

Chapter 12

Barriers to Resilience Processes: Understanding the Experiences and Challenges of Former Child Soldiers Integrating into Canadian Society

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It is estimated that there are currently 250,000 children involved in armed conflict internationally (United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, 2008). Furthermore, at the end of 2008 there were approximately 32 million refugees globally (UNHCR, 2008/2009). Many of these individuals seek safe refuge in Canada. Canada receives between 240,000 and 265,000 immigrants and refugees annually (Statistics Canada, 2009). In 2011, 15,600 refugees were admitted to Canada, approximately 40 % of the total number of applications received that year (IRB, 2011). It is often overlooked that refugees coming to Canada from conflict zones may also have been used in conflict as child soldiers.

A child soldier is defined by the Paris Principles as, “any person below 18 years of age who is or has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities” (UNICEF, 2007, p. 7). While the majority of child soldiers are believed to be in African countries, it is also a practice used in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. It is estimated that 40 % of the child soldiers that are used are girls (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

Children undertake a variety of roles within armed groups, and are exposed to a variety of traumatic experiences which impact negatively on their mental health and psychosocial well-being, resulting in increased prevalence rates of mental disorders, including mood, anxiety, and conduct disorders (Tol, Song, & Jordans, 2013). Effective intervention is challenged by the diverse and complex ways in

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which former child soldiers (FCSs) exercise personal agency in the course of their experiences. As Mark Drumbl (2012) explains, “the portrayal of the child soldier as a faultless passive victim is unduly reductive . . . [that] occludes, flattens and conceals details. . . which are salient and matter” (p. 11; see also Abdullah et al., 1997; Boyden & Mann, 2005; Machel, 1996). As with policy and practice elsewhere, Canadian responses in terms of culturally embedded legislation, services and general public response is more-often-than-not misaligned with the needs of refugees who are FCSs (Boyden & Mann, 2005).

While the use of children in armed forces is a global problem, this chapter’s focus is on the experiences of FCSs from Sub-Saharan Africa, specifically South Sudan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). To this end, we draw on the experiences of resilient, African FCSs who were refugees to Canada and who participated in two separate exploratory sessions, focused on the refugee and integration experiences of FCSs to Canada, conducted by the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative in 2010 and 2012. For the purposes of this chapter, we conducted a secondary data analysis of the transcriptions with a view to exploring how migrating FCSs’ interaction with Canadian culture potentially hinders their resilience processes as shaped by the heritage cultures that they bring with them to Canada. Put differently, we explore how Canadian culture is less facilitative of the resilience processes of FCSs given its profound differences from traditional African cultures. In this way, the chapter also provides an illustration of how a clash of cultural traditions can complicate resilience processes.

12.1 The Cultural Contexts and Resilience Processes of African FCSs

While numerous differences exist culturally amongst the communities from which child soldiers come, some cultural features are salient across groups in an African context. In general, African youth come from collectivist societies where key attachments can be quite diverse, extending beyond parents and immediate nuclear families (Mann, 2001). Youth are typically expected to make their extended families and communities of origin proud, in part by gaining an education and contributing to familial and community upkeep (Theron & Theron, 2013). Furthermore, in numerous African cultures, meaning-making of life events is attached to family relationships in ways that are not as evident in more individualist and industrialised nations such as Canada. Numerous studies have highlighted the key role of caring guardians (nuclear and extended family as well as non-family members) in the capacity of youth from post-conflict settings to resist the effects of community stigma and exclusion (see, for example, Betancourt, 2012; Boyden, Eyber, Feeny, & Scott, 2004).

Socialisation of children in collectivist cultures fosters team work and cooperation with a goal of working towards collective benefits (Boyden et al., 2004). This

approach to collective survival and wellbeing is ordinarily maintained in conflict settings, and often forms the basis of both indoctrination into armed groups (Betancourt & Khan, 2008) and maintaining wellbeing in contexts of combat (Denov & Maclure, 2009; Johnson, Morantz, Seignior, Zayed, & Whitman, 2012; Maclure & Denov, 2006). Traditional child-elder interaction is typically framed by cultural understandings: that respect for and adherence to elders is reciprocated with a valuing of children, who are therefore to be protected and nurtured by elders. These cultural contracts are often exploited by militant leaders who demand loyalty and obedience in exchange for protection (Betancourt & Kahn, 2008).

While the cultural framework of many African child combatants may be more collectivist, this framework does not negate the agency of youth themselves, who often draw on personal capacity and strength to navigate physical and psychological challenges and dangers they face (Denov & Maclure, 2009). Importantly, youth engagement in combat can bolster personal empowerment, developing personal resources such as self-efficacy and confidence and improve social status (Denov & Maclure, 2009).

Nevertheless, research focused on the positive adaptation of FCSs post conflict has underscored community reaction to the return and integration of FCSs as one of the most critical factors underlying the wellbeing of these youth (Betancourt, 2012). The importance of community acceptance and support of youth underscores the role of collectivism in their fostering positive outcomes. The interaction of collectivist culture (including respect for elders) with agentic experiences (that have challenged the motivation of elders) results in a complex historical background for youth entering contexts such as Canada.

12.2 Canada, Immigration, and Youth

Canada provides refugee status to individuals in need of protection – such as FCSs – as per the UN Convention Relating to Status of Refugees (1951) (CCR, 2008). The experiences of refugees to Canada varies greatly and is influenced by numerous factors, including country of origin, age, socio-economic status, education, whether they are accompanied by family members, and physical and mental health. The onus is on applicants to prove they are being persecuted in their country of origin which can be an arduous process, particularly in instances where applicants have fled war-torn contexts. Average processing time is about 16 months (UNHCR, 2008/2009) and can cost refugees up to CAD\$10,000 for costs related to their application processing, transportation, and medical examinations (CCR, 2008). While refugee applicants are provided loans by the Canadian government, it is expected that these will be repaid with interest within 12 months of arriving in Canada (see also <http://ccrweb.ca/en/transportation-loans>). Some applicants who manage to enter Canada before submitting their application can be “stuck” for years without any permanent status in Canada (CCR, 2002), severely limiting access to

basic resources (including medical care) and impacting negatively on employment options (CCR, 2012) and capacity to integrate with Canadian society.

Important sources of support for newcomers, include friends, family, faith communities and other refugees and immigrants (CCR, 2002). Most must adjust to an individualist consumer culture, and more importantly, struggle against racism deeply rooted in Canadian society (CCR, 2012). In addition to limiting integration, this affects employment, housing, and how contributions are valued, impacting sense of civic engagement and responsibility (CCR, 2002; Rousseau, Crepeau, Foxen, & Houle, 2002). For FCS this experience is additionally complex.

In 2000, Canada became the first country to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict which establishes 18 as the minimum age for recruitment and deployment of soldiers (UNCRC, 2002). Yet, many of Canada's immigration laws and policies appear to contradict this protocol, rendering FCSs vulnerable to the threat of prosecution and deportation (Adleman, 2002; Bryan & Denov, 2011).

Consequently, no accurate data exists regarding the numbers or experiences of FCS migrants. Senator Dallaire, a key advocate for increased awareness regarding the use of child soldiers following his experiences commanding the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), argues that Canadian immigration laws need to change so that FCSs are not restricted from coming to Canada:

If you have to start your immigration process with hiding the fact that you were a former child soldier we have a fundamental mistake to address in our immigration process. One of the most horrific things is living under the threat that one day some person might say something and call attention to the fact that you were a former child soldier and how this might be used as grounds to extradite you from Canada (The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 2010).

Revisions to existing legislation that potentially allow FCSs now living in Canada to be prosecuted for offences committed as minors while engaged in hostilities would possibly alter the culture of their integration into Canada in two ways. The first would be the capacity for FCSs to talk about their experiences should they choose. And second, these changes would facilitate the establishment of services and supports more closely aligned with the needs of FCSs. More importantly it would create a social space for FCSs to manage their experiences in ways that would better facilitate healthy psychosocial outcomes. As Betancourt (2012) points out, when communities are accepting, FCSs fare well. If however, societies are not accepting of refugees and in particular FCSs, then the integration and settlement experience is difficult at best, and at worst, resilience processes that can potentiate positive outcomes inhibited.

12.3 Resilience Theory and the Challenges Faced By FCSs in Canada

In this section, we report a secondary data analysis of the transcribed reflections of 30 African FCSs residing in Canada. We used the lens of Ungar's Seven Tensions (Ungar et al., 2007) to conduct this analysis and to better understand how Canadian legislative and cultural practices challenge resolution of these tensions, given the differences that often exist between Africentric heritage cultures and that of Canada. To explore these experiences, we draw on statements made by participants who attended 2010 and 2012 focus group sessions hosted by the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative. The first included only FCSs from South Sudan and the second female FCSs from South Sudan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Overall 30 FCSs participated in these sessions; 13 females and 17 males. The purpose of these meetings was to explore FCSs' experiences of integrating into Canadian life. At the time of the meetings, participants' ages ranged from 18 to 35 years¹ and their length of stay in Canada ranged between 2 and 20 years. All participants were invited because they were then leading lives that showed positive psychosocial outcomes that reflected resilient transitions.

12.3.1 *Power and Control*

Allied to their African heritage cultures' veneration of education, all interviewed FCSs prioritised receiving an education in Canada. In many African communities, education is seen as critical to future success, and as a means of constructively shaping improved life worlds for all (Hoppers, 2001), in ways that are perhaps not considered in Canadian culture. As Jane² explained, "Education is not only needed for a job, but it shapes how you see the world."

FCSs perceived education as key to feeling in control of future destinies and having the power to move towards these destinies, with concomitant access to social-emotional and physical resources. However, this aspiration was often frustrated by the realities of the Canadian context and the challenges of adjustment as newcomers. Kuol explained,

missing home can affect attentiveness in school or university. At first I could not keep up with the pace of the lectures, I had to seek assistance from other students and professors regularly.

¹ While all young adults, the age range of participants is still quite diverse. Fear of prosecution due to engagement in combat, meant that engaging resilient FCS participants was challenging. Because of this age restrictions were not included in the recruitment of participants.

² Pseudonym.

Challenges included practical, emotional, and financial difficulties, but also extended to cultural differences. For instance, in participants' contexts of origin, education does not demand parental engagement, while in Canada education is highly dependent on this. As Jane further explained, these differences result in a misalignment between the capacity of refugee families and the Canadian education system that can place strain on youth and their attempts at gaining an education:

The school system in Canada is set up in such a way that it expects all parents of kids to be educated. For many of the refugee children that are in Canada this may not be the case and then it appears as if the parent is not supporting the child. However, this is not the case, but for someone who is illiterate and does not know the culture how can they support their child in the Canadian education system?

Additionally, financial demands stemming from the Canadian refugee system (see *Canada, Immigration and Youth* earlier) threaten this educational possibility. Michel talked about the challenges in balancing financial responsibilities with the desire to achieve:

I attended two different high schools because we could not afford to stay in our first house, so we had to move. Because I had to work three jobs for my mom and I to survive, my marks suffered at school and I almost did not get into university.

12.3.2 Access to Material Resources

For many FCSs, life in Canada held the promise of access to material resources: achieving an education meant opportunities for gainful employment that would facilitate access to resources for both those living in Canada, and for their family and community in their country of origin. This promise coloured how some FCSs experienced their Canadian peers who were perceived, by Michel for example, as “spoiled, ungrateful and disconnected from the real world”. He further reflected:

high school was a strange experience, I felt like Canadians complain a lot, about little things. One day a friend was complaining about her cell phone, she was upset her parents bought her a black one instead of a pink one. That night I called my sister in Uganda and she was telling me she needed money for food. . .the contrast was so strange to me.

In African cultures it is understood that family members living abroad have access to resources and finances that are not accessible to those who remain behind. Given the collectivist nature of these communities it is expected that money will be sent back home. In fact, in 2012 remittances to Africa outnumbered the amount of official development assistance received by African nations from Western donors (Doyle, 17 April 2013).

Many FCSs, however, felt that expectations of what Canada would offer were unrealistic. Participants described how depictions of Canadian life, as recounted by Canadian officials, were idealistic and excluded adequate descriptions of the difficult aspects of life in Canada, including actual financial demands of life in Canada in relation to personal income. This mismatch between expectations and reality

became a challenge for FCSs as they struggled to explain the reality of Canadian (or Western) financial systems to those within their country of origin. As Kuol explained, “When you are here people back home think you are better off here and expect you to send money.”

The burden of restricted finances was aggravated in that the apparent financial good will of the Canadian refugee system is often misunderstood. Michel explained the consequences of this, saying:

The Government of Canada makes you pay back loans for bringing you here as a refugee. So you arrive and are already in debt from the get-go. This was not explained to us when we came. A bill came in one day and we had to focus on paying it back. This bill even included chocolate chip cookies and a bottle of water that we had at the embassy when we landed. . . although I was at school, I had to work three jobs to help pay off the debt we owed. The debt kills your credit so that you start off already on a bad foot.

Additionally there are restrictions to finding employment for refugees to Canada. Such restrictions are compounded by cultural differences in prioritisation of work experience and self-promotion. Kuol, for example, described how the biases related to work experience undermine the ability to become financially independent:

finding jobs is difficult here because you need experience for everything. At home, you are not expected to have the experience, they train you on the job to give you the experience.

Kuol explained further how cultural understandings may also limit your ability to achieve success:

in my culture you do not “self-promote” yourself to others. However, in Canadian culture you must learn to sell yourself to get jobs, scholarships and opportunities.

12.3.3 Identity

Many participants voiced personal identities that reflected collectivist culture which informed a sense of civic responsibility to community. For some this identity, together with experiences of war, shaped their outlook on life, desire to achieve, willingness to trust others, and a tenacious spirit. These collectivist identities were, however, challenged by the realities of the formal Canadian systems and individualist culture that FCSs have to navigate. Abiel explained:

The reason I came to Canada was because of educational aspirations and [to] contribute back to society. What I found was that it was very difficult here. When you come to Canada as a child affected by war you never had the education that other kids had. I struggled a bit and was frustrated, should I continue or should I just quit. But my determination, as a result of my struggles, made me to continue to study and then I went on to college.

12.3.4 Relationships

Coming from traditionally collectivist cultures and close-knit communities, relationships are crucial to the resilience processes of African FCSs (Betancourt, 2012; Boyden et al., 2004). Yet for many FCSs, their experience in creating and maintaining relationships in Canada, and with family and friends in their countries of origin, was challenging, in part because Canadian culture prioritises peer relations above familial ones. Elizabeth recounted the challenges that young Sudanese refugees faced in this regard:

[Youth in Canada] are more influenced by their friends than their families. More concerned with appearing cool to their friends and parents feel like they have no control over them. In traditional Sudanese culture, the youth listen to their elders, but in Canadian society this all changes.

Making friends in Canada is further complicated, in part due to issues of identity, Canadians' perceptions of immigrants and refugees, and FCSs' unfamiliarity with Westerners. Michel, for example, recalled:

it took a long time to make friends. When I enrolled in high school it was challenging as the new African kid, the odd one out in school. The other Africans had been here a long time and we didn't gel.

Others, such as Kuol, remarked:

at first I could not differentiate people in Canada, especially girls. I was accustomed to identifying people based on height. So, I had to learn to distinguish different features such as hair, eyes, etc. Prior to this it was hard for me to remember people's names.

Maintaining relationships was exacerbated by FCSs' intrusive memories of their traumatic past. For example, Michel explained:

I still get nightmares, it is hard for my friends to deal with. . . people just do not understand and it makes it difficult to form relationships. I do not know what it is like to sleep through an entire night.

FCSs foregrounded the resilience-supporting value of strong and supportive relationships, ranging from friends, to professors, colleagues at university, or members of their communities. In this regard, Michel recounted a supportive relationship with a chaplain at school:

at a high school I attended, I connected to people through the help of the chaplain. She was more helpful to me than anyone else that I encountered up 'til then. She was very open, her role was to be the religious and spiritual support for kids and to give advice when kids reach out. This chaplain pushed me towards university and success in public speaking.

Particularly female participants argued that it was critical to be afforded opportunity to articulate their wartime experiences in a safe setting. Unfortunately, many FCSs struggled to experience such opportunities. Kiki, for example, had resided in Canada for 20 years before she shared her stories with anyone. As Kuol stated, part of this reluctance related to FCS experiences being foreign to the average Canadian:

I do not want to tell people in Canada my story because I do not want them to be sad. I am not sure how much people here can handle.

Yout elaborated:

the issue with child soldiers here in Canada is not that they don't want to speak, but that they are not aware that their stories are welcome.

This is compounded by FCSs' concern that acknowledging combat experiences may create barriers for immigration. Peter recounted the fear he experienced in relaying his military experience both during his refugee application process, and after arriving in Canada. He explained that while in the refugee camps applicants were discouraged from identifying as FCSs when applying for immigration to Canada. The belief was that this experience is viewed negatively by Canadian authorities:

if you talk about your experience as a soldier, they will not accept your applications and you have to hide this fact. . .the immigration authorities are always instructing you on what to say.

He elaborated, saying that:

in Canada we are told that they don't like people who have been involved in military things. So, if you say you were a soldier you might be rejected.

12.3.5 Cultural Adherence

For many FCSs, the challenges of coping with individualistic, Canadian culture was overwhelming and isolating. For example, participants commented on the cultural differences related to the perception of time in their home country versus Canada. As Kuol described, "Everything here in Canada is rushed. We are not accustomed to such perceptions in Africa."

Others felt strongly about the absence of collectivist values. Elizabeth explained "In South Sudan, we work collectively, every decision you make for yourself must be framed in terms of how it affects your whole family. This is not the case in Canada." Similarly, as Jane noted, notions of family and community are much different in Canada than in an African context:

back home your definition of family is very big, it includes all of your extended family. But here in Canada your definition of family is much smaller and this can present a lot of difficulties in terms of access and benefits.

Cultural differences also complicated interpersonal interactions. Kuol, for example, explained how he has not had a girlfriend since his arrival in Canada:

I have not had any girlfriends here, even though I may like a girl. This is because of traditional expectations of my family. . .it may be very difficult for the girl to meet the expectations due to the cultural differences and I would not want to put a girl through this
 . . .

While balancing integration with cultural traditions can be difficult, successful navigation seems to call for deep reflection and critical awareness of the differences of culture and traditions. Michel spoke of this duality:

I have kept some of my traditions, but try to balance this with Canadian culture. My culture is very religious and I grew up with rigid thoughts, being in Canada has caused me to question a lot of my beliefs.

12.3.6 Social Justice and Cohesion

With regards to social justice, most participants were concerned with how they could contribute positively to their countries of origin rather than Canadian society. As Jane explained:

We live physically here in Canada but emotionally we live back at home. People want to go back, but only if there is a conducive environment to participate.

Caught in this tension between wanting to contribute to their home country but feeling barred from doing so, some respondents relayed how their Canadian experience affected their views on how to resolve conflicts in their home countries. Kuol relayed:

My Canadian experience has taught me that I can reach out to others and advocate for others. I believe I can learn here in Canada and take back these experiences to help my country . . . I want to give back, use my knowledge and incorporate this to solve problems in my home country. This is my driving force to obtain an education here in Canada.

Conclusion

For many African FCSs now living in Canada as refugees, there was a strong contrast between their heritage culture and the more individualist life-world of Canada. As evident in participating FCSs' reflections, this disparity complicated their resolution of the tensions informing resilience. Simultaneously, however, resilience processes were supported by the interaction of the traditional culture of their childhood homes and resources made available in the Canadian context. For example, the collectivist culture of their childhood with the related sense of civic responsibility formed the basis of most participating FCSs' resilience processes. A Canadian education, was typically regarded as the vehicle that would provide the capacity – the power—to access resources and importantly, to shape the future course of their lives, including their capacity to make meaningful contributions to their home communities. In this way, it is the financial and educational potentialities of their Canadian context that potentiates resilience processes for FCSs. These three adaptive components of civic responsibility, personal capacity, and control of their future are closely tied to family, home community and

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Canada: the access to resources that education provides also means that resources can be sent home, and knowledge can be used to inform peace-keeping and restricting efforts.

As noted earlier, adherence to heritage culture within the Canadian context can place exceptional strain on FCSs. When FCSs adhere to a collectivist culture of sharing resources for example, they face obstacles in the enactment of this culture. Formal Canadian systems, such as immigration and education, are structured in ways that complicate and challenge navigation to resources. Furthermore, both formal and informal systems (i.e. immigration laws and communities) limit the capacity of FCSs to negotiate for appropriate social, educational and employment resources. When home communities fail to understand the realities of the Canadian context, the expectation of financial support from the newcomers can compound their struggle to integrate into their new contact and hamper resolution of their combat experiences. In this way, resulting cultural and contextual conflicts stand to threaten the resilience processes of FCS.

Many of the challenges and resilience processes of FCSs are not dissimilar to those of other refugee youth coming from conflict settings. However, the conflict between heritage and Canadian cultural and policy frameworks impact FCSs in important ways, in particular their emotional and psychological healing process, and the role of meaning making. As Boyden and Mann (2005) explain, the process of meaning making is often culturally informed. When personal culture and broader contextual culture conflict, this process can be severely hampered (Masten, Best, & Garnezy, 1990). Existing Canadian legislation has resulted in a culture of silence around the experiences of FCSs. By contrast heritage African cultures are ordinarily ones of expression and sharing, including traumatic experiences. Furthermore, healing within the African culture of many FCSs is community-based rather than service-based, as is the case in Canadian culture. The practice of meeting individually with a therapist as part of the healing process can be at odds with the African heritage cultural practices that inform the resilience processes of FCSs. These findings are key when considered in light of the fact that a recent report by the Canadian Council for Refugees (2011) identified access to employment and support for mental health and trauma related issues as top priorities for refugees in Canada.

In summary, we have recounted the viewpoints of a small number of FCSs living in Canada as refugees and the challenges they faced during their integration into Canada. Their experiences suggest that Canadian law and policy with regards to immigration and service provision must be adapted to assist FCSs rather than ostracize or alienate them. Such changes will help create a culture of service and social context that can facilitate the resilience processes of FCSs through an open and supportive environment. Collectively,

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these changes may allow for better integration of heritage cultures with the Canadian context, where African cultural practices can be accounted for in formal and informal supports in ways that further potential resilience processes.

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