

Introduction Article

My name is Jessica Bonumwezi and I am a third-year doctoral student in the Montclair State University clinical psychology PhD program. My desire to pursue a career in Psychology was born out of my childhood. I was born and raised in Rwanda, Africa and came to U.S. to go to college. There was a genocide in Rwanda 25 years ago that claimed the lives of an estimated 800,000 people and left about 2 million others displaced (Prunier, 2009). This genocide has had an enormous psychological toll on the Rwandan population. Growing up in this post-genocide society, I was introduced to this psychological distress at a very young age and this fueled in me a desire to understand and alleviate this suffering. One of my first encounters with this reality was from a boarding school classmate in seventh grade. Clarisse, who was 5 years old during the genocide, had lost her whole family and although undiagnosed, showed signs of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). One night in the dorms, she was frightened by a noise and it triggered her symptoms. She became agitated and started crying and screaming “baranyica mana mfasha we,” which means “God help me, they are going to kill me.” She hid in a corner in the dorm for hours.

Research suggests that rates of PTSD in Rwandan genocide survivors may be as high as 87.4% (Ministry of Health, 2011). There is therefore a huge need for mental health services. However, there are very few mental health providers. According to the most recent reports from the World Health Organization (2018), Rwanda only has 2.01 mental health workers per 100,000 people. This number includes psychiatrists, psychologists, mental health nurses, social workers, and occupational therapists. For comparison, the US has 271.28 mental health workers per 100,000 people (World Health Organization, 2018). This is why I decided to become a clinical psychologist. My long-term goal is to use the education I am receiving to bring a change in my community and other communities that, like mine, are torn by war and plagued by trauma-related disorders.

I especially hope to do this through research. Prior to beginning my doctoral studies, I had the opportunity to have a summer internship at the only neuropsychiatric hospital in Rwanda and to conduct an independent research project on the stigma of mental illness in Rwanda. At the end of this experience, I was given the opportunity to share the results of my research project with Rwandan mental health professionals. This helped me see how research can help guide clinical work and thus powerfully impact people’s lives. This experience is what gave rise to my interest in research. My research interests in psychology are diverse and but are centered around culture and how it affects the expression and treatment of trauma-related disorders in non-western populations. I am interested in trauma and PTSD in culturally diverse populations and war-exposed immigrants and refugees, as well post-traumatic growth, risk and protective factors for PTSD, and biological correlates of PTSD. For my Master’s thesis, I investigated the effects of discrimination and trauma on Muslim American college students. For my dissertation, I will be working with a Rwandan genocide survivor organization named GAERG to investigate the factors that shape mental health in genocide survivor youth. I have also conducted research on the effects of various types of trauma exposure in other contexts, such as in the aftermath of

natural disasters and among first responders. I hope in the future to conduct intervention research in Rwanda and other non-western countries that have experienced war and conflict.

This year, I am doing an externship at the Regional Diagnostic and Treatment Center (RDTC) at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center. This center is one of only four state-designated multidisciplinary centers that evaluate and treat children who are victims of abuse in New Jersey and it serves residents of Essex county. This externship will help me gain more experience working with trauma-exposed, culturally diverse populations. It will allow me to expand my knowledge of the assessment, diagnosis, and evidence-based treatment of trauma-related disorders. Additionally, this externship will allow me to receive training in forensic psychosocial evaluations and comprehensive health evaluations of children. Training at The RDTC will complement my research focus on trauma and will be a valuable step toward helping me become the trauma-informed clinician and researcher that I want to be.

References

- Ministry of Health. (2011). National Mental Health Policy in Rwanda. Retrieved from <http://www.moh.gov.rw/index.php?id=510>
- Prunier, G. (2009). *Africa's world war: Congo, the Rwandan genocide, and the making of a continental catastrophe*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- World Health Organization. (2018). Mental Health Atlas 2017. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/atlas/profiles-2017/en/