

Living under the shadow of a parent's criminal past: An exploration of the meaning of being a *génocidaire*'s descendant in Rwanda

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Abstract

In Rwanda, following the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, many people were found guilty of genocide crimes and imprisoned. Their children as a result found themselves in a situation of ambiguous loss. This article presents the multidimensional impact of this situation on the everyday lives of these children and their families according to key themes as they emerged from the findings of an ethnographic study in which twenty-one children and their family members participated. These themes include changed family dynamics and family stress, economic adversity, incomprehension of the parent's criminal past, the social stigma of being a child of a *génocidaire*, and agency of the children in the situation of having *génocidaire* parents. The uniqueness of the ambiguous loss as experienced by descendants of perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda compared to perpetrators of the Holocaust or other crimes, relates to the context of *gacaca* and the severity of crimes committed in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.

Key words

Genocide, imprisonment, *gacaca*, descendants of perpetrators, ambiguous loss, Rwanda

Introduction

Following the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, a big number of suspected perpetrators were arrested, provisionally detained and later judged (or judged without previous detainment). This development broke through the culture of impunity that had typified previous episodes of political violence in Rwanda since 1959 and resulted in a situation of thousands of children with imprisoned parents or parents recently released from prison. Lately, various studies have highlighted the multi-faceted problems that children and young people are grappling with in post-genocide Rwanda. These range from parental loss due mainly to the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and consequent traumatic crises to socio-economic adversities.¹ But, what is happening today in the lives of children of parents accused of genocide crimes, convicted and punished with imprisonment and other penalties, is still largely undocumented. This article aims to contribute to filling this gap with an exploration of the multi-dimensional impact of being a child² of a *génocidaire* in Rwanda on the lives of these descendants, commonly referred to as the “second generation”.

Research on prisoners’ children has mainly been done in the Western world and the US in particular.³ Most of this research points out that parental imprisonment has similar detrimental effects on children’s lives as parents’ divorce, separation or death, and is accompanied by a profound sense of insecurity, confusion, guilt, hyper-vigilance, ineffective coping, etc. The complexity and uncertainty with regard to parental imprisonment creates a specific situation of loss for the children, more precisely, a situation of ambiguous loss.

Ambiguous loss refers to the loss of any loved one in a family who is both there and not there.⁴ The concept captures two types of loss: a physical absence with a psychological presence and a psychological absence with a physical presence. Examples of these kinds of losses are family situations of chronic physical or mental illness, missing persons, divorce or military deployment. Boss theorized about ambiguous loss engendered by her long-time interest in family research and family therapy as a way to better understand family processes, and in particular, family stress and resilience. She defines an ambiguous loss as a loss that remains unclear and identifies that it is this lack of clarity that is potentially traumatizing for individuals and families. Boss’s theoretical premise is that ambiguous loss is the most stressful loss compared to clear-cut losses such as death, because it defies resolution and creates confused perceptions about whether or not the person who is absent in mind and/or body is in or out of the family. Without sufficient clarity, families and their individual members have no choice but to live with the paradox of absence and presence. In this article, we illustrate that members now live a stress- and/or resilience-focused life that is multifactorially determined.

We build on studies of the effects of parental imprisonment on children in general, but in particular on the few studies that have identified and analysed these effects from the perspective of the theory of ambiguous loss.⁵ However, we also draw on the unique realities of post-genocide Rwanda to highlight how the ambiguous-loss experiences of prisoners’ children in other contexts compare to the situation of children of parents imprisoned because of genocidal crimes in Rwanda. The uniqueness of the Rwandan context is particularly due to the severity of the genocide crimes for which parents were convicted as well as the community justice in the form of *gacaca* courts. The courts were established in 2001 by the Rwandan government in order to mete out justice on the perpetrators of genocide and to also alleviate the correctional population in the mid and late 1990s.

The empirical data that inform this article are derived from an ethnographic study that focused on the sequence of phenomena that began shortly after the genocide, which developed from provisional imprisonment in the mid and late 1990s throughout ten years of the *gacaca* process and impacted the lives of all Rwandans. This article examines how the above-mentioned sequence of phenomena shaped the ambiguous-loss experiences of prisoners' children and how they live with that situation in Rwanda today.

After the methodology section that follows, we present the multidimensional impact of ambiguous loss following parental imprisonment for genocide crimes on the everyday life of children and their families according to themes as they emerged from our empirical findings. In the last section, we identify key elements shaping experiences of ambiguous loss that are unique in Rwanda with reference to literature about children of imprisoned parents elsewhere in the world and descendants of Holocaust perpetrators in Germany.

Methodology

The focus of this article is on children whose parents were or still are in prison or *Travaux d'Intérêt Général* (TIG)⁶ camps because of their involvement in the genocide against the Tutsi. The empirical data that inform this article were collected in the southeast area – Nyamata Sector, Bugesera District – between September 2008 and December 2012, mainly by the lead author (often joined by the second author). The pre-genocide Tutsi population of this region was decimated. Consequently a significant number of *génocidaires* and their descendants could be found there.

There were 21 main respondents, 14 females and seven males, aged 10-42 years, living in two adjacent neighbourhoods. Three of the 21 respondents belonged to one family, the others to distinct families. Most of the study participants had one parent (a mother) who had participated in a community-based sociotherapy program that has been implemented in the area since 2008.⁷ The respondents were selected consecutively through purposeful sampling via sociotherapists, mothers and a snowball technique. To evaluate the validity as well as the scale of the effects on a child's life of being a *génocidaire* descendant, we sought the views of parent(s), grandparents, and siblings. In total, we collected in-depth views on the dynamics of 19 families. Data collection techniques included participant observation, individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGD) and home visits.

The data from FGDs and some individual interviews were audio recorded. All data, including field notes from home visits and other informal conversations with the main respondents and key informants, were transcribed and translated from Kinyarwanda into English. The data organization and coding was done manually and electronically using ATLAS.ti 7 software. The coding and analysis drew on research findings and data categories from other contexts about the effects on the children of parental imprisonment and/or of being a descendant of a perpetrator. Nevertheless, since the lives of prisoners' children are still largely undocumented in post-genocide Rwanda (particularly after the *gacaca* process), in our data analysis we also generated context-specific themes.

All participants in this study gave oral consent. The first author received permission for this research by the then National University of Rwanda as well local district authorities. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. This study is limited since the unfolding of the genocide and the phenomena that followed (namely the arrests and *gacaca* courts trials of suspects) tend to reflect geographic specificities that make this study's findings not

generalizable. A small sample of mainly rural participants with a low education may not be representative of the lives of all *génocidaires*' descendants across Rwanda. Nevertheless, the children's narratives in this study give general indications about the experiences of inheriting the legacy of genocide perpetration and living as a *génocidaire*'s descendant in Rwanda. Some of our respondents, who were young children when one or both of their parents were first arrested in the mid and late 1990s, were teenagers or young adults when we interviewed them. Therefore, their memories of (first) parental imprisonment were generally narrated by their older siblings.

Findings

Our findings follow the chronology of happenings/events including provisional detention and release, *gacaca* trials, (re-)imprisonment, and other sentencing (TIG in particular) that typified the aftermath of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and gradually led to the emergence of the children experiencing parents in prison and eventually being the child of a *génocidaire* phenomenon. We describe each stage/event and the dimensions of the attendant ambiguous loss for the child in post-genocide Rwanda. The findings are presented in order of the following topics: changed family dynamics and family stress, struggling with economic adversity, the child's incomprehension of a parent's criminal past, social stigma of being the child of a *génocidaire*, and agency among children and their *génocidaire* parents.

Changed Family Dynamics and Family Stress

In post-genocide Rwanda, like elsewhere in the world, the physical absence at home of a parent due to imprisonment triggers major changes in the lives of the family members left behind. A prominent change is the adjustment of roles, positions and interactions with each other, which Boss⁸ refers to as boundary ambiguity. While ambiguous loss is a stressor situation, boundary ambiguity is a perceptual response. A core assumption of the theory of ambiguous loss is that the higher the degree of boundary ambiguity the more negative the outcomes. The following section demonstrates that these outcomes are distinct for young children compared to older ones.

In Rwanda, there are many children whose parents were imprisoned in the mid and late 90s when they were not yet born or when they were still too young to fully comprehend the physical absence of a parent at home, much less the reason for the parental imprisonment. In certain families caught in this situation, the older siblings or remaining parent or grandparents took control of the situation. They used their 'creativity' in finding explanations to give to the young children about the physical absence of one or both parents. Family members assumed that finding a suitable explanation for the little ones would not only calm them temporarily, but also quench further attempts to raise questions about the whereabouts of the absent parent(s). However, as it has been documented in other contexts, caregiver attempts to clarify parental absence due to imprisonment by giving vague explanations or avoiding talking about it altogether can lead to the child having increased stress, and eventually result in family and individual dysfunction. Serena's story serves as an exemplar of this situation.

In 1996, Serena was arrested and imprisoned because of her involvement in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. Serena left her two-year old daughter, Mwiza with older children and their grandmother. Since Mwiza was often crying, at some point the older siblings and grandmother told her, "Shut up your mother has died!"

From that moment on, one of the older children (the one included in our respondents) recalled that Mwiza never cried again. Mwiza ran away from home barely two years after her mother had returned home. She did not want to live with her mother again.

As time went by, silence and lies about imprisoned parental whereabouts were exposed as children grew up and started to understand their family dynamics. For some young children, who had been born shortly before or after the imprisonment of one or both of their parents, parental absence was not as evident or problematic as one might expect since they believed and treated older siblings or grandparents as fathers or mothers. In most cases, children were told that their real parents were dead or nothing was said at all. Munyana's family is one example.

Munyana is a 59-year-old mother of ten children whose husband was sentenced to life imprisonment. Her youngest son, Murengera, was born a few months after her husband was imprisoned because of his involvement in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. "He grew up thinking that my first born, Musangwa, was his father and he used to call him 'Daddy'!" Munyana said. However, one day Murengera cried and as usual he called for his older brother, who became angry. Eventually, Musangwa yelled at his younger brother, "I am not your father! Stop calling me your father. Your father is not here, he is in prison!" In this case, attempts to conceal the truth about the father's whereabouts and the reason of his imprisonment had not only overwhelmed the older brother, but also changed his youngest brother's understanding of the dynamics of his family relations.

Another example of changed family dynamics is the case of Mutoni, a 57-year-old mother of seven children whose husband was sentenced to 28 years in prison by a *gacaca* court because of his involvement in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. In 1995, when Mutoni was two months pregnant with her last born, Tresor, her husband was arrested and imprisoned for the first time. About nine years later, her husband was temporarily released, while Tresor was in his second year of primary school, but he had never known his father. "A child who was born in such situation never accepts his/her father no matter what you do!" said Mutoni. She continued:

Tresor does not accept his father because he does not know him. Even when the father tells him "come here" and wants to treat him like his son, the child does not want him; he does not know him. In that case, the father is saddened by a child that does not accept him, and the child becomes a rebel who does not recognize his own father! When the father went to bed, Tresor did not accept it and he asked, "Who is this man, mother?" And even when his father asked him to give him a cup of water, the boy would say, "Why should I give water to this man when I don't know him?"

The long absence of parents/father in family life means that children like Tresor lose parental socialization, which is particularly difficult for older children with no substitute father. Some children of imprisoned *génocidaire* fathers who do not have parental control, role modelling and supervision, in some cases end up dropping out of school. Some of our respondents partially attributed children's dropping out of school to the family's economic situation. Although some claimed to have dropped out because of poverty, for others the motivation was their lack of interest in education possibly due to a lack of discipline. One example of this situation was given by Donata, a 61-year-old mother of seven children whose husband has been sentenced

to 30 years in prison because of his involvement in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. Donata reported that her children did not take her word seriously as they would have done with their father's. "Had he been here, he would have yelled at them 'go back to school stupid people'! And they would have done so!" she said. On the other hand, the lack of motivation to pursue schooling may have been due to the fact that the children did not find their fathers to be a role model of excellence, especially because of their fathers' involvement in the genocide. They hence problematize the need to continue school, as claimed by Kamanzi, a 64-year old mother of four children whose two sons dropped out of school following the sentencing of their father to life imprisonment by *gacaca*.

The case studies in this section point to differences in the way a parent is psychologically present for a child after imprisonment as well as differences in how a parent is again physically present in the family setting following release and is then accepted or not by their child. More of these differences, particularly in the way the psychological presence of a father is problematized in the post-genocide context, will be highlighted below.

Struggling with Economic Adversity

Following the imprisonment of *génocidaire* parents, mostly fathers, children experience their father's physical absence at home as an ambiguous orphanhood status with some economic implications. Many respondents reported that a main challenge was to live as an orphan when they were not. Julius, a 19-year-old young man had a father sentenced to 10 years in prison. Julius told us, "what is actually difficult for us, is to live a life without a parent especially when he is there; you live like an orphan when you are not really one." This feeling of being ambiguously orphaned is arguably typified by the fact that although the father is physically absent, he is psychologically present and most notably his genocide crimes and their consequences are interfering with children and family lives not only socially but also financially.

As documented for children with an imprisoned parent who used to be a breadwinner (usually the father) in the US⁹, a common consequence is the dire economic situation of the family left behind, which adds to the family's stress. This also takes a toll on the children's psychosocial wellbeing, particularly when they must participate in additional income-generating and household tasks. Most of the older children in our sample, both genders, reported working hard to compensate for their parent's absence. "You realize that you have to do everything yourself, and because of doing many things I get very tired. It is very difficult!" Francois a 19-year-old boy whose father has been sentenced to 19 years in prison reported. What increases these children's frustration and anger mainly toward their responsible criminal parents, is that, in addition they also in some ways have to care of the latter in prison.

In the mid and late 1990s prison visits was a task mainly performed by women.¹⁰ However, as time went by, in some families this family responsibility was gradually taken over by children. Hence, some prisoners' wives such as Kamanzi (referred to above), who has been visiting her husband since the mid 1990s, gradually handed over this responsibility to their children who were much younger and stronger. Like in other contexts mainly in the US, it is well documented that prison visits usually interfere with family functioning and weigh on the visitors both physically and psychologically.¹¹

Having a father or a husband in prison is like having a second home to take care of, our respondents stated. It weighs heavily on family financial resources. Some prisoners' wives provided better food to their imprisoned husbands than what they gave to the children at home, which sparked anger and incomprehensibility among these children. For instance, Domina reported that each time her children noticed that she was getting ready to visit her husband in prison the children started to complain about the bad food they would be having in the days leading to and following the prison visit. She said, "They [children] start to tell me, 'mum are we going to eat cassava pasta again? What has he [husband/father] done for us?' In that case I immediately halt my preparation for the visit and then change their diet to calm them down!"

Since many *génocidaires* not only killed people but also looted and destroyed their victims' properties, they consequently have to pay reparation for the damages caused in 1994. When people sentenced to pay reparations are unable to do so personally, because they are in prison, dead or disappeared, it is their family members who have to take over. The sums of money families which participated in this study had to pay as a result of the damages caused during the genocide against the Tutsi ranged from 30,000 Rwandan Francs approximately 34 US Dollars to 5,000,000 Rwandan Francs approximately 5,665 US Dollars. For the children, paying reparation on behalf of their *génocidaire* parents not only exacerbated their anger toward the latter but also their sense of incomprehensibility as it will be explored in the following section.

The Child's Incomprehension of a Parent's Criminal Past

It was through *gacaca* trials that most of the children, particularly those who were still young in the 1990s, learned why one or both of their parents were already in prison before *gacaca* started or were being re-imprisoned or sent to TIG camps. Some of the children revealed to us during the interviews in their home (and their mothers concurred) that on the day of their parents'/father's trials they did not go to school and instead went to *gacaca* gatherings. What the children learned about their parents at the *gacaca* trials translated into a heavy burden typified by numerous unanswered questions for the children. The respondents told us that what they heard about their parent at the trials made them feel marked by a past they did not understand. As Daria, a 20-year-old girl, reported,

The fact that he [her father] took part in the genocide is so difficult for me to imagine. I try to think of the reasons he did it but I cannot find any. Today when I think about it, it is beyond my understanding! I cry when I think of how genocide was a time of pain and sadness!

Even when parents were already dead, their children's everyday life was still dominated by questions about their parents' involvement in the genocide, which only the latter could have answered. "Yes, if he was still alive, I would ask him many questions!" complained Melisa, a 25-year-old single mother of two children, whose Tutsi mother was killed by her own father in 1994. Melisa's father died in 2006 after having spent nine years in prison. Echoing Melisa's incomprehension about her father's atrocities during the genocide, Rebecca, a 42-year-old widow with two children, told about her father's involvement in the genocide, which has left her and the rest of her family deeply frustrated, "If he was here now I would tell him, 'You, if in the first place you had not gotten involved in the genocide and looted other people's properties, we would not be having any problem today!'"

Other children turned their frustration and incomprehensibility towards their mothers like in the case of Lea, a 48-year-old mother of three children. Lea's youngest daughter, Mukamana, was surprised by her father's guilty verdict in a local *gacaca* court, because he had assured his family that he was innocent following a temporary release from prison. Mukamana then angrily turned to her mother Lea for an explanation, "Has dad also killed people? How many? Did you know about it?" For Lea's children, the father they thought they knew was actually someone else, a *génocidaire*. The children's reaction to their father's conviction and subsequent re-imprisonment indicated that they believed that he was actually a *génocidaire*.

Today in Rwanda there are thousands of children whose dead or imprisoned parents have left their children feeling frustrated as were Rebecca, Melisa and Mukamana. This was not only because they could not understand or explain what the parents had done during the genocide, but also because they could not avoid the consequences of their parents' actions at the time. The children's incomprehension adds to their ambiguous loss since there is no closure or finality to the consequences of their parent's role in the genocide.

What this section showed is that finding meaning in one's loss is especially difficult when the loss is shrouded in ambiguity and that children are likely to accept the truth of ambiguity better when information is shared with them.

The Social Stigma of Being the Child of a *Génocidaire*

Most of the children who participated in this study reported that after discovering, mainly through *gacaca* courts, that their parents are guilty of genocide crimes, they tend to live a life of social withdrawal – mainly self-imposed due to feelings of shame. As a result, these children would prefer that their parent's consequent imprisonment remains a secret, but since the majority of imprisoned people were tried and sentenced in public by *gacaca* courts, this is unlikely, at least in their immediate living environment. Following *gacaca* hearings, the children of convicted parents had become de facto descendants of *génocidaires*. The parents' exposed criminal past became a troubling reality, which from that day forward would be a defining factor in their social lives. As one child of a convicted and imprisoned father said during an interview, "you don't know what it is like to be a child of a killer."

The tendency of *genocidaires'* descendant to isolate themselves becomes one of the defining factors of their social lives. For instance, knowing from the start whether or not a colleague or a classmate is also a child of an imprisoned *génocidaire* is one of the key factors they consider when forging relationships, or engaging in a conversation. They do not feel comfortable with those who cannot understand what they are experiencing. They have to be careful when choosing whom they associate with and (especially) who should know that one or both of their parents were or currently are in prison. Julius, a fifty-year secondary school student, reported following his father's sentencing to 10 years in prison by *gacaca*.

There are many groups in schools. There are those in which I cannot join and say that my father is in prison. They would fear me and start to say that I am a son of a killer. As you can understand, I cannot say anything I want there!

Children claimed that telling a person who was not in the same situation as theirs could also cause a difficult conversation, thus leading to further (mainly) self-imposed isolation. The stigma generated by parents' criminal past and subsequent imprisonment, children shared, was overshadowing their future family life as

well. Solange, Daria's mother, wondered whether her daughter might find a marriage partner at all. While reflecting on the potential damage her husband's criminal past might have caused her daughter's chances of finding a suitable husband in the years to come, she said "Who knows, maybe no one may want a daughter of a *génocidaire*."

In attempts to evade life-long damage that the social and self-imposed stigma of being a *génocidaire* descendant may cause, some children have taken radical steps such as changing their family names. We have observed cases of prisoners' children who 'secretly' attempted to change their names to cut off any remaining connection with their guilty parents. Joshua, for instance, an 18-old young man in the fifth year of secondary school, was born in late the 1990s when his father was already in prison. He only came to know his father when he was temporarily released from prison in 2003. Until then, Joshua had lived with other family members namely his grandparents and, a few years after his temporary release the father was found guilty of genocide crimes and sentenced to 25 years by *gacaca*. A few years after Joshua moved to another school, a family friend informed his mother that her son had been registering for school under his grandfather's name. "He wants the name of my father!" the mother said. Attempts to secretly change names are likely to be motivated by the grandfathers being the only 'real' fathers the children have known. It is also highly possible that carrying an 'untainted' name of a grandfather makes the child feel socially better. Here ambiguous loss is also causing a loss of immediate family identity including one's family name, which has potential legal and administrative complications based on registration in Rwandan government records and other benefits based on family ties, e.g., property rights.

Stigma, mainly self-imposed stigma is arguably the most difficult consequence of being a *génocidaire*'s descendant; these children have had to deal with. However, as the case of Joshua demonstrates and, it will be explored further in the next section, these children are not passive of observers, they are also active agents, because, as one of the Nazis' children said, "Children cannot... divorce their fathers"¹².

Agency among children and their *génocidaire* parents

It has to be noted that most of the parents who had been temporarily released had assured their families, children included, that they were either fully innocent or that they had given a genuine and complete confession. Therefore the emergence of new allegations for which eventually their parents were convicted and imprisoned again, in most cases, left their children in a more ambivalent situation than before, torn between parents' version of their (non)involvement in the genocide and the verdicts of the *gacaca* trials that ended in imprisonment.

Children of (mostly) imprisoned *génocidaires*, however, are not just passive observers but they can also be active agents as the case of Joshua already illustrated. Some children in our sample manifested agency particularly during and after their parent's sentencing. Their agency confirms that the relationships between *génocidaire* parents and their descendants cannot be viewed only as victimhood and disassociation from a parent. Other factors, namely *gacaca* tenets and the desire of rediscovering a normal family life produce multiple readings of the situation of imprisoned *génocidaires*' children. In addition, the collision between children's desires and convicted parents' interpretations of *gacaca* provisions namely confessions suggests that the legacy of being a *génocidaire* burdens the parents as much as it does to their children. The following two cases testify to that.

Emma was a teenage girl when her father was temporarily released in 2003. She and her youngest brother Tresor (both are Mutoni's children) were happy to have him back home, even though the beginning of the relationship between the father and his youngest son was very difficult as explained earlier. By the time Emma's father was summoned before the *gacaca* courts, she and her siblings had again built a strong bond with their father. Their father's appearance before *gacaca* not only brought fear to the family (particularly for the children) over the possibility of his imprisonment, but it also raised the children's interest in the deeds of their father as well as of his generation, as was described in the previous section.

As a result, on the day Emma's father was tried by *gacaca* instead of going to school she chose to attend his trial. "I went there because I felt ashamed!" Emma said. "I wanted to hear the unkindness of those people of that time!" Emma's father had been temporarily released because his confessions had been deemed sincere and complete, but when he appeared before *gacaca* new and serious allegations about killing a man from his village emerged. Although Emma's father categorically refuted the new allegations, he was subsequently re-sentenced to 28 years in prison.

According to Emma, at that time (before TIG was established), when the accused accepted the accusation, asked forgiveness and showed remorse, he/she could be set free by the court. However, her father chose not to ask for forgiveness or show remorse, much to the dismay of his children. Up until today, Emma still questions her father about his decision to go to prison rather than ask for forgiveness. The choice or the stubbornness of the father still baffles Emma and her siblings.

Emma is now married with a five-year-old son. Her father's choice became even more difficult to understand for her when her wedding preparations began. It is still a strong tradition in Rwanda that parents, namely the father, have the final word in whether the marriage of their child goes ahead or not. In a situation of an imprisoned father, some children have had to take their would-be spouses to prison with them, not only to symbolically receive permission to proceed with their weddings, but also to keep up with the tradition and by so doing keep the father at least psychologically in the dynamics of family life. Emma's mother did not specifically send her to prison to ask permission for her marriage, rather she sent Emma to inform her father about the wedding and ask him whether the family should sell a piece of land to raise the money needed for the wedding. "When I told him that a man asked for my hand and that I was getting married, he became very sad!" Emma said.

Claire was still a young child when both of her parents and three uncles were arrested and imprisoned because of their involvement in the genocide. When the confession campaign began in prison, her mother Serena confessed and was eventually released. However, Claire's father refused to confess or to accept the accusations that were levelled against him. Claire, as the oldest daughter, used to go to *gacaca* to see her father when he was summoned to appear before the court. Claire's father was found guilty of genocide crimes and eventually sentenced to 30-years in prison. For Claire and her siblings it was incomprehensible that their father would not act like their mother so that both parents could re-join their children since other prisoners had done it as well. Claire and her siblings confronted their father with the same question as Emma did, "Why did you not confess?"

In these two cases presented above, the fathers chose to go against the *gacaca* proposed way—to admit to being guilty and become a remorseful man or woman, who not only wants to be out of prison, but also help the society in the process of dealing with a violent past by telling the truth about what happened and by eventually asking for forgiveness. All of our respondents, unlike in what was observed elsewhere with some descendants of high profile perpetrators¹³strongly disavow the genocide ideology of their parents' generation and its execution in 1994 against the Tutsi.

Discussion

The results of our ethnographic study have demonstrated that being in a situation of ambiguous loss has had a multidimensional impact on the daily lives of descendants of people who committed genocide crimes in 1994 in Rwanda and are likely to continue to taint these lives for years to come. The various effects of having a parent in prison on the children's physical, emotional, social and economic wellbeing are interconnected.

For the children of convicted parents in our sample the situation of parental imprisonment was compounded by the status of the parent as a *génocidaire* and in so doing has uniquely amplified the ambiguous loss experience observed among prisoners' children elsewhere in the world. It has been suggested that people suffering from ambiguous loss, particularly children with a parent in prison, may resist clarifying information because accepting all information means identifying one's parent as a criminal and therefore bad.¹⁴ However, by the time we met with the children in our sample, they had already known the crimes their parents were in prison for; mainly because of *gacaca* trials, some of which had taken place a few meters from their homes or schools.

In Rwanda, the damage caused by parental imprisonment has continued to affect family dynamics even when the parent has come back from prison. It has been established that when long-term prisoners are back home, they feel like strangers and are equally treated as such by their loved ones.¹⁵ This is also the case in Rwanda, particularly with young children who never or hardly knew their parents before imprisonment which only compounds their ambiguous loss.

The agency of the children in our sample to act against constraining socio-legal structures to obtain first-hand information about what their parents were accused of and why they were sent back to prison, fits with common practice among people experiencing ambiguous loss to seek clarity. It has been argued that the failure to achieve clarity about the whereabouts of a loved one or parent one has never met or for long did not know existed at all further contributes to ambiguity and emotional ambivalence.¹⁶ For the children in this study though, it is the knowing that resulted in more confusion and ambivalence instead of the positive psychological presence of the parent.

By enabling a large number of *génocidaire* descendants to formally learn about what their parents did in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, sometimes against the wishes of these parents, the *gacaca* courts that began less than a decade after the genocide symbolized a distinctive factor in the lives of these children and the generations that will follow them. This is in contrast with the experience of some Nazi descendants, mainly from the second and third generations, who have accidentally (in most cases) discovered several decades after the Holocaust that their parents or grandparents participated in the atrocities.¹⁷ *Gacaca* took place when most of the children born just before or after the genocide were at the “peak” of their individual and social

development, at a stage and in a socio-cultural context where fatherhood and family are still crucial elements. Hence (some) children's ambivalent perceptions of their parent's imprisonment and consequent status of *génocidaire* suggests that relationships between imprisoned fathers and their descendants are complex, not always epitomized by anger and dissociation.

Various studies have demonstrated the multiple ways that prisoners' children manifest their emotional stress, ranging from internalizing the stress, displaying withdrawal behaviour and crying, to externalizing stress, displaying acting out behaviour including hostile behaviour, using drugs or alcohol, running away from home and school.¹⁸ In our study, we found more internalizing than externalizing behaviour. However, our sample was too small to draw any conclusions from these findings.

It has been suggested that behavioral problems observed among prisoners' children associated with parent criminality create a situation that put the former at risk of becoming a criminal and being imprisoned.¹⁹ Participants in our study, mainly from rural areas, showed no indication of following their convicted parents mainly because of the deterrent nature of the *gacaca* process and also, it appeared to us, because they are keen on being seen as distinct from their parents.

We did notice substantial anger among children whose convicted *génocidaire* parents were either in prison for a long time or who have since died in or out of prison. These children (now young adults) are incapable of understanding the previous generation's motives for violence and managing the resulting consequences. Like Nazi descendants, *génocidaires'* children in Rwanda are overpowered by events they neither participated in nor understood but which have nevertheless become theirs to explain and follow them all their lives. This situation was illustrated by the experience of a son of a member of *Nazi Schutzstaffel* (Protection Squadron) commonly known as SS, "To discover that you are the son of a murderer is worse than having been a murderer yourself... What can the son do but enumerate his father's crimes and drag the millstone with him all through life?"²⁰ Therefore, we suggest that ambiguous loss can also cause anger and unresolved anger that prevents closure. The number of years that these children and families have lived with ambiguous loss is staggering and whether or not this will affect the grandchildren of the *génocidaires* as occurred with the *Nazis*, is yet to be determined.

It was the *gacaca* process that became the main channel through which children of alleged *génocidaires* publicly learnt about what happened in 1994 and their parent's role in it. The *gacaca* courts were also the channels through which the first generation's stories and traumatic experiences were vividly relived, and possibly marked the beginning of the process of passing on the legacy of perpetration from one generation to the next.

Our findings establish that becoming known as a *génocidaire's* child goes beyond nominal considerations. It is a phenomenon that has invaded and affected every aspect of the children's lives today and is expected to continue in years to come. For *génocidaires'* descendants, the crimes committed by their incarcerated parents have heightened their sense of stigma that is normally associated with an imprisoned parent, and seriously undermines the children's socio-cultural expectations such as for marriage. In post-genocide Rwanda, as with descendants of Holocaust perpetrators, the shame brought to their lives by their parents' criminal past leads to a sense of fear and insecurity related to their future life, expressed in a variety of decisions, actions and anticipations.

In Rwanda, children and parents (mostly mothers) are concerned about what the legacy of parents' involvement in the genocide may mean for their children's future. This is especially true in a socio-cultural context, such as Rwanda, where expectations for marriage and childbearing are normally high. It has been observed that, "when loss combines with ambiguity, there is no closure and the rupture continues until a perceptual shift restores relations, meaning, and hope."²¹ For descendants like Melissa and Rebecca, the rupture in family relations continues even after the death of the parent, and this has been the experience of many children of perpetrators of genocide who have died.

What is at issue in the above is what Cavalli²² describes as "indigestible" facts, the fabric of trauma, which generates deadly ghosts and mental voids that are transmitted from one generation to the next. What Cavalli identifies here relates to one of the core assumptions of the ambiguous loss theory, namely that with situations of ambiguous loss, truth is unattainable and thus relative. As this study showed, *génocidaires'* children everyday goal is to find meaning in the situation they are in, despite the absence of information and persisting ambiguity.

Endnotes

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2. In this study, a child is understood in the biological sense, being a *génocidaire*’s offspring and not as human being below a certain age. The age of ‘children’ who participated in this study ranges from 10 to 42 years.
3. Erika L. Bocknek and Jessica Sanderson and Preston A. Britner IV, “Ambiguous loss and posttraumatic stress in school-age children of prisoners,” *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 18, no. 3 (2009): 323-33.
4. Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
5. Bocknek and Sanderson and Britner IV, “Ambiguous loss and posttraumatic stress in school-age children of prisoners,” 323-33.
6. Travaux d’Intérêt Général (TIG) (*Works for General Interest*) was introduced in 2005 as an alternative punishment for inmates who confessed to their crimes in the genocide and asked forgiveness. These works have the mission to render justice/punishment, and to foster unity and reconciliation, social reintegration and development. Makeshift camps for inmates doing TIG are seen across the country. Inmates do various activities including building roads, bridges, schools, and houses for genocide survivors.
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15. Grounds and Jamieson, "No sense of an ending" 347-62.
16. Boss, *Ambiguous loss*, 1999.
17. Katrin Himmler, *The Himmler brothers: A German family history* (London: Basingstoke, 2005).
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20. Sansal, *An unfinished business*, 2008, 220.
21. Boss, "Ambiguous loss theory: Challenges for scholars and practitioners," 105-11, 108.
22. Alessandra Cavalli, "Transgenerational transmission of indigestible facts: from trauma, deadly ghosts and mental voids to meaning-making interpretations," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 57, no. 11 (2012): 597-614.