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# LIBERIANS' EXPERIENCES AND RESILIENCE

## Victims to Survivors: Liberians' Experiences and Resilience during the Liberian Civil War

MSW Clinical Research Paper  
Submitted by Melissa A. Petersen  
May, 2012

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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# LIBERIANS' EXPERIENCES AND RESILIENCE

## **Abstract**

Warfare is an ever-present phenomenon that impacts people all over the world. Many of those who live in a war-torn country encounter horrific experiences that cause trauma, loss, and grief. The Liberian people are an example of those who have experienced the tragedies of war in their country. The Liberian Civil War caused many individuals to flee, becoming displaced and seeking safety in other countries or refugee camps. This research study interviewed eight Liberian refugees who were children or adolescents during the war in order to explore their experiences and resilience. The participants in this study experienced horrific violence, separation, long travels, harsh conditions, and tremendous loss. The participants were resilient by relying on their faith in God, family, determination, adaptability, and hope. The resilience the Liberian refugees embodied allowed them to become survivors of war. The findings of this research are significant and an important addition to the literature on warfare, refugees, trauma, loss, resiliency, macro-level social work, and cross-cultural social work.

**Acknowledgment**

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Victims to Survivors: Liberians' Experiences and Resilience during the Liberian Civil War

**Introduction**

**Refugee Survivors of War**

Warfare is an ever-present phenomenon that impacts people all over the world. War causes loss in all areas of life, which often impacts how a person sees and experiences the world (Oakes, 2003). Individuals who become victims of war often experience trauma, loss, and grief throughout the war and during displacement (Schmitz, Vazquez, Stakeman, Valenzuela, & Sprankel, 2003). There are millions of refugees that are displaced from their homes due to war and persecution in their countries (Schmitz et al., 2003). Refugees are considered “acute refugees” when they have not planned to leave their country and a dangerous situation, such as war, causes them to leave suddenly (Dow, 2011). Acute refugees are pushed out of their homes, communities, and countries by war and oppression and do not have time to take possessions or make sure their family is intact for the long, dangerous journey ahead (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). Refugees who flee from war often experience or witness torture, separation, violence, rape, and mutilation (Stepakoff, 2007). Refugees who reach refugee camps are often times forced to live in harsh conditions and receive minimal assistance to meet basic needs. Many refugees end up living in camps for years without receiving the necessary treatments and interventions to overcome the trauma, loss, and grief experienced during the war (Hardgrove, 2009).

The Liberian Civil War is an example of a long-standing war that displaced Liberians for several years. The Liberian Civil War is known for being an extremely violent war that caused massive destruction including execution, rape, abduction, hacking

off of limbs, sacrifices of pregnant women, torture, and eating human parts (Stepakoff, 2007). The war started in 1989 and was consistently violent through 1996. During this time period, hundreds of thousands fled to neighboring Guinea where refugee camps existed (Stepakoff et al., 2006). Rebel groups attempting to unseat the new government caused violence to erupt again in 2002, when over 50,000 Liberians and Sierra Leoneans fled to surrounding countries to escape the violence (Stepakoff et al., 2006; Moran, 2006).

A limited amount of research has been conducted on Liberians' experiences in refugee camps during and after the Liberian Civil War. A few studies focusing on trauma as well as religiosity and spirituality have been conducted that examine the experiences of Liberian women (Dovlo & Sondah, 2001; Hardgrove, 2009; Isis-Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange [Isis-WICCE], 2008; Kreitzer, 2002). More common are written accounts on the history and political aspects of the war (Ellis, 2007; Isis-WICCE, 2008; Moran, 2006; Williams, 2002). Research on the Liberian Civil War is lacking a focus on the impact of loss and bereavement on Liberian refugees. There is also a lack of qualitative data from individuals who were children and teens during the Liberian Civil War. Research could also benefit by gaining qualitative data from the standpoint of both genders.

The concept of trauma does not seem to apply as much to the general refugee experience as the concepts of loss and grief. Limited research has been conducted on the effects of loss and grief on refugees, specifically in the Liberian community. A larger population of refugees may be impacted by issues of loss and grief rather than of trauma. Previous research discusses the impact of trauma on the lives of refugees who are victims

of war (Boucher, 2009; Goodman, 2004; Heptinstall, Sethna, & Taylor, 2004; Stepakoff et al., 2006). However, refugees should be considered survivors of war, not victims, because they have survived extreme hardships and used various strengths and resources to overcome harsh conditions (Pipher, 2005). More recently, research has been conducted on the resilience to overcome trauma experienced by war (Berger & Weiss, 2002; Bonanno, 2004; Boss, 2006; Boucher, 2009; Farley, 2007; Harvey, 2007; Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello, & Koenig, 2007).

In order to better understand the refugee experience and how to better serve refugees, it is important for social workers to use assessment topics, such as grief and loss, which apply cross-culturally. By doing so, our services and interventions will be relevant to the populations served. However, several barriers must be overcome in order for refugees to receive appropriate and beneficial care that is in alignment with their worldview. It is the role and responsibility of social workers to educate themselves on how to overcome these barriers (Dow, 2011). Overcoming barriers and increasing international social work efforts will allow refugees better access to appropriate services so that their basic needs can be met and resiliency can be increased.

This study will explore the experiences of Liberian refugees who were children and teens during the time of the Liberian Civil War. The following research questions are examined in this project: 1) What types of trauma were experienced by Liberian refugees during the war? 2) What feelings of loss and grief do Liberian refugees experience from the war? 3) Do Liberians experience more trauma or more grief and loss from the war? 4) What resiliency and coping factors helped Liberians overcome the effects of the war? This qualitative research project will explore and bring meaning to the impact of trauma,

loss, and grief among Liberian refugees and their resiliencies to overcome the effects of the war. This research will also help clinicians identify and create culturally relevant ways to aide refugees in their resiliency efforts.

### **Literature Review**

This section will review the current literature on the Liberian Civil War as well as Liberian refugees and other refugee populations who have experienced war. Research about war discusses the impact of traumatic experiences on individuals who are victims of war. Limited research discusses the effects of war on feelings of grief and loss. Research also discusses resiliency and coping factors that are used to help individuals overcome the trauma, loss, and grief experienced by war. Strategies for appropriate interventions are also discussed in the literature, especially in regards to working with refugee populations. This literature review will compare and contrast what researchers have hypothesized, studied, and found on these topics.

### **Liberian Civil War**

Liberia is a country on the west coast of Africa that was founded by freed American slaves in 1822 and became independent in 1847 (Isis-WICCE, 2008; Williams, 2002). The capital, Monrovia, is named after James Monroe who was the United States president at that time (Williams, 2002). Liberia is also home to over sixteen indigenous tribes (Moran, 2006). Research by Dovlo and Sondah (2001), Moran (2006), and Williams (2002) explain how violence stems from the tension between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians due to the religious and political differences. Opposition groups were not happy with the current Liberian government under the leadership of Samuel Doe because it had a bad representation due to corruption and

human rights violations (Williams, 2002). Charles Taylor was selected to lead an opposition group against the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). He recruited Liberians and individuals from neighboring counties, secretly trained them, and created a rebel group called the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). The NPFL consisted of individuals from a variety of backgrounds that came together in an attempt to unseat Samuel Doe (Ellis, 2007). The opposition group eventually split due to disagreement; therefore, the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) was created (Williams, 2002).

On December 24, 1989, Liberia was invaded by the NPFL, taking citizens by surprise (Ellis, 2007; Isis-WICCE, 2008). At that point, the NPFL, INPFL, and the current government all broke out into Civil War. Hundreds of thousands of Liberians began to flee in order to seek refuge from the escalating violence between 1989 and 1996 when Charles Taylor's army fought and overtook the government, as well as in 2002 when Charles Taylor's government was taken over (Stepakoff et al., 2006). Schmitz, Vazquez, Stakeman, Valenzuela, and Sprankel (2003) explain how refugees escaping war search for safety in other countries; they are forced to leave their home to survive the violence and persecution. Research by Isis-Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE, 2008) and Moran (2006) explains how violence increased in 2001 and 2002 when the rebel group, Movement for Democracy and Elections in Liberia (MODEL), captured Taylor's attention in order for the rebel group, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), to attack Monrovia and unseat Charles Taylor.

The extremely violent war in Liberia ended up terrorizing entire villages and towns. Moran (2006) explains how all state institutions were closed; therefore, there was no work or school and there was a lack of resources. Looting and killing of civilians

frequently occurred instead of focusing the fighting on opposing army soldiers (Ellis, 2007; Moran, 2006; Williams, 2002). Children were recruited to fight alongside the rebel forces and participated in rituals, often staged by the leaders, to show they were spiritually protected from bullets. They were given guns and chemicals such as alcohol or marijuana to assist them in slaughtering opposing forces and suspicious civilians (Ellis, 2007). Moran (2006) explains how 10 to 40% of the rebel groups consisted of young male and some female recruits. Harvey (2007) supports this claim by expressing how more and more children become soldiers and are forced to kill and recruit others. Ellis (2007) describes how the reasons for fighting changed throughout the war to also include protecting oneself, fighting between groups and tribes based on old arguments, random acts of violence, and revenge. Moran (2006) states that over 200,000 Liberians were killed, 600,000 were in refuge, and 800,000 were displaced between 1989 and 1997 due to the war. During displacement and refuge, many were separated from their family and faced starvation (Bryant & Ahearn, 1999; Williams, 2002). Liberians witnessed and experienced execution, rape, enslavement, piles of dead bodies, and torture until the war came to an end in 2003 (Moran, 2006; Stepakoff, 2007). Liberians' exposure to war caused them to experience a variety of traumatic and tragic events.

### **Liberian Refugees' Experiences**

**Trauma.** Victims of war and oppression experience trauma (Ridley, 2005). Bracken, Giller, and Summerfield (1995) explain how it is critical to acknowledge this trauma within a societal context. Liberians experienced involuntary migration due to the violent war that invaded their homes. The experience of exile creates significant stress for refugees (Dow, 2011; Miller et al., 2002). Being forced out of one's home is an

extremely traumatic event that causes disorder because people are separated, things are left behind, and the future is unknown (Berger & Weiss, 2002; Bryant & Ahearn, 1999). Kreitzer (2002) explains how trauma impacts every area of one's life. Farley (2007) describes trauma as an experience that interferes with one's ability to cope, have control, and find meaning. Tan (2006), who studied Cambodian refugees, supports this by explaining how the external chaos of war also causes internal chaos to occur. Berger & Weiss (2002) believe trauma causes emotional pain and changes one's beliefs and views about everything. Traumatic events often occur without warning; therefore, it becomes very disabling for individuals and difficult to overcome (Boss, 2006; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). Hunt (2010) points out that people cope with trauma in different ways. Trauma, such as witnessing violence or murder, causes stress due to the threat to one's life or safety (Bryant & Ahearn, 1999). Boss (2006) describes trauma as an extreme, unplanned stressor that one cannot overcome. According to Dow (2011), the experience of migration creates stressful crises to occur. Since the stresses that many refugees experience are so traumatic, they can be referred to as critical incidents. Boss (2006) characterizes critical incident stress as something experienced by victims of war. It consists of cognitive, physical, emotional, and behavioral signs that occur from a crisis that overwhelms the usual effective coping mechanisms of individuals; it disrupts homeostasis. Some of the critical incidents experienced by refugees are physical harm, deprivation, loss, barriers, and alienation (Boucher, 2009).

Trauma can impact people in a variety of ways due to their relationship to the traumatic event. One can witness trauma, know someone experiencing trauma, or experience it themselves (Farley, 2007). According to Lacroix and Sabbah (2011), trauma

experienced during a cultural war effects the whole community because society breaks down and is no longer safe. Those experiencing war often witness death, destruction, torture, and sexual violence (Miller et al., 2002; Veer, 1998). This is similar to a story Pipher (2002) describes about a Kurdish family who was in danger because the father had opposed Saddam Hussein. Pipher (2002) states that many refugees are tortured, killed, arrested, and raped. Goodman (2004) studied refugees from Sudan and found their experiences to include violence and death as well as hunger, thirst, danger, and disease. Ingleby (2005) explains how refugees experience betrayal and are often forced to make choices that result negatively. Lacroix and Sabbah (2011) explain how betrayal occurs within neighborhoods and amongst civilians, which destroys the societal structure. Harvey (2007), Isis-WICCE (2008), and Kreitzer (2002) conducted research showing the prevalence of women who were attacked and became victims of sexual abuse and abduction by guards, soldiers, and refugees. Pipher (2002) explains the story of Iraqi men who suffered during the Gulf War and were treated like animals without dignity. Perhaps some refugees experience more trauma than others, such as the male or child soldiers, because they are in the middle of the violent combat and play an active role in the traumatic events (Harvey, 2007).

Refugees continue to experience trauma while living in refugee camps because of the hardships and scarcity (Pipher, 2002). Hardgrove (2009) found that Liberians were not easily welcomed into Ghanaian society when they lived in the refugee camp. Refugees experience hunger, thirst, minimal medical supply, vulnerable shelters, limited employment or income, lack of control over life, destroyed social supports, and corruption (Bryant & Ahearn, 1999; Kreitzer, 2002; Stepakoff et al., 2006). Hardgrove

(2009) also identifies these stressors and explains how expensive camp life was, especially education and basic needs such as water. Hardgrove (2009) found that education was important to refugees because they saw it as their opportunity to get out of camp and rebuild their lives. Individuals did not always feel safe in refugee camps, which added to the trauma (Hardgrove, 2009). Dovlo and Sondah (2001) explain how fighting occurred frequently over the limited resources that were available in camp. According to Hardgrove (2009), people had to go to the bathroom in bushes, but were often afraid of getting raped. Pipher (2002) states that many refugees experience rape inside the camp. These multiple traumas interfere with one's ability to think rationally about how to cope. The ambiguity of the traumatic and stressful refugee experience leaves individuals feeling vulnerable and uncertain (Boss, 2006). Many families did not feel safe to leave the refugee camps and return to Liberia because of the possibility of running into enemies (Hardgrove, 2009). Ingleby (2005) describes how child soldiers also feared to return to Liberia after the war because they did not trust people and were worried about repercussions for their past actions. Liberian refugees had different relationships to the events that occurred during the war and displacement and therefore experienced various forms of trauma.

According to Ingleby (2005), stressful situations can impact individuals, families, and communities; the more people impacted by the stress, the more dysfunction occurs throughout the system. Harvey (2007) used an ecological perspective to explain how there are individual differences in reactions to traumatic events. Boss (2006) explains that the amount and type of reaction to the event depends on feelings of helplessness and confusion that impact one's ability to cope. Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello, and Koenig

(2007) support this by saying resilience is negatively impacted when one feels pity, alone, victimized, and not appreciated. Therefore, individual traits regarding the way people cope with the stress determines if they will be traumatized from the event (Peres et al., 2007). Research has shown that separation from family and loved ones is a traumatic stressor that interferes with one's ability to be resilient (Boss, 2006; Bryant & Ahearn, 1999; Heptinstall et al., 2004). Lacroix and Sabbath (2011) support this by expressing how important family support is during traumatic experiences. Hardgrove (2009) found Liberian women were more hopeful when they had support than those who were single caregivers. A lack of social support and feeling isolated can make people more prone to develop symptoms of trauma (Miller et al., 2002). War impacts individuals, families, and communities, but everyone is affected differently depending on their personality traits, ability to cope, and social support.

Individual differences impact how people cope with the effects of war; therefore, not everyone becomes traumatized from the experiences. Trauma is often associated with PTSD, which is a diagnosis from western society and may not apply to other cultures (Ingleby, 2005). Bracken et al. (1995) believe that the difference across cultures is often discounted by clinicians. However, Fernando (2010) believes refugees are still frequently being diagnosed with PTSD. Potocky-Tripodi (2002) explains how this problem can occur in cross-cultural practice. Heptinstall et al. (2004) state that war trauma is linked to diagnoses such as PTSD and depression and is associated with mental health issues later on in life. However, Peres et al. (2007) explain how many individuals do not meet the criteria for PTSD even if they have undergone a traumatic event such as war. Potocky-Tripodi (2002) also argues that even though immigrants and refugees have an increased

likelihood of developing psychopathology, the majority do not. Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) support this by explaining how most individuals who experience traumatic events do not develop psychopathology. Bracken et al. (1995) conducted research in Uganda and found that individuals may have symptoms of PTSD, but they do not increase suffering or inhibit survival. Potocky-Tripodi (2002) discusses how individuals may have symptoms that are better associated with their culture. Ingleby (2005) believes that the majority of war victims' ability to function in life is not negatively impacted by war. Harvey (2007) also agrees that many war survivors do not have PTSD, and that many actually show signs of resiliency. Individuals in Uganda found the somatic effects of war to be more difficult to cope with (Bracken, Giller, & Summerfield, 1995).

Pipher (2002) states that about 40% of refugees experience torture. A study by Isis-WICCE (2008) found that torture acts were completed by 12 different armed groups during the Liberian Civil War. The study explains how torture can include sexual, physical, and psychological means (Isis-WICCE, 2008). Those who experienced torture during war are at a 50% risk for developing PTSD (Peres et al., 2007). Miller et al. (2002) support this claim by stating that the amount of violence experienced in war determines the amount of PTSD criteria experienced. Therefore, individuals who witness violent acts such as murder or rape, or lose family members, are more likely to experience PTSD (Heptinstall et al., 2004; Isis-WICCE, 2008; Miller et al., 2002; Schmitz et al., 2003). Heptinstall, Sethna, and Taylor (2004) support this by saying children have been properly diagnosed with PTSD after the war and received appropriate services. Dow (2011) believes forced migration causes a weakening in supports that could lead to mental health problems. Lacroix and Sabbath (2011) believe that refugees

in camps have a higher chance of developing PTSD. War trauma, commonly experienced by fighting soldiers, may be associated more with PTSD symptoms whereas displacement may be associated more with feelings of loss and grief (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Miller et al., 2002).

As clinicians, we must also be cautious about the approach used to assess trauma in refugees because the diagnosis of PTSD is a Western-culture label in mental health services that does not always apply cross-culturally or to every individual who experiences war (Bracken et al., 1995). The symptoms of PTSD may be witnessed in refugees across the world, but it does not mean that the symptoms have the same meaning in other cultures (Ingleby, 2005). Hunt (2010) supports this by explaining how the symptoms may be present, but the construct is different. Bracken et al. (1995) and Ridley (2005) argue that the medical model causes clinicians to over diagnose and not take into consideration the impact of societal factors. Assuming similar meanings across cultures could lead to potential errors with serious implications (Bracken et al., 1995; Ingleby, 2005). Therefore, clinicians must be cautious on how they diagnose and treat trauma and PTSD so that culturally inappropriate methods are not used (Bracken et al., 1995; Fernando, 2010; Ingleby, 2005).

**Loss.** It is important to assess for trauma, but clinicians must also assess for issues of loss and grief. Trauma is often an initial response to an extreme event, whereas feelings of loss and grief are present long after the event has occurred, and may never go away (Boss, 2006). Loss and grief are longstanding problems that could impact a larger percentage of refugees who experience war. Loss occurs in all cultures and grief has the same meaning cross-culturally (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Therefore, it is possible that

the large majority of civilians impacted by war experience more loss and grief issues due to displacement. Non-fighting men, women, and children experience the difficulties of war when their homes are invaded and they are forced out, having to leave behind everything and not knowing what the future will bring (Harvey, 2007). The experience of being forced to flee and displaced from one's home causes several losses to occur simultaneously.

Bryant and Ahearn (1999) and Veer (1998) describe how loss is central to the refugee experience. A study by Isis-WICCE (2008) shows that loss was extremely prevalent amongst Liberian refugees. Fernando (2010), Oakes (2002), and Pipher (2002) support this claim by explaining how refugees experience loss in every part of their lives, which causes their lives to forever change. Liberian refugees experienced a variety of losses from the war (Stepakoff et al., 2006). Research by Stepakoff et al. (2006) on Liberians and Sierra Leoneans found that most refugees lost relatives or their entire families, while others had relatives who were missing. Loved ones were tortured, which was meant to be traumatizing for the survivors (Stepakoff et al., 2006). According to Boucher (2009), refugees can experience the following losses: cultural history, support, respect, self-esteem, confidence, self-care, identity, power, intimacy, children, communication, trust, safety, happiness, hope, health, and community. Berger & Weiss (2002) also believe that identity is challenged because of separation and loss. Hooyman and Kramer (2006) and Ingleby (2005) discuss how difficult it is for refugees and immigrants to cope with the loss of homeland, belongings, family, status, identity, traditions, language, and self all at the same time. These various losses impact one's ability to feel empowered and find meaning (Ingleby, 2005).

Refugees could be at risk for complicated mourning, which exceeds the norm, because their losses are from extreme trauma and violence (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). The violence refugees experienced often occurred from people they knew. This may have caused a lot of ambiguity for Liberians about their relationships with people. Oakes (2002) studied Bosnian refugees and found that many were betrayed by their friends who joined the side of the enemies due to various circumstances. Therefore, it was difficult to know who to trust and relationship boundaries became blurred between family, friends, and communities. This ambiguity added to the intensity of the trauma and violence. Liberians were constantly surrounded by trauma and random violence during the war. According to Stepakoff et al. (2006), the heightened, ceaseless violence caused Liberians their loss of happiness and pleasure.

Fernando (2010) and Oakes (2002) explain how primary attachments in life, such as culture, friends, home, and belongings, are difficult to give up. Bryant and Ahearn (1999) support this finding by explaining how loss of support and identity can contribute to cultural bereavement. Berger and Weiss (2002) and Lacroix and Sabbah (2011) explain how the intensity and amount of losses that occur during the refugee experience are so stressful that they often change the individual. These losses continued to be present while living in refugee camps. Refugees felt alone and judged while living in refugee camps (Stepakoff et al., 2006). Refugees in camps experienced physical remoteness, loss of transportation, loss of communication to the outside world, food and water shortage, loss of safety and adequate housing (Bryant & Ahearn, 1999; Stepakoff et al., 2006). Boss (2006) and Ingleby (2005) explain how forced migration impacts one's identity. Bryant and Ahearn (1999) explain how losing a home causes the loss of comfort and

protection, while losing family causes the loss of a supportive community. Hardgrove (2009) studied Liberian refugees living in a Ghanaian camp and found that families were greatly altered as a result of the war. Falicov (2007) and Ingleby (2005) agree that social support is lost during exile; therefore, it is crucial to reconstruct social networks.

Feelings of loss remained present for Liberians, even while in refugee camps, due to the circumstances and the ambiguity of the losses they experienced. Experiencing sudden migration, transitions, and traumatic events causes ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006). One type of ambiguous loss occurs when a family member is missing, but they are continually thought about (Boss, 2006; Veer, 1998). Research on Bosnian refugees shows that many did not know if their loved ones were dead or alive while they were fleeing from the war torn areas (Oakes, 2002). Boss (2006) explains how it is difficult to overcome loss in these situations since there are often no remains to bury because they are lost in the massive terror. According to Boss (2006), ambiguous loss that is out of one's control generally becomes traumatizing and disabling for the individual. Falicov (2007) compares ambiguous loss with what he calls migration loss. According to Falicov (2007) and Dow (2011), the migration experience causes relational difficulties due to the separation that occurs in families. Refugee's lives may never be the same due to the tremendous amount of losses they have experienced (Dow, 2011; Oakes, 2002). Miller et al. (2002) believe that the losses experienced during migration and displacement may cause feelings of depression. Bosnian refugees explained how different life was in the refugee camp than back home because life felt lonely and purposeless (Miller et al., 2002). Hardgrove (2009) had similar findings with Liberian refugees in Ghana. Many Liberian refugee women discussed how they were once able to care for their family and

provide, but are no longer able to do so. Berger and Weiss (2002) discuss a similar concept of culture loss due to all the changes that occur. However, Falicov (2007) believes people's ability to cope with loss will be better if they continue to follow their cultural traditions.

**Grief.** When an individual loses something or someone of importance, he or she may experience a physical, psychological, or social reaction (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Therefore, grief can affect the whole being in a variety of ways. Refugees experience a lot of mourning and grieving due to the various losses they have experienced (Bryant & Ahearn, 1999; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Potocky-Tripodi, 2002; Veer, 1998). Ridley (2005) argues that victims often feel angry, ashamed, embarrassed, and vulnerable. Research has developed five stages of grieving or mourning which include: denial, rage and anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Bryant & Ahearn, 1999). Research has also identified another model for the process of mourning which is called the "R Process Model." The "R Process Model" includes the following stages: recognizing and accepting the reality of loss; reacting to, experiencing, and expressing the pain of separation; reminiscing; relinquishing old attachments; readjusting; reinvesting (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). However, clinicians must be conscious of what is considered appropriate ways to grieve in different cultures (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Liberians may go through these stages of grieving after experiencing a variety of losses. It is important to realize that all individuals grieve differently and may experience these stages at different times. There are several factors that affect grieving such as one's background, personality, society, supports, and culture (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). According to Hooyman and Kramer (2006), grief can express itself in a variety of ways.

The process of grieving and mourning is not always a linear process (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). When the loss is great, there may continue to be an underlying sense of grieving and mourning in the individual.

Many Liberians grieve due to a sense of guilt and shame from the war that is difficult to overcome. According to Boss (2006), the soldiers torture people for the mere purpose that they experience guilt and shame and feel less than human. Witnessing or experiencing rape from soldiers, or being forced by soldiers to rape family members also caused excruciating guilt and shame (Boss, 2006). Some Liberian refugees also blame themselves for some of the losses that occurred and feel a sense of guilt for not being able to stop the violence and torture (Dovlo & Sondah, 2001; Kreitzer, 2002). Kreitzer (2002) interviewed a woman who held herself responsible for her family being murdered by rebels since she was pregnant and could not get to her family to help them escape. Hardgrove (2009) also found caregivers were grieving while in the refugee camps due to the difficulty of finding adequate resources for their family. In order to lessen the grief experienced from this, it is important to identify what happened as an external event that was large, violent, and beyond one's ability to control (Boss, 2006). This may help decrease the self-blame and guilt that many Liberians feel. Many individuals are able to reconstruct their views and identities after all of the trauma and cultural loss (Boss, 2006). While struggling with trauma, loss, and grief, Liberians had to find ways to cope and overcome their struggles in order to survive the war.

### **Resiliency and Coping Factors**

Even though the circumstances that refugees are in cannot be changed, resiliency can still be formed (Ingleby, 2005). Oakes (2002) found that even in the midst of

traumatic and violent war, Bosnian refugees were often able to rise above the feelings of loss and grief in resilient ways in order to move on and create new life conditions.

Goodman (2004) researched refugees from Sudan who viewed themselves as survivors, not as victims. Resilient individuals are minimally affected by an extreme experience, while some individuals even flourish after experiencing trauma (Harvey, 2007).

Therefore, not all refugees want or need help in coping with their experiences (Veer, 1998). Coping behaviors help people overcome the effects of stress by altering the conditions, redefining the meaning, or managing the outcomes (Bryant & Ahearn, 1999).

Potocky-Tripodi (2002) explains how coping behaviors can also help defend against mental illness. There are a variety of factors that influence one's ability to successfully cope (Harvey et al., 2003). Personality, environment, and external support all impact coping success, which leads to resiliency (Bryant & Ahearn, 1999; Harvey, 2007).

Therefore, resilience is not the same in every individual and it may occur more easily for some than others (Farley, 2007; Peres et al., 2007; Veer, 1998). Research by Harvey et al. (2003) found eight areas that account for differences in people's ability to overcome trauma. The eight areas include: "authority over memory, integration of memory and affect, affect tolerance and regulation, symptom mastery, self-esteem, self-cohesion, safe-attachment, and meaning making" (p. 90-91). The less each area is affected, the more likely one is to be resilient (Harvey et al., 2003). Research by Veer (1998) identifies similar individual protective factors. According to Bonanno (2004), the pathways of resilience to loss and trauma are hardiness, self-enhancement, repressive coping, and positive emotion and laughter. Strong individuals are not threatened and therefore are often confident and active; they also utilize social support to deal with the distress

(Bonanno, 2004). According to Hooyman & Kramer (2006), resilience occurs when people use various traits to overcome negative situations and continue to flourish in life. Wilcke (2007) explains how people who refuse to let external things control their life are often resilient. Physical and mental health, along with comfort with ambiguity, all impacts one's ability to be resilient (Boss, 2006). Harvey (2007) and Goodman (2004) found that resiliency in non-western cultures may be aided by social support and feelings of responsibility and interdependence.

Resiliency allows individuals to rise above the traumatic and ambiguous losses so that they may maintain functioning (Boss, 2006; Bonanno, 2004). Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998) and Goodman (2004) explain how refugees do not have time to focus on the losses because they must continue on for their own survival. Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998) discuss the physical and mental toll that war takes on refugees, and how their ability to survive is based greatly on instinct to continue on. Farley (2007) found that resilient individuals overcome extreme situations, adapt, and continue to grow in a variety of ways. It is important to realize that resilient individuals still experience loss and grief, but their experiences do not debilitate them to the point that impedes functioning throughout life (Bonanno, 2004). Research by Fernando (2010), Harvey et al. (2003), and Harvey (2007) supports this claim by explaining how resiliency and mental health symptoms can occur together. Bonanno (2004) believes that resiliency is more common than theorists first believed due to the lack of chronic symptoms present and evidence of healthy functioning in individuals. Fernando (2010) also discusses how theories on resiliency challenge the initial belief that trauma greatly impacts individuals. According to Bonanno (2004), there are a variety of ways to be resilient and overcome

negative events. Coping with the trauma of war and dislocation requires more than active or passive coping strategies; it also requires belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication processes (Boss, 2006). Goodman (2004) believes coping can occur by ignoring the situation as well as finding community support, meaning, and hope. Peres et al. (2007) found resilient individuals understand the event, find meaning, and utilize coping skills. The conceptual framework of Hooyman and Kramer (2006) includes background characteristics, adversity, capacities, and mental and physical well-being. These components influence the protection people receive during times of loss therefore decreasing the effects. The resilience framework developed by Hooyman and Kramer (2006) includes characteristics that Bonanno (2004) and Boss (2006) include in their definitions and features of resiliency. Bryant and Ahearn (1999) believe that coping and resilience are influenced by interpersonal relationships and psychological and emotional tools. Researchers, such as Hooyman and Kramer (2006), view these strategies as capacities that fit under the following categories: personal; cultural; family, social, and community.

**Personal capacities.** There are a variety of personality factors that affect individuals' ability to survive trauma and loss (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). Demographics such as gender and age also impact one's ability to cope with trauma (Berger & Weiss, 2002). Assertiveness, flexibility, tenacity, optimism, distancing ability, intelligence, group consciousness, and the ability to find meaning and courage in one's life are all characteristics of survivors (Berger & Weiss, 2002; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Oakes (2002) explains how the personal capacities of relationship, insight, initiative, coherence, and meaning are a part of the dynamic side of resilience. Some individuals increase

resilience by externalizing the event or by avoiding the unpleasant thoughts, emotions, and memories associated by the event (Boss, 2006; Bonanno, 2004). Others are more resilient by being comfortable with ambiguity and being able to hold two opposing ideas (Boss, 2006).

Resilient individuals decrease their exposure to stress by finding meaningful purpose in life, believing they can influence their surroundings and the outcome of events, and believing they can learn and grow from all experiences (Bonanno, 2004). Finding meaning and making meaning is a main theme found in the literature around trauma and loss from war and relocation (Berger & Weiss, 2002; Farley, 2007; Goodman, 2004; Hardgrove, 2009; Harvey et al., 2003; Lacroix & Sabbah, 2011; Oakes, 2002; Tan, 2006; Wilcke, 2007). By making sense of the loss and finding benefits, people are better able to grow from their experiences (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Research by Berger and Weiss (2002) and Tan (2006) explains how immigrants and refugees are encouraged to find meaning in order to bring understanding to their experiences. Farley (2007) also believes that making sense of the event and finding meaning is the most beneficial pathway to overcome trauma. People can find meaning in their traumatic experiences by naming the problem, having hope, perceiving suffering as inevitable, by doing good works or sacrificing, and through rituals and religion or spirituality (Boss, 2006). Frankl (2006) supports Boss (2006) by believing that meaning in life is discovered by creating a work or doing a deed, experiencing something valuable or encountering someone, and understanding that suffering is not always avoidable. Research by Goodman (2004) found that Sudanese refugees acknowledged that they survived while others did not, which brought a sense of purpose and meaning to their lives.

Making meaning can sometimes have a religious or spiritual component for individuals. Tan (2006) relates spirituality to an independent exploration of meaning and purpose whereas religiosity is associated with detailed communal beliefs and activities. Research on immigrants and refugees by Schmitz et al. (2003) found a relationship between stress, self-esteem, spirituality, and coping. Dovlo and Sondah (2001) and Hardgrove (2009) found that Liberian refugees used Christianity to help them cope. Similarly, Pargament (1997) states that having religious foundation aides coping efforts, especially for individuals who are highly devoted to their faith. Belief in God helps people derive meaning from experiences of trauma and loss, while spirituality often reassures people and helps them cope with feelings of ambiguity (Boss, 2006). Religion is a medium for dealing with loss and meaning in most cultures because trusting in a higher power brings comfort to the situation and aids resilience (Boss, 2006; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Tan, 2006). Farley (2007) believes that resilient acts are the same as spiritual and religious acts because the functions of spirituality impact resilience. Frankl (2006) argues that people can deal with almost any situation if they have a reason to live. Religion and spirituality may help people find value, meaning, and appreciation in their lives (Hardgrove, 2009; Pargament, 1997; Wilcke, 2007). Religious faith helps people stabilize their inner being and create a foundation that helps them cope with the chaotic world around them (Tan, 2006; Wilcke, 2007). Religion and spirituality can help one's mental and physical health by decreasing symptomology and allowing for growth (Goodman, 2004; Peres et al., 2007; Tan, 2006).

Religion also creates a supportive network for individuals (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Farley, 2007; Hardgrove, 2009). Pargament (1997) states that religion should not

be viewed from an individual standpoint, but rather in the context of the whole community in order to better derive meaning. A common faith in God can also help break down barriers in society that often exist post-war (Dovlo & Sondah, 2001). The refugee camp churches provided a variety of supports for individuals and had several activities to be involved in (Dovlo & Sondah, 2001; Hardgrove, 2009). Liberian refugees in the Buduburam camp found pleasure in the music, devotions, and services because they created purpose and an escape from the violence (Dovlo & Sondah, 2001). This is supported by Peres et al. (2007) who found religion and spirituality assist traumatized individuals in making meaning, finding purpose, and coping. Faith-based beliefs and activities help empower individuals which in turn aides resiliency (Dovlo & Sondah, 2001; Farley, 2007; Hardgrove, 2009; Tan, 2006).

Religion and spirituality help people realize that they can make their own choices in life about their actions and feelings, but they cannot always choose how it turns out (Goodman, 2004; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Liberians that survived the war based the reasoning on God; therefore, instead of questioning God about the war, they turned to Him (Dovlo & Sondah, 2001). Goodman (2004) found similar findings when researching Sudanese refugees as did Wilcke (2007) when researching women from Yugoslavia. Individuals must try to find meaning, even during times of suffering (Tan, 2006; Wilcke, 2007). According to Frankl (2006), suffering will always be a part of life; therefore, people must accept it and learn how to cope with their own suffering in order to bring meaning into life.

To help overcome the feelings of grief from loss, one must focus on positive meaning from the experience. It is important to find opportunities even in the midst of

struggle (Frankl, 2006). For some individuals, religion or spirituality can help turn negative experiences into more positive experiences (Hunt, 2010; Pargament, 1997). Similarly, experiencing positive emotions and laughter helps to reduce the negative impact of traumatic events. Farley (2007) believes creativity and humor are two components of resilient individuals. Not only do positive emotions quiet the negative emotions, but they increase the contact and support people receive in their environment (Bonanno, 2004). Schmitz et al. (2003) agree that being optimistic and having social support increases resiliency. Developing a sense of humor and seeing things in a humorous light was an important coping mechanism for Liberians. It is possible to have a sense of humor even when suffering is omnipresent (Frankl, 2006).

Hooyman and Kramer (2006) use the term “capacity” to describe adaptability, or the changing of circumstances in order to thrive. Individuals who have this ability and are overly positive in favor of themselves may be better able to adapt and adjust to loss (Bonanno, 2004). People may be living under horrible circumstances, but the inner capacities of the person influence who they become and how they react to things, not the external influences (Frankl, 2006). Victims of war may feel like everything is being taken from them, but they can choose their attitude and make decisions even amidst the darkest circumstances. Potocky-Tripodi (2002) considers this trait to be mastery, which is part of one’s personal resources. Frankl (2006), who survived the harsh conditions of a concentration camp, describes how prisoners have to decide if they will let the powerful leaders take over them and change them by taking away their human dignity. Not allowing powerful leaders to take over you allows you to keep your individual freedom and stay internally strong in order to overcome the harsh circumstances (Frankl, 2006).

Individuals who created conditions for maximum potential during the war often viewed an opportunity and attempted to win victory over the challenge. Viewing a traumatic situation as a challenge allows more active, cognitive coping to occur and allows people to feel a sense of control (Oakes, 2002). Meaning can be found when people turn a tragedy into a triumph or a predicament into an achievement (Frankl, 2006).

While sometimes it is beneficial to engage in action to create one's fate, other times it is necessary to just accept fate (Frankl, 2006). Research has shown that the more people value control and mastery, the more distress they experience from loss and ambiguity (Boss, 2006). Therefore, individuals who were comfortable with not having control over the situation may have been more resilient and coped better during the Liberian war than those who valued control. Sometimes major things happen, such as war, which is beyond our control and comprehension. Having a sense of hope can help people become more resilient (Boss, 2006). Goodman (2004) found that education provided a sense of hope for Sudanese youth. Feelings of hope can also allow one to believe that things can change for the better (Farley, 2007). Vaclav Havel said, "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well [for me], but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless, of how it turns out" (Boss, 2006, p. 179). Hope increases resilience and one's chances for survival during war and the refugee experience. A participant in Goodman's (2004) study explained that he needed to have hope in order to feel like a person. Frankl (2006) explains the important connection between mind and body. He believes that staying mentally strong by being brave and optimistic helps people stay alive during difficult circumstances, whereas the opposite could lead to defeat (Frankl, 2006).

More resilient Liberians learned and grew from the war. A challenge or experience that is difficult to overcome can actually provide gains and allow one to grow (Berger & Weiss, 2002). Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999), Wilcke (2007), and Tan (2006) also found that traumatic moments can create a turning point for growth to occur. According to Hooyman and Kramer (2006), loss has the potential to allow people to grow in kindness, consciousness, and understanding. Some refugees experienced natural growth from the war and found themselves to be more rational than they were before the war (Oakes, 2002). Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) and Hunt (2010) believe experiencing trauma can allow wisdom to develop and growth to occur due to the existential questions that can arise. "Posttraumatic growth" is often a benefit of grief that is influenced by one's environment when an extremely traumatic event occurs (Berger & Weiss, 2002). Hooyman and Kramer (2006), explain how individuals always choose their reactions to things, even while grieving. People can choose to continue on and overcome the conflicts and loss they experience (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Harvey (2007) believes that individuals can experience suffering and growth at the same time if they incorporate their resilient characteristics. Individuals who choose to endure and find ways to learn and grow through trauma and loss are resilient even in the face of war and torture.

**Cultural capacities.** Bracken et al. (1995) explain how war often demolishes the traditional lifestyle. Individuals often turn to cultural values and beliefs to help them make sense of their world and bring meaning to their experience (Bracken et al., 1995; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Liberians engage in a variety of social and communal activities and coping strategies to overcome the loss and trauma of the war. Attending memorial services and gatherings, worshiping, celebrating cultural festivities and

traditions, eating traditional foods, laughing, being positive, singing and dancing, grieving, forgiving, journaling, visiting relatives, supporting family back home, and talking about the war often help them overcome the effects of trauma and loss (Boucher, 2008). Rebuilding their cultural community assists refugees in overcoming the various losses they experience (Bracken et al., 1995; Falicov, 2007).

**Family, social, and community capacities.** Liberians attempted to escape the war by fleeing to different locations and neighboring countries. Oakes (2002), who researched Bosnian refugees, found this coping strategy to be a healthier option than being surrounded by the violence and devastation. During flight, the availability of supportive resources increases one's ability to cope with the psychological effects of refugee trauma and loss (Bryant & Ahearn, 1999). It is important to have family and community supports intact when attempting to overcome trauma from war (Goodman, 2004). Bracken et al. (1995) and Potocky-Tripodi (2002) found social supports played a critical role in overcoming war trauma. It is important to have the support of family and friends because it helps to decrease the stress of war. Communicating with others creates a sense of cohesion in the community and can increase the whole community's outlook (Kreitzer, 2002). Human connections and relationships are crucial in forming a resilient identity because they support people, and help them make decisions and overcome stressors (Boss, 2006; Bryant & Ahearn, 1999).

Even though there are several pathways to resilience, they must always include the component of community (Boss, 2006). According to Hooyman & Kramer (2006), sharing one's experience with others who have similar experiences of loss is beneficial in a variety of ways because it creates relationships and builds community. Goodman

(2004) also explains how sharing allows people to feel that “what is happening is not happening to me alone” (p. 1183). Wilcke (2007) also found the importance of acknowledging a shared experience among Yugoslavian women. During the war and after, it is important that Liberians share their experiences with each other and work to build a sense of community. Many Liberians have grown even closer to the Liberian community because of the war and losses they experienced. Liberians showed evidence of great resilience during the war, which allowed many to become survivors. Even resilient individuals experience yearning and emotional pangs from loss (Bonanno, 2004). Liberian war survivors could possibly benefit from clinical interventions to address their loss and grief as well as aid resilience and coping strategies.

### **Clinical Practice: Addressing Trauma, Grief, and Loss while Aiding Resilience**

Professionals that worked with Liberians in a Guinea refugee camp noted that Liberian war survivors had mental, physical, and basic needs that needed to be met (Stepakoff et al., 2006). Fernando (2010) supports this claim by explaining how services in lower income countries are lacking a solid foundation and adequate resources. Ridley (2005) confirms that minorities receive less care due to the lack of available access. Pipher (2002) attributes this to discrimination and Falicov (2007) believes it is a call for social justice. As a clinician working with refugees, it is critical to acknowledge the barriers that exist, help clients understand the system, help the system understand the clients, empathize, provide translators, and not generalize or judge them (Boucher, 2009). Schmitz et al. (2003) also point out the importance of translators. It is important to accurately assess refugees in a way that is culturally appropriate before beginning clinical interventions (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002; Ridley, 2005). For some individuals, clinical

interventions may be ineffective, harmful, or interfere with natural coping efforts (Bonanno, 2004; Fernando, 2010). Lacroix and Sabbah (2011) believe natural supports and personal expertise about one's own life should be fostered and included in interventions. Bracken et al. (1995), Potocky-Tripodi (2002), and Ridley (2005) argue that clinical interventions should include a holistic approach when working with refugees, especially one that includes cultural and traditional approaches. Schmitz et al. (2003) also discusses the importance of steering away from western approaches in order to employ a more multicultural approach. Understanding the traumatic experiences, the nature and extent of the losses, and the amount of social support available is crucial for assessment and planning interventions (Bryant & Ahearn, 1999; Dow, 2011).

When providing treatment and interventions with refugees, it is crucial to be culturally competent (Boss, 2006). Ridley (2005) states that clinicians should have interest in their clients' cultures and work to better understand from their cultural point of view. Potocky-Tripodi (2002) and Schmitz et al. (2003) believe this begins with one's own self-awareness and then understanding the client's point of view. Falicov (2007) argues that it includes embracing cultural diversity and showing interest and acknowledging the differences. Harvey (2007) and Veer (1998) express the importance of taking a stance of not knowing because of individual differences that occur within each culture. Refugee clients may have a different understanding of trauma and may feel a lot of stigma about mental health issues and treatment (Boss, 2006; Oakes, 2002; Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). Ridley (2005) expresses the importance of acknowledging, understanding, and empathizing feelings of victimization in clients. Researchers recommend considering each client's culture, development, history, society, finances, and

beliefs because these factors influence how he or she grieves and experiences loss (Boss, 2006; Bryant & Ahearn, 1999; Dow, 2011; Harvey, 2007; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Schmitz et al., 2003). For example, there may be cultural aspects such as political oppression or social injustice that impact a client's life (Bracken et al., 1995; Ridley, 2005). Loss changes people for the rest of their lives because it is often difficult to overcome (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). Falicov (2007), Fernando (2010), and Lacroix and Sabbah (2011) discuss the importance of family therapy and viewing it from a systems perspective. That is why Bracken et al. (1995) believe different approaches should be implemented instead of psychotherapy because its' focus is too individualist. The refugee experience impacts the family structure and how the family as a whole functions (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). Another part of being a culturally competent social worker is being flexible when defining family because culture and ethnicity play a major role in defining family and family boundaries (Boss, 2006; Veer, 1998). Ingleby (2005) explains how the whole family is always a part of the individual who is seeking treatment, whether they are present or not. Lacroix and Sabbah (2011) also believe treatment and services should involve the whole family. Harvey (2007) and Lacroix and Sabbah (2011) believe a community approach should be taken because the whole community is affected by trauma. Cultural competence is critical for providing proper care for refugees (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002).

The types and intensity of loss experienced by refugees is life-changing. However, Hooyman and Kramer (2006) also argue that pain tends to decrease over time and becomes manageable, even when sad memories occur. According to Stepakoff et al. (2006), clinicians should provide a safe place that allows refugee clients time for genuine

mourning and exploration in order to create a pathway for future healing. Similar components such as safety, mourning, and reconnection are listed by Goodman (2004) as the three stages for trauma recovery. Being supportive and empathic as a clinician assists clients in managing their pain, regaining hope, and finding a sense of meaning and purpose in life (Stepakoff et al., 2006). Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) agree with Stepakoff et al. (2006) and suggest that clinicians should first build a positive therapeutic relationship with clients based on mutual trust, understanding, and respect before discussing the difficult trauma issues they have experienced. Ridley (2005) and Veer (1998) also discuss the importance of the therapeutic relationship for creating a trusting environment in which exploration and change can occur. A sense of safety and the therapeutic relationship provide a stable foundation to build on later when exploring trauma that eventually assists clients in reconstructing their relationships and life (Goodman, 2004; Stepakoff et al., 2006). Harvey (2007) agrees that developing safety should come before working on transforming relationships. Ingleby (2005) identifies safety as the main threat experienced by war survivors; therefore, it must be the primary, initial focus of treatment. Ridley (2005) argues that the therapeutic process should be a collaborative process between client and clinician.

Clinicians must create a careful balance that allows clients time to grieve as well as create room for happy experiences in life (Boss, 2006; Stepakoff, 2007). The ability to balance grief and joy is done by having a both/and approach (Boss, 2006). Some adaptive coping strategies that could help people move from feelings of pain to happier experiences are accepting feelings of loss, discovering meaning, reorganizing identity, social relationships, daily routines, and reinvesting (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Part of

this process may involve helping clients determine what factors can and cannot be changed. When factors cannot change, Boss (2006) believes it is the clinician's responsibility to help clients cope and aid in resiliency efforts. Boss (2006) and Lacroix and Sabbah (2011) state this can be achieved by assessing resiliency patterns in their family genogram. It is important to empower individuals and families by pointing out strengths, positives, and resiliency attributes that they possess (Pipher, 2002; Veer, 1998). Goodman (2004) stressed the importance of focusing on strengths with refugee clients. Kreitzer (2002) also found the importance of empowering Liberian refugees by increasing their self-sufficiency. Research by Kreitzer (2002) assessed this through the means of camp programming involvement. Education in camps helped empower refugee women and allowed them to play a more active role in camp programs (Kreitzer, 2002). Ingleby (2005) also found the importance of empowering refugees by keeping them involved in activities or work that gave them a sense of meaning.

The current themes in research identify four main interventions that have been found to be effective while working with refugees who have survived war. The four areas include: narratives/reconstructing identity, symbolization, building social supports, and reframing. These interventions are based on factors that refugees deemed beneficial in their coping efforts. Harvey (2007) states that aiding resiliency is a key component of therapy with survivors of trauma. Oakes (2002) agrees that clinicians should help clients develop coping skills based on what was proven to be successful for them during the war. Therefore, researchers find that clinicians who incorporate these interventions will help aid resiliency in refugee clients.

**Narratives/reconstructing identity.** Telling one's story, or engaging in narrative therapy, is extremely beneficial for clients for a variety of reasons (Hunt, 2010). Often talking about events allows them to become less overwhelming, helps clients recognize commonalities with other group members, and begins identity transformation (Lacroix & Sabbah, 2011; Stepakoff et al., 2006). In a group or one-to-one therapeutic setting, it is healing for refugees to tell their stories (Boss, 2006). In a Guinea refugee camp, clients were able to feel support in a group environment while sharing their traumatic stories of loss (Stepakoff et al., 2006). This form of group therapy often allows individuals to build resiliency and overcome trauma. Lacroix and Sabbah (2001) explain how it builds relationships and allows the community as a whole to grow. Falicov (2007) recommends sharing stories within the community because it could allow individuals to act as mentors to others. It is often said that "what is mentionable is manageable, what is unmentionable is unmanageable" (Stepakoff et al., 2006, p. 928). Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) and Hunt (2010) explain how narratives help bring memories together in a way that allow people to better understand the situation and find meaning. Peres et al. (2007) also find structured narratives to be an important therapeutic tool to implement when aiding resiliency efforts. According to Stepakoff (2007), being honest during discussions about war experiences helps to eliminate the negative associations and bring about positive change to the individual and the family. Research by Boss (2006), Lacroix and Sabbah (2011), and Stepakoff et al. (2006) express the importance of normalizing the experiences that are shared while also pointing out that war and trauma change people. Berger and Weiss (2002) and Hooyman and Kramer (2006) agree that losses should be acknowledged in order to begin the process of growth.

Understanding each client's worldview is important in order for clinicians to practice in culturally competent ways (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). Listening to a client's story also helps the practitioner understand his or her worldview and allows the client to experience growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Wilcke, 2007). However, practitioners must be able to listen to traumatic stories, be open to learning, and remain present without overreacting (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). Veer (1998) warns that counter-transference can occur when clinicians experience secondary-trauma from listening to client stories. These traumatic experiences of war and displacement cause one's worldview to change (Veer, 1998). Boss (2006) and Hunt (2010) also explain how social interaction and storytelling allow clients to reconstruct their identities. The "new" identity often becomes a combination of who they were before the loss and who they are now in order to overcome the trauma (Boss, 2006). Berger and Weiss (2002) agree that collaboration in therapy should include identity formation, which calls on clinicians to focus on strengths and perhaps faith-based components. However, Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) warn how the new identity can change the relationships one has with others. Fernando (2010) believes developing a new identity should be a transformative experience that includes both strengths and limitations. Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) also find it important to redefine one's place in the world which includes both the traumatic past and a hopeful future. In order to overcome this loss, refugees must work to externalize the problem while embracing change and ambiguity to rebuild their identities (Boss, 2006). Boss (2006) expresses how it is critical that professionals engage in self-reflection about their own identities in order to better serve clients who are working to shape their new identities.

**Symbolization.** Symbolization is another therapeutic intervention that is beneficial for refugees in an individual or group setting. According to Stepakoff (2007), symbolization aids the healing process by helping give form to something that is difficult to express. Internalizing the traumatic events and deep feelings of grief and loss by war victims is extremely harmful. Symbolization allows these events and feelings to be externalized which decreases anxiety and distress and transforms individuals to experience increased healing (Stepakoff, 2007). The therapeutic process of symbolization includes a variety of integrative approaches. Symbolization can occur through drama, drawing, stories, songs, dance/movement, writing, and rituals (Stepakoff, 2007). These modalities allow clients to depict their stories, convey truths, understand events, validate feelings, explore alternative ways, and let go of negative emotions (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). When working with clients doing symbolization, it is beneficial to ask open ended questions to help them explore their memories and emotions (Stepakoff et al., 2006). Symbolization can bring up a lot of intense memories and feelings; therefore, it is important to listen, paraphrase, validate, normalize, and empathize with clients. However, requiring someone to engage in storytelling would be unethical and not therapeutically beneficial for the client; therefore, clinicians must create an environment that welcomes people to share when they are ready (Boss, 2006). Hooyman and Kramer (2006) recommend clinicians to help clients find meaning in ways appropriate for him or her in order to create a reality that balances both joy and sadness. Sometimes, meaning is found through religious or spiritual mediums for refugees. Boss (2006) and Farley (2007) suggest that it is the role of professionals to help clients get in touch with their spiritual or religious beliefs if they find it helpful for coping. Farley (2007) argues that ignoring the

religious or spiritual components causes professionals to drift away from a holistic approach. A form of symbolization that is related to religion and spirituality is performing bereavement rituals. These rituals often help clients find meaning and cultural ways to remember and connect with the deceased or missing members of their families (Ingleby, 2005; Stepakoff et al., 2006). Processing the refugee experience and transforming it into symbolic forms is an extremely beneficial therapeutic intervention that aids clients in healing from trauma and loss.

**Build social supports.** Individuals who have experienced loss need to have a variety of supports available so that they can grieve effectively (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Building social supports is a helpful intervention for refugees who experienced trauma and loss from war (Hunt, 2010; Miller et al., 2002). Harvey (2007) and Ingleby (2005) agree that having social supports and being involved in a cohesive group that has shared experiences helps to create successful results. Ambiguous loss caused by the war often breaks human connections; therefore, treatment should focus on rebuilding human connections (Boss, 2006; Ingleby, 2005). Falicov (2007) points out that many relationships are changed because of the war; therefore, they must be reconstructed. Veer (1998) describes how it is important to strengthen the family unit and help them understand each other's needs. Lacroix and Sabbah (2011) agree that families are the primary support system for individuals; therefore, their participation should be considered during the treatment process.

It is helpful for refugees to connect with others in their community who went through similar experiences because they can help identify positive changes even more so than practitioners (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). They may also be able to learn from one

another by witnessing changes in growth (Berger & Weiss, 2002). Kreitzer (2002) believes it is the role of social workers to develop community programs that help to address the needs of refugees and rebuild social ties within the community. Stepakoff et al. (2006) describe how a refugee camp in Guinea held social activities for groups of refugees from the Liberian civil war. Being involved in social activities built resilience, promoted social interaction, and allowed clients to expand their social networks (Stepakoff et al., 2006). Miller et al. (2002) explain how group involvement creates purpose and meaning in each individual. There is a healing power that can be found when discovering others who have experienced similar traumatic experience and loss (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). When engaging in group therapy, clinicians could include activities that help acknowledge similar experiences or collective loss that has occurred. Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) explain how group members can share different views and help others find ways to describe their experiences. This changes the experience from being something extremely personal to something that is shared by the larger group (Stepakoff et al., 2006). Discovering the broader perspective of the loss helps clients make sense of their traumatic experiences and reconnect with their community. In group therapy, refugees are able to overcome their feelings of shame, isolation, and stigmatization through the support of social relationships and interactions with members that they have shared experiences with (Falicov, 2007; Stepakoff et al., 2006). Lacroix and Sabbah (2011) found that family and group interventions that helped build social supports and strengths within the supportive network were found to be the most beneficial.

**Reframing.** Clinicians can also address grief and loss with individuals through cognitive reframing interventions. These exercises allow clients to view things from a

different perspective and think about their experiences in a new light (Berger & Weiss, 2002). Cognitive reframing can help change one's view of an event by making it more positive or by attributing it to an external source (Boss, 2006; Goodman, 2004; Oakes, 2002). When discussing issues of war and oppression in treatment, clinicians should acknowledge the political and societal components of the problem in order to attribute the events to an external source (Bracken et al., 1995; Ingleby, 2005). Pipher (2002) argues that psychoeducation assists clients in acknowledging their inability to have stopped the traumatic event. By reframing and relabeling events, clients are able to decrease some of the guilt and shame they feel. However, Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) express the importance of playing a supportive role that understands the feelings of grief. One refugee focused so much on how his father died that it was impossible for him to find a positive memory of his father. The therapeutic goal is to counterbalance the image and memory of his death with positive images from before the war when he was a loving father (Stepakoff, 2007). The author suggests clinicians should be supportive towards clients as they remember the whole life of the person they lost in the war. As clinicians provide support, clients are likely to have a positive representation of the individual in their mind and not focus on horrific images of war (Stepakoff et al., 2006). Cognitive-behavioral interventions can also benefit victims of war by decreasing their anxiety and fear they have associated to the trauma (Bonanno, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

Literature on the Liberian Civil War identifies themes of trauma, loss, and grief. Similar themes have been found in the current research on experiences of refugees and victims of war. More recently, researchers have focused on resiliency traits and strengths

found in refugees and survivors of war. Various coping factors and capacities that impact one's ability to cope have also been assessed by researchers. Studies have been conducted in order to determine culturally competent and appropriate assessments, interventions, and treatments to use while working with refugees. However, research could benefit from more studies and literature on Liberian refugees in order to incorporate themes of loss and grief as well as viewpoints of both genders and individuals who were adolescents during the war.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this section, I will discuss the current theories that relate to this research and provide a lens for viewing participants' experiences. This research project will explore themes within the qualitative data and attempt to develop themes from the interpretations. The use of grounded theory will allow this research to explore missing information about Liberians' experiences and resiliency during the Liberian Civil War. It may also confirm common themes and data found in previous research about Liberians' experiences and resiliency during the Liberian Civil War. The conceptual frameworks used for this study include the ecological perspective, critical theory, and symbolic interactionism. These conceptual frameworks will create the foundation for how the Liberians' experiences during the civil war will be viewed in this study.

### **Ecological Perspective**

The ecological perspective focuses on interactions between the person and environment. The ecological perspective incorporates a holistic view that does not

separate individuals from their surroundings, but rather acknowledges the relationships that exist amongst them and their interrelatedness (Forte, 2007). From an ecological perspective, social workers attempt to enhance interactions between people and their environments in order to create congruency and maximize human potential (Forte, 2007).

Forte (2007) argues that in order for individuals to develop, they require motivation and support from their surrounding environment. The surrounding environment includes one's community and culture. The ecological perspective believes that ethnic traditions are significant for individuals because they help create meaning (Forte, 2007). The conceptual framework of ecological perspective also includes a focus on strengths of the individual (Forte, 2007). Therefore, this perspective would identify Liberian refugees as having capacities to overcome the war and view them as survivors. The ecological perspective will also assess interactions among Liberians in the community during the war. This conceptual framework will help determine in what ways the war environment impacted Liberians, what their strengths were to overcome it, and what meaning they were able to make of it.

### **Critical Theory**

Similar to the ecological perspective, critical theory also incorporates the person and environment. Critical theory focuses on freeing oppressed individuals from the injustices they are experiencing and empowering individuals to overcome their oppressors (Forte, 2007). These injustices are caused by the larger structures in society, not individuals (Forte, 2007). Forte (2007) compares society to a combat zone where opposing forces fight and argue. Critical theory believes powerful individuals such as

military and government leaders do not always invest in the common good and often control society (Forte, 2007). The existence of social hierarchies allows groups higher up in society to gain all of the control and capital (Forte, 2007). The poor, oppressed, and downtrodden can begin to blame themselves for the current circumstances and therefore do not act to create change (Forte, 2007). Therefore, this theory finds it to be critical that social workers help to empower the oppressed and work collaboratively by using the client's expertise to create social change in order for equality to exist (Forte, 2007).

Critical theory also believes that individuals are part of a larger group in society that must work together to create change (Forte, 2007). From a critical theory perspective, social workers should advocate on a macro level for policy changes that are in the best interest of society as a whole as well as reunite a sense of community (Forte, 2007). According to critical theory, it is the responsibility of social workers to end injustice by implementing nonviolent tactics to help the oppressed overcome the power of the oppressor (Forte, 2007). The conceptual framework of critical theory relates to Liberian civilians that were oppressed by their government and executed war in order to decrease governmental power and put an end to civil rights violations. Critical theory will help identify the importance of empowering oppressed Liberians and working collaboratively with them in refugee camps in order to create systemic change and promote equality.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

The conceptual framework of symbolic interactionism helps bring meaning and understanding to something (Forte, 2007). This may include understanding one's place in a larger group, or a larger group's place in society. Therefore, symbolic interactionism

focuses on different groups within a larger society and how successful the interactions are between them. Negative interactions between social groups can cause disruptions in society (Forte, 2007). Forte (2007) uses art and theater to help describe how symbolic interactionism helps people interpret difficulties that occur during their interactions with their environment. The conceptual framework of symbolic interactionism views individuals and groups within society to be interrelated to their environment (Forte, 2007). Therefore, influence and causality can flow bidirectional between person and environment. Everything is interrelated and can influence actions and decisions. By using symbolic interactionism, a social worker can help individuals or groups find meaning during difficult times. Symbolic interactionism believes that individuals can play an active role in controlling their lives, even in the midst of difficult situations (Forte, 2007). Therefore, through their different capacities, they can overcome turmoil by having hope that things will get better and by finding a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. This is often done with social support and in ways that include what is best for the family and the whole community (Forte, 2007). The conceptual framework of symbolic interactionism relates to the Liberian Civil War because it incorporates diversity, unity, and action for the common good (Forte, 2007). Symbolic interactionism will help identify the importance of symbolism, a sense of purpose and meaning, and social support within the Liberian community.

The conceptual frameworks of ecological perspective, critical theory, and symbolic interactionism will be used in this study. This research will view Liberian Civil War experiences through the lens of ecological perspective which incorporates a strengths perspective. This study will also have a framework of critical theory in order to

address social justice and empowerment. Symbolic interactionism will be the third lens I use to view experiences during the Liberian Civil War. The conceptual frameworks of ecological perspective, critical theory, and symbolic interactionism will create a foundation for this research to be grounded in. In the following section, I will discuss the methods of this research design.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This research project has a qualitative research design. Qualitative research assesses individuals in their environment in order to better understand their experiences, way of life, and culture (Berg, 2009). A qualitative research design is a good fit for this study because I am interested in understanding Liberians' lived experiences during the war, how they made sense of it, and the meaning they found in their lives. By using qualitative techniques, such as interviews, I will be able to have a better understanding of their experiences through hearing their stories as well as being able to see their view of the war and its' impact on the Liberian community (Berg, 2009). Conducting interviews will also allow me to get an idea of what life was like in refugee camps for Liberian refugees and how they found purpose and meaning in their lives (Berg, 2009).

This researcher conducted eight semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted approximately one hour. The questions in the interview (see Appendix A) focused on the pre-migration stage and early flight stage. Therefore, the interviews began by asking about their experiences during the Liberian Civil War and experiences during displacement, such as life in a refugee camp. The second part of the interviews consisted of questions that searched for examples of resiliency as well as ways of finding purpose

and meaning. The interviews helped this researcher understand the experiences of Liberian Civil War refugees and their resiliency to overcome it.

### **Sample**

The participants for this study were Liberian refugee men and women who were children or adolescents living in Liberia when the Liberian Civil War began. The participants were interviewed in English as that is the primary language spoken in Liberia. I did not inquire about their legal status or citizenship as it does not directly relate to my research questions and may have deterred them from wanting to participate in the study. I recruited a total of eight Liberian refugees to be participants in this study.

I recruited Liberian refugees who were interested in talking about their experiences during the Liberian Civil War. I recruited them by posting flyers (see Appendix B) around the Liberian community. I posted flyers in a Midwestern city and neighborhood communities at various African establishments and establishments where Liberians live. These establishments included grocery stores, restaurants, clubs, and colleges/universities. I also handed out flyers to Liberians I encountered in the community and in the establishments listed above. Therefore, this study used convenience sampling (Berg, 2009). The sample included Liberians who were available in the Midwestern city. I met with each participant one time to conduct an interview. I used a structured interview guide of questions during each interview. However, I allowed the participants to expand their answers to the questions and include what they deemed to be important information. Therefore, the interviews were semi-structured. Some of the questions were exploratory in nature, as not a lot of research has been conducted in this

area. Other questions were used to further support or negate previous research that existed on the Liberian Civil War and refugee victims of war.

The research information sheet (see Appendix C) explained the procedures for how the interviews were conducted, tape recorded, stored, and transcribed. The information sheet also included the possible risks and benefits of the study. I explained confidentiality at the beginning of each interview so that participants were not concerned about their experiences being shared with others. I provided a gift card to each participant of the study. I had a list of community resources and supports (see Appendix D) for the participants to take and utilize if they found it beneficial.

The interviews were conducted in the location preferred by each participant. This ensured that participants were comfortable and felt safe to share their stories. I suggested that they were conducted in a private area so that confidentiality was assured. For participants that did not have a preferred location, a private room was reserved and used at the St. Catherine University for interviews. While audio recording, I read the information sheet and received consent from participants at the beginning of the interview as well as discussed confidentiality and their right to end participation at any time. I transcribed each of the interviews in order to look for themes and interpretations that could be compiled into categories.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

The St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed this study and approved it before research began. I worked to ensure that the participants were protected throughout the research process. Before the interviews, I read the information sheet and consent form (see Appendix E) to the participants. I explained that their

participation was voluntary and that they could end their participation at any time. I received consent from each participant at the beginning of the interview. The interview questions touched on the participants' experiences of trauma, loss, grief, and resiliency during the Liberian Civil War. I provided the participants with community resources and phone numbers in case they needed additional supports. Steps were taken to ensure confidentiality of all participants. The audio tapes and transcripts were locked up in a desk drawer and destroyed after the research study was completed. A private, personal computer was used to complete the transcriptions. The computer documents were deleted from the computer once the study was completed. No one, besides this researcher, had access to the recorded interviews or transcriptions.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

I completed eight interviews that were audio recorded and transcribed them immediately after each interview. I transcribed the interviews word for word and completed open coding in order to find themes throughout the interviews. I read through each of the interviews carefully to discover themes, develop categories, and interpret meanings. I conducted data analysis by hand in order to be enveloped in the experiences of each participant. This allowed for better understanding of the stories and increased accuracy in finding themes and categories that emerged. I used the audio recordings, transcriptions, and field notes as data for this study. While listening to the audio recordings and reading the transcriptions, I recorded in a separate document the themes and concepts that emerged. I analyzed the themes and concepts that emerged in order to interpret the participants' experiences and the meanings behind them. I created a concept map to assist me in connecting the themes and concepts that emerged (Berg, 2009).

Based on the themes and categories that developed, I used them to support and negate current research and to develop theories.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There were a variety of potential strengths and limitations of this study. By using grounded theory, this research explored new themes that were not present in current research. This research used both male and female participants, which had not been done in most of the research on the Liberian Civil War. This research project also asked for participants who were children or adolescents during the war whereas most of the current research on the Liberian Civil War was conducted on adult females. Another strength of this study was that it explored feelings of grief and loss from the Liberian Civil War. This helped determine something that was missing in current research- if issues of trauma or grief and loss impacted refugees more. This research used participants a Midwestern city, which was one of the major resettlement locations for Liberian refugees. Therefore, there was a large population to sample from. There was a large focus on resiliency and strengths within this research project. It may have been a positive experience for participants to identify factors of their resiliency and the strengths they possessed to overcome struggles and difficulties in life. Individual participants were also provided with a list of resources to utilize if they deemed necessary in order to receive extra support after discussing their experiences from the war. The individuals also received an incentive of a \$10 grocery store gift card for participating.

Having a small sample size of eight was one limitation of this study. The interviews conducted consisted of individual experiences that may not have been representative of the entire Liberian population. Because my sample was from a

Midwestern city, the interviews were experiences of those who were able to immigrate to the United States. Therefore, they may have resources and supports that other Liberians who are still in Liberia or the refugee camps do not. Having participants share past experiences of trauma and feelings of grief and loss was one limitation and potential risk of this study. Interviews may have brought up sensitive topics and difficult memories for the participants. On the other hand, it has been a long time since the war began and therefore participants who were children or adolescents during the war may have difficulty remembering some of the details. The participants recruited for this study were Liberians who lived in Liberia during the war.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative research project consisted of semi-structured interviews with Liberian refugees to better understand their experiences during the Liberian Civil War. Liberian men and women who were children or adolescents living in Liberia during the onset of war were recruited for this study through the use of flyers. Data collection for this study consisted of a private, hour-long interview with each participant. Data analysis utilized the audio-recorded interviews, transcriptions, and field notes to discover themes and interpret meanings. Confidentiality was assured and the data was destroyed once the research project was completed.

## **Findings**

### **Demographics**

A total of eight Liberian refugees were interviewed for this research study. A pseudonym was used for each participant in order to protect their identity. The participants consisted of four females and four males who ranged from ages 7 to 15 when

the war began. The participants were all living in Liberia during the onset of war. When the war began, five of the participants were living in a city and three were living in rural areas. Every participant decided to leave the location they were residing in due to the war.

### **Forced Migration**

**Rebel attacks.** The Liberian Civil War forced people out of their homes and caused them to flee in search of safe territory. Every participant reported that the presence of rebel forces invading and attacking their location caused them to leave their home. Mary explained that her family began “noticing unusual things” and decided to go to a neighboring town. However, upon their arrival, they realized the war was heading in that direction. This was evident when their “house began to vibrate” due to a bomb. Gloria’s family was threatened by rebels who said “they would bomb the whole house down” if they did not come out. Sue knew the fighting had reached the city and it was time to leave due to the sound of gunfire and rockets being launched. Sue exclaimed, “Man, the shooting...the sound! We had to leave. We left everything. You could see the soldiers.” Henry was forced to leave his home when he woke up to the sound of gunshots and rebel soldiers commanding him to come outside and line up. Steve was attending school and fled when the rebels took over the campus. According to Steve, the rebels harassed students, raped girls, took all the food and medicine, and looked for students from the Krahn tribe whose parents may have worked for the government. Elizabeth was also attending school at the time, which closed and forced students to leave due to the danger. Every participant described witnessing shooting, rockets launched, bombs, and hearing loud sounds when the rebels attacked. Some were reluctant to leave and confused

due to a lack of information. However, they had to leave everything and go their own way to find safety. The participants reported it was too dangerous to stay once the rebels invaded due to people being harassed, raped, looted, buried alive, killed by stray bullets, or slaughtered.

**Separation.** Upon fleeing, some participants ended up being separated from family. Six participants reported being separated from their families while two participants were able to remain with their families. George reported his family separated for precaution, while Emmanuel and Steve reported being separated from family because of being away at school. Henry was separated when the soldiers at a checkpoint commanded him to go one direction and his family the other. Participants reported that the checkpoints had skulls and dead bodies. According to the interviews, if people did not follow the soldiers' demands at the checkpoints, they would be killed. While searching for food, Mary was separated from her mother due to the road closing. Elizabeth reported being separated from her family due to fleeing the violence and getting stuck in a different territory. There were different territories due to parts of the land being taken over by different groups. Charles Taylor and the rebels had taken over large territories and it was difficult to get past the checkpoints to get into a different territory. Steve explained that he would lie at each checkpoint and pretend he was a soldier for that group in order to get past them. Sue and Gloria reported that they were not separated from family during the war. However, later on they became separated from their families when some of the members went to a refugee camp while others did not. Therefore, at one point, every participant experienced being separated from family. The theme of multiple flights and returns arose while interviewing participants. Six participants specifically

mentioned fleeing their home and finding refuge in a safe place for a short time, and then returning home again during times of cease-fire until the violence erupted again, causing them to flee.

Many feelings arose within the interviews regarding being separated from family during the war. Steve, Elizabeth, and George expressed how hard and terrible it was because they missed their families. George stated that he faced hardship as a kid without his parents there to help support him. Mary explained how she was worried because so much was unknown. She did not know what happened to some of her family members and whether they were alive or not. Emmanuel expressed worry and some fear about whether his family would ever reconnect again. Henry, the youngest participant, struggled because he was so young when he was separated from family that when they reunited later, he had to completely rebuild their relationship. Being separated from family members during the war was really difficult for these participants, especially because they were so young and the conditions were so harsh.

### **Relationships**

Being separated from family and friends during the war seemed to affect the Liberians who experienced it. However, the participants of this study also explained that their relationships were impacted in other ways as well. During the interviews, two participants stated that their relationships have not changed since the war. Gloria attributed this to her family staying together and not losing anyone in her family during the war. The themes that evolved from the interviews regarding relationships included ways that participants' relationships were positively and negatively affected. Themes around having a greater appreciation, determination, and growing in closeness to people

and God were found in the ways participants' relationships were positively affected. Themes around having anger and a lack of trust were found in the ways participants' relationships were negatively affected.

**Positively affected.** Three of the participants stated that they actually grew closer in their relationships with people due to a growing appreciation for life, family, and friends. Two participants discussed having a greater respect for all individuals and other people's views. Emmanuel explained:

I have a great appreciation for life and for family relationships. The war opened my mind to relishing the unique relationships we enjoyed with friends and relatives under peaceful conditions. I have a greater appreciation for life and to make the best out of it whilst I am still living. I gained an appreciation for respecting other people's views and privacy as well. I thank God everyday for giving me a second chance at life.

Similar to Emmanuel, Steve also mentioned that his relationship grew with God and that he thanks God every day for surviving. Sue's relationship with God was also deepened due to her experience praying for help during the war. She expressed, "I love the Lord more than ever. It created a good relationship with God." Sue, who was not separated from her family, explained that the war brought them closer and made them "love each other and appreciate life more."

Two participants mentioned that the war changed them as a person. Steve explained how he could have died during the war; therefore, he is very appreciative. He stated, "I try to enjoy life and strive to be the best man that I can be because there are a lot of people who could have been in my position now who are no longer alive."

Elizabeth explained that she “changed a lot” and “learned to forgive in so many ways because of the war.” Even though the Liberian Civil War was a horrible experience that negatively impacted people, the interviews shed light on how people changed in positive ways by becoming more appreciative of life, family, and God.

**Negatively affected.** Three participants explained how the war negatively affected their relationships. Henry had to work hard to rebuild his relationships after being separated from family for so many years. Elizabeth mentioned having anger towards the Krahn tribe during the war. Mary described having anger towards the rebels who were after her family and trying to kill them as well as towards the neighbors who would point her family out to the soldiers. Mary stated:

Going through the experience of being in a house where you see that they want to kill your father...it changed a lot of things. When I saw these people I got angry. I felt bad and really scared because you never know what could happen to you.

Participants also discussed being cautious and not trusting people. Mary stated, “You never know what these people are capable of.” She explained how she could not even trust some of her own family members.

It changed a lot about me because even some of my relationships with my relatives...they were becoming soldiers and whether you were their relations or not, they did not care. It's all about your own safety. You could either protect the one you care about or you could say you don't know them because associating with them could mean your life is at risk.

Steve appeared to feel similar to Mary. He stated:

One thing I learned was not to underestimate anybody...not to trust people 100% and not to underestimate them. Because, I saw kids killing grown men, ya know! I tried to know my limits...be very careful, be gentle, and give everybody the respect they deserve. And don't underestimate people because you never know...tomorrow, that could be your falling stone or your helping hand. So I am very, very careful with people.

The Liberian Civil War negatively impacted relationships for some individuals. The war caused some people not to trust anyone, even family members. The war brought hate into the country and divided people. According to the interviews, this appeared to cause anger, divisions, a lack of trust, and a lack of safe and secure relationships. The negative impact of the war on individuals' relationships was a difficult experience for them to go through.

### **Difficult Experiences**

**Violence.** The Liberian Civil War was an extremely violent war. The interviews were filled with stories regarding threats, torture, injuries, and deaths. Some individuals directly experienced these things while others were witnesses. In both instances, individuals were majorly impacted. Being directly or indirectly associated with the violence was considered to be an extremely difficult experience for Liberians. An underlying theme that arose throughout the interviews was that every participant stated the exact date and year while describing the difficult experiences they encountered. By remembering the exact date of these experiences, it shows how they will never be forgotten because they had such a significant impact on the participants. Emmanuel described a time when he got "caught up in a cross fire" and his focus was on survival.

He explained how the environment smelled like dead bodies. Steve explained how “the whole country was in disarray.” Emmanuel stated:

I witnessed a lot of people getting killed...a whole lot of people getting killed right in front of me...one, two feet in front of me...head blown off, bullet ripped through their heart, people bleeding, crying for help! Crying, bleeding all over...but nobody can help them because everybody is running. People are afraid for their lives. People don't have time to stand and help people. People running! If they drop, they can't run...bleed to death. Dogs, walking around, eating dead human beings! Crazy stories!

George discussed how the soldiers and rebels would randomly kill people, especially the child soldiers. He explained how they considered it “ethnic cleansing” even though “they killed anyone they felt like.” Steve talked about how soldiers would make bets on what kind of babies pregnant women were having. They would take machetes and cut open the stomachs of pregnant women and pull out the babies to see who won the bets. Mary experienced several violent situations due to her family being targeted by the soldiers. She remembered a time when they were sleeping and soldiers came in and held them under gunpoint. She reported:

They had my dad kneeling down and they told him they were going to kill him no matter what. My dad was begging for his life. He was like, ‘anything you want; I will give it to you.’ The soldiers said, ‘We don't want your material worth, the only thing we want is your head for soup!’ We thought we were going to die.

Mary's family was able to escape that violent situation by climbing papaya trees and hiding in the outside bathroom. George had the experience of the INPFL going after his uncle. They "arrested him and cut his head off" even though some of them were his own friends from work who ended up joining the rebels. Betrayal was a common theme as family and friends became divided due to the multiple forces involved in the war. Mary experienced multiple instances when the soldiers were after her family. There was another time when they wanted her sister to come and cook for them. She explained, "Whether you like it or not, you become a wife. You want your life- you have to go." As another woman, Elizabeth could also relate to Mary's experience regarding her sister becoming a wife for soldiers. Elizabeth stated, "Prince Johnson couldn't see women like us. He would take you, rape you, and make you his woman. If I say 'No' then they would kill my whole family." Mary described instances where people would get shot right in front of her. She explained that the soldiers would ask people questions and shoot them if they did not know the answer. If relatives react or ask questions, they shoot them, too. This was very hard for Mary to witness. Henry had a similar experience when he was lined up and people were pulled away and shot. Henry witnessed soldiers amputate people's arms. The soldiers would ask if you wanted a long sleeve or short sleeve before chopping off part of your arm. Mary described how the soldiers would torture people by tying their elbows behind their backs, causing them to break. She explained, "Seeing all these dead bodies...they look like dummies." Elizabeth explained, "I saw so many people jump over dead bodies."

George found it difficult to duck from the bullets and dodge the rockets that were launched. He explained how the UN forces came and fought to push the rebels out of

Monrovia. The rebels did not wear uniforms; therefore, they were not clearly identifiable. George stated, "They [UN] bombarded the area with rockets hoping the rebels would leave. Random people were getting killed. That was the hardest, just trying not to get killed." George experienced a rocket landing on his uncle's house. George ended up getting burnt from the rocket powder. Elizabeth explained that the government supporters started to burn the city. She explained, "They will come to your house and rape you. They will take gas and put it around your house and burn you alive...I was in that situation." Elizabeth also got wounded in the leg while running through cross fires. She described the following scene while she was bleeding and running: "While I was running, a lady had a baby on her back and the stray bullet hit the baby and she just untied it and let the baby drop and off she went."

Liberians experienced torture, stray bullets, rockets, and random killings during the war. Several participants talked about October 15, 1992 when "operation octopus" occurred. This operation was launched by Charles Taylor in an attempt to attack the city of Monrovia from every angle. Steve considered this operation to be "the deadliest war ever." There was a lack of safety during the time of the war due to the amount of violence and the amount of groups that were fighting each other. According to the interviews, it was nearly impossible to have a sense of safety because violence was going on throughout the whole country. The amount and severity of the violence experienced during the war was one of the most difficult experiences for the Liberians interviewed in this study. In addition, the violence that erupted in Liberia during the war caused a lot of individuals to be separated from family and friends.

**Separation.** Being separated from family and friends was a theme that emerged in the interviews as being a difficult experience for participants who experienced it.

According to Steve:

It was hard...very terrible. If your family is walking, soldiers would stop you and say, 'You- stop! Mom, dad- keep moving forward...Keep going, keep going!' If you don't move forward, they kill you. So they question your son or beat him up, and he's forced to join them.

The participants that were interviewed were between the ages of 7 and 15 when the war began. Therefore, they mentioned how difficult separation was because it caused them to be on their own at such a young age. Not having parents around to provide food and safety was an extremely scary and difficult experience, especially for George. Steve also struggled with not having parents around to provide when he was in Charles Taylor's territory. He stated, "I had to find my own food to eat, make friends, and just try by all means to survive." Having to experience separation multiple times due to several attempts to flee from violence was extremely difficult for some individuals. Steve also mentioned that having to flee without any warning was hard because he was not able to say "goodbye" to people. Due to fleeing from the violence, many individuals who became separated from family did not even know where their family members were. This was the experience that Henry had. The unknown of the condition and whereabouts of separated family members was a struggle because it caused a lot of worry. Liberians were separated from individuals while attempting to flee from the violence. Fleeing from violence led to long travels with harsh conditions.

**Long travels with harsh conditions.** The theme of having to undergo long travels with harsh living conditions arose within every interview. While fleeing from violence, participants experienced floods, animals, mudslides, cross fire, bombs, disease, and no electricity. Henry had to walk hundreds of miles to the neighboring country, Ivory Coast. Emmanuel traveled by foot to the neighboring country, Guinea. Several participants mentioned hiding in the bushes and having to sleep on the dirt floor in the forest. People were extremely isolated during the war because they had to hide from the opposing forces. Participants explained that there were times when it was unsafe for women to leave the home. This was when the men would leave the home to search for food or loot because if the women left, they would be raped. Participants also explained that there were times when it was unsafe for men to leave the home. This was because men would be recruited by soldiers to fight or they would be killed. This lack of safety caused people to isolate in their homes or in the bushes in order to hide. Isolation meant that people would not leave their home to even find basic needs such as food. Steve explained, "You're afraid of your life every minute you get out of the house." He did not go outside to loot when fighting was going on. Steve talked about not caring if he ate or not. He stated, "My number one concern was not even food, it was survival." Steve adopted this motto because he saw a lot of friends who left the home to go look for food and they ended up getting killed.

According to the interviews, Liberians experienced a severe lack of basic needs during the war and displacement. Emmanuel explained, "Sanitation was out of the window; I did not bathe for days because I was focusing on survival." While fleeing from violence, Liberians had to go days without food and water. Every participant interviewed

described how hard the war was when it came to having to hunt for food and clean water. George explained how the town stores were closed, the ports were closed, and there was no farming during the war. Mary talked about how the dead people would be buried by the well; therefore, the water would become unsanitary and people would develop diseases. Many people had to hunt for food, loot, beg, eat natural resources, or experience starvation. Henry described the various natural resources he would eat along the journey such as plants and leaves. George stated that his mother would walk “8 to 9 hours every day to find two cups of rice.” Steve explained how sometimes he went about 4 days without eating anything at all. He described how people would chew on sugar cane to satisfy their cravings for food. According to Steve, Liberians survived by “rechew,” which occurs when someone chews on food or sugar cane and spits it out on the ground and other people come by and pick it up to chew it. Gloria remembered seeing “people eating food from the garbage” and “rechewing” off the ground. This allowed some Liberians to feel like they were getting food in their system, or at least the taste of it. Emmanuel described how there was limited rice available, which is a staple for Liberians. He said there were rocks in the rice they could get so he had to be very careful while eating. Every participant talked about how they would soak rice for several hours in order for it to swell up and they would cook it with greens late at night to eat before bed; therefore, they could go to bed on a full stomach. Gloria talked about people looting and stealing in order to have their basic needs met. She also mentioned that people would beg others or sell their stuff in order to get food in return. Gloria explained that the boys would “go and hustle for food and basic needs.” For Gloria, it was very difficult to see people begging and wanting things when prior to the war they always had what they

wanted. Gloria reminisced about eating a jar of mayonnaise, a grapefruit, malt, or a cube of sugar for a meal. Gloria and Steve both mentioned drinking tea all day when there was not food available. Gloria explained how there were times when they would just drink beer to survive because her uncle was working in a beer factory; therefore, that was all the family had. Gloria stated, "It was difficult for us kids, but it was more difficult for our parents to see us going through stuff like that." She explained how some people still cannot get over their experiences.

The Liberian Civil War was an extremely difficult time for children and parents, especially for those who were caring for the elders or extremely young in the family. Emmanuel remembered his younger siblings being carried by family members while they were traveling far in order to escape the violence. Several people interviewed described their experiences of trying to provide for a large family when there were limited resources as well as caretaking of the sick and elderly. George talked about how his grandmother had lived with his cousin until he could no longer keep her due to an inability to provide food and basic needs. It was then that George was in charge of taking care of his grandmother. Steve shared the story of when he was able to return home to Monrovia and be with his grandmother who was home alone. He described how happy she was because she had "poor health and was living by herself." Steve appeared grateful to be reunited with her and to be able to care for her. Many Liberians took on the responsibility of caring for the young, elderly, and sick during the war. Unfortunately, many Liberians experienced the loss of these individuals as well as several other losses throughout the war.

## **Loss**

Loss was a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews. It appeared as though every aspect of the war brought about experiences of loss. This theme had an underlying presence in the stories the participants shared and the experiences they described. Liberians appeared to experience loss of understanding and knowledge during the onset of war and throughout displacement. While experiencing violence and displacement, several Liberians experienced the loss of safety, security, and stability. They also experienced the loss of their homes and belongings after fleeing from the violence. The loss of family and friends occurred through separation and betrayal. The impact and violence of the war caused the loss of country, civilization, freedom, and peace. The major loss that impacted every Liberian during the war appeared to be the loss of life. The Liberian Civil War was an extremely violent war that caused the death of many individuals.

**Understanding and knowledge.** The Liberian Civil War brought about a lot of confusion, misunderstanding, and a lack of information. When the war began, many participants did not know exactly what was going on. Mary remembered “noticing unusual things going on” and stated that her family accidentally fled towards the violence. It was unknown what territory the fighting was coming from and where it was heading. Steve explained how the groups wore civilian clothes; therefore, you did not know who was a civilian or who was a soldier and what force they were supporting. This caused a lot of people to be killed. Mary noted that there was “no communication” during the war which led to confusion, misunderstanding, and a lack of information. While fleeing from the violence, participants did not know where they were heading. Steve explained how he did not know where he was going, but that he “had to leave the area.”

The main goal was to run in the opposite direction of the bullets. Gloria, Steve, Elizabeth, Emmanuel, and Mary experienced a loss of knowledge when they were separated from family and did not know whether their relatives were alive or not. Not knowing the location or status of relatives was difficult because they had to wait for further information or reunification in order to know and experience closure. Elizabeth stated, "I was so confused and there was no psychology to explain, no counseling." It appeared to be difficult for some Liberians to grasp what was going on during the war because it began suddenly and quickly escalated. The loss of understanding and knowledge was a difficult experience that may have caused Liberians to feel vulnerable and therefore feel a lack of safety, security, and stability.

**Safety, security, and stability.** Civil war brings about the loss of safety, security, and stability to a nation and its people. According to Steve, when the capital of Monrovia was being bombed from every direction, several forces including the peace keepers began fighting in attempts to protect the city. However, the city was no longer safe due to the amount of violence occurring amongst several groups. Mary explained how people cannot be trusted; therefore, you can only count on yourself for safety. Elizabeth felt a loss of safety and trust when the violence erupted around her and rebels attempted to burn her alive in her house. Emmanuel experienced a loss of safety, stability, and peace of mind when he had to "focus so hard on surviving" while in the midst of cross fire. George did not feel safe or secure during the war because "they would just randomly kill people." Therefore, he mentioned always having "that type of fear." He even had the experience of a rocket landing on his uncle's house when he was standing outside of it. Steve experienced a bullet fly through his window and land in the dining room table

while he was eating. Steve described how there was “no peace” and “you’re afraid of your life every minute.” He explained how much stress everyone was going through because “the whole country was in disarray and nothing was stable.” Henry experienced fear and a loss of safety and security when he was hiding out in the bushes from the rebels. Participants experienced a loss of stability when they had to flee from the violence multiple times in a moments notice. Steve explained how he would be home for a couple weeks, leave for a couple weeks, return home for a couple weeks, and flee again. Steve mentioned having to “always be ready to get on the run.” Similar to Steve’s experience, Mary experienced multiple migrations and found several different places to seek refuge along her journey to safe territory. It was difficult for people to leave their homes and seek refuge in other places.

**Home and belongings.** Henry, as well as the other participants, experienced a loss of home while fleeing from the violence. Sue explained how she left her home and returned after the war ended, but her home was empty. She stated, “Everything was gone! We had to start all over again. We had a loss of everything!” Similar to Sue, Steve left his home and belongings during a quick attempt to flee the violence. He stated, “We just left everything at home- clothes, food, everything...door wide open...we just left.” Steve explained that when he returned home during a cease-fire, everything in the house was gone because the soldiers looted it. Participants’ experiences of not having their basic needs met was a loss. Gloria, George, Emmanuel, and Steve experienced this loss while having to loot, steal, and beg for food. Mary described her experiences with starvation and horrible water conditions. Emmanuel experienced the loss of basic needs when he

was unable to bathe for a long time and had to live without running water and electricity. The loss of home, belongings, and basic needs was difficult for many Liberians.

**Family and friends.** According to the interviews, many Liberians lost family and friends during the war due to separation and betrayal. Gloria, Mary, George, and Steve described how they experienced loss when they were separated from family members. Steve was able to enter into Monrovia, but his “mom was somewhere else and unable to cross over into the other territory.” Mary not only experienced the loss of family due to separation, but also due to betrayal. She had relatives who became soldiers and “did not care” who they were related to. This greatly impacted her relationships with those relatives. George’s family experienced betrayal when his uncle was arrested and killed by work friends who had joined the rebels. Being betrayed and separated from family or friends was a significant loss for many of the participants.

**Country, civilization, freedom, and peace.** When the capital of Monrovia was infiltrated by opposing forces, there was no longer peace in the country. Liberians lost their sense of freedom because the country was divided by territories that were controlled by armed forces and many roads were closed. People were not allowed in or out of the different territories unless they could pass the checkpoints. Mary experienced this loss and mentioned being “so afraid” because there was “no way to cross.” Participants also experienced a loss of freedom when they had to isolate themselves in the house or in the bushes in order to stay away from the violence and recruiting rebel forces. Gloria mentioned having “significant loss” because she does not know if her “country will ever be the same.” She explained how “development, restructuring, and civilization” were affected by the war. The loss of country, loss of civilization, and loss of love had a major

impact on Gloria. Gloria described the loss that was experienced when the Liberian community was separated into multiple opposing groups. Gloria stated, "The war took a lot from us. It took a lot of love...it gave us even more hate...it took us far apart...it took a lot of love! Since the war came, it took everything!"

When some Liberians had to flee to refugee camps and other countries for safety, they experienced the loss of their country and home. Steve experienced this loss when he had to take a bus to Ghana and live in the Buduburam Refugee Camp. Elizabeth described how hard it was to leave and go to Ghana because Liberia was her home and way of life. According to the interviews, many participants continue to have concerns about whether Liberia will ever be the same as it was before the war.

**Sickness and death.** A major loss that affected every participant was the loss of family or friends due to death. Every participant interviewed had the experience of witnessing people get killed and seeing dead bodies scattered everywhere. Steve explained how he witnessed stray bullets hitting people and that "operation octopus" killed so many people. He experienced the loss of his grandmother who raised him. He explained how her "pressure went up" and there were "no medications." He stated:

Gun sounds, bombs every night...your heart rate goes up, down, up. She was forced to eat food that wasn't helpful. So all that helped to kill her...the stress, she worried about us...the kids. We'd have to run from the fighting and she's running with us- every day, foot hurting. She went through a whole lot!

George also had a grandmother pass away during the war, which was extremely difficult for his family. He described symptoms and causes of death similar to what Steve

described with his grandmother. According to George, “her pressure went up from the loud sounds and she died because there were no doctors or hospitals.” George’s family experienced guilt due to their inability to provide a proper burial for their grandmother. He stated the following about his father, “His whole life, all he wanted was to give his mom a proper burial, but he couldn’t do that.” They experienced a loss of rituals when she died because they had to bury her immediately in the back yard and could not take her to the cemetery and hold a funeral service. George also had an uncle who died after being arrested and decapitated by the rebels. Steve and Mary had several close friends who died during the war. Henry had an uncle as well as a grandfather who passed away after becoming ill during the war. Steve and George had aunts who became extremely sick. George’s aunt became sick after giving birth to a baby who ended up dying from malnutrition. Many Liberians became sick during the war due to the loss of quality health care. This loss caused many Liberians to die during the war due to health complications. Sue experienced the loss of her uncle and grandmother during the war. She expressed how sad it was to lose such important members of her family. The loss of family and friends from illness and death was a significant loss that impacted every participant.

### **Coping, Survival, and Meaning**

The same themes arose when talking to participants about their ability to cope, survive, and find meaning during the war and displacement. According to the interviews, individuals coped differently during the Liberian Civil War. The participants who were interviewed attributed their ability to cope, survive, and find meaning to their faith and the grace of God. They also believed that their families, upbringing, and ability to adapt helped them in these ways. The participants stated that they witnessed other individuals

cope in negatives ways and struggle to find meaning amidst the tragedy. Some individuals coped by bearing arms or joining the rebel forces, which also helped to protect their families. Other individuals struggled, committed suicide, or were killed. According to Gloria, "Some people still can't get over it."

**God and faith.** Individuals' faith in God and Christian values helped them to cope during the war. Many participants relied on prayer and hope that God would protect them and bring an end to the war. Mary mentioned "praying a lot and asking God to save her family." She explained how prayer helped her family find meaning in life. According to the participants, Liberia is a Christian nation. Gloria believed her Christian values were the number one thing that helped her cope with the war. Gloria comes from a Christian family that believes they would not have been able to help themselves during the war and would not be here today if it were not for God. Gloria stated that Psalm 23 helped her family through the war. Sue and Steve also believed their faith in God attributed to their ability to cope with the war. According to Gloria, "The only thing that could help you was God; it was impossible to withstand." Sue had similar beliefs as Gloria when she stated:

Almost every Liberian will tell you God first. It was because of God.  
Because when you go through what we went through, even if you weren't  
born again, you will accept Christ because it was just life and death.  
Everybody will tell you they survived by the grace of God. If it weren't  
the help of God, it was a deadly war.

Seven of the participants stated that it was their faith in God that they attributed to their ability to survive the war. Sue explained, "By the grace of God, we survived." She

attributes her survival and the ending of the war to God because it was so violent and so many people died. Emmanuel stated that he “became prayerful and relied on God’s help daily for the strength to endure.” Gloria and Elizabeth also believed that God was the reason they survived and the war ended. Gloria said, “Nothing else would have solved that problem; people had the means to make the war go longer. If it was not God, it would still continue today.” Elizabeth stated, “Without God, you can’t survive that war!” Mary stated God was the reason she survived the war. She explained, “I could have died. I wasn’t better than anyone else. There were instances I was under gunpoint and would have been shot if it weren’t for God.” George had an instance when he was looting from a container of lunch meat, was placed under gunpoint by the rebels, shot at, and actually survived. He described how he thought he “was going to die that day.” He explained how “they usually shoot you dead as you walk out of the big container.” Fortunately, George had connections to the rebel soldier who opened the container and he was released. Unfortunately, they killed the other people who were looting the container with George. George described other “instances where you are supposed to die” and attributed his survival to God.

**Family and upbringing.** Family is extremely important to Liberians. Sue expressed, “We love family.” Sue explained how supportive and protective her family was during the war. Her parents would often put the children first by making sure they had something to eat, even if they as parents did not. She stated, “It’s during the war that you learn to appreciate family.” Gloria believed the values her parents taught her had an impact on her ability to cope. She explained that they taught her to “love family, pray everyday, and ask God for help.” Mary believed she was able to survive because of how

close her family was. She stated that her “family helped her find the true meaning of life.” She also described how supportive and encouraging her parents were during the war. Steve found this same support and encouragement in his grandmother who raised him. Steve’s grandmother would tell him to “not give up and keep improving his life.” He would think of her when things were difficult and tell himself not to give up.

George believed he was able to cope with the war because he was mentally prepared. He described his upbringing of being whooped and beaten as a kid, which was normal for his culture. He mentioned how growing up he would witness chickens, goats, and cows get killed for food. He explained, “It’s not the same, but it’s kind of similar.” He believed the way he was brought up helped him cope with being beaten by soldiers and witnessing others being killed. Emmanuel also believed that his upbringing helped him cope because he was not used to having electricity, adequate running water, or a lot of food. Throughout childhood, he would go to the forest for wood and fetch water from the well when he lived with his mother. He stated, “I now appreciate those things because it helped me during the war.” He explained how living with his father was not helpful for learning how to cope during the war because at his father’s house “everything was available and came easy.”

**Determination, hope, and adaptation.** Several participants coped and survived the war because of their determination, perseverance, hope, and ability to adapt. During the war, Steve focused his energy on trying to make it through the situations and survive. He believes he was able to survive by being smart and taking precautions. He stated, “I either think about it, cry about it, don’t do anything and die, or don’t think about it and be smart in order to go through it.” George also tried to be smart and developed “strategies

to target top guys to be his friend and give him food.” Similar to George and Steve, Emmanuel also “took advantage of opportunities” and “tried to make smart decisions.” Gloria found meaning in her life during the war by staying true to herself and her values and beliefs. She found it helpful to cope with the war by distracting herself with books in order to “take her mind off stuff.” Henry also tried to cope by distracting himself and “not focusing on the negatives of the war.” A few participants believed they coped because they made smart decisions, took precautions, and focused on survival. Mary had hope and “envisioned there will always be a better day.” She explained how she did not give up no matter what happened. Steve appeared to have determination and hope that “he was going to make it.” He “had faith” that he would make it because he was “determined to not give up.” He explained how he did not complain, but would at times grieve and cry before quickly pulling himself together because he believed it “would not solve any problems.” The war brought about a lot of uncertainty for some Liberians. Emmanuel explained that he found meaning when he realized that life could be taken from him at any moment. He stated, “We are affected by the conditions around us daily, regardless of our participation.” Some Liberians did not think too much in the moment, except about survival. Steve explained:

After the war, I sat down when things got calm and I was like, wow! That was a crazy experience! You ask for John, John is dead. You ask for Peter, Peter is dead. You ask for Paul- oh, Paul died. And you’re like wow- I’m still alive!

Some Liberians developed various ways to adapt to life during the war, which many participants attributed to their ability to cope and survive. According to Emmanuel,

“the best course of action was to adapt to the lifestyle during those trying times.” They adapted by sleeping in the bushes, going days without food, eating whatever they could find, or learning the customs and dialect of the countries they fled to. Elizabeth stated that “going to Ghana was tough because they were not welcome there; however, she learned to speak and behave like them.” Henry had a similar experience trying to cope and survive in Ghana. He had to learn the language and sell things in order to provide for his family. Mary and Gloria mentioned surviving by eating sugar packets. Gloria and Elizabeth had to eat jars of mayonnaise to survive as well as malt and roots. Elizabeth and George explained how they adapted their ways of cooking and time of eating in order to have more rice to eat and go to bed on a full stomach. Participants described eating things called “I will kill you, rack your jaw, five fingers, and make it thick.” According to Elizabeth:

Liberians are good at naming things. That’s what I like about us. We used to make fun of it. There were things you never ate, but during the war you did. We were blessed because God showed us many ways to survive.

Some Liberians were determined to join efforts to end the war because they wanted the violence to stop. George discussed how a “vigilante group was formed because people were sick of the war.” According to George, the group created their own checkpoints so people bearing arms could not enter the community. The group chased the soldiers with guns away from the community. George explained how they knew how many bullets were in each kind of gun; therefore, they could tell when it was the last round and they were safe. He shared a story about a soldier who wouldn’t stop shooting; therefore, they “chased him, beat him up, cut his veins, tied him up, and threw him in the

river.” They were consoled by someone who said, “Everyone is a part of this, but don’t be mad because these people are trying to kill everyone here. We are just taking a stand because no one will come to our aide.” Some Liberians were determined to end the war because it had affected them and their country so much.

Even though the war was a difficult experience, many people tried to find happiness in the midst of darkness. Mary’s family took the war as a positive measure. She explained:

No matter where I go, I’m going to lift my head up high and still don’t allow it to bother me. It’s just one of those bad things that happen in life and I’m going to try to make the best out of it. I’ve accepted it. I’ve had a lot of positive. Maybe if I hadn’t gone through the war, I wasn’t going to look at what it really means to be sick and not have a doctor. What it really means to be wasteful. I learned to not be wasteful. I learned to know starvation. I learned to adjust to situations. Now I will be able to tell people because I’ve gone through it that I understand what they’re going through.

Steve believed that he had to be happy in order to make other people happy. He stated:

If I’m not happy and I’m stressed, there is no way I can make other people happy. Everyone goes through difficult times, but you can’t give up. It might not be pretty at times. It might not look good. But, at the end of the day, I’m going to make a way out of no way. I’m a survivor!

A few participants found meaning by viewing the war and their experience in the United States as an “opportunity to grow and learn a way of life that they can go back and implement in Liberia.” George and Gloria have “hope that things can change back home” and that they can “help to create the change.” During the interviews, there was a sense of obligation to use what is learned in America to better Liberia. Henry believed it was important to learn a lot while in the United States so that he could make a difference back home in Liberia. Gloria stated, “We need to make our lives better and our country better.” According to George:

If you learn something good, we should use it and try to implement it there. That's the purpose of Liberians who went any place out of Liberia where life is better- to learn something and go back and try to implement it. It can make an impact and create change.

**Bear arms.** The participants who were interviewed did not bear arms, which they attributed to “coming from a good family.” However, some Liberians decided to bear arms and join the rebel forces. Steve stated, “You have no other choice but to suck it up or join the rebels.” He explained how some people joined to help provide for their families, but joining caused many to die. Gloria explained that some people “joined the rebels after seeing what other people did to their family.” George had some friends who joined the rebels because it was such a struggle for them to survive and provide the basics. He stated, “Joining the rebels meant- whatever they were doing, you had to do. Even if it wasn't something you wanted to do. If a group of 30 guys start raping a girl and you say 'no'- you are next! Even if you feel sorry for her, you got to participate just to get along because your life is at risk, too!” However, many of the rebels were on drugs when

they were committing these violent acts. Gloria explained how “they did not do the slaughtering out of the conscious of their heart; they were manipulated.” According to George, the rebel forces who recruited child soldiers to fight would “put heroin in their food and do witchcraft so they felt safe and wouldn’t remember things.” George explained how it was more difficult for those soldiers who refused to take drugs because they had to witness and do horrible things that often became traumatizing. George reported:

They stood and watched somebody’s heart get ripped out of their body. The next thing you know the guy is taking off his clothes, eating stuff off the ground, and going stone crazy! It’s like a game. The war was a test. If you were a city boy, the rebels would tell you to kill a girl- not just shoot her, but tie her up, use a knife, and cut her heart out. Some guys then prove that they aren’t weak. You leave from there and your life is not the same!

George explained how the fighters or rebel soldiers struggled to cope after the war because they were not around nor engaging in violence before. He said, “Seeing someone sitting there, begging you, while you’re cutting their neck is different!” He stated how there are many “retarded people who were fighters now living on the streets of Liberia because they don’t have mental homes.” Gloria explained how these “fighters were once manipulated kids, but are now grown men who are haunted by their past actions.”

**Struggle.** Some Liberians struggled in a variety of ways to cope with the effects of the war. Emmanuel explained how some “struggled and made ill advised decisions.” Elizabeth stated that she saw other people handle the war “very hard.” According to

Gloria, some “people became prostitutes because of being raped or seeing their family raped.” It was a struggle to cope with the war when so much energy was spent on trying to survive. Steve explained how some people struggled during the war because they were looting, sick, stressed, frustrated, or grieving. Mary and George described how Liberians who were better off ended up struggling more during the war than those who were poorer or farmers. Mary reported:

Some people felt that life was gone, especially those that allowed themselves to be carried by their material worth. That’s a reason why a lot of people got killed. If you have your property and you know the war is really heated at that particular place and a soldier walks into your house and you refuse to leave your things, you get killed.

George explained how during the war, the rich Liberians had to adjust to not having their workers do things for them. He stated, “Most people who were living better...most of them had serious problems. They had a harder time adjusting than those who were poor or farmers who hunted and killed animals.” Therefore, it was a struggle for those who were well-off to survive because they previously did not need to develop or use many survival strategies since their needs were met. George stated, “Mentally, it started affecting them.” George explained how some people were “stealing, prostituting, or becoming disobedient.” Mary explained how some people were traumatized and struggled because of the violence or torture they experienced. George also touched on trauma when he mentioned knowing people who had “nightmares” or would “yell and take off running” as soon as they hear any sound.

Some Liberians struggled to cope with the effects of the war and ended up taking their own lives. Other Liberians were killed during the extremely violent war. Mary explained how the stray bullets, rockets, and grenades killed so many people. For those Liberians who survived the war, some were affected negatively and some took it as a positive measure. Many who survived ended up living in refugee camps.

### **Camp Experience**

Two participants who were interviewed did not have any experiences living in a refugee camp. Some participants mentioned how they did not want to go to the refugee camp, but found it to be their only survival option. Two participants found living at a refugee camp to be heavenly in comparison to the war zone they had just fled. Liberians primarily fled to the refugee camps in neighboring countries. The two refugee camps that the participants experienced were in Ivory Coast and Ghana.

**Ivory Coast.** George was the only participant who had experience living in the Ivory Coast refugee camp. George found it extremely difficult to assimilate while living in Ivory Coast. He explained how it was a developed country, but the people were not welcoming. According to George, the people in Ivory Coast could tell who the Liberians were because they “act like Americans.” George shared stories about the Ivory Coast police who would “patrol the country and ask people for papers.” He explained how refugees received papers, but it took months to register for them. Therefore, he had to “stay in the house the whole time because they had checkpoints outside and would randomly search people.” George appeared to really struggle with the communication barrier because he did not speak French. His inability to communicate in Ivory Coast and the unwelcome community caused him to move to the refugee camp in Ghana.

**Ghana.** The refugee camp in Ghana was called Buduburam. Six of the participants who were interviewed had experiences living in the Buduburam Refugee Camp. The experiences the participants described consisted of stories about sanitation problems, overpopulation, disease, limited food, bad water, uncomfortable homes, no work, and a lack of education. Elizabeth stated, "Living with Ghanaians was hard! They'd call you refugee every second to remind you." She did not think the Ghanaians were friendly because they would "insult" the Liberians, "increase the prices at the market, and raid the camps for stuff." Mary also had experiences where Ghanaian school children were rude to her and called her names. Mary explained how one student even said she should have stayed in Liberia so she could be bombed and die. Mary told her, "Don't ever pray for war in your country."

Elizabeth explained how it was difficult to live in Ghana because of the heat and language difference. She described how the sun was so hot that she would "get sick and need to get drips at the hospital." Steve also struggled with the heat and humidity in Ghana. George described how difficult it was to deal with the heat because the water conditions were bad; therefore, you could not cool off with a bath. Emmanuel and Steve described how the living conditions were harsh at the camp. Steve expressed how overpopulated and unsanitary the camp was. George felt the hardest parts about camp life were the horrible sanitation and water conditions. The water conditions were difficult because people were using the same water source to bathe, go to the bathroom, and drink. George explained how "the pit of water was brown like Ovaltine and the pump of water was light brown like Lipton tea." He explained how they would "put chlorine tablets in the water for the dirt to settle before using it to bathe." Mary shared her experience of

having to bathe at the water pit, which was in the open and around men. She “did not feel ashamed” because she “had to do it in order to be clean and stay sanitary.” They also had to wait in line for the water trucks that would come on occasion to the camp. Mary explained how you could “get whipped by the Ghanaian water person.” Instead, people like Mary would walk to the mountain outside of the camp and fill tubs of water to carry back to the camp. She explained how they found alternative ways to fetch water while living in the camp. “We would take the water from the creek, let the dirt settle, and drain it.” They would also catch the rain water or “cover the sand on the side of the road with a towel, beat the sand for the water to flow through.” This tactic allowed the towel to act like a filter so they could scoop up the water without a lot of sand. Mary explained how difficult it was to live in harsh conditions and without water on the camp. She explained how she lived in a “camping tent for 2 years” that would often “leak rain water and almost blow away in the wind.” Steve also explained how the water conditions were bad and how “people got sick from diseases and infections that spread all over the camp.”

Emmanuel encountered various diseases and George had rashes and jaundice. Emmanuel stated that the “wide spread diseases ranged from malaria, cholera, and a lot of malnourished children.” George did not believe the medications were helpful or strong enough. According to Mary, who became very sick, it was very difficult to get medications. Therefore, many Liberians tried alternative herbal medications such as parts of the tree and grass. The participants discussed how long the lines were for the camp clinics. Every participant also described waiting in long lines for food distribution. However, they were able to get a “steady diet of rice and beans” while living at the camp. Mary stated that she was “not used to having to wait in long lines for food.”

According to George, "Employment and education were hard to get there." The schools located in the Buduburam camp were in harsh conditions with limited resources. Mary described having to "sit on a strip of plank in the dust with one notebook." This was difficult because she was used to a formal classroom with appropriate resources. Henry was in school at Buduburam and seemed to enjoy having more stable living conditions than he experienced during the war. Since it was difficult to find employment, some people started "robbing and scamming people." Liberians who were able to get money often held parties in order to have fun. According to George, "It helped people to escape a bit from what was going on. The more you sit, the less your mind is occupied, the more you start thinking about all the stuff you went through."

### **Supports and Services**

The participants expressed gratitude for the supports and services that were available. The refugee camps had developed churches, schools, and clinics. The Liberian refugees also received support from groups such as the UN and Ecowas. The other sources of support the participants found helpful were donations, aide money, and money sent from family in the United States. However, the conditions were so harsh and so many people were seeking refugee that the supports and services available were often not enough.

**Groups and donors.** The United Nations and Ecowas were the two main groups that assisted the Liberian refugees. The Ecowas were the peace keepers who helped outside of the camp area by giving people supplies. Gloria did not live in a refugee camp, but she received supplies and food from the Ecowas. According to George, the UN would give the Ghanaian government money to help develop the refugee camp. However,

George believed that Ghana took the money and did not use it all on the camp. He also stated that “the UN left and stopped providing for the camp” after a while. Emmanuel explained how “the UN helped the best they could, but there was a lot of corruption and favoritism.” The United Nations under High Commission for Refugees (UN-HCR) brought food into the camps, which allowed the refugees to have at least one meal a day. Henry also found the UN-HCR trucks loaded with food and water to be helpful. Elizabeth believed the rations were helpful for getting the basics such as rice and oil. She explained how the rations were not very good and caused a lot of problems at first. According to Elizabeth, “Some people ate it and died because their bodies were not used to eating. Some of the vitamin food the UN passed out literally killed people!”

Emmanuel explained how there were communication posts in Sierra Leone that allowed him to connect with relatives. Communication posts were extremely helpful for the refugees because they could talk to relatives in the United States and ask for assistance. Elizabeth received assistance from external people. She explained how a Ghanaian lady paid for her school fees and her aunt in the United States would send money. Henry also received financial assistance from family in the United States, which allowed him to purchase food and supplies. George explained how he received financial help from family, but clarified that the conditions at the camp were horrible no matter how much money you had. Steve stated, “If you don’t have family in America to send you money to survive, it is very difficult.”

**Churches, schools, and clinics.** The groups, donors, and aide money helped develop various services on the camps. The churches, schools, and clinics on the camp helped provide support for Liberian refugees. The local churches also helped by sending

money and food. Mary described how there were a variety of churches in the refugee camp. George explained how the schools at Buduburam were “not the best standards of education.” He explained how there were “no lights and no books,” but people were still able to learn the basics. Mary explained how the schools would get external donors to “send benches, copy books, pencils, and uniforms.” There was also a group that would cook for the school children so they had the opportunity to eat at school even if they could not eat at home. Mary found these donations and services to be very helpful. According to Mary, there were also vocational schools and local colleges that were developed. They had “volunteers come and teach sewing, soap making, and crocheting to help people build technical skills.” She explained how the UN also sponsored scholarship programs for people to further their education.

There were a few clinics that developed in the refugee camps. According to Mary and Emmanuel, medical supplies and medicine were given by the Red Cross. Steve explained how there were UN clinics and nurses who would provide shots and pills. The demand for the clinics was so high that it was very difficult to get seen. Steve explained how the lines would start forming hours before the clinics opened and often consisted of hundreds of people. Therefore, the services that were available were helpful, but the demand was higher than the supply.

Sue stated, “I would say the support was not enough because sometimes we ran out of food.” She explained there were very few clinics and how “eventually everything ceased.” Steve also believed that the help was “far from enough.” He explained how there “was no counseling and a lot of traumatized people.” He also mentioned a need for more

reunification help because a lot of families were still missing people. According to the interviews, the assistance from groups and donors ceased over time.

### **Struggle Today**

According to the interviews, many Liberians who survived the civil war continue to struggle with loss, fear, worry, trauma, and life in the United States. Several participants explained how “there is no place like home.” Many of them mentioned struggling with loss because of being homesick. A couple participants also mentioned feeling a loss of their childhood because they grew up in a war environment. Some of the participants described experiencing the effects of fear and trauma after the war ended. Every participant migrated to the United States and has found it difficult to assimilate and survive in the United States.

**Loss.** The Liberians who were interviewed have experienced the loss of their country by moving away from it. A loss of country was also felt because Liberia has changed since the war. The participants expressed a deep love for their country, which has caused many of them to be homesick. Steve expressed how much he misses home. George explained, “Home is home...if there is any place around...Liberia is the place.” Elizabeth and Steve also expressed how “there is no where like home.” Steve believed that people don’t understand how much home means until they leave it. He said, “You may come from a poor country, a poor home, or a poor family...that feeling is still there. There’s nowhere better than home. All the food, games, jokes, and friends...we don’t have that anymore.”

Elizabeth felt a loss when she went back to Liberia after the war and realized that everything was different. She explained, "The people you knew are not the people who are there. It's hard, but that's life."

Some of the participants continue to mourn the death of their loved ones. Sue expressed, "The loss, things can't be brought back. My grandmother, my uncle, they can't be brought back." Mary continues to feel the loss of her father who died during the war. Some participants experience feelings of loss when they look back upon life as a child growing up in a war zone. Emmanuel stated, "I continue to struggle with not living a normal life as a teenager. I did not enjoy my youth. I feel like my life has always been a struggle." Sue stated:

Just the fact that it was war and there was no peace as a kid. You're starving, hungry, hearing gun sounds, living in fear, and worrying. You don't know whether you will survive the next day. It was so bad! It takes time to get over that!

Henry also continues to struggle with the fact that he "did not have a normal childhood because of the war." For these participants, they lost many years of their lives and the opportunity to be kids. Sue explained that "loss was more significant than trauma" for her. She believed that "families who were attacked more directly would have more significant trauma." On the other hand, "the general civilian may have more of the loss." There were participants who were more directly attacked that continue to struggle with fear, worry, and trauma.

**Fear, worry, and trauma.** Several participants continue to struggle with the effects of trauma. Sue and Mary discussed how some of the trauma they experienced

continues to affect them today. Sue mentioned having nightmares about the war and waking up thinking that it was still going on. She explained how nightmares were a daily experience after the war, but that they have subsided now. Mary struggles with fear when she hears loud noises. She stated, "I get so afraid that I lie on my stomach." Overtime, her sister has been reminding her that she is no longer in a war-torn country and that she has "got to let the memories pass." There is also a sense of fear and worry that many participants continue to experience. Gloria continues to have "fear that it might happen again." She also believes that most Liberians have fear that war will happen again back home.

**Life in the United States.** George explained how difficult it has been to survive in the United States. He has had to work the third shift, which has been a difficult adjustment because "there is no such thing as third shift" in Liberia. There was also a sense of missing the ease and way of life in Liberia. George described how life in Liberia was much more "laid back" than life in the U.S. There was a theme that surviving in the U.S. is harder than surviving in Liberia due to the cost of living. Elizabeth expressed gratitude for everything the U.S. has to offer, but explained how "you have to work so hard for the money." Emmanuel explained how it is frustrating to get charged for fruit because back in Liberia he could pick the fruit from nature for free and it tasted even better. He stated, "I struggle with getting charged outrageously for something that earth produces." George explained that there is "more to worry about with several bills to pay" and that it is not a forgiving place.

George and Emmanuel have also struggled with the U.S. being a more individualistic society. Elizabeth also mentioned how independent America is. Emmanuel

feels that people are not friendly or respectful in the U.S., which is very different from Liberia. George felt like the people were more helpful back home. He explained:

Here, you get a ride from someone and they ask you for gas money. That is the first problem I started having here! People would offer me a ride and then expect money! Back home, they wouldn't do stuff like that. People don't expect you to buy gas, especially if you're going that way. Here, everyone is concerned about their own immediate family and nobody else.

A few participants mentioned how large the United States is in comparison to Liberia. Therefore, their families and friends are more spread out across the country. Being separated from family and friends has been a struggle for many participants because they were used to living in close proximity to them. Emmanuel stated, "I struggle with not being able to see my mother and hug her when I want." Steve said, "It is hard to be separated from family and friends." He explained how "everybody is busy doing their own thing in the U.S." and he misses being "connected and close to his family."

It is difficult for some of the participants to live in the United States and hear about the wars that are going on in the world. After directly experiencing war, it is difficult for them to support war. Sue expressed these feelings by saying the following:

War is not good! That's all I can say to anybody. When I see what they are doing in the Middle East, I just wish they would stop. It is so bad. It is so negative. You are going to lose people. You are going to destroy your country. Sometimes I wonder, even if they rebuild if it will ever be the same. People should have discussions and try to resolve problems before fighting. I think peace is the best thing.

## **Conclusion**

The eight participants who were interviewed were young children when the Liberian Civil War began. They grew up in a country of political unrest, causing them to witness violence and torture. The participants had to flee their homes for safety and became separated from their family and friends. During displacement, many participants endured long travels with harsh conditions. Every individual experienced a variety of losses during the war. Several of the participants ended up living in refugee camps that provided minimal supports and services. Through their faith, family, and determination, the participants were able to cope, survive, and find meaning in their lives. While currently living in the United States, the participants continue to struggle with some of the effects of the war because it has forever changed them. They have used their experiences from the war to better themselves as individuals and create positive change. They are truly survivors.

## **Discussion**

### **Findings Related to Research**

There were several parallels between the findings and previous research that has been conducted. The findings confirm common themes and data found in previous research about Liberians' experiences and resiliency during the Liberian Civil War. The findings support the research describing the onset of the war, the amount of violence, and the impact it had on the towns and villages (Dovlo & Sondah, 2001; Moran, 2006; Williams, 2002). Some of the participants described why people decided to fight, which supported the research that there were a variety of reasons why people fought in the war (Ellis, 2007). The findings regarding the recruitment and drugging of childhood soldiers

were also related to previous research (Ellis, 2007). The participants shared stories about the things they experienced and witnessed during the war which were similar to those described in previous studies (Goodman, 2004; Miller et al., 2002; Moran, 2006; Pipher, 2002; Stepakoff, 2007; Veer, 1998). Stories of betrayal and sexual abuse were also reported in the previous research (Harvey, 2007; Isis-WICCE, 2008; Kreitzer, 2002; Lacroix & Sabbah, 2011). While fleeing the violence, the experiences of leaving home, separation, and long travels with harsh conditions were found in the interviews and previous research (Berger & Weiss, 2002; Bryant & Ahearn, 1999; Williams, 2002). The descriptions given by participants about life in a refugee camp were parallel to the previous research conducted (Bryant & Ahearn, 1999; Hardgrove, 2009; Kreitzer, 2002; Stepakoff et al., 2006). Similar themes arose regarding Ghanaian society, camp conditions, and limited supplies and services.

The overarching theme of encountering difficult experiences that caused trauma, loss, and grief was present in the findings and research. The theme of loss was related to every topic discussed during the interviews with participants, which was similar to the findings in previous research (Boucher, 2009). This supports the research finding that loss is central to the refugee experience (Bryant and Ahearn, 1999; Veer, 1998). The previous research and findings support that the losses experienced were extremely difficult to overcome (Berger & Weiss, 2002; Bryant & Ahearn, 1999; Fernando, 2010; Lacroix & Sabbah, 2001; Oakes, 2002). However, similar to the findings of Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998) and Goodman (2004), the participants did not have much time to focus on their losses in the moment because they had to focus on their survival. None of the participants used the term Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) when describing the

effects the war has had on them. Some participants identified having responses such as nightmares and fear that are representative of trauma symptoms. However, the findings do not strongly support some of the research that states trauma interferes with coping and finding meaning (Farley, 2007). The participants who were interviewed were able to cope with the war and therefore survive. However, when asked how they witnessed other individuals cope, they provided some evidence to support the research that trauma interferes with coping for some individuals.

The findings of this study also do not support the research findings of Berger and Weiss (2002) that state trauma changes one's beliefs and views about everything. The participants in this study were able to cope and find meaning by holding strong to their beliefs in God and the importance of family. This relates to the research of Lacroix and Sabbah (2011) that reports the importance of family support during trauma as well as research by Bonanno (2004) that emphasizes the importance of social support to overcome distress. The findings presented similar themes regarding pathways of resilience that were discussed in previous research. Participants described capacities of emotion regulation, self-esteem, self-cohesion, safe-attachment, meaning making, hardiness, self-enhancement, repressive coping, and positive emotion and laughter (Bonanno, 2004; Harvey et al., 2003; Veer, 1998). Previous research and the findings of this study both identify the importance of meaning making, spirituality and religiosity, adaptability, positivity, hope, determination, and social supports in overcoming the difficult experiences and traumatic effects of war (Berger & Weiss, 2002; Bonanno, 2004; Boss, 2006; Dovlo & Sondah, 2001; Farley, 2007; Frankl, 2006; Goodman, 2004; Hardgrove, 2009; Harvey et al., 2003; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Hunt, 2010; Lacroix &

Sabbah, 2011; Oakes, 2002; Pargament, 1997; Peres et al., 2007; Tan, 2006; Wilcke, 2007). Several of the participants described experiencing positive changes that resemble “posttraumatic growth” (Berger & Weiss, 2002). Similar to the research of Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998), it was evident in the findings that the war took a major toll on the Liberian refugees, but the participants survived because they were determined to continue on. Overall, in relation to research that has been previously conducted, the participants encountered horrific experiences that were extremely stressful and difficult to cope with; however, they relied on their attributes of strength and resiliency in order to overcome them (Bryant & Ahearn, 1999; Harvey, 2007; Veer, 1998). The participants in this study are resilient individuals because they were able to overcome the traumatic experiences and losses they experienced during the war and continue to function well (Bonanno, 2004; Boss, 2006).

### **Findings Related to Theory**

There were several parallels between the findings and theory. The conceptual frameworks of ecological perspective, critical theory, and symbolic interactionism were used in this study. The participants' experiences were viewed through the lens of these theories. The findings of this research included participants' stories about growing up in a war-torn environment. From an ecological perspective, people are impacted by their environment (Forte, 2007). Liberian refugees experienced violent and traumatic interactions in their environment that impacted their lives forever. An ecological perspective also includes the importance of community, culture, and traditions (Forte, 2007). Throughout the Liberian Civil War and displacement, the participants lost some of their community, culture, and traditions. However, they tried to rely on the ones they did

not lose, such as their faith in God, in order to create meaning. The ecological perspective also incorporates a strengths perspective (Forte, 2007). The participants in this research study had a variety of strengths that helped them overcome the war such as their determination, perseverance, and adaptability.

Through the lens of critical theory, the Liberians would be viewed as oppressed individuals who were suffering from injustices brought upon by political unrest (Forte, 2007). The findings show how individuals felt that the government was gaining all the control and capital instead of investing in the common good. The corruption that occurred in Liberia caused the onset of war. Therefore, the rebel forces decided to attack the government in order to rid it of corruption. The existence of social hierarchies in Liberia was also reported in the findings, which relates to critical theory (Forte, 2007). During the war, many people were killed based on their tribal affiliation. According to the findings, the enduring violence empowered some Liberians to create change by creating vigilante groups and standing up against the war. Critical theory supports people coming together in order to create change and equality (Forte, 2007).

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the different social groups within the country of Liberia did not have successful interactions (Forte, 2007). The negative interactions between the groups led to the Liberian Civil War. The conceptual framework of symbolic interactionism believes that individuals can control their lives and find meaning even during difficult times (Forte, 2007). The findings support this theory because the participants were able to find a sense of purpose and meaning during the war. Participants also received support from their families and friends to overcome the effects

of the war. The findings of this research study were related to the ecological perspective, critical theory, and symbolic interactionism.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This research study had a variety of strengths. A limited amount of research has been conducted on the Liberian Civil War. Most previous research on the war has not included interviews with both male and female participants. This research study was able to collect data from four male and four female participants. This research study was also able to view the war from the perspective of those who were children or adolescents during the war. Most previous research has been conducted on individuals who were adults during the war. The use of grounded theory allowed this research to explore missing information about Liberians' experiences and resiliency. This study also explored feelings of grief and loss that Liberians experienced during the war. The findings of this research helped determine in what ways refugees were impacted by trauma as well as grief and loss. The findings helped distinguish how some experiences cause trauma whereas others cause grief and loss. There was a large focus on resiliency and strengths within this research project. The findings identified a variety of ways in which the participants were able to cope, survive, and find meaning throughout the war and displacement. Identifying these capacities is useful for similar and future war experiences. It provides insight to groups and service providers so they are able to develop programs that assist with increasing these capacities. An example would include providing Bibles or holding worship services to allow people to be connected to their faith in God, which was the main capacity that participants attributed to their ability to cope, survive, and make meaning. The findings also identified the supports and services

that participants felt were lacking. This information is extremely beneficial in determining what progress needs to be made and what assistance is deemed most beneficial by the refugees who receive it.

This research study also had some limitations. There were only eight participants who were recruited for this study. The participants immigrated to the United States and were recruited from a Midwestern city. They may have had resources and supports that other Liberians did not. Therefore, there was a relatively small sample size and the findings may not be representative of the entire Liberian population. There were a variety of wars that occurred within the Liberian Civil War. Some people were in Liberia throughout the whole war span whereas others had migrated to refugee camps or the United States at various times. This research did not specifically ask about every wave of violence that erupted; it only asked about when the war began in 1989. Some participants specifically addressed the different violent stages whereas others did not. This related to the interview question that asked, "Where were you living when the war began and what happened to make you decide to leave your home?" The question was not sufficient because the participants experienced multiple cycles of living at home and leaving in order to flee the violence. It may have been more beneficial to ask specifically about particular timeframes because of the multiple migrations that were experienced.

This researcher was requested to make changes in the interview questions so they would not be leading. This research did not use the word "trauma" when asking the participants about their experiences. This research also did not specifically ask if Liberians experienced more traumas or more loss and grief. Therefore, there was not an

exact, clear answer given by every participant regarding the phenomena of trauma and loss. However, participants did describe experiences of trauma as well as loss and grief. They also touched on how some Liberians experienced more trauma whereas others experienced more loss. The findings also appeared to identify how the concept of loss is related to every situation experienced. The findings provided some information about the difference between trauma and loss, but more information would be helpful to clarify whether they are different concepts or interrelated. Future research can continue to be conducted on the experiences and effects of living in a war-torn country as well as what services and interventions would be the most appropriate and beneficial to provide.

### **Implications for Social Work**

This research study provides a variety of implications for social work practice, policy, and research. Many refugees displaced by war continue to live in refugee camps, which lack appropriate resources and services (Stepakoff et al., 2006). There is also a lack of education and programs developed in war-torn countries. Liberian refugees could continue to benefit by having more programs implemented to help them normalize their experiences. Identifying in the findings what the refugees were lacking throughout the war and displacement allows changes to be made in the future in order to better fulfill these needs.

There are major implications for policy development when it comes to the affects of war on countries, civilization, and citizens. The findings show how war causes countries, civilization, and citizens to be destroyed, making it almost impossible to be the way things were before the onset of war. When assessing the findings in this research to those of other wars, common themes develop regarding torture, rape, and the slaughtering

of innocent lives. These findings should be used to further develop policies that put an end to these horrific experiences. The findings also have the potential to influence countries to find alternative ways to address conflict in order limit the amount of wars in the world and decrease the damaging effects.

Social workers need to expand their work to the macro or international level to help the refugee population deal with the devastation and trauma they have experienced (Oakes, 2002). As social workers, it is our role and responsibility to expand care so that it can be accessed all over the world. It is unethical for refugees to not have access to the specialized care they require after experiencing trauma and ambiguous loss. Social workers need to continue expanding towards a macro-level approach so that refugees across the world receive the necessary services they deserve (Stepakoff et al., 2006). Refugees have a right to basic needs and services to help them overcome the hardships of war and it is our role as social workers to implement services cross-culturally. As clinical social workers, we must focus on the strengths that refugees have and use different methods in treatment to help build these resiliencies and empower each survivor.

It is critical that clinical social workers practice in a culturally competent manner (Boss, 2006). Clinical social workers must take an integrative approach that includes the worldview of those being served in order for mutual understanding and culturally relevant services and interventions to be available to refugees (Ingleby, 2005). Social workers in a variety of settings may work with immigrants or refugees who have experienced traumatic events that have caused tremendous loss and grief. Immigrants and refugees experience a variety of losses throughout the stages of migration.

Throughout the refugee experience, individuals are at risk for trauma, loss, and grief. It is crucial that social workers provide appropriate therapeutic interventions for immigrants and refugees to address the catastrophic trauma, loss, and grief they have experienced.

The trauma, loss, and grief experienced by Liberian refugees will forever change their lives. They may never find complete resolution from the various losses they experienced, especially with so much ambiguity present. Hooyman & Kramer (2006) believe that the therapeutic goal should be to create a life full of meaning, even though change and loss have occurred, by creating a new character and framework for life. With their resilience and the help of clinical interventions, refugees can create a new way of living that includes their pain and the ability to transform it into power so they can feel whole (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Creating a new life that allows one to feel whole again transforms one from being a victim of war to a survivor of war. Stepakoff et al. (2006) explains how survivors are able to recreate themselves and their framework for life even despite their past experiences of trauma and loss. Liberian war survivors are able to contain their pain and loss while their renewed lives continue to grow to include happiness and joy.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of Liberian refugees who were children or adolescents during the Liberian Civil War. This research examined the types of difficult experiences as well as the feelings of loss and grief that Liberians experienced due to the war. The participants identified separation, violence, and long travels with harsh conditions as being the difficult experiences they encountered. The

participants identified a tremendous amount of loss they experienced during the war and displacement. They experienced the loss of understanding, knowledge, safety, security, stability, home, belongings, family, friends, country, civilization, freedom, peace, health, and life. The participants brought some insight to the difference between the impact of trauma and loss due to people's direct relation to each. However, the theme of loss encompassed every experience the participants encountered. This research also examined the resiliency and coping factors that helped participants overcome the Liberian Civil War and displacement. The participants identified their faith in God, family and upbringing, determination, adaptability, and hope as factors that attributed to their resiliency, ability to cope, find meaning, and survive.

The findings of this study are grounded in theory and research. This research study was able to support previous research as well as explore topics that have not been previously discussed in research on the Liberian Civil War. This research provides findings that are beneficial to the body of knowledge in social work on warfare and refugees. It also contributes findings to the body of knowledge on coping and resiliency. It provides beneficial information regarding macro-level social work with refugees. The findings are crucial for providing a framework for cross-cultural social work that is culturally sensitive.

This research provides further examples of the horrific and tragic acts that occur during warfare. It brings insight to the situations that government leaders, policy makers, and aid providers need to further address and attempt to stop acts of war. It is imperative that macro-level social workers utilize this information to educate themselves on the

difficult experiences refugees encounter as well as the resiliency and coping factors that help them overcome the effects of war. This research also allows social workers and aid providers to educate themselves on the services and supports that are lacking while refugees are displaced and living in refugee camps. Macro-level social workers should advocate to increase the services and supports that are lacking in the refugee camps as well as to improve the health and safety conditions. It is the role and responsibility of social workers to provide culturally appropriate interventions that address and assist refugees in overcoming the trauma, grief, and loss they experienced. Social workers should also identify strengths, increase resiliency, and empower refugees to create new meaning in their lives as survivors of war.

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**APPENDIX A****SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. How old were you when the Liberian Civil War began in 1989?
2. Where were you living when the war began and what happened to make you decide to leave your home?
3. Were you separated from your family or friends? If so, what was that like?
4. Have your relationships changed since the war started? If so, in what ways?
5. Could you tell me about some difficult experiences and some significant losses you experienced during the war?
6. What is it about being a Liberian that helped you cope with the war?
7. How did you see other people cope?
8. What were your experiences while living in the refugee camp?
9. What were some of the supports and services that were available and beneficial in the refugee camp?
10. What do you think you can attribute to your ability to survive the war?
11. What helped you bring meaning to your life and experiences during the war and displacement?
12. Being a Liberian who lived during the war, what do you continue to struggle with today?

**APPENDIX B****RECRUITMENT FLYER****RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS FOR A STUDY****Liberians' Experiences during the Liberian Civil War**

A research project is being conducted by a Masters of Social Work student from the University of St. Thomas about Liberian refugees and their experiences during the war and displacement.

**LOOKING FOR: Male and Female Liberian refugees who are 29-37 years old and lived in Liberia during the Liberian Civil War**

**PARTICIPATION INCLUDES: An hour long, audio-recorded interview**

*PARTICIPANTS WILL RECEIVE A \$10 FOOD GIFT CARD*

\*All participants and interviews will remain confidential\*

Interview Questions will ask about:

- Difficult experiences and losses during the war
- Displacement and life in a refugee camp
- Supports and services received
- Survival and making meaning
- Overcoming the war and its affects on your life now

Please contact the researcher, Melissa Petersen, by January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012 if you are interested in participating in this study.

This research is being conducted under the supervision of Catherine Marrs Fuchsel who is Assistant Professor at the University of St. Thomas.

**APPENDIX C****INFORMATION SHEET FOR THE STUDY**

My name is Melissa Petersen and I am a Masters of Clinical Social Work student under the direction of Professor Catherine Marrs Fuchsel, PhD in the School of Social Work at St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas. I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences of Liberian refugees who were children or adolescents living in Liberia during the Liberian Civil War. I am interested in learning about the experiences of Liberians during the war and displacement as well as their ability to overcome it. I hope that what I learn from this study will help social workers and social service providers understand the experiences of Liberian refugees and how we can better serve survivors of war.

I am recruiting participants from the Liberian community to interview for approximately 1 hour. The interviews will be audio-recorded with your permission. I will be conducting the interview at a public or semi-public location preferred by each participant that has a closed and private space such as a public library, community center, or a reserved library room at St. Catherine University. The interviews will be scheduled based on the participant's schedule and what works best for him/her. If you are willing to participate, I will ask if you understand the information letter, if you have any questions and if you agree to take part in the interview. This study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to not participate, it will not affect you in any way. You may also choose not to answer any question.

In the interview, I will ask you about your experiences during the Liberian Civil War. I will ask you about difficult experiences and significant losses. I will also be asking you about displacement and life in a refugee camp. The interview questions will also ask about supports and services you received. I will ask what you attribute to your survival, your ability to make meaning out of your experience, and your ability to overcome the war experiences. I will also ask how these experiences have continued to affect your life today.

I will be providing you with a list of community resources and supports, which may be useful after discussing past experiences from the war. I will debrief with you after the interview and ask how you are feeling after sharing your story. You will receive an incentive of a gift card for participating in this study. This study will help other people understand the experiences of Liberians during the Liberian Civil War and displacement. The information from this study will be published in my clinical research paper and may be published in social science journals. Your name will not be used to identify you. I will keep the audio recordings and transcriptions in a locked desk drawer where only I will have access to the confidential information. That data will be kept until the research is completed and published, and then it will be destroyed.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through St. Catherine University at (651-690-7739).

**APPENDIX D****COMMUNITY RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS LIST**

- Organization of Liberians in Minnesota
  - Assists with social services, immigration issues, and barriers to education, employment, and housing. OLM has programs for youth including mentoring-leadership development.
  - Free- Uses their grants and scholarships to provide services
  - 7001 78<sup>th</sup> Avenue North Suite 200  
Brooklyn Park, MN 55443
- African Assistance Program
  - Assists with overcoming barriers to attain economic security and self-efficacy. AAP has job development, business development, and financial literacy services as well as a community organizing program to raise awareness and promote equality in the community and workplace. AAP also has health education and advocacy programs as well as a youth enrichment program.
  - Free- Services are funded by the Department of Human Services
  - 3300 Bass Lake Road #312  
Brooklyn Center, MN 55429
  - (763-560-8995)
- Hope International Health and Social Services
  - Provides the following services: case management, referrals to community resources, parenting and child development services, GED and ESL preparation, housing assistance.
  - Free- no fees (requires proof of immigration status “I-94” and an ID)
  - 220 South Robert St. Suite 109  
Saint Paul, MN 55107
  - (651-222-3962)
- Homeless & Refugee Children, Inc
  - Homeless services, resource development for self-sufficiency and moving services.

- Low cost
- 6301 Zane Ave. N  
Minneapolis, MN 55429
- (763-504-2940)
- Lutheran Social Service- Refugee Services
  - Helps new arrival refugees (30-90 days) with resettlement, helps all refugees with immigration services (I-94s, travel documents, Visas, Green cards), cash assistance, and family reunification.
  - LSS receives grants and donations, but there may be small client fees as well.
  - Center for Changing Lives  
2400 Park Avenue S.  
Minneapolis, MN 55404
  - [Kim.Dettmer@lssmn.org](mailto:Kim.Dettmer@lssmn.org)
- Catholic Charities- Migration and Refugee Services
  - Assistance with immigrations forms and processes, family reunification paperwork, case management for newly arrived refugees, cash assistance (first 8 months in U.S.), and employment resources.
  - Low cost services
  - Migration and Refugee Services  
1276 University Avenue West  
St. Paul, MN 55104
  - (651-647-3100)
- Minnesota Council of Churches- Refugee Services
  - Services: case management for new arrivals, employment counseling, education opportunities (finances, computer skills, job readiness), assists with obtaining citizenship and with reuniting families.
  - Need Public Assistance or the Match Grant for Employment Counseling. May have low cost for other services.
  - MCC Refugee Services  
122 W Franklin Ave. Suite 100  
Minneapolis, MN 55404
  - (612-874-8605)

- World Relief Minnesota
  - Assists with costs and items needed upon arrival to U.S., Resettlement services (applying for Social Security, economic assistance, school, housing, medical needs), ESL classes, outreach activities, job skills training, employment locating, interview and career counseling, cash assistance, legal services (green card, travel documents, reunification, and naturalization applications).
  - Free services from World Relief. Immigration Services charges fees for the applications.
  - 1515 E. 66<sup>th</sup> Street  
Richfield, MN 55423
  - (612-798-4332)
- Hennepin County Office of Multi-Cultural Services & Assured Access
  - Coordinates services, enhance access to culturally appropriate services. Services include cash assistance, forms in various languages, and interpreters/translators. Assured Access finds sliding fee clinics based on income.
  - Sliding Fee scale based on income. Not eligible for Assured Access if you have medical insurance.
  - 330 South 12<sup>th</sup> Street  
Century Plaza Building, Suite 3700  
Minneapolis, MN 55404
  - (612-596-6639) for Assured Access staff- connection to sliding fee clinics
- Hennepin County Economic Assistance
  - Apply for assistance programs such as Minnesota Family Investment Program [MFIP], Diversionary Work Program [DWP], Work Benefit Program [WB], Minnesota Supplemental Aid [MSA], General Assistance [GA], Refugee Cash Assistance [RCA], Hennepin County Emergency Assistance Program [HCEAP].
  - Application fees may apply
  - 330 12<sup>th</sup> St. South  
Minneapolis 55404
  - 612-348-3400 (adult with minor children)  
612-348-2722 (adult with no children)
- Ramsey County Human Services

- Apply for assistance programs such as Minnesota Family Investment Program [MFIP], Diversionary Work Program [DWP], Work Benefit Program [WB], Minnesota Supplemental Aid [MSA], General Assistance [GA], Refugee Cash Assistance [RCA], Hennepin County Emergency Assistance Program [HCEAP], Medical Assistance, General Assistance Medical Care, Emergency Assistance, Child Care Assistance Program [CCAP], and Food Support Program [FS].
- Application fees may apply
- 160 East Kellogg Blvd.  
St. Paul, MN 55101
- (651-266-4444)
- Social Security Administration
  - Card Center for Social Security Card. Get or replace social security card, and apply for retirement, disability, or Medicare.
  - Application fees may apply. There is no fee for a social security number and card.
  - 1811 Chicago Ave. S., Suite 2  
Minneapolis, MN 55404
- MinnesotaHelp.info – online directory
  - Free service: Online search engine for resources
- United Way 211- phone directory
  - Free service: finds appropriate resources and information
  - Dial 2-1-1

**APPENDIX E****LETTER OF CONSENT****Introduction:**

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating the experiences of Liberian refugees during the Liberian Civil War. This study is being conducted by Melissa Petersen, student in the Masters of Clinical Social Work Program at St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because of your Liberian heritage, age, and presence during the war. Please read this form and ask questions before you decide whether to participate in the study.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of Liberian refugees during the war and displacement as well as their ability to overcome the effects of the war. Approximately 8 people are expected to participate in this research.

**Procedures:**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to partake in a one-time, hour-long interview with this researcher. The semi-structured interview will provide you with questions about your experiences during the war and displacement. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed.

**Risks and Benefits:**

The study has a couple possible risks which include sharing past difficult experiences and losses. Therefore, the interview may bring up sensitive topics and difficult memories for some participants. However, you will receive a list of community resources to use for extra support.

There are no potential benefits for your participation in this study.

**Compensation:**

If you participate, you will receive a \$10 Food gift card at the time of the interview.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that could identify you will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented. I will use a false name if I am quoting you in the research paper.

I will keep the research results in a password protected computer and in my locked desk drawer and only I, Melissa Petersen, and my advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you. I

will be the only individual with access to the audio recordings and will destroy them immediately after they are transcribed.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with St. Catherine University in any way. You can refuse to answer any question if you choose. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships, and no further data will be collected. You will still receive your gift card if you end the interview at any time.

**Contacts and questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Melissa Petersen. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Catherine Marrs Fuchsel (651-690-6146), will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact John Schmitt, PhD, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651-690-7739).

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time and no further data will be collected.

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

I, the researcher, have carried out the informed consent process.

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to participate in the study and I agree to be audio-recorded.