

Unfolding the lived experience of children born of genocidal rape in Rwanda

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Abstract

Rape is an ancient weapon of genocide, and one of the legacies of genocide are the children born of rape. This study examines the question, from a hermeneutic philosophical perspective, what it is to be a child born of genocidal rape. The main argument of this study is that for young adults born of rape, it is through the process of understanding and constructing the meaning of their life experiences, including the circumstances in which they were, conceived that their personal and collective identities are formed.

The paper adopts a qualitative exploratory cross-sectional design with a phenomenological approach. Ten Rwandan young adults born of genocidal rape aged 22 were identified using a purposeful sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted. Five themes emerged from the analysis of their narratives. Young people described their experience of being conceived through genocidal rape in term of the process of and intersectionality in their identity formulation. Difficult childhoods marked with abuse triggered the need to know who they were. The discovery of the truth about their birth origins led to reactions such as shame and guilt related to the assigned identity of being a “child of a perpetrator.” In the middle of the complex relationships with both sides of their families and community members in which they were involved, they found support from the young people with whom they shared the same experience. In addition, these young people took the opportunity of a conducive social and political context to shape their preferred identity as “Rwandans” and reject assigned identities such as “little Interahamwe.” The paper concludes that in a conducive social and political context, the children of genocidal rape can be empowered to construct their narratives and preferred identities as equal members of society.

1. Introduction

There is considerable empirical evidence on rape as a systematic strategy of warfare.¹⁻⁵ The International Criminal Tribunals for both Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia have recognised rape as a crime against humanity, torture and genocide.⁶⁻⁸ There seems to be a consensus that rape has complex effects not only on its primary victim, but also on the wider society.⁷⁻⁹ Yet while rape has gained increased attention from scholars in different fields, the focus has been mostly on women as primary victims.¹⁰⁻¹⁴ Considering that the impact of rape goes beyond the primary victim,¹⁴ there is a need to extend the attention to other victims. One of these groups directly affected but often neglected in both scholarship and practice are children born as a result of rape. Van Ee and Kleber¹⁵ argued that while the birth of a child is never a crime against the child, the latter is victimised through the crime committed against the mother.

The case of children born of rape in the context of genocide is complex. These offspring are vulnerable to various threats from the time they are conceived, during pregnancy and delivery.^{12,15} Scholars have documented the complex family and societal conditions in which they grow up, including poor parenting and strained relationships with the wider family, stigma and discrimination, and undermined rights.^{11,14-15} While most children are raised by their mothers - and may not even know their fathers - in most cases, the fathers' identity is imposed on the children, who carry the shame and guilt associated with the fathers' crime.^{7,16-18} As result of these pressures, children might have physical and mental problems, less access to the available socio-economic opportunities, and in turn be less able to contribute to their society. In wider research, childhood stress has been associated with negative health outcomes that can be passed on from generation to generation,¹⁹⁻²¹ making these challenges specific to the offspring of genocidal rape, as well as to the general community in which they live.

The importance of an in-depth understanding of the experience and needs of these children cannot be overemphasised. Most of what we know about them is drawn from mothers' perspectives and conceptual analysis of what could be the effects of rape on children.^{11-12,22} The insufficiency of empirical knowledge from the child's perspective could be, in part, explained by the time it often takes for children to learn about their birth circumstances and their ability to share their experience, as well as for researchers to adapt their research to be accessible to the younger children. It could also be due to the ethical issues of doing empirical work with young vulnerable people. The available studies included young people aged between 14 to 21, and have focused on certain aspects of their experience, including their relational and psychological needs, the process of disclosure and learning their birth circumstances, as well as interventions that could be of use in this population.^{16-18 23-4} However, there is still a need of an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of offspring of genocidal rape survivors, the meanings that emerge from their experiences and how they have informed the formation of their identity and adult lives.

This study aims to build on this research on children born of rape, in the specific context of genocide, by answering an ontological question of what it is to be a child born of sexual violence. This fundamental question is explored from a hermeneutic philosophical perspective that seeks to understand ways of being.²⁵ Adopting this philosophical lens, a retrospective exploration of the lived experiences of young Rwandan adults, aged 22 years old, born of genocidal rape, was conducted. The findings of this study provide insights into the context in which these young adults have constructed experiences and meanings of what it is to be a child born of genocidal rape. The findings highlight the need and emergence of interventions that create a conducive family and social context that protect and facilitate the child's development. The study also highlights the need to understand the experience of this population from their own perspective and structure interventions accordingly. In this vein, the findings

emphasise the importance of looking at identity formation beyond the dominant assigned ones of perpetrator or victim to the formation of a new identity through the construction of meaning of ones' experience and creation of a personal narrative. This narrative becomes more meaningful when it is shared with others in similar situations and supported by the community and the country as a whole.

The paper shows how the political endeavour in Rwanda to construct a national identity has helped to create a conducive environment in which these young people have been able to construct new identities that are not tied to notions of being a perpetrator or a victim. This challenges one of the dominant views in the literature on Rwanda, which argues that the push to establish a Rwandan identity has been used as a means of control and a way to paper over divisions.²⁶ This work with young people born of rape shows how a national identity has helped to create a crucial space for them to construct their own sense of belonging. Intersectionality is highlighted throughout the process of identity formation. However, it should be noted that this process of forming new personal identities will take continued efforts from various stakeholders, including social groups, as seen in the support offered among the young people included in this study. In building this argument, the study contributes to the debate on the benefit of a national identity for Rwandans. In addition, it offers a young adult's perspective, highlighting the importance for them of knowing about and sharing the truth about their birth origins. In this vein, our findings nuance the discussion on these young people's desire to conceal their experiences.²⁷ Rather than wanting to conceal their identity as children born of rape, participants in this study sought opportunities to construct a new identity. A conducive socio-political environment and the notion of "being Rwandan" helped them to do this.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological method. The method derives from a constructivist worldview that believes that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and develop various perspectives and meaning from their experience.²⁸ Hence, the method allows an exploration of the lived experience of young adults born of genocidal rape in Rwanda and the meanings they attach to these experiences and as a result, how they define their own identity. It also helped explore the intersectionality in shaping their lived experiences. As will be argued in this paper, it is through the process of understanding and constructing the meaning of one's experience that the assigned narratives of victim and perpetrator identities could be challenged and altered, and that new identity could emerge from the narrative authored by the offspring themselves.

2.1 A post-genocide setting

The participants of this study were first identified through 'Solidarité pour l'Épanouissement des Veuves et des Orphelins Visant le Travail et l'Auto promotion' (SEVOTA) and Abasa Association. SEVOTA is a Rwandan non-government organisation that started on 28 December 1994 in Taba and expanded its activities at the national level in 2003. The organisation provides a platform for the community, including women survivors of genocidal rape and their offspring, to come together, discuss and analyse, as well as address their own problems. In particular, SEVOTA has contributed to bringing together the women survivors of genocidal rape and their offspring and helped them through the process of addressing the issues around rape, including facilitating the disclosure of the circumstances of their children's conception. Abasa, which translates as "We are the same," is an association of women survivors of genocidal rape located in the southern province of Rwanda in the Huye District. The association members live together in a village built and donated to the association members by the Rwandan First Lady, Janette Kagame. Some of these women live with their adult children born of genocidal rape. The leader of each organisa

tion was approached to explain the purpose of the study, to request permission to conduct research in their respective institutions and to help recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria of the study. These criteria were female and male offspring born of genocidal rape, who were aware of the circumstances in which they were born and were willing to share their experiences. The organisations were requested to search for young adults with different family and socioeconomic backgrounds. Ten participants from the two institutions were recruited using the purposeful sampling approach and all participants signed a written consent form. Given the sensitivity of the topic, participants were informed of measures that would be used in case the interview led to emotions that needed additional support and management; these included the right to discontinue the interview and withdraw from the study at any point, as well as a referral to psycho-social support if needed.

Participants decided where they wanted to be interviewed and private space was arranged accordingly. All participants chose locations outside of their communities, highlighting the importance of the initial interviews being understood to be a private and anonymised exchange. Transport was provided to all in order for them to travel to their selected location. An interview guide with broad open-ended question was developed and used to guide the individual interviews. The opening question invited participants to introduce themselves and to share their stories, with a focus on what it is to be a child born of genocidal rape. Follow-up questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate/clarify as needed. Each participant was interviewed following the interview guide, but with flexibility to ensure participants told their story as they wished to. Interviews lasted between 29 and 58 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and then translated into English. Field notes were also transcribed.

2.2 Data analysis and discussion

Data analysis followed the steps proposed by Creswell.²⁸⁻²⁹ To get a general sense of the findings, its structure, and the quality of the empirical material, I listed and read through all the data many times. Through this process, I highlighted and noted initial thoughts on a possible analysis. After this, I proceeded with an in-depth reading of each transcript and organised data by chunks that convey meanings, and assigned codes. Data on similar topics were clustered to form categories that continued to be revised and reorganised. From these categories, five themes were developed, refined and described using the quotes from the data under related codes. The emergent themes were: first, experiences of a difficult childhood, second, the centrality of discovering one's origins, third, the description of complex relationships, fourth, the effects of the experience, and finally, an articulation that life goes on, implying progress made toward resilience. Different perspectives from participants were used to provide the full description of the phenomena. The five themes were analysed and discussed together to provide a description of the meanings the participants assigned to being a child born of genocidal sexual violence. Manen³⁰ posits that the researcher transcends the participants meaning to generate new meaning of the phenomenon of interest. At this stage, the preliminary findings were discussed in light of previous studies on related phenomena and relevant theories, and the analysis and interpretation were discussed and agreed through discussion with other experienced researchers.

3. To be born of genocidal sexual violence

This study involved ten participants: six male and four female adults born of genocidal rape, aged 22 years old during the time of interview. Four participants: three men and one woman, recruited from the Abasa Association came from one village in the Huye district, in the southern province of Rwanda. The six participants from SEVOTA: three women, and three men, came from five different districts. To facilitate better understanding of the

experience of the offspring, a brief biographical description of each participant and his/her family experience is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Description of participants

Pseudonym	Brief description of the participants
Clement	Clement has completed his secondary school education. He lives with his mother and step-father in the southern province. His mother was raped and remained with his father for about three years, during which she gave birth to him and his younger brother. She also has two other children with his stepfather. His father is still alive but he has not seen him since he left and he does not know who he is. Clement visits his grandmother on his father's side. He has good relationship with both families.
Kagabo	Kagabo has completed high school and qualified for education at the University of Rwanda. He lives with his mother. His mother and aunt are the only ones that survived in their family. During the genocide, his mother fled to Congo, where she was caught by a group of Interahamwe. They raped her and left her with deadbodies, thinking she was dead too. He does not know his father or anyone from his father's family.
Ntwali	Ntwali has completed nine years of basic education and then underwent a one-year vocational training in hospitality and catering. His mother was raped while she was trying to run way during the genocide. She does not know who Ntwali's father is or any other information about him. He lives with his mother and a young stepsister.
Teta	Teta lives with her mother and two young step-siblings. She grew up with a stepfather who later passed away; by then she was in grade 2 and had to drop out of school to help her mother provide for the family. Her mother and stepfather lost their respective families during the genocide. Tata's father killed her mother's family, took their belongings and raped her. He is currently in prison serving a sentence of life imprisonment. She has never visited him, but she knows his family, though she has refused to have any relationship with them.
Karabo	Karabo is in her final year of high school. She has a mother, stepfather and young stepsiblings. She was chased away from her family and since then has been hosted in four different families. He mother was raped by a man who killed the mother's siblings while she was watching and kept her in sexual slavery, hoping that she would also die. The father has subsequently died. Her father's relatives did not welcome Karabo when she attempted to approach them.

Rose	Rose has completed high school and has qualified for tertiary education. She lives with her mother, stepfather and a stepsibling. The family is able to meet its basic needs, such as food, medication and housing, without external support. Karabo's mother was raped by Interahamwe during the genocide. She does not know who Rose's father is or where he comes from. Her mother moved away from her family because they did not want her to have Rose.
Gabiro	Gabiro dropped out of school after the first year of high school. He then undertook vocational training and learned metal work and plumbing. He has a mother, stepfather and four young stepsiblings that he grew up with. He left the family, due to conflict with his stepfather, to live with his father's mother. However, he has never seen his father. His father raped his mother during the genocide and took her into exile and he died when they were returning to Rwanda.
Nganji	Nganji has completed high school. He lives with his mother, stepfather, and stepsiblings. He is the eldest in the family. His family is able to meet its basic needs such as food, medication and housing, without external support. His mother was raped by a man who killed her mother and other people in the village where she lived. Nganji's mother abandoned him when he was a little child, however, later she brought him back into the family. His father was in the military; he has died but his family is still around and has recognised Nganji.
Sinzi	Sinzi is the third born among five siblings, with two older and two young stepsiblings. He has completed high school. He lives with his mother and some of his siblings. His mother was raped by Interahamwe in Congo where she had fled. He was never given a name and never had a close relationship with his mother and her family. He has lived on the streets several times. He does not know his father or his father's family.
Baho	Baho is at college. She has a mother and an older stepfather. She does not have any information about her father. Her family is poor, as her mother is weak and unable to work. They live in the village of survivors with a small piece of land to cultivate.

Five narrative themes emerged from the experience shared by these participants: as noted above, they described their difficult childhoods, the centrality of discovering one's origins, their complex personal relationships, the wider effects of their experience, and a strong articulation that life goes on. These themes demonstrate the process the offspring went through to form their current understanding of their experiences and who they are. Out of difficult childhoods, these young people sought to understand who they are. As a result, they became aware of their birth origins and the complex relational contexts from which they were receiving assigned identities of victim or perpetrator. However, through peer support, psycho-social support from the supporting organisations and a conducive socio-political environment, new narratives emerged and preferred identifies were formed which gave hope and courage to these participants to keep their lives moving forward.

3.1 Difficult childhoods: A zigzag life trajectory

Childhood for all the participants was not easy. As Sinzi describes, his childhood was like a zigzag path:

“My life since I was a little child until now, I would say it hasn’t been easy. Nobody can understand it. I grew up without knowing where I was coming from and where I was going... Being a child of a mother who was raped is like going through a zigzag path. I mean, there is nothing good about it, except to give you stress. The reason I describe it like a zigzag path, you see you can even get sick of going through that path. It is like you go down turning around, go down again, turn around.”

However, the extent to which it was difficult varied from one participant to the other. The main things that participants said that have made it hard for them included lack of parental care, abuse, poverty and living in isolation. These hardships triggered the desire of finding out who they are, since their experience was different from their siblings and peers. This was the first step towards the formation of their own self-narrated identity.

3.1.1. Lack of parental care

Participants received varied levels of parental care. Most participants experienced difficult relationships with their mothers and/or stepfathers - when their mother remarried. Some were abandoned at an early age or were neglected, as Kagabo explains:

“It was by God’s protection that she did not kill me when I was still a child. If she was able, she could have done it. She told me that she thought about it a lot. She tried to abandon me, but later she changed her mind.”

Only one participant reported growing up with a loving and caring mother: Rose offers the following description:

“My mom took good care of me... My mom did not mistreat me, beat me or make it hard for me in any way. She had come to terms with her experience... They (her mothers’ brothers) did not want her to give birth to me. That was when she made a decision to move away from them.”

It should be noted that by the time of the interviews, for most participants, their relationship with their mothers had improved, with the exception of Sinzi and Karabo.

All of the participants never knew their father’s care. This was even the case for two participants who said they had lived with their fathers for a while. In all instances, their fathers left or died when they were still very little. Hence, they don’t have any memory of their time with a father. While some of the participants do not want to see their fathers, others regret not having a father in their lives. One of the participants whose father is still alive went in search of his father and was willing to meet him. However, by the time of the interview, he had not yet met him nor got to know where he was.

Some participants reported having a caring mother but had difficulties with their stepfather. In some cases, the child had to leave his/her mother and stepfather to find somewhere else to live. As Gabiro explains:

“Since I was born until when I was about 16, I was raised by my mom and my stepfather. My stepfather would beat me about 30 strikes a day... When I was 16, he beat my mom and I also beat him. That is why he chased me away. I went to my grandmother to care for her cows. That is my mom’s mother.”

However, one participant shared that her stepfather was the most caring and he was the one who also facilitated a good relationship between her and her mother. In Teta’s account:

“My stepfather lived with my mom since I was still little. They are the ones who named me. I knew him as my father. He loved me, and I thought he was my father... My stepfather is the one who is my father. He took very good care of me... But, when my mom remembers what my father did - even until now when she remembers, I cannot even sleep in her house... That started after my stepfather died.”

There were also those who received care from a member of the extended family - an aunt or grandmother from either side of their biological parents. In some cases, that involved moving from one family to the other. For example, when Gabiro left his family, he stayed with three different families, starting with his grandmother on his mother’s side and ending with his grandmother on his father’s side. Those who did not have a relative to run to, would find a community member who was willing to take them in, like in the case of Karabo, who, up to now, has lived in four different families. For the most marginalised, like Sinzi, who could not find a relative or a community member to host him, there were times he was homeless and slept on the street.

Lack of parental care is not uncommon among children conceived through rape, in particular, in the context of the war and genocide.^{16,31} The lack of fatherly care could be explained by the fact that many women do not even know who the father is, or, if known, he might be in prison or had fled due to his genocide crimes. Hence, in most cases, the study participants received care primarily from their mother, her family and community, if they were able. Similar to other studies,^{11,18} the empirical material of this study shows that the quality of care was affected by associating the offspring with the father’s crimes. The progress that the mothers, families and community had made in dealing with and healing from genocide-related emotions and other related experiences determine the quality of care the young adults received. In particular, this study shows how in the Rwandan context, childcare goes beyond the nuclear family, which can be beneficial or a hindrance. Hence, this aspect should also be taken into consideration when designing studies and developing interventions for this and similar populations.

3.1.2. Abuse

While Rose could not recall any form of abuse she has ever experienced from her mother, stepfather or any other person, all the rest of the participants reported being subjected to various forms of abuse. Participants recalled, for example, that whenever they would make any mistake, they would be punished harshly in ways that they considered beyond the normal punishment a child gets from their parents. As Baho recalls:

“When I look back on how she used to react to my mistakes, it was a lot, beyond the normal reaction to a child’s fault. I used to wonder why. For example, she would beat me seriously, and I would think that she might finish me.”

For some, the punishment would be accompanied with insults, being called Interahamwe or told that they regretted that they were not abandoned at an early age. As Clement explains:

“She would tell me some words about my dad, when I would make a mistake, like ‘iriya Interahamwe so’ (that Interahamwe, your father), and many other things. Before I could understand what that means, it was not a problem; but after knowing what it meant I felt unfairly treated.”

In particular, Sinzi shared that he was not given a name like other children. He grew up with one name that people made up according to his skin colour. Later, not only did he have to find a name for himself, but he also had to make up one for his father for school registration purposes. The issue of the name has been reported in other studies among children born of rape and it is closely linked with their identity formulation. The offspring were given names associating them to their father’s crimes. such as “little Interahamwe,” “Chetnik baby,” or “little killer.”^{11-12,16} In a study that explored the metaphors used by female adolescents born of genocidal rape in former Yugoslavia, Erjavec and Volcic¹⁶ reported names such as “cancer” that those adolescents used to describe themselves, and such names emerged from the internalisation of imposed identities pertaining to their fathers’ crimes and the resulting consequences. In this same study, the adolescents were able to share their preferred identity that emerged from the narratives authored by the adolescents themselves, such as “warrior,” describing their positive and active role as agents of change. Clearly, one’s name is closely linked with one’s identity; in its absence, one finds it difficult to identify him or herself.

3.1.3. Poverty

Each participant mentioned poverty as one of the factors that has made it difficult for them as they were growing up. In most cases, their early childhood was marked by living with a single mother with limited resources with less opportunity to find a job or an inability to work due to health conditions. Some of their mothers returned back to their families for support, or decided to move away to other areas where they could get better living conditions. In all cases, their mothers faced poverty that the participants found to be one of the most challenging things they have ever experienced in their lives. Participants shared that due to the poverty, sometimes their mothers were unable to protect their children from being physically and emotionally abused, especially in cases where the abusers were the ones who provide for the mothers, e.g., stepfathers. Similar findings on the intersectionality of socioeconomic status of the mother and the ability to care, protect and foster formation of identity was reported in a study among the offspring of genocidal rape in the former Yugoslavia [32]. In addition, three participants had to drop out of school because they could not afford the cost of education or they needed to help their mother make a living. In Teta’s words:

“I dropped out of school after grade 2 - it was hard for me because there was a lot of work at home and I was the first born. And my stepfather had just died. So, my mom and I started working together to be able to survive.”

However, with the support from the government programme and other supportive organisations such as FARG (Fonds d’Assistance pour les Rescapés du Génocide), the living conditions of the participants have improved, and most of the families were able to meet their basic needs. However, two participants shared that their families still struggle with deep poverty due to their health status, including the poor mental health and HIV/AIDS of their mothers. Through support from different organisations, seven participants completed high school and two completed vocation training. This was considered as an important achievement, as it leads to being self-sustained, which each participant expresses as their primary goal. In addition, this gives a sense of dignity to the participants, as they become less of a burden to the family and community, and become self-reliant, as well as establishing themselves as a contributing member of society in their own right. In line with the overarching argument of this paper, this offered another way of reconstructing their identity in a preferred direction.

3.1.4. Living in isolation

Kagabo and Nganji shared that they grew up in isolation because they lived with their single mothers without other children and no extended family. In addition, Kagabo's home was geographically isolated:

"I grew up in isolation, because I did not have a family or a grandfather to take his cows to the well (where most people meet), I did not have an aunt to go and play at her house. I did not visit my neighbours. I would be on my own. We had goats. I would take them to the forest and stay with them there the whole day. I would return them home when it was dark."

For Baho, she only had her mother and an older brother but they did not have a close relationship, and her mother did not allow her to interact with her peers. Up to now, she still feels isolated and doesn't know how to relate to people.

The above accounts described adverse childhood experiences from the empirical materials of this study, including lack of parental care, abuse, poverty and living in isolation, highlighting the hardships that structure what it is to be a child of rape. This empirical material supports previous studies conducted in Rwanda and other places such as the former Yugoslavia.^{17-18,24,31-32} These difficult childhoods must be understood within the context in which these young adults grew up. They were born in 1995, which was just a few months after the genocide, when the genocide was still fresh not only to their mothers but also their communities and the whole country. As participants explained, most of their mothers were dealing with trauma, due not only to the rape but also to the loss of their beloved ones. The findings suggest that there might be a connection between the mother's psychological status and the quality of childhood care they received.

In her paper on intergenerational realities of sexual violence and abuse, Devon³³ argues that parental status has effects on their children. It should be noted that the accumulation of stressful experiences in the early stage of life, which is the most sensitive developmental period, is thought to increase the risk of various chronic mental and physical diseases, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and cardiovascular diseases, with the possibility of passing the disease on to their offspring.¹⁹⁻²¹ Hence, early identification of such high-risk children and concerted efforts to provide them with adequate care could prevent a number of life and health adversities. These young people's difficult childhoods also served as the starting point of their independent identity formulation. As mentioned above, the participants' early childhood experiences pointed to their differences from others and triggered their need to know who they were.

3.2. Irresistible desire for discovering one's origins

All participants shared an irresistible desire to know their origins, including their biological father, his family and where he came from. For Nganji, it was not only finding out about his father, but also his mother, as he had been abandoned as a little child. The desire was triggered by different things. One common trigger was being in a family without a father while other children around them had fathers. In other cases, the school required pupils to have both parents' names for annual registration, and, more importantly, for the national exam at the end of primary school.

In some cases, the desire was because of abuse suffered or from overhearing that the stepfather or the caretaker was not the child's biological father or mother. Participants reported how the question about their father would be a complicated one for their mothers to answer. The question triggered unexpected emotions that participants could

not understand. The first answers they got were, “I don’t know,” or “He left” or “He is dead.” Baho offers his account:

“I would go home and ask my mom but my mom would just become sad or sometimes cry and leave me... I always had those questions, but I could not get the answers. I would think, ‘Why is she not willing to tell me?’ I thought that what I was asking was not something that should make her cry. I was not aware that I was hurting her. I thought that it was just a question that you can ask anyone.”

Most of them started asking at the age of five or six and got the answer when they were between 12 and 14. While all the participants had got information about how they were born and their fathers, they still wanted more details, such as where he came from and what he looks like, alongside more details about their father’s family. Some participants shared that they continue their journey to find out more information. Others have given up, since it is only their mother who can tell them and they don’t want to open the wound again, or, as Rose experienced, simply because their mother doesn’t even know.

It should be noted that the search for one’s origins included other important information for the participants, such as other members of the family, and their geographic origins. While some mothers came to a point where they were able to share their stories with their children. others had to get support from counsellors to help disclose the news. For those who were told by the counsellors, it was through group counselling organised by organisations that support mothers and children born of genocidal rape, such as SEVOTA. However, the participants still wanted to confirm their origin with their mothers. Hence, mothers would then take the opportunity to share their experience with their children but there were still some mothers who needed more time and further counselling before they were able to discuss that with their children. Gabiro explains:

“They told each of us the names of his/her mother and what happened, that our mothers were raped during genocide... I never discussed with my mom about what I was told in that meeting... When I was about to start secondary school, my mom took me into the room to give me some advice.[He paused to cry.] That is when she told me that she is my mom... She made me understand that the man she was living with is not my father, but he has to take care of me. She told me that I don’t have a family.[Pause to cry again.] That was in 2010.”

This empirical material shows the deep desire among participants to discover one’s origins, including biological and geographical. The desire is not unique to Rwandan children born of rape [16,32]. Carpenter[34] argues that this desire starts at the adolescent stage. Participants in this study had this desire from as early as five or six which is the learning and social stage in childhood development [35]. Participants shared that they could see that other children had fathers and started to wonder where theirs had gone. Also, at this age, most children start school and needed to know their parents’ names for registration purposes. For other participants, the desire was motivated by the abuse they endured. According to Carpenter[234] it is common for children with experience of neglect, stigma and other psycho-social difficulties due to their biological origins to search for their roots. This study revealed that while the disclosure of the children’s origins entailed sharing with the child his/her mother’s rape experience and hence triggering strong emotions, the disclosure served as a starting point for the child to heal. All participants shared that learning about their mothers’ experiences help them understand the mothers’ behaviours towards them and it narrowed the distance between them and their mothers. Van Ee and Kleber [15]. posit that children will have to know their origins but there is a need to understand the right time and procedure to do this. As participants shared, the interventions to facilitate this disclosure and accompany both the children and the mothers through this process

has potential to yield positive results. For the participants in this study, this was a key step toward the identity formation that was reported as a turning point for all participants. Despite the pain that resulted in knowing their origins, they all appreciated the fact that they finally learned the truth about their birth circumstances, as it helped them to make sense of themselves and their relationship with others.

3.3. Complex relationships

In this study, the young people reported complex relationships that affected their lives, some in negative ways and others in positive ways.

3.3.1 Family

All except one of the young adults in this study were raised by their mothers. Some mothers returned to their family for support. Hence, family member could have a say in how the child would be treated. As Sinzi recounts:

“When my mom would try to care for me, her mother and brothers would just be unhappy and put her aside. So, you could see that she had hindrances, even when she wanted to give some care.”

For women who remarried, some stepfathers would actively get involved in the care of the child, while others would fail to relate to their step-children. Where the father’s family was known, the latter could be welcoming and take part in caring for the child. In other cases, the father’s family would not participate, either because the family did not acknowledge the child or because the mother and/or the child did not want to interact with the family. Tate offers his account:

“He is the one who killed my family and took our things. She told me everything. Then, I hated him. He is in prison for life imprisonment... He is my father, because he gave life to me, but I don’t love him. I never visited him. He is from our village. He has his siblings but they don’t love me. We don’t talk. When we meet, we never talk.”

3.3.2 Community members

Most participants reported that they felt accepted by the community they lived in, both at home and at school. Some related this acceptance to the fact that not many people knew the story about their birth but it was also mentioned that community members have expressed compassion for the children of rape in general. Among those who were brave enough to share their story, they were still accepted. In Baho’s account:

“I am no longer feeling guilty for his crimes. I hear what people think about us. So far, people are caring. But I think if people were condemning us because of our fathers, I would be concerned. You see, you hear people saying those children born of mothers who were raped- even if they don’t give us anything, but you hear that people are caring and have compassion. That makes me feel no guilt for my father’s fault.”

However, this was not the case when the father was known and the young adults find it hard to relate with the community members who were their fathers’ victims. One participant, whose father was known and had killed in the village where he lived with his mother, reported being beaten and taken to the police because of what his father did. These findings are in line with the feminist perspectives that emphasise the importance of taking into consideration the intersections that contribute to the formation of identity.³⁶ In the case of Rwandan offspring of

genocidal rape, their multi-dimensional experience is formed, for example, by race, gender (in particular in a patriarchal society where the child is assigned to the father's identity), the father's crime, socioeconomic class, social structure and culture, to name a few. This intersectional experience is greater than the sum of each contributing element.³⁶

Other meaningful relationships were built with their peers, including personal friends and membership of AERG (Association des Etudiants Et Éléves Rescapés Du Genocide), which is an association of student survivors of the genocide. The AERG welcomes any other students who are not survivors of genocide but want to join the association. It is in this context that some of the participants in this study also joined the AERG. However, most of the participants had not been able to share their stories with other members.

The relationship that all participants identified as the most meaningful was the one with peers who were born in the same circumstances. In this community, participants explained that they openly discussed their situation and received mutual support. Through the interviews with some participants, it appeared that this community was considered as a safe place to question and reject the imposed identity pertaining to having a genocidier and rapist father. This could be done in formal gatherings organised by the organisations such as SEVOTA or informally, such as in the case of the Abasa community, where most of participants live in the same village. Rose comments:

“There are some young people that I have chatted with in our meetings at SEVOTA and they told me that their aunts hate them and when they see them, they insult them... Their [genocidiers] offspring are also Rwandan and human beings! They should not be calling them names... It is your father who committed the crime, not you.”

The relationship with their fathers was described by most participants as a biological relationship such as “I have his blood” or “He gave birth to me.” Participants made clear that the biological relationship does not mean they, as children, have a share in the crime committed. This perspective was liberating and empowering in the sense that these young people could then reject the shame and guilt associated with their birth circumstances. This material contributes to the ongoing debate regarding revealing or concealing the truth about birth origins of Rwandan youth born of genocidal rape. Eramian and Denov suggest that in their research, participants articulated a need to know about the circumstances of their birth but held a strong culturally informed preference for concealing this from their wider community [27]. Participants in this study emphasised the importance of being able to share their story in a trusted and safe environment, and peer communities played a crucial role in offering support. In Rwandan culture, concealment can be preferred if there is no reason to talk, as it is said in Kinyarwanda: *Batanyumvira ubusa*, meaning “I don't want them to hear me without purpose.” As discussed above, they did not consistently see the community as necessarily being discriminatory towards them and the complexities of their relationships were often at the intimate family level. The main concern expressed by the young adults in this study is that the truth about the sexual abuse of their mothers and the crimes committed by the fathers entailed shame, guilt and fear of abuse and discrimination. However, the material suggests that creating appropriate and safe spaces for the young adults, mothers and communities to heal can aid in dealing with these emotions if the process respects the pace of healing of those concerned.

It should be noted that even though participants were aware of their fathers' ethnicity, this was not mentioned as a concern they had to deal with. Under the current government led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), all citizens are identified as Rwandans, which most participants explicitly mentioned as their preferred identity. In Sinzi's words:

“I want to be identified as a Rwandan who belongs to the whole country.”

This empirical material highlights the importance of the political context in the formation of personal identity. Unlike other countries where there are official ethnic groups,³² the study participants did not articulate a concern about belonging to an ethnic group. Rwandan young adults born of rape did not have to decide which ethnic group to belong to or accept any that would be assigned to them because Rwanda has decided to identify every Rwandan as Rwandan. This research suggests that in such a socio-political context, these vulnerable young people are in a better position to form an identity that gives them a sense of belonging, if not to any particular family, they belong to Rwanda, as Sinzi reported. Not only does such an identity empower these young people to reject the imposed identity associated with the shame and guilt of what their fathers did, it promotes their equality and sense of belonging. While some members of their family and community did identify the offspring with their fathers and use names such as “children of Interahamwe,”¹¹⁻¹² participants explicitly rejected this identity with various arguments, including the fact that they were not involved in what their father did and they did not even know who their fathers were. They reported feeling closer and belonging to their mothers who were the only parents they knew, even for those for whom the relationship was not yet established. However, it did not appear that this meant being identified as a victim. Instead, participants expressed the desire to construct an identity that is not determined by their birth circumstances. They claimed to be considered as any other child, as another Rwandan. It is important to note that this direction was shared among their community of young people conceived through genocidal rape. It was supported by the organisations that had been supportive to them and in line with the wider political direction of the country.

This finding nuances the issue of identity discussed in the literature, which draws on data from sources other than children themselves,^{12,37-38} where the focus is on victim versus perpetrator identity. This in-depth study of the children’s identity from their perspective highlights the difference between assigned identity and self-constructed identity. While Rwanda no longer uses identities associated with ethnic groups, except insofar as it is important to understand the historical implications of ethnicity as regards genocide, the offspring still had to deal with the issue of assigned victim/perpetrator identities. As mentioned above, none of these emerged as their preferred identity, rather, they are in a process of constructing and co-constructing an identity of being “Rwandan.” This finding supports the findings of Benda³³ that describe the formation of the Ndimunyarwanda (I am Rwandan) identity from the perspective of children of perpetrators in Rwanda. The empirical material of this study nuances the literature that discusses the national identity as a top-down imposed identity.³⁹ The young adults joined other Rwandans, as seen in Benda’s work,⁴⁰ to claim being identified primarily as Rwandan.

Drawing on a narrative theory and therapy perspective,⁴¹⁻⁴² people tell their stories, assign meanings to them and live accordingly. In a conducive socio-political context, community members, such as the children of genocidal rape survivors, are able to externalise and alter imposed stories and identities and start the process of re-authoring their narratives and co-constructing their preferred identity. It is only when one starts living authentically with who s/he truly is that s/he can progress to live to his/her full potential and feel fulfilled and contribute to society.⁴³

4. Emotional response

On hearing of the reality behind their birth circumstances, participants shared various reactions, including shock at hearing an unexpected story and sadness about the circumstance in which they were born and their inability to do anything about it. Some participants also shared that they were sad because they realised that there was no way they will ever know their fathers and their families. This was especially stark in the situations where the perpetrators were unknown to their mothers.

Shame was another common reaction that participants experienced. The shame was mainly associated with the fact that their father raped their mother, but also, having a father who has killed people. While some participants stated they don't feel guilt for their fathers' crimes as they were not involved in it, some shared that they would understand if the victims mistreated them because of their fathers' crimes. In fact, participants reported that after hearing what their mothers' experienced, they became more understanding and tolerant of their mothers' reactions. Kagabo reflects:

“My relationship with Mum, even though she did not take good care of me, and we did not get on very well, I think that was because she was emotionally traumatised by what she had gone through.”

Unlike other participants, Baho and Sinzi's first reaction was hatred against their mothers. They could not get over the way they had been treated. Both participants reported emotional and physical abuse from their mothers and other family members. It should be mentioned that the mothers of these participants suffered from mental and physical illness up until the time of the interview.

Participants had various feelings toward their father, including hatred and anger. Others reported having no feelings about them at all. One particular finding in this study was that in some cases, the feeling about the father was extended to all men, which has complicated the relationship the young men then have with other men they have come across. Nganji explains:

“My reaction to my father is that I don't feel I want to talk to any man. Even at home, I don't talk with my stepfather... My stepfather also did not have any problem with me. It was me who just felt I didn't want to live with him...But I also consider all the men the same. I would bear men at my school because they were my teachers but a couple of times I was sent home when I had shown disrespect to the male teachers... The reason for my reactions is because I heard that a man raped my mom during the genocide.”

Other effects shared by the participants were that at times they felt uncomfortable with others, had low self-esteem, or felt like a negative reminder and a problem to their mother and their families, alongside fears of community reactions in cases where they knew how they were born, or unexplained physical symptoms, such as passing out and loss of voice.

While most of the study participants felt that they have gone through their most difficult experiences and were now more concerned about their future, there were still some issues that needed additional attention, such the above-mentioned difficulties to relate to men and others in general. Baho expressed her need for advanced care as follows:

“I have not consulted a counsellor and worked on my problem except some group counselling I received with other young people like me. I feel I can work with a counsellor but one who does not know me. I feel I have a lot to share with somebody who is not very familiar to me.”

While the psycho-social effects on participants were not explored systematically, this study found that children born of rape experienced various emotional reactions. This finding is in line with the study by Erjavec & Volcic16 conducted among female teenagers who were born as a result of genocidal rape in the former Yugoslavia, as well

as a previous study conducted in Rwanda.¹⁷⁻¹⁸ The need for counselling has been highlighted by participants, and the crucial role organisations with a mission to support this population play. It is worth noting the need for advanced counselling to go beyond facilitating the disclosure and to assist the young adults to deal with the complex psycho-social effects of their lived experience. As reported, participants are involved in complex relationships that can have positive or negative effects on them, which calls for considering the interventions that focus not only on the child but also engage with the wider context. Postmodern psychotherapy approaches with social constructivist views such as feminist and narrative therapies could be useful. An important aspect of these approaches is that, in addition to helping individuals externalise the imposed narrative and re-author their own stories, they also intervene in taking steps to change the wider social structures that affect people lives.⁴¹ This can help to facilitate the co-construction of their preferred identities that inform the ways that they want to live their lives.

3.5. Life goes on

Despite the challenges each participant has gone through, all of them were able to identify some achievements that gave them hope for a bright future. For some, it was surviving through circumstances that could have taken their lives; for others, it was being able to complete secondary school or other technical training. Some participants qualify and plan to go to university. Sinzi was satisfied that, despite the lack of parental care and love, he took himself off the street and was able to complete high school. Rose put it this way:

“When I look at myself and the family in which I was born, I remember that it could have been possible for me not to be able to study due to lack of school fees. The fact that I have been able to study and complete secondary school gives me hope, and I should not worry about my future. Life goes on!”

Education seems to be the main channel to becoming self-sustained, and poverty was identified as one of the most challenging things participants experienced. Access to education was also mentioned as the most important resource one can provide to a child born of genocidal rape. This seemed to be a major source of hope for their future.

Over time, the relationship between participants and their mothers generally improved. The disclosure of their birth circumstances seems to have helped the participants understand their mothers’ experience and enabled them to make sense of some of the difficulties they have gone through. Most participants mentioned that their mothers have been the most significant person in their lives and this has given them a sense of belonging. This was even true when the participants were still not living with their mother, in most cases because of the difficult relationship with the stepfather, and, in some cases, where the mothers were still struggling with the effect of their experience, emotionally and/or physically. Nganji, who was initially abandoned by his mom, stated:

“My mom treats me like her own child. She is my role model. The most important person in my life is my mom.”

Sinzi and Karabo, whose relationships with their mothers were still unstable by the time of the interview, expressed understanding and desire to relate to their mothers. Also, some participants have established a relationship with their fathers’ families, while they also continue to keep a growing relationship with their mothers.

All participants expressed hope for their future and a desire to contribute to the rebuilding of their country and to support others who might be in the same situation as them, while working to prevent what has happened to them

happening to others. Despite the described lived experience for the young adults interviewed, the findings of this study illuminate the progress made by the participants in making sense of their experiences. The described experience from a hermeneutics perspective shows the interpretive process that these young adults went through to understand their origins, articulating a journey to author their narratives and determine their preferred identities. This process of identity formation is a process of healing consistent with narrative therapy theory, which emphasises the importance of being able to author one's own identity, live authentically with oneself and engage in a progress to self-realisation.⁴¹ In addition, this paper has argued that the wider political context makes it easy for children born of genocidal rape to move ahead as they participate in co-constructing the national identity. This is in line with the feminist perspective, in particular, the intersectionality in forming one's identity.

4. Conclusion

The lived experience of children born of rape is marked by a difficult childhood, a strong desire to discover their origins and the complex relationships that they are involved in, as well as those that are assigned to them. Although a painful experience, knowing the truth about their birth origins preceded the process of re-authoring their stories and offered an opportunity to determine their preferred identities. This study provides an in-depth understanding of what it is to be a child born of rape in the context of genocide. The unique contribution of this study was to describe the process through which the difficult experiences were used by the young study participants to form their identity, highlighting the contribution one's context plays in facilitating or hindering the process of identity forming. This study highlights the importance of a conducive context that fosters the development of identities that individuals and communities need in order to move forward. The context of the study – where children are no longer identified according to official ethnic groups – reveals the positive impact the removal of the ethnic group has had on these children. Being Rwandan, as any other Rwandan, gave them power and a voice to decide who they wanted to be. This study challenges the view of the “Rwandan” identity as an imposed one, rather, it emerges as a preferred identity by the young adults born of genocidal rape. Further studies should explore the impact of the lived experience of the offspring of genocidal rape on their health and well-being.

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