inSocialWork Podcast Series

Episode 174 - Dr. Yabome Gilpin-Jackson: Post-Traumatic Growth and Moments of Resonance: Narratives on Ebola in West Africa

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We are in social work high from Buffalo. Welcome back academic types both faculty and students hope you are enjoying your summer. Folks who don't live around here might not know just how close Niagara Falls is. I've been there regularly but never rode the gorge in a high speed jet boat until now it's wet and wild. A must do. I'm Peter Sobota. The Ebola outbreak last year in West Africa is not a news story tower guest for her. The outbreak and its systemic impact are personal as well as an issue for collective humanity. In this episode our guest Dr. Yabome Gilpin Jackson describes the economic health educational infrastructure social justice cultural and social trauma impacts of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. Dr. Gilpin Jackson articulate a counter response to the post-traumatic stress disorder that's commonly used to describe collective trauma. She articulates what she is learning about post-traumatic growth as part of a narrative for many individuals and larger systems specifically moments of resonance as people and their culture make meaning of their experiences. Dr. Yabome Gilpin Jackson Ph.D. M.A. MBA see HRP is a social scientist focused on human and organization systems development.

[00:02:04] She works teaches and conducts research in the areas of leadership human systems organizational change and development transformative learning and post-traumatic growth. In addition she has published research into the growth and development needs of war affected people in Africa. Dr. Gilpin Jackson was interviewed by our own Dr. Robert Keefe associate professor here at the UB School of Social Work. They spoke together in May of 2015. Hello everyone. My name is Dr. Rob Keefe. I'm an associate professor at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Here with me today to talk about Ebola is Dr. Yabome Gilpin Jackson. Dr. Jackson thank you very much for joining us today. You're very welcome. Now I think many of us in the United States have been trying to get our brains around the whole issue of Ebola. Ebola concerns us all and we know of your particular interest in what is happening in the West African outbreak and around the world. Tell us about your interest and views on the Ebola outbreak. Part of my connection to what's happening in West Africa is that myself I am a third unioned heritage. I was born in Europe and when I lived in Sierra Leone for 15 years. And I went to school there. And so it is deeply a part of my identity. And still with some of what you use for from an article I had written before Ebola is much more than just another news story to me. However beyond that as you know at this moment we're looking at over 10000 people affected both in terms of people that have been infected by the viral disease and also a death toll.

[00:03:56] And so this is beyond a personal issue it's also an issue of our collective humanity. It is an issue of collective interest and being and in Canada in North America. While an outbreak got worse and worse and the news coverage of the outbreak continued. For me it was also watching some of the unfortunate side impacts of just a repeat of what I call the Periya narrative of Africa and being here watching for those of us of African heritage you know respond to that with things like I am certain union not a virus. I am African and I'm not from any of the countries affected which in itself was bad as people tried to both share a full narrative and educate people and distanced themselves from some of what's happening with the coverage. Again very needed coverage but had its own impact in terms of reinforcing the narrative that that wasn't helping the situation. And so for me that really led me to wanting to do more seeing more as we can be and be a voice in shifting that narrative and making sure that what was needed to be heard was being heard and that a fuller

picture was being portrayed overall as much as I can be a contribution to that. I think so many of our listeners are very interested in the system's impact of Ebola and I know some of your work in research is in the area of human systems development. What systemic impacts can we anticipate from the Ebola outbreak. Well I think we can absolutely expect the impacts from a systems perspective at every level.

[00:05:37] I think if you are looking from the context of sort of social economic structures and looking at the structure of a functioning society Ebola absolutely has affected every fare in that perspective. So the economic sector. I mean there's just been impacts at every level from the primary sector to the secondary sector to the service economy. I mean up being either affected internally and for example the mining industry is huge and that has slowed down and ground to a halt in some cases. Organizations that were there and building had to close operation in the secondary sector are obviously the primary sector is getting them that impacted everything else for where we do have manufacturing etc. and just the service sector in the business sector and the financial sector. I have a friend in the tourism sector whose business just just stopped and he has to look at different ways of continuing to do the work that he did. Beyond that the obvious one is the health sector. We were already struggling in Sierra Leone with health infrastructure in the post war environment that we were in having had 10 years of civil war. A lot was moving forward still. There was a lot to do and one of the places where those did a lot to do with restructuring our health system. And so you can only imagine now you've probably had seen with some of the coverage just a huge impact on our healthcare workers nurses doctors just lost so many to the Ebola outbreak and they cared for the sick and so health sector has been impacted. The system of health is the obvious piece with this. So things like water and sanitation and all of that. So that's that piece.

[00:07:22] And then there's other areas again some that are more top of mind for people than others for example the education sector the schools only reopened in Sierra Leone within the last month a month and a half ago. Schools were closed for literally almost a year and that had students out of school. There's been impacts of that especially. We've been hearing a lot around teenage pregnancy and young women who were students in school not out of school because they became pregnant during the height of the schools being closed. The infrastructure needs. I know that I spoke to some colleagues who were front and center in the response in Liberia where access road access to some of the areas where the outbreak was the worst was a significant issue. And that has come back to focus with Ebola outbreak and then overall around social justice and equality in the global system going outside we taking that system perspective outside of the local context. When you look at what the need for comparatively relatively the needs in Sierra Leone Liberia and Guinea were the primary three countries affected by this outbreak comparatively small in global scale. So that just brought to focus some of the global inequalities that we sit with and the impact of that for the global system around wealth inequalities and what can be done to support those countries in relative poverty in a way that builds capacity. And it's not just about aid and handouts because what those economies need and what these countries need I believe is an ability to build their own capacity so that the response to something like Ebola can be locally met and doesn't have to be dependent on the global system and on aid coming in from elsewhere.

[00:09:08] So you know just going back internally just huge impacts on social cultural systems family systems community systems and cultural norms we can expect in boxing. All of those areas you know that many people have spoken about the response they're moving forward and being better coordinated. Once people are willing to attend to community and cultural norms around things like burial rights and so we can expect those ongoing impacts. I think from a psychosocial human systems lens there's also impact at every level that individual people that have had trauma social trauma. And again in Thurley and Liberia especially those countries are not far into the impacts of social trauma unfortunately because of the war experience that they have as well. The issues of trauma I'm sure are very pervasive. And you speak of those issues at an individual level a

community level nationally and internationally. You also talked very interestingly about post-traumatic growth. Can you tell us about your work in this area. Yes you know post-traumatic growth is very near and dear to my heart. And as you know a big part of the research that I have done what led to that was that I was really troubled again sort of having been in Sierra Leone in Freetown when the war came to a climax in Freetown in around 1997 about 1999 2000 of the war that had been going on for years. In other parts of the country.

[00:10:40] And so I left specifically at the time that I left Freetown I left because of the spread of the war into the capital there and still moving out to Canada for university etc. and just again listening to sort of the popular narrative the popular narrative and just the language out here around African War and African civil war. And what was known about the impacts. Again I'm always careful when I talk about this to see you know the popular narrative around the death the disease the post-traumatic stress and the trauma needs to be made and needs to be attended to. So that is important to say. At the same time what I was acutely aware of was that there's a whole other side to that narrative that seems to be named and not known and not talked about which is the potential for post-traumatic growth and transformation. And the stories of people who yes had that individual trauma. And at the same time we're doing incredibly well things and making incredible difference both in the context of trauma and outside of that and just having huge sort of social change impacts. And so I started looking into that and you landed on this idea and concept of post-traumatic growth that there's researchers out at USC Charlotte University of North Carolina in Charlotte I have pioneered and the post-traumatic growth research group out there. So I started looking into this and it was found that it resonated for me. So some of what those researchers tradition Calhoun's sort of Crimea is research and I've written a lot about it. Part of what they will find is that the phenomena of post-traumatic growth which is the potential for significant and transformational growth as a result of the struggle with a traumatic event is well comma that is no. And that's other research that shows that potentially 75 to 90 percent of survivors report benefits from a traumatic experience.

[00:12:43] Again this is not to say that the post-traumatic growth experience is a result of trauma. In my own research with people I interviewed every single one of them said I wouldn't wish this trauma of this war trauma in my case as a research I did wish it on anybody but as a result of the struggle with it as a result of the convening of it I have come out on the other side and have been identified as someone who potentially is experiencing post-traumatic growth. And so specifically what it is then is the idea of politics change again transformational change experience the result of a struggle with a major life crisis but traumatic events. My research again looking at post-war survivors interviewing the people identified in the communities was people that weren't change makers and just making a difference. And I also looked at autobiographies of people who'd written about war experiences and did their of analysis and inquiry of them. What I found was that post-traumatic growth needs to be understand in sort of a marker again systems perspective. In the case of the war termites specifically looking at African war survivors it needed to be understood within the context of the people's capacity for holistic knowing that the people I interviewed and identified and that for them the way they understood the world and made meeting wasn't just about cognitive knowing it was about holistically knowing it was about cinematic knowing it was about spiritual knowing all those things also needs to be understand within the context of social norms family systems communities and taboos they get if you relate that back to what we just said about Ebola.

[00:14:24] This was importance in understanding what needed to be done to respond better to the Ebola outbreak and educate people and lead the response. It also was really important to understand the post-traumatic group within the context of not only how people understood knowledge and knowing but also in terms of how the language acts specifically for African war survivors in terms of narrative and storytelling because this was core to how people made me. And in that context and this was important because part of what moved me to do this research was looking at the research on postwar growth and post-war experiences and finding predominantly the research on post-

traumatic stress disorder. And with that a lot of the African groups that were administered the post-traumatic stress disorder instruments to wiggler would report upwards of 90 percent post-traumatic stress and that outside of context context and the contents of their experiences. It was hard to tell if that was the predominant experience. What I found in fact was that even though post-traumatic stress was there and people did not deny the trauma that was equally these experiences of truth and transformation. And so in the context of speaking to them from a way that they could relate to. And I read the stories within what I found was the six themes associated with the post-traumatic growth process and how people came to realize their own post-traumatic growth. These themes really complemented the research that has already been done you know quantitatively with the post-traumatic growth indicator as well as quality to everybody and allow for an understanding of how people came to realize their transformational experiences.

[00:16:11] And so what the narrative to me was yes meaning that trauma but mainly the narrative form of transformation and then the six things that came out of that was that for all of the people I interviewed in the autobiography is what I found was the idea of resonance as a transformational learning moment. So there was a moment of moments where these interviewees and biographers deeply resonate to something inferior for them that was related to the past that was related to their pre trauma conflicts that provided for them a moment of awakening and opened them to a conscious engagement with their transformational experiences in a way that moves them forward. So it was altogether a moment that had to acknowledge the past realized where we were in the present and realized what they wanted to move forward into in their future and it was really pivotal in uncovering the other five themes around post-traumatic growth which is realizing their proposed in the post drama in this case post-war narrative really opening them up through social consciousness as an outcome of what is possible for them in the post-war context being aware of social context and of what they could do. As social change agents it provided for them all. So this determination and the will to make a difference. Open them up to spiritual and moral development. Wrestling with questions of life with philosophy with how do I want to live my life and make a difference. And oftentimes a spiritual experience in that religious or otherwise. And then just having faith that a deeper appreciation which they talked about for the value of life and the value of humanity and the value of our human connectedness.

[00:17:59] One of the participants in my study summed it up really beautifully in terms of defining sort of a narrative of transformation and how experience or resonance in the line that something in me has changed. I know now that I could look forward and back without any regrets. At the same time and that just really expresses the ability to look at the past event and the trauma and yet be present with the impact of that on your life. And at the same time being able to see form very clearly in terms of purpose and everything else that unfolds out of it. And so you know that was some of what I found with the push or growth research and it was a really emotional experience but it was a different emotion experience than that we would typically think about with post-traumatic stress. But it wasn't that well somatics shock denial you know pain and struggle. Again that was present but it was also moving to a deep emotional and effective connection that also moved people forward that had the quality of the soldier and evil and connected them sometimes to politics past events. But it is sad events for some people it was the experience of seeing a family die in the war. For others it was connecting so you know before the war. I have so much passion I had this dream and reconnecting to that in a positive way. That was both ends of that spectrum and it just really moved them into both cognitive and effective means making of their work experiences. It sounds as though so many of them were able to somewhat transcend the horrible traumatic experiences that came their way that happened to them that as you say they were able to make much meaning out of it.

[00:19:44] Those experiences and although they were horrible experiences it seemed as though they transcended them in a way that made them able to give back much to their communities. Get back

much to the people in their lives. Absolutely. It was also an experience and some of the other research on post-traumatic growth has described that sort of as they get to a point of making meaning and realizing the potential benefits out of their experience and realizing the relative strength. So you know this happened to me but it could be worse because I know that people had a worse experience and haven't had a glimpse of that experience that other people must be struggling with. I am in a position to make a difference and to do something and to be a voice for the experience that I have had and feel what's possible to support other people. It was very much and knowledge of the trauma in a way that as you put it allow them to hold the experience and yet transcended all at the same time. So yeah it was that kind of explaining it for them. So it's actually fascinating to listen to this and I do wonder with so many of our listeners who are trying to be helpful and to reach out to other people who have sustained traumatic events in their lives. How can we apply. Well you're helping us to understand how can we apply to working with survivors people affected by Ebola are perhaps affected by other major traumatic illnesses traumatic events and so forth. This is a really important question and for me it is the question of moving from research to action to practice and really making a difference with the research and work that we do.

[00:21:33] And so how it can be applied. So one of the things that I didn't see earlier is that it was very clear and this is something I believe as a social worker communities and you know counselors and therapists know already is that when the moment of resonance came from that being engaged with other people whether it was one person or in community the conflicts of trust was important and the context of really allowing people to uncover to be at different stages almost that they needed to be. And as the process the trauma but also just to gently come alongside them and develop sort of the context for trust and disclosure. In fact that's what I called it in the research vessel and it really was embedded and came out of the majority of the time that trust the disclosure Karthick that allowed people to move into the place of making sense of the rhythm and the experiences they were having and have insights from that that then unfolded the other things that I guess read earlier. So that is really important and I believe that that is something again social work therapists understand. I know that the connection Calhoun has done some work on facilitating that for post-traumatic growth from the therapist and psychology perspective from those of us who sort of border on psycho social support and social work. I think overall it is a recognition that when you're working with people affected by any trauma with it's Ebola. Otherwise to hold this perspective that's what is possible in that post from a context isn't just psycho pathology and PTSD and therefore PTSD assessments and treatment possibilities that it is also possible.

[00:23:16] It is not you know a requirement that everybody experiences post-traumatic growth. And again I want to be careful. It is not expensive. You go into you with the expectation that everybody you work with support being relationship with must experience mastermind a group that also other contextual factors that I talk about in the research. In addition to I've talked about the sociocultural and holistic notion of the community factors and that the personal factors you know the person pre trauma and to the background and personal personality and all of those characteristics and factors come into play as well. So the triple to it was people have a holistic view of what's possible and just coming alongside them in a way that might open up those Resonant's moments and might open up inside the recognition that a full spectrum of experience is possible and in some ways for me I think it requires a fundamental shift to a developmental mindset and not only of Survival Resilience mindset. Again that perspective is needed and important. It is important to work with people depending on the level of trauma and really just support them to get back to normal functioning. And you know manageability and resilience and it is I think equally important to hold the possibility of development and possible no matter what their past and their experiences are. And so the knowledge I think that stress symptoms and growth can coexist. And to look for appropriate contextual approaches to support people improve trauma context that also doesn't reach traumatized them. And at the same time allows them to think through the possibilities of moving forward.

[00:25:02] They think in that process those Rosalind's moments are possible that it's possible to sort of support the need to come alongside people and encourage them to deeply connect to what's important for them. And it's true that this post-traumatic growth and transformational experience can fold. So I think that perspective ultimately again as I looked at the literature that taking this perspective I believe will significantly increase the effectiveness of psychosocial and counseling programming international development humanitarian initiatives. I think too often that those initiatives well intentioned do fail because of a focus on just one end of the spectrum here. And I think end up in a situation where potentially people you know we'll just see what you want to hear or give you the answers on the PTSD scale sometimes don't even understand the implication of what they're responding to. If it will mean some kind of need some kind of help some kind of immediate sort of survival need that they have in the immediate sort of emergency response context will be met. That doesn't lend itself to that sort of big picture around capacity building and development and psychosocial development and the possibility for people to move forward in a way that holistically support both themselves and their communities. With all the work you've done I think so many of us in the U.S. were absolutely to social media and our new shows and so forth listening to the horrifying things going on in Africa with Ebola. And to some of the people who are U.S. presidents who also contracted Ebola and it seems that we're barely getting beyond that does a traumatic event. I'm wondering what's next for you. You know for me this is not a time to stop.

[00:26:50] This is not a time to say you know the worst has passed as I said earlier the system impacts some of them are only just beginning to unfold. This is a time to take that developmental mindset that I just talked about and to take that capacity building mindset and to think about how do we set ourselves again. For myself personally what can be done in support of so much work going on in Sierra Leone in Liberia and Guinea in other places where there were cases in Nigeria had a few more than the other countries outside of Africa and the cases that made their way here to America. And so I think that this is a time to look at how do we change the narrative. How do we not only change the narrative we're going to action to set up a system that will allow for us to build capacity on the ground for a system for the education sector within communities nationwide so that we are not back in this place so that people are aware of the impact of the public health impacts of communicable diseases and are willing to go into a prevention mindset again that is at a developmental frame. How do we as a global system look at. I know that again the international community has been a phenomenon and you know I've been just inspired by people both locally and internationally that has done work that it both responded to the crisis and looked at building people's capacity to be able to set up systems for themselves.

[00:28:32] And so how did we from the global system look at what is needed to right some of the inequalities and the social justice and social change questions that need to be addressed so that we're not backing this place so that even if there is another outbreak that it doesn't result in tens of thousands of people affected and people dying. You know I always think of this in terms of the body analogy if things is suffering if you cut your finger you feel it over your body. And for me that's the same thing with this situation. It matters because if one part of our global system is suffering all of us are. And I know that there's a lot of other sort of global issues and disasters we need to be attentive to so my call has always been that you know whatever issue you're connected to that has global systems impact don't be silent. So for me ongoing work around the post-traumatic growth research and work that I'm doing are connected with a delightful group of women in Sierra Leone just committed to social change and social action. And one of them who has an organization called excel. It has just taken 12 students who are from social work programs the first of its kind for Sierra Leone and she's working with these students training and mentoring them building the capacity to go out and work from that frame and be mentors and support workers in the community to build other people's capacity working to encourage people to look at you know what do we have locally in our hands ready that we can use to be in action and be in response to what is needed now. So coming alongside them and seen ways that I can support work like that.

[00:30:13] I'm working with other groups such as the People's Foundation for Sierra Leone that's looking at what can we do from an education sector and to support people to go back to university and so sort of in sort of social change I'm connected to organizations like that with my research continuing to think about how to spread this work around post-traumatic growth and resonance and working from a holistic devolve into a lens in Proserpina context and doing a lot also on the questions of African leadership globally. Again this is not just a question of leadership on the continent but it is a question of leadership. For me at every sector both locally on the continent and for those of us that are outside the continent and in terms of what can we do to just continue to lead change and not wait for permission and not just look at leadership again just from the lens of political leadership which tends to dominate that conversation again. So what are the alternative leadership lenses and ways that we can just of in action. So I am doing something in sort of all three of those areas and continuing to look for the possibilities everywhere. Well thank you. Thank you very much for the wonderful work that you do and for taking time with us today Dr. Yabome Gilpin's Jackson. Thank you again. Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to have you here. You've been listening to Dr. Yabome Gilpin Jackson discuss narratives on Ebola in West Africa on in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series.

[00:32:02] For more information about who we are as a school our history our online and on ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at W W W dot social work dot Buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find it under the Community Resources menu.