Communal Crisis and Psychological Trauma of Victims of Ezza/Ezillo Communal War in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Communal crisis dislocates sources of livelihood while the psychological consequences has been debilitating. Psychological distress experienced during communal conflict dislocates a persons' integral psychological wellbeing leading to psychological trauma. This study is a narrative inquiry of the experiences of psychological trauma underwent by victims of Ezza/Ezillo communal crisis in Ebonyi State. The principal objective was to investigate if there are elements of psychological trauma in the experiences of the participants. The study adopted the qualitative narrative approach because narrative inquiries have the strength to expose silenced voices like those of war victims. The narrators comprised of 20 communal war victims who experienced the Ezza/Ezillo communal crisis who were sampled through purposive and convenience sampling technique. The study was anchored on John Bowlby's and Mary Ainsworth attachment theory. Narrative content analysis was conducted and results revealed that participants made sense of their experience of the crisis using knowledge that resembled those of psychological trauma. Such experiences included but not limited to a loss of sense of self, nightmares and flashback memories, feeling of disconnection from the world, sleepless nights, feeling disoriented, disorganized and confused, having problem of concentration, feeling of helplessness and suppressed emotions. Narrative analysis in the study further revealed that the experiences affected their overall wellbeing and made them at some point to have suicide ideation. Conclusion was made that the communal war the participants experienced affected their overall psychological wellbeing such that they made sense of their experience of war with knowledge that coincided with those of psychological trauma. Recommendations were made some of which included that the victims of the Ezza/Ezillo communal war required both psychological and financial intervention to help ameliorate their sufferings. Such intervention was expected from Federal government, State government, Non-governmental organizations and other Agencies.

Keywords: Psychological, Trauma, Communal, war, Victims, Crisis, Ezza/Ezillo

Introduction

Crisis can be said to be part of human existence but the high rate of inter/intra-ethnic crisis and communal war experienced in Nigeria has become a condition of concern. Communal war and crisis as everyone knows, leaves the people affected in a shattered condition owing to loss of lives and properties that are sometimes irreplaceable. At the global scene, communal crisis has caused disruptions in territorial relationship. Nigeria in the past decades has witnessed numerous violent cases of communal/ethnic war and crisis. As current researches has noted, the ravaging communal conflicts around the world occur both among people of the same ethnic group and those of other out-groups with debilitating consequences (Juon, 2024; Baalen, 2024; Mahadevan, 2024).

Imobighe (2003, p.13) gave example of some notable communal crisis that has occurred in Nigeria within the last decades. These include; "The Chamba-Kuteb in Taraba State in the year 2000; Itsekiri-Ijaw/Urhobo between 1999-2006 in Delta State; Ife-Modakeke in Osun State between 1997-2003; Aguleri-Umuleri crisis from 1933-1999 in Anambra State; Yoruba-Hausa Community crisis of 1999 in Shagamu, Ogun State; Ijaw-Ilaje conflict 1998 in Ondo State; the intermittent clashes and killings of 2004 in Yelwa in Kano, Kano State; Basa-Egbura crisis of 1997/98 in Nassarawa State; Eleme-Okrika crisis of 2000 in Rivers State; Hausa/Fulani-Sawaya crisis of 2001 in Bauchi State" (Imobighe, 2003, p.13). There are yet so many communal crisis and war that has occurred within the country. These crises and communal war has consequently displaced many from their home town such that survival and hopes of livelihood becomes bleak. Communal conflict has become common and needs to be examined differently because of the enormity of trust that is broken when people who live closely and enjoy proximity values suddenly become enemies and strangers. Klinken (2007) had earlier noted that the nature of communal crisis is diverse such that in order to understand the dynamics of communal crisis, it was important to understand the underlying causes of such conflicts. While it is important to understand the root causes of these conflicts, the overarching effects that the crisis has on the lives of participating and innocent individuals is sometime horrendous to imagine. Just as Klinken (2007) opined, the core dynamics of communal conflicts are still not understood by the research community, so also are the human side of communal conflict. A focus on humans are

affected by communal war needs to be illuminated more at this period when there are upsurges in the number of communal war cases in Nigeria.

The Ezza/Ezillo Conflict

Nigeria is replete with violent ethnic and communal crisis which destroys both lives and properties. The Ezza/Ezillo people who are studied in this research are related people from an ethnic/communal group that are differentiated with minor language distinction. As Mba and Nwangwu (2014) noted, these two communities are very homogenous in terms of ethnic composition and they share the same cultural values owing to their origin and ancestral heritage. This implies that they have a lot in common as people of same origin but divided by communal war.

On the major causes of the crisis, Oji and Nwoba (2014) observed that the Ezza/Ezillo communal crisis was caused by a multiplicity of factors such as cultural denigration, indigenship, land ownership, competition of resources, and sociocultural issues among others. These causes are in exhaustive because some were remote while others were immediate. For instance other sources (Ajeli, 2023) found that biased historical information, politics and land disputes were the root causes of the Ezza/Ezillo communal crisis. The Ezza/Ezilo crisis as studies by Emma-Echiegu, Eze, Izugbara, Mbam, and Chigbo, (2018) revealed, affected the victims to the point where they felt a huge sense of loss and feeling of emptiness due to the overwhelming nature of the communal war. Oji and Nwoba (2015) studies on the human cost of the Ezza/Eillo crisis found that death tolls from the communal crisis rose to about 150 lives which included women and vulnerable children.

The Ezza/Ezillo crisis which has claimed many lives has also displaced many individuals as well. As Itumo and Nwobashi (2017) opined, the Ezza/Ezillo communal crisis has affected socioeconomic activities in the crisis environment as thousands has been displaced from the war. As the authors posited, the crisis has led to untold hardship for both the warring parties and other innocent citizens communities the environment (Itumo & Nwobashi (2017). In the case of innocent citizens, the Abakaliki-Enugu expressway which passes through the Ezillo axis was a death den as innocent passengers often met their untimely death from the communal crisis (Ani,

2017). While evaluating some of the effects of the Ezza/Ezillo crisis Onwe, Nwogbaga and Nwakanma (2015) identified the crisis as among the major causes of increase in poverty level and unemployment in Ebonyi State. This is partly because social conflicts and communal war has debilitating effects on social development due to chaos orchestrated by tension, violence and lack peace. People are been traumatized by their experiences of communal war. Others have been disconnected from their integral functional as a result of their communal war experiences. This is far more beneficial than consideration of economic waste occurring from communal war as most studies have recently done.

Conceptual Review

Psychological trauma

Individuals who experience life challenging events are likely to experience psychological trauma. Communal war and other various forms of conflict can expose individuals to psychological trauma experience. Just as Quincy (2000) observed in a research on Hmong that they have a history of trauma related to invasions and war. Such experiences have long characterized victims of war. However, most researches are not directed towards the victims in terms of their individual internalized behaviours after exposure to such life threatening experiences which of course are the basis for experience of psychological trauma. Meanwhile, psychological trauma has been highly correlated at any time-point and any mental disorder (Hogg et al, 2023).

The experience of psychological trauma has become prevalent and conditions driving them are common in the current period when there multiple cases of crisis among communities and nations. This is why Bloom and Sarah (2008) informed that we need to have a shift in knowledge on how we perceive human problematic situations because trauma experience has been seen as prevailing. Victims of communal war are even at the forefront of experiencing psychological trauma because of their exposure to pains of losing loved ones in a violent manner, the loss of valuables and in most cases their displacement from their home communities where they have lived and established their livelihoods. All of these can be considers as emotional

abuse and threat to their social integrity which has been seen to predict psychological trauma (Neuner, 2023)

Trauma is now being recognized as part of human experience and is no longer a specialized area as Gold (2008) informed. Because the current world is full of chaos and people are negotiating boundaries in a more challenging manner, making sense of life experiences with trauma experience is equally becoming common. Naso (2008, p. 68) noted that "Global distress leads inevitably to the pervasive sense of helplessness". These conditions of living have seen many individuals fighting both within families, villages, communities, localities, ethnic groups, racial groups and among nations. The individual experiences that accompany such crisis and war are most times self-defeating. This is equally because it has been found that traumatic events have become very common in most societies (Kolk, 2000). Community crisis and communal war has no advantage because what is lost both material and human cannot be at parity with what triggered the crisis. However, Freud (1926/1959) saw global distress as an essential traumatic feature (Naso, 2008). This implies that trauma experience may be inevitable in the cases of distress.

Experiences that leave people traumatized might be subtle but if the conditions that create them are not removed or reconstructed, this could make a particular environment traumatic and difficult to inhabit. Such feeling create a fault line in the thought processes of the inhabitant individuals. Although Stolorow (2011, p. 220), argues that "trauma as a possibility and as an eventuality is in part what it means to be human and the possibility of emotional trauma is inherent to the basic constitution of human existence", what is more important is to access how to support the individuals undergoing such trauma conditions. This is further important because if they do not receive help then it may affect their concept of life meaning and, as Solomon (2004) has argued, the most insidious psychological consequence of trauma is the erosion of an individual's sense of purpose and life meaning.

Trauma and psychological wellbeing
Hermann (1992) identifies, among other effects and pathological symptoms, the psychological outcomes of trauma as causing emotional numbing, sadness, shame, helplessness, panic, anger,

shame, aggression, depression and acute symptoms of anxiety. The author was of the view that experiencing a traumatic event alters an individual's perceptions of life (Herman, 1992). During trauma period, the alteration in an individual's functioning may take the form of intrusion into the connected sense of being. Stolorow (2007) describes this as threatening the individual's' psychological organization, something that maintains vitally needed ties in the life of an individual. This is obviously due to loss of wholeness caused by life threatening experiences such as losing a loved one or losing a source of livelihood. Emotionally, a traumatic event shatters absolutism and creates a catastrophic loss which alters an individual's sense of being in the world (Stolorow, 2011). The psychological effects of trauma may cause a traumatized individual to oscillate between self-defeating conditions as feeling of anxiety, depression, helplessness and sadness.

The psychological assumptions and explanations of the etiology and understandings of trauma, sees the individual in the situation as important as well as the event. In the case of people who lost everything that they have lived for, such stressful events could lead an individual to be traumatized, as shown in the works of Seides (2010). Similarly, Seides (2010) further argues that an individual's appraisal and interpretation of stressful events determine how they handle psychologically stressful situations. This view, however, has been argued against. For example, Sydney Philips rejected the idea that what made an event traumatic was determined by the meaning or appraisal the individual gave to such event (Bonomi, 2004). Although an individual's interpretation of an event is important, sometimes the situation may just be so overwhelming that meaning-making and appraisal of the situation become very difficult. Under such conditions it's probably not about what people think but how they feel they have been affected. Thus, Buheji (2024) argued that when people experience painful and distressing life condition, it should understood from what he/she says they are experiencing.

Trauma exposure creates a fault-line in the psychic functioning of an individual (Straker, Watson & Robinson, 2002). It is believed to shut down the normal functioning of the individual's psyche and this, as Straker and colleague have noted, is exploited by other contingencies. Thus, the other functioning aspects of the individual are also affected by traumatic experiences. Brewin and

Holmes (2002) refer to this psychic dysfunction as a mental defeat situation where an individual experiences helplessness in a profound state that makes categorization of either their emotions or their beliefs difficult. This situation could lead to an individual experiencing life through an irrational lens since their psychological well-being is altered by traumatic experiences. What may be considered irrational lens can be used by an individual overwhelming life circumstances which then suggest that the center could not hold anymore. Psychological effects of trauma and reactions to traumatic experiences may differ across individuals because, as Levine (1997) observed, trauma affects people in different ways. What happens during a period of intense emotional disruption is that people experiencing trauma tend to bring in different defense mechanisms to avoid traumatic memories. However, as Brewin and Holmes (2003) argue, a traumatic memory breaks into consciousness and intrudes in different forms, such as flashbacks and nightmares. Thus, avoiding trauma traumatic memory may not help the trauma victim since these experiences keep surfacing into awareness. Avoidance can be a worthwhile memory defense mechanism but when the experience becomes self-defeating repressed memories will be forced into consciousness.

Consequently, psychological and mental functioning are disorganized during trauma as the situation makes connections between the inner world and the person's outer world difficult (Naso, 2008). Levine (1997) also notes that articulation and having a felt sense of self become disconnected. The disconnected sense of self in trauma, constituted in an intersubjective context, as Stolorow (2011) notes, causes pain because it cannot find a relational home in which to be held. Again, this coincides with the inability of victims of trauma to articulate and integrate their sense of cohesion because both their inner worlds and their relationships with the outer environment are affected.

Theoretical Framework

The attachment theory developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth in 1958 which draws from the concepts of ethology, cybernetics, information processing, developmental psychology, and psychoanalysis (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) grounds this study. The basic tenets of the attachment theory lie in the exposition of the consequences of disruption, separation, deprivation

and bereavement akin to mother and child figure relationship (Breherton, 1992). This study pursues the consequences of deprivation, bereavement, disruptions and separation of victims of Ezza/Ezillo communal crisis from their previous conditioning and consciousness. This is pursued through the trauma framework because trauma can occur due to disconnection from attachment figures and can be understood from the articulations in the attachment theory. The attachment theory proposes a deprivation hypothesis which suggests that continual attachment disruption between caregivers and their attachment figures could result in long term social, cognitive and emotional difficulties (Mcleod, 2024). This break in relationships wherein the environment that provided solace and attachment is disrupted, could account for the onset of psychological trauma and other mental health problems.

Strong, Bean and Feinauer (2010) argue that attachment theory focuses not on one domain but on many among behavioral, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal and social-contextual dynamics in relationships, and the seeming interactions of all these domains. Therefore, because trauma affects all the domains of human functioning, attachment theory, which focuses on the interactions within these domains, can help us understand why people may experience trauma. People, who experienced communal war, lost their cherished families, were separated from their ethnic/communal attachments could become victims of psychological trauma. This is why this study is anchored in the attachment theory.

The attachment theory also emphasizes the importance social networks in maintaining and sustaining healthy living (Bretherton, 1992). The theory also provides an understanding of the outcomes when separation, loss, deprivation or bereavements breaks the bond (Bowlby, 1977). When these bonds are broken, an individual may experience stressful and psychological difficulties and the onset of trauma could become imminent. Benight (2012) argues that traumatic events and experiences could have a considerable effect on the interpersonal relationship pattern of an individual in a way which interrelates with the individual's existing attachment capabilities. Victims of communal crisis who experienced war and were displaced will experience unfamiliarity that are characterized by loss, depression and a feeling of

helplessness (Church, 1989) as a result of losing their attachment figures, which could lead to further cycles of problems.

When there is separation from care givers, an individual's sense of security may be threatened and this may affect their personal identity, possibly resulting to feelings of "self-devaluation, failure, shame, and self-blame that undoubtedly affect interpersonal functioning" (Benight 2012, p. 5). Likewise, separations from parental bonds and cultural familial attachments have been seen to play a significant role in the prediction of later pathology (Main et al, 2011). Communal war victims experience all of these and trauma may become the outcome of their conditions owing to the level of the bond formed before the disruption. What Bowlby, the originator of attachment theory, posited was that natural processes of survival are ingrained in the perceived loss of parental care and love (Bowlby, 1973).

In effect, attachment closely predicts mental health, such that separation from bonds can have implications for psychological discomfort and problems (Bowlby, 1997). Mental health problems may arise from an individual's self-appraisal due to the thought processes about formed relationship in the past (Lamagna, 2011). As the author argues, the appraisal of the present, which otherwise occupies the intra-psychic mind in guiding, regulating and organizing thoughts, affects, perceptions and the general behaviour of the individual, leading to a personal crisis (Lamagna, 2011). Separation from loved figures creates a feeling of loss and disconnection, which also happen during trauma. Although this situation differs between individuals Surcinelli, Rossi, Montebarocci and Baldaro (2010) argue that differences arise because of variations in people's attachment histories. However, individuals may feel insecure when a bond they formed in the past is broken. This is because security is what their old bonds provided to them. Therefore, separation from these attachment figures predicts various psychological problems. Furthermore, as Doucet and Rovers (2010) argue, there is a form of trauma known as generational trauma, which is transmitted from parents to their offspring. These individuals may be traumatized and may hold on to their coherence and functioning through their attachment to their home bonds and families before the outbreak of the communal war they experienced. Therefore, separation may lead to retraumatization. Attachment and separation can thus be seen

as highly implicated in the causes of traumatic experiences. This study addresses the pertinent objective of exploring to gain an in-depth understanding of how people who experienced the Ezza/Ezillo communal conflict were psychologically affected. The goal is to understand whether there are elements of psychological trauma in the experiences of the victims of the Ezza/Ezillo communal war. This will help to illuminate whether life and living is still meaningful to these communal war victims and to explore the kind of available support system that is provided for the victims of the crisis to help them cope with their loses.

Methodology

The study is designed as a qualitative inquiry and data was collected through narrative interviewing. Qualitative methods of inquiry require thick and rich information from few individuals who are considered important in the inquiry process. Participants comprised of 10 males and 10 females within the age of 35-45 years. They were sampled purposively on the reason that they were born and they lived in Ezza/Ezillo for all their lives before the outbreak of the communal war in the early months of 2008. They were also sampled conveniently based on their availability and willingness participates in the study. Participants were able to read and write which was important inclusive criteria such that they were able use English language to tell their stories. Also, the use of "pidgin English", which is common Nigeria, was allowed to ensure that the participants had the right words to use in making sense of their experiences. Narrative guides were used in this study and the narrators had the leverage to oscillate between their experiences without interruptions.

Narrators in this study were briefed about the study prior to the narrative interviewing section. This was to enable them prepare and be relaxed in recounting their ordeal in the form of stories. Each narrator was interviewed separately in their places of comfort. 12 narrators were interviewed inside the cubicles where they lived, 3 were interviewed inside the church where they equally stayed most of the time while the 5 others were interviewed in other quiet places around the community where they reside as refugees. Each narrative section lasted between 45minutes to 1 hour. The stories were captured using audio tape recorders with the permission of the participants for transcription purposes only. The narrators gave their oral consent to be part of

the study and were informed of some of the psychological implications of recounting their experiences.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis, as Riessman (1993, p. 70) notes, "allows for a systematic study of personal experience and meaning: how events have been constructed by active subjects". In this study, individually transcribed narratives are thematically analyzed textually. Narrative content analysis is at an embryonic stage when compared to other defined methods. It primarily aims to interpret the different ways in which people perceive reality, make sense of the world they live in and perform social actions, as Smith and Sparkes (2009) have noted. This technique of interpretation, attempts to attend to the messiness of human actions and responses that clean methods suppress.

The grounding assumptions is that narrative analysis do not conform to the standardized analytical practices seen in other methods. Just as Mishler (1986) has noted, there are different ways in which narrative researchers can attend to the data collected in their narrative interviews. The different ways of doing narrative analysis are not like mainstream methods such as surveys, which have standardized procedures. Narrative researchers cannot rely on these standardized procedures as the procedures do not attend to the diversities in what the participants say, how they say it and what it means to them (Mishler, 1986).

In this study the transcribed stories are analyzed textually from the merging themes that weaved through the stories of the 20 narrators that participated in the study. There was a conversational analysis of the narratives in this study because the narrative interviewing conducted in this research is a form of discourse whose interpretation is a joint production of meaning by the researched and the researchers. This is grounded in the theoretical assumption that the researcher cannot be separated or distanced from the interpretation of what is studied. The narrative analysis is therefore presented using the narrator's actual words in depth so as to avoid the imposition of personal meaning by the researchers in the interpretation of the narratives constructed by the participants. The role of the researchers is to retell these stories and analyze them as a way of making the narratives of the narrators meaningful to the reading audience.

A cross-narrative thematic analysis was done in the study. However, this is not to compare the experiences of the participants but to evidence some possible commonalities and themes that run through their stories, and these serve as the findings. These emerging themes include; loss of sense of self, Nightmares/flashback memories, disorientation and confusion, lack of concentration, sleepless nights and disorganization and suppressed emotions.

Loss of sense of self

Narrators made sense of their experiences with a feeling that their sense of self was disrupted such that they are not sure if what has happened to them has really happened. The narrators felt like they was some mix up somewhere, which means that they have a feeling of disconnection from the world. This is seen in the vignettes of their stories thus: [narrator 2]…..”*I sometimes do not believe that l am the one in this condition*” [narrator 15]”……..*my life changed and it can't be me and keep saying this is not me*” [narrator 5] “.....*I don't understand myself anymore since that war*” [narrator 9] *“…..it made me feel that another person*” [narrator 3] “…..*this war changed me to another person*” [narrator 1] “….*since then I am not myself*” [narrator 4]….”*me john going through this is not like it's me*” [narrator 17] *“….i am no longer the same person*” [narrator 8]….”*I mean do you know that I can't believe it's me that is here in this village*” [narrator 19] “…..*everything is gone including the person inside me*”

As seen in the stories of the narrators, they all had experiences that made them feel that they have lost the sense of who they are. These experiences that weaved their stories were self defeating and were told with a body language that suggests a feeling of living another person's life. The experiences of losing their sense of self as the narrators used to make meaning in their narratives was because they felt the war was overwhelming and they could not cope with the enormity of loss they experienced.

Nightmares/Flashback memories

The experience of nightmares and flashback memories occupied the narratives of the narrators in this study. Participants made sense of their experience of the war using nightmares and flashback memories as catalysts to their unending challenging experiences. This is seen in the vignettes of their narratives as shown below.

[narrator 14] "…..*I can't close my eyes without seeing the way people were being killed and when l sleep bad dream will come and l will jump up since that war*" [narrator 6] "……*the people who died in that war keep coming to my dream to scare me*" narrator 9] "……*my brother who died during the war keep appearing to me because he died in pain*" [narrator 1] "…...*there was too much blood spill and each time I hear a sound l will jump up in fear*" [narrator 5] "…..*my child's bicycle tire bust and I thought they have come again*"[narrator 18] "…...*the feeling that these our brothers who were killed are always with me to make me fear*" [narrator 7] "……*when I close my eyes I see war and I will wake up*"[narrator 12] "….*even now I still fear because of the things I saw in that war*" [narrator 11] "…..*the thought of how I escaped that day is still fresh because of the fear I went through*" [narrator 20] "……*carrying sick mother at the back running and she later die is what I cannot forget even though I try to forget but I cannot*"

The narrators had experienced the war using their different lenses but they have a common feeling which cannot easily be taken away because of intrusions from the war experience. As seen in their story extracts, they have nightmares due to the horror nature of the war. They had nightmares of constant internalized self thought about their experience of the war. Some lost their loved ones and the manner of death affected their lives such that they keep memorizing and soliloquizing on those painful experiences. Some feel scared because of those nightmares and flashbacks suggesting that use insecurity to make sense of their experiences which was also evident in their body language.

Disorientation and Confusion

Narrators in this study used a feeling of being disoriented and confused to make sense of their experience of the communal war. Their stories revealed these themes and it occupied and weaved through their narratives as seen in the following vignettes.

[narrator 18] "…..*do I even know what I am doing again since after that war*"[narrator 10] "….*the worst is that I don't know how to move on because I am just finished*" [narrator 5] *"….i don't know where I am going from here because there is nothing remaining"* [narrator 16] "…*I saw hell in that war and it really disorganized me that I don't know what is going on*" [narrator 7] "….*I keep asking myself what is going on, I am dreaming or is it going to be like this*" [narrator 19] "….*sometimes I will just be confused and be walking around doing nothing since after that war*" [narrator 2] *"….losing him since then has scattered me that I am no longer myself*" [narrator 15] "……*sometimes I will be asking if this really happened because of the pain I feel*" [narrator 12] *"…..they caught him and butchered him and I escaped but is this life that I*

am living? Why not take mine too I always ask" [narrator 6] *"…..I can't even remember since that war when I have been myself because life is not what I know before that war"*

It was very clear in the narratives of the participants that they had experienced the war in a way that it disoriented them and made them to be confused. Confusion of whether it is a dream or they are living the real life occupied the narratives of the narrators. They saw death, escaped but for them life was meaningless without their homes and loved ones that were destroyed and killed in the war.

Lack of Concentration

Narrative evidence also suggests that the participants had problems with concentration since they experienced the communal war. There was evidence of incoherence in their thought processes which again illuminates the overwhelming nature of the kind of condition these narrators have experienced. Narrators have storied about not being able to focus on the future because their past exposure to communal war have not provided an opportunity for them to be articulated in their daily encounters. Thus the vignettes of their narratives suggesting these are shown below.

[narrator 1] *"…..i am confused because I don't know what l am doing again" [*narrator *12] "….i sometimes forget myself not knowing what to do"* [narrator 5] *"….to focus and do something important for myself have not being easy since after that crisis"* [narrator 8] *"..you find out that you don't even know what to do because of too much thinking"* [narrator 14] *"….calling my son Ada and not Nnaemeka that is his name always happen to me because immediately we ran to this place everything changed"* [narrator 6] *"…then my sister said to me Edo, Edo don't do it because I forgot what I was doing that day"* [narrator 3] *"….my farm handwork is no longer as before because they give me small land to farm but when I go to the farm, I will not do any work, I will just be sitting down thinking"* [narrator 9] *"…my children will just be calling me Mama, Mama before I will realize myself"* [narrator 17] *" ….we have suffered and we are still suffering because we don't know what to do"* [narrator 19]…."*life don scatter and I am not focusing on anything again after we were chased out of our homeland"*

As seen above, the participants narrated their ordeal in manners that suggested that they lost concentration and could not engage meaningfully in touch with time and place. It was basically overwhelming as we saw in their narratives where a mother or father had difficulty with attending to the needs of their children owing to excessive self-defeating thoughts. Others lacked

concentration with engaging in activities they enjoyed before their experience of the communal crisis.

Sleepless nights and Disorganization

Narrative evidence also suggested that the narrators had problems with sleeping and were also disorganized by the war they have seen. This was among the major themes that emerged from their stories. They had lost sleep due to constant reminiscent and rumination of the manner they were sent away out of their community and of course by the things they lost. This is evidenced in some of the extracts from their stories as seen below.

[narrator 10]…"*I can't sleep again like before because I am always awake thinking, crying and asking God why me*" [narrator 4] "*…when I remember how my family suffered to be alive sleep will just commot for my eye*" [narrator 12] "*…my life was so much in pain even to sleep is a problem*" [narrator 15] "*…man has suffered to the extent that if I close my eyes I will be seeing those people that were killed and I will start stand up and can't sleep again*" [narrator 14] "*….my life turned upside down after all this is not a normal life at all. Every time is thinking even at night that war affected me as a man*" [narrator 11]…." *I have never been so disorganized in my life like now, what is life even all about without happiness?*" [narrator 20] "*….it is very painful experience that took sleep out of my eye*" [narrator 13] "*….we don't sleep with two eyes closed now because of fear even here that we are staying because of our enemies are very wicked*" [narrator 2] "*….every time I go to bed I will just be awake thinking about how this life has not treated me fairly*" [narrator 17] "*….see my children they were better than this before we came to this place and it is giving me sleepless night*"

The above extracts illuminates the problems associated with sleepless nights encountered by the victims of the Ezza/Ezillo communal crisis orchestrated by their various perception of the damage the war did to their families and livelihood. The fear of reprisal attacks still occupies their thoughts and it further exploited and disorganized their lives. The memories of those they lost to the communal war and the thought of being strangers without hope of returning to their original homelands disorganized the narrators as their stories have revealed.

Suppressed Emotions

Narrators storied a life of suppressed emotions that could not find a relational home to be held. As their stories evidenced, they have expected to get assistance immediately after the war but they felt disappointed that it was difficult. Others could not find people to trust and as such could not share their inner pains with people. These are shown in the vignettes from their narratives below.

[narrator 12] …*" we don't know who to talk to and who is even happy that this happened to us to we just take it as it has happened*" [narrator 3] *"….everybody is not our friend here so I mind who I talk to because people are bad and that is why me and my family have just taken life as we see it*" [narrator 14] *"…..they accepted us here by giving us room to stay with my two children but we that is all. No love after that so we mind our business*" [narrator 6] *"….there is no one to run to here that is why life is more painful*" [narrator 13] *"…..we then came down here and hoping to find peace but they are people that I can share my worries with*" [Edozie] *"….sometimes I feel like begging them of something here but when I remember their behaviour I get weak*" [narrator 4] *"….everybody failed us even government and who can we run to again?"* [narrator 16] *"….there is no need to talk about this thing we saw because it does not even help us"* [narrator 19] *"….my children will be asking me when are we going back and I tell them that they government have not heard our cry so we have to continue our suffering*" [narrator 11] *"….I am asking you people that are high to know when all these our suffering will finish and we can go back to our homes. But since we came here and nobody is asking after us I think we are on our own*" [narrator 15] *"….many people have been coming to ask about what happened but nothing has been done since so I am not expecting them to do anything"*

The above extracts from the stories of the participants reveal a sense of suppressed emotions. This is so because as noted earlier they could not find a reliable relational home for their emotions to be held. Suppressing their emotional pains as their stories reveal has connection with their expectations that they will be supported by several stakeholders, since it did not happen, they resorted to suppressing their emotions.

Result

The findings from the narrative analysis in this study have shown that the victims of the Ezza/Ezillo communal crisis had experiences that affected their integral functioning. The narrative evidence reveals that there are some experiences the victims had which can be related to those of psychological trauma. Major among those experiences as the cross-narrative thematic evidence has shown include; losing their sense of self, experiences of nightmares and flashback memories, feeling of being disorganized, disoriented and confused. Other such feelings include; losing concentration in their daily activities, having a feeling of helplessness and having their emotions suppressed. The results of the analysis also revealed that the conditions of the war victims has been terrible as some of them thought at some point that it could have been better if they had died than live to go through those overwhelming experiences. One may feel that sixteen years after the communal war, the victims might have overcome their worries. This was on the contrary as this study has shown that the agony is still fresh in their mind and they ruminate over them as each day goes. That is an indication of psychological trauma and post trauma experience. These conditions exist because of lack appropriate support systems to help the victims cope with the war experiences.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study have shown how people could represent their lived experiences using stories. The stories may have been scattered due to a fault line that have already occurred in the thought processes of the narrators which was due to the painful experiences they had. They experienced collective pain similar to those found by Buheji (2024) among Gaza War victims that led to grief, psychological distress, displacement and uncertainty which negatively affected the thought processes of youths and children.

The study has earlier targeted gaining an in-depth understanding of how individuals were psychologically affected by the Ezza/Ezillo communal crisis. From the result of the cross-narrative thematic analysis, it was found that the integral psychological functioning of the participants has been affected such that meaning making was difficult. The evidence showed some elements of psychological trauma in the experiences of the victims of the crisis. Thus,

participants storied having disconnection in their sense of self and feeling disorganized which is what happens during trauma. Just as Naso's (2008) study revealed, people undergoing trauma seem to have disorganized psychological and mental functioning, making a connection between their inner and outer worlds difficult. The consequences of psychological trauma are enormous as seen from the results of this study and as research by Spytska (2023) informed, psychological trauma experiences poses high danger with profound impact on people's health than a physical illness.

Participants in the study also had feelings of disorientation and confusion as shown in their narratives. Thus, Stolorow (2007) opined that trauma disorients a person's functioning such that the individual finds it difficult to cohere. The confusion experienced by the participants in this study made it difficult for them to understand themselves. Other resemblance in their experiences with those of psychological trauma is having a feeling of sleeplessness and helplessness. Smith (2007) noted that a person's life is under threat in conditions of trauma and this is characterized by a feeling of helplessness. Other supporting studies (Jones and Wessely, 2007) found that difficulty sleeping and mental disorientation are major evidence of psychological trauma.

There were experiences of lack of concentration in the narratives of the participants and research has found that people who experience traumatic events often have profound feelings of helplessness, continue to dissociate in the face of threat and have difficulties with planning effective actions (Kolk, 2000). Just like Lopez (2011) has said, trauma is damage to the psyche that impacts on the day-to-day functioning of a person and arises from events that are overwhelming and threatening. Participants in this study could not plan effective activities owing to their continuous reminiscence of the war they were exposed to. Fearful situations such as those revealed in this study parallel some of the understandings in the trauma literature, which sees trauma as evolving from held energy in the body arising from a fearful situation that threatens the normal functioning of a person (Levine, 1997; Suvak & Barrett, 2011).

The works of Freud (1926), as Stolorow (2007) noted, indicates that the most immediate impact of trauma is to make an individual feels powerless and overwhelmed. The feelings of powerlessness and overwhelmed emotions was common in the narratives of the participants in

this study which resonates those of psychological trauma. There were evidences of nightmares and flashback memories in the experiences of the participants in this study. Similar to these, Brewin and Holmes (2003) found in their studies that trauma memories break into consciousness and intrude in different forms like flashbacks and nightmares. One can conclude that there are resemblances of the experiences of the Ezza/Ezillo victims with those of psychological trauma. These as (Robert, 2000) informed include; recognizing that there is a threat, recognizing that the stress and trauma cannot be handled with their existing coping skills, experiencing fear, confusion and stress and possibly beginning to show some symptoms of distress and discomfort.

Accordingly, this study further aimed at understanding if life was still meaningful for the participants. Narrative evidence revealed that the participants found life uninteresting as they were also unable to make meanings out of their lives. This was the case because they were preoccupied with the agony and excruciating conditions they experienced which endorse Herman's (1992) statement that traumatic stress disorders may take the form of ruminative preoccupation. Lastly, on the objective of the support they have got, the participants lamented on not receiving support they had expected to receive help from various stakeholders which never happened and which also contributed to the feelings of helplessness they had.

Conclusion

We conclude that the experiences of the participants in this study were overwhelming partly because they could not find a relational home where these experiences will be held. There were experiences that resonates psychological trauma from the narrative experiences that weaved the stories of the narrators. The psychological consequences of the Ezza/Ezillo communal war on the war victims is one that have disrupted their overall psychological wellbeing as their attachment bonds were broken and they were separated from their collective consciousness and previous conditioning. All of these led to other circles of psychological distress captured through the psychological trauma framework.

Recommendations

This study has shown that victims of communal crisis can be exposed to conditions of trauma. It has also revealed from the evidence in the narratives of the participants that support was very essential in their lives. This is to give them hope that life has not ended in the war. Just as some of the narrators storied, people around victims of communal war need to support them to help them move on in life. Such supports were needed from individuals, the immediate communities that welcomed them as refugees, religious organizations, government agencies and private agencies. For such victims in South-Eastern Nigeria who do not have camps for internally displaced persons, they are more exposed to dangers of negative thoughts and suicide ideation. Counselors and therapists are required to visit the victims of communal war because most of them find life so distressing that they wished they were not living. Psychological interventions are therefore very necessary in the lives of these individuals.

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