Civil War and the Culture of Violence among Youths: An Analysis of the Liberia Experience

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to analyze the culture of violence among the Youth in Liberian society to establish recommendations that will mitigate the effects of continuous violence. Drawing from the principles of a postwar culture of violence, this study relies heavily on the scholarly discourse on the Liberian civil war to establish a case study analysis that aligns the behaviors with the event. In the absence of such a connection, the recommendations for addressing the issue of violence among the Youth are not specific to this population's lived experiences. Therefore, this article relies on literature relating to the conditions of the civil war, causes of the culture of violence, and occurrences of violence among the Youth to direct the recommendations for mitigating these occurrences. Through the Social Learning Theory, violent behaviors are found to be a condition of lived experiences and third-party observations. The key recommendations for mitigating the violence among the Youth and reducing the potential for generational acceptance of violence include improving mental health services, providing equity in education and economic opportunities, and providing mentorships for peacekeeping behaviors.
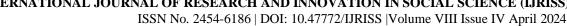
Keywords: Civil War, Culture of Violence, Liberia, Occurrences of Violence, Postwar Violence, Youth.

INTRODUCTION

Violence is a critical factor that undermines development in any society. In Liberia, widespread violence experienced during the Liberian civil war resulted in the loss of several Liberian lives (Kelly et al., 2021). Even though the war has ended, citizens have continued to engage in several forms of violence (Bara et al., 2021). Postwar violence, according to Bara et al. (2021), can best be understood as a culture of violence or the social acceptance of violence following war conditions. Understanding this culture of violence in Liberian society is critical for stability as it has been recognized that young people are exhibiting the highest degree of violent behaviors (Ismail & Olonisakin, 2021). Therefore, through a case study analysis, this qualitative study aims to analyze the culture of violence among the Youth in Liberian society to establish recommendations that will mitigate these postwar concerns. The concept of the culture of violence indicates that violence is a learned state of social norms, raising concerns that the postwar conditions will continue (Bara et al., 2021). In terms of structure, this article explores the topic by analyzing and providing recommendations through three sub-sections, namely: Youth and the Culture of Violence in Liberia, Factors Contributing to the Culture of Violence in Liberia, Occurrences of Violence in Liberia, and Recommendations for Preventing Violence among Youths.

METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

This article is a qualitative study utilizing the exploratory case study method. According to Schoch (2020), a case study methodology is most appropriate when the researcher aims to understand the implications of an

event limited by space and time. In this study, the phenomenon in question is the manifestation of violent behaviors among the Youth in the Liberian society that has resulted from the culture of violence established by the long-enduring civil war. Schoch (2020) further noted that because the lines between the phenomenon and the event are not explicit, the case study methodology requires multiple sources of evidence to establish this connection. Thus, for this article, it was essential to identify literature relating to the conditions of the civil war, causes of the culture of violence, and occurrences of violence among the Youth to direct the recommendations for mitigating these occurrences. The study utilized search engines of several academic databases: Google Scholar, ProQuest Central, Policy FILE, and SocINDEX.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

Through the inferences derived from the analysis, the researcher can better understand the relationship between the event and the phenomenon of inquiry (Schoch, 2020). At this time, it is understood that the civil war has led to a culture of violence in which society has come to acknowledge the role of violence in achieving goals (McMullin, 2022). It is further known that there is a higher occurrence of violent behaviors among the young members of Liberian society (Ismail & Olonisakin, 2021). Finally, societal norms are known to lead to greater degrees of marginalization and intergroup conflicts (Peters, 2012). Still, there needs to be more understanding of the relationship between these areas of knowledge. Therefore, the recommendations for addressing the issue of violence among the Youth are not specific to this population's lived experiences. This study will uncover the connection to align the recommendations with the Liberian Youth.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To have a clear understanding of the culture of violence among Youth, especially their exposure to war, the Social Learning theory is best suited because it provides a broader understanding of social norms and civil war. According to Cosme (2021), as Bandura's Bobo doll demonstrated, children learn through modeled behaviors. When Youth are provided examples of non-aggressive behaviors, they are likelier to imitate them. However, when the examples in society are aggressive or violent, the Youth will exhibit the same (Cosme, 2021). Fortunately, Cosme (2021) noted that humans are flexible and able to adapt their previous behaviors based on changing social norms when such examples are present.

Furthermore, the theory indicates that behaviors can be reinforced through third-person outcomes related to attaining a goal (Cosme, 2021). This raises the question as to what extent the Youth perceive goal attainment as an outcome of violent behaviors. By examining the case study through this theory, the recommendations can be established to align with the lived experiences of the Liberian Youth.

YOUTH AND THE CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

The central focus of much of the literature is on the impact that violence has on young people in Liberia and the way that young people contribute to violence within the country. Although not so young now, one of the core problems after the civil wars officially ended was that young men and combatants within the war had to reintegrate with their communities (McMullin, 2022; Podder, 2012). As the civil wars lasted between 1989 and 2003, many of these young men had never experienced peace and stability in their lifetimes, making the integration challenge even more difficult (McMullin, 2022; Podder, 2012). One study notes that the experience of young returnees from combat in Liberia faced the same problem that returnees do all over the world, in that "return to home communities is a normative given, around which reinsertion and reintegration support is planned" but that "such an approach is oblivious to conflict experiences relating to violence, recruitment, rebel abuse, and coercion (Podder, 2012, p.186). Taylor (2023) added that reintegration for rebel soldiers was further challenged by the limitations of the Liberia Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Program (DDRR). As will be noted below, the failure of policy and reintegration efforts to understand the

experiences of these young men is part of the reason that violence has become endemic in many communities and why policy alone may not be the solution to reducing the impact of violence in the country.

In trial transcripts from Sierra Leone regarding the war crimes committed there, the young men who fought in this country's civil war were described as "war machines" (Hoffman, 2011). This suggestion was contentious, but the definition of a war machine in this purpose was something or someone who acts without reason because its only purpose is war (Hoffman, 2011). In this case, the fighters in Sierra Leone were not war machines because they were human beings acting under their control (Hoffman, 2011). As has been previously noted, of course, many of the fighters in Sierra Leone were veterans of the civil war in Liberia and were grouped under the heading of "war machine" (Hoffman, 2011). One of the issues with this is that because these young men had known nothing but violence and were considered by some parts of the population, particularly those in the international communities, as having been used as "war machines," this part of their identity stuck even upon reintegration with their communities (Hoffman, 2011). This creates a situation in which violence is not only normalized but seen as a badge of honor, in that men who can fight against each other and win can continue to identify with the "war machine" label (Hoffman, 2011).
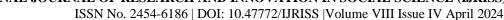
FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE CULTURE OF VIOLENCE IN LIBERIA

The most impactful of the events contributing to instability and violence in Liberia was the two Liberian civil wars. The First Liberian Civil War began in 1989 and lasted through 1997; the Second Liberian Civil War started in 1999 and lasted through 2003 (Larmin & Banini, 2022; Peters, 2012). This war was fought between a variety of different rebel groups and factions and led to the death of around a quarter of a million people and the displacement of many more to neighboring countries as people fled to avoid the violence and conflict during these two wars (Hoffman, 2011). This is one of the most extended periods of civil war in modern history, and as a result, many young Liberians have strong memories of violence that shaped their Youth; the country has still not recovered from this violence, and many continue to experience tensions (Bara et al., 2021; Peters, 2012).

Liberia is not the only country in the West African region to experience such violence, as Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire have also experienced political tension, structural violence, and armed conflict (Peters, 2012). The violence in Sierra Leone had an impact on Liberian people. Charles McArthur Ghankay Taylor, President of Liberia between 1997 and 2003 and now a convicted war criminal, approved the use of blood diamonds and illegal timber exports to fund the Revolutionary United Front in the civil war in Liberia (Peters, 2012). Indeed, it was partly due to these actions that led to the Second Liberian Civil War, as a rebel group launched an insurrection against Taylor (Hoffman, 2011).

However, these civil wars are not the only contributing factor to violence in the country. Young people experienced a crisis in their social roles even before the conflict. As Peters states, "the patrimonial structured states were no longer able to fulfill their promises towards their clients with young people – at the lowest rungs of the patrimonial ladder – becoming the main victims of this failure" (Peters, 2012, p.879). It is no surprise for many that these social changes have led to an increased level of violence in the country: this, for many, is the best way to get their voices heard or to express frustration at being left out of social structures with no civil war to fight as a way of asserting independence (Hoffman, 2011). This is equally true regarding the justice system, where crimes are committed and not equally addressed, leading to young people seeking justice through mob justice (Ismail & Olonisakin, 2021). Ismail and Olonisakin (2021) explained that the exclusion of the youths' voices creates unfavorable interpretations of events, increasing their reliance on violence.

Another contributing factor is that the wars had weakened the nations' gainful limit and uprooted a large portion of the agronomically profitable portion of the populace. Improving food security requires considerable consideration, including broadening compassionate food help close by improving farming profitability;
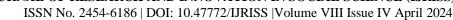
furthermore, supporting little scope means cultivating (Blattman et al., 2017). It must be perceived that the change from alleviation to improvement was not a straight encounter and that alleviation and advancement help were required simultaneously for various years (Blattman et al., 2017). The association between a recharged state mechanical assembly, polite society, and private areas is crucial for post-struggle reproduction (Blattman et al., 2017). Reacting to the requirements of the coercively uprooted is an unpredictable endeavor that needs expansive associations to be produced, including every single applicable on-screen character – conventional turn of events accomplices, money-related organizations, respective benefactors, offices with necessary commands, universal and national NGOs with their information, the private segment and, not most miniature, the more extensive neighborhood everyday society (Blattman et al., 2017).

This has created a situation in which young, disconnected Liberians who were easy recruits to the warring factions of the civil war have become disconnected from the rest of society (Bedert, 2021; Maclay & Özerdem, 2010). The very conditions that led them to the war in the first place – seeking a sense of importance and independence away from the cultural background that marginalized them in the first place – have not been an easy place to reintegrate into after more than a decade of civil war (Bedert, 2021; Maclay & Özerdem, 2010; Taylor, 2023). Qualitative research suggests that post-war re-marginalization leads to the disengagement of young people in the country and that current economic reintegration programs have not addressed the issues of youth empowerment directly enough (Maclay & Özerdem, 2010; Taylor, 2023). Instead, the suggestion is that political and social engagement strategies that take a vertical and horizontal integration perspective are more likely to be effective than simple policy changes in re-engaging young people (Maclay & Özerdem, 2010). Indeed, this re-engagement is necessary for combating the ongoing specter of violence that haunts the country because, without the cooperation of young people, the country cannot rebuild itself (Käihkö, 2017).

One of the main reasons for the disenfranchisement and disconnect of young people in Liberia is that the cultural structure of the country relies on a patrilineal hierarchy in which younger people are placed at the bottom (Maclay & Özerdem, 2010; Moran, 2023). Young people are under the control of their elders until graduating into adulthood, a transition that does not typically happen until the individual is well into their 30s (Maclay & Özerdem, 2010). Many young people at the time sought war to declare independence from this structure and gain some autonomy outside the traditional structures. As one respondent to an interview suggested, the war was "because of dissatisfaction, because those men have been marginalized and abused" (Maclay & Özerdem, 2010). One vivacious here is that participation in the civil war was shaped by opportunity rather than bloodthirsty motivation, which suggests that structures that prevent the marginalization of young men may be beneficial in dealing with the ongoing problem of violence in the state (Käihkö, 2017). As young men were the most "detachable" part of society because they had no connection to this older hierarchy, one solution outside of policy is to ensure that these young men do not become detached again and thus have opportunities for independence and action outside of violence (Maclay & Özerdem, 2010).

OCCURRENCES OF VIOLENCE IN LIBERIA

There have been many attempts to understand where violence occurs in Liberia and its underlying causes. One model suggested that identifying risk factors for violence can help to forecast where local violence is most likely to occur, which can then be used to deploy peacekeeping and policing resources more specifically (Blair et al., 2016). Ethnic heterogeneity, for example, was found to be associated with local violence, but problems in the economy are less associated with violence (Blair et al., 2016). Higher local violence occurs where majority and minority ethnic groups share power (Blair et al., 2016; Nomikos, 2021). This information highlights that violence in Liberia may not always be due to obvious risk factors; instead, it can occur due to imbalances between people in that area. It is necessary to take a more holistic look at Conflict theory when considering the occurrences and causes of violence.
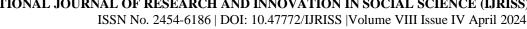
There are still holdovers from the civil wars impacting the country regarding who is causing the violence and against whom (Nygård & Weintraub, 2015). One theoretical explanation for this is that there is a status quo distribution of power among rebel groups, and this is weighed up against the costs of fighting and the likelihood that one rebel group will opt to end bargaining over a set of goods unilaterally (Nygård & Weintraub, 2015). Violent conflict between rebel groups is one way in which the Liberian civil wars was so severe, and the ties that people had during this period are still impacting the situation in the country to this day because of the bargaining game of incomplete information (Nygård & Weintraub, 2015). This is something that should be considered when trying to understand the historical ramifications of the civil war on the country and why there are still tensions between certain groups that had lived together before the wars (Vorrath, 2017), and more specifically, why violence is still so prevalent in the Liberian society.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PREVENTING VIOLENCE AMONG YOUTH

To reduce violence among young people, a colossal investment must be made in building young people's capacity (Blom et al., 2021; Ismail & Olonisakin, 2021). For instance, Hook et al. (2020) noted that natural disasters and civil war have diverted resources away from mental health programs, leading to an increase in mental health challenges that are exasperated by the very conditions that have limited services. These conditions, associated with disconnect, can lead to suicidality and isolation that further distances the Youth from the social realm (Quarshie et al., 2020). According to Quarshie et al. (2020), these outcomes are interrelated with substance use, which increases the negative implications of both mental health conditions and the manifestation of violent behaviors. Here, it is possible to draw a connection between the state of disconnect among the Youth and the continued exhibition of violence within this population. Cooper et al. (2021) recommended the integration of school-based mental healthcare services to increase accessibility as well as provide training for religious and cultural leaders to reduce stigmatization and better assess the community's needs. Through creating a culture of acceptance for mental healthcare, Cooper et al. (2021) posit that more Youth would utilize these services, combatting the negative psychological implications of the civil war and postwar culture of violence.

Another significant element of recommendations in the literature relates to the provision of voice to marginalized populations. Social norms that exclude groups based on age and gender create hostility and support the continuity of violent behaviors (Nir et al., 2023). However, these conditions are sustained due to tradition and misinformation (Nir et al., 2023). Nir et al. (2023) explained that addressing these misconceptions in both in-group and out-group populations can significantly reduce inter and intra-group conflicts. Therefore, Reimer et al. (2021) recommended that diverse groups increase their interaction levels across the populations, which will debunk many of the misconceptions. In the case of Liberia, this means that the inclusion groups must be open to dialogue with the exclusion groups by involving their perceptions in the decisions that affect all people. When such a state of communication occurs, marginalized groups will not depend on violence to be heard, as Hoffman (2011) discussed. Instead, through this transformative approach to social cohesion, policies, and practices can meet the needs of all population members, limiting the root causes of violence.

Notably, economic challenges serve as an additional point of intersectionality in which the Youth are marginalized. As the reintegration programs have yet to meet the economic needs of this population, the perception of the social reality remains negative (Taylor, 2023). Many cited factors have been how these programs have led to disparities, especially among rebel soldiers (Taylor, 2023). However, to ensure that the recovery from civil war addresses the postwar culture of violence, such disparities must be met with educational and economic programs that uplift the youth population. According to Apeh et al. (2020), however, the disparities noted in programs specifically for participants in the civil war extend to educational and economic opportunities for marginalized groups based on age, gender, and social class. Formal and informal education is limited for these populations, widening the disparities gap and increasing the negative perceptions of the social reality (Apeh et al., 2020). Indeed, there have been recent improvements in the

educational system in Liberia, but there remains a significant area of improvement that could reduce violence among the Youth.

Furthermore, as the Youth have learned violence through example and the normalization in society, it is imperative that they are exposed to peacekeeping models through mentorship. Peacekeeping mentorships are often focused on humanitarian efforts in which civilians are shown and trained to use infrastructure or tools to sustain basic needs (Button et al., 2023). However, efforts to mentor communication across groups are often viewed negatively due to cultural differences. In the case of the Youth in Liberia, religious and cultural leaders can provide mentorship to mitigate these concerns. As noted by Cooper et al. (2021), utilizing these community and cultural resources can help to address many of the root causes of violence among the Youth in Liberian society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the article aims to analyze the culture of violence among the Youth in Liberian society to establish recommendations to mitigate these postwar concerns. Relying on the literature relating to the conditions of the Liberian civil war, causes of the culture of violence, and occurrences of violence among the Youth, I have presented a case study to direct the recommendations for mitigating these occurrences. Through the application of the Social Learning Theory, it has become evident that the culture of violence has been established through exposure to ongoing war-like tendencies and the marginalization of the younger generations. Therefore, they have learned that, to be heard, they must exhibit violent behaviors.
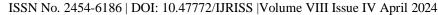
The long enduring civil war conditions have led to society accepting violence as usual. However, this increases the sense of urgency for breaking this cycle. Recommendations for mitigating the violence among the Youth and reducing the potential for generational acceptance of violence include improving mental health services, providing equity in education and economic opportunities, and providing mentorships for peacekeeping behaviors. While there is no way to undo the exposure to violence, it might be possible to address the culture of violence through the integration of these recommendations.

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Dr. Nat B. Walker (Nathaniel Benjamin Walker, Sr.) is a development, peacebuilding, and social policy scholar-practitioner with over 20 years of experience in post conflict settings. He is an adjunct faculty member at the Kofi Annan Institute of Conflict Transformation at the University of Liberia while serving as the Political Advisor and Early Warning Liaison Officer of the Economic Community of West African States in Liberia**.**

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