line with the narratives of the two female perpetrators that were interviewed in this study; they are both incarcerated for denouncing Tutsi. According to Adler et al, this has everything to do with the cultural context which shapes an image of a women as someone who takes care of the family, and therefore societal pressures they experienced are highly different compared to those experienced by men.³⁹ This corroborates the point of views of Immaculée, a respondent, who participated indirectly in the violence, what she struggles mostly with is still her gender-identity, being a woman who is convicted for genocide crimes. As Jessee also notes, for women to participate in the warfare was considered a general taboo in the Rwandan context.³¹

‘I have to accept myself and endure the prison life. The shame I am experiencing is the shame of a woman, a mother, who has left her family behind while others remain in their family and care for their children. Even today, when I stand up as a woman, I feel ashamed.’⁸ (⁸Immaculée sub-session 2.)

As presented, half of the respondents’ childhood narratives expressed clear feelings of being abandoned as a child and most of the respondents actually highlighted the lack of being visited by their family members. However, next to the experience of “being abandoned” they started to also see themselves as abandoner, as they left their children and partners behind. Eduard stated:

‘When I was imprisoned, I was feeling very sad, especially for our young children who need much care. But I had no choice. I can say my wife is very strong. She is playing the role of mother and father. My children are now under the protection of God. I cannot do more.’⁹(⁹Eduard, sub-session 2.)

This experience of being someone who abandoned the family, and in that regard “neglected” their partner- and parental-identity, including the roles and responsibilities, was also found among both the male and female perpetrators. Félicien’s children are still visiting him, but his wife ceased to visit him, stating that she felt impatient to visit someone with a life sentence. Félicien shares about the way he is no longer able to fulfill his responsibilities as a man. Together with other respondents like Innocent, Gérard, Eduard and Justus, he expressed a feeling of a man who abandoned his family role and responsibilities.

‘I am feeling as a powerless man. At home I even had land to cultivate, but here I can’t do anything. What I can do is to accept myself. As I am the one responsible for my family, I know my wife is limited, even though she can do something. [...] my imprisonment had a negative impact on my life goal, most of all because I am not able to fulfill my responsibility as a man.’¹⁰(¹⁰Félicien sub-session 2.)

The construction of the sense-of-self among the respondents, presents a strong linkage with the feeling of abandonment either during childhood, in the pre-genocide period or in the present-day situation. They indicated how it affected and continue to affect their self-perception. However, implicitly they also presented themselves as abandoners, so acting the painful act that they experience (d). Which leaves some of them with a sense of confusion,

like Immaculée, who expresses that feeling abandoned is actually what she deserved due to the crime she committed. The narratives present an internal conflict in relation to the social relationships that they are still entitled to as human beings and what they no longer deserve due to the crimes they committed.

The Process of Ethnic Self-Discovery and Positioning

When the diverse happenings across the lifespan were narrated, becoming aware of one's own ethnicity was a pivotal experience in shaping their sense of self. Almost all respondents said that they learned about ethnicity during their childhood. Instead of learning from their families, they mostly got to know about it through external unifying centers like peers, community members or schools, or through their Identity cards. This finding is confirmed by the prior findings that indicated that knowledge on ethnicity was not transmitted in the home setting, but they were hearing it from outsiders, without explanations given about the meaning of these ethnic groups.²⁸ In the context of the school, teachers were requested to ask Tutsi, Hutu and Twa to stand up one after another in order to count them and report the figures to their superiors.

'We were openly saying this is a Hutu, a Tutsi or a Twa. Even in P2 (Primary 2) we had to say whether we were Hutu or Tutsi.[...] I remember in the village we had Hutu, Tutsi and Twa families. I was among the rare people in the village that shared food with Twa. And when I had trouble with my stepmother, it was actually a Tutsi family who helped me. They said: 'We know how your stepmother is, we will support you.'¹¹(¹¹Jean Marie, sub-session 2.)

Christine was also uncertain whether the father she grew up with was actually her biological father.

She shared a similar experience 'I was not aware of the different ethnic groups. It was at school that they asked us to stand up while they were categorizing Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. I didn't know my ethnic background, but because they metaphorically used the word 'imfura' for Tutsi people, which normally means 'first born' and as I was the first born, I stood up. Later I realized my so-called biological father was Hutu, so teachers went to my father asking whether I was Tutsi. My father said: "No she is my own child, she is Hutu." My biological mother was a Tutsi, she told me when I asked her. My father knew I was not his own daughter. When he married my mother, she was already pregnant, then my father found out and divorced

from my mother, but the family of my mother and father were friends, so they decided that my father would care for me. As man are good with keeping secrets, he treated me like his own child. But one time he was beating me and he said: "I have a secret to tell you later." Later I understood what he meant [He was not her biological father].¹²(¹²Christine sub-session 2.)

Eduard (born in 1955) and Esperance (born in 1966) are the oldest respondents among the eight. They were not informed about ethnicity through their schools or parents, instead their ID cards, mentioning their ethnic background, was their source of information.¹³(¹³"I know about ethnic groups, only through the ID cards, but otherwise I didn't know them . Up till when I was 10 years old, I didn't know." Eduard, sub-session 2.) Esperance, received her ID card when she got married, that is when she knew she was a Hutu. In 1973, during the violent upheaval, Esperance had seen houses burning, by then she was nine years old. Her parents did not want to inform her about what was going on. As Prunier writes, it was the time that sentiments of regionalism were majorly present and political tensions between Hutu and Tutsi were gradually taking shape. Jean Marie mentioned that the houses that were burned belonged to Tutsi and that his family was among those protecting Tutsi:

'In 1973, when Habyarimana took power, I was in primary school. Houses were being burned. They said these are houses of Tutsi families, even when I came back home there were Tutsi's in our house who were seeking refuge. So that is when I got to know that there were tensions. Luckily it didn't last long.'¹⁴(¹⁴Jean Marie, sub-session 2.)

Assessing these ethnic tensions at macro-level, influenced attitudes at family and community level, some of the interviewees expressed that at family level, a strong anti-Tutsi sentiment existed. Apart from Jean Marie, Christine and Félicien also both visited Tutsi families regularly when they were young. As their testimonies reveal, in both cases, the response from especially their stepmother was negative. It was perceived as if they were bringing back something "bad" to their families once they had visited the Tutsi families.

'During my childhood, I visited my neighbors often, because they knew my stepmother was not a good person. They helped me to get food and they cared for me. My family at home was saying: "You cannot go to that family anymore, because the bad spirit of Tutsi will follow you. [... ..]'¹⁵(¹⁵Christine, sub-session 2.)

Ethnicity played different roles during their upbringing, depending on period during which they grew up, the sentiments in the family and their own ethnic affiliation. None of them mentioned that they themselves experienced a sense of hatred towards Tutsi during their childhood, however, in some families Tutsi were portrayed as an enemy that can lead to something negative. How this affected the sense of self of the interviewees growing up in these families is unclear, but the fact that they referred to these statements, especially coming from their stepmothers, implies that it is something that had an influence on them. Jean Marie clearly expresses that it was a Tutsi family that helped him before the genocide; potentially he referred to that to indicate that he himself did not experience before, any negative sentiments towards Tutsi.

All eight respondents engaged in marriage, which was identified as a important episode in their lives.

‘As I came back from Kigali to the village, girls in my village saw me as a smart young guy. I attended the wedding of a cousin. The groom had a beautiful sister and I asked if I could meet her after the wedding. [...] When we met, the lady was very much impressed by me, so from that moment in time, we became fiancés. I also had a fiancée with a Hutu background. I brought both dossiers to my parents and they selected the Tutsi fiancée for me. We got married in 1991.’¹⁶(¹⁶Gerard sub-session 2.)

Eduard’s marital life can be described as a rollercoaster determined by family sentiments regarding the ethnicity of his wife. At first, he chose to get married with his Tutsi neighbor, whom he had impregnated:

‘I was living nearby my father in law and we knew each other. I proposed his daughter to marry me, but before living together, I had already impregnated her. I brought her to my house. My family was against it, they said that I needed to marry a Hutu lady. From then I lived in a kind of social isolation, because they didn’t want me to marry a Tutsi. [...] “I remember when we married, we were generally in a good relationship. We were even making a good development in the family and we were able to build our own house. When other family members saw this, they wanted to divide us. We even separated. I married another lady, a Hutu, but I chased her out and I came back to my first wife. [...] I left the second wife when she was pregnant of a girl. When she gave birth, my family told the second wife not to bring the child to me, because the Tutsi lady will kill the child.’¹⁷(¹⁷Eduard, sub-session 2.)

The ethnic self appeared to play a larger role within an interethnic marriage. Although interethnic marriages had traditionally been a way to cementing ties and building relationships based on mutual exchange between Hutu and Tutsi families, marriage became subject to intense scrutiny in the genocidal propaganda.⁴ The majority of the respondents in this study said that they came from ethnically mixed marriages. This highlights the “illusion of a singular identity” that was shaped by Hutu extremists to incite people to commit violence in its name.^{4,40} The self-understanding of those engaged in an interethnic marriage, was marked by ambiguity, due to the outsiders’ perspective on their being, but also their confusion around the meaning of ethnicity in their personal lives.^{27,40}

The Perpetrator Narrative

Well planned mass killings began on the 7th of April 1994. Specially trained militia (Interahamwe), and soldiers were mobilised to exterminate the Tutsi. Roadblocks were set up across Kigali to ensure that Tutsi could not flee to other areas of the country. Those carrying a Tutsi ID card and those who appeared to have the Tutsi features were killed. Straus’ analysis indicates that outside of the Rwandan capital, violence evolved quite differently. It did not start at the same time everywhere and regions were differently affected.²⁷ The respondents in this study were all living outside of Kigali when the genocide started. They share different experiences in terms of the way the genocide started and how it changed their thinking, feelings attitudes and behaviors. In relation to what happened within their sense-of-self, some respondents report a significant change within their relationships and their sense of right or wrong. The perpetrator narrative was marked by two cores and interrelated, elements related to meaning making including (a) (self-) protection and (b) lack of agency. It is important to highlight that eight life stories present significant differences regarding the type of crimes that were committed by the genocide perpetrators, the context in which they were committed and the level to which the respondents were physically involved in the act of killing. According to Mironko, the categories of organised perpetrators included: (a) those who planned and oversaw the genocide (the “architects”), (b) those who commanded the army (“FAR”), (c) the local militias (“Interahamwe”), and (d) subordinates who carried out their orders. In addition to that, he refers to a fifth category of ‘countless ordinary civilians—men, women, and children—who were more informally persuaded to take part in the killing, but who

may in fact have killed more innocent people than all the other forces combined.^{4,41} Our respondents either belonged to category three, four and five.

A significant finding from this study is that actually five respondents stated that they participated in the killings, simultaneously hiding Tutsi in their houses. Out of these five, three stated that they participated in the crimes so as not to be perceived as indifferent by the Interahamwe. According to the respondents, in these circumstances their participation in genocide crimes was inevitable. Jean Marie stated that he purposefully took a leading role in the groups of killers to avoid any neighbour to go to his house where his mother and his cousins were staying. Active participation in the killings was presented by him as a strategy to protect family members. The other two who were hiding Tutsi stated that they participated, because, unfortunately, they found themselves in the area where Hutu militia were arresting Tutsi, and they were immediately requested to join the killings. Hence, they described themselves as being victims of those circumstances, and that it was the only way to protect their own lives. Feelings of hatred or anger towards Tutsi or fearing an invasion by Tutsi were not explicitly mentioned in their narratives. Group pressure and fear of losing one's life or the lives of family members and the willingness to protect were the main reasons given:

When genocide started, I regretted that I married a Tutsi lady. Even people had warned me about it, saying that one day she would be killed. Our relationship totally changed. I really regretted marrying her, also because her brother came to hide in our house.¹⁸(¹⁸Gérard, sub-session 2.)

Gérard's statement presents a sense of fear that arose when the genocide started. The fact that his wife was a Tutsi and he also had to protect her brother, implied that he was now at risk. Despite the fear, still he took the responsibility of protecting them, as he was hiding his wife and brother-in-law when the genocide started. The story of Justus, who had a Tutsi mother, was also hiding Tutsi in his house gives an indication of how the uncertainty about the situation and what was going to happen, led to ambivalent behaviors among some of respondents.

'I knew that genocide was happening, when people from the family of my mother came to my house to hide. When it started, I thought it was a conflict that will end, but when violence continued, I got out to participate in the meeting to learn about what was happening. I heard that only Tutsi were targeted. In our house we had Hutu and Tutsi hiding;

I went back and said to Hutu: "You can go back, because only Tutsi are targeted." People were hiding under the bed and under the roof, when the killers came to check.'¹⁹
(¹⁹Justus, sub-session 2.)

As Justus' expectation was that it would just be a conflict that would end, it might have been a reason for him to accept hiding some people at that time. Also, he seemed not to be aware yet who would be targeted, which is a sign that at the local level, this ideology to eradicate all Tutsi was not something that was fully ingrained in his mind. In the interviews, Justus refers multiple times that he was a member of two groups, and he stated that it is sometimes difficult for him to bring these two identities together in his mind; protecting and becoming a killer:

'It was an unplanned involvement. I managed to move my neighbor who was hiding from one place to another; I came across the group of killers. They wanted to kill him with a gun, but they failed. They told me to kill him with a machete. That is how I got involved. I was there.'²⁰
(²⁰Jean Marie sub-session 2.)

Later in his story, Justus refers to more killings of which he was accused for. The kind of "non-planned" involvement is something seven out of eight respondents claim. Jean Marie is the only respondent who explained his involvement based on a certain rationale. He stated that he became among the leaders of the interahamwe, in order to protect his mother and other people who were hiding in his house.

"I and my elder brother were hiding Tutsis in our houses. When we went out, we met those neighbours who said: "Please come we need to find those Tutsi who are hiding and kill them. I decided to join. I first participated in an attack of Tutsi who were revealed by the person who was hiding them. In the second attack, we killed four people, husband, wife and two children. We were with soldiers, police and even militias. After that I became part of the group and started leading the searches in the houses, to see whether there were Tutsi. I didn't check all the houses, because I knew we had Tutsi in our house and in that of my elder brother. Four people were thrown in the river, Nyabarongo. I knew them, they were our neighbours. Even the police knew them, they were their friends, we killed them together. [...] I was trying to show them that I was with them, to make sure that they would not discover that I was indifferent to their plan."²¹
(²¹Innocent, sub-session 2.)

Jean Marie who actively participated in the killings, reasoned that this would be the way to protect his mother, cousins and his own family. His leadership position in the group gave him a certain power over the situation. In his narration, Jean Marie generally presents himself as someone who was in control and he refers to others as “the killers”. In addition to that, he states that he did not fear the Tutsi to take over the power, as he assumed almost nobody would be left after the violence, implying that he was aware at that time that all Tutsi should be killed. His testimony presents the tendency to rationalise the crimes he was committing in favor of the self that actually rescued people. His narration also implies that he had the feeling that he was on top of the situation. Apart from what this statement says about the position of Jean Marie and in some way he gives an insight in the way the situation was interpreted by him. Jean Marie did not see Tutsi in his locality as a threat. His full narrative presents a man that was aware of his actions. . None of the respondents actually claimed that they saw Tutsi as a threat, or that they feared them. In Emmanuel’s story, we even see that the men in the village made a pact. An agreement that was made in his village among men that participated in the genocide:

‘Genocide erupted as a volcano. It was well prepared by the government. I remember in a meeting at sector level, they said: “If you know a Tutsi, please go there and kill them. We went to the neighbors and killed the two children. I didn’t want to refuse to the Government, I was afraid; it doesn’t mean that I hated them. I just didn’t know how to refuse. I had a Tutsi wife, but she survived, because I can say that in our village, we had many men who had Tutsi wives. As men we made an internal agreement, we said: “If we kill one, then we will take revenge and kill the other wives.” So that is how some of Tutsi ladies survived in our village.’

Interviewer: Was there no pressure from the authorities to kill these women?

‘Authorities were not aware of it. It was a silence (ceceka) and arrangement among us. We were already given the command to go and kill everyone who was Tutsi. As I was someone who was introvert, I didn’t talk to the government authorities myself. about that’.²²(²²Elysee, sub-session 1.

The respondents portray an interesting dynamic in having a sense of agency and control versus being powerless or overwhelmed by the situation. However, through their

narratives, it remained difficult to get a clear explanation or meaning of such ambivalent behaviors during the genocide. Most of the respondents actually referred to a sense of being overwhelmed and not having any agency in the process.

‘At the moment when the two women were killed and raped by the group of killers I was in, I was overwhelmed. I felt out of control. One lady was married to a Hutu. In the group of perpetrators there was division. Some said: “No please don’t kill them.” Others said: “Let’s kill them. If they wanted to survive they should have gone to Kabgayi where the other Tutsi escaped.’²³(²³Eduard, sub-session 2.)

‘I participated in the attack of a man. As you know, my siblings came to my house to look for my [Tutsi] wife. ‘What are you doing here?’, they said, ‘Go and follow the others to kill’. I had no choice. The group killed a man. I didn’t kill him directly, but I was there, because my siblings wanted me to follow.’²⁴(²⁴Innocent.)

The narratives around the genocide crimes reflect a meaning making process of the respondents that tries to understand and give explanations for those crimes. In addition, they allow them to disclose their memories of the past. Some of the respondents state that they participated willingly and actively in the killings, while most stated that their participation was unplanned and coincidental, therefore it is difficult for them to bear the consequences of their imprisonment. From these different circumstances of the respondents, the fact that all of them carry the same label as “genocide perpetrators”, leads to a conflict within their sense-of-self and how they had imagined themselves to be.

Previous work of diverse scholars studied the motivations of genocide perpetrators. Scott Straus is one of the first researchers who tried to collect systematic data on motivations of genocidaires from a micro-level perspective. According to him, previous explanations on why the genocide happened were mainly based on the macro-perspective and included arguments around ethnic hatred, high levels of poverty, the scarcity of land, the culture of obedience and the influence of RTLM.⁴² However these hypotheses were not formally tested in a way that they explained what happened at the micro-level. Straus comes to the conclusion that there are three main factors that lead to the genocide. He starts with tinsecure atmosphere countryside. Straus describes that this dynamic escalation facilitated Hutu hardliners to take control over the country

and carry out their plan to exterminate the Tutsi. His second argument builds upon the power of the state and controlling structures in the society that already existed in pre-colonial times. This culture of obedience, embedded in general feelings of insecurity, uncertainty, fear and anger, made the state effective in mobilizing citizens to fight for them. His third argument is centered around preexisting ethnic or racial classification, whereby Tutsi were taken as the enemy of the state. According to Straus, Hutu participated in the genocide, due to mechanisms around uncertainty, fear, social pressure and opportunity. They wanted to protect themselves, and the encouraging culture of participating, made it easier to comply with what was expected from them, than to not comply. Taking part in the violence was also an opportunity to gain power and property. Straus draws his conclusion on 210 surveys conducted among convicted genocide perpetrators in 15 prisons.⁴²

The analysis of Aletta Smeulers and Lotte Hoex particularly focuses on how the environment shaped social reality and how this influenced the behavior of the perpetrators.³⁰ The researchers conducted 29 interviews with prisoners in Kigali Central Prison in April and May 2009, 15 years after the genocide. What is highlighted in their study is that the killings in Rwanda were almost exclusively committed in groups. The researchers conclude that social dynamics and social interaction between the different layers of perpetrators shape and characterize the genocidal acts.⁴³ Among those who joined the killer groups later (category four and five from Mironko), is where according to them the greatest differentiation in terms of the levels of willingness, fanaticism, sadism, and conformism among the perpetrators. They also refer to these social dynamics as the processes that shape the norms, and how the type of violence can easily escalate once these norms are shifting more and more in terms of the brutality of the acts. According to Smeulers and Hoex the main reason for the high levels of participation and the extremely cruel nature of the acts was that at macro level the genocide was planned and ordered for execution by layer one, making perpetrators of layer two and layer three believe that what they did was actually right, especially since it was a group effort. This analysis implies that there was limited reflection among genocidaires about what they were doing, because it was even done by others in their neighborhood.

The late Lee Ann Fujii, refers to the ordinary citizens as “joiners”. Fujii’s work tries to investigate the complexities

and ambiguities entrenched within the genocide. In her work, she shifts away from the state-sponsored ethnic hatred sentiments, and thereby underlines the sense of agency citizens, including perpetrators, had during the genocide. Her work actually complements the work of Straus, whereby her research looks into the smaller geographical and social spaces, particularly focusing on the social interactions before and during the genocide. In that regard, it provides space for a more multilayered and complex approaching of “ethnicity”. The same author highlights that the key mechanisms she identified that led to participation were actually the social bonds and group dynamics. Smeulers and Hoex indicate that though the genocide was presented as an ethnic conflict, they support that the genocide was actually an outcome of the way ethnicity was used as a tool to mobilize people rather than that there was a strong sense of hatred towards Tutsi.²⁸ Mironko conducted an extensive research among genocide perpetrators, whereby he interviewed more than one hundred ordinary citizens. He again rejects the view of, for example, Mamdani about one of the key motivations to participate being the fear experienced by many Hutu towards the Tutsi and their anticipated domination, but claims it was rather “well-structured, already entrenched mechanisms of coercion”.^{28,41}

The data in this study confirms the view of Mironko that coercion played a significant role in participating in the genocide. Most of the respondents claimed to have been experiencing a sense of pressure by outsiders in order to commit the crime and they claimed to be aware that what they did was wrong. Which implies that indeed the social norms and dynamics played a major role in their actions, but differently from what Smeulers and Hoex’ data suggest, it seems that they were aware that what they did was wrong.³⁰ The female perpetrators denouncing Tutsi actually did this in isolation, without experiencing direct social pressure. Lastly, something that has not been presented in these previous studies is the motivation to protect someone with whom they had a close relationship. This has been one of the key drivers expressed by some of the respondents in this study.

Imprisoned and Imagined Future Self

Life in imprisonment is characterized by their label of being a genocide perpetrator. Due to the physical setting, they are in with all restrictions, their other roles in life, like that of a partner, parent, sibling, have diminished. It is a transition of identity, whereby the life before their imprisonment was characterized by the role and position they

had in their families. One of the observations from the interviews is that their imprisonment has severely altered their self in relation to others and themselves. In this section, about the imprisoned and imagined future self, this alteration in their “sense of self”, is explored further.

Most respondents in this study have limited or no contact with their nuclear family members. Innocent had two children, but when he got imprisoned his wife got two more children from another man. He was not able to deal with this situation, and it was difficult for him to forgive her. His first born was two years old and his second one five months when he got arrested. While his first born is now 28 years old, he never shared with her the truth of what happened in the genocide. Also during the genocide, he did not share it with his wife. He only shared what happened when he was imprisoned; this also complicated the relationship with his wife:

“Not being there as a father and husband affect me of course, but I try to accept it. And not being in the family had also consequences on my two girls. One dropped out [of school]. My absence is also a burden to my family and the way they have to deal with their daily life. Especially since my wife is a survivor herself.²⁵(²⁵Justus.)

Justus also does not have any contact with his children anymore. He had two young children and his wish was to achieve something with his family. His family is struggling. His elder son was 3 years when the genocide happened, but after the genocide, he developed a psychological disorder.²⁶(²⁶-Jean Marie sub-session 2–.) While their self in terms of their relation with family members and the role they had in reference to this identity faded, it seems that the role of religion became more prominent. From childhood onwards, religion was an element attributed to the self-understanding of the respondents. Religion has become a key element in the lives of the respondents during their imprisonment. They all feel that God knows their real story and this protects them as individuals. When asking Félicien whether he considered himself as a genocidaire he said:

For me genocidaire has two meanings. In the first meaning I can see that I am a genocidaire, because the killing happened and I was there. This makes me a genocidaire, but for my second understanding of the term I can say that at a conscious level and towards God, God knows it was a kind of accident that happened when I was meeting with the killers.

In this perspective their belief in God is also used as a way of someone outside who really knew the intention of why one participated in the genocide. It goes beyond the judicial evidence that was presented in the Gacaca courts. This can be perceived as a kind of self-protection mechanism, as taking the full responsibility of the act is very heavy for a person to carry and in some cases impossible.

‘The religion is more important to me. In the past I prayed God to ask for forgiveness, and I think he forgave me. I try to relate good with God, it is good maybe after my death to be in a good relationship and that I will not abandon him again.’²⁷(²⁷Immaculée – sub-session 2.)

In terms of their imagined future self, some of the values that characterized their narratives concerning their imagined future include, for example, becoming good citizens contributing to the Ndi Umunyarwanda philosophy (Ndi umunyarwanda is a programme initiated to build a national identity based on trust and dignity. It helps people to overcome ethicism and boost unity and reconciliation among Rwandans), parents who convey an anti-genocide ideology to their descendants and becoming agents of change in the community.

‘My life goal is to live with others in peace, live as an example. I only have five years remaining for my imprisonment. And I need to educate my children, they suffered from my absence. I want to work for my family to compensate for my absence. [...] As a mother I will give them the good image, try to regain their confidence and trust towards children. [...] Even if I am old, I can continue to be with him [husband]. As I don’t have any information, and he is still alive, we can do HIV test and we can continue if both of us are negative.’

What is evident for all respondents, is that they want to make up for their wrongdoing and for the period of their absenteeism. Besides abandoning their families, they also feel as if they abandoned the community, as they feel unable to contribute to the rebuilding of the Rwandan society. Furthermore, retrospectively, during genocide they felt like they abandoned God and that their religion had become meaningless to them. Most of them expressed the journey they have taken in this phase of their lives to strengthen themselves spiritually. Though some respondents still wondering about the length of their sentence, they all stated that they want to contribute to peace in the country and to the development of their family. All the respondents expressed the hope for possible release, even

those with life sentence. This feeling was accompanied by their hope for change and a renewed sense of citizenship that transcends the past ethnic divisionism, but rather embraces a vision of new Rwandan society to which they need to contribute after their release. Therefore, they think that they can be restored and reintegrated into a flourishing life in the community. Some of the values that characterised their narratives concerning their imagined future include, for example, becoming good citizens free of ethnic divisionism and, parents who can convey anti-genocide ideology to their descents, but also becoming the community change agents.

Discussion

From the narratives of the respondents as discussed in the perspective of their self-perception, the research findings go beyond ordinary narratives and have revealed the existence of strong double inter-related feelings from genocide perpetrators: being abandoned and some being abandoners.

The Feeling of Abandonment

The experience of abandonment embraces different angles, including family, society, cultural and spiritual. The common feature of feeling abandoned here refers to their experience of suffering the consequences of genocide crimes and the related shame where they feel disconnected from their family members and the society in general.

The Feeling as Abandoner

As abandoners, respondents referred to the absence of their parenting role and adverse outcomes, as many of them also experienced this during their childhood. The fact that they also feel unable to contribute to the rebuilding of a new Rwandan society free from hate and ethnic divisionism makes them feel like abandoners. Furthermore, based on their beliefs, during genocide they felt like they abandoned their God and religion was meaningless to them while committing genocide crimes. However, a double inter-related feelings from genocide perpetrators: abandoned and abandoners, accompanied by a renewed sense of citizenship among genocide perpetrators, constitute a central pivot of the contribution of this research. These findings also challenge the previous studies that indicated that the perpetrators and offenders of crimes fail to develop a sense of new citizenship due to their criminal history.^{44,45}

The results from the narratives revealed positive and negative sides of their relational self, but also in terms of elaboration of dynamic construction of identity. Throughout their narratives, perpetrators depiction discussed on how they consider themselves in line with horizontal relationships, but also vertical relationship referring to their current relationship with God. Hence, their willingness and readiness to reconcile with other people, but also with their God was found. These findings corroborate the results from previous studies conducted in Rwanda.⁴⁶ However, the same findings do also challenge other previous studies that revealed that the perpetrators were not able to request for the forgiveness and this contrasted the awareness to develop the positive relationship with others.⁴⁷

Moral Reconstruction

The research findings revealed that the narratives are linked to moral reconstruction. In this context, any person's particular narrative identity is a co-authored, psychosocial construction, product developed in conjunction with the culture.^{13,48} In this perspective, the results from the respondents tended to minimize individual responsibility and rather emphasizing on group responsibility in regard with the crimes committed. Also the ambivalent behavior was expressed by some respondents who described themselves as killers and protectors, who hid some people. These results also give nuance to the study of Mironko whose results suggested something different regarding the reasons for ordinary people to participate in genocide crimes. These include the promise or expectation of economic gain, the settling of old scores and rivalries unrelated to ethnic identity, and probably most important, coercion (the threat to "kill or be killed").^{30,41}

However, the narratives also mark their tendency to rationalise the crimes committed and tell them in a way which can become acceptable for the wider audience. This tendency as defense mechanism deviates from the views of literatures of the scholars who agree that the genocide perpetrators committed it intentionally. The previous scholars theorised that people do not engage in antisocial (immoral) behaviors unless they can justify their behavior through a process of cognitive restructuring or rationalisation. A person may feel forced to kill another person which attenuates his responsibility, and therefore minimizing the agentive role in the crimes committed.⁴⁹ It is in that regard they define genocide as a crime with a double mental element, ie, a general intent as to the underlying

acts, and an ulterior intent with regard to the ultimate aim of the destruction of the group.^{50,51}

Similarities and Differences Observed from the Narratives of Respondents

Similarities and differences from the respondents in terms of the identity change were found. This corroborates the idea of the prior studies that indicated that people possess multiple constructions of self that differ in activation across situations.^{52,53} For example, a number of the respondents did not highlight anything specific in their childhood regarding the feeling of abandonment, whereas others expressed it. Women narrators expressed a particular feeling and self-perception, as guardians of the children and home, during the 1994 genocide against Tutsi. The study revealed that women not only assisted men in the killings, but they indirectly participated in the crimes. This experience of being someone who abandoned the family and in that regard “neglected” the cultural mother-identity, including the roles and responsibilities is part of their current identity as prisoners. These findings corroborate the previous studies.^{49,54,55} Many women offenders bear a huge burden, both as being seen as a deviant for breaking the law, and secondly, for identity construction of women offenders being seen as “unfit mothers” the most meaningful role that they have ever held as an adult. A feeling of unfit and deviant mothers is prevailing among them. Many women had relatively exterior roles in the genocide roles that were due to women’s constrained or situated agency, understanding the women who perpetrated violence and rescued would be fruitful for future studies.⁵⁶

Research Limitations

The research was conducted in a sensitive setting, where the access to the respondents required more attention. Also, even if this research was not solely aiming at finding the truth on genocide crimes, it was not easy to give credit or verify the veracity of what has been said by the respondents. However, the aim was to provide an insight in the narrations of the key autobiographical memories of eight convicted genocide perpetrators and convey the narrations of their life experiences and how they think about them to a wider audience. Therefore, the narratives might have served as a defense mechanism rather than an expression of actual experiences. Lastly, through the process, the authors learned that the respondents benefitted a lot psychologically by sharing their life stories. This was

expressed numerous times after the interview and before the second interview. Therefore, authors expect that narrating life stories might contribute to the well-being of prisoners and eventually to the rehabilitation and reintegration process. This was not further explored in this study, but the effectiveness of the narratives of genocide perpetrators in the rehabilitation and reintegration process would be an interesting topic for further studies.

Conclusion

This study focused on the way perpetrators narrated key autobiographical memories in their life, their present experiences and their imagined future self, by using the life stories method. What became clear from the study is that genocide perpetrators in the context of Rwanda continuously work on ways to acknowledge, rationalise or justify those acts as part of their biography. The results were categorised into four main themes that reflect the sense-of-self of the respondents. The history of their families and their childhood contributed significantly to the sense of self and meaning making. This stems from the fact that half of the respondents were raised in single parent families, which generated many psychosocial problems among them. Two inter-linked feelings from the respondents that were highlighted in their narratives (1) considering themselves as abandoned during childhood and presently, and (2) considering themselves as abandoners, unable to fulfill their moral obligations as well as family and societal responsibilities and missing the opportunity to contribute to the development of Rwanda. Becoming aware of one’s ethnicity was also one pivotal experience that shaped the perpetrators’ sense-of-self at some point in their life, especially in the period just preceding the genocide and it determined their position during the genocide in terms of whether they were a genocide target or not. During genocide, an ambiguous situation was prevailing from some of respondents’ narratives: being both a genocide perpetrator and feeling the responsibility and willingness to protect also some of the victims with whom they had kinship relationship. In some cases, this was marked as a key motivation for them to participate, something which has not been explored yet in many studies. The imprisoned self is one that is in search for how to make up for the past and do things different in the future. The respondents expressed their hope for being reintegrated into a flourishing life in the community, and with a sense of a renewed citizenship, hence a new identity.

Abbreviations

BNIM, Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method; MNRD, National Republican Movement for Democratic and Development; PFR, Prison Fellowship Rwanda; PIN, Particular Incident Narrative; RCS, Rwanda Correctional Service; SQUIN, Single Question Inducing Narrative.

Data Sharing Statement

The authors confirmed that, for agreed motives, some access restrictions apply to the data underlying the results of the study. Though the data from the participants were anonymously collected by not including the names and geographical areas of the participants, this decision is in the interest of ensuring confidentiality and privacy of subjects and their families. Data for this study can be made available on request by contacting the corresponding author by email (felbig@yahoo.fr).

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The current study was conducted under sociotherapy research that was reviewed and approved by the Rwanda National Ethics Committee (RNEC). The authors received the authorisation to conduct the study in prison from Rwanda Correctional service (RCS). The privacy and confidentiality of the participants were maintained during the study. The study was ethically allowed to be conducted from 12 April 2016 to the deadline was 12 April 2017. Authors were in the team of the implementers of the community-based sociotherapy programme, however the study was not aiming at exploring the effectiveness of the programme.

Consent for Publication

The consent to publish the results from this study was obtained from the participants.

Acknowledgments

We thank the Aegis Trust for its supports and RCS for facilitating and allowing the research in prison setting. We are also grateful to PFR that implemented the community-based sociotherapy approach in Muhanga Prison where the research was conducted.

Author Contributions

FB conceptualised, drafted the manuscript and supervised the research activities. He also contributed to

design the research method, data collection and formal analysis. AJ contributed to the conceptualisation of the research, data collection, data analysis and editing. All authors made substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; took part in revising the manuscript critically for important intellectual content; agreed to submit to the current journal; gave final approval of the version to be published; and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Funding

The research was funded by Aegis Trust.

Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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