RESILIENCE PROCESSES IN THE CONTEXT OF EXTREME SEXUAL VIOLENCE:

LESSONS LEARNED FROM CONGOLESE RAPE SURVIVORS

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ONGOING PROJECTS

• Qualitative meta-analysis (N=164) of cosmology episodes
• Cross-sectional studies of Haiti earthquake survivors
• Secondary trauma in international humanitarian aid workers,
• Human terrain team members deployed to Afghanistan
• Racial unrest in Ferguson Missouri
• Earthquake survivors in China
• **Current project:** Interview and ethnographic data collected during the summer of 2015 of (a) individuals who have experienced brutal sexual violence, (b) the caregiving teams who serve them, (c) the HEAL Africa organizational leadership that manages the hospital and care teams, and (d) the community members of North Kivu DR Congo.
Whenever I could have uh, abdominal pain, I could stay only in bed with people, and I could wonder and say, why God, why am I the only person to suffer like this. And when I was wondering and asking myself such questions, I could just remember, and sometimes I could say, oh what is this? So I could just say… ok, let it go. When I started suffering, I could tell God.

Everyday I could go there and the Doctors and nurses everyday… I decided to become a nurse and do nursing because as I was bothering the doctors and nurses, I would like that also, that patients will come to bother me to say we need you to help us.

When I started my nursing studies, I was at school, people would see me and asking me questions and say what are you doing here? I could say I’m doing the nursing. They said, why do you prefer to do the nursing? I could say what pushes me to do the nursing because I was bothering nurses and the doctors. I like also to, I would like also that I be bothered.

When I was sent for the training here, we were presented with the list where we will do the training. And I was asked where will you do the training? I say HEAL Africa. Many trainees say at HEAL Africa people work hard, they don’t care about trainees. But I said it’s where I was a patient, so I need to be also to help other patients. And for the first time I was sent to patients who were leaking like me. I started treating them, and the patients could say, oh this one, this one was with us, now she is treating us. Whenever I was with patients, now I could feel well.

Up to now I thank God because He has heard my prayers.
An adequate theory of trauma and its outcomes, “must be able to explain this constellation of changes in meaning regarding the self, others, and the world” (Joseph & Linely, 2005, p. 262).
COSMOLOGY DEFINED

• A cosmology is an overarching worldview of the universe that defines such matters as identity, purpose, value, ideology, meaning, and transcendence.

• A cosmology is shaped by historical imprinting, cultural geography, spiritual traditions, institutional positions, and personal strategies.

• A cosmology is essentially the result of multiple layers of meaning-making, that one is born into, and with which one engages (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002; Eliade, 1957; Weick, 1993).
“A cosmology episode occurs when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together. Stated more informally, a cosmology episode feels like vu jádé—the opposite of déjà vu ‘I’ve never been here before, I have no idea where I am, and I have no idea who can help me’” (Weick, 1993, pp. 633–634).
The term *cosmology episode* is **not** interchangeable with the terms *disaster, crisis, or trauma*. The terms disaster, crisis, and trauma are constructed and assigned by those encountering the event, but are **not** the event itself (Roux-Dufort, 2007). Likewise, the term cosmology episode is a socially constructed term and **not** an event. An event may trigger a crisis, trauma, or disaster (as deemed such by those encountering the event), but not necessarily a cosmology episode. We define a cosmology episode as a process of sensemaking that is prompted when the cosmology has been sufficiently jolted, disrupted, or ruptured to trigger sense-losing and the subsequent need to remake sense (O’Grady & Orton, in press).
SENSEMAKING AS PROCESSES

• “A cosmology episode is the result of a triggering event confronting unstainable aspects of the cosmology; therefore, what exists in the cosmology and the resources that sustain the cosmology prior to the triggering event are necessarily part of a cosmology episode.”

• “The cosmology episode does not begin with the triggering event, but rather during the anticipating of a cosmology episode, because “the triggering event is only the most visible part of a destabilization process that started long before and that suddenly races out of control under the effect of a specific event” (Roux-Dufort, 2007, p. 111).”

• “From this vantage point, people and systems are always anticipating, responding to and recovering from cosmology episodes. Management scholars emphasize that a study of cosmology episode must include the investigation of the beliefs, practices and resources that exist prior to the triggering event (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015).”
COSMOLOGY EPISODE: RAPE IN DR CONGO

I know that being raped and being taken by force, this is first and main issue I, uh, ever experienced. …But you see that you have other many consequences. For example, you just be dependent because you not have no strength to go and see your how your life can develop, so you just become dependent. Yes, people could say ok, be of good cheer and the counselors also. But, we see that our life is now dependent.

- 8.25E
Cosmology episodes are composed of a preliminary processes of *anticipating* of an impending crisis (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007), a secondary process of *sense-losing* during which people create a “narrative of duress” (Quinn & Worline, 2008); a central process of *improvising* that requires honest brutal audits and social innovation (O’Grady, 2010); a fourth process of *sense-remaking* during which a social unit creates a “narrative of collective action” (Quinn & Worline, 2008) which leads to *renewing or declining* (Park, 2005).
METHODS

The present study utilized a constructivist ontology, abductive epistemology, a qualitative methodology, and an ecological Framework to explore how resilience is constituted among women survivors of extreme sexual violence, used as a tool of war, within the Democratic Republic of Congo. The study examines resilience processes (e.g., anticipating, sense-losing, improvising, sense-remaking and renewing) during multilevel cosmology episodes.
PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURES

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 adult women survivors of rape as a weapon of war at the HEAL Africa hospital in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Time since rape for participants ranged from 2 months to 12 years. The majority of participants were at least 2 years post rape during the time of the interview. Interviewers were white Social Science researchers trained from the United States. Local clergy and one of the researchers translated between French speaking participants and the English speaking researchers. The interviews were recorded and transcribed; a thematic content analysis was conducted with the interview data.
ANTICIPATING

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ANTICIPATING: BEFORE THE TRIGGERING EVENT

The cosmology episode does not begin with the triggering event, but rather during the anticipating of a cosmology episode, because “the triggering event is only the most visible part of a destabilization process that started long before and that suddenly races out of control under the effect of a specific event” (Roux-Dufort, 2007, p. 111).

A study of cosmology episode must include the investigation of the beliefs, resources and practices that exist prior to the triggering event (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015).
The sexual violence being perpetrated in the DRC is taking place in the context of a protracted and brutal civil conflict that dates back to 1998. The conflict is often referred to as ‘Africa’s World War’ due to the fact that the DRC is inextricably embedded in the larger context of other local conflicts; the proximity of the Rwandan genocide, the Sudanese civil war, the Ugandan civil war, and the Angolan civil war.

“Our country is just a country of war – no peace, no security. Congo was very good because you could just go farming and have anything you need to eat.”

- Translated quote from interview with participant 8.22 I

“There is nothing good in Congo, because once you are raped you feel that is no reason to live – and only wars, no peace.”

- Translated quote from interview with participant 8.22 G
Prior to the trauma of sexual violence, women in the Eastern DRC were already a vulnerable group, as they lived in a high risk, environment, which included the following adversities: extreme poverty, limited educational opportunities, insecurity with an ongoing threat of violence (due to almost twenty years of continued armed conflicts), a dearth of healthcare resources and/or access to them, corrupt leadership within a collapsing and/or weak government, and a patriarchal culture and impunity towards GBSV is the norm.
RESOURCES, BELIEFS, AND PRACTICES

Resources:
* Land * Family * Community * HEAL Africa * and other NGO’s and FBO’s

Beliefs:
* Role and Value of Women * Faith in God * Spiritual Worth

Practices:
* Gathering of Water * Farming * Spiritual Worship and Rituals
BELIEFS ABOUT WOMEN’S WORTH

The way we live in our country, we see that there is corruption. Women are neglected. We seem to have no value.

Women are not respected. (Translated quote from interview with participant 8.31A)

The real challenge in our country is that whenever you go to fetch water, because the source is far away from where people live, and then you will just find, just a man or group of men just follow you and rape you. This is the kind of country we have. The other thing is this, if you know the perpetrator, the one who raped you. Maybe you just report the case, he will be apprehended… but after just one week, you’ll be surprised to see him walking around… Yeah, this happened to me. After a week I saw the perpetrator was released. (Translated quote from interview with participant 8.25D)
SOCIAL SUPPORT RESOURCES: FAMILY

“What I see in Congo is that families are united. Congolese don’t like to go far away from their families. They just want to be there. They don’t want to go; they just want to be with their families.”

- Translated quote from interview with participant 8.24B
Q: “How about the faith of the people of D. R. Congo?”
A: “People love God so much.”
Q: “Sometimes it’s confusing how people love God so much, and yet there’s so much violence. Have you ever thought about that?”
A: “So here we have good people – because we have Satan and we have God. God will say these are not my people, and these are my people. God will choose”

- Translated quote from interview with participant 8.22
SENSE-LOSING

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SENSE- LOSING DEFINED

Sense-losing, as it relates to the process of resilience and post-traumatic transformation, has been studied in terms of the cognitive dissonance a cosmology episode unveils upon a person's global belief system (Orton, 2002). In other words, upon encountering a cosmology episode, in which an individual's appraised meaning of an event cannot be understood within or reconciled by his/her cosmology, or cognitive worldview. Therefore, the individual experiences upheaval, or a falling apart and losing of his/her cognitive reality and ways of making sense of the world. Scholars refer to this cognitive unraveling as “sense-losing” (O’Grady & Orton, 2016; O’Grady et al, 2013).

While sense-losing in its very nature may set the stage for sense-remaking, for some individuals and/or populations, sense-losing may be prolonged. For vulnerable individuals, such as the survivors in this study, who lack resources, support, and/or an environment in which to wrestle with discomfort and confront such upheaval, and who face further ongoing threats to their lives and realities, sense-remaking may be too overwhelming a task. Survival and finding more sustainable ways to live take precedence over sense-remaking, which may lead to risks of ongoing loss of identity, reality, and belonging. In their studies of organizational crisis, Quinn & Worline (2008) noted, “Incomprehensible events tend to strip people of identity, leaving them no sensible narrative to enact …generate feelings like fear, meaningfulness, and disconnection” (Quinn & Worline, 2008, p. 501).
SENSE-LOSING THEMES OF SURVIVORS

LOSS of WORTH

Yeah so I, with all these difficulties, I know that I went through many problems as an orphan first. First of all in addition to being raped and all that then I was thinking with myself that I'm not worthy because I find myself like I have missed the Earth and I have missed Heaven and then I find that I was nowhere.

For sure I was worried because I was helpless… There [was] nowhere for me to go. I don’t know where to go because I was considering myself that I am not on Earth and I am not in Heaven. I am totally abandoned and forsaken. (8.25D)

HOPELESSNESS

I did not know I could recover because in me, I was hopeless, I was down, I was crushed. I was like someone who was in a grave. …I was down and I was in darkness. Nothing good was in my mind. I was thinking that I am dying. (Translated quote from interview with participant 8.24A)

FEAR

I’m very scared to go back there because. There are no counselors there. Plus, I am worried that maybe on the way back again, maybe I can, I can still face the same problem of rape. (Translated quote from interview with participant 8.31B)
IMPROVISING

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After spending the year after the 9/11 attacks studying resilience, an author in the *Harvard Business Review* concluded, “Resilient people…possess three characteristics: a staunch acceptance of reality; a deep belief, often buttressed by strongly held values, that life is meaningful; and an uncanny ability to improvise” (Coutu, 2002, p. 48).

Improvising is an intuitive process that draws upon and revises old meaning while incorporating the changing environment.
THEMES OF IMPROVISING

Emergent themes that represented during improvising included:

(a) Faith
(b) Equanimity
(c) Inspiration
(d) Community programs and resources
FAITH

It is God who is helping me because He is the Almighty. I always believe God gives me strength to work hard, to do some businesses or farming, and then I can find something for my children to eat. …I only believe in God, that I can do all things because it is God who enables me to do. Otherwise, humans are weak, but it is God who gives strengths.

(Translated quote from interview with participant 8.25A)
EQUANIMITY

I’ll always be overwhelmed when I see that I am just alone. So the life of loneliness has really been my dreadful. And it really makes me sad when times I think how lonely I am. And yet I’m still surrendering everything to God”

- Translated quote from interview with Participant 8.25d
“Only when after I was raped I went to the clinic. I never went there again because I was wondering some people were telling me just abort and I said no, I cannot abort. Let the child will grow. I will deliver and the child will grow and he will be helpful to me and to others.”

Translated quote from Participant 8.25G
It was very difficult for me to survive with the children, you know, because with the livelihood. In addition for the two children that I had before, and with the twins, but since when I met with the counselor here [Wamama Simameni Ndoshо], and with the seamstress, we got the opportunity to learn. The first thing is that, yes, I was abandoned, I was raped, and I was very weak – I was hopeless. But through the help I got from HEAL Africa I found, oh, I am still valued. I did not know that I could still be alive. (Translated quote from interview with participant 8.22E)

Yeah… the strength I got was the support from the neighbors because they were the ones who were surrounding me all the times whenever I could be overwhelmed. They could just approach me and come to me and say “ok, our dear sister, don’t worry;” because I was really worried most of the time, but their support, being with me, helped me. Because sometimes I was feeling like I want to leave, but they were really approaching me. This is why I got that strength, with their fellowship. (Translated quote from interview with participant 8.25E)
TRANSFORMATIVE PIVOTS

When I make this [handbag], I can take it to someone and just buy - I’ll just sell it and just buy something for my child to eat and I can just contribute something. In my family, I can also collect some money I’ll give to my family, because I can support myself. …I accepted myself, and it was like a revolution within and inside me. And I refused to remain dependent. I could just use my one hand and just prepare the donuts or fritas on the main road to help my child go to school. …I was not counting myself among other people, that I was valuable. Because I, I supported, I decided that now I need to take a step and go forward and just say it is my life. Definitely, I needed to take a step in my life because I was hopeless and did not love myself. And since then I became alive. No more trauma was in my mind. …before I could not relate my story, but today I am ready to take even a microphone and say before I was like this, but now here I am.

(Translated quote from interview with participant 8.28A)
SENSE—REMAKING AND RENEWAL

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• Moving beyond improvisation, sense-remaking after cosmology episodes is the process by which individuals reconstruct personal and global narratives, reconfigure new meaning and purpose in life, and redefine one’s identity and belonging (O’Grady & Orton, 2015).

• In the Sense-Remaking component of the resilience process, survivors shared and exhibited signs of growth in their actions, sentiments, and lives, including finishing a nursing degree to give back to other survivors receiving hospital treatment.
My faith changed because even my relatives could just chase me and say go far away from us you are smelling bad, but I say that I will keep on serving the Lord. Even though I am smelling bad, but I will keep on having the Holy Communion and everything. My heart was telling me that I just have to serve the Lord. I did not want all this to happen to me but I need to serve the Lord no matter how I am. Because one day Jesus will remember me and I will be like all the others. Because anyone could experience any problem. (Translated quote from interview with participant 8.31C)

Before I got raped, I was praying that God help me get diploma and I was thinking to become a nun. Then I got raped, everything collapsed. But I kept praying, and I thank God because he gave me the skills for business, so I know that I can make my own life.

I can now take some fabrics and make outfits and then go to the tailors, and I can sell. Even though I have a home and have a husband, I want to not be dependent and to have a personal life. This is what really helps me. ...And it’s not good to hide any problem. You need to disclose it. Because this made me to suffer. When I was not disclosing. Because I can speak about it now, I feel this is another strength. (Translated quote from interview with participant 8.27A)
Spirituality and religion offer people a personal and collective belief system that “may uniquely equip individuals to respond to situations in which they come face-to-face with the limits of human power and control and are confronted with their vulnerability and finitude” (Smith, Pargament, Brant, & Oliver, 2000, p. 171).
"The client knows that his African way of meaning-making is marginal and not accepted in the mainstream, because it is deemed unchristian, uncivilized, unscientific and unprogressive. Unless this huddle, of the marginalized, outlawed, and shunned meaning-making system, is removed the best efforts of a competent clinician are wasted. Cultural competence in this case will involve creating a space where the African client, whose discourse has been discredited and dethroned, but remains subliminally active, is allowed to describe, name, relate, express his reality from his vantage point."

- William Guri, 2016


