

Restorative Storytelling: A Pilot Project Exploring Testimonies of Survivors of the Genocide Against Tutsi of Rwanda

Sophie Yohani, PhD¹, Linda Kreitzer², PhD, Jasmine Nathoo¹, MSc, Serge Bayingana³, BA, Pamela Karambizi³, BA.

¹University of Alberta, ²University of Calgary, ³Memory Keepers Association

ABSTRACT

Healing after genocide is a multi-dimensional and complex process, yet finding truth and justice are often seen as fundamental to healing processes. “Ubuhamya” refers to a narrative testimony of one’s lived experience, which is viewed as an important educational tool, as well as a mechanism for personal and communal healing by survivors of the 1994 genocide against Tutsi of Rwanda. Despite the prevailing use of testimonies in healing and justice-based processes, little is known about the processes of giving testimony, or its impact on the storyteller or their healing. The current pilot project was initiated when members of the Rwandan community in Edmonton approached the University of Alberta and University of Calgary researchers with questions about how best to support members of their community in giving testimony. As such, this community-based participatory project is being conducted in collaboration with the Rwandan community of survivors in Edmonton to better understand the experience of giving testimony, and to explore the possibility of using video as a medium of giving testimony. This poster presents focus group results, including the process of preparing to give testimony via video.



FUNDING

This project is funded by University of Alberta, Faculty of Education’s Support for the Advancement of Scholarship

INTRODUCTION

In 1994, a genocide against the Tutsi of Rwanda took place in which over one million men, women, and children were killed and 1.75 million people fled the country as refugees¹. It is estimated that there are nearly 8000 Rwandans who have immigrated to Canada, most of whom arrived after 1994².

Healing after genocide is a multi-faceted and complex process, and finding truth and justice are now seen as a fundamental part of healing processes and peace-building³. One of the processes for healing is restorative storytelling, more specifically survivor testimonies.

“Ubuhamya”, a narrative testimony of one’s lived experience in relation to the 1994 genocide against Tutsi of Rwanda, is considered an important element for personal and communal healing both in Rwanda and the Diaspora⁴. It is also considered an important educational mechanism to prevent future genocides, and ensure the memory of loved ones is passed on to future generations.

The Rwandan survivor community in Edmonton, Memory Keepers Association (MKA), has requested collaboration with us on a small-scale pilot project to examine the process of documenting survivor testimonies using videos.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- (1) *What is the appropriate process for preparing, delivering, and documenting testimonies?*
- (1) *How does storytelling through testimonies contribute to a survivor’s healing process?*

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- (1) Engage community members in a process of developing a safe and supportive method for restorative storytelling for the preparation, delivery and documenting of testimonies
- (2) Begin to explore the use of restorative storytelling as a community-based healing process
- (1) To explore a sustainable way to continue this project and archive material for future use.

PILOT PROJECT PLAN AND METHODS

This project utilizes a community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework. CBPR is an approach that emphasizes relationality, collaboration, and co-creation of knowledge⁵.

Previous research⁶ with the Rwandan community of survivors in Edmonton highlighted the importance of telling their stories and sharing testimony in the healing process. We are exploring the various mechanisms for survivors to share and document their stories.

Phase 1:
Community Consultations
and 2 Focus Groups



Phase 2:
Collection of 3 Video
Testimonies

PHASE ONE: FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are being conducted with survivors of the 1994 genocide against Tutsi of Rwanda living in Edmonton. The first focus group was conducted with those who have given testimony at the annual commemoration ceremony. Participants shared their experiences of giving testimony. The second focus group was conducted with individuals who have not yet given testimony, but are interested in sharing their stories.

Focus group 1

8 participants.

Focus group questions included:

1. What led you to the point in which you wanted to tell your story?
2. Describe in detail what it felt like to tell your story?
3. What prevented you from telling your story before this time?
4. What was the outcome of telling your story?
5. What supports, if any, did you need after sharing your story?

Focus group 2

3 participants.

Focus group questions included:

1. Explain why, up until now, you have decided not to tell your story.
2. Describe preparations that you think you would need to tell your story.
3. Describe what supports you think you would need to tell your story.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS: FOCUS GROUPS

| Reasons Survivors Shared Stories | Experience of Sharing Story | Preparation | Experience of Support |
|--|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling Ready (Age & Maturity) • Belief that Sharing Story is Healing • Community Involvement as Catalyst • Sense of Responsibility To Victims and Survivors • Role Modeling for Survivors • Educating Others • Combating Genocide Denial • Faith as a Catalyst | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remembering and Honoring Loved Ones • Feeling Like a Role Model • Mixed Emotions During Process of Storytelling • Awareness of Cultural Expectations • New Questions About Genocide Arise • Fear of Breaking Down/Being Vulnerable • Concern about Perceptions of Others • Enhanced Compassion for Suffering of Others • Feeling a Sense of Belonging in Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Preparation/Impromptu Decision to Share • Careful Preparation – E.g. Wrote Testimony, Practiced with Friends or Family • General Consensus that Preparation is Helpful | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Support/Expectation of Support • Friends/Family Reached Out After Testimony • Companionship During Testimony Giving • Need for Space to Process Emotions After Testimony • General Consensus that Support Needs are Unique |

PHASE 2: VIDEO TESTIMONIES

Video Recording – Expected May -June 2019

Following the annual commemoration ceremony, the next stage of the project will involve collecting video testimonies. Video testimonies will be collected from three people (1 adult, 1 youth, 1 child at the time of the genocide against Tutsi).

They will be asked to participate in pre- and post-recording interviews.

Video recordings will be edited for length and to remove sensitive or identifying information in collaboration with participant.

Testimony videos will be given to participants for their records, and if participants consent, videos will be archived, and may be shared at future commemoration ceremonies.

REFERENCES

1. Meredith, M. (2005). *The state of Africa – A history of fifty years of independence*. London, UK: Free Press.
2. Marson, J. J. (2016). *The Rwandan diaspora in Canada and the United States: Reconciliation and justice (Doctoral dissertation)*. Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University.
3. Richters, A., Dekker, C. & de Jonge, K. (2005). Reconciliation in the aftermath of violent conflict in Rwanda. *Intervention*, 3(3), 203-221.
4. Bizimana, J. (2017). Personal communication. National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide, Kigali, Rwanda. May 9, 2017. *Personal communications do not go in reference list according to APA*
5. Parker, E., Margolis, L.H., Eng, E., & Henriquez-Rolan, C. (2003). Assessing the capacity of health departments to engage in community-based participatory public health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 93(3), 472-476.
6. Kreitzer, L. & Yohani, S. (2017). *Post 1994 Genocide Survivors in Edmonton: Rwanda Community-based Research Project Exploring Mental Health Challenges, Strengths and Pathways to Healing*. Final project report submitted to PolicyWise for Children and Families. Calgary, AB: PolicyWise for Children and Families.