'What is the use of talking-talking?' Reflections on talking, silence, and resilience in Sierra Leone

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When conducting research on how Sierra Leoneans dealt with the past of a civil war in their everyday lives, I often observed that my informants felt that talking about the war was no longer necessary, especially in public situations. Moreover, many told me that it was better to 'forget' and move on. Speaking about such attitudes at conferences or workshops in Europe, I often received sceptical comments, suggesting that Sierra Leoneans seem 'not yet ready' to deal with their violent past and that this could not be healthy in the long term. Inspired by these reactions, I ask whether 'not talking' about experiences of violence is unhealthy. To answer this question, I draw on psychological studies on resilience that examine the factors that help individuals cope successfully with adversity. I find that the role of 'talking' may be of lesser relevance for the well-being of those who have experienced mass violence. Rather, various individual, social, and cultural factors contribute to resilience. The reflections in this article is intended to encourage further research on the different ways in which people cope with adversity.

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Who are we to say that silence is denial, and talk therapeutic? For silence may be, as in Africa, a way of healing and reconciliation, and not a way of evading or repressing an issue. Indeed, it may be a consummate form of coexistence. Speech disperses the world, say the Mande; silence restores wholeness. Speech burns the mouth; silence heals it. Speech builds the village; silence regenerates the world (Jackson 2005: 155).

Just a few kilometres outside Freetown, in a town called Waterloo, lies a former Liberian refugee settlement. Over the years, it has become a permanent home for Liberians and Sierra Leoneans once displaced by the brutal civil wars in their countries. The cramped buildings nestle around an abandoned airfield, which gives the area an unexpected feel of open space. In November 2010, my research assistant and I found ourselves in Mariatu's[2] house, who invited us to sit with her, as we had been visiting the campsite for the past few days. We discussed the Sierra Leonean Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that concluded its work in 2004. Mariatu suffered a great deal during the civil war, but she told us that she did not like listening to the broadcasted radio sessions of the Commission. She did not see the benefit of the "talking-talking":

> So, what is the use of this talking-talking. Some people, all the time they keep on talking about this rebel talk. They talk about war […]. But for me, I just feel that it has happened, and it has passed, so you should think about another thing. To make you do better things. I have no time to sit and talk about it. But if I keep on talking, I will not even feel good. So I have no time to talk about it (Mariatu, November 2010).

The conversation with Mariatu was one of my first about this issue, but during the course of my subsequent research in Sierra Leone, I learned that many others in several research locations shared such attitudes. Instead of pondering about the past, the majority of my informants deemed it more important to focus on how a better future could be created, given the hardships they faced in their everyday lives. They not only viewed "too much" talking as unnecessary, but many also asserted that it was better to forget about the war, now that it had passed. And indeed, the war seemed rarely a concern in the everyday interactions I witnessed (Mieth 2013b).

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2   Names of respondents are changed.

The impetus for my discussion in this article, however, were the reactions I received when talking about these research findings at conferences and workshops in Europe. I often received sceptical comments on my elaborations about Sierra Leonean views of talking and forgetting. It was common for someone from the audience to question whether these practices were, in fact, healthy and not some form of denial. Did I really think that this was a sustainable way to cope with such extreme forms of violence? Would such silence not simply delay the unavoidable process of dealing with the past?

I understand such responses as a mirror of broader assumptions about the effects of war and mass violence and how human beings recover from such experiences. "Put briefly, these assumptions are that the experience of war routinely generates not just suffering or misery but 'post-traumatic stress'", writes psychiatrist Summerfield. It is assumed that "victims do better if they 'work through' their experiences [and that] timely intervention can avert later mental disorders, violence and wars" (Summerfield 2004: 239-40). Thus, if trauma is assumed after a war, the idea arises that surely people would have to *do* something about their trauma; they should not simply 'forget about it'.

In this article, I challenge these assumptions. I point out that the origin of talk therapy – and thus the idea that talking 'about it' is generally beneficial – lies in research with traumatised individuals and that this does not tell us much about how other, non-traumatised individuals cope. Recent research on resilience – the ability to withstand and make sense of adversity – provides insights into these other ways of coping. I argue that an unwillingness to 'talk about it' or 'work through it' should not automatically be viewed as unhealthy behaviour. By discussing some factors that may contribute to resilience in Sierra Leone, I show that there are various ideas, beliefs, and circumstances that help Sierra Leoneans cope with their experiences of mass violence.

1.   The civil war in context

Sierra Leone, a small country on the West African Atlantic coast, is home to approximately 6 million people, 40% of whom live in urban areas (Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2014: 44). Sierra Leonean society consists of 16 different ethnic groups, the three largest are the Temne in the north, the Mende in the south, and the Kono in the east of the country. Muslims, Christians and other believers practice a remarkable religious tolerance. As a former British colony, Sierra Leone gained independence in 1961. After a brief post-independence euphoria, the country's economy went into decline, primarily a result of mismanagement by a one-party

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government. By the 1980s, Sierra Leone's economy was in a serious condition, with public services and infrastructure palpably diminishing (Keen 2005).

The civil war in Sierra Leone started when a few hundred armed rebels entered the east of the country from Liberia in March 1991. The political aim of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), as the rebel group called itself, was to topple the nepotist and corrupt government that marginalised large parts of the population, a view that was shared by many in Sierra Leone at the time. However, the RUF attacked innocent villagers instead of the political elite; it forcibly recruited new members and seemed to be more interested in diamond mining. The national army proved incapable to stop the rebellion, and some units even collaborated with the RUF in looting activities. A decade of civil war followed that ultimately spread to all areas of Sierra Leone, characterised by indiscriminate and indescribably brutal attacks on civilians rather than military battles between armed groups (Keen 2005, Richards 1996).

Almost all Sierra Leoneans were affected by the war. More than 50 000 people were killed, many women and girls were raped, and amputations were common. All armed groups forcibly recruited civilians, particularly children, often forcing them to perpetrate atrocities against their own families. Despite extensive peace-building efforts by civil society groups early on in the conflict, peace was established only in 2002 after an intervention of West African, UN and British peacekeeping forces (Lord 2000, TRC 2004).

Notably, the war did not evolve around ideologically motivated conflict lines, which meant that the majority of the victims were targeted indiscriminately and not because of their identity. None of the armed groups represented particular ethnic or religious groups, or political parties. The reasons for the prolonged conflict must be seen in the context of power structures that traditionally marginalised youth, particularly young men, making them available for armed groups. Once the war started, the power vacuum was exploited by economic and/or political actors and increasing international involvement (Hoffmann 2011, Peters 2011, Reno 2003).

Since the end of the war, Sierra Leone has slowly, but gradually developed into what some called a successful case of post-conflict transformation. Three post-war elections took place relatively peacefully. In recent years, large mining contracts boosted Sierra Leone's economic prospects and lifted the hopes of many for more prosperity. Yet, while the overall economic outlook may have improved and safety and security levels are comparatively high, human development and basic infrastructure in Sierra Leone remain critically low (Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2014: 44). This was not least demonstrated by the collapse of the country's health system when faced with the ebola epidemic in 2014. At the time of writing, Sierra

Leoneans look back at almost a year of fighting ebola, with the hope for a recovery to normal times slowly arising. The data for my research was collected before the ebola outbreak.

2. Researching 'dealing with the past' in Sierra Leone

The aim of my study, ten years after the civil war, was to find out how Sierra Leoneans dealt with the experiences of mass violence in their everyday lives. What role did the war play in everyday interactions? How did people make sense of the past violence? How did they live together? In total, I spent 9 months in Sierra Leone in three research periods: 2010-2011 (5 months), 2012 (3 months), and 2014 (1 month). I mainly stayed in three research locations: Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone; Madina, a small village of about 200 inhabitants near Makeni in the north of the country, and Tombodu, a larger village of about 3 000 inhabitants near Koidu Town in the east of the country.

The research participants included villagers from Madina and Tombodu, friends, acquaintances and neighbours in two different neighbourhoods in Freetown, as well as a few residents in the former refugee camp in Waterloo, near Freetown. I also talked to employees of civil-society organisations, community leaders, local councillors, traditional healers, and foreign-aid and diplomatic personnel. During the research period, I conducted more than 60 in-depth interviews and engaged in numerous informal conversations while living together with Sierra Leoneans in the three main research locations. As different languages were spoken in the rural locations, I worked closely with research assistants, from whom I learned a great deal.

I got to know most of the research participants through everyday interactions and approached them as 'ordinary' people. In other words, I did not select interviewees because of a particular status, experiences, or (perceived) belonging to a certain group, such as 'ex-combatants', 'war victims', or an ethnic group. In the villages, most of the respondents worked as farmers, diamond diggers, market women, or petty traders. In Freetown, where I stayed in a mixed-income neighbourhood, I talked with employees, businesswomen and -men working in the formal or informal economy, university students, school-going teenagers, unemployed individuals, slum dwellers, and homeless people. The majority of my informants were severely affected by the war. Some directly experienced attacks by the armed groups and were subject to, or witnessed, horrible atrocities; many lost loved ones, or were forced to flee their homes. A few of my respondents were former combatants, though it is likely that others did not disclose this openly.

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3.   Talking and silence after the war

There are different forms of silences in the aftermath of wars and atrocities, and the reasons why individuals prefer to remain silent may be diverse and overlapping. First, many of my informants, in all research locations, shared the idea of moving on after the war. Some mentioned that the war was long over and that it was no longer necessary to talk about it. When I stayed in Madina, the small village in northern Sierra Leone, my neighbour told me, "well, it is the kind of freedom that we are living in now, there is no need to talk about it anymore". This was different from the time immediately after the war, he explained: "the time we were still in pains we were talking about the war. Now we are grateful that it is over, there is no need to talk about it anymore" (man in his 40s, December 2010).

In addition, the notion of forgetting was prevalent in all research locations. A message that gained wide popularity after the war was that Sierra Leoneans should 'forgive and forget' (Shaw 2005, 2007). This phrase was coined by Sierra Leone's president in 1999, but in many ways resonated positively in all of my research locations. However, rather than asking people to 'forget', as I have argued elsewhere, this slogan should be seen in the context of a wish to move on – personally, but also as a nation (Mieth 2013b).

Such wishes to move on and 'forget' are not necessarily a form of denial, they may be strategies to cope with the past. Many of my informants wished to distance themselves from the violent experiences and believed that focusing on other things helped them to do so. This echoes earlier findings by Shaw (2007). In fact, there may be concrete physical and psychological benefits in turning one's attention away from negative feelings and refraining from incessantly pondering over what happened. For example, Lewis describes how Tibetan refugees in India believe that, while suffering cannot be avoided, one is able to control one's response to it. Her respondents described how they tried not to "buy into" disturbing emotions by focusing too much on their difficulties. This, in turn, relieves stress (Lewis 2013). Similarly, many Sierra Leoneans explained to me that they could not make the dead come back, and it seemed that by simply saying 'let's forget about it' (some were fully aware that they would not be able to do this), they at least could divert their attention.

This explains perhaps why some of my informants expressed discomfort when confronted with public accounts or representations of the violent past. As in the case of Mariatu in Waterloo discussed earlier, many pointed out that bringing back the memories only made them feel bad. Other researchers similarly found that local ideas of speaking or not speaking about the violent past collided with the ways in which transitional justice institutions such as the TRC encouraged truth-seeking (Millar 2011, Shaw 2005). In the same vein, some of my informants

did not want to be confronted with the memory of war in the official, certain, and fixed ways encouraged by the TRC or other actors. An elderly man in Tombodu, for example, offered his views about a small memorial in his village that was erected by civil-society organisations soon after the war:

> I just want it to be in my mind, that there was a war, but I don't want to see anything to remind me that there was a war. Because whenever I see that place, it will always remind me of the war. [...] So we don't feel good about that house. [...] As for me, I don't even enter there (man in his 60s, January 2011).

The man did not wish to deny his suffering as such, but felt uncomfortable with such an 'open', public reminder of the violent past.[3]

There were not only individual silences, however. At the social level, 'forgetting' may be necessary to rebuild social relationships. Some of my respondents indicated that forgetting helps people reunite. A villager in Tombodu, for example, said, "rebels, victims, whosoever, bring them all together. This country is a small country; let's forget about this war. And indeed, we can say that the war is almost done. We all came back together" (man in his 50s, February 2011). Other villagers in Tombodu experienced coexistence of civilians and former combatants as tense and believed that talking about the war in public was inappropriate. They argued that it would not only make them feel bad again, but also disturb the normality that had gradually been rebuilt, which was similarly described for the Sierra Leonean city Makeni (Bolten 2012) and for the cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda, and Burundi (Eastmond & Selimovic 2012, Buckley-Zistel 2006, Nee & Uvin 2010, respectively).

People's silences and their ideas about moving on must also be viewed in the context of the particular political environment. Unlike in other societies, the issue of the civil war was by no means a taboo in Sierra Leone. Some Sierra Leonean politicians even referred to the experience of the war as a unifying factor: it was a horrible experience, but it happened to all (Mieth 2013b). An unwillingness to talk about the war did thus not stem from forms of political repression and Sierra Leone can therefore not be compared to other post-conflict settings where even the mention of certain aspects would be considered socially and politically unacceptable, such as the topic of ethnicity in post-genocide Rwanda (Buckley-Zistel 2006).

3   This does not mean, however, that memories of violence will simply vanish. Even when people refuse to talk openly about the past in their everyday encounters, the past may be remembered in nonverbal (or non-intentional) forms such as certain expressions or words, beliefs in witchcraft, or places and things, as Ferme (2001) and Shaw (2002) pointed out for earlier experiences of violence in Sierra Leone, and Perera (2001) for the case of Sri Lanka.

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Finally, silences may be part of the research process itself, as participants may be reluctant to talk about such sensitive topics with outsiders or strangers. Informants have little control over what happens with the information they provide, and may feel that they are being exploited (Cuéllar 2005). This has to be acknowledged in Sierra Leone in particular, where keeping secrets and withholding information are often political strategies, rooted in a history of violence (Ferme 1999). I hope to have provided sufficient information about my research process to put the argument in this article in context.

4.   Resilience as a common pathway to coping with adversity

In order to unravel the notion of 'unhealthy' silences, it is important to seek the origin of the assumption that it is essential to talk about one's experiences. Bonanno (2009) traces this idea back to the work of Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and his work with bereaved individuals. Freud was one of the first to state that grieving is 'work' and explained that, in the process of a deep talk therapy, the grieving person undergoes a mourning period in which she has to sever all ties with the deceased person. Only after this painful separation can the person face life again (Bonanno 2009: 14). Although talk therapy has evolved significantly since the works of Freud, this principle is the foundation of conventional trauma therapy as it is currently practised: in a safe environment, supported by an understanding practitioner, the patient recalls the traumatic event and is able to gradually relieve her symptoms (Herman 1997).[4]

In addition, trauma and other negative after-effects of war have been a dominant subject of the study of post-conflict societies. It has been established that the diagnoses of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder may not be suitable in non-Western cultural contexts (Summerfield 1999, Bracken et al. 1995). Many anthropologists have shown that, while the same symptoms may exist in such societies, they will be interpreted, diagnosed, and treated according to the respective cultural framework (Theidon 2012, Green & Honwana 2001, Igreja 2012). Yet, as crucial as these debates are, they tell us little about how non-traumatised individuals recover from extreme life events.

Research on resilience, on the other hand, shifts the focus to those individuals who do not experience traumatic symptoms after extreme events. This interdisciplinary field started to gain traction in the 1990s when researchers in

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4   Trauma therapists are increasingly questioning the benefit of talking immediately after a potentially traumatising event (Ringel & Brandell 2012).

'positive psychology' – which focuses on what keeps people healthy rather than on what makes them ill – realised that a pathological reaction to an extreme event may, in many cases, be the *exception* rather than the *norm* (Almedom 2005).

So, what is resilience? The concept has a long and broad interdisciplinary history. Psychologists understand resilience as the ability to withstand adversity, to "maintain a stable equilibrium" (Bonanno 2004: 20). More precisely,

> resilience to loss and trauma [...] pertains to the ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event, such as the death of a close relation or a violent or life-threatening situation, to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning (Bonanno 2004: 20)

Anthropologists define resilience more broadly as "the capacity of individuals, families, communities, systems and institutions to anticipate, withstand and/or judiciously engage with catastrophic events and/or experiences; actively making meaning out of adversity, with the goal of maintaining normal function" (Almedom & Tumwine 2008: S1). This is important, as the ways in which individuals cope with adversity are always embedded in, and influenced by the wider sociocultural environment.

Resilience thus describes an outcome or process rather than a set of symptoms or characteristics, as in the case of a diagnosis such as trauma. It could be understood as a more open concept in that it neither prescribes the particular ways of reaching this outcome, nor does it define what the outcome must be – in other words, 'healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning' or 'normal function' may be interpreted and perceived differently in specific contexts.

Yet, resilience does not mean that a person is not affected by the extreme event. Rather, shock, grief, or sadness will not prevent one from functioning in everyday life. For example, in studies on asylum seekers in London and ex-soldiers and survivors of atrocities in Nigeria, Summerfield (2004: 240) found that "[w]hilst there were few whose despondency had dulled them to their immediate situation [...] the vast majority were as active and effective as the opportunities in their new environment allowed. They were upset but not ill". Walsh has aptly described resilience as the ability to "struggle well" (2006: 6).

With regard to the issue of 'talking about' and 'working through' one's experiences, the literature on resilience indicates that there is not one way to be resilient. A number of factors and circumstances seem to contribute to resilience in different cultural contexts, which will be discussed below, but talking or sharing one's emotions is not expressly named (Almedom et al. 2005, Bonanno 2004,

Hobfoll 2002, Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). Some findings suggest that resilient individuals do not live through a period of 'mourning' or 'working through' and are able to function and experience positive feelings in the period immediately following the event (Bonanno 2009: 14). Hence, each person may deal differently with her experiences, depending on her personality, social environment, or cultural context. Consequently, while 'talking about' and 'working through' may be beneficial in trauma therapy, this does not necessarily mean that these processes are a requirement for successfully coping with adversity.

To recapitulate, resilience and trauma are both pathways to coping with the experience of violence. [5] Many studies suggest that resilience may be more common than trauma. Focusing on resilient people in this article does not mean that I negate the possibility of trauma (or other reactions) in Sierra Leone. Rather, a focus on resilience merely shifts attention to those who seem to cope successfully with their experiences, in order to learn about the resources that help them thrive.

5.   Factors contributing to resilience in Sierra Leone

If 'talking about' and 'working through' one's experience may not be a requirement for recovery, what helps people cope with adversity? To focus on resilience means to examine the various resources in people's lives that help them cope with their situation. In the following, I will discuss six aspects that may contribute to resilience in Sierra Leone. This is a preliminary and certainly incomplete selection of factors intended to stimulate further research on the issue.

5.1   Hardiness

Resilience is dynamic and often a combination of both personal and environmental factors. Hardiness, a personality trait first described by Kobasa (1979), describes a person's commitment to herself, and a robust attitude towards her environment. It has been related positively to mental and physical health (ibid.), and to resilience (Almedom 2005). 'Hardy' persons tend to put negative events into perspective and thus feel less threatened by potential adversity; they possess some form of 'inner control'. They will also use more coping strategies after adversity (Almedom 2005: 257, Bonanno 2004). Thus, hardiness is an inner quality that some people possess or develop and others not.

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5   Psychologists also discuss other trajectories of coping that would lie on the continuum between resilience and trauma, such as delayed recovery. Such a discussion is beyond the scope of this article. See, for example, Bonanno & Mancini 2008.

Many of my encounters during my research in Sierra Leone made me reflect about such personal dispositions. Consider, for example, the remarkable story of Adama, a woman in her 50s whom I met in the former refugee camp in Waterloo outside Freetown. During the war, Adama's village in northern Sierra Leone was attacked. As people fled the violence, she was separated from the rest of her family and captured by the rebels. Their "treatment", as she called it, made her start to lose her eyesight; when I talked to her in 2010, she was blind. She fled the rebel bush camp; in her flight, she was attacked and beaten by other fugitives who thought that she was one of the rebels. Again, she managed to escape and, upon reaching a village, she pleaded with the villagers for help, showing them her scars, and was directed to a nearby city. She later learned that both her husband and her mother had passed away, but she was able to reunite with her four children. After crossing the entire country, they ultimately settled in the refugee camp near Freetown. Adama then earned her living by working in manual jobs, such as sand-mining. After she lost her eyesight completely, she started selling market goods on her veranda. During our talk in Waterloo, she described her feelings when she thought of her story, but added a surprising conclusion: "Adama: [If] I remember how they captured me, they make me suffer, my mother died, without seeing her, if I think of it, I feel it so much! If I think of that one, I feel it. [...] But when I think about it also, I take courage". At first, I thought I misunderstood her, because I expected her to say that this *dis*couraged her. She continued:

> Adama: Yes. Because it has passed. [...] Yes. After some time I encourage myself.
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> FM: What makes you find the courage?
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> Adama: What makes me encourage? Because of the situation that I am living in now. [...] Because if I'm facing the same problem, that hardship, it will make me think about my husband every day, I will think a lot, but for now, I will think for some time, but then also take courage. Because I'm able now to feed my children. I can feed myself. That is what encourages me (November 2010).

The way in which Adama framed her story – and this is also representative of many of my other interviews – may be an example of hardiness: after describing her negative emotions about the war, she immediately put these experiences in the context of what she had accomplished after the war. She seemed to display a feeling of purpose – taking care of her children –, which was all the more astounding considering her impairment. It seemed as if for her there was no question but to forge ahead and persevere, in order to regain control over her life.

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5.2   Cultural notions about the self

While hardiness is defined as a personality trait, and thus an inner resource, cultural notions and values may also contribute to an individual's resilience. In some cultural settings, the 'self' may be imagined as being stronger and more adaptable than in others. Such dominant ideas of the self may act like self-fulfilling prophecies in times when individuals experience negative life events and thus shape the very perception of the negative event: "The attitudes of wider society (which may change over time) shape what individual victims feel has been done to them and the vocabulary to describe this, whether or how they seek help, and their expectations of recovery" (Summerfield 2004: 233). In addition, some authors have argued that, in Western societies, the ever-increasing 'reach' of psychology has supported the idea that people are no longer able to go alone through stressful times in their lives, and fostered an idea of an increasingly vulnerable self. For this reason, people may not only feel less inhibited to seek professional help when they are not feeling well, but also expect to feel more 'exposed', or more vulnerable (Bracken et al. 1995, Summerfield 2004).

Yet, in many societies, and I would include Sierra Leone, one is expected to demonstrate strength, endurance, and adaptability when faced with adversity (Bracken et al. 1995). Let me describe one situation that revealed some of these cultural expectations in Sierra Leone. Early in 2014, I visited a family home where I often spent time during my research. The large household consisted of five co-wives in their 50s and 60s, all widows of a businessman who passed away years ago. In addition, relatives and some foster children from friends and relatives often stayed in the house. While we sat in the living room, a three-year-old girl was playing in front of us. It was explained to me that her mother, a sister of one of the wives, passed away just two weeks ago and that her aunt now took care of her. The girl who saw her aunt heading towards her room called out "Auntie!", and followed her. An elderly woman observed the scene and asked the wife, "Ah? She isn't calling you 'Mami' yet?". "No", the wife replied, "it's still Auntie, Auntie". I remember being surprised about the remark and that the little girl was expected to move on so quickly. Yet, such comments reveal certain expectations that children are able to adapt rather quickly to a new situation, even after extreme loss.

The widespread practice of fostering in Sierra Leone is another example of such expectations. Often, fostering has practical reasons, such as the parent's wish to send the child to a larger town for education, or the parents' (financial) inability to take care of their children. The situation of foster children is often critical, as many are forced to work in the new household and are treated unfairly *vis*-à-*vis* the foster parents' own children. In a study on fostering among the

Mende of Sierra Leone, Bledsoe (1990) found that the parents are not only aware of, but also support this treatment. They reasoned that this additional struggle would force their children to work harder later in life (Bledsoe 1990). These views hint at more general ideas of what levels of endurance or strength are considered 'normal' for a person. This, in turn, influences how individuals experience adversity and hardship.

As Summerfield (2004) and Bracken et al. (1995) suggest, different cultural settings may influence not only how strong a person perceives herself to be, but also how she perceives and interprets the emotions and feelings she experiences. In particular, the priority of the 'self' may differ in various cultural contexts, depending on whether the self is imagined as either individual or intrinsically related to others:

> Consider the emphasis Western personhood gives to a deep, hidden, private self, and to emotion and vulnerability [...]. How congruent is this with non-Western definitions, in which the self is largely interpersonal and consensual, more oriented to key roles and relationships than to what is deeply private? Social connectedness, not personal depth, is the measure of the moral value of the self. (Summerfield 2004: 239).

This difference has also been described as the difference between individualistic and collective societies (see Markus & Kitayama 1991).

In Sierra Leone, which may here be understood as a collectivistic society, I often observed how my informants gave their own feelings a lower priority than their obligations as a member of a group. Unlike some areas in Freetown and Madina, Tombodu was besieged by armed groups for over three years during the civil war, which severely affected its inhabitants. Ten years later, people found it difficult not only to earn a living, but also to coexist with former ex-combatants. I learned that many of my informants experienced negative emotions when faced with the situation, but they nevertheless regarded peaceful coexistence in the village as more important. In other words, they prioritised their relationships with others over their own, private feelings. They did so by emphasising that *behaving* appropriately in public – greeting each other, exchanging goods, being polite, and so on – was crucial for peace, regardless of their *feelings* about it (Mieth 2013a).

Such a difference in priority may ultimately help a person cope with her experiences of violence. When repairing social relationships and performing certain social activities and roles are perceived as more important, it may keep a person from dwelling on her own feelings, focusing on practical issues rather than her own suffering (see Bracken et al. 1995: 1074). Moreover, such attitudes affirm

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the importance of belonging to a community, a factor that strongly promotes resilience.

5.3   Social support

The availability of social support has been found to contribute substantially to resilience (Bonanno 2009, Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010, Glandon et al. 2008). A person's ability to mobilise social support overlaps with her personal traits (for example, hardy persons are more successful in mobilising support) as well as the cultural and social environment. Every person is integrated in certain social networks – family, friends, work, religious groups, and so on – yet resilient people are often those who "have a broader network of friends and relatives on whom they can rely, both for emotional support and for helping with the details and demands of daily life" (Bonanno 2009: 75). Thus, those who show resilience are able to benefit more from their networks both emotionally and practically.

It may almost seem like common sense that, in Sierra Leone, as in many African societies, people are able to draw on large social networks, given the traditionally high value placed on extended families, religious communities and other communal or voluntary institutions. Also, mutual aid associations have a long history in Sierra Leone. Members of these groups contribute regularly; some groups lend financial help to their members in need or donate to charitable causes (Little 1957). Irrespective of their socio-economic status, many of my informants were included in several such networks.

While in Freetown, I witnessed the practical and emotional benefits of such social support. I stayed in the house of two sisters, who at the time also offered accommodation to an extended cousin. I was surprised to learn that they had never met before. One day, the woman simply appeared at the door, introducing herself as their cousin. Her husband had recently passed away; she had lost her job while taking care of him, and then found herself evicted from her house, as she was unable to pay the rent. The cousin was allowed to stay, even though one of the sisters had to share her bed with her. The woman used this time to seek employment; the sisters also gave her emotional support. This did not necessarily entail that we talked with her about her problems or her feelings, but rather that she was surrounded by us, and, according to the sisters, this prevented her from 'thinking too much'.

It was in the context of such informal social settings, that some of my informants and friends felt comfortable speaking about the war, even while emphasising that 'too much talking' was not good. For example, a neighbour in Freetown mentioned how certain stories could be shared among friends,

but not openly: "in groups, you can discuss it. In our peer group, there we will share one, two stories of what happened, when we briefly remember. But not in the community way" (man in his 40s, March 2012). Similarly, a woman from Tombodu told me, "when we are about three or four in number, we discuss about the war. Those of you whose parents or children were killed by the rebels, you sit and talk about it" (woman in her 40s, January 2011).

Finally, social networks provide not only emotional support, but also practical assistance, thus also playing a role in building resilience. An interesting example is a study of the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the residents. Glandon et al. (2008) found that individuals who were active members of local religious communities had managed to build up their homes more rapidly than others. One of the reasons was that their regular contact with church members simply increased the possibility of finding helpers. Such local communities can act as a "protective element" regarding the effects of trauma (Bracken et al. 1995: 1081, Bonanno 2009, Almedom et al. 2005). Thus, the availability and functioning of social networks may have substantially helped Sierra Leoneans rebuild their lives and cope with their experiences.

5.4   Making sense of violence

As described by Almedom and Tumwine (2008), one of the characteristics of resilience is that the individual or community is able to make meaning of adversity. Many Sierra Leoneans have turned to their religion, in order to make sense of the violent war. This is congruent with many studies that found that religiosity promotes resilience (Almedom et al. 2005, Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010, Glandon et al. 2008, Utsey et al. 2008).

For many of my informants and friends, the belief in God not only provided meaning for the senseless suffering during the war, but also entailed hope for some form of justice. For example, one woman in Tombodu stated that it was not for her to decide what should happen with former combatants:

> We don't have problems with them [ex-combatants], actually. Because those things already happened. There is no other way. When I get money, I will be able to live fine with my family, is it not so? This we think of, nothing else. [...] The only thing is, the judgement they will get between them and God. Anything we humans do, we get the reward. You do good, the reward will be good. You do bad, the reward is bad. We don't last here. [...] It's only God who has his own judgement (Woman in her 40s, January 2011).

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> A woman in Waterloo described how she would not blame anybody for what happened, as the war must have been God's decision:

> Well for that one, that case [of the war], it's God who knows best. But I have no one to blame. I just know that it's God. It was God who marked that this should happen and you have to suffer this way. So I just take it. Because even the people they were saying the rebels, the rebels - it was something that happened before [the war] happened - so for blame? It's God. So I put it to me. So I take it (Woman in her 50s, November 2010).

It seemed as if these beliefs somehow relieved my informants from further dwelling on the issue, as the question of the (ultimate) cause of the war became irrelevant. At the same time, their beliefs allowed the women to turn to what is important in their present lives and accept that the suffering had to be endured. "So I take it", as the woman from Waterloo concluded.

While religious beliefs were not the only way in which people made sense of the war, they illustrate how such meanings can also work as unifying elements in a post-war society. Statements such as those from the two women often resounded easily with others, because these beliefs were widely shared. At the same time, my respondents assumed that everybody in Sierra Leone is religious and regarded this as a unifying factor.

5.5   Resumption of ordinary life

Meaning is not only created consciously, however. It may also be imbued in seemingly ordinary activities and routines. When discussing how they fared after the war, my informants repeatedly drew my attention to the importance of experiencing a sense of normalcy after all that happened. The possibility of engaging in ordinary activities seemed to be a significant condition for successfully coping with their experiences. This echoes Almedom et al.'s (2005) research in Eritrea. They found a correlation between meaningful daily activity and increasing hope, which, in turn, is often an element of resilience.

The resumption of ordinary life – focusing on one's job or education or taking care of one's family and participating in communal life – helped my informants feel better and established a sense of normalcy in the communities. In several of my research locations, civilians and former combatants had to find ways to live together again. According to informants across the different research locations, it was at least 'working': community members would perform everyday tasks together, and tried to focus on the future rather than the past. Many explained that normal life had gradually returned and resulted in a feeling of being at peace,

a 'resting heart'. The repetitive and routine character of everyday activities such as farming may, in turn, enhance this feeling of normalcy (Mieth 2013b).

In addition, daily activities not only help (re)create a sense of normality, but also provide one with a purpose: to earn a livelihood for oneself or one's family. As suggested earlier in the case of Adama, for many informants, pure need motivated them to resume everyday activities: they had to make a living and earn some money in order to survive. For many, it was also a way to 'forget' about the war, to 'think of better things'. After all, recovery takes place in the arena of ordinary life: it "is an unspectacular and even banal matter, grounded in resumption of the ordinary rhythms of everyday life – family, sociocultural, religious, economic – which make the world intelligible (Summerfield 2004: 243-4).[6]

5.6   Distraction

The last factor I wish to briefly address is distraction in the sense of leisure activities. The resumption of ordinary life also entails the return of festivities and ceremonies; during my fieldwork I observed that many festivities and a vibrant entertainment culture in Sierra Leone seemed to flourish, irrespective of people's struggle to make ends meet. Sierra Leoneans meet frequently to celebrate: they engage not only in traditional ceremonies such as secret society meetings or circumcision ceremonies, national Christian and Muslim holidays, but also in more mundane activities such as disco or movie nights in the villages. Freetown boasts a vast entertainment and nightclub culture, which draws young people from all over the country. The participation in such festivities or other leisure activities may help people to rebuild a sense not only of normality, but also of togetherness (Mieth 2013: 153, Jackson 2005: 154, Stasik 2010).

Contrary to previous assumptions among psychologists, the display of happiness or positive emotions after an extreme event is not the expression of denial of what happened, but is part of a normal and healthy coping process. One of Bonanno's interesting findings was that those people who coped well during and after adversity experienced not merely feelings of sadness but that negative feelings were also interspersed with periods of positive feelings. He found that such an oscillating pattern of emotions is not only common, but also healthy in

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6   Meaningful daily activity might also enhance the effect of psychological interventions. Eastmond (1998) writes about assistance efforts for two groups of Bosnian refugees in Sweden that were significantly affected by the civil war in Bosnia. One group consisted of individuals who were given work, while the other group benefited from psychological interventions. The study found that the first group fared much better after a certain time, while individuals in the latter group seemed to struggle more with their experiences, leading Eastmond to conclude that psychological interventions must acknowledge the situation of the patients in a holistic manner.

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grieving processes. Also, positive emotions establish and reinforce connections between individuals, and help build social networks (Bonanno 2009: 25). Other researchers found that leisure activities can both buffer the effects of negative circumstances and sustain a person's coping efforts (Hutchinson & Kleiber 2005). Thus, activities such as going out to a night club or watching a football game together may create spaces in everyday life where people can relax or enjoy themselves, ultimately contributing to their (mental) ability to cope with difficult experiences.

6. Conclusion

Triggered by the sceptical reactions to my research on how Sierra Leoneans seemed to simply want to move on after the civil war, I asked in this article whether a person really has to first 'work through' her experiences of violence, in order to cope in a healthy way. I showed that resilience – the ability to withstand and make sense of adversity – is not only a common response to extreme life events such as war, but that it also may not necessarily correlate with a period of 'working through' or 'talking about' it. This is not to negate the beneficial effects of talk therapy for traumatised individuals. This was not my focus. Rather, one has to acknowledge the selective nature of studies that focus on trauma, as trauma is only one of several possible reactions to stressful life events.

In this article, I have shown that, even in a post-war society, individuals can draw on numerous resources that help them cope with their experiences and make sense of what happened. I examined some factors that could contribute to resilience in Sierra Leone, in order to indicate how people may be able to cope 'healthily' with the experience of mass violence, even if they feel that talking about their experiences is unnecessary. A number of factors may have promoted resilience in Sierra Leone, such as culturally mediated ideas about personal strength, the availability and functioning of social networks, and the strong religious belief that provides both a meaning of the war but also hope for (otherworldly) justice. Furthermore, the resumption of ordinary life has helped many of my informants regain a sense of normality and allowed them to engage in meaningful activities. Finally, the role of positive emotions should not be underestimated in the process of recovery after adversity. Thus, when Sierra Leoneans say that talking too much about the war is 'not good' and will make you 'think too much', they may well point to a healthy way of dealing with experiences of violence.

The aspects I discussed are explorative in nature; in my view, there is also a limit as to how psychological and anthropological methodologies can be meaningfully combined. This article should thus be understood as an inspiration for further

interdisciplinary research, as Almedom (2005: 263) already encouraged it: "[it] is the duty of applied anthropologists, psychologists, and others to venture beyond their own disciplines and acquire new skills to enable them to engage in interdisciplinary inquiry into the human spirit, which often rises above the trauma of war and other disasters". After all, the basic question of how human beings cope with adversity is of interest to both disciplines.

Finally, the aim of this article was neither to trivialise the experiences of civil war that continue to distress many in Sierra Leone, nor to suggest that there is somehow more resilience in Sierra Leone than elsewhere. Moreover, I have not adequately addressed *ongoing* difficulties experienced by many of my informants. Let me conclude by introducing two common expressions in Sierra Leone, namely "Ee no easy" and "na for bear". They mean, "it's not easy" and "you just have to bear it". Their use and meanings are widespread and allude to both the difficult living situation many Sierra Leoneans find themselves in and the endurance that this life demands from the individual. Such common phrases capture a certain knowledge and acceptance of suffering, and may perhaps best describe the difficult experience of coping with a past of violence.

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