

Family of Origin: Lessons from Exile

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Abstract: Family of origin is a special cocoon into which each individual is born. It can offer warmth, support and protection, or it can be a source of heartache and pain, if it does not offer the nurturing we often crave. Exile, the forced displacement of individuals and families from their homeland through events not of their own making, can be a life-changing experience during which decisions are made hastily to ensure the survival of the people involved. Families are torn apart because of exile. Family members die alone; some get lost and are separated from the group. The separations create a hole in the heart of the family. The experience leaves scars that are hard to heal, and in turn impacts future decisions for one's career path or the meaningful relationships one can build with family and friends. According to Hutchison (2011), there is no one way to define family. *Family of origin* may mean the nuclear family, comprised of a mother, father and children. It may also mean in addition to the direct parents and their biological children, the uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and in-laws. For the purpose of this paper, the second definition is used to define family of origin.

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My Lived Experiences in My Family of Origin

Early on the morning of July 14, 1994, I was awakened by noise of a different kind. Goats, sheep, and cow sounds; children calling their mothers. At first, I thought I was dreaming, because for the last three months, that time of the day was rather quieter after shootings and beatings of victims of the genocide, which was happening at the time. When the noise persisted, I went to the door of the apartment I was staying in at my parents' house, and then to the gate of my father's compound. I peered into the peephole, and saw on the road a long column of fleeing people with their farm animals and bundles of mattresses and clothes on their heads and backs. I realized then that the war, which had been raging through the country for the last four years, had finally reached Gisenyi, my hometown. I just had time to put a wrap on top of my pajamas and put my baby on my back, before running to alert my mother about what I had just seen. Two hours later, my family of about 20 people joined the column of other fleeing families to the border between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, then known as Zaire). Our first stop during the flight from Gisenyi was at a relative's parents' house. Right away, her family had to find us water and tea to drink. I could imagine their minds turning in circles, wondering how they were going to host this large gathering of relatives-by-marriage for an unforeseeable length of time. I was the first to react to this dilemma. Being familiar with the Center for Disabilities in the DRC, I decided to go there and find out if they would take

in my children and me. My dad had the same idea of relieving this family of the burden of caring for all of us. He took my two mothers, the grandmothers, and my younger siblings to a distant relative of ours. It was both sad and heartwarming at the same time to see my family's industrious side to finding solutions to our plight by putting all their ingenuity and resourcefulness to work.

The bombing started late the next day. Shells were falling on the fugitives –Rwandans fleeing their country, my family among them –as the new Tutsi rebellion army took control of Gisenyi, the last town on the Western border with the DRC. Many refugees died, and children were separated from their parents. I had been hiding under a bed at the Center for Disabilities. Every time a shell fell somewhere close, I shook with fear for the baby I was carrying on my back and for myself, and I did not know where one of my four kids was. In the confusion and haste of fleeing to the center, my second-to-youngest daughter had gotten separated from me. So I frantically ran back and found her. I felt embarrassed that at that particular moment, I was not thinking of the rest of my family. I knew that my two sons had been briefly reunited with my husband sometime in the past month; but because my husband had been forced to flee two months earlier and barely had a place himself to sleep, he could not keep our sons with him. The boys, ages 11 and 12, had been placed with a Tutsi family from Burundi, whereas my husband had taken on a job as trucker's aid. However, at that time, we were more worried about staying alive than being together. The disruption was even a welcome relief as long as we were all still

alive. Radio and television announcements declared that the borders into Rwanda were now closed. Nobody could go in or out. I stood at the other side of the border and turned my eyes to Mount Rubavu, the mountain, which at its foot lay Gisenyi, my hometown. It dawned on me that there were indeed people who had so much power they could decide whether or not I would get to live in my ancestor's home. That realization made me feel very small in the world, and the weight of longing for a home to be together with my family of origin, or knowing whether they would be safe, was overwhelming.

On day three of the exile, I woke up to another tragic sight: piles of refugees' bodies, dead from cholera. Every family I knew, or met then, was impacted by the disease, and mine was no exception. In less than a week, the disruption to my family of origin was inconceivable. We lost an uncle, two cousins, and my cousin's baby. My cousin's wife lost a brother. Refugees were dying like flies; victims of exhaustion, unsafe drinking water, and lack of sanitation. The Congolese were disgusted and could not hide how much they despised us, telling us to take our cholera and our dead back to Rwanda, and that Congo was for the Congolese. Consequently, the refugees (my family included) were asked to leave the city and relocate to a camp the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) was establishing on the outskirts of the city, some ten miles north.

A former colleague of mine suggested I try to find a job because with a bachelor's degree in education, I was the most qualified in my family; but at the moment, the only available jobs were in the medical field or in social work. I then realized my language skills, which had always been an asset, were useless; I could not help my relatives or myself, nor could I get them the help they needed: shelter, food or medical care. Envious of my friends who could access such help, I could feel a heavy blanket of helplessness and despair envelop me. I promised myself two things: to never become a refugee again, no matter what, and to get a degree in a medical or social work field. I needed skills I could use anywhere, any time. I wanted practical skills that would not become obsolete with circumstances.

When one of my younger nephews got really sick at the refugee camp with cholera, my father decided we

should all go back home to Rwanda where we could give proper a burial to our relatives. The nephew's illness was a determinant, because he was one of two children my younger sister had left behind, when she died 5 years before; my father had promised his dying daughter that he would raise them as his own, and that nothing would ever happen to them. We fled our country for fear of dying, and now we were dying anyway, so there was no point staying in the DRC. My sister could not go back with us. Her husband and his brother had decided that we should not trust the new government in place in Rwanda. They preferred to follow other refugees until they were all allowed to come "with dignity." That meant the winning army needed to negotiate with the army that had lost the war. It never happened; and my sister, her husband, and their five children stayed in the refugee camp for two more years before they were forced out by another invasion of the camps by the new Rwandan army. The invasion caused even more death and more disruption of the family fabric.

My Choice of a Practice Setting

Those experiences in my family and country of origin subsequently impacted my choice of a practice setting. For reasons of safety, my children and I sought asylum in the United States, consequently separating from the rest of the family, including my husband. Several years later, I had the opportunity to enter the masters of social work program (MSW) at a prominent U.S. university. At the time, my intentions were to get on a community track to take those skills back to Rwanda, and to work with my people in post-conflict communities. In the MSW program, my concerns were different from those of my classmates. I wanted the language and skills to address poverty and trauma in the context of a third world country, survivors of genocide and war. I told myself that I had done enough work on the ground and knew what the issues were, but I now needed skills that would place me in a position where I could impact the decisions that were made about my community and my people.

The community track I had chosen turned out to be focused on practice within the United States. My field placement at a homeless shelter further convinced me that I was learning skills I was not sure how to transfer into the Rwandan context. I learned that although homeless people are very poor people and often have mental health issues, I did not have the "cultural

language” to work with them. I once shared with a group of American women my reflections about my field placement, and one of them asked, “So are you going to build gathering places in Rwanda?” I smiled and did not respond; but I was thinking that back in Rwanda, each home in my community naturally serves as a gathering place for community members. For one school project, my group had to design an after-school project for school-age children. I remember hearing my group mates suggest to build a playground or a recreation center (rec center, as they called it). For me, they were speaking a foreign language. I had no clue what they were saying or why school children needed a recreation center. This illustrated well for me that even the concept of poverty is socially constructed. I, as a Rwandan, had come from a collectivist community. Unlike in the West, we are still a *Gemeinschaft* community, where individuals identify with the community, and relationships matter so much that if a bill needs paying, it is more about who has the money to pay for it. In contrast, there is the *Gesellschaft* community, where individuals are responsible for themselves and must pay their own bills; if not, they endure the consequences (Hutchison, 2011).

For a society that was recovering from a four years’ war and genocide, the priorities were about addressing basic needs—food, shelter and health care—and the replenishing of livestock. Even during the war, children were safe as long as they could not be connected with adults who were wanted. It is true that we had a rather large number of children who had lost parents to war, genocide or disease. These children needed families to take them in, not recreation centers. The fact that Rwanda is a tropical country means that people, especially children, play outside without worrying about inclement weather. The realization that I needed to switch world views so that I could practice social work in the U.S. made me wonder how much of this new society I still needed to know in addition to the regular concepts we learned in social work classes. Social work is not a value-free profession; we draw from our practice competence by understanding the social-cultural connotations of the settings in which we operate.

At the homeless shelter, we distributed bus tokens and disposable diapers, as well as provided childcare, GED preparation lessons, and card

making. At the time, we opened the facility at 8 a.m. on Monday morning and closed at 5 p.m., five days a week. My first question during a staff meeting was, “where do the women go after we close and on weekends?” It scared me to imagine women and children on the street, even in the winter. I thought that if Americans can be homeless in their country, what would happen to outsiders, such as me and my children, should the need arise? I learned about other concepts too. I found out about child protective services and the notion of a foster care system, that took in children whose parents could not take care of them. I learned about food stamps, government-subsidized housing, and school social workers. There are a plethora of social services designed to address the issues facing American disadvantaged groups, but I needed to know them, understand them, and be able to connect the clients with those systems of service. I felt I was a complete misfit to serve the American poor, and I would be more useful serving continental African poor, whose context I understood better.

For four years, I saw my country invaded and my people displaced, and turned from thriving, self-sufficient communities into beggars. I saw the war culminate into genocide while the world watched. A United Nations (UN) battalion stationed near my house systemically refused to help my young children, who were fleeing the massacre, cross into safety, when the border was only two miles away. And yet, my neighbor, who did not even have a gun, risked his life by hiding my husband, knowing that he was putting his own family at risk, by protecting a man who was wanted because he was a Tutsi. I was in complete disbelief that UN soldiers were told not to intervene because they were there to keep peace, not to make peace. I thought it was nonsense. Then and there, I wanted skills that would allow me to stand, or sit at that UN gathering, which could make life-and-death decisions for my family, my people, and my community.

Impact on My Client Population

In the second year of my MSW program, I decided to work with refugees and asylum-seekers. I realized that I was never going back to practice in Rwanda because it was not safe; thus, I turned to refugee and asylum-seekers who, like me and my family, had lost their home country, and were most likely as confused about the American system as I was. My husband died the

night I graduated with my MSW, and the children and I were not able to go back for the funeral. I felt very guilty for abandoning him in his time of need. Later, I could empathize with many of the respondents interviewed for my dissertation research study, who felt the same guilt when they could not go back for funerals of loved ones, who died after the respondents had resettled in the United States. At the same time, I understood that the international community stood by while my people were being massacred, and I wanted skills and a special voice to take advocacy and policy making to those high places.

Impact on My Theoretical Perspective (Social Constructivism)

After completing my MSW, I was strongly encouraged to pursue my Ph.D. The formulation of my research question for my dissertation was informed by my own experience in my family and country of origin, and subsequently in my MSW training. The refugees I worked with could not come right out and ask for their rights, but would tell me in private of their needs and challenges. Earlier, during discussion about research topics and formulation of research questions, I listened to my classmates' topics and questions, and could not understand why mine were different than theirs. One of my classmates was researching female sexual offenders; another was interested in transgender issues. I wanted to talk about refugee issues and refugee-producing conditions. I wondered if I were not sophisticated enough in my thinking. It was by researching Gergen's (2001) social constructivism theory that I felt vindicated. One of the premises of social constructivism is the assumption of multiple realities, the acknowledgment that reality is co-created by people who share experience, and that language is the conduit through which communities make meaning of their shared experience. The fact that my classmates had different research interests did not negate the validity of my own interest in the lived experience of my participants. The topic lent itself more to political science than to social work. I once attended a workshop for doctoral students entering the dissertation phase and was reminded that as a social worker, I should be thinking more in terms of practice. My question at that time was, "What does it mean for refugee women from the Great Lakes Region of Africa to be recipients of

refugee services during the first four months of their resettlement in the United States?" I was interested in the lived experiences of my participants. Those experiences seemed to intersect with my own, and it took my advisor, who specialized in qualitative research, to make me realize that all my preconceived information belonged in a phenomenological "epoche" or bracketing, which is putting aside everything you know or think about the topic, before entering the field for your research (Creswell, 1998).

It was thanks to my understanding of social constructivism that I was able to advocate for a client, a mother of nine, who did not understand why her case manager required her to separate from her older children so she could continue to receive services. The client complained to me, saying, "I lived with all my children in small tents in refugee camps, and we were fine. How can [social services] say that the house is too small for all of us to live together?" This example is one indication of the fact that practitioners who are proponents of Erickson's developmental stages may believe that a child over the age of 18 is an adult, and should be encouraged to live on his or her own, or else the child would be exhibiting issues of confused identity; whereas in collectivist societies, it is perfectly acceptable for a young person over the age of 18 to continue to live with parents until the young person gets married or moves away because of work. It proves that there is not just one way that the world is; there are multiple ways, and they are all valid.

Impact on My Role in Advocacy: Refugee Congress Advisory Board

My lived experiences in my family of origin directly impacted my desire to incorporate an advocacy role into my later career as a social worker and educator. Although in the United States, I have given many presentations and lectures on my experiences and their impact, more formally, my advocacy has taken the form of work with the Refugee Congress and subsequently, the Refugee Congress Advisory Board. The focus of this organization is to bring together the voices of refugees to speak for them and about refugees. The Refugee Congress was the brain child of the UNHCR in its American regional representation. It was created at the time of the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Geneva Convention that created the UNHCR in 1951. In August 2011, refugees were called to be an active partner in programs and

policies that were designed for them locally, nationally, and internationally. In the three years of existence of the Refugee Congress, members, including myself, have met with state representatives in Washington D.C., and in our home states. We have created committees that advocate for family reunifications; refugees with special needs, such as the elderly, minors, and the gay, lesbian, and transgender refugees; and more importantly, the asylum seekers who are incarcerated in different places in the country. I have taken on the task of collecting stories of survival, with implications for successful integration and family dynamics. This is an ongoing project that I intend to complete as time allows.

The experiences of my family of origin have been the mirror through which I approach my teaching, and my practice of social work. Most recently, at the American university where I teach, I have introduced a new course, "Social Work with Immigrants and Refugees," which has been well

received on other campuses. It was offered at my school this past summer, and hopefully, will continue to be offered in future semesters.

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