

**Experiences and Views on War: Voices from War-affected Communities**

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Abstract

In this article, six individuals who come from war-affected societies in different parts of the world are sharing their experiences and views on war through individual narratives. Based on these war narratives, the article, in particular, explains how memories of past experiences remain, while there are cognitive shifts in one's view of one's present life. While most literature argues that the pain of the far reaching consequences of war lasts many years, yet, based on the narratives that people in this article discuss, feelings related to war may shift from hopelessness to optimism, for example, or from helplessness to becoming more committed to peacebuilding. In this context, war narratives are able to generate a discourse of inward change. This article will highlight at least, three major factors that contribute to these cognitive and emotional shifts, namely: peace education in higher learning; being in a relatively safe environment, that is, being away from war; and an experience living in a caring and supportive community.

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In large scale violence like war, the experience of those affected consists of, at least, two levels. The first level comprises the immediate impact of the actual fighting in the lives of the civilian population, which may take the form of shock, panic, disbelief, and to some extent, nervous breakdown. The second level includes the possible long term effects on the psycho-social, physiological, emotional and spiritual aspects of people's wellbeing due to the following circumstances: being uprooted from their homeland and becoming either internally displaced or refugees, the death of loved ones and friends, separation from family members and relatives, the destruction of household belongings and other properties and the disruption of communal or societal affairs like anniversaries and other religious and cultural activities. This kind of violence, which takes place in a specific socio-cultural context, indeed, results in a massive trauma, intertwining psychic, social,

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political, economic and cultural dimensions, making it irreducible to a single level of analysis because it targets the body, the psyche, as well as the socio-cultural order (Suarez-Orozco and Robben, 2000). This is the setting where the voices that shape the content of this article came from.

This article presents some views and perspectives of war through the eyes of, at least, six individuals, whose first hand experience of war has provided this material with a rich resource in terms of our understanding of the dynamics of war-related cognitions, that is, the psycho-emotional processes of the impact of war in people's lives; and also in terms of how people's interpretations of war has made a strong influence on their commitment to peacebuilding. This interpretive scheme, according to John Paul Lederach, is a mechanism by which meaning is given to what is observed (or experienced). (Lederach, 1995) Peacebuilding, based on people's articulation of war narratives, refers to the comprehensive idea that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships. (Lederach, 1997). This concept of peacebuilding envisions the creation of a self-sustaining infrastructure of processes by local communities that promote reconciliation. (Lederach, 1997) This is what the people that I have talked to intend to do upon their return to their respective countries.

I wrote this article from a *community-based perspective* where those who have first-hand experience of war and their experience-based knowledge are seen as “the primary source for the study.” Lederach calls this an *elicitive* approach in gathering information which

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refers to the implicit but rich understandings people have about their setting, which includes their knowledge about how the war emerges, how it develops and affects them as a community, and how they try to handle and manage its effects. (Lederach, 1995).

The way I use the term, *war narratives* in this article refers to people's stories about their experience of war. War narratives are about people's conceptions and articulations of war and its impact on their lives and community.

## *Voices of War*

In Spring of 2003, I had the privilege to initiate in-depth conversations with six individuals who come from war-affected countries. Their wars range from ethnic or tribal war to interstate conflict. Some of these wars are either directly or indirectly related to issues pertaining national identity, sovereignty and maintaining the status quo of the powers that be. Others started as a political unrest due to territorial disputes, corruption by government officials, militarization and other forms of injustice. In order to protect their individual identity, I shall withhold the names of the people I have talked to and will employ letter codes, instead, in referring to each one of them, according to their respective countries of origin. They are from Nigeria (Person A), Croatia (Person B), Kenya (Person C), Palestine (Person D), Pakistan (Person E); and Burma (Person F). Four of them were women and two were men. Their ages range from 29 to 39 years old. They came to the United States in 2002 to pursue a Master's degree in Conflict Transformation at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) in Harrisonburg, Virginia. They are the *voices* that provided this article its content..

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My conversations with each one of them were guided and facilitated conversations. From a research perspective, one may consider these conversations as interviews. However, the dynamic was mutual. While I asked them specific questions regarding my interest in hearing their stories and perspectives of war, they were also interested to hear about what my views on war are, based on my work experience in various conflict-affected settings in Asia and the Asia Pacific. Our conversations took place at different occasions between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2003,

There are, at least, three major aspects that comprise the following discussion. The first aspect deals with *life during the war*. Here, people narrate their actual experience of war in terms of what they witnessed and how they have felt about the whole experience, including their views or perspectives of the situation. The second aspect addresses *life away from war*. This mainly covers the period when they left their respective home countries to come to Virginia to pursue their graduate studies. The third aspect explains how *the whole experience has influenced their commitment to peacebuilding*.

### On *warviews*

In this article, I use the term, *warviews*, as my way to embody, in a collective manner, the different views people have on war, in terms of how they experience it and its emotional and psychological impact on their lives and community as a whole. (Fuertes, 2004)

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*Warviews* also became a tool in understanding and interpreting the war narratives. They (warviews) help establish what Maxwell and Miller would call, *similar-based relations*, that involve resemblances or common features found on the narratives. Here, similarities and differences of people's perspectives on war are generally used to define categories and to group and compare the information by category. The strategies that I used under this type of relationships are called *categorizing strategies*. (Maxwell and Miller, p. 1).

*Warviews* also help establish *contiguity-based relations*. These are connections that are identified among the narratives, based on an actual setting where the war was happening, which include relations in time and space, links of one-directional or reciprocal influence, or relations among parts of a narrative. Strategies that focus on relationships of contiguity are called *connecting strategies* (Maxwell and Miller, p.1).

## *Experiences of War; in their own words*

In this section, I would like to emphasize the idea that while the following articulations of war experience may be universal in nature yet, hearing these words being said by those who have first hand experience of the event makes the whole dynamic even more personal. One of the most disturbing aspects in people's experience of war, for example, is having to witness the *killing of innocent civilians*, either intentionally, which refers to civilians getting killed because they were believed to have been linked or were suspected to be sympathizers to either of the conflicting parties OR unintentionally such as by accident; being hit by bombs or from stray bullets or shrapnel. Many civilians were killed

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simply for being a wrong target. The pain and anger due to the sense of loss that this experience brings to survivors will continue to haunt them for a long time. A second aspect of the experience of war is the *physical and material destruction*. People that I have talked to witnessed the burning of people's houses, including their own; the looting of personal belongings, the slaughtering of animals, the destruction of crops and farmlands and the disintegration of the whole village in general. In other words, people's possessions which provide them with social and economic security are gone. Their support system destroyed. What many of them would consider to be their 'home' is not there anymore. This provides the people with a sense of insecurity and uncertainty. A third aspect is *hunger*. Based on their narratives, war results to loss of jobs. In societies where people depend on agriculture such as farming and fishing for their living, war means no farm produce such as vegetables, fruits, livestock or poultry since people are either afraid to farm or they are barred from farming. Hunger also translates itself into becoming dependent on food rationing by organizations that are helping victims and survivors of conflict. This is true especially among refugees and internally displaced people, which this article will discuss later. They had to rely on humanitarian assistance and other agencies for help. In some cases, those who are being displaced, for example, would go for days without food. *Separation from loved ones vis-à-vis disintegration of family ties* is the fourth aspect of war experience that people identify in their narratives. War usually results to displacement of local residents. In cases when military attacks come as a complete surprise for local residents, meaning, there were no early warnings that would prepare them for what is to come, the running away from their village to seek refuge in the jungle or somewhere else can result to separation from other members of the

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family. Person F, for example, narrates that some parents have not seen their children since arriving in refugee camps nor have the children seen their parents and other siblings since they left their village: *Many of them do not even have any clue if other members of their family and relatives are still alive.* Person B contends that her village became a refugee or an evacuation center for many months. During this time she realized the pain and anguish of those who lost their loved ones due to displacement. Some were reunited after more than two months of searching while others remain separated until today (2003). Fifth is what I have already said previously: the *displacement of local residents* which results in separation from loved ones or the disintegration of family ties.

Displacement in this context comes in two forms: forced evacuation and voluntary evacuation. Forced evacuation, which characterizes most of the war experience, happens when people are forced to sever links with their home village (or country). They cannot rely anymore on their governments, local or national, for legal protection. In most cases they are desperate and in need of humanitarian assistance (UNHCR, p.3). Voluntary evacuation is similar to the former except that people's decision to leave is mostly borne out of fear for their own safety and uncertainty in terms of what the future may hold for them. In voluntary evacuation, people may not necessarily sever ties with their government. The sixth aspect of war experience that people identify is the *disruption of community life*. When a village is destroyed and people have nowhere to live, community celebrations and other forms of public gatherings are affected. Even the observance of religious rituals and cultural practices, for example, are usually not allowed inside refugee camps or evacuation centers. As Person A indicates, *all collective efforts toward any form of celebrations are being monitored by the military to ensure 'social order'.*

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Gatherings by villagers, in this case, are perceived as threats by the powers that be.

Disruption of public gatherings can also be attributed to the fact that during war, people's priorities shift into issues of survival for their personal lives and families. *Sexual abuse such as rape; and physical torture* are also mentioned as another aspect of war experience.

Despite the grim images of war, one may still see something different from what has been discussed previously and that is, *war can be a time for cooperation*. Person B, for example, contends that in her country people from different organizations, regardless of religious and political affiliations, came to help victims and survivors of war. Individuals and various groups worked together in collaboration with each other in an effort to help those affected in whatever ways possible.

## *Emotional response*

A prevailing emotional response by people that I have talked to was a feeling of *insecurity* about their present life and *uncertainty* about their future. They do not understand the rationale behind the war much more the reason why civilian communities are being targeted and attacked. Person A, for example, always asks himself the questions as to *why do people go to war? When people kill other people, what does that say about what they value in life?* With uncertainty come *fear and a feeling of being deeply terrified*. As Person E narrates, *My life before was very difficult. Everyday, we were bombarded by military planes. I was always afraid of what might happen to us, especially*

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*my family. In fact, many of my relatives were killed. Some of them become angry when questions related to war are left unanswered while the conflict continues to escalate, resulting to massive destruction. War also made them feel helpless, discouraged, and to some extent, just wanting to avenge what has happened to them and their people. Despite all these, four of them felt compassion for the victims and those affected by war.*

All six of them want to go back home as soon as possible. *I have to go back home*, said Person A. *I feel guilty being here (US) knowing that many of my people back home in Nigeria, including my family, are suffering. I believe that Nigeria has a great future.* The same longing is expressed by Person C when she said, *I will go back to Kenya, but right now, I am defining my goal in terms of work. I plan to work more on documentation... maybe with an organization and equip other people in the process.* Person D, on the other hand, has a different side to the issue. She contends, *I don't want to go back home not because it is more comfortable here (US) but because the whole social system where I am from is getting worse. It will be very disappointing. I would rather stay here for a while.*

All these aspects of war experience and the emotions that accompany have enabled the people that I have talked to redefine their meaning and understanding of war in light of their present life here in the United States, in terms of how they can possibly respond more meaningfully to the challenges posed by the deteriorating situation in their respective countries. The realization of the complexity of war and of the nature and dynamics of conflict have both inspired and challenge them to pursue a master's degree in Conflict Transformation.

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*From hopelessness to optimism*

This section will highlight, at least, three major contributing factors that have made them become more committed to peacebuilding. First is *peace education in higher learning*. Second is *being in a relatively safe environment, away from war*; and third, *the experience of living in a caring and supportive community*.

## *1. Peace education in higher learning (MA in Conflict Transformation)*

In this article I use peace education to refer specifically to the MA program in Conflict Transformation at Eastern Mennonite University that all six of them were pursuing in 2003. The following are some highlights of our conversation.

All of them strongly emphasize that their being enrolled at the Conflict Transformation Program (CTP)<sup>1</sup> which is now being renamed as the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP), has helped them acquire new meanings and understanding of war, which facilitate change in terms of how they look at the event and how to possibly address its consequences. Person A, for example, credits this new awareness to his academic studies:

*My being a student at the Conflict Transformation Program (CTP) has challenged*

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<sup>1</sup> This article will use the former name, Conflict Transformation Program (CTP), instead of its new name, since this was what the program was called by the time our conversations took place.

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*everything I used to believe: my views on gender, politics, environment, etc.... It helped me realize that there is more to war than mere shooting and killing. Being in CTP helped me realize that there are better solutions to war that many people have never thought of before. Now, I realized that indeed, the whole notion of war is the non-recognition of the value of human life. Person B, on the other hand, sees a way to utilize the emergence of war as a learning tool, especially in relation to her own context, ...” coming to CTP enables me to gain new knowledge about war as something that can be analyzed and prevented. War, she said, is an experience that can be utilized as a teaching tool for others to learn. I did not have this knowledge before while I was still in Croatia.*

Person F emphasizes the importance of peace education in effecting new meanings and understanding about war: *At first, it was very difficult for me to talk about peace especially non-violence given the kind of situation where I came from. I used to dislike people who are advocates of non-violence. In the first place, they did not experience the kind of experience that my people and I went through. However, talking it out with people who are interested to listen to my story helps a lot. Being in CTP gives me an opportunity to think that maybe there are alternatives to address conflicts and not just by killing one another. I am open to these possibilities. He continues, I still remember very well the war and what happened to my family and community. The painful memories will always remain in my heart and mind. It is hard to forget something that has caused us so much pain and which destroyed many villages. Sometimes, I continue to harbor anger and feeling like wanting to take revenge against the military because of what they did against my family and community. However, coming here in Harrisonburg to study conflict*

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*transformation somehow eases the pain, although I have missed my loved ones very much already. It is nice when you are able to discuss your experiences in a classroom setting and people are interested to listen.*

For Person E, being in the CTP provides him with an opportunity not only to theorize and analyze his experience of war but also process his war trauma by telling his stories.

## *2. Being in a relatively safe environment, away from war.*

Being away from war, with an opportunity to live in a relatively safe environment like Harrisonburg or Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, has provided them with an opportunity to reflect about the meaning of life against the backdrop of war. *Life here is different. It is more peaceful. I can think clearly*, exclaimed Person E when asked what life is like living in Harrisonburg. Person F remarks, *Here, I could relax and take some quiet moment to reflect and write my experiences. In my country, it is difficult to find personal time.*

According to Person C, being removed from the very war context gave her an opportunity to reflect and analyze the conflict. *In Kenya, I feel like I am a part and parcel of conflict. I am stuck with it and it defines my relationship.* A similar response is expressed by Person A when he said, *coming to Harrisonburg, VA enables me to reflect more and realize that there are alternatives in dealing with conflicts affecting my country*

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*other than just going to war.* According to Person D, leaving the war behind enables her to acquire a deeper sense of identity as a Muslim woman. It clarifies further her values in relation to the conflict affecting her country. *Had I just stayed in Palestine, she said, I would not have this kind of self awareness.*

Being in a relatively safe environment also means enjoying some of the things that life has to offer which are absent in a war setting. This includes having opportunities to be able to sleep more peacefully at night, to sit on a couch and relax during daytime; and to buy the kind of food that the family would like to eat knowing that there are choices.

### *3. An experience living in a caring and supportive community*

A third contributing factor that facilitates change in people's meanings and understanding of war towards peacebuilding is the experience of living in a caring and supportive community. For people that I have talked to, Harrisonburg is *a home away from home*. Being surrounded by people who care and show love in concrete ways is healing and refreshing. This happens in many ways, such as: people showing strong interest in stories and experiences of others, especially those coming from war-affected settings; people showing concern about problems in other countries; local residents extending their 'home' for international students to dinner and other family gatherings and celebrations; friends and neighbors from within the area sharing food, clothing, and other resource materials with those who need; and organizing cultural activities which

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highlight cultural diversity. For someone who comes from a war-affected setting, these gestures shown by residents of Harrisonburg are affirming.

## *Becoming more committed to peacebuilding*

In general, what this article attempts to emphasize is that the experience of war in light of their present life as graduate students in the CTP; being in a relatively safe environment, away from war; and living in a caring and supportive community, have made them become more committed towards peacebuilding.

What happens is that the whole process of articulating warviews through people's narratives becomes a transformative experience in itself, which results to newly acquired meaning and understanding about war. If witnessing a war is a sad and painful experience for people, naming and identifying warviews is a life-changing experience for them.

Person A, for example, resolves to working on the educational system upon returning to his country. He believes that education is vital for social change and that he has a role to play in effecting this change by educating and training children and young people to become good and responsible citizens and leaders in the future. Person B and Person D become more interested in pursuing further studies and work in the fields of civil society and social change. The rest of them just want to go back home after they are finished with

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their graduate studies program and share with their people their newly acquired knowledge and skills in peace and conflict transformation in whatever ways possible.

Note:

1. I would like to thank the people who share with me their stories and views on war.
2. Another person who influenced my approach in the conversations that I mention in this article is Paulo Freire, author of the book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum International, 2000.

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(Note: UNHCR stands for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).