A Time of Running and Fire: War and Evil in Sierra Leone

by

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“I will tell you something about stories…

They aren’t just entertainment.

Don’t be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,

all we have to fight off

illness and death.”

- L.M. Silko, *Ceremony*
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Acknowledgements**

**INTRODUCTION**

- **Chapter 1**: From Fear to Dreamland: A Journey of Unlearning........................................p.1
- **Chapter 2**: Sierra Leone’s Story: A Cultural Context.........................................................p.13
- **Chapter 3**: Literature Review.............................................................................................p.28

**METHODS**

- **Chapter 4**............................................................................................................................p.37

**RESULTS**

- **Chapter 5**.............................................................................................................................p.44

**DISCUSSION**

- **Chapter 6**: Stories of a Narrative Pursuit.............................................................................p.56
- **Chapter 7**: Learning in a Broken World: War and Moral Development.........................p.63
- **Chapter 8**: Good v. Evil in the Social Construction of the Rebel and Soldier......p.72
- **Chapter 9**: Staunch Resilience............................................................................................p.86
- **Chapter 10**: Meditations on Suffering..................................................................................p.91
- **Chapter 11**: The Healing Power of Narrative and Community........................................p.96

**CONCLUSION**

- **Chapter 12**: Where Do We Go From Here? Future Research Directions.........................p.103
- **Chapter 13**: Waving a Magic Wand......................................................................................p.109

**Appendix**...............................................................................................................................p.112

**References**...............................................................................................................................p.123
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INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1: From Fear to Dreamland: A Journey of Unlearning

“If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that, too is a choice: but whatever choice we make, we make it at our own peril” (James 1896, p.14).

Day 1

I am on my first of two long plane flights, heading to London Heathrow airport, where I will catch a connecting flight to Freetown, Sierra Leone. I’m deliriously excited at moments and tranquilly forgetful at others. The current tangibility of this trip, after so many months of planning, has not entirely processed.

I have been dreaming of this trip for years and years, since I watched nature shows as a toddling child and decided to go to Africa. I have been drawn to this lush and mysterious continent for my entire life. I have been dreaming of working with people in Africa for years, ever since I read Mountains Beyond Mountains by Paul Farmer and felt something tug me across the sea.

I know nothing, but I want to know everything.

Walking through the airport, I feel so wonderfully free, so independent. I built this trip myself, from the ground up. I dreamed it into existence. I’m on a plane to Sierra Leone when all I had a year ago was a dream, an idea, a fantasy. I’m on my way to learn, to ask people for their war stories, to listen. Academically, I am trying to understand how growing up in a war zone affects childhood moral and attitude
development. Emotionally, I am trying to understand why I have felt so powerfully drawn to this place, and if my vague dreams could become a concrete reality.

It makes me feel as though I can do anything I want to do. I just have to dream it. One day, this will all be a memory, a story told over drinks and laughter. But right now, this is my life, and it hums with magic.

I know that a strong belief in magic is laced throughout Sierra Leonean society. I think that I believe in magic, and I know that I believe in dreams. So much of my childhood revolved around dissecting my world to scour pieces for the supernatural. But the most magic I ever found could only be seen out of the corner of my eye, in a swift blur, a lost glance, an entire world at the tip of my fingertips but chained with impenetrable locks. What does magic mean to me? Magic is the land where science ends, a hazy realm where equations fall short, and dreams take over. Magic can be anything that inspires wonder. I have not yet decided where magic starts and stops, but I have learned that it comes alive in a story.

But until recently, I only dreamed of magic. I never saw it, created it, lived in it. My friends scoffed at me for my dreams, either placing their trust in God or science. I never understood why magic and science were mutually exclusive.

What is science, really, but magic broken down and peered into? Countless civilizations viewed breathing, evaporation, even thunderstorms as acts of the divine. In the twentieth century, we decide these things are not magical, after all, but scientific. But nothing has changed except our perception of them. Thousands of years ago, atoms mingled and bounced apart the same way they do today.
I know why salt lingers on my tongue after swimming in the ocean. I know that I taste the sodium chloride through a complex series of chemical signals. I think this, and yet it changes nothing. I still feel something greater in the ocean. Maybe that greater thing is just atoms, molecules, vibrating strings coming together in harmony, coalescing through a narrative.

Realistically speaking, any scientific theory is just that, a theory. And no matter how many equations we chisel out of the leviathan of our galaxy, an infinite number of intriguing ideas and blatant absurdities will hover just out of reach. From clean Newtonian physics to the gnarled tangles composing quantum mechanics, science has never fully succeeded in explaining our universe sprawling with infinite possibilities.

Personally, I like the idea of a stalwart point science cannot peer beyond, a brick wall vibrating with the indescribable and unquantifiable. What could reside beyond that wall? Numbers, elements, quarks? A senior thesis? I doubt it. The human mind has boundaries and fences itself in through the very act of trying to shatter natural barriers. Therefore, I will not try to shape words or give form to whatever dwells beyond that wall. Because if I can, if I possess that ability, I lose my infinite possibilities. I lose my magic.

Practically, this means that I will not challenge African practices in favor of Western science. I am trying to conduct science in a country that disavows much of its existence. If I truly want to live in Sierra Leone, I may need magic to succeed in my research.
I am searching for meaning, not in science or in statistics, but in stories and in music. And even when you look through the microscopes and analyze the equations, you can still hear the gentle thrumming notes of thousands of strings, of magical bodies, creating music together that echoes into infinity.

**Day 2**

My first morning in Sierra Leone finds me sprinting for the toilet. I’m not horribly sick – that will come later – my body is just adjusting to the different food and water, and complaining loudly in the process. I clench my teeth and hold back tears, feeling like the epitome of a spoiled American as I sweat, moaning over the lack of air conditioning and running water.

I am scared of taking bucket showers, of getting sick, of failing in my endeavor. I am scared of being lonely. I am scared of being away from my friends for so long, not guessing that in six weeks, I will cry to leave people here.

I take a few pills to settle my stomach and head out on my new friend Hadji’s motorcycle (with him driving). As we speed through Freetown, my long hair whipping the back of Hadji’s neck, I peel open my eyes and let myriad exotic images fly by me. I see images of seven-year old boys with plates of candy on their heads, of women in long, blindingly colored garb, of open gutters, of dark laughing faces.

That night, I head to dinner at a local home where my American contact, a graduate student named Jon, resides with his adopted family. To get there, after riding a smelly bus for forty-five minutes, I hop on the back of another motorcycle, which speeds off down a bumpy dirt road. I have a moment, riding through the dark without a helmet, entrusting my life fully to an unfamiliar driver, when I realize that my
parents were perfectly right to worry about this trip. I spend the rest of the night sitting on a floor, sharing stories and smiles.

A few days later, I have my first moment of crisis. I realize that I can study this war forever and never entirely understand it. What am I looking for? If I have no idea, how am I supposed to find anything?

I have just interviewed a man who was abducted by rebels during Sierra Leone’s civil war, and who, between smiles, begged me to help his country. Who am I to ask him questions? I am just some curious white girl who wants to help war-torn Africa. People ask me why I’m here in Sierra Leone. “Research,” I answer. “I want stories.” But who am I to ask for them?

I know nothing.

**Day 5**

The sun is so strong here. I can feel it pulsing against the back of my neck in hot red waves. I feel lost and overwhelmed. I stick out like a sore thumb, and my stomach still roils most mornings. I am currently undergoing a massive culture shock, one that will take me over half of the trip to overcome and will deeply challenge my body, intellect, and ethics. In this time, I will contract ascaris luminocoid worms and a nasty bout of food poisoning. I will get bitten by a dog, be rushed to the hospital, and receive a serious proposal of marriage from my physician, feeling utter disbelief, while blood streams down my leg. I will be robbed of $350, fall off a motorcycle, and get a pile of mattresses dumped on me. I will be yelled at, grabbed, and panhandled at least forty times a day. And I will begin to love this country with every cell in my body.
Day 10

“Bakarr done learn me Krio.”

“Bakarr done learn me Krio,” I repeat, feeling accomplished. My friend claps my shoulder and gets up to order another Coke. Bakarr has taken to giving me daily Krio lessons while we relax at the local hostel, a popular hangout place (see Appendix D photo 5). In return, I attempt to converse with every local in the room, to their great amusement. But by the end of the trip, I can conduct my interviews almost entirely in Krio. I credit this to Bakarr’s endless patience and the inordinately slow pace of life in Sierra Leone that allows for frequent lackadaisical conversing. On the phone with my parents, I will joke that if someone shows up three or four hours late, they are often lauded for showing up at all. Official appointments run several hours behind schedule, if the official decides he is in the mood to attend. As an American accustomed to a packed university schedule, I find that this sense of time poses a challenge for me.

I begin to feel as if I have to thoroughly earn every interview I conduct. When I climb up a steep hill, over roads and streams through pouring rain, getting soaked and trying to avoid streams of overflowing sewage, I’m earning these interviews. I really have to want them.

After one particularly intense adventure through a rainstorm to a local school, I rush, gasping and looking as I’ve just emerged from a pool, into a room of students taking a final exam. A wave of surprised murmurs greets my entrance. How often does a white girl walk into the school? Maybe once or twice a year, I’d guess. The school principal pulls me into his office and welcomes me. I never entirely ceased
being surprised at the level of respect simply being a stranger garners in Sierra Leone, a country that prides itself on its hospitality and welcoming attitudes. I like to tell people that Sierra Leone is the only country in the world where someone will run across the street, through hectic traffic, just to say hello and welcome you to the country. True to this theme, the principal treats me as an honored guest, with the courtesy due to someone who, in my mind, has at least completed her college education. After the students finish their exam, he sends eight girls (I am short on girls and attempting to keep even gender ratios) to me to interview. Women, I have found, tend to talk less expansively. I attribute this almost entirely to the men’s desire to flirt with and date me, which encourages them to pontificate and extend any conversation.

**Day 17**

Although I stayed in Freetown, the capital and largest city in Sierra Leone, for the majority of the trip, I also spent five days in the second largest city in Sierra Leone, Bo, which is known as the capital of the south. On a porch at a local house in Bo, with sheets of rain pounding the ground, the roof, every available surface, I sit down on the ground, voice recorder out, to conduct my twenty-eighth interview. I am feeling fairly comfortable with my interviews at this point, but I had never done one in a home setting and at such short notice.

Thirty minutes earlier, my friend Jon and I had rushed into his friends’ house, seeking refuge from the torrential Sierra Leonean rains, against which no amount of American-designed umbrellas or raincoats would function effectively. I shook the water from my hair and walked around, performing the five-minute greeting ritual
with every family member. The eldest daughter was outside, pounding spices in a chipped wooden bowl. Jon glanced up from a conversation with her and asked if I would like to do an interview. Slightly bemused but nevertheless eager, I pulled out my pen, my interview sheets, and my voice recorder, then went and sat down next to her. One thing I’ve learned after two weeks in Sierra Leone: if you sit on the floor, locals are more likely to pay attention to you, due to a cultural stereotype that Europeans abhor dirt and refuse to get on the same level as locals.

As this woman’s teenage sister sporadically sprinted out half-naked into the rain to collect water, I attempted to focus on her story. Out of all my interviewees thus far, she had the least education, having never even attended primary school. Nevertheless, she displayed remarkable insight in her grasp of war politics.

My interviews never occurred in a typical laboratory setting. I conducted them in the canteen at the local university, with reggae music steadily pulsing in the background; at an orphanage school, after kicking the tribe chief out of the room for the sake of confidentiality; in a moving bus, praying the driver would avoid gutters. I spent hours at schools, sitting and reading, waiting for curious students to walk over and query me about my activities. I traveled, sweated, argued, and listened. I warned over-eager men that this interview did not qualify as a date, and no, I would not be handing out my phone number. I experimented with translators and, upon realizing that one of them was translating a participant’s statements into more politically correct terms, quit and began conducting the interviews myself in Krio, the local language. I worked every day at learning Krio, not just for my interviews, but also to
show respect for the local culture. By the end of the trip, I could conduct interviews in
imperfect Krio, with occasional linguistic questions to a nearby friend.

**Day 22**

I am sitting on a postcard.

Boray Beach, two hours’ drive from Freetown, stretches for miles of pristine
white sand, enfolded by glittering blue water on one side and lush green rainforest on
the other. All I can hear is ocean; all I can see is forest.

Right now, with my foot dangling in the lukewarm sea, I again feel as if I can
do anything. My future is the ocean, at once encroaching terrifyingly fast and then
pulling back, withdrawing, disappearing. But life is in the pauses between the sea’s
lashing waves, in the spaces between raucous excitement, in what causes the smiles
and tears that carry you from one beginning to an end.

I do not care if I get bitten out here, if a cockroach runs over my foot, if there
is no bathroom, if my hair is dirty. I can see the stars, the ocean is right next to me,
and it’s singing.

It’s singing me home.

**Day 30**

I’ve learned that I can adapt to dilapidated dirt streets, to no running water, to
dirt, to having fewer luxuries, to eating strange food. I have more trouble with the
constant harassment that confronts me every day on the streets and the dearth of
personal space. Sometimes, I just want to disappear, to blend in. But I never can here.
Everyone wants a part of me, and typically, it’s for all the wrong reasons.
Strength lies not in overcoming the most colossal challenge, of making the biggest decisions, of surviving the hardest moments. Strength – true strength – is rather in surviving the spaces between the mountains and the valleys. It is the average days when smiles fade. Strength is trusting that important things will indeed happen and knowing that you can handle them. Strength is the last moments before the final sprint, when adrenaline has faded to a dull throb, when excitement has all but vanished, and what is left is a solid but mediocre ache. Strength is knowing that you can make it to the next moment, and embracing banality as a challenge in itself.

I have so many moments when I want to go home, when there is no sickness, no emergency, and I have no spotlight. These are the hardest moments. These are the moments when Etta, my surrogate mother, teaches me to find my strength. Etta is the strongest woman I have ever met. She does not love her husband, does not live with her children, and finds little fulfillment in her job. But I have never seen Etta cry. I have never seen Etta without a smile and a hug. I have never seen Etta feel less than deliriously grateful for yet another day of life. Later in the trip, Jon and I will discuss this, how we have both grown to revere the sheer gratitude that the average Sierra Leonean feels, compared to what the average American feels. People here have so little, and yet somehow, they have more than I could ever dream of. Theirs is a house of dreams and stories.

**Today**

It has been two hundred and sixty eight days since I left Sierra Leone, and I am still learning.
I learned that I could handle higher levels of adversity than I had formerly thought possible. I will return home with a significantly higher tolerance for uncomfortable situations while still maintaining a positive outlook. I could easily return claiming the trip was a horrible experience, replete with sickness, pain, and bad smells, and considering some of my experiences, such an interpretation might even be justified. But I have chosen not to view the trip in that light. I have chosen to see it through a lens tinted rose by nurturing relationships, beautiful scenery, and incalculable learning. I have chosen to see the magic instead of the scientific details of what happened to me in Sierra Leone. I have chosen to tell a happy story, and this narrative will mold my memories, and thus, my experience.

Everyone has a story. Through this project, I find myself in the complex yet exhilarating position of being entrusted with forty stories in addition to my own. I have never been forced to run for my life, I have never held a gun, I have never sold food on the streets. And yet, somehow, I am in possession of forty narratives in which this and so much else occurs. Forty people looked into my eyes and decided to trust me with their most valuable possession – their story. I have found it an incredibly humbling experience, to hold pieces of someone’s life in my hands.

Am I forty people, or one? I think that the best listeners embed a piece of their companions in their hearts, where it can flow through their bloodstream, imbuing empathy. And because of this, I will never be an unbiased interviewer in the pursuit of my research. I’ve shared food with these people, danced with them in the drenching African rains, cried with them, laughed with them. They became a part of
me, every person’s pain and love and joy binding us together. It’s a giant web, tightly
trussed and roped together, and I can feel the tugs, the pull, even now.

In many ways, I interviewed forty-one subjects, and this section serves as my
own exposition. I freely admit that the writing of this project bears inherent bias,
partially because I so completely immersed myself in the research process. I lived
with my participants for six weeks, and I left a piece of myself there.

A hefty amount of social research bears witness to the idea that sharing
trauma narratives exists as an essential yet often overlooked part of the healing
process. Did I, by listening to people’s stories, help them to heal?

I do not think it is impossible to use both science and magic simultaneously.
Maybe this constituted my magic in Sierra Leone, that from behind the opaque veil of
scientific research, I listened, and I heard.
Chapter 2: The Story of a Nation

“Since the meaning and consequences of actions cannot be understood outside of their dramatic context, and since that context cannot be captured, we can only achieve an approximate understanding of what the contemporary reaction was to important events” (Scheibe 2000, p.236).

The information presented in this section exists as an amalgamation of what I learned both from my experiences in Sierra Leone and from political science reading, particularly Gberie’s (2005) A Dirty War in West Africa and Reno’s (2011) Warfare in Independent Africa.

Historical background

The beginning of any written history must by definition be somewhat arbitrary. The land composing modern Sierra Leone existed for millennia before Portuguese colonizers gave it a name. Sierra Leone translates as “Lion Mountains.”

People lived there, enmeshed in a local, uniquely African culture, untouched by Europeans until the 15th century. Sadly, little documentation exists regarding this earlier history. Because of a lack of written documentation as well as the political context in which my research becomes germane, I will focus on recounting the country’s development following the European entry.

Modern Sierra Leone is a small country about the size of South Carolina situated on the coast of West Africa. It borders Liberia on the south and Guinea on the north and on the east. Freetown, its capital, resides on a peninsula on the northwestern coast of the country. The country is divided into four main provinces:
the western area (Freetown), the north, the south, and the east. The principal city in
the north is Kabala. The principal city in the south is Bo. The principal city in the east
is Kenema. The population of Sierra Leone is approximately six million, with about
one-fifth concentrated in Freetown.

Part I: The Road to Independence

Portuguese ships began arriving in Sierra Leone in 1462 and quickly
established a lucrative slave trade. They maintained only a minimal presence in the
country, apart from regular raids to acquire slaves.

Sierra Leone was colonized by Britain in 1787 as a refuge for freed slaves
returning from the Americas. However, it took the British only twenty-one years to
declare it a Crown colony over the objections of local chiefs. Both the British and the
Krios, freed slaves residing in Freetown, deemed education paramount. In fact, the
first major university in West Africa, Fourah Bay College, was founded in Freetown
in 1827. Even today, literacy rates are much higher in Freetown, the primary domain
of the Krios, than in any other area of the country. In 1896, Sierra Leone became a
British protectorate. In 1951, during political struggles for independence, Milton
Margai of the newly founded Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) took over as prime
minister. Margai steered Sierra Leone slowly toward independence while maintaining
ties with Britain. A conservative, he was highly cognizant of his nation’s struggling
economy and welcomed Western support. In 1961, Sierra Leone gained its
independence from Britain in a relatively peaceful transition.
Part 2: Corruption

Soon after Sierra Leone achieved independence, Siaka Stevens, a former official in the SLPP, became frustrated with Margai’s policies and split to form his own party, the All People’s Congress (APC). After oscillating for several years between the two parties, citizens elected Siaka Stevens as prime minister in 1968, ostensibly using a British-derived constitution. In reality, though, Stevens governed the country as an oligarchy, doling out power and wealth to himself and his favorites, and failing to provide basic public services to his citizens. In 1978, Stevens forced the political system into a one-party state, crushing and condemning any opposition. The rampant corruption in the government reached a peak in the 1980s, when many schools and hospitals ceased functioning due to lack of funds. Terrified of potential coups, Stevens hired foreign mercenary soldiers, alienating and siphoning all power and efficacy from his own military. Deficits, debt, and inflation skyrocketed. Elections, when they occurred, were based not on votes but on guns – which side could seize control of the polling booths, threaten voters, and thus swing the election. Furthermore, even though Freetown developed as an urban area, the rest of the country was characterized by stark poverty and a paucity of any public goods, including healthcare. Stevens also attempted to phase out the railway that connected different parts of the country, making civilian transportation extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Stevens also initiated the corruption and violence inherent in the now-infamous diamond trade after massive diamond mines were discovered in the northern provinces. Although exploitation of the diamond trade began officially in
1931, under Stevens, it became a colossal state-sponsored collection of crimes. He used the diamond trade to sustain his patrimonial order.

In 1985, Stevens handed over leadership to a hand-picked successor, former army general Joseph Momoh. Although many citizens became hopeful that Momoh would rejuvenate the government and enforce regulations, in actuality Momoh did not perform the sweeping changes he promised. Although Momoh did arrest some of Stevens’ former cabinet members, he replaced them with similarly corrupt Lebanese officials, thus bringing about limited change. Unlike Stevens, Momoh was not inordinately selfish and dictatorial; his greater flaw lay in his inadequacy and weakness when it came to asserting any control over the rampant corruption.

Corruption in Sierra Leone was not a secret; virtually all of the national newspapers and magazines discussed it on a regular basis, leading to widespread popular discontent in the late 1990s. The citizens of Sierra Leone were angry and desperate for change. But until Foday Sankoh and Charles Taylor came along, the people had no means of expressing it.

Part 3: War

Foday Sankoh (1937-2003), the infamous leader of the Revolutionary United Front, a rebel group that battled Sierra Leone’s splintering government and citizens, began his career as a photographer. After dropping out of primary school, he tried his hand at photography but joined the army soon before Sierra Leone gained its independence. Sankoh worked in the army during the 1950s, a time when it was characterized as a brutal force of colonial repression. Several years later, under the corrupt regime of Siaka Stevens, Sankoh was jailed at a harsh Freetown prison for
failing to report the plot of a coup (see Appendix D photo 3). Sankoh was incarcerated in this prison for seven years and emerged determined to seek revenge and overthrow what he viewed as an inherently corrupt and evil state. Sankoh characterized the struggle that lasted from 1991-2002 not as a rebellion, but as the people’s fight for fairness and basic human rights.

Even taking into account Sankoh’s overwhelming charisma, determination, and lack of moral restraint, he could not have independently started the war without financial backing. At this stage, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya and Charles Taylor of Liberia took on pivotal roles.

Gaddafi bore Stevens a lingering resentment for failing to attend a summit meeting he held and thus was thrilled with any opportunity to destabilize the APC regime. When Sankoh entered the scene and offered power and wealth in the form of diamonds, Gaddafi leapt at the chance to increase his power and wealth, as well as revenge himself on an old rival. Gaddafi also helped to train revolutionaries in Libya to fight in civil wars occurring in Liberia and Sierra Leone, a training that would later have far-reaching consequences. It was in one of these camps that Sankoh met Charles Taylor, who would fund and supply the rebels in exchange for a steady supply of illegal diamonds.

Taylor had instigated his own civil war in Liberia in 1985, which bore many similarities to the later conflict in Sierra Leone. The Liberian conflict made it easy for Momoh in March 1991 to blame the first attacks of the Revolutionary United Front (Sankoh’s rebel group, commonly known as the RUF) on Liberia’s war, rather than on teetering local instability and his own incompetence. The rebels, however, led by
Sankoh, instantly overwhelmed the Sierra Leonean army, which was already severely depleted from years of Stevens’ autocratic regime. The main government fighting force was composed primarily of new and poorly trained recruits, who often defected at critical moments. In fact, both sides were poorly equipped, badly trained, and often placed at the whims of questionably sane and corrupt commanders, which led to complete chaos across the countryside.

In contrast to popular citizen perceptions, the majority of rebels did not elect to join the RUF; instead, they were abducted and then brainwashed through a combination of psychological and physical torture, harsh drug regimes consisting primarily of cocaine and marijuana, and strict punishment for disobedience. Some also joined in a desperate search for protection in the midst of a bloody conflict. However, the interviews I conducted suggest that many Sierra Leonean citizens believe that the rebels were inherently evil men.

Political scientists categorize the rebels in Sierra Leone as warlord rebels, a category that tends to emerge in decentralized post-colonial states as a result of a corrupt system (Reno, 2011, p.36). Warlord rebels are disorganized and, as is evident in Sierra Leone, spend almost as much time fighting among themselves as against the government, their nominal enemy. A charismatic but ruthless leader who substantiates his war crimes on liberation and freedom ideologies typically leads them. Foday Sankoh epitomizes this type of hawkish leader. Another characteristic of warlord rebels is their blatant disregard for the civilian population; in fact, during conflict, banditry, outlaw behavior, and the arbitrary punishment of civilians become common war methods (Reno, 2011, p.167). Such behavior leads to massive human
rights crises. In the cases of Sierra Leone and Liberia, human rights crises led the United Nations to negotiate directly with the rebels, thus lending them a greater air of legitimacy.

For the next several years, the war became a “see-saw conflict with towns changing hands with dizzying rapidity” (Gberie, 2005, p.79). Combatants on both the rebel and soldier sides behaved with unruly violence and were often more likely to target civilians than each other. In fact, sources claim that soldiers and rebels were often visually indistinguishable from each other and sometimes even from civilians, which increased civilian casualties. Common war tactics on both sides included amputation, rape, and burning houses.

In 1993, a new force entered the chaos. Dubbed the *kamajors*, or *kamajoisia*, these combatants were citizens coalesced into a parochial fighting force by the town chief to protect a specific area from rebel attacks. The *kamajors*, however, were often just as detested by civilians as the rebels, due to their increasingly rampant brutality and wide use of arbitrary punishment to compel district obedience. However, the *kamajors* tended to be older than the rebels, almost half of whom at one point were children (defined as below the age of eighteen).

By 1995, Sierra Leone was in complete chaos, with soldiers and rebels changing sides daily. Violence was brutal and arbitrary. Goals of banditry had overtaken the previous goals of political alteration. The RUF had begun as a mercenary enterprise with diamonds as its primary output but never evolved into a functional political organization. In 1998, the RUF announced Operation No Living Thing, which used arbitrary amputations and punishments in an attempt to
demonstrate to the population that the government could not protect them (Reno, 2011, p.185). A somewhat horrifying quote from Sankoh epitomizes the rampant violence inherent in the rebels’ mission: “When two elephants are fighting, who is going to suffer? The grass, of course. I cannot deny it.”

Around this time, international forces attempted to broach a peace agreement with rebels to halt the unrestrained carnage. An election occurred in 1997 but was rejected by the RUF, with the elected president banished within a year. A rebel-friendly leader took over instead, and immediately established Sankoh in a high-ranking government position.

In 1999, the rebels invaded and took control of Freetown for two weeks, unleashing a frenzied bout of murder, amputation, and incineration. The rebels’ initial motivation to invade was to free the recently jailed Sankoh, but a bloodbath ensued once the heavily drugged rebels took control of the city. Rebels made little if any distinction between civilian and military targets and killed on whim. Eventually, however, international forces (primarily professional South African soldiers) beat the rebels back from the battered capital. This invasion illustrated the utter annihilation of any previously existing wartime rules. Violence was completely random and brutal, combatants routinely switched sides, and authority figures intentionally fueled the chaos.

It should be mentioned that half of the women in Sierra Leone were the victims of sexual violence during the war (Kristof, WuDunn 2009, p.83). Women’s stories of trauma do not appear in published literature with a frequency proportional
to their occurrences, and Sierra Leone’s national narrative provides no exception to this pattern.

Part 4: Reckoning

By 2002, with the help of West African and international peacekeeping forces, particularly ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group), Sierra Leone’s decade-long war reached its conclusion by brokering a long overdue peace agreement. Foday Sankoh and other rebel leaders were imprisoned and eventually put on trial by the Special Court for Sierra Leone. A massive project of disarmament and reintegration began. The war had by now displaced 30% of the population and led to at least 50,000 casualties.

Not one of the people I talked to in Sierra Leone fully understood the causes of the war. Many berated the deaths of the primary battle leaders, claiming that any hope of understanding the war had died with them. Political scientists have generated two possible explanations describing the cause of the conflict, although very few can explain its extreme bloodiness. One explanation simply involves diamonds: that is, that Charles Taylor and Gaddafi manipulated an insane Sankoh to provide them with diamonds, resulting in a civil war. The second explanation rests on the assumption that a corrupt state that functions at the expense of its civilians will not survive forever. As with many dual political theories, the real answer probably lies in a combination of the two.

After eleven years of heavily destructive warfare ending in 2002, however, Sierra Leone has begun to stitch itself back together. When talking to citizens, I was struck by the fierce support they have for one another, as well as their staunch
opposition to violence. Although raging poverty and weak national infrastructure still
enter conversation, support and harmony have become dominant themes. Sierra
Leone is dreaming of peace.

**Ethnic composition**

There are many diverse ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, all of which have their
own languages. This section will only discuss the three largest groups, from which all
of the study’s participants came.

Krios are descended from freed slaves and compose the primary inhabitants of
Freetown, the capital city. They speak primarily Krio, which is an English pidgin,
derived from a synthesis of English and local dialects. The Krios are also the only
ethnic group in Sierra Leone not to practice female circumcision. Furthermore, the
Krios have the highest literacy rate by far of any ethnic group in Sierra Leone and
place a high value on education.

The Mendes primarily inhabit the south of Sierra Leone, with Bo as their
capital city. They speak Mende, which is an African tribal language. The
responsibility to treat guests and strangers well is paramount in their culture.

The Temnes primarily inhabit the north of Sierra Leone. They speak Temne,
which is also an African tribal language. The majority of Temnes are Muslims.

Ethnic tensions between the Mende and the Temne are currently running at an
all-time high. The two primary political parties in Sierra Leone, the All People’s
Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP), constantly vie for
power over the political scene. The APC represents the interests of the Temne, and
the SLPP represents the Mende. In November 2012, Sierra Leone held its third
democratic election since the conclusion of the war, in which the APC candidate, Ernest Bae Korama, claimed victory in a surprisingly peaceful process.

Both the Mende and the Temne elect their own tribal chiefs, who exist at three levels: local, district, and tribal. Local chiefs manage villages. To visit a village, strangers need a personal introduction to the chief from a mutual friend. Gifts and a show of respect are also necessary. For example, when I visited Tikonko village in the south (see Appendix D, photo 4), I brought the chief a small bag with 20,000 leones (about five dollars) and a baseball cap. Some Westerners may view such actions as akin to bribery, especially when the chief proceeds to assist the visitor. However, in Sierra Leone this practice is expected when meeting an authority figure, or a bigman. In return for the gifts and the honor of a visit, the chief will typically bring out a plate of freshly picked fruit and a couple of bottled soft drinks. After several minutes of respectful greetings combined with sporadic periods of silence, it becomes acceptable to introduce a topic of business. In virtually all situations in Sierra Leone, when in doubt, I learned to sit down and bide my time. Often, locals will test foreigners by having them wait for long periods of time. Waiting proves how much you value the meeting. This attitude runs contrary to the Western expectation that promptness is a show of respect and thus takes many foreigners some time to appreciate and understand.

On a different note, Sierra Leone possesses a relationship culture that influences how gender is approached. It is common in many non-Western countries for men to take multiple wives, or one wife and several girlfriends. Sierra Leone is no exception to this phenomenon, and monogamous relationships are extremely rare.
Distinct from many other countries, however, is the practice of women frequently taking several boyfriends. Based on my observation, I deduced that it was equally acceptable for women to lead polygamous lives as for men. Many women have children by several men, and the biological fathers are expected to help support their children, although the women take the primary burden of responsibility.

**Geography, transportation, and economy**

Throughout Sierra Leone, small villages of up to a thousand citizens function reasonably autonomously. The primary economic activity is agriculture, and people will walk regularly for miles carrying their goods to be sold at centrally located markets. Due to rapid inflation during the 1980s and 1990s, in 2013, one dollar can be traded for approximately forty-three hundred leones (the national currency). Sierra Leone consistently ranks at the bottom of lists of national GDP and income.

During the war, many people were displaced from the villages to Freetown, which is now dangerously overpopulated. However, convincing former village residents to leave the capital, which they view as offering more financial opportunities, to return to the villages has proven difficult. The government and several NGOs are currently attempting to induce migration back to the villages, which provide the majority of the country’s exports, primarily in the form of agriculture and lumber.

Paved roads and government buses run regularly between most of the major cities and Freetown, which also functions as a port. Taxis and motorcycles also frequent the major roads. Individual ownership of a car in Sierra Leone is unusual. Most city-dwellers use local public transportation, of which there are three primary
Motorcycles, the most expensive option, comprise the only form of transportation that will take you exactly where you want to go. Ten years ago, the government encouraged the bike transport system as a way of providing steady jobs to former combatants. Before getting on the bike, bartering over price is requisite. Unfortunately for me, a large discrepancy exists between local price and what is affectionately dubbed the *whiteman* price. Locals will attempt to charge foreigners on average four to ten times as much as the standard rate – which, in comparison with European prices, is still fairly cheap. The most I ever paid for a local transport was about five dollars, for which a bike driver happily sped me across Freetown (a journey that takes around forty-five minutes). I was later informed that a local would have paid less than two dollars for the same ride. The second form of transportation is car taxis, which will frequently squeeze four people into the back and two into the front, then set off along a preset route. Knowledge of the city is absolutely essential for this form of transportation, as passengers have to specify exactly when they want to disembark. It is also possible to charter a taxi to bring only one person to a specific destination, but this option often costs significantly more, particularly if the customer is white. The third and cheapest transport option is a *poda poda*. *Podas* are hollowed out, ancient vans into which drivers will squeeze twenty to twenty-five people (See Appendix D photo 6). They also travel on preset routes, and the standard price for one ride is equivalent to about twenty cents.

Seatbelts on any of these options are virtually nonexistent. Traffic lights and regulations are found very infrequently on the streets of Sierra Leone. Occasionally, a police officer will be seen directing traffic, but they are typically more interested in
collecting bribes than in actually directing traffic. Due to intense overpopulation and lack of infrastructure, Freetown traffic makes driving in Manhattan seem calm by comparison.

A highly abridged dictionary of essential Krio terms

*Whiteman/whitegirl:* Westerner, non-African

*Kamajors:* local civilian militia

*Salone:* affectionate term for Sierra Leone used by locals

*Poda poda:* hollowed out vans used for cheap transportation

*Bigman:* any person with power or great wisdom, like a chief

*Provinces/villages:* any part of Sierra Leone outside of Freetown

**Conclusion**

All participants in my study grew up primarily in Sierra Leone and consider it their country. With the exception of the five participants who fled the country as refugees for a few years, all participants also lived through a brutal civil war. At no point in their lives was Sierra Leone entirely stable, with a national confidence in the probity of its leaders. Political stability, when it existed, hung by a thread.

Living in Sierra Leone, even in peace, nevertheless presents significant challenges. Extreme poverty is not the exception but the norm. The country’s infrastructure is weak at best and often nonexistent.

Working against conflict and abject poverty is Sierra Leone’s incomparable sense of community. Even though Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world, its citizens rarely starve because they take care of each other. If someone has food one week, they share it with as many people as they can. And then the next
week, when the former provider’s resources have dwindled, someone else will feed the community.

I have tried to provide an abridged understanding of Sierra Leone’s history and culture to set the stage for my participants’ narratives. This world I have described, this national narrative; this is the backdrop, the setting, wherein forty stories will unfold.
Chapter 3: Literature Review

This thesis examines the influence of participation in and observation of war on the psychological development of young people, and how they heal from these experiences. All existing literature on human development, trauma, and war is potentially germane. Thus, I must be selective. A common Western conception claims that trauma hinders successful development. This idea implies that Sierra Leone’s youth should be brimming with social developmental issues stemming from the recent civil war. Based on my interviews, I pursued three primary topics in existing research literature, all related to war experiences: 1) moral development and attitudes, 2) the power and influence of the situation, and 3) resilience.

Moral development and attitudes

Children who are unaffected by direct conflict nevertheless display some comprehension of its consequences. Selman’s (1980) five levels of social-cognitive development state that during the first level of development, children view war through the lens of personal relationships. Children understand war as a conflict with friends, and peace as the lack of conflict (Hakvoort, 1998). Even young children seem to possess a rudimentary understanding of the concepts of peace and war by the age of six. As children grow up, they begin to understand peace more in terms of human attitudes and something that requires effort to accomplish. Peace takes work, and it requires diplomacy.

According to a British study, most preschool-age children possess a rudimentary understanding that war is violent (Rodd 1985). Because information
about war can also stem from news, media, and adult influences, children relatively unaffected by war easily incorporate the idea of violence into their war schema. Although most children in Rodd’s study do not demonstrate an understanding of how wars end, they perform well on questions regarding why wars are fought. Furthermore, almost all these young children (82%) clearly understand the concept of a soldier, primarily in terms of aggressive behavior (Rodd 1985). A large majority also state unequivocally that war is bad.

Violence is common in war zones. Seeing these horrific acts can irreparably damage a child’s conception of how a moral world should function, if a moral world exists at all. Bandura’s (1963) classic experiments on aggression illustrate unequivocally that modeling aggression in front of a child (i.e. punching a doll) significantly increases the likelihood of the child behaving aggressively later that day or even after a couple of weeks. This research suggests that aggressive behavior, especially for children, is powerfully influenced by the actions of others. Seeing frequent violence can alter a child’s moral schema and increase the likelihood of violent behavior.

In terms of attitudes, Jagodic (2000) suggests that children who live through a destructive war can learn to hate war and yet simultaneously develop favorable attitudes toward the military prowess of their own country, including soldiers. His study of Croatian children also reveals that younger children are more likely than older children to view war more favorably (i.e. admire soldiers, support government loyalty). Additionally, children with higher levels of victimization during war are more likely to have positive attitudes toward the nation’s aggression (Jagonic 2000).
Jagodic proposes that younger children are less psychologically affected by war because they have not yet gained enough comprehension of morality for moral rules to be broken, a somewhat controversial idea. He also mentions some attitude variances between different war-affected nations. Covell (1996) supports the idea of differences in war attitudes between countries in her study on the discrepancies between American and Canadian adolescents’ attitudes toward war. She also reconfirms the existing finding that boys tend to be more accepting and supportive of war than girls. This research, however, does not analyze non-Western populations.

All these studies show that when compared to a population unaffected by war, war-affected children who view regular violence are more likely to demonstrate later violent behavior and support their country’s soldiers during a conflict. Research on attitude discrepancies between war-affected and non-war-affected children is a little hazier and varies according to the individual and the country. However, research suggests that strong war exposure does affect attitude development, particularly attitudes about actors in the war.

**The power of the situation**

A multitude of social psychology studies document how a powerful situation can significantly alter an individual’s behavior. Philip Zimbardo (2008), the architect of the classic 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, discusses in his recent book how horrible situations, from prisons to wars, can transform honest, moral people into evil perpetrators of horrific acts. An example of this can be found in the surprisingly violent behavior of the guards in the Stanford Prison Experiment. The rebels in Sierra
Leone, according to this interpretation, were not intrinsically evil people – they were simply good people placed in a bad situation, or good people who did bad things.

Another example demonstrating the power of the situation is people’s proclivity for obeying an authority. Stanley Milgram (1963) proved this point unequivocally and shockingly in his classic obedience study when over sixty percent of the participants in his study agreed to shock another person with four hundred and fifty volts of electricity. Milgram drew his participants randomly from the population; these were not abnormally vicious people. Instead, they reacted to an authority figure and obeyed, even when the orders were at odds with their personal morals.

**Resilience**

If children survive a war, how do they recover from it? The study of resilience, comprising a large research base, was partially founded on Werner’s classic (1985) longitudinal “Children of the Garden Island” study, which analyzes the long-term consequences of prenatal stress and bad rearing repercussions on physical, cognitive, and social development. Werner’s study is particularly unusual because she studied all of the children residing in a community, not just the high-risk ones. Werner identifies protective factors that helped more high-risk children resist stress, including high sociability, high activity level, and low excitability and distress, all of which strengthen the child’s relationships with caregivers. In essence, having a supportive community increases resilience and the odds that a child will lead a happy, successful life.

In addition to Werner’s research, a substantial body of literature exists documenting resilience in childhood, including risk factors, protective mechanisms,
and vulnerability. The existing research has identified three primary models of resilience when explaining the role of protective factors: compensatory, protective, and challenge (Fergus, 2005). A compensatory model involves a protective factor directly working to improve an outcome, such as a social worker meeting regularly with a troubled child. In the protective model, protective factors work against risk factors (e.g. good parents versus negative peer influences). The challenge model leads to a curvilinear outcome, in which moderate levels of risk enable an adolescent to overcome the challenge without being overwhelmed. Low levels of risk do not provide enough of a challenge to necessitate resilience, and high levels of risk overstress the child, preventing the development of adequate resilience.

However, a limitation in the research on resilience involves the efficacy of interventions aiming to help certain risk groups thrive. Furthermore, there is a paucity of data that compares resilience across cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds using equivalent quantitative scales. Another issue is that most of the research, with the notable exception of Werner’s study, has been done cross-sectionally, collecting data on participants at only two ages (Fergus 2005).

Several studies chronicle the ages between five and nine years as having the greatest vulnerability to trauma, due to a child’s greater ability to process real events without yet possessing a more consolidated identity and solidified defense mechanisms (Barenbaum, 2004). Basic moral principles have been taught but are not necessarily assimilated into ethical schemas, placing the child in an extremely delicate moral position. However, no substantial longitudinal study as yet has assessed the mental health outcomes of children who partake in war violence.
All things considered, both adults and children display remarkable resilience to trauma. An evolutionary hypothesis claims that evolution would not only have selected for better fighters and survivors, but also for effective psychological coping mechanisms to the stress violence imposes (Belsky, 2008). Natural selection may have worked to increase levels of both physical and psychological resilience. This idea could help to explain striking resilience findings. Additionally, Belsky (2008) suggests that much of the childhood trauma associated with indirect war experience stems from a feeling of insecurity akin to that of a missing parent. Lacking a stable caregiver while living through a destructive conflict leads to insecurity and turmoil in the world of a child. One hypothesis in line with Werner’s work advocates that a stable influence, like that of a committed caregiver, can protect a child from many risk factors and increase resilience.

From a different point of view, resilience can also be understood as the brain’s adaptive process to recall a traumatic event through rose-colored glasses. Kahneman’s (2011) study on the remembered versus the experiencing self illustrates the potential discrepancy between experience and memory. In this study, one logical hypothesis is that people, when given a choice, will select an option that causes them less pain. However, Kahneman’s experiment questions the consistency of this idea. Kahneman had participants place their hands in painfully cold water for two trials. For the first trial, participants had to leave their hand immersed in the cold water for sixty seconds, a fairly painful experience. For the second trial, they immersed their hands for ninety seconds; however, for the last thirty seconds, warm water slowly streamed into the basin, making the final thirty seconds slightly less painful than the
preceding sixty. However, even though the last thirty seconds were less painful, the participants still experienced pain during them. The second trial involved more pain than the first trial. Surprisingly, however, participants’ recollections focus on the mild improvement at the conclusion of the second trial, skewing the memory of the second trial as a more positive experience than the first trial. Kahneman distinguishes between a remembering self, or the part of the individual that recalls less pain after the event concludes, and an experiencing self, or the part of the individual that actually experiences the pain in the moment. Surprisingly, these two components of the self often perceive painful events rather differently. Most participants, when given the option, choose to repeat the second trial over the first, which actually causes increased levels of pain overall. In this scenario, the remembering self triumphs over the experiencing self. Kahneman’s findings indicate that people make choices based on memory, not on experience. This study suggests that people’s stories and feelings toward past events can distort the memories of what actually occurred, potentially aiding in the healing process. If we remember an experience as less painful than it actually was, healing becomes easier. This dichotomy between the remembering and experiencing self might contribute to resilience. Unfortunately, in some cases, the remembering self might make a decision that leads to greater pain, as demonstrated in Kahneman’s study when participants chose to repeat the second trial over the less painful first trial.

Resilience, whether stemming from innate determination or differently remembered selves, can be facilitated by several adjustments to a child’s life. Education, for example, has been proven to help to restore a semblance of normalcy
to the disrupted lifestyle of a war-affected child, promoting stability, community, and a new social identity as a student (Barenbaum, 2004). Furthermore, success in school enhances self-efficacy and coping strategies.

The psychologist, Jonathan Shay (1994), who counseled many survivors of the Vietnam War, suggests that sharing trauma narratives is essential for healing from this trauma. Although much of the writing on narratives lies outside the field of psychology, the vast cornucopia of literary memoirs bears witness to a fundamental human need to tell stories. Our own stories, other people’s stories, stories of who we wish we were; all of these and more have been slaved over, written, and sometimes published. But why do people feel this compulsion? Why do we want to reveal our darkest secrets, not just to a friend or to a community, but to the world? And why are some secrets revealed rather than others?

As detailed above, a substantial amount of research exists codifying war attitudes and general resilience among Western children, including those who are affected by conflict and those who are not. However, much less research documents the experiences of children in non-Western countries, particularly in Africa and in parts of Latin America. A few researchers, notably Betancourt (2010), Blattman (2009), and Wessells (2009), intensely study the experiences of war-affected children across the African continent. But very little psychological research attempts to understand the general experience of youth who grow up during a civil war. Child soldiers, amputees, orphans, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) victims have all captured the global spotlight in recent years. But what about relatively unaffected youth? What about the children who are witnesses to but do not participate in
conflict, and who nevertheless grow up in a war zone? Some research documents what happens to children who live through a war in Europe, North America, and some Asian countries, but fails to adequately study children in the developing world. This research attempts an inquiry into the effects of growing up in a war zone on the “average” Sierra Leonean child, the child who was not a soldier or an amputee but who nevertheless lived through a destructive civil war. Although many potential avenues of research could be pursued here, I chose to focus my interviews and research on moral development and how war can influence a child’s moral sphere, on attitudes toward war and its participants, with a focus on conceptions of good and evil, and on how living in a cohesive community and sharing trauma narratives can help to ameliorate battle scars and knit a purportedly broken country back together.
Chapter 4: METHODS

Preliminary planning

I initially selected interviewing as the best research technique, based on Barenbaum’s (2004) research-based policy initiative that acknowledges the relative paucity of psychological research stemming from developing countries. This paucity can bias behavioral measures used to study mental health in an international situation. Finding an effective cross-cultural screening and measurement tool is therefore a significant concern. For the moment, until the scientific community understands enough about a specific country to construct an effective mental health test, Barenbaum suggests direct, simple interviews as the best option. Based on preliminary reading and conversations with my advisor, I conducted five recorded pilot interviews with Wesleyan students to test the fluidity and comprehensiveness of my questions. Because most Wesleyan students do not have past war experiences, I told the pilot interviewees that they were free to fabricate answers. After the pilot interviews, I revised my questions. However, because of the specifically foreign nature of my project, the materials that I brought to Sierra Leone comprised only a draft, a draft that I adapted and revised during the trip as the interviews progressed.

Participants

I conducted 40 interviews with 20 females and 20 males, with ages ranging from 18-28. The mean age was 20.3 years. I selected this age range for interviews because my research focuses on the effects of war on childhood development, and thus I wanted to talk to people who were growing up during Sierra Leone’s civil war. Because the war ended in 2002, I focused mainly on people around the age of twenty
who would have been ten years old when peace was brokered. The majority of my participants were living in Freetown, with about a third living in Bo. I only interviewed two participants who were currently living in a village, because visiting any village required an introduction from a friend of the chief, which was very complicated to arrange in only six weeks. All participants were born in Sierra Leone.

In terms of education, three participants had no schooling whatsoever. Thirteen had completed primary school, 15 had completed secondary school, and nine had completed or were currently attending university.

**Procedure**

I acquired contact with participants through three tactics: 1) from schools I was given an introduction to, 2) from local universities I spent time at, waiting for students to approach me, and 3) through friends. The NGO I partnered with, the Youth Partnership for Peace and Development (see Appendix C for an organizational profile), introduced me to several principals at their affiliated schools and asked if students over the age of eighteen would be willing to be interviewed. Additionally, my Sierra Leonean friend David took me to the canteen at the local Fourah Bay University, where we sat and waited for potential participants to approach us. Although in America this tactic might not have worked, in Sierra Leone, students curious about my presence in the canteen often approached me. I also used this approach at Njala University in Bo. Finally, I received a smattering of final participants through local friends.

When I interviewed at a school, I offered to buy my participants a soft drink. When I interviewed a friend of a friend, I typically compensated them with the
equivalent of about one dollar, which is a fairly standard rate for an unskilled day’s labor in Freetown.

There exists a highly unusual money culture in Sierra Leone, which probably stems from the civil war. During the war, if anyone displayed money, they would be killed or attacked for it. In light of this, even today, people in Sierra Leone tend to be very subtle about cash transactions (which includes almost all financial transactions in the country). Money is crumpled and folded deep into a person’s palm, then slipped clandestinely into the recipient’s hand. In fact, it feels almost rude to take a moment and count money in plain sight. Instead, people restrict counting their money to banks and secluded corners. When I compensated participants, at the end of the interview, I simply shook their hand, simultaneously pressing a bill into their palms.

I presented the subject of the interview as “questions about growing up in Sierra Leone,” as I did not want to prime my participants to focus their answers around war. I told participants that they could stop the interview at any point or elect not to answer any question. Interviews were given wherever I happened to come across the participants. Most occurred in private classrooms, a few occurred in homes, and a few occurred at restaurants. A memorable one occurred in the back of a moving vehicle. The interviews typically lasted ten or fifteen minutes. At the end of the interview, I switched off the recorder and explained the purpose of the study and how it related to war (which had been formerly concealed). I then asked participants if they had any questions for me. Many asked me to clarify details of the study. A significant portion also asked me questions about my life, what I planned to do with these interviews, and if I planned to return to Sierra Leone. I answered questions
about my life and my thesis honestly and as best I could. Since I do plan to return to Sierra Leone to conduct future research during graduate school, I confirmed that I would indeed be returning.

**Instruments**

For the first 27 interviews, I used a translator whenever my participant was not fluent in English (for example, all of the university students were fluent). During this time, I committed to learning Krio and practiced every day. Then, at one interview, I noticed that my translator was expressing the participants’ words in politically correct terms, rather than in the actual language used. After that, I conducted the interviews on my own, with occasional aid on an unknown word from a nearby friend. I also had my interview questions translated by an English/Krio bilingual into Krio, which greatly facilitated the process. I digitally recorded all but three of the interviews (participants had an option to opt-out of voice recording). I took notes during all interviews. (See Appendix A for the original interview questionnaires).

**Analysis**

War can be thought of as the antecedent condition to this research. After the interviews were fully transcribed, specific data were entered into an excel spreadsheet. A reliability check using a different coder was impossible in this situation, given that all the interviews were conducted either in Krio or in heavily accented English.

The next step was creating univariate histograms for the most important independent variables (war exposure, family demographics, education level) and
primary output variables (definitions of the “enemy,” attitudes toward soldiers, knowledge of the word victim, and attitudes toward the rebels as evil or not).

Then, using SAS programming, I ran several bivariate frequency regressions. The main variables studied were war exposure and education level correlated with attitudes toward soldiers, attitudes toward the rebels as evil or not, definitions of the enemy, and knowledge of the word “victim.” Gender was used as a control for all of these regressions.

Community context

Two factors intrinsic to Sierra Leonean society affected my interview process and thus bear mentioning. First, the country places an unusually strong emphasis on welcoming and taking care of strangers or guests. I received an influx of help every time I got lost, felt sick, or needed virtually anything. Furthermore, Sierra Leoneans, unlike Americans, do not expect immediate and fair reciprocation. They did me favors out of a desire to build a relationship with me, and with the understanding that whenever the time came, I would reciprocate. Therefore, when it came to asking for introductions to schools and for aid in finding participants, I was completely overwhelmed with offers of assistance. I distinctly remember the first school where I conducted interviews, where the principal offered me interviews with thirty participants without any expectation of payment (see Appendix D photo 2). In fact, I was instructed that payment in this situation would offend her. My inability to interview participants under the age of eighteen limited the pool of offers, but I can nevertheless say that the process of recruiting participants was surprisingly easy. On another note, the welcoming culture also contributed to participants’ willingness to
talk to me. The hardest part of the interviews was not finding willing participants; it was convincing people that I only wanted forty in all, and that I could not interview anyone younger than eighteen. I had several experiences where a sixteen or seventeen-year-old ran into the room, convinced that his or her strong desire to help me would override any lingering doubts I had about their age.

The second cultural factor involved my distinctiveness as a Caucasian in the country. Due to Sierra Leone’s extreme poverty and recent conflict, tourists are an anomaly; all Westerners (primarily British citizens) I met there were either working on a program or conducting research. Therefore, every time I walked into a room, I was noticed. Locals routinely ran over just to tell me hello and ask what I was doing in Sierra Leone. Several children sprinted over to stroke my arms because they had never touched a white person before (see Appendix D photo 4). On one memorable occasion, an infant burst into tears when she saw me, presumably because I was so different and thus terrifying. This racial salience also contributed to people’s willingness to talk to me, as they could then tell stories about how they met a white girl. I was an exciting, unusual, and quite desirable contact, especially considering my American connections and affluence.

**Biases and limitations**

This research was not conducted using random sampling, which limits the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, as only one person (who was heavily invested in the success of the project) conducted the interviews and the analysis, results are certainly not free from investigator bias. Basic statistical controls were difficult to set up, and there was no control for socioeconomic status or culture. The
only potential demographic controls were education, gender, birthplace, and geographical location. Due to feasibility issues, participants came primarily from one of the two principal cities in Sierra Leone, which limited geographic diversity. Furthermore, the frequent practice of interviewing in schools limited educational diversity, although this bias was not nearly as sweeping.

A bias could also be found regarding many of the male participants, who exhibited very clear romantic proclivities towards me. Therefore, the expansiveness of many of the male participants’ answers cannot be wholly attributed to simple responsiveness regarding the questions. The virtual illegality of homosexuality in Sierra Leone eliminates the potential for this effect in female participants, who in general spoke less prolifically, although this could have stemmed in part from cultural expectations or prescribed gender roles.
Chapter 5: RESULTS

The results of these interviews are divided into three primary categories: 1) the overall demographic portrait of the sample, 2) relational/comparative descriptions, and 3) overarching thematic results.

**Description of the sample**

The majority of my participants are, in absolute terms, extremely poor when compared to a global sample, with many earning an average daily salary of one or two dollars (if they were employed). However, when compared to the population of Sierra Leone, my participants were relatively privileged. In terms of education, 23% of participants were attending or had attended university. Given that only 8% had no education at all, the participants taken holistically reside in an above-average educational class relative to the nation of Sierra Leone, possibly due to the high numbers of Krio participants, who place a greater emphasis on education. The males were on average slightly more educated than the females.

![Figure 1. Highest level of completed education](image-url)
The participants as a whole had high war exposure, with 55% falling in the significant or severe exposure categories. The males interviewed had higher war exposure, with the exposure averaging in the significant coding, than the females, whose average exposure fell at the moderate coding. Significant exposure was defined as repeatedly viewing violence or having a family member severely affected. Severe exposure necessitated direct involvement in a war activity. Only five percent of participants reported mild or unremembered exposure.

![Figure 2. Level of war exposure](image)

Almost half of the participants came from the Freetown area. Forty-seven percent lived in Freetown during the war, which, although relatively peaceful for the majority of the conflict, experienced a few weeks of sweeping destruction. Twelve percent of the participants resided in Bo during the war. Kamajor violence was especially prevalent in the southern provinces, where 20% of participants lived. Ten percent of participants grew up in the northern villages. After the war began, 15% of participants fled the country as refugees. A refugee is defined as a participant whose
family left the country because of the war and lived elsewhere for at least two years.

Refugees commonly fled to neighboring Guinea or Ghana.

Figure 3. Location during war

Response trends

This section discusses modal meanings that a significant number of my participants gave to central terms used during the interview. I have identified five major definitions or comparisons germane to my topic: 1) definitions of war, 2) attitudes toward soldiers, 3) attitudes toward rebels, 4) definitions of an enemy, and 5) how a victim is defined. All five involve attitudes toward war and its participants. These attitudes are presumed to be the result of years of social and moral development.

1. Defining war

Although less quantitatively significant, participants’ definitions of war reveal a surprising breadth of understandings regarding violence. There were four primary categories of war definitions: a violent situation affecting its participants, vast
amounts of death and suffering reaped, negative images unrelated to concrete effects, and general, unemotional dictionary definitions.

In the first category, participants demonstrated an understanding of the transformative power of a violent situation on people even peripherally involved and defined it as such. According to BD\(^1\), “in war, people are influenced by evil, not good. The war changed my life from good to bad.” In this vein, several participants expressed an understanding of the substantial situational power of a pervasive conflict. BG claimed that “[war] leads people to do what they do not want to do.”

Several participants defined the war in terms of death and suffering, especially as it applied to the fragmentation of a national community. BK asserted that “war is not necessary because all of us are brother.” Another (AF) ardently and pithily expressed the rampant devastation in the statement: “war no good because they kill people. If mama no die, sister go die. If sister no die, daddy go die. If daddy no die, friend go die.” This class of participants understood war primarily in terms of its destructive consequences.

Another group of participants defined the war without relating it to people, but instead phrased it using broad responses that transcend individual experiences. An example of this category of response is “the war is a madness” (BP) or “it is a natural disaster” (AN). Both of these definitions place a strongly negative connotation on the concept of war, but without expanding and describing what this negativity stems from (i.e. loss of life). Another poignant response that defined war in terms of a destructive image was that “it was a time of running and fire. The fire burned” (AI).

\(^1\) These initials are fictitious and randomly assigned to participants as unique identifiers.
The last class of participants, 25% of the total, defined the war using an unemotional dictionary definition. An example of this category can be found in the narrative of AL, who claimed that war is “a conflict between two parties, one of good, and one of bad.” AO also gave a dictionary definition, but one that incorporated some negative effects, saying that war “destroys the economy of the country, destroys lives and properties, and it destroys the country to rubble.”

There is an additional coding labeled “refused to answer.” This coding accounts for participants who did not understand the question, either linguistically or conceptually, or participants who understood the question but preferred not to answer.

![Figure 4. Definitions of war](image)

2. Attitudes toward soldiers

Perhaps the most striking finding involved participants’ attitudes toward soldiers. Just over half of participants had a strong positive view of a soldier, defining him or her as “someone who fights against our enemies to save the life of the righteous, innocent people” (BD) “guardians, saviors” (AL) or “they care” (BL). An example of a neutral association can be found in BF’s statement that “somebody who
fights for something or for someone by orders, whether for the good or for the bad.”

An example of a negative association is, “when you do bad, [soldiers] never forgive you. They kill you. The heart is bold. They don’t think twice about killing” (AF).

Some participants qualified the definition with descriptions of a characteristic set of clothes or training regime.

A relation was found between war exposure and attitudes toward soldiers. Almost two-thirds of participants classified in the two most severe war exposure categories expressed positive associations with soldiers.

The frequent positive association with soldiers is surprising, due to high levels of soldier involvement in rebel activity during the war. Beginning in 1996, many of the government soldiers defected to the rebel side, committing countless war crimes, like amputations. In light of this activity, it seems puzzling that over half of the participants reveal a respect and even reverence for soldiers.

Figure 5. Attitudes toward soldiers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response categories</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative; 5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral; 11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive; 21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refused to answer; 3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Attitudes toward rebels

One of the questions inquired whether rebels were evil people or simply good people who did bad things in a bad situation. Of participants who responded, 69% claimed that rebels were intrinsically evil people. Three-quarters of the participants who said rebels were good people who did bad things were university students or graduates, suggesting a relationship to educational level. In fact, every single participant attending university said that rebels were good people who did bad things. Very few participants without a university education grasped the moral idea that people who commit atrocities are not necessarily evil. These participants thought that because rebels perpetrated horrific crimes, they were horrific people. Females were almost twice as likely to say that rebels were irrevocably evil than males were, which could reflect educational disparities.

![Bar chart showing responses](image)

**Figure 6. Are rebels evil people or good people who do bad things?**

Of the participants who allowed that rebels could still possess some goodness, several offered situational explanations for war crimes. For example, one explanation
was “we was gone bad. For me, he is not a bad person because if you ask who are the bad people, they don’t know. He had no other way.” Participant BF claimed that, “all the people fighting, they are all the same” which equates the rebels with soldiers and *kamajors* instead of making a blanket statement on one group. Participant BM gave a developmental explanation for war crimes that closely resembles the hypothesis of Bandura’s (1961) modeled aggression studies, stating that, “for a young boy like me at a particular time, killing somebody, [the killers] are stigmatizing me. A boy like me should not have that mindset. Maybe I will do that. In the mind of a boy, whatever he sees, he wants to try that. Just because of our mindset, the killing of people in front of some of us, the looting can make us change.” Most of the participants did not offer situational explanations for war crimes. A few of the more educated ones, however, seemed to understand the overwhelming power of the situation on individual behavior. These explanations are consistent with Zimbardo’s (2008) view on situational influences.

The responses of participants who believed that rebels were intrinsically evil varied less. Most followed some derivative of the original question. For example, as participant AO emphatically alleged, slapping the table forcefully, “they are bad people who do bad things.”

4. **Defining the “enemy”**

Definitions of the enemy fell primarily into three categories: in interpersonal relationships, in terms of war, and in unemotional dictionary definitions. An example of a definition given in terms of relationships is “someone who tries to spoil you, tries to damage you, to spoil your name. They are not good to you. They can take your
life” (BD). Many participants simply claimed that enemies were “bad people” (AC).

The majority of participants (72%) defined the word “enemy” in terms of personal relationships and daily life outside of the context of war. This finding could partially stem from the colossal emphasis Sierra Leonean society places on relationships and community.

Only seven percent of participants defined the enemy in terms of war or conflict, suggesting that at this point in time, the more pernicious enemy for participants was the one who threatened their personal relationships and place in the community. Participant AP stated that an enemy was simply “someone who fights.”

Only participants with some form of education defined enemies in context of a larger political or historical context of the war.

Figure 7. Definitions of the enemy

5. Defining the “victim”

The first point to make on this issue is that 42% of participants in my study did not know the word victim in English, and no translation to Krio was readily
available. After the first several interviews, wherein this issue emerged, I sat down with an American graduate student who spoke fluent Krio, a local woman who spoke fluent Krio, English, and Mende, and a local man who spoke fluent Krio and Mende, as well as conversational English. Between the four of us, we could not determine a direct translation for the word “victim” in either Krio or Mende. Because the question asked participants to define the word, I was unable to explain what victim meant to those not cognizant of the word in English, at risk of biasing their definitions. It seems significant that neither of the two primary languages in Sierra Leone has a word for victim.

![Figure 8. Did participants know the word “victim?”](image)

Figure 8. Did participants know the word “victim?”

Forty percent of participants defined “victim” in terms of war. Participant BB explained a victim as someone who “doesn’t know how comes the war, what brings the war, but he is affected by the war.” BD defined the word simply as “someone who falls into the hands of the rebels.” This participant also gave one of the most positive definitions of a soldier in the group, demonstrating a clear in-group bias. Participant
BR related the word to Sierra Leone in general, defining victim as “the people that are having problems from war. So many victims in Sierra Leone.” This definition again raises the question of why no direct translation exists for the word victim, given that BR sees such an abundance of victims in his country.

Seventeen percent of participants defined the word victim in general terms unrelated to a specific event, which was coded as a dictionary definition. An example of a dictionary definition of a victim is “somebody who has unfortunate circumstances” (BI). Participant BL defined victims as “sorrowful people.”

*Overarching themes*

From war to victims to soldiers to rebels, the majority of participants defined these words, these concepts, in terms of negative consequences and powerful emotional images. Very few participants overall, and primarily only those with a university education, defined any of these terms unemotionally in what was coded as a dictionary definition.

Many participants revealed a good-versus-evil dichotomy, primarily in terms of soldiers and rebels. Furthermore, generally speaking, the higher the level of war exposure, the more stringently this polarity was expressed. Given that soldiers and rebels both committed significant war crimes, this finding was surprising, especially coming from the participants who probably had viewed war crimes from a variety of perpetrators.

I would like to propose that high levels of war exposure during childhood can impede certain stages of moral development. Specifically, war exposure through codified out groups can impede the understanding that complex conflicts cannot be
demarcated cleanly into two sides - one good and one evil. The situation and occurrences prevalent in a violent conflict train children to view the world in terms of good and bad, of us and them, in a more concrete and violence-based way than outside of a warzone. I am basing this tentative conclusion on my experience and research.

One of the most striking impressions I received from living in Sierra Leone for six weeks is its powerful sense of community. A sense of community is difficult to quantify, although many participants alluded to its existence. A strong sense of responsibility exists in Sierra Leone, where people actively attempt to care for each other. An example of this phenomenon can be found in the surprisingly low rates of starvation relative to other countries with comparable poverty levels. I rarely if ever saw someone cook food only for their nuclear family; instead, they shared with anyone and everyone in their vicinity. And the next week, when the cook perhaps had run out of food, someone else would provide food in return.

As will be discussed in chapter 11, a child’s moral and emotional development is contingent on some sense of community and adult role models. Perhaps the Sierra Leone community has recently evolved to be stronger partially in order to protect children who lost their primary caretakers during the war.
DISCUSSION

Chapter 6: Stories of a Narrative Pursuit

“We do not, after all, simply have experience; we are entrusted with it. We must do something – make something – with it. A story, we sense, is the only possible habitation for the burden of our witnessing” (Hampl 1999, p.18).

I flew across the Atlantic and returned with forty stories, in addition to my own. Because I conducted my research in interview format, what I took away from it was not primarily statistical data, but instead an assortment of stories. Therefore, scholarly literature regarding what constitutes a story and why stories are so important is essential for my research. To begin – or, more accurately, to end – a story, we must understand what it strives to accomplish.

What is a story?

People are storytellers by definition and by calling. People are storytellers by passion. We are all artists, and our art comes in the form of creating a story, of lacing together the threads of a life or a moment. But our artistic process is selective. We choose the colors and textures that best complement each other and aid the impression we desire to create. Sometimes, we weave in an invisible thread, one that exists not in reality but only within the confines of the story.

Stories often distort the nature of time. More time might be invested in recounting two minutes than an entire year. Certain characters make brief appearances and then leave, but their presences color the threads composing an experience. According to Kahneman (2011), “a story is about significant events and
memorable moments, not about time passing […] Caring for people often takes the form of concern for the quality of their stories” (p.387). The closeness of a personal relationship can be defined in one sense by how many of one person’s stories another person knows. We invest time, energy, and countless thoughts in the quality of our stories and in what they reveal about ourselves. We tell certain stories to certain people, flipping through anecdotes and character attributes, magnifying the part of ourselves we most want scrutinized in that moment with that audience.

The stories we choose to share then become emphasized in our self-concepts. In his discussion on the nature of the self, Scheibe (1995), who studies the human craving for drama and stories, claims that, “human beings are not mere processors of information, they are inventors and makers of narratives, including narratives about themselves […] This process is creative, original, constructive but not always subject to the constraints of realism” (p.146). People interpret and understand a situation through the retelling of it. Telling stories, in this sense, is not only for the entertainment of an audience. Often, the storyteller learns about the experience from their own recounting, which teaches them how they feel about an event or a thought. Storytelling plays just as important a role in the formation of memory as the events on which it is based. In her memoir on the experience of being a writer, Patricia Hampl (1999) describes this idea: “I am forced to admit that memory is not a warehouse of finished stories, not a gallery of framed pictures. I must admit that I invented […] It still comes as a shock to realize that I don’t write about what I know, but in order to find out what I know” (p.27). We constantly consult our stories for information about ourselves.
The purpose of storytelling is threefold. Storytelling builds relationships, teaches us about ourselves, and provides a venue for sharing and connecting with the world, to enact change. When asked why people create and tell stories, Hampl (1999) responds with the claim that, “if we think of memory naively, as a simple story, logged like a documentary in the archive of the mind, we miss its beauty but also its function. The beauty of memory rests in its talent for rendering detail, for paying homage to the senses, its capacity to love the particles of life, the richness and idiosyncrasy of our experience” (p.33). The inclination for storytelling is an integral part of human nature. The details of stories change from one individual to the next, but such tales are often alike in their very dissimilarity. Stories tend to share several basic traits, or a general schema, as referred to by common archetypes.

**Drama: the linchpin of any good story**

A successful story has several important characteristics, perhaps the most important of which is drama: a harrowing adventure, an obstacle to overcome. Would we even have stories without drama? A story without drama would be tedious if it existed at all. Drama directly ties into the listed purposes of a story, because it enables a greater understanding of our own identities. We cannot know ourselves without cognizance of how we respond to challenge.

Because drama is so important, the tendency to dramatize a story and thus command attention from an audience exists as a fundamental human characteristic. Stories evolve based not only on their component elements but also on the audience and on the intentions of the speaker. Drama and stories create worlds “which are perfectly intelligible and psychologically real, even if they were created out of
nothing” (Scheibe 1998, p.14). Stories are often more substantially based in emotions and exaggerated retellings in pursuit of social connections than in the events from which they stem.

**Political stories**

A small number of stories are written down and selected for codification in history. But which stories are kept, and which are hidden? And who decides? During this process, “the work of memory becomes politically dynamic, and personal testimony approaches danger, for its purpose becomes not only elegy but survival” (Hampl 1999, p.84). The survival of a story in historical narrative roughly equates with immortality, not biologically, but perhaps in an even more essential sense.

Any event has the potential to be memorialized in history. But for this to happen, someone has to write about it, from either a personal or a cultural perspective. Someone has to write the story, and when that occurs, “out of the dread of ruin and disintegration emerges a protest which becomes history […] The dry twigs left of a vanished life, whatever its fullness once was, are rubbed together until they catch fire. Until they make something. Until they make a story” (Hampl 1999, p.204). History, however, does not tell every part of a story, or even every story. This limitation stems from the fact that, according to a prominent cultural analyst, “the desire for narrative closure thus forces upon historical events the limits of narrative form and enables forgetting” (Cvetkovich 2003, p.8). Codifying every facet of every story is an impossible task, which makes selective forgetting an essential component of memory. But to forget, we first have to choose what to remember.
Both the desire for a better narrative and the preference for one narrative over another to advance political goals contribute to a national forgetting of certain stories. For example, “trauma histories are frequently taken up as national urgencies, histories that must be remembered and resolved in order for the nation to survive a crisis or sustain its integrity” (Cvetkovich 2003, p.36). Sierra Leone has its own trauma history, written by Ishmeal Beah (2007) about his time as an abducted child soldier for the rebels. But why was Beah’s story published over millions of other screaming voices? Beah’s literacy and education undoubtedly played a role. But there was something integral to Beah’s story that captivated the international community. Beah, over all other educated Sierra Leoneans involved in the conflict, was encouraged to share his story, from both international and domestic humanitarian organizations. And his story will contribute to the characterization of the conflict in Sierra Leone, both in the pages of history and in contemporary consciousness.

A nation’s memory

Memory provides the very core of identity. No person, no community, no nation, can exist and define itself without its stories. The memories of an individual are already subject to intense filtering and alterations through their remembering. Therefore, when an entire culture attempts to construct a holistic memory, the process becomes infinitely more complex with every birth and every passing moment. Cultural memory takes the stories of a few salient individuals and presumes the memory of a million. Cvetkovich discusses this issue, asking, “what does it mean for a culture to remember? The collective remembering of a specific culture can often appear similar to the memory of an individual – it provides cultural identity and
gives a sense bound up in complex political stakes and meanings. It both defines a
culture and is the means by which its divisions and conflicting agendas are revealed”
(Cvetkovich 2003, p.1). Sierra Leone’s memory is, right now, bloodstained and
fragmented, at least from the perspective of the international audience. But does this
interpretation have more to do with the stories selected for recounting, or is it
representative of the general population? Based on my interviews, I would incline
toward the former view. The stories I heard spoke more of happiness and dreams of
the future than of a bloody past. It seems to me that Sierra Leone has more hope than
anger right now.

As for these stories I collected, scrawled on dirty sheets of paper, what could they add to Sierra Leone’s story? They might contribute to an international
understanding of conflict’s effect on children, I hope, but I dream of something
greater than that. When the international community hears about Sierra Leone, they
often think of diamonds, child soldiers, and machetes. Such associations stem
partially from news reports and partially from stories like Beah’s. Very few
westerners have traveled to Sierra Leone and seen just how integrated a country it
has become, how it has laced itself back together with bloody fingers but using clean
white thread. I would like to share these stories.

As a fly on the wall

And what about the story of the writer, of the person who studies stories? We,
the adventurous foreigners, the aspiring poets, the determined healers, we have a part
in the story as well. We intend to be a blank slate, a silent audience, but stories rarely
function that way. In fact, dispassionate listening could very easily lead to the
storyteller halting the narrative in pursuit of a more involved audience. In a certain sense, we have to care, to show bias, if we want to hear stories at all.

The journalist, Megan Stack, discusses the experience of observing and trying to remain unaffected in her novel recounting her experience of traveling through the conflict-ridden Middle East from 2001-2008. “It all matters,” she claims, talking about what she saw while abroad. “You turn yourself into something separate, something absent. There and not there. It works, putting thick glass between you and the world. You can be anywhere if you’re not really there. You can walk into any room, drive down any road, ask any question, write about anybody’s pain. You tell yourself you are unscathed. You stand smooth and count yourself unaffected. And basically, it’s true – compared with the people around you, the civilians and soldiers, you are unscathed and unaffected. That works fine until all of a sudden it doesn’t work at all” (Stack 2010, p.240). Hearing peoples’ stories changes you, whether you want it to or not. And you, in turn, can concretely change the stories you only intended to hear.

The fly on the wall is not supposed to alter the story. The fly is supposed to remain virtually invisible, an observer, a non-participant. But I have found remaining invisible to be wholly impossible and not to be participating, not to be forging relationships and helping whenever possible, unethical. In my experience, the fly on the wall is an essential character in the story it observes.

The story can give our lives meaning. It is perhaps the only thing that can.
Chapter 7: Learning in a Broken World: War and Moral Development

“The first thing I knew about war was also the truest, and maybe it’s as true for nations as for individuals: You can survive and not survive, both at the same time” (Stack 2010, p.4).

Moral development begins at birth and lasts a lifetime. According to Bloom (2010), babies will display a moral sense by disapproving of what is wrong or naughty even before they can walk. But how does morality develop, and can an external situation, such as war, hamper its development?

War challenges morality at its very core. Standard social rules like the taboo against murder can become afterthoughts, and a culture of violence supersedes goals of peace. The rules of wartime differ exceedingly from the rules of peace. This chapter explores whether it is possible for children to learn peaceful ethics if they grow up surrounded by violence.

Defining morality

Morality resides on the hazy border between emotion and logic. In some respects, reasoning is essential; however, when human emotion and sympathy are not accounted for, reasoning can be deadly. People with antisocial personality disorder, who feel no empathy or remorse but are often function successfully in society, provide an excellent example for the importance of emotion in ethical reasoning. William James (1896), one of the fathers of modern psychology, defines individual morality as, “[…] questions whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof. A moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be
good if it did exist. Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the *worths*, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart” (p.10). Morality can be readjusted and calibrated by logic, but its existence and essential components are deeply rooted in the emotional mind, in the heart. Intellectual criticism cannot refute or prove a moral choice; they exist as different domains. As James (1896) claims, “If your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one” (p.11). Morality frequently evades the rules of logic.

**The rules of war**

One hundred years ago, William James claimed that “[…] history is a bath of blood” (James 1906, p.3). James warned society against rampant warfare. Bombs can obliterate a city, but war, even without technology, can also have insidious effects on a population. If a generation learns its morality within a warzone, it can struggle to function during peace.

The rules of war teach soldiers how best to survive, but not necessarily how to live ethically or functionally. Jonathan Shay works as a clinical psychologist helping Vietnam War veterans who suffer from PTSD to recalibrate their moral universe to match a peaceful lifestyle more effectively. His clients experience difficulties, particularly with trust and with forming equal relationships with others. According to Shay (1994), “The moral power of an army is so great that it can motivate men to get up out of a trench and step into enemy machine-gun fire” (p.6). Soldiers are taught and lauded for a willingness to lay down their lives. However, “When a leader destroys the legitimacy of the army’s moral order by betraying ‘what’s right,’ he
inflicts manifold injuries on his men” (Shay 1994, p.6). Military leaders may betray their ranks by taking advantage of the blind trust expected in the military hierarchy, placing soldiers at extreme risk in pursuit of a larger military goal. Many of Shay’s clients found it nearly impossible to trust any authority figure or forge independent relationships after experiencing betrayal from a combat leader, upon whom they were extremely dependent. In order for many of these men and women to succeed professionally after Vietnam, Shay helped them to understand that this betrayal was in fact a reproachable betrayal, not an acceptable combat tactic. War, Shay explains, often breaks the ethical world of the soldier or the bystander. To stay alive, rules must often be broken, and the world dichotomized into good and evil. However, after this ethical betrayal in war, safe, nonviolent attachments at home can become exceedingly difficult.

If a war lasts long enough, both combatants and noncombatants can begin to define themselves through the war and their perceived role in it and thus have no developed self-identity for peace. Researchers working in Israel worry that “Without an enemy, these children essentially would be left without a way to understand their own identities” (Myers-Walls 2003, p.780). Myers-Walls found that children of all ages could discuss the concept of an enemy with ease, often using physical description or the idea of two sides to structure a dispute. They have learned the rules of war, but the rules of peace remain a mystery.

**Learning violence**

Aggression is not a stable, genetically predetermined trait; instead, it varies widely and is affected by situational factors. Bandura’s (1963) studies analyze the
effects of an adult modeling aggression on a child’s later behavior. When a child watches an adult beat up a human-sized Bobo doll, he or she is later much more likely to attack the doll when frustrated. Children who do not view the modeled aggression on the doll are unlikely to unleash aggression when frustrated later. This research suggests that modeling aggression in front of a child greatly increases the likelihood of later violent behavior. Therefore, growing up during a pervasive war in which violence has become commonplace may predispose a child to behave more aggressively.

One of my participants, BP, argues that the war catalyzed a regression of Sierra Leone, both in terms of economic infrastructure and violence. After the war, BP claims, “The country is going back. You have violence taking place, stealing, combat, so many more things occur now than before.”

Repeated exposure to violence can have not only behavioral effects, as discussed above, but can also precipitate a shift in attitudes toward violence. Through a process of desensitization, Affouneh (2007), who studies children growing up in Israel, suggests that children may gradually lose their ability to attach moral significance to violence and begin to regard it as normal and undeserving of concern. Furthermore, if children grow up with this desensitization, they may find it challenging to view violence as an intrinsically negative phenomenon.

The behavior of combatants during war also teaches noncombatants specific rules that challenge a nonviolent lifestyle. Children are particularly susceptible to these influences. Affouneh (2007) questions how best to teach morality in a war zone.
Children frequently pick up informal moral messages from adults or the media. It is difficult to teach forgiveness in the midst of violence.

The combination of desensitization and modeling effects on aggression can alter a child’s attitudes toward violence as well as increase aggressive behavior, forming a positive feedback loop whereby behavior reinforces attitudes, and vice versa. War, therefore, can socialize violence into a society. Younger generations are particularly susceptible to this effect because of their lack of experience and strong proclivity for replicating modeled behavior. A society can, in this sense, become mired in violence.

Megan Stack (2010), an American journalist who worked in the Middle East, describes this perpetuation of violence. “It matters, what you do at war. It matters more than you ever want to know. Because countries, like people, have collective consciences and memories and souls, and the violence we deliver in the name of our nation is pooled like sickly tar at the bottom of who we are. The soldiers who don’t die for us come home again. They bring with them the killers they became on our national behalf, and sit with their polluted memories and broken emotions in our homes and schools and temples. We may wish it were not so, but action amounts to identity. We become what we do” (p.51).

**Disorder**

The previous two sections have discussed concrete ways in which war can negatively impact a society, from deconstructing institutions to socializing violence. This section analyzes a more abstract ethical consequence of war, in which the general disorder incurred by any pervasive conflict hinders a child’s conceptual
understanding of an ordered, moral universe that follows ethical rules. This phenomenon is worst in civil wars like that in Sierra Leone, where violence is often arbitrary and nonsensical. Rafman’s (1996) analysis of the play and interactions between children who had lived through a war reveals a disordered moral universe with only fragments remaining, as demonstrated by fractured speech and play. According to his research, “Children lose not only family and community [during war], but also the world of shared assumptions, the world in which rules mediate relationships between people and events. A destroyed moral order in war includes such features as its human-induced nature, the confusion between good and evil, perpetrator and victim, the politically and socially sanctioned killing of the parent, the ambiguity of the aggressor, issues of retaliation, vengeance, and often secrecy” (p.818).

Furthermore, war often sabotages a country’s infrastructure, preventing schools, unbiased media outlets, hospitals, and other fundamental institutions from functioning effectively. The lack of education can impede a child’s ability to analyze critically information from the media in a family that may be encouraging violence. Additionally, mourning rites, funerals, and societal supports are often absent, which makes assigning meaning to tragic events much more difficult (Rafman 2006, p.825).

Growing up in a disordered world makes children less likely to believe that the world could change, and that they could have the agency to change it. Sanyika Shakur (2004), who joined a Los Angeles gang at the age of eleven, said he often felt as though “[he] had lived in too much disorder to believe that there was an actual design to this world” (Shakur 2004, p.227). Because of this feeling, it took him years
and a forceful relocation to realize that he could function outside of the violent world of gang wars.

**Moral development through community**

A community and adult role models are essential for a child’s moral and emotional development for three primary reasons. First, the social group is available to criticize erroneous actions. In this situation, the “generalized other” social group provides a way to think about oneself and the “rightness of any contemplated course of action” (Scheibe 1995, p.38). Second, social interaction in itself is requisite for healthy emotional development. According to Kohlberg (1971), a prominent moral theorist, moral development occurs through relationships and social interaction in each stage of development. Third, children learn a great deal about how to act by watching and modeling themselves off of adults. The child can be thought of as a “fledgling actor” trying to learn appropriate roles from adults (Scheibe 1995, p.75). Social interactions, especially with adult caretakers or role models, provide an essential component for moral development.

Communities, however, do not always teach peace. When violence occurs through generations, as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, adults often transmit their negative values toward the enemy out group to their children. Some Palestinian children, for example, are shown anti-Israeli and anti-American images in their primary school books. Children are easy targets for any sort of propaganda.

Richard Dawkins (2006), an eminent biologist, suggests that uncritical trust towards adults was evolutionarily favored in childhood in light of clear survival benefits. Therefore, when adults feed children their attitudes, the children are very
likely to adopt these ideas as their own. The onus thus falls on the community to teach children peaceful, altruistic morals.

**Human goodness**

Although this chapter focuses mostly on how war can affect people negatively, some attention should be given to the people who resist, the people Joseph Campbell (1949), who wrote a great deal on archetypes, would define as heroes. Heroes challenge the codified rules, often by recognizing and drawing attention to the world outside of the situation. According to Campbell (1949), “it is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse” (p.336). Heroes are the people who can remind others that the outside world still exists.

Is it possible for a former combatant to retain his or her former morality in the midst of dramatic violence? According to Scheibe, “the capacity for human caring is a result of being cared for. Those who are not cared for are in danger of falling off the stage” (Scheibe 2000, p.52). Perhaps this is what enables heroism – not a concrete moral schema or the individual avoidance of violent situations, but instead a healing network of social relationships, otherwise known as a community. A strong community can, perhaps, also function as a hero, as an entity that refocuses people on each other and away from encroaching violence.

I witnessed very little violence in Sierra Leone and spent much of the trip musing on how this was possible given my preconceptions regarding how negatively war can affect people’s moral schemas. Previous research and theory predicts that I should have found myriad violence and moral deterioration in a society like Sierra Leone that has recently undergone such a pervasive conflict. However, this is not
what I found, although with the caveat that my observations may certainly be flawed, due to sampling bias or the limited time I spent in Sierra Leone. The primary violence I found was contained in stories, not in daily experience. I believe that Sierra Leone has recovered from conflict so effectively due in part to the strength of its community, which the war failed to eradicate. The one exception to this idea that I found stems from my participants’ attitudes toward good v. evil, in which a strikingly large number claimed that the rebels were intrinsically evil. The community did not protect from individual negative attitudes toward an out group. It did, however, provide a sort of opaque cloak, behind which its members were not as strongly influenced by or as predisposed to violence.
Chapter 8: Good v. Evil in the Social Construction of the Soldier and the Rebel

“The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal” (Arendt 1963, p.112).

What is evil?

Evil can either be viewed as infinitely tangled or as pure and simple. If evil exists as one concept, if it transcends the boundaries of human understanding, it actually becomes simpler. Evil is out there somewhere, in the foggy recesses of another dimension, existing for its own sake. It is something we cannot grasp, and, like many concepts outside the realm of human understanding, it fills us with a deep, atavistic fear. Perhaps, as some theology avows, evil is the incarnation of nonexistence. Of course, according to this argument, no human can be labeled purely evil. Oblivion is difficult for the human mind to grasp.

For the purposes of my discussion, I would like to delineate this topic into three forms in which evil is possible: an action, a situation, or a person. An evil act is defined as one that aims to severely harm without concern for the plight of the victim. There is no doubt that some actions are evil, like the decision to unleash Operation No Living Thing in Freetown. Certain situations, like Zimbardo’s prison experiment, greatly increase a person’s likelihood of committing an evil act. This idea begs the question of whether a situation is evil if, like Zimbardo’s, it was not intended to deliver harm. The most contentious of the three forms involves people. Can we label a person as wholly evil or wholly good? I do not think so. Stoessinger (1998), an
eminent war historian, defines an evil person as a “war lover [who] needs war without end in order to feel like a man.” (p.158). I disagree. I think that bad (not evil) situations can, when combined with certain character traits like a proclivity toward retribution, become evil acts. People, however, are not intrinsically evil. An action, not a situation or a person, is the only entity that can be purely evil. Both people and situations have dual potentials for good and for evil.

I am not attempting to argue about the nature of evil in this chapter; I will leave that barbed rhetoric to philosophers. Instead, I hope to present some of the salient existing arguments regarding evil, in hopes that it will help to provide an abstract lens through which to view concrete actions.

The thorny issue of moral relativism surfaces here and throughout much of this chapter. I have no answers to the questions it poses, but I do appreciate the requisite ambiguity. Approaching this project from an inherently foreign perspective, one of my goals was to avoid making sweeping moral judgments regarding practices or actions that occurred during both war and peace. I would have heard very few stories through the lens of judgment and Western superiority.

**Journey to the trenches: how people become evil**

Evil sometimes seems to possess a will of its own, a drive to be revealed, and certain aspects of human nature can help guide a finger to the trigger. Gun in hand, people may not want to shoot, but some chilling force courses through their body like arsenic, taking over, and they let go. Because younger people have less impulse control, in the eyes of megalomaniacal leaders like Foday Sankoh, they often make the best soldiers. Having a gun in your hands imbues you with a deep, almost
atavistic desire to shoot it. We must use our tools, after all. And in the cleverly crafting hands of some leaders, of some situations, evil can become nothing more than a tool to be used.

1. Social roles in war

The hierarchies and armies intrinsic to violent conflict provide socially endorsed roles in which violence is not only acceptable but is often rewarded, thus increasing the likelihood of evil acts. Youth frequently receive accolades and a plethora of encouragement when they enroll in the army, at least when the community supports the war. Initially, appellations such as general and commander are merely titles; however, once violence ensues, the soldier may take such a title to heart. As Zimbardo (2008) proved unequivocally in the Stanford Prison Experiment, social situations can alter perceived moral actions. His work in the Stanford Prison Experiment made Zimbardo an expert on evil, specifically, on how certain situational influences can increase the likelihood of individuals committing evil acts. Youths struggling to discover their identities are particularly susceptible to situational influences because “…the need to belong can also be perverted into excessive conformity, compliance, and in-group versus out-group hostility” (Zimbardo 2008, p.230). Such youth may also feel less revulsion to committing later deeds if their identities are built off a hawkish role. Furthermore, Scheibe (1995) suggests that a soldier who receives a military title and does not necessarily merit it will perhaps be more willing to sacrifice morality in the name of the army.

Labeled and perceived roles have a significant capacity to change a person. People glean their social identity and role within their complex social and community
system. But what about when the system breaks down and newly necessary roles, such as that of civilian protectors, or kamajors in Sierra Leone, encourage immorality? In Abu Ghraib, the men were “…as ‘ordinary’ as can be imagined – until they were put into a novel situation in which they had ‘official’ permission and encouragement to act sadistically against people who were arbitrarily labeled as the ‘enemy’” (Zimbardo 2008, p.286). Assigned roles, particularly those given by a respected authority, often precipitate enthusiastic compliance. Under the veneer of a violent situation, a soldier is expected to be violent, and the jailers in Abu Ghraib saw no other option. Can they betray an authority, an authority that has bequeathed them such a powerful label? Very few men possess this strength.

Furthermore, many generals or leaders frequently use powerful rhetoric to convince their soldiers that they are taking part in something historic, something that will alter their nation, or the world – typically for the better. According to Hannah Arendt (1963), who analyzed whether prominent Nazis like Adolf Eichmann were purely evil, “What stuck in the minds of these murderers [in concentration camps] was simply the notion of being involved in something historic, grandiose, unique, which must therefore be difficult to bear” (p.105). Note that the challenge associated with this violence is recognized as strenuous, which may in part add to its appeal, particularly with competitive youth. A dramatic, challenging, historically valuable, socially condoned mission – what could be more exciting?

2. Obedience

This discussion hovers around another phenomenon, obedience, which can increase violence and the potential for evil behavior. Obedience stems from a
situation. In his shock experiments on obedience, Stanley Milgram (1961), found no demographic or personality characteristic that predisposed his participants to obedience or rebellion. A respected authority, like that of a general or of a doctor, has the potential to command great obedience. According to Zimbardo (2008), “Human beings are capable of totally abandoning their humanity for a mindless ideology, to follow and then exceed the orders of charismatic authorities to destroy everyone they label as ‘The Enemy’” (p.15). Furthermore, when the orders to commit an evil deed come from a source external to the soldier, it becomes easier to rationalize the soldier’s personal behavior. They are simply following orders, as a soldier should. And once soldiers commit one atrocity, unless carefully monitored by the same authority that once gave orders, they become increasingly likely to commit more.

If the society surrounding soldiers does not actively object to war crimes occurring, then the soldier often views this inaction as sanctioning violent actions. Soldiers may use such bystander inaction as moral justification for their crimes.

3. Desensitization

After committing a minor or trifling evil act, one’s moral sensitivity can undergo habituation; the idea of performing a worse evil act then seems easier and more acceptable. The soldier’s simplification of loyalties and shrinkage of the in-group “flows directly from the betrayal of ‘what’s right’” (Shay 1994, p.25). Although the initial betrayal of a moral world often stems from an authority figure, such as a general, once that moral world is broken, evil has a way of seeping in independently. Once evil is committed, it loses an element of novel drama. The only way to recover this excitement, this drama, is to pursue more evil, greater evil, more
extreme evil. The initial act fails to catalyze the same level of excitement it once did and so, like a drug addict, the soldier craves progressively higher levels of drama. And in the case of Sierra Leone, literal drugs were used to amplify this progressive desensitization and incur greater obedience to the army that provided the drugs.

For example, participant AF said that kamajors, not rebels, were evil because of atrocities they committed later in the war, after a process of desensitization had occurred. AF explained her judgment of the kamajors as evil by recounting a war memory when a group of kamajors “cut the hand, cut the foot, cut the face, and eat it like beef.”

4. Deindividuation

A soldier’s capacity for committing a violent act significantly increases when they do not feel personally accountable for their actions. This accountability dissipates in large groups, under orders, and behind a mask. People become increasingly likely to commit an evil act “…if the situation or some agency gives them permission to engage in antisocial or violent action against others, as in these research settings, [then] people are ready to go to war” (Zimbardo 2008, p.301). When the orders come from outside of individuals, they do not necessarily feel accountable for their actions, and this lack of responsibility increases the likelihood of violence.

Deindividuation also occurs when a soldier can blend in and feel part of a group, rather than an individual responsible for his own actions. Army uniforms and masks, which eliminate sartorial distinction, often lend themselves to deindividuation. According to Zimbardo (2008), “90 percent of the time when victims of battle were
killed, tortured, or mutilated, it was by warriors who had first changed their appearance and deindividuated themselves […] when the war is won, the culture then dictates that the warriors return to their peacetime status. This reverse transformation is readily accomplished by making the warriors remove their uniforms, take off their masks, wash away the paint, and return to their former personae and peaceful demeanor” (p.304). The uniform thus transforms a man into a soldier, and when this role is undertaken, any action committed under orders, while in the uniform of a soldier, does not necessarily feel as though it impacts or even applies to the individual man.

5. Dehumanization

Dehumanization provides a powerful mechanism by which a soldier can easily justify violence against a labeled enemy. “By identifying certain individuals or groups as being outside the sphere of humanity, dehumanizing agents suspend the morality that might typically govern reasoned actions toward their fellows” (Zimbardo 2008, p.311). Such dehumanization enables the perpetrators to avoid viewing themselves as evil, or as one who commits crimes against humanity. After all, violence committed against an evil sub-human does not provide the same level of accountability. This transformation of the enemy into a monster outside the sphere of humanity is the job of the army and of the society. “In order for [the enemy’s] elimination to be made psychologically legitimate, enemies must be depicted as subhuman, bestial, unworthy of basic human rights and privileges” (Scheibe 1995, p.200). A community that inoculates this perception of their enemy into a soldier has vastly increased the soldier’s likelihood of committing evil actions against this sordidly labeled enemy. In
order to create this perception of an enemy, “The process begins with creating stereotyped conceptions of the other, dehumanized perceptions of the other, the other as worthless, the other as all-powerful, the other as demonic, the other as an abstract monster, the other as a fundamental threat to our cherished values and beliefs” (Zimbardo 2008, p.11). In Sierra Leone, because the government, albeit a very altered government, remained in power at the conclusion of the conflict, soldiers were embraced into the in group and labeled heroes, while rebels were shoved to the fringe of society and harshly demonized.

The essence of this dual construction lies in the creation of harsh dichotomies that differentiate the ‘good’ side from the ‘evil’ side. A successful dichotomy will leave no similarities between the two groups through which a soldier can relate to the enemy out group. War, therefore, “…engenders cruelty and barbaric behavior against anyone considered the Enemy, as the dehumanized, demonic Other” (Zimbardo 2008, p.17). It is much easier to justify hurting a demon than an angel.

6. Dissonance

Once soldiers begin committing evil acts, they may justify them through the desire of reducing cognitive dissonance, which often then perpetuates the evil action. Once an act is justified, it becomes easier to replicate, and can even incorporate itself into the self-schema. “The dissonance effect becomes greater as the justification for such behavior decreases, for instance, when a repugnant action is carried out for little money, without threat, and with only minimally sufficient justification or inadequate rationale provided for the action. Dissonance mounts, and the attempts to reduce it are greatest, when the person has a sense of free will or when she or he does not notice or
fully appreciate the situational pressures urging enactment of the discrepant action. When the discrepant action has been public, it cannot be denied or modified” (Zimbardo 2008, p.220). We tend to dislike those we hurt, and we tend to hurt those we dislike (although not exclusively).

7. Lack of regulation

The evil of inaction facilitates and lends credence to the evil of action. Once a soldier commits a morally reprehensible act, if it is not recognized and criticized by higher authority, the soldier might assume that they accept and endorse it. “That is what soldiers are trained to do, to kill their designated enemies. However, under the extreme stress of combat conditions, with fatigue, fear, anger, hatred, and revenge at full throttle, men can lose their moral compass and go beyond killing enemy combatants […] the furies are released into unimaginable orgies of rape and murder of civilians as well as enemy soldiers” (Zimbardo 2008, p.417). Lack of regulation, or unwillingness to prosecute mistakes, can lead to progressively increased levels of violence and insubordination.

8. The fluidity of good and evil

I wonder if evil could exist without good, and if good could exist without evil. Perhaps they are nebulous twins bracketing the extremes of our existence. For example, if a person is born purely good or born purely evil, can they be venerated or condemned, respectively, any more than for hair color, or for a congenital disease? Eagleton (2010), who attempts to define the nature of evil in his recent book, suggests that perhaps evil, or at least the concept of evil away from which we shy, is necessary
for a functionally good world to exist. Perhaps we need the threat of pure nonexistence to induce us to fight for goodness in our short lives.

Furthermore, major personality changes and long periods of time are not required for good people to begin committing evil deeds. Switching from a good to an evil action does not require a major, cataclysmic event; the process can be shockingly easy and quick. Milgram (1963), who revolutionized psychological understandings of the human capacity to obey depraved commands, showed that it does not take evil or aberrant persons to carry out actions that are reprehensible and cruel. Good people, when placed under certain situational pressures, frequently turn toward evil – and then turn right back. According to Zimbardo (2008), “It is possible for angels to become devils, and perhaps more difficult to conceive, for devils to become angels” (p.3). Good people can commit evil deeds in certain situations with alarming rapidity and potentially without cognizance of the level of transgression. Second, just because someone commits an evil action does not mean his or her character has undergone an irrevocable shift toward evil. They can still be, and most likely will be, good.

**Community transmission of evil**

One of the easiest ways to incite a population or an individual to retribution is to demonize, or dehumanize, an out group. This idea was discussed in the previous section, but without acknowledging the community’s integral role. Warlords and soldiers certainly take advantage of this tactic and dehumanize the enemy in an attempt to rally their troops. However, peaceful communities also often unwittingly fall prey to this method, when the in group is defined through the rejection of an out group. The Bennett (2004) study demonstrates that cross-culturally, children’s in-
group favoritism runs high. However, it does not necessarily indicate negative views of general out groups, but instead only particular out groups, such as the rebel. As Bennett claims, young children “are more likely to reproduce views (both negative and positive) that are widespread in their nation than to evince generalized prejudice” (p.137). This idea can help to explicate why Sierra Leonean interviewees felt strong antipathy toward the rebels specifically, but not toward armed combatants as a whole.

Children have evolved to trust adults, and therefore easily slip into the roles and opinions delineated for them. There is a three-way transmission that feeds hatred of an enemy out group – beginning in the government’s ideas and public statements, conveyed onto adults, and finally landing on their children. And the children with whom this succeeds then grow up and often work for their country, against a previously vilified enemy. Fussell (1975) provides an example of this kind of government-imposed thought process directed toward an enemy in his historical analysis about World War I, which says “‘We’ are all here on this side; ‘the enemy’ is over there. ‘We’ are individuals with names and personal identities; ‘he’ is a mere collective entity. We are visible; he is invisible. We are normal; he is grotesque” (p.75). Although awareness of evil can contribute to a moral impairment, persistent dichotomizing between an in group and an out group is primarily an effect of hindered moral development, a particularly strong community facing a threat, or some combination.

The cognizance that evil exists alters a child’s universe. The child will proceed to attach this depravity to only certain people or groups of people, as learned
from adults around them, long before understanding that people are not black and
white, not good or evil. We are all varying shades of gray.

**Sierra Leone’s case study: Soldiers v. rebels**

Sierra Leone’s case is particularly germane to the topic of good and evil due
to the strikingly disparate attitudes about soldiers and rebels gathered from
interviews. Over half of participants evinced positive attitudes toward soldiers.
Almost three-quarters of participants who understood the question stated
unequivocally that rebels were evil people, not good people who did bad things.
These views are surprising given that, according to contemporary accounts of the war,
soldiers and rebels both committed atrocities and were often sartorially
indistinguishable. Most fighters in both groups were uneducated, under the age of
thirty, barely trained, and recruited only after the war began. Government soldiers
participated in and helped organize the 1999 coup that led to three weeks of absolute
chaos and destruction in Freetown. Additionally, it was very common for soldiers to
reverse sides regularly, aiding rebels in moments and the government at other times in
pursuit of individual success and survival (Gberie 2005). Thus, how does this
discrepancy enter the popular conception, allowing, of course, for the possibility that
my data sample could be biased?

The soldier v. rebel dichotomy stems from two principal factors joined
together in a positive feedback loop. One, the state and community labeled the rebels
as an out group from the first attack and taught their children this moral exclusion.
The self-schema is highly dependent on its conception of the country (Scheibe 1995,
p.116). This dependence, however, can prove dangerous, as a potential effect involves
justifying the actions of government-affiliated actors. This idea can explain the overwhelming positive associations found in interviewees toward legitimized government soldiers. Second, as discussed in the previous chapter, the war itself impeded the level of moral consciousness necessary to understand that good people can do bad things, as well as encouraged a good v. evil dichotomy. The division is strengthened by the idea that what our larger in group has done, we tend to judge as right, even if it is evil. According to Hall (1993), who studied childhood attitudes toward war, children have a common tendency “to hook warfare onto notions of conflict between good and evil” (p.186). War strengthens this tendency and the predilection to assign absolute, irrevocable moral labels.

**The drama of pure evil**

Evil is as addictive to our dramatic human nature as seven hits are to a heroin addict. Many soldiers cite the first time they shot someone as a turning point, when adrenalin hit an all-time high, and their story tangled itself through with a dark drama. The elevation to this level of drama makes it difficult for one to return to more mundane excitement. According to Scheibe (2000), an expert on people’s craving for drama, “The absence of danger is not exciting news. The thrill is to approach danger and to flirt with evil” (p.66). Evil accrues excitement and enriches stories.

An evil act does not beget an evil individual. Soldiers commonly attribute killings and war crimes to the heat of the moment and not as anything they would repeat outside of a war zone. The role of a soldier provides a protective layer against attributing an evil action to oneself as a person. Instead, the action stems from the assigned violent role – which, of course, does in no way diminish its narrative value.
Conclusion

Very few armies fight a war in pursuit of notoriety. Indeed, rules are codified, courts established, to prevent the occurrence of evil acts. But viewing oneself as intrinsically good and incapable of evil often blinds soldiers and armies to the objective depravity of their actions.

Touching back on Kahneman’s remembering versus experiencing self, perhaps soldiers remember their violence in a more peaceful light. Particularly when aggression is directed against a vilified out group, one person’s narrative, as shaped by his or her remembering self, has the potential to legitimize and even sanctify a half-remembered crime. Any soldier has the potential to commit an evil act, and every soldier has the capacity to dilute its memory.

The widespread dichotomy of war stories into good versus evil, and the wartime withdrawal into an in group, threatens the moral health and community of a nation. People are not evil, and we should not treat them as such. But from another viewpoint, existing in close proximity to evil actions may be necessary if one wants to help generate good in the situation. In order to redeem evil, one must grow close to that evil, to understand it, to become deeply involved in the situation, and possibly even to embrace that from which the evil stems. According to Eagleton (2010), “If the artist seeks to redeem a corrupt world by the transformative power of his art, then he or she must be on intimate terms with evil,” (p.59). This argument functions equally well for any person, not just for an artist. We must understand that which we attempt to destroy. However, if nonexistence is the point from which evil originates, creatio ex nihilo, perhaps it is not humanly possible to reduce it to its primordial state.
“Emotions are authentic but ephemeral. We move on. Events recede, as the living memory of them is carried forward into the present, and occasionally events are revivified, *mutatis mutandis*, by sympathetic conversation” (Scheibe 2000, p.236).

**Protective factors**

Werner (1961) pioneered the idea of protective and risk factors that alter the way a person, particularly a child, reacts to a potentially traumatic situation, in her foundational study that followed both purportedly stable and at-risk children of a Hawaiian community for decades. An example of a protective factor is the presence of a nurturing parental figure. An example of a risk factor is ubiquitous drug and alcohol use in the vicinity. The presence of protective factors increases a child’s likelihood of recovering from trauma, and the presence of risk factors decreases this likelihood. This chapter will focus on how protective factors, particularly community, can contribute to resilience.

Betancourt and Khan (2008), using Werner’s research as a foundation, studied the mental health of children affected by armed conflict, focusing specifically on protective processes and pathways to resilience. This study models itself in part on Werner’s by its discussion of protective factors that increase resilience. Betancourt stresses the importance of a relationship with at least one adult, as the child needs a caregiver on which to model his or her behaviors and emotions about an event. In Gibson’s (1960) visual study experiments, infants whose visual depth system was still developing would often look to their caregivers when deciding whether to venture out
or not over a clear glass surface. They gather information about the possible danger of the event from the adult’s facial expression. Emotional support, self-esteem support, and instrumental support exist as stalwart protective factors for children. Education, which also increases resilience, can offer predictability and security in a world of chaos, as well as facilitating social connections.

I would like to extend this idea beyond education and propose that a strong social community, like that found in Sierra Leone, acts as a protective factor increasing resilience. Although no protective factor can entirely eradicate the trauma of living through a civil war, the community cushioned Sierra Leone’s children from many of the moral damages war can bring. As discussed in Chapter Seven, war has the capability to shatter a moral universe, potentially leaving combatants or witnesses with the idea that a just, peaceful world does not exist. The world is then understood through the lens of conflict. But one of the reasons why the community can act as such an effective protective factor for children is because of nearby adults who model fair and moral behavior. Even if the world seems to be falling apart, if a small bubble exists wherein people are kind to each other, perhaps children will not resign themselves to the perpetual inevitability of violence and injustice. Perhaps they will hope for a better world.

The remembering v. the experiencing self: Why time heals

Kahneman (2011), a Nobel Prize recipient, introduces the idea of the remembering self that frequently differs from the experiencing self in one’s memories. Memory does not function as a Polaroid camera; we do not necessarily remember the details of our experiences precisely as we lived through them. Instead,
we remember the event through the lens of a codified memory, which often
 crystallizes as the event concludes. This ending, as Kahneman proves,
 disproportionately weights our perception and memory of what occurred throughout
 the entire event. According to Kahneman. “Memories are all we get to keep from our
 experience of living, and the only perspective that we can adopt as we think about our
 lives is therefore that of the remembering self” (p.381). A good ending to a negative
 incident can enable our memory to view it through a rose-tinted lens. We therefore do
 not always have a choice in what we remember; the remembering self embodies and
 shapes our memories consistently regardless of situation.

 The remembering self frequently remembers situations as occurring
differently - a memory often colored by endings. As Kahneman claims, “The
 experiencing self does not have a voice. The remembering self is sometimes wrong,
 but it is the one that keeps score and governs what we learn from living, and it is the
 one that makes decisions. What we learn from the past is to maximize the qualities of
 our future memories, not necessarily of our future experience. This is the tyranny of
 the remembering self” (p.381). The remembering self thus contributes to resilience by
 allowing our memories to focus asymmetrically on the endings of events. The end of
 a conflict is typically less traumatic than the perpetuation and embodiment of a
 conflict. Therefore, by labeling a more positive piece of the conflict as representing
 the conflict itself, the remembering self can enable people to recover more easily.

 The tyranny of the remembering self, in Kahneman’s words, also helps to
 explain the common aphorism that time heals. As events recede steadily further into
 the recesses of memory, details of experience fade and are replaced by memories
provided by the remembering self. The remembering self distorts our experience and
can lead to unfortunate decisions based on faulty memories. However, its frequently
rose-tinted vision can also help us to heal more readily, softening the sharp edges of a
bitter experience. The experience occurred, but was pulled into a memory that left the
individual relatively undamaged, in sharp contrast to the actual event experienced by
the self. Suffering does not have to be carried forward into memory to damage life.
The remembering self has triumphed.

**Hope**

A word here should be given to the least studied, least quantifiable factor that
contributes to resilience: hope. Hope is essential to human nature, and yet we
understand very little about it. Hope cannot co-exist with complete omniscience of a
situation, but absolute knowledge is terrifying in its own regard. Part of the beauty of
hope stems from a nugget of faith, of choosing to believe that the unknown could in
fact be good. James (1896) expounds on this idea, claiming that “Our errors are surely
not such awfully solemn things […] a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than
this excessive nervousness on their behalf” (p.9). Perhaps, like evil, hope itself lies in
the foggy realm of the unknown, existing as an enigma due to its very nature.

Is having hope enough to survive a war? It certainly helps. According to Stack
(2010), “War is a total change, unleashing all things light and all things dark; we are
pushed forward and our lives are invented by the history we live through […] But we
lived through it, and we are living still. But in the end, survival is not a meager
redemption; it is substantial and it will not last forever, either. Maybe there is greater
redemption still to come, an understanding or clarity of vision” (p.251). Physical survival does not necessarily guarantee recovery, but hope is perhaps integral to both.

In discussing resilience and the extraordinary ability of the human psyche to overcome trauma, one participant’s remarkable story comes to mind. BJ was born in the provinces and attended a few years of primary school as a child. He had to drop out when his mother died, and his grandmother did not have enough money to pay his school fees. One of BJ’s biggest regrets is that his mother, who always passionately advocated for his education, did not live to see him attend university. When BJ was ten years old (1995), the rebels attacked his village, and he fled to the bush with his grandmother. They were captured, and his grandmother was slaughtered right in front of him because she was blind and thus useless to the rebels. BJ was then abducted by rebels and forced to work for them for five months of abject terror.

But this war story, this story that is utterly inconceivable to me, constituted only five minutes of BJ’s thirty-minute interview. BJ spent a great deal of the interview extolling the many benefits of education and expressing how lucky he feels to be attending university, even in his late twenties. This man, to me, encapsulates the idea of resilience and success in the face of overwhelming adversity. When talking about how content he feels in his life, BJ said, “I appreciate when I think of the past. Because even though I finished school very late, my mummy is dead, I’ve been in the war, that all really helped me. It was where I learned English. My English has changed, and I got a lot of friends here, so I really appreciate that. So I’m happy.”
Chapter 10: Meditations on Suffering

“Our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow and thousands of years of peace won’t breed it out of us” (James 1906, p.5).

War, and its definitions

Children’s conceptual understandings of war develop over the years from possessing a loose connection with violence to existing as a multifaceted conflict. Based on studies of Australian war veterans, Robin Hall (1993) finds that “acceptance and justification of war,” and war’s inevitability, increases with age (p.182). Along this line, her research demonstrates that young children cannot necessarily provide a conceptual definition of war, although they can typically explicate effectively whether they believe it to be good or bad. She also notes that boys tend to believe more in the inevitability of war, while girls believe it to be less necessary, and know less about it. Hall concludes with a description of a J-shaped curve describing children’s attitudes toward war. Young children typically view war as entertaining; as they grow older, they condemn it on principle; and, as adults, they accept a more complex understanding in which it can occur and most likely will occur, often with horrific consequences (p.188). According to Hakvoort (1993), young children define war primarily in terms of violence (p.66). A common definition of peace for young children is simply the absence of war. However, as they grow older, children gain cognizance of peace as a difficult and complex phenomenon.

My participants were all over the age of eighteen, and thus the majority understood war as involving more than just violence. One participant defined war
Can you have a victim without a label?

While in Sierra Leone, I discovered that there is no word for victim in either of the country’s two most prevalent languages, Krio and Mende. This phenomenon is especially striking because the civil war left a countless number of people whom the American media would likely label as victims. According to the Whorfian hypothesis, this linguistic lacuna transcends simple word choice and reflects something about Sierra Leonean culture. Perhaps the lack of a word to describe victims stems from citizens’ adamant refusal to perceive themselves as victims.

One of my participants, in answering the question about defining a victim, said simply, “[there are] so many victims in Sierra Leone” (BR). If there are so many victims in Sierra Leone, as this participant avows, then why is there no word to describe their state? Viewed through the lens of the Whorfian hypothesis, the linguistic chasm left by this word could have evolved because of the population’s denial of their status as victims. Many of my participants did not seem to feel particularly victimized; instead, they evinced gratitude and happiness for their lives and their relationships. This discussion leads to the question of whether status as a victim depends on self-identification as such, or whether it stems from an external labeling source. If an external source decides whether people are ‘victims’ or not, then the majority of Sierra Leoneans are indeed victims. But if we leave this labeling agency in their hands, maybe they will see themselves as survivors, rather than victims.
The horrifying and intrinsically human love for war

No other animal species kills its own members with the same efficacy and gusto that humans evince. According to Hoffer (1955), “Our sense of power is more vivid when we break a man’s spirit than when we win his heart” (p.45). War presents combatants with an ultimate power: the power to decide whether another lives or dies. Kraus (1919) suggests that although conflict may begin with two ineluctably polarized sides, after a weary era of battle, they inevitably grow closer and end up resembling each other in mutual destruction.

Chapter Eight of this thesis argues that people are significantly more likely to harm or show aggression toward those categorized as our out group, whom we often demonize and label as evil. Are we built to hurt each other, or at least, to hurt those different from us? Perhaps we are. A larger in group would lead to less opportunity for moral exclusion, but an infinite expansion of the in group, to the entire human race, for example, is utterly impossible. Our minds and our societies are structured to dichotomize, to form sub groups, to erect boundaries. The minimal group effect illustrates the ubiquity of this human tendency to sub grouping. Even arbitrary and meaningless distinctions between groups, such as hair color or wearing the same type of pants, can induce in-group favoritism.

One of my interview questions asked participants if they thought that war were necessary or inevitable. When I asked BS if war this question, he responded, “Yes. Because you have life.” BS seemed to believe that the existence of war goes hand in hand with the existence of life, or possibly just with the existence of
humanity. According to this outlook, war and violence can never be eradicated as they compose an integral part of our natures.

We have evolved to bounce back, but we have not yet evolved to avoid the violence and suffering that necessitates such resilience. Hampl berates the seeming redundancy of conflict, saying, “None of this dying gets the job done, it seems. There is a terrible living on of the self, not just in memory, but in the habit of the self to be wounded (afflicted) to no purpose” (Hampl 1999, p.154). No matter how many people die or how much suffering ensues, we manage to entangle ourselves in conflict after conflict and harm those whom we view as different from us. The in group will always exist, but we have to learn to appreciate, respect, and, perhaps most importantly, tolerate the discrepancies inherent to out groups. Education has been shown to be invaluable to this process. We have to give out groups the same human rights that we give ourselves.

A hidden spark

Based on my observation, citizens of Sierra Leone seem to be closer to expanding the in group than Americans are. Physically, I stand out in Africa as a discernible outsider, yet I never felt like one. By the end of my six weeks there, I had been inducted into a community and into a family. People there routinely call each other “brother” and “sister,” regardless of relation. According to my friend Jon, a political scientist who studies Sierra Leone, there are more reasons for an ethnic conflict to occur in Sierra Leone than there are reasons for there not to be one, yet the country exists peacefully. And since the war, Sierra Leone has knitted itself together tightly in an effort to prevent another violent conflict, another heap of suffering.
Sierra Leoneans have expanded their in group through a strong community. And piecing together a national narrative only serves to bind each individual, each community, closer together.

We in the West often feel a pressure to send over aid, to bestow our knowledge, to sop up the blood and work to mend a continent we view as inherently violent. There are reasons for this judgment, of course, but my experience in Sierra Leone diverged sharply from this common narrative. I came away with a powerful sense that we should be learning from them.

I am taking notes.
Chapter 11: The Healing Power of Narrative and Community

“I cannot escape the suspicion that what we do as [American] mental health professionals is not as good as the healing that in other cultures has been rooted in the native soil of the returning soldier’s community” (Shay 1994, p.194).

Defining community

The dictionary defines community as “a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common.” This definition is incomplete. It fails to convey the depth of emotion and importance of identity that a strong community can offer. Based primarily on my observations in Sierra Leone, I would define a community as an extended family and a lifestyle. Months after my return to the States, memories of Sierra Leone’s community continue to affect and move me. I remain a part of a small Freetown community and talk to my family there on the phone almost every week (they frequently berate me about my deteriorating Krio).

Additionally, a central element of community involves education, in which older members guide and model behavior for other, typically younger, members. This modeled behavior is essential to the community’s protective role in periods of conflict. According to Zimbardo (2008), “That is my operational definition of ‘community,’ people caring enough to take action in the face of an unusual or possibly illegal event on their turn” (p.25). People taking care of each other with the expectation to be similarly cared for: this is community.

One of the primary discrepancies I observed between the community in Sierra Leone and in the United States involves expectations of reciprocity. In America, we
have a give and take attitude – if someone scratches your back, you will scratch his or hers immediately, for the exact same period of time. A favor owed expects reciprocation, typically within a set time limit. In Sierra Leone, however, people help each other without a concrete expectation of any return in any specific period of time. They often help the neediest individuals, with the understanding that whenever these individuals are in a position to reciprocate, they will. No rush exists, no overdue loans, because people there trust each other. No one would ever default on a loan, for example, because what would be lost betraying the community is much greater than whatever small amount he or she could gain in that instance.

When American soldiers return home from war, they have access to limited medical and psychiatric care as well as certain financial benefits. Many health practitioners, such as Shay, acknowledge that these provisions may not actually provide the form of aid most integral to recovery for these war-affected individuals. There is an element, or many, outside of our structured jurisdiction. Soldiers’ families are frequently overwhelmed by the post-traumatic reactions of their loved ones and by how much they have changed. Fear and confusion in the supposedly safe home environment, even when combined with strong affection, do not promote healing.

A better approach to help veterans would be for the government to educate families and the larger community about what occurs in war and how best to welcome their loved ones home. This method seems less relevant in a country like Sierra Leone, where the majority of individuals have war memories of their own. The level of support provided there with a community that understands what former soldiers have undergone lends weight to the hypothesis that educating families about war in
the United States would benefit returning soldiers. As participant BT claimed, evincing a viewpoint commonly expressed in interviews, the only way to end war is to “come together as one among citizens.” We should strive to provide a more sympathetic community.

I would like to insert a qualification here about my own personal bias. I became intensely involved with my subject matter and with the Freetown community during the six weeks when I lived in Sierra Leone. Feeling as a small, extended part of this community provides a great source of satisfaction to me. However, it is possible that my intense personal and emotional involvement has colored my observations and writing. Perhaps I view and describe the community that I love so deeply through a rose-tinted lens.

**Powerful healing**

A strong community is as important for a child as for an adult. Challenger (1997) uses an analysis of five autobiographies of adults who survived difficult childhood to assert that a strong community, with a strong parental figure centering it, can help a child through almost any obstacle (p.179). Conversely, Challenger cites research showing that children who do not grow up with adult role models and support systems “often do not establish a meaningful bond with adult society and are involved in anti-social and often violent activities” (p.40). In other words, growing up in the absence of a community can lead to later defiance of its rules and norms, particularly regarding an ability to connect and empathize.

Betancourt’s (2009) research on war-affected children emphasizes that children found air raids and bombings less stressful than separation from family
members. Her research also suggests that if a child has strong parental or community support, they are much more likely to survive and recover from traumatic experiences. Having a parental figure, a model, is perhaps the most important factor in determining a child’s resilience, according to Betancourt.

One of the most important aspects of healing in a community involves sharing narratives, particularly trauma narratives. Telling a story to someone who understands and has a similar one promotes connection, as well as the sense that recovery does not have to occur in solitude. Challenger describes an example related specifically to narrative in which one child’s ability to write, or “to use language to create a forgiving world and ask for what he needed,” enables him to survive and grow as a healthy adult (p.79). In this way, the ability to tell one’s stories promotes resilience. In this scenario, storytelling also helps the child function as a more effective member of the community. However, because the capacity for autobiographical memory develops with age, young children often struggle with forming chronological narratives (Schauer 2004, p.20). A community involving adult role models, therefore, is even more essential for children. Adults can teach children how to construct a cohesive narrative. Through this, the adult will simultaneously build a stronger relationship with the child and help them to reconstruct and recover from past trauma.

Shay presents sharing narrative in a community as almost a panacea to emotional trauma. According to him, “Healing from trauma depends upon communalization of the trauma – being able to safely tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community” (Shay 1994, p.4). When a trauma is shared and dispersed across a community, when
several individuals work together to heal from it, when formerly concealed stories are
told and accepted, healing is catalyzed. The process of healing a community depends
on sharing the individual narratives of its citizens so as to form a cohesive story. This
process is essential to revitalizing a community and enabling it to function and move
forward in a post-traumatic environment. In fact, one of the most common responses
of participants to the question inquiring how to best end a war is “calling everyone,
talking with them. Let them keep on talking, talking” (AL). The more people share
stories, the more similarities they will find between each other, and the more difficult
it will be to classify the other as part of the out group.

I think that a cohesive community through which stories can be shared acts as
a protective factor, increasing resilience. Community and narrative are inextricably
interlaced in this process. “When a survivor creates a fully realized narrative that
brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, […] the survivor pieces
back together the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused” (Shay
1994, p.188). This idea explains why telling a story can have such a powerfully
beneficial impact. War can take over the self by fragmenting consciousness and
community, but shaping a narrative can bring it back. Later on, individual trauma
narratives can shape themselves into community narratives, even into national
narratives.

Conclusion

There is a final piece to the healing cycle delineated in this chapter:
propagation of narratives through generations. The cycle proceeds like this: the
occurrence of trauma, the erection of a supportive community or family in which a
survivor slowly builds trust, the (ideally reciprocal) construction and sharing of trauma narratives, the healing laced within and throughout a community, and finally, the sharing of stories to those uninvolved in conflict, to the future generations. Each step is contingent on successful completion of the one before it. The final step is essential to reducing future conflict. Future generations can, through stories, learn about the horrors of war and why it should be avoided. I found an extremely strong aversion to conflict in the people I talked to in Sierra Leone. And beyond that, I discerned a burning determination in my participants to share stories about the conflict both with younger generations and with foreign cultures who did not have war experiences.

As acknowledged in Chapter Seven, although strong communities in which war stories are shared provide invaluable healing, they also can promote moral exclusion and stronger dichotomies between the in group and out group. This tendency perpetuates itself through the cycle and embeds itself into a community as generations pass on stories. For example, generations of Palestinians have propagated anger toward Israelis in the transmission of their war stories, and visa versa. Even in light of this tendency, the healing cycle of community and narrative should nevertheless be encouraged. Ultimately, people cannot recover until they forgive and feel secure in their communities.

Do trauma stories conclude with a successful recovery\(^2\)? The idea of ending a story is confusing, counterintuitive, and, to some extent, absolutely terrifying. If it

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\(^2\) I have used the terms “recovery” and “healing” consistently through this chapter without defining them. This is partially because I am not a licensed clinical psychologist, and partially because I think that recovery means a different thing in
were up to me, I would never have pressed the “stop” button on my digital recorder. I would have let my participants talk, and I would have listened until they had no more to say. I do not think they would have ever run out of things to say.

“All that, for a story I never wrote. Newspaper stories ought to have endings, and Ahmed’s didn’t – it just stopped” (Stack 2010, p.216). With this powerful line, Megan Stack, journalist, warrior, adventurer, ends the story of one of her interviewees. After being seen with Stack, an American, in a café, Ahmed was followed and never heard from again. Stack questions which resolution is worse: dying a horrific death, or vanishing without a trace. What is the horror of dying unstoried? The majority of people in this world leave it quietly. Only a few receive the honor of ending their existence with a loud bang, a crash, a blazing fire. Most trail softly into nonexistence. Does a story prolong life, after the heart has ceased beating? Is the root of its comfort nothing more than a dream of immortality? There is a magic that comes alive only through stories.

different cultures. I would like to leave these terms as an abstract concept that the reader can define for his or herself. After all, it is the victim who inevitably decides if they have successfully recovered, not the psychologist.
CONCLUSION

Chapter 12: Where Do We Go from Here? Future Research Directions

Trauma and resilience

The psychological literature on resilience and childhood development during war has been well substantiated. However, there exists a paucity of cross-cultural studies in this area. Most research on trauma development, for example, stems from a Freudian conception that trauma leads to psychological impairment. Although this idea certainly holds true much of the time, very little research has been done on how non-Western cultures nurture resilience in their children. Furthermore, a significant portion of the cross-cultural research on resilience or trauma in wartime focuses primarily and often exclusively on the most extreme cases. Child soldiers, for example, have recently captured a global spotlight (Wessells 2009, Betancourt 2008/2010). These extreme cases are certainly important, but they do not tell the entire story.

One notable exception to this trend involves UNICEF’s 2006 study that randomly surveyed 750 male youth, producing more generalizable results. This study identified family connectedness and social support as the primary protective factors for measured psychosocial well being, thus lending weight to the argument advocating the beneficial effects that a strong community provides. A solid societal infrastructure reduces the sense of disorder in a community. However, more research in this vein is necessary in order to talk more broadly about how entire populations
are affected by war, rather than just the most traumatized individuals in these populations.

Much more research is needed to understand the role of community in resilience, which in current literature is dominated by qualitative information and research. One potential tactic for studying community quantitatively would be to measure individuals’ feelings of connection to their community, home, and family, and then perform a between-groups analysis. However, qualitative research on community is equally important as quantitative and should not be overlooked in the pursuit of data. In terms of resilience, more non-Western studies need to be done, particularly those that take into account cross-cultural and community distinctions.

**Narrative therapy**

Narrative exposure therapy (NET) is a relatively new treatment designed for victims of PTSD as an alternative to cognitive behavior therapy, which requires a trained clinician. NET is designed to enhance the encoding of declarative autobiographical memories and enable the construction of an individual story that relies less on affect and image, both of which can trigger severe PTSD symptoms (Robjant 2010, p.1032). The successful formulation of a story serves dual purposes, both of which are essential to healthy functioning. First, fashioning a cohesive story from disordered remnants helps one to grasp and understand what has occurred, which is a requisite first step to healing from an event. This approach is particularly beneficial to children who may have more trouble piecing together an event. Second, storytelling and the craving for good stories constitute a fundamental element of human nature. Therefore, feeling that one’s stories are listened to and valued can
facilitate healing. Narrative therapy can fulfill both of these processes by helping one to generate a story and by providing a sympathetic listener.

More emphasis in research should be given to the potentially beneficial effects of simply formulating and recounting a good story. Furthermore, the narrative process that occurs organically in communities such as Sierra Leone’s should be further investigated and potentially used as an inspiration for future adaptations of narrative therapy. This relatively new therapy should not be overlooked in clinical practices.

**Education**

One of the most significant policy changes that I would like to advocate is a siphoning of government aid from military supplies and non-researched initiatives over to education. Education has been shown to reduce disorder and restore predictability and social supports to children (Betancourt, 2005). Furthermore, it is much cheaper than later medical and psychiatric care. The best (and cheapest) educational programs engage the community’s social network to support the children. Higher education is also correlated with less impulsive behavior and higher income (UNICEF 2006). Education is by no means a panacea, but it does provide invaluable services to children in communities. Educational programs can also function dually as aid initiatives and research projects analyzing the impact of specific components of or techniques in education.

**The role of culture in treatment: incorporating magic**

Health services should integrate traditional language and practices to support the existing community. Of course, this idea would not be realistic or even helpful for implementation in all situations, but incorporating local culture into medical aid
would certainly benefit many projects. This initiative, however, requires detailed knowledge about each individual culture in which services are instated. Very little research exists that studies traditional medical practices in non-Western cultures. I strongly advocate that anyone responsible for selecting a policy involving a foreign country should either consult an anthropologist or have spent a significant portion of time residing in the country in question.

Citizens in Sierra Leone, for example, frequently place considerable trust in village chiefs and locally respected medicine men or women. Furthermore, a good deal of local knowledge relies on centuries of learned experience, as opposed to brewed magic potions and prayers. For example, when I got sick, my local friends knew exactly what kind of fruit I should consume based on my symptoms. And it was surprisingly effective. I will now occasionally prescribe a mango or banana to a sick friend at Wesleyan. Some people are more receptive to this treatment than others.

**My dreams**

And as for me, what part will I play in these ever-broadening fields of research? To claim that I know unequivocally what path my career will take would be unrealistic. However, there are a few potential research avenues that I would like to consider pursuing.

First and foremost, I want to return to Sierra Leone. I made a promise to return, to myself and to Etta and Bakarr, and I have no intention of disappointing any of us. Because this thesis was an undergraduate research project, I faced predictable but somewhat debilitating limitations from a lack of funding, time, and manpower. From the project’s inception, I viewed it in part with the goal of determining which
questions I should ask in future projects, rather than as an attempt to find conclusive answers. I would like to revise my interview questions based on the analyses in this thesis and on research that will occur over the next couple of years. Then, I want to fly back to Sierra Leone with at least one other person to assist me in the research. With greater funding, I want to strive for a cleaner random sampling process in the population. I would also like to interview more than forty participants. With a research assistant or two, I can eliminate at least some investigator bias. In an ideal world, as the heavily biased principal investigator of the project, I would not conduct any interviews myself. I would be responsible for recruiting participants, analyzing data, and potentially translating the interviews. Additionally, I would like to replicate this study in Liberia and Ghana, two other countries in West Africa. Liberia had a similar civil war but is currently in a much stronger financial position than Sierra Leone. This comparative study would provide a quasi-control for poverty. Ghana, a relatively stable and peaceful country, would act as a quasi-control for conflict. Both of these countries have similar (although certainly not identical) cultures to Sierra Leone.

After conducting this fairly substantial follow-up study based in Sierra Leone, I would like to explore other conflict-ridden areas of the world. Countries to which I feel particularly drawn include the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Colombia, and Afghanistan. I would like to travel to these countries, live in a village in a “hot” region that sees a significant amount of conflict, and, after building relationships, to attempt to ingratiate myself with local rebels. As I have argued in this thesis, I do not believe that any person is intrinsically and irrevocably evil or
exclusively capable of evil acts. Even rebels with blood on their hands deserve to have their stories told. I am not entirely sure what I would do at this point, if I have survived and succeeded in talking to several rebels. One option would be to consult with the UN about the best method to promote peace. If the individuals I have interviewed consent, I would also love to write about their unconventional lives and share pieces of their stories with the world, which would certainly benefit from hearing the rebels’ stories. A third option would be to use social psychological techniques in an attempt to reduce conflict in certain areas.

I doubt that I will achieve all of these goals. I can only hope that whatever I end up doing, I will never lose sight of my dreams, and I will never stop searching for magic sparks that I see most readily in the clear eyes of other human beings.
“I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together.” – The Beatles

**Chameleons**

I waltzed into the Freetown airport for the first time (and certainly not the last), pale-skinned and sleep deprived, pursuing what a clandestine part of me believed to be my destiny. Six weeks later, my skin browned and my heart lightened, I boarded a return flight for London. Was the trip life-changing? Absolutely. Was it my destiny? I sincerely doubt it. I do believe in a magic that draws people to certain places. I’ve never had a logical explanation for what it is about Africa that so irresistibly fascinates me. But I do not think that it was only path my life could have taken. As Scheibe (2000) says, “And yet when we look in the mirror we do not see an accident. We see and we feel an essence. We own our names and our faces, our families, and even our place in the world – be it noble or humble – as essential elements of our being […] We have a general reluctance to change our essential features or to suffer mistakes in how we are called, recognized, or acknowledged. We either deny or forget that it is all so improbable, so unlikely, so unnecessary, so arbitrary” (p.16). Humans are true chameleons, colored by our situations, changing form and shape and essence with every minor perturbation in our surroundings.

I do not think that any one attribute, any one situation, defines us. We are always changing. My participants – my beautiful, eloquent, inspiring participants – they did not allow one situation to define them. A war, they told me, with an occasional hint of condescension regarding my startling ignorance, a war occurs, and
then it ends. We do not need to carry pain caused by past conflicts into the future anymore than we need to carry forward any other situation.

I learned in Kahneman’s readings how true this idea is, that we can actually shape our own experiences, molding and twisting them into memory. So there is hope for even the most horrifying of incidents. A coping mechanism lies deeply submerged in our cerebral cortex, waiting, distorting memories, producing resilience, and, eventually, enhancing survival.

**My mistake**

While crafting my project, I had a preconception that education would be my magic bullet, my clinical application. When this idea emerged from a murky swamp of half-formed hypotheses, I felt as if a gleaming light bulb had quite literally sprouted above my head. Education, I hypothesized, could heal people from trauma. Of course! I envisioned myself placing hundreds and thousands of war victims in schools, where the blustery haze of trauma would be washed clean. I was, and in many ways still am, a naïve, idealistic college student. I want to believe that education is a panacea, and, more than that, I want to believe that a panacea is even possible in a century choked by conflict. If I work hard enough, then I could one day wave my magic wand and, with that simple motion, heal the world. Right?

I do not want to discount the power of education, because it is an absolutely invaluable tool. However, I do not think that it is the primary factor contributing to the striking resilience to war trauma that I observed in Sierra Leone’s youth. The magic, in fact, comes from an even more obvious source – other people.
We can hold on to each other. That’s all we ever really had. And that’s all we’re ever going to have. Material things change with each passing day; jobs and situations come and go. Education is the pinnacle of human accomplishment, but it does not transcend.

People are the core. Why do we get so much happiness from a shared smile, from a hug? I cannot decide if it is simply biologically based or instead something magical, something rooted deeply within you. I think that if there is any magic in this world, it can be found in relationships, in other people, in communities. Sitting silently with another person should not necessarily uplift your heart, and yet it can so effectively. There is no intellectual analysis that explains the warm feeling in your stomach when surrounded by people you love.

It must be magic. This thing, this community, this insatiable drive to connect with other people, even people whom we will never see again, this is the essence of humanity. And it is good.
Appendix A: Original Interview Questionnaire

GENERAL PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

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<th>NUMBER</th>
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PLACE OF RESIDENCE

PLACE OF ORIGIN

FAMILY COMPOSITION/BACKGROUND

WAR EXPOSURE
INTERVIEW

WHAT ARE THREE IMPORTANT OR PIVOTAL EVENTS IN YOUR LIFE?

1.

2.

3.

WHO, OR WHAT, HAS HAD THE GREATEST INFLUENCE ON YOU?

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF YOUR LIFE?

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE A WAR?
IS WAR A NECESSARY PART OF LIFE? WHY OR WHY NOT?

HOW DO WARS END?

WHAT DEFINES AN ENEMY? A SOLDIER? A VICTIM?

WHAT ARE THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF WAR?
DO YOU FEEL THE WAR ACHIEVED ANYTHING POSITIVE? IF SO, WHAT?

HOW DO YOU FEEL THE WAR AFFECTED YOUR LIFE/YOUR FAMILIES' LIFE?

DO YOU THINK THE REBELS WERE BAD/EVIL PEOPLE, OR GOOD PEOPLE WHO DID BAD THINGS?

ARE THERE ANY OTHER STORIES YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?
Appendix B: Research Informed Consent

Research Informed Consent 06/12

Studies of Childhood in a Post-War Zone
Kaitlin DeWilde

Purpose
We are conducting a research study to examine the stories and experiences of people who grew up in a civil war.

Procedures
Participation in this study will involve one in-depth interview with the principal investigator. We anticipate that your involvement will require about one to two hours. You will receive a free meal before or after the interview for participation.

Risks and Benefits
Participants in this study may experience some distress due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions. Although this study will not benefit you personally, we hope that our results will add to the knowledge about childhood and adolescence in a traumatic environment.

Confidentiality
All of your responses will be kept completely confidential. Names or any other identifying information will be kept separate from the interviews. Only the principal investigator will have access to the information you provide. Your identity will not be revealed in any presentation of these data unless you explicitly give permission for this purpose at the end of this document.

Voluntary Participation
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to participate, to end participation at any time for any reason, or to refuse to answer any individual question without penalty or loss of compensation.

Questions
If you have any questions about this study, you may contact the investigator, Kaitlin DeWilde (Youth Partnership for Peace and Development, 817.874.7096). If you would like to talk with someone other than the researcher to discuss problems or concerns, or to discuss your rights as a research participant, you may contact Lisa Dierker (Wesleyan University Psychology Department/860.685.2137/Judd Hall 302). You may also contact the Wesleyan University Institutional Review Board at www.wesleyan.edu/irb.

Agreement to Participate
I am at least 18 years of age. I have read the above information, have had the opportunity to have any questions about this study answered and agree to participate in this study.

__________________________________________  ____________________________
(printed name)  (date)

__________________________________________
(signature)

[Obtain one signed copy for participant and one for experimenter.]
ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND
Youth Partnership for Development (YPPD) is a national non-governmental, advocacy and human rights non-profit making youth-led organization that was established in 2005.

The organization however was borne out of the desire of bringing young people onboard who can serve agitators and agents of change and activists in their respective communities for the promotion of advocacy and youth empowerment in nation building.

YPPD holds a conviction on young people as agents of positivism in terms of national development, thereby strongly believing that as young people that there is the call for us to come together and build the buoyancy needed in others, as a possible way of enabling youth in stepping forward for positive changes in our various communities and the world at large. With our vision, we develop insight from the daily struggles of our fellow young people who are marginalized and voiceless in the communities they live. This initiative is entirely managed for and by young people in Sierra Leone, which we consider as a novelty in the lives of every young person trying to make a change.

In response to the challenges that children and youth face and in line with the increased attention governments and the international community are giving to children and youth, YPPD has made a commitment to integrate and deepen its work by first preparing a strategy on children and youth. The strategy focuses that youth and children should not be seen as problems, research subjects or an issue, but as active agents of their own development in all spheres.

OUR VISION
We have a vision whereby young people can maximize their participation in development and democracy; shaping the present and future for their communities and societies. Thereby advocating for the rights and dignity of our fellow young people that are marginalized and voiceless.

OUR MISSION
Our mission is to advocate, inform, involve, inspire and celebrate social change led by and for youth. We connects with organizations and individuals who support young people, and build an alliance between youth groups, empower and develop the marginalized and vulnerable youth of Sierra Leone and Africa at large for them to become responsible future leaders by taking active part in the decision making processes and development programs at all levels to take the golden destinies into their own hands

KEY ISSUES OF MAJOR CONCERN TO US.
In acknowledging young people as trusted partners in democracy and development, as well as people with the right to life and health, we respond to the call for our youth-focused programs to address the global agenda on poverty alleviation and HIV/AIDS. In addition to our areas of strategic focus and mandates of our programs, we recognized that there are other important priority areas of youth development other than our core programs. These include disaster management, peace building and conflict resolution and the Millennium development Goals relevant to public health and formal education systems.

OUR STRATEGIC PROGRAMME AREAS
Our mandates demands that we focus on the following four strategic areas:

**Youth Enterprise Development**
This area of work represents a promising avenue for young people to create their sustainable livelihoods, supported be appropriate programs and supportive policy environment. Sierra Leone Youth Partnership for Development plans to promote sustainable livelihoods among young people as a strategy for poverty reduction and enhancement of living standards through youth enterprise training and research into other innovative projects in collaboration with our partners.
In this drive, we are tremendously trying to bridge the divide between non-disabled and the disabled young people.

**Youth Networks and Governance**
Our work in this area will give young people an opportunity to promote and provide practical support for the achievement of our fundamental values. The goal of this strategic program is to enhance the capacity of young people and youth networks to influence governance processes at local and national levels in partnerships.

**Youth Participation**
Participation is an essential vehicle for young people’s development, and it contributes to development in wider spheres through building conscious, tolerance and active citizenship. The goal of this strategic program area is to realize the potential of young people as citizens through their participation in, contribution and engagement with national, social, economic, political and cultural development processes.

**Youth Work Education and Training**
our work in this area recognizes that young people, youth leaders and youth servers all bring experiences and perspectives to the learning environment and, through formal and non-formal training creates opportunities and contribute to build a professional youth service. Through this Program, we plan to promote the profession of youth work, guided by codes of service and regulatory mechanisms.
Appendix D: Photos

Photo 1: Shot of Freetown taken from the YMCA hostel

Photo 2: Kaitlin at a local Freetown school with a group of students/participants
Photo 3: The Pademba Road Prison in Freetown where Foday Sankoh was jailed

Photo 4: Kaitlin being greeted by children of the Tikonko village
Photo 5: The family. From left: Etta, Hadji, Kaitlin, Bakarr, David, in the Freetown YMCA hostel

Photo 6: Freetown residents cramming into a *poda poda*
References


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Locke, J. (1688). *The second treatise on government*.


