



Africa Media Review, Volume 17, Numbers 1&2, 2009, pp. 9–22
© Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2009
(ISSN 0258-4913)

Theorizing Post-conflict Peace Communication: Can Rwandan Women’s Narratives of Sexual Violence Become the Point of Departure for Research?

Eddah Mutua-Kombo*

Abstract

Francis Nyamnjoh asserts that ‘African context and experience should contribute towards theory-building’ (See Wasserman 2009:286). To what extent is this statement relevant to post-conflict peace communication research? This article advances an argument that the experiences of Rwandan women during and after the 1994 genocide can help us to develop a theory of post-conflict peace communication. The epistemic implication of this argument is that how we understand communication in post-conflict settings is grounded in the embodiment of lived experiences. To develop a valuable theory that explains this reality is to bring to the forefront the voices of those who have lived the experience. The author uses Rwandan women’s narratives of sexual violence to illustrate the epistemic implications of their experiences in optimizing the understanding of post-conflict peace communication.

Key Terms: Rwanda, genocide, women, sexual violence, post-conflict peace communication.

Résumé

Francis Nyamnjoh défend la thèse selon laquelle « Le contexte et l’expérience africaines doivent contribuer à la construction des théories » (voir Wasserman 2009:286). Dans quelle mesure cette assertion peut-elle être pertinente à la recherche sur la communication pour la paix d’après guerre ? Cet article propose que les expériences des femmes rwandaises pendant et après le génocide de 1994 puissent bel et bien nous aider à développer une théorie de la communication pour la paix d’après guerre. L’implication épistémique de cet argument consiste au fait que la façon dont nous comprenons la communication dans un contexte d’après guerre s’appesantit sur la symbolique des expériences vécues.

* Communication Studies, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, Minnesota, USA.
Email: emmutuakombo@stcloudstate.edu

Développer une théorie solide qui explique cette réalité nécessite de mettre en avant les voix de ceux qui l'ont vécue. L'auteur utilise alors les narrations des femmes rwandaises sur la violence sexuelle pour illustrer les implications épistémiques de leurs expériences et exploiter la compréhension de la communication pour la paix d'après guerre.

Mots clés : Rwanda, génocide, femmes, violence sexuelle, communication pour la paix d'après guerre.

Background

The need to expand African communication education and research remains a priority for African communication and media scholars. Under the auspices of the African Council for Communication Education (ACCE), scholars, media practitioners and activists have had opportunities to pursue dialogue about what constitutes a new paradigm in African communication education and research in the twenty-first century. Taylor, Nwosu & Mutua-Kombo (2004) argue for the need to reorient communication education and research in order to respond to phenomena in need of attention in the African communication environment. Building on this argument, this essay proposes an epistemological project that challenges the current status of African communication education. The questions raised about the status of African communication research and Rwandan women's experiences are at the same time suggestions for the directions in which future research about communication scholarship in Africa should or could go.

Africa is under-theorized in the area of post-conflict peace communication in contrast to the plethora of research on a wide range of issues about conflict that has besieged the continent in the post-colonial era. The paucity of research about how communities communicate after conflict limits broader understanding of what constitutes communication in post-conflict settings. For this reason, theorizing post-conflict communication becomes imperative to illuminate knowledge that offers a broader understanding of peace communication in Africa beyond the stereotypical image of Africa as chaotic, wild and conflict-ridden. In view of the foregoing concerns, this article presents an argument that has epistemic implications for post-conflict peace in Africa. The purpose is to evoke theoretical discussion needed for analysis and hopefully the resultant creation of a theory or theories of post-conflict peace communication. The context of the argument is framed around Rwandan women's narratives of sexual violence. The question posed is: Can Rwandan women's narratives of sexual

violence become the point of departure for African communication in a post-conflict setting?

This question offers an important proposal for African communication research to seek the inclusion of the lived experiences and authentic voices of women and their knowledge as a legitimate point of departure for research. What are the options available to realize this proposal? At the moment this essay proposes two options: (i) use women's narratives as theoretical framework since women's words and actions show epistemological potential, and (ii) engage scholars working with Rwandan women to mediate how to use women's narratives and experiences to create theories about post-conflict settings. These options are deemed relevant to other post-conflict societies, including Sierra Leone, Liberia and Southern Sudan, just to mention a few.

This author's work, examining women's participation in peace building in the post-genocide Rwanda, points to possibilities of building theory from women's narrative – what they say and do – in response to their horrific experience of the 1994 genocide. The essay begins by describing the context that the women's narratives were told, excerpts of women's words, and fieldwork interaction experiences. Finally, the essay offers a discussion of lessons learned to inspire scholars to respond to these lessons from Rwandan women's lived experiences. The Rwandan context has the potential to illuminate indigenous knowledge useful to understanding post-conflict peace communication.

Context

The setting where interactions between the women and the author occurred indicates a prospect to generate indigenous knowledge about post-conflict peace. The women spoke and acted in ways that reveal how the genocidal experience engulfed their existence. The evidence of the genocide and the memory it holds are exemplified through facets such as genocide memorial sites, mass graves, amputated bodies and messages about peace, reconciliation and forgiveness on billboards and in Rwandan people's vocabulary. In the post-genocide era, peace and reconciliation are what a majority of Rwandans desire. However, it is ironic that the performance of post-conflict peace and reconciliation occurs in a double-faced setting.

While on one hand the inhumanity of the genocide is undeniable, it is also the case that humanity is present in form of determination, perseverance, hope and resiliency of Rwandan women, exemplified through involvement in numerous peace initiatives. It is these virtues of humanity that give direction for the women to chart new ways for peace in their

country. References to historical, cultural, political and economic factors signify what shapes women's interpretation of their social world. Women's worldview explains the complexity of meanings assigned to being at and/or absent from the place the violence occurred. The contention is that being at the place where the violence occurred and lived, the effects of the genocide influence one's perspective differently from those who were not present or did not experience the violence. This is a perspective that draws our attention to politics of place and space in post-conflict peace communication discourse. It reveals the essence that the 'place' does define the experience of the present, notably in ways communication in post-conflict setting is shaped. Accordingly, acknowledging the meanings assigned to the place helps us to avoid the temptation to politicize historical experiences and memory.

In discussing the 'place' where the narratives were told, the author's intention is to show the complexity of the context in shaping ways that life is comprehended in the physical space. It also draws attention to the complex ways to look at Rwandan women's experiences without necessarily suggesting that the impact of the genocide and trauma is only present or best comprehended at the physical space. As Jelaca (2009) argues, 'trauma does not necessarily carry the obvious physical markers. It is trans-spatial, transnational and translational and it is not fixed to a single context, interpretation, situation or space' (Jelaca 2009:10). Having noted this argument, however, it is pivotal to make it clear that the scope of this discussion is limited to narratives told by women who were, and still live, at the physical place of the violence of the genocide. Nevertheless, Jelaca's (2009) theorizing of trauma, notably the questions she poses about the where, what and how of trauma, are useful in enriching our understanding of the context in which the Rwandan women's narratives were told. Writes Jelaca:

Is trauma deeply tied to the space of its origin, or does it float around, unbound, uncontrollable? Does it help to leave the space of trauma in order to heal, or does one need to face their demons at the place of the trauma's origin? Can one ever talk about the authentic site of trauma? ... I do not intend to offer answers to any of these questions, as those would inevitably lead to essentialisms of sorts. Who can say for sure what works and what does not when it comes to healing trauma, without making a blunt generalization and denying endless ways in which people cope? (Jelaca 2009:1).

Rwandan Women's Narratives

How then does one make sense of the narratives told? Does one say 'I went, saw, heard and documented' and leave it at that? Or does the person take a step further and ask questions about meanings assigned to what the women say and do about their experiences of the genocide? The intention in this article is not to offer full analysis of the women's narratives shared. The goal is to make them available and to persuade readers that we need to know about them. At the same time, an attempt is made to offer an opportunity for scholars to engage in critical reflection on Rwandan women's experiences, particularly with regard to what we can learn about the following:

- The act of forgiveness
- Reconstruction of forgiveness
- Women's agency in claiming back their own bodies
- The revelation that women can recoup themselves and move forward to reconstruct their country and reconcile communities.

The following paragraphs sample women's narratives that provide the context of the argument in this article.

'We Are the Genocide'

I met Halima and other women who are victims of sexual violence at 'Village of Hope' (VOH) at Gizosi, Kigali in July 2008.¹ My visit to this facility that offers numerous services to survivors of sexual violence was facilitated by Rwandan Women's Network (RWN), a local Rwandan Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). RWN is dedicated to the promotion and improvement of the socioeconomic welfare of women in Rwanda through enhancing their efforts to meet their basic needs.² Halima is a beautiful woman in her late fifties. She is a survivor of sexual abuse that rampaged throughout Rwanda in 1994. She is one of the estimated 250,000 to 500,000 women and girls raped and the astounding 70 per cent of women who were infected with the HIV virus during the genocide.³ During my conversations with her, she sat quietly with her arms folded on her chest. When it was her time to talk she began by asking me: 'Have you visited any of the genocide memorial sites?' I said 'Yes'. 'Have you seen disabled women like me?' She then proceeded to ask me to look at her arms that she had kept folded throughout our conversation. I saw scars on both arms and amputated fingers. Thereafter, she pulled off her headgear to show me another scar on her head. Pointing at her arms and amputated

fingers, she noted the following ‘This is it ... the experience of genocide. It reminds us of the depth of the violence. We are the genocide. Please tell people in Kenya not to do stupid things’⁴

It is not about Male Power

Uma and I were enjoying a drink of Rwandan coffee at a coffee-house located in downtown Kigali. We had not seen each other since 2004 and so it was wonderful to be able to meet again. As we talked about different journeys in our personal and professional lives, we could not help but stop to reflect on what unites us even when our experiences are so different. I cannot exactly recall how we got started on some very emotional discussion about sexual violence. Uma shared how she had found the topic troubling. She explained how some ‘outsider’ scholars were trying to theorize sexual violence from a ‘Western perspective’. I asked her to elaborate on her claim. In response, she recalled an incident where a [foreign] professor told her that violence against African women was inevitable as long as gender inequality continued to render women powerless in Africa.

She lowered her voice and posed a number of questions: ‘How many people know or realize that sexual violence – during the Rwanda genocide – did not happen purely because of gender inequality or male power? How can one explain systematic rape of a given group of women? What about the women who ordered young men to rape Tutsi women? What do you call this? Sexual violence is not male power as may be perceived in the West. During the genocide, sexual violence was not necessarily an act of male power. It was Hutu power which was also extended to women. The women in power distributed condoms to men at roadblocks to rape women’. In fact, this violence inflicted on Rwandan women was an act of genocide.

Anger and Victory in the Bedroom

Solange tells me of her experience with four prisoners who were convicted of sexual assault during the genocide. She is married to a civil servant (government official) and resides in a government house. She describes how she was in her bedroom with the male prisoners as she showed them how she wanted the room painted. She recalls:

I wondered what they were thinking – a woman in a bedroom with them! I was thinking about it all through but did not get afraid. But deep inside me, I felt the anger. I imagined what would have happened if that moment and day was one of the 100 days. As I walked around the room and showed them what I wanted done, I felt so much power around and with me. I knew

they could do nothing to me! I had overcome their 'power' as all women in Rwanda had done. We have said no more violence. There is law in place. It is a good thing.

The Act of Forgiveness

Fatawa

I am HIV positive and yet I am able to do something for my life and others. For example, I am teaching young men about the importance of using condoms. For women who are positive like me, I teach them about good diet. Village of Hope has taught me how to help others. I am a full person. My brother's friends' who I had known for a long time raped me because I was half Tutsi. I was violated but we are all living together. For now, we feel free of our burden of bitterness. We feel free. Only God can punish. We have to forgive those who did bad things to us.

Kazi

We have forgiven those who hurt us because we want to live together peacefully, celebrate our families. Here at Village of Hope, we empower our children to live in harmony. We do this through drama and songs and dance. We are happy when we see our children growing up as Rwandans. We do not want them to grow up in the Rwanda of the past.

Domitila

Many bad things have happened to us. *Gacaca* is a place where we talk and testify about what happened to us. If they say the truth we forgive them.

Each of the women's voices offers pointed argument for the inclusion of often overlooked stories coming directly from the women. These stories are both about the genocide and the post-genocide period. These two experiences offer examples where women engage in activities that spearhead the process of reconciliation and forgiveness.

It is this specific context which we consider when we attempt to extract meaning from the experiences of Rwandan women, in the larger context of theorizing peace communication in post-genocide setting in Rwanda and beyond.

Making Meaning of Women's Experiences of Sexual Violence

Two questions come to mind as the article explores what these narratives mean to the women who narrate them and those who listen and document them.

1. For what purpose do the women tell their ordeals?
2. For what purpose do researchers collect and document these narratives?

We will need to examine the epistemic implications of women's narratives in order to authenticate the argument seeking to centre Rwandan women's experiences as the point of departure for post-conflict peace communication. The narratives reveal knowledge that the women know, which we do not know and need to know.

On the other hand, the experiences of researchers who listen to and document these narratives need to be brought to the forefront of discussions about post-conflict peace communication research. In general, fieldwork experiences discussed below are useful in setting a frame for an epistemological discourse that recognizes the complexity of research among populations that have experienced unbearable trauma. These circumstances enable researchers to clarify their purpose, examine what they bring to the research setting, and how it affects the research process. Also important is how these experiences allow the opportunity to address tensions that arise from different 'truths' about academic/research training, personal knowledge, urgency and activism.

We become better informed about what constitutes post-conflict peace communication research by recognizing diverse experiences and how they are responded to in a research setting traumatized by the genocide.

Fieldwork Experiences

Drawing from the fieldwork experiences, a number of themes emerge that point to ways that the experience of the genocide defines how Rwandan women comprehend their lives. These themes reveal the unique knowledge that the women possess and which needs to be further studied.

Gaining Access and Establishing Rapport with the Women

Summer 2004

Rwandan women have suffered 'interview fatigue'. Asked to elaborate on this concern, Anna responded 'Rwandans are tired of being asked what, why and how questions about the genocide. There are many foreigners coming here to ask us questions. What is the purpose of it? We want to tell our story from our own perspective rather than have outsiders cue us on how to tell our experience' (Mutua-Kombo 2009:317).

Summer 2008

Karekezi expressed the following to my translator:

Are you saying she (referring to me) wants to ask us questions? Does she know what we experienced? Should it be us to tell her what happened?

Our interactions revealed insider knowledge that the women possess which the author does not know or possess and may never know as an outsider to the experience unless a deliberate effort is made. In this regard, it is important to seek knowledge that explains women's responses during the initial stages of the research process in view of two important revelations, namely: (i) women's apprehension in welcoming the author (an outsider) and/ or readily accepting to be interviewed, and (ii) women's critique of researchers and the desire to direct the interview process. From these initial experiences of the research process, a significant question emerges that might offer insights into post-conflict peace communication research: What do women's responses to the research process teach us (researchers) about how we enter their space?

Negotiating Identity and Acceptance

The author's attempts to connect with the women did not go as expected. The author had hoped that her shared regional identity with Rwandan women as East Africans and her national identity as a Kenyan would make her acceptable to the women. The author's notion of acceptance based on both identities differed from how the women identified themselves with others. I was naïve to think that, since I was Kenyan African, the women should be able to easily identify with me and readily accept me as one of them. Through this experience, I was quick to learn that I was an outsider to the world of Rwandan women. For the most part, what I experienced trying to 'fit in' and learned about the women's experiences from their narratives confirmed my 'outsiderness' in this contested space. The distance between the women and me became obviously wide.

In order to reduce the distance, I realized that how Rwandan women comprehended their lives was not the same as I thought. Being a Kenyan or African – like them – was not enough to guarantee immediate acceptance. Clearly at stake was what the women knew about their experience of the genocide. So, the question to consider is what we might need to understand about identity – regional, national or ethnic – that might be useful in guiding post-conflict peace research. This experience also teaches a number of things. For instance, it challenges the Eurocentric notion of a homogeneous 'African' identity and treatment of Africa as one monolithic

culture. At the same time, it emphasizes the fact that local experiences need to be taken into consideration while theorizing and studying about Africa.

(Re)Learning the Place Where the Violence Occured

As earlier discussed, our interactions did not occur in a vacuum. Women's responses to my questions, and more so their interpretation of their world, revealed without doubt that they were communicating in the place where the violence of the genocide occurred. For example, the explanations as to why the women have forgiven those who sexually violated them point to the fact that their lives have to be rebuilt at the same place where they were destroyed. In many cases, this phenomenon was framed in the form of questions, and not necessarily in declarative statements or direct answers to questions asked. For example, the women would respond to a question with a question. Some examples include: 'How can we not forgive them when we all live together?' 'If it was you, what would you do?' These responses re-routed the contours of research, often calling upon the author to remain attentive to nuances of emerging new knowledge. Our conversations about old narratives of women as killers vis-à-vis new narratives of women as peacemakers revealed how this 'place' grounded Rwandan women's perspective of their existence. It was clear that the women did not want to accept a negative representation portraying them as killers. They saw themselves as peacemakers while at the same time acknowledging that not all women were innocent during the genocide. Their words and actions defined how they are transforming and reconstructing the 'place' for peace and reconciliation. The opportunity to probe possibilities for new knowledge lies in paying attention to the emerging new narrative that presents women as peacemakers and heightens their epistemological prospects as creators of knowledge.

Discussion of Lessons Learned

If we are to productively understand Rwandan women's narratives of sexual violence, then we must ask epistemological questions that seek the meaning assigned to what women say and do about their experiences. The questions asked by researchers are to be contextualized in a process that becomes 'a corrective epistemological project to work against hegemonically universalist subject positions available in dominant modes of theorizing' (Lal 1996:113). Posing questions that heighten the epistemic implications of Rwandan women's experiences offer to present them as creators of knowledge. The effort results in knowledge generated from a

location of women's authentic experiences to allow us to know the authenticity of their knowledge. In view of the narratives and researcher's experiences discussed, this essay offers some examples of questions to guide future epistemological projects.

- What do Rwandan women's responses to the experiences of sexual violence mean? In other words, what is the underlying meaning in their words and actions?
- What don't we know about Rwanda women's experiences that might hinder our understanding of what they say and do? For example, what research questions might provoke such statements as 'We have forgiven those who did bad to us'? Do we understand the act of forgiveness as the women do?
- In what ways do Rwandan women as creators of knowledge evoke new ways of scholarship about post-conflict peace communication?
- What methodological and theoretical frameworks are appropriate for this work? Are future epistemological projects likely to contribute to the development of methodologies and theories suitable for studying African communication phenomenon? This question is pivotal, given that research in the late 1980s and early 1990s decried the lack of appropriate methodologies and theories suitable for African communication research (see Bofo & George 1992; M'Bayo & Nwanko 1989; Obeng-Quidoo 1987; Okigbo 1987).

Benefits of Engaging in Future Epistemological Projects

Future epistemological projects become the point of departure for research that offers opportunities where we begin to probe other possibilities that challenge regimes of knowledge (Madison 2005). By so doing, we acknowledge diverse perspectives that have epistemic implications for optimizing indigenous knowledge about post-conflict peace communication in Rwanda. These are the perspectives that women who survived the genocide bring to the table by communicating beyond the pain of their experiences to a new reality, emphasizing peace, reconciliation and forgiveness. This new reality propels researchers to engage in theoretical discourse, seeking to reclaim traditionally marginalized zones of knowledge and to present women as producers of knowledge. The process of centring women as knowing subjects can be mediated through scholarship that is geared at creating theories about communication in post-conflict communities. In the case of Rwanda, new theories created would be grounded in Rwandan women's experiences and context in which they live and serve.

Equally significant is the move towards developing a greater awareness of women's experience in ways that influence and lead to different understanding of communication. Generally, African communication research is modelled on Western communication theories. This is not to say that we do away with these theories but, rather that we find ways to move them around to fit and respond to realities of the African experiences and context. To dare to build theory from this contextual location is to affirm the fact that theories are not necessarily permanent.

African communication research has the potential to move and reshape the grand narrative in ways that advance recognition of indigenous knowledge and sharing of common concerns of the global communication research community. Nyamnjoh's (2009) view of research as dialogic is useful to the understanding of post-conflict situations. This is to say that one need to be aware of the nuances of post-conflict experiences to make meaning of women's words and actions.

A commitment to explore how Rwandan women know and comprehend their lives advances theorizing that offers insightful understanding of a particular/ non-universalized phenomenon that needs to be explained. Examining Rwandan women's expressions, actions and communication styles will reveal deep layers of knowledge of their experiences that need to be unveiled to expand the frontiers of communication research in general. For example, Kinyarwanda language terms *Gahuza miryango* (the one who brings families together, the reconciliator) and *Twese hamwe* (all of us together) are often used by both men and women to explain women's role in peace building. In this context, these are conceptual terms that embody communal cultural values that capture the new meaning of existence in post-genocide Rwanda. It is how this new existence is (re)constructed and performed by Rwandans themselves and represented to the world that requires further investigation.

In conclusion, the future of post-conflict peace communication research bears rich possibilities. This article attempted to provide us with narratives of Rwandan women with the intent that we know about them so that we can act accordingly. Indeed, if African communication researchers commit to explore this under-theorized area of African communication in such places as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, South Africa, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, among others, we will learn more about how communities communicate in post-conflict situations. Moreover, in the case of this essay, we will create greater awareness of Rwandan women as creators of knowledge, transformers and peacemakers, and not solely as victims of the genocide. This call to explore epistemologies of

post-conflict peace challenges the ‘lopsided view of the world that currently characterizes the discipline of communication’ (Miller 2005:226). African communication researchers have articulated this ‘lopsidedness’, and so, we do not need to belabour it but instead openly talk about the way forward. It is now time to respond by thinking and rethinking about our own experiences and contexts to inform authentic research on post-conflict peace communication. How we venture into new frontiers to expand and refine current theoretical standings depends on ways that we choose to engage Africa.

Notes

1. Names of actual women (and one male intermediary) who shared their experiences have been changed to assure confidentiality.
2. <http://www.rwandawomennetwork.org/>
3. See <http://www.herizons.ca/nod/335> – excerpts from *The Men Who Killed Me: Rwandan Survivors of Sexual Violence*, 2009, edited by Anne-Marie de Brouwer and Sandra Ka Hon Chu.
4. The women who were present at the focus group discussion were aware of the violence that had rocked Kenya in January through March 2008, following the disputed general elections results.

References

- Boafo, K. and George, N., eds., 1992, *Communication Research in Africa: Issues and Perspectives*, Nairobi: African Council for Communication Education (ACCE).
- Jelaca, D., 2009, ‘Trauma in Spaces’, A conference paper presented at the International Congress on Qualitative Inquiry, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, May 20-23, 2009.
- Lal, J., 1999, ‘Situating Locations: The Politics of Self, Identity and the Living and Writing the Text’, in Sharlene Hesse-Biber, Christina Gilmartine & Robin Lydenberg, eds., *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (pp. 100-137). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Madison, S., 2005, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics and Performance*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- M’Bayo, R. and Nwanko, R., 1998, ‘The Political Culture of Mass Communication Research and the Role of African Communication Scholars’, *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 72-82.
- Miller, A., 2005, ‘Keeping up with Cartography: A Call to Study African Communication’, in W. J. Starosta and G-M. Chen, eds., *International and Intercultural Communication Annual*, 28 (pp. 214-236). Washington DC: NCA.

- Mutua-Kombo, E., 2009, 'Their Words, Actions and Meaning: A Researcher's Reflection on Rwandan Women's Experiences of Genocide', *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 15 No. 2, 308-323.
- Obeng-Quidoo, I., 1987, 'New Development-oriented Models of Communication Research in Africa: The Case for Focus Group Research in Africa', *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 52-65.
- Okigbo, C., 1987, 'American Communication Research and African Communication Research: Need for a Philosophy of Africa Communication', *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 1 No. 2, 18-31.
- Taylor, D., Nwosu, P. and Mutua-Kombo, E., 2004, 'Communication Studies in Africa: The Case for a Paradigm Shift for the 21st Century', *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 12, (2), pp. 1-24.
- Wasserman, H., 2009, 'Extending the Theoretical Cloth to Make Room for African Experience: An Interview with Francis Nyamnjoh', *Journalism Studies*, 10:2, 281-293.