

# Women trauma survivors of the Rwandan genocide: A seven week group building exercise

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**Abstract:** *The article highlights the need for a support community group for women who survived the Rwandan Genocide, and who are completing groupwork for Post traumatic Stress Disorder. The authors review practice literature, discuss specific strategies for adult women, many of whom had been children during the genocide, and introduce a seven-week group experience that leads to development of a community of survivors. The seven-week group incorporates a Rites of Passage in association with a spirituality framework. The authors incorporate Rwandan cultural practices familiar to women who had lived in the country prior to the genocide.*

**Keywords:** groupwork; group work; trauma; Rwandan genocide; PTSD; survivors; women;

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## Introduction

The 1994 Rwandan genocide lasted 100 days, involved 120,000 perpetrators and resulted in the murder of approximately one million Rwandan people who were mostly members of the Tutsi tribe (Bohm, 2013; Parkes, 2009; 1996). A distinguishing characteristic of this genocide was the presumed active involvement of women as perpetrators in the slaughter (Brown, 2014; Jones, 2002). Many had observed relatives and friends tortured and murdered by fellow citizens. Survivors of the Rwandan genocide experienced horrific acts that were terrifying including: personal injury, and observation of intensive violence including rape, maiming of others and murder (Bohm, 2013; Jones, 2002; Richters, Rutayisire & Siegh, 2013). Since the conflict ended, while many have stayed in Rwanda, many have also immigrated to other countries, and have benefited from various approaches to address posttraumatic stress.

This article resulted from discussions among clinical social workers with a social work educator and Rwandan genocide survivor who lived in Rwanda prior to the genocide. The survivor was invited to co-author the article because she is a clinical social worker and competent in working with female Rwandan refugees and their children. Many of the children in exile who survived the genocide are reaching adulthood and continue to experience residual effects of the trauma. Many have also experienced trauma in adjusting to their new countries of residence. This paper is the result of a review of the literature that describes various therapeutic approaches and methods that have been used with survivors of genocide and political trauma and a presentation of different approaches that have been used with Rwandan genocide survivors since the end of the conflict. The authors have developed a group experience based on best practices of working with trauma survivors, an exploration of Rwandan cultural group practices that existed prior to the genocide and personal experience of the co-authors facilitating groups with refugees and trauma survivors.

The group experience includes an awareness of cultural practices that may be used to develop a social support community of caring for *former survivors*. In this discussion, the term *former survivor* describes the survivor that has gone through therapy for trauma experienced through the genocide, and has moved into a new *period* of their lives.

The term *period* describes a time in life that is marked by a major psychosocial event that changes one's life direction. The Rwandan genocide constituted a terrifying period of life for those who survived. The end of the genocide marked the beginning of a new phase where survivors moved into a period of time of uncertainty about the future. Survivors who experience trauma therapy begin yet a new period after the therapy where they enter a self-chosen path.

## **Literature review**

There is a growing literature about methods and techniques used with the survivors of the Rwandan genocide. Most of the literature is composed of qualitative research that was provided to children and includes discussion of the factors leading up to the genocide (Bohm, 2013; Parkes, 2009), trauma therapy approaches that include music (d'Ardenne & Klyendeye, 2015), and constructivist hands-on science activities (Perrier & Nsengyumva, 2003). One promising adult intervention was community-based sociotherapy (Richters, Rutaysisire & Siegh, 2013). Sociotherapy is a person-in-environment approach that focuses on development of positive interpersonal relationships, which are a juxtaposition to the issues of family violence, interpersonal violence outside of the family, sexual assault, and breakdown of social interaction at the community level experienced during the genocide (Richters, Rutaysisire, & Siegh, 2013). Overall, the intervention literature builds on individual and group elements that include creativity, social support and cultural practices that existed long before the genocide (Nyiransekye, 2011). After the events of 1994, those who experienced PTSD were in a psychosocial environment that led to additional trauma, torture, loss of loved ones, and a sense of despair and hopelessness.

### **Cultural practices:**

#### **Weaving, dancing, drumming and cleansing rituals**

In the darkness of that time many experienced resilience. Traditionally in Rwandan culture, women gathered in safe spaces called 'weaving places' to gather strength, share heartache and to learn from each other.

Nyiransekuye (2011), discussed the resurgence of cultural practices that foster healing while allowing women to share their pain. The social support atmosphere engendered by the women in the weaving place, allows the women to practice weaving, dancing, drumming and share narratives of pain and accomplishments as a process towards healing. The women weave products used by others that become sources of healing. The 'weaving products' become metaphors for trauma, healing and transformation in their lives. Their drumming leads to dance that generates energy to pursue a new path. It is through reclaiming their dreams and building a future that will help them realize their mission in life.

It is important to develop safe meeting places where women can engage in cultural practices necessary for healing and growth. The meeting places provide a safe space where the women can metaphorically weave 'their pain, mourn their losses, and offer each other tips for coping' (Nyiransekuye, 2011, p. 11) with the significant residual effects of the genocide. This social support atmosphere allowed them to realize they are not alone in their struggle, and that there are ways to move into the future with new energy and vision. The drumming circles allow them to dance, share, nurture inner wisdom, and shape a spiritual focus that is life sustaining and future directed. Associated with the weaving and dancing are other cultural rituals that may allow for deeper healing. One of the most promising is the cleansing ceremony where the community comes together to reduce the power of unwanted toxic outside forces over their lives that harm members of the community. This time of sharing provides a sense of togetherness that helps participants reconnect with family and friends, and these connections become a source of strength and prosperity. Survivors' cultural practices incorporate cleansing ceremonies after natural disasters or at times following personal harm, where survivors share a ritual together in the community. Participants who witness or suffer from the tragedy ingest a concoction prepared by community elders. In Rwandan culture, an elder is a person who carries wisdom and cultural traditions which have been passed down through the generations. To be an elder one does not need to be of an advanced biological age, only that they have the knowledge and experience to perform the traditional practices. The concoction used in this cleansing ceremony usually consists of the leaves of the umunaba plant, or the

kamaramahano plant, or a combination of both (traditional Rwandan cleansing plants). This metaphor of ingesting an elixir is a solution of hope and health. This practice gives victims a clean new start, after the disaster and they are recognized as overcomers as they return to their communities. This allows them to psychologically reintegrate into the community, during this next period in their lives, and pursue their dreams and pathways through life (Nyiransekuye, 2011). The last intervention reviewed is Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET). **NET literature associated offers with Rwandan survivors the potential to attain positive outcomes through therapeutic intervention (Schauer, Neuner, & Elbert, 2005/2011).**

## **Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET)**

Schauer, Neuner, & Elbert (2005/2011) developed NET that asserts that PTSD (**spell out**) ensues from an extreme and frenzied recollection of traumatic events that result in disordered sensory-perceptual memories (Neuner, Schauer, & Elbert, 2014). This perception includes fragmented, verbal autobiographic and contextual material. Those experiencing individual and groupwork can benefit from the use of NET. It is a short-term group-based intervention for those diagnosed with PTSD who have experienced the loss of loved ones and have been experiencing severe depression (Schaal, Elbert, & Neuner, 2009). The authors asserted that NET in combination with group-based bereavement results in successful outcomes for those diagnosed with PTSD with symptoms of depression. Consequently NET, groupwork for trauma survivors, cultural practices and sociology-therapy provided for survivors of the Rwandan genocide have influenced the development of the following proposed seven-week group experience. Knight (2009) and Klein & Schermer (2000) discuss the importance of groupwork, mutual aid and social support as an integral element of treatment for genocide survivors.

## **Groupwork for trauma survivors**

Groupwork has been found to meet the treatment needs of trauma

survivors and reduce the symptoms associated with trauma, enhance self-esteem, and reduce depression and isolation (Knight, 2009). Groupwork helps normalize and validate the members' experiences and increase the mutual aid benefits of members feeling they are 'all in the same boat'. The members' isolation decreases when they realize they are not alone. Groups provide an opportunity for members to connect with others who have similar experiences and this helps build the members' self-esteem and self-efficacy (Knight, 2006). In addition, groups that are more structured and time-limited and have an educational component have been found to be more effective with socially isolated members (Klein & Schermer, 2000).

## **Proposed seven week women's group**

The seven-week groupwork program addresses the importance of community development, social support and cultural healing practices as an ongoing experience for survivors of trauma. For people who lived in small towns and villages the sense of belonging to a community is an important part of the survivor's lives. This group intervention is proposed for Rwandan refugee women living in the United States.

### **Social support**

The literature about intervention programs for survivors of the genocide suggests that provision of social support is an important element in healing. Many communities have developed cultural practices over the centuries that provided social support. The cultural practices of women coming together to support each other and socialize is an integral part of the experience in Rwanda. The weaving place and cleansing ritual (discussed previously) serve as social supports. These cultural practices of cleansing and healing fit well with a rite of passage framework that will assist them in participation and completion of the seven-week group. This group experience reflects a Rite of Passage framework that parallels the psychosocial process experienced by former survivors (van Gennep, 1960).

## Rite of Passage

The Rites of Passage framework consists of three progressive stages: *separation*, *limen* and *aggregation* (van Gennep, 1960). As survivors traumatized by genocide and war will evolve through the treatment process they experience interlocking steps. The steps are similar to the rites of passage outlined by van Gennep (1960). While van Gennep did not specifically discuss transitions of traumatized refugees, the discussion here applies to survivors of genocide and war. Survivors leave the perilous traumatic environment and enter refugee status with additional stressors. They participate in trauma-based therapies moving them toward reframing and refocusing their lives. By embracing cultural rituals as part of their social support communities, they can rebuild lost dreams and enter a hopeful future (Nyiransekuye, 2011). The stages of the rites of passage experienced by persons addressing issues related to surviving genocide and war include the following:

### *Separation*

Individuals leaving the war zone are often homeless and many become refugees. As survivors, they develop intuition that acts as a warning system, and this self-protective strategy serves them well (Harris, 1989). Separation is the step survivors take when they leave their previous life and will not return. Entering individual therapy and the seven-week group program is a separation from the traumas experienced. Next, they enter the *liminal* stage that consists of individual work and groupwork.

### *Limen*

As the survivor moves into the *liminal* stage, there is a sense of being betwixt and between terror and survival. Survivors work through the traumatic experiences to re-vision their lives. This is where dreams emerge that lead to community development, and social support structures. These elements will assist in developing a path forward. As renewed survivors, they enter their secular communities with new roles that include models of resilience and healing.

### *Aggregation*

Survivors return to their communities where they behave differently

than when they entered the liminal space. Their community responds positively to the survivors in their new roles. After transforming their trauma through a cleansing rite, they continue to work on personal goals and act as mentors and providers of social support to others who are entering the healing community.

The various steps of the *Dance of the Spirit* (Harris, 1989) parallel the Rite of Passage journey where *former survivors* will have a chance to renew themselves using familiar cultural practices that lead to healing and new visions of their futures.

### **Dance of the spirit**

Maria Harris (1989) developed a faith development framework that consists of seven steps. The focus is on women's spirituality and can be generalized to other at-risk populations. The *Dance of the Spirit* addresses life situations where individuals experience a significant crisis in meaning or purpose at some point in life. In the case of Rwandan genocide survivors, their life circumstances forced them into an unsafe world. Many became refugees and others stayed in their communities of origin. At some point along the road survivors realize that they need to seek assistance to cope with, heal, and find support in a new world.

The seven steps of the *Dance of the Spirit* include *awakening, discovering, creating, dwelling, nourishing, traditioning, and transforming*. The *Dance of the Spirit* fits with the situation experienced by the genocide survivors. Many have experienced a spiritual emergency (Grof & Grof, 1989) triggered by the trauma of the genocide. This emergency serves to awaken them to a post crisis existence that may have resulted in them leaving their place of origin. The period just after the genocide is fraught with pain, suffering, awareness and movement toward rebuilding meaning and purpose in their lives. It is a time when re-experiencing trauma leads them to explore different understandings of reality. These growing realizations and desires for understanding the trauma, result in the *awareness* that things were not right. *Awareness* is the first step of Harris' (1989) model.

#### *Awareness*

It is during the awareness step that survivors begin to seek some

form of healing, and they investigated unexamined aspects of their lives. The NET Lifeline (Schauer, Neuner & Elbert, 2005/2011), and other methods assisted survivors in encountering their trauma and transforming their suffering. Separation, the first step in the Rite of Passage framework, coincides with the awareness step in Harris' (1989) work. During this part of one's journey a survivor will build on work already begun in NET, and it may lead to recognition of forgotten personal characterizations about the self. They realize new characteristics that are life giving. The survivor is aware that this step leads to a sense of appreciation and esteem for the past, present, and emerging self (Harris, 1989). As the survivor identifies personal strengths and current life roles, it is appropriate to move to discovering, the next step in the dance (Nyiransekuye, 2011).

### *Discovering*

The *discovering* step is where unconscious information emerges and survivor listens to an inner voice. Building on NET, further awareness of the period of trauma will address the unexamined awareness about the self and, as a result, further resilience and healing of the traumatic wounds will ensue. While focusing on intuition, a survivor may experience the shadow self that is in the unconscious (Harris, 1989). Jung and De Laszlo (1959) stated that when one meets the shadow and the light simultaneously one sees the self from two angles and thereby gets in the middle (Jung & Hull, 1991). *Discovering* is where one discovers connections and insights that assist in the healing process. It is in this stage that holistic contents make a significant contribution of energy to the healing process. An awareness that humans have shadow content and awareness of one's shadow will better equip survivors to process forgiveness concerns with others and self. In Jung's theory, the shadow is the negative part of the self that can often be projected onto others when one is unaware of its presence in the psyche. The behavior of others that irritates a person may be an example of shadow material. Survivors finding a new sense of meaning and purpose, encounter new insights that facilitate integration of awareness and wisdom.

### *Creating*

As the dance moves forth, the *creating* step provides opportunities for the inner artist to create a new sense of well-being and wholeness

(Nyiransekuye, 2011). It is during this time that creative ideas about weaving emerge. In this step, the survivor weaves as a means of letting go and dreaming about a new future.

Wisdom and insights of the *awakening* and *discovery* steps lead to creation of the artistic perspective. From the Rite of Passage framework (van Gennep, 1960), *creating* fits with the *limen* stage. It is now that the survivor feels betwixt and between the traumatic events of the past, and the future that offers the possibility of experiencing wholeness (Turner, 1995). The survivor's NET experience began to address this betwixt and between ambivalence, and this group experience assists in concretely fashioning avenues absent of ambivalence for work in the next period of life. The life-giving energy of the dance allows survivors to step away from remembrance of the trauma. As the dance proceeds, transformation of survivors' pain becomes hope as new insights and perspectives about past and present events take on a different meaning. The pathway forward in this step focuses on the vision of actualizing personal potentials (Harris, 1989)]. As survivors reflect on inner strengths and dreams a clear picture of a goal emerges and the survivor's goal will provide an opportunity to actualize un-lived potentials. The shift in perspective offers the survivors limitless healing possibilities instead of living in the trauma. The process of NET therapy and groupwork provides survivors with a process by which to find meaning in their suffering and discovery of new choices which can be pursued in the next period of life. The dancing and the weaving serves as a *creating* milieu, the survivor weaves and dances into alternative paths that detach from trauma (Nyiransekuye, 2011). It is within the process of weaving and dancing, that the weaver and the dancer are no longer focusing on the trauma, they are transported to another place using their senses. At this point, the survivor realizes there has been a shift in understanding, recognizing it is time to take the next step of *dwelling* where the survivor will experience a deepening and self-renewal.

### *Dwelling*

A survivor taking the *dwelling* step enters a time to rest and focuses on spirituality (Harris, 1989). It is in the *dwelling* space where the survivor's dialogue about life paths and stories accompany them more clearly to focus their work. Survivors learn by sharing their stories of survival

and resilience, and they recognize how the stories have familiar themes. Survivors' stories with a range of similar themes allow individuals to gain strength and wisdom through social support. The encounter with others in a caring community leads to development of future goals and plans as they  *dwell*  in their creative efforts. It is in this  *dwelling*  step that survivors enter the  *return*  stage in the  *Rites of Passage*  framework (van Gennep, 1960). The confluence between the  *dwelling*  and  *nourishing*  steps is a time to celebrate. As the restful space of dwelling is complete, it is time for the  *nourishing*  step.

### *Nourishing*

In the  *nourishing*  step attention is shifted outward focusing on the experience of the physical self in the world. To move beyond mere survival, it is important to focus on establishment of positive mental and physical health practices. These elements include regular exercise (such as walking and dancing), a balanced diet, and positive support of family and friends. The  *nourishing*  step requires that one concentrates on one's vision and needs to sustain the inner-survivor. Nourishing assists in moving from the survivor role to the next phase in life. This step also involves  *nourishing*  others as well as the self. Those nourished include family members and other survivors. Nourishing creates strength and energy that leads to healing and self-confidence as survivors return to the community in their new role. The next step in the dance is about  *traditioning*  where the former survivor reaches out to others to integrate their growth.

### *Traditioning*

*Traditioning*  is the step where the former survivor returns to the community of origin and is recognized as a renewed person. This step parallels the  *Rite of Passage*  stage labeled  *aggregation*  where the survivor returns to the community viewed as a changed person (van Gennep, 1960). This includes sharing the dance with others, and giving and receiving the richness of spirituality with others. Harris observes that the 'dance print of traditioning' enhances the former survivor and offers an example of giving others the gifts of wisdom, love, and spirituality (Harris, 1989, p. 46). Traditioning is about embracing cultural practices. This dance step changes the tempo of the weaving activity in the direction of dance energies that are inclusive

of all former survivors in the healing community. The dynamics of healing shifts outward in *traditioning* from the self toward others, from oneness toward community. The new role continues to increase inner resources, while reaching out to others who may not be as far along in the dance steps. This reinforces and anchors the changed personality and the survivor experiences dignity and self-esteem anew (Jacinto, Turnage, Cook, 2010). Part of the journey back into the community recognizes the changed person and leads to holding the Cleansing Ceremony (Nyiransekuye, 2011). This ritual transitions the former survivor across the threshold back into the community by shedding all the energy released and left behind. The celebration of togetherness reconnects them to their communities. Participants drink an elixir that symbolically seals the healing and returns them anew to their families and communities. *Traditioning* links to *transforming*, the next step in the dance.

### *Transforming*

*Transforming* centers on reaching out to others in the community. The former survivor is one who has experienced the cleansing ritual having demonstrated the courage to heal wounds from the trauma. They continue in the dance assisting others to have the courage to heal. They have recognized that their dance is a lifelong dance that transforms and changes them with ever changing events in life. Their fellow genocide survivors and refugees are ones they are *traditioning*. The presence of those who had danced the steps provides social support, healing and transformation for those in the group. The former survivors share a beacon of hope for healing where others find strength to overcome their survivor status, as they perceive their purpose for living and their re-clarified mission in life (Nyiransekuye, 2011). Having successfully experienced self-change through healing, the individuals are able to mentor survivors in their own healing. The result of the seven-week group is a community of caring survivors and those who have transformed survival into new roles and directions.

## **Seven week groupwork program outline**

Here an outline is proposed for a seven-week groupwork program to

provide genocide survivors with an initiation into a caring support community. The purpose of the seven sessions is to assist survivors to consolidate individual and groupwork, and encourage participation in the use of social support to move on from the period of trauma.

### **Week One. Awakening: Present and past experiences**

An introductory session where members share their stories with each other. They will discuss their individual experiences and the next step as they move away from the survivor role, will list key events from birth to the present, and choose one that stands out for them. They will briefly describe the event and share what they learned from it that will assist them in this period of life. They can use a journal in which to document their work in the group. As homework, they will draw a current map beginning with their recovery period. The map will include their plans for the near future, and they will bring the map to the next session.

### **Week Two. Discovering: Exploring change points of life**

Survivors will share their maps with the other members of the group. They will list key change points in their lives and pick the one event that stands out, and they will share with the group the unfulfilled potential that was present during that time. Next, they will review the maps they made for homework and point out the change points in life to see if any of them are similar. The group will discuss what they learned from the past that may provide ideas for reaching their projected goals.

### **Week Three. Creating: Focusing on life roles**

They will begin to reflect on roles they have in life. Members will complete an artwork that depicts the various roles they have experienced. Then they will discuss their pictures with the group sharing the most fulfilling aspects of the roles. As they talk, they will list the positive aspects and review how those might enhance their current roles.

### **Week Four. Dwelling: Revisioning**

Further refinement of a picture is developed by the survivor of what the members want to become. Participants will complete a miracle image that projects them into the near future. The image will include roles, goals, and accomplishments. In this session, members may want to develop an image of their successful selves, and engage in a dialogue with the successful self to figure what they will need to reach the pinnacle of success on their lives. Based on insights from this week's group meeting, members might want to start weaving and bring the weaving to the next meeting to discuss its meaning with the group.

### **Week Five. Nourishing: Inner reflection**

Members will share their weaving progress and the meaning of the weavings to the group. Members will then begin to think about the people and beings (family, friends, historical figures, pets, fictional characters and so on) who have shared wisdom about the meaning of life. Wisdom figures have a profound meaning in our lives and come along at times when we are seeking direction regarding the meaning and purpose of our lives. They will pick the one wisdom figure whose words or actions speak most loudly to them. The members will share with the group the choice of wisdom figure and the message that gives them energy and strength. Homework will include the members anchoring the powerful message represented by the wisdom figure. They will think about a song or musical work over the next week, and will be prepared to share it with the group.

### **Week Six. Traditioning: Self-compassion**

Members will share their musical selection with the group. Members will discuss what they do for self-care and discuss self-forgiveness. They will list situations, experiences, and circumstances for which they have unfinished business. They will choose one item from this list and share with the group the answer to the question: 'What am I receiving from this that keeps me from forgiving myself.' After this the members will take a few minutes to write themselves a letter about forgiving self as if it was from their best friend. In dyads, members will read a letter written by the other person in the dyad. The member who

wrote the letter will respond to the person who reads the letters as if speaking to the friend. After the exchange between the members, the members of the dyads will share their feelings and insights with the group. They will talk about how self-forgiveness involves caring for the self in a way that averts burnout.

### **Week Seven. Transforming: Mentoring**

This final session of the group focuses both on closure, and will act as a bridge to a community support group. Survivors will be encouraged to mentor others who are in therapy for trauma. Having successfully completed the seven-week group they have an opportunity to actualize their potential by giving back. An exercise for closure called 'My Resilient Self,' will allow each group member to become the focus of the group, and will write their name on the worksheet provided. Group members will write the strengths and resilient words they believe describe the member on the My Resilient Self sheet of paper that has a large circle drawn on it. The members will share the reason they choose the words they write on the paper. Members will write the strongest characteristics closer to the middle of the circle. Each member will have a My Resilient Self sheet to take home. These words of encouragement by other members can serve as anchors or handles for the member during difficult times. The members will then set a time for their first support group meeting and pass a sign-up sheet around for those who would like to become part of an ongoing community of caring. The group that gathers will begin to determine what will constitute the support group. Some may want to get together to weave and dance, others might wish to develop a different focus based on their needs.

## **Conclusion**

This article provides a literature review and overview of a proposed seven-week group for female survivors of the Rwandan genocide and other traumatic events. This eclectic groupwork model incorporates narrative exposure therapy, rites of passage, and cultural healing practices as an intervention for Rwandan refugee women living in the United States. The group members' traumatic experiences

transform the narrative construction and revision of their personal stories. Rituals of personal and group exploration lead to ongoing discovery of renewed meaning and purpose in life. This integration of methods is offered through a seven-week group experience that utilizes healing through storytelling, progressive work through the steps of the Dance of the Spirit, and use of familiar cultural rituals. An important aspect of the seven-week group is that it provides a bridge from individual counseling to a group that leads into a caring community of survivors.

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