From Struggle to Coping: Understanding Distress in Post-Liberation Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the emotional and psychological distress experienced by individuals involved in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. An in-depth, exploratory design was used in the study. The research integrated trauma theory, postcolonial theory, healing and resilience theory, and social justice theory to examine the impact of trauma on 15 participants, including 6 war veterans and 9 war collaborators. This research is justified as it not only sheds light on the psychological ramifications of the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, but also provides actionable insights for healing, reconciliation, and national rebuilding. It emphasises the importance of resilience and the need for comprehensive support systems to promote recovery in a post-conflict society. Participants reported enduring trauma, socio-economic instability, and feelings of betrayal and marginalisation. Despite these challenges, many demonstrated resilience through coping strategies like social support and pro-social activities. The findings highlight the complexity of distress in post-conflict settings and the need for targeted support and healing initiatives. The study contributes to the understanding of post-conflict recovery, offering insights into the psychological landscape of those affected by war in Zimbabwe. It emphasises the importance of addressing the well-being of war veterans and collaborators.

Keywords: struggle, healing, distress, post-liberation, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The liberation struggle's aftermath in Zimbabwe presented a complex web of challenges, foremost among them the imperative to reconcile a deeply fractured society and rebuild a nation scarred by decades of conflict. The processes of transitional justice and reconciliation were significantly influenced by the intricate legacies of colonialism, the brutal realities of the liberation war, and the ongoing issues of socio-economic inequality and political instability.

While the struggle for independence remains a source of national pride, its enduring impact necessitates careful navigation in the pursuit of unity and healing. The newly established government's efforts to address the lingering effects of colonial land ownership were marked by the dual challenge of meeting demands for restitution and redress while ensuring economic and political stability (Dube, 2019). This tension between populist aspirations and the pragmatic necessities of state-building has emerged as a defining feature of Zimbabwe's post-independence trajectory. Scholars have noted that the government's land reform policies aimed not only to rectify historical injustices, but also to consolidate power and maintain legitimacy among its supporters (Moyo, 2004; Scoones et al., 2010). However, these policies often exacerbated existing societal tensions, leading to further divisions and underscoring the need for a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between historical, political, and socioeconomic factors in Zimbabwe's post-independence landscape.

The material spaces of daily life, including cultural expressions, memorials, and public commemorations, have emerged as critical sites for engaging with historical memory and trauma in Zimbabwe. These spaces facilitate dialogue about the past, foster collective memory, and are essential for promoting healing and reconciliation (Raftopoulos, 2004). The concept of the "avenging spirit" (*ngozi*) serves as a potent metaphor for the societal fractures within Zimbabwe, as traditional belief systems are invoked to confront the unresolved legacies of the past (Mutekwa, 2010). The *ngozi* symbolises the anger of those who have suffered injustices, highlighting the need for acknowledgment, restitution, and ongoing dialogue.

Cultural productions, including literature, music, and art, have played a vital role in shaping national identity and collective memory in the aftermath of the liberation struggle (Gonzalez et al., 2013). Zimbabwean authors and musicians often reflect the complexities of post-colonial life, articulating both the struggles and aspirations of the people. This cultural renaissance fosters a sense of belonging, acts as a catalyst for societal healing, and underscores the importance of inclusive dialogue and community engagement in addressing the legacies of the liberation struggle.

As Zimbabwe continues to grapple with the ramifications of its past, the interplay between memory and identity remains crucial in shaping the future. Ongoing political and economic challenges, including corruption, poverty, and social unrest, underscore the urgent need for concerted efforts towards reconciliation and healing (Chikanda, 2019). This research is justified as it not only sheds light on the psychological ramifications of the liberation struggle

in Zimbabwe, but also provides actionable insights for healing, reconciliation, and national rebuilding. It emphasises the importance of resilience and the need for comprehensive support systems to promote recovery in a post-conflict society. The aim of this study was to explore the long-term psychological impact of the liberation struggle on individuals in post-liberation Zimbabwe, focusing on the complexities of distress, coping strategies, and the role of social support.

Study objectives

The study is premised on the following objectives:

i)   To identify the nature of distress in the aftermath of the liberation struggle.

ii) To explore the impact of exposure to war and violence

iii) To come out with targeted support initiatives and resilience-building activities that address the specific psychological needs of individuals, promoting post-traumatic growth and recovery.

Research questions

1) What is the nature of distress in the aftermath of the liberation struggle?

2) What is the impact of exposure to war and violence on the psychological well-being and coping mechanisms of individuals in post-liberation Zimbabwe?

3) How can you deal with distress in the aftermath of the liberation struggle

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in a comprehensive theoretical framework integrating trauma theory, postcolonial theory, healing and resilience theory, and social justice theory. This multi theoretical approach provides a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of distress and healing in post-liberation Zimbabwe.

The trauma theory (Herman, 1992) serves as the foundation, examining the psychological and emotional impacts of historical events on individuals and communities. This framework is crucial for understanding the collective trauma and intergenerational transmission of distress in Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, the postcolonial theory (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994) contextualises the ongoing struggles within the broader framework of historical colonialism and its aftermath, highlighting the power imbalances and socio-economic disparities that shape individuals' lived experiences.

Additionally, the healing and resilience theory (Ungar, 2008) focuses on the capacity for recovery, emphasising the role of cultural identity, community support, and traditional healing practices in fostering resilience.

Finally, the social justice theory (Fraser, 1995; Young, 2000) provides a critical framework for examining systemic factors that perpetuate distress, underscoring the importance of equity, representation, and addressing structural inequalities.

The integration of these theories creates a comprehensive framework for exploring the multifaceted nature of distress and healing in post-liberation Zimbabwe. By examining the interplay of trauma, historical context, cultural resilience, and social justice, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by individuals and communities, as well as pathways toward healing and recovery.

Literature

The psychological toll of war: Trauma and distress among Zimbabwean war veterans

The liberation struggle's gruesome war events exposed combatants to severe psychological distress, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Mhanda, 2017). Traumatic experiences, such as mass killings, continue to haunt survivors, posing a significant threat to their mental health (Mazarire & Rupiya, 1999). The lack of professional mental health support exacerbated distress, while the stigma surrounding mental illness led war veterans to shun services, suffering in silence (Mazarire & Rupiya, 2000). The prioritisation of physical scars over mental needs (Mhanda, 2011) and limited awareness of mental health services (Dzinesa, 2000) further contributed to the neglect of ex-combatants' psychological well-being. This underscores the need for targeted interventions addressing the psychological toll of war among Zimbabwean war veterans, emphasising the importance of psycho-social support for community reintegration (Kriger, 2013; United Nations Commission for Refugees, 2012).

Environmental hardship and psychological resilience: The experiences of ex-combatants in the liberation struggle

Ex-combatants faced formidable environmental challenges in the war zone, including treacherous terrain, wildlife threats, and basic physiological needs deprivation (Alexander & McGregor, 2003; Bourke, 2007). However, their belief in ancestral protection and religious convictions fostered courage and resilience, enabling them to thrive in adversity (Fonda, 2011; Ingersoll, 1994; Kahle& Robbins, 2004). Liberation songs played a vital role in promoting unity, inspiring perseverance, and providing an emotional outlet through music and dance

(Afana et al., 2010; Edwards et al., 2006). This underscores the significance of cultural and spiritual factors in promoting psychological resilience among ex-combatants in the face of environmental hardship, highlighting the importance of considering these factors in supporting the mental health and well-being of this population.

Zimbabwe's turbulent path to independence and the legacy of distress

Zimbabwe's history is characterised by prolonged civil turmoil, from colonial-era nationalism to post-independence conflicts and state-sponsored violence (Dzimbanhete, 2013; Sims, 2015; Ray, 2017). The Lancaster House Agreement (1980) perpetuated economic privileges for the settler minority, while ZANU-PF's violent repression, exemplified by the Gukurahundi massacres, has contributed to lasting distress (Cousins, 2003). Historical traumas and ongoing conflicts have exacerbated social and psychological distress in Zimbabwe, manifesting as PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Musisi, 2005; Kinyanda & Musisi, 2002). Vulnerable groups, such as young women, have been overlooked in the liberation narrative (Muzenda, 2019). Economic decline, hyperinflation, and chronic budget deficits have further entrenched distress since the 1990s (Kanyeze, 2014; Mzumara, 2012; Britannica, 2023). Zimbabwe's tumultuous history has created a profound legacy of social, psychological, and economic distress, underscoring the need for comprehensive reforms and effective implementation to promote recovery and reconciliation.

The interconnectedness of war and violence

War and violence have profound, intergenerational impacts on individuals, communities, and societies, affecting physical, economic, social, and psychological spheres (Malesevic, 2010). The psychological repercussions of war-violence can be profound, with trauma potentially passed down through generations (Leavit & Fox, 2014). Vulnerable populations, including children and non-combatants, are particularly affected (Goldson, 2010). Exposure to violence disrupts communities, hinders national development, and can lead to feelings of insecurity and victimisation (Edkins, 2003; Staub et al., 2015). In Zimbabwe, the legacy of violence influences behaviours and perceptions, particularly among the elderly (CCJP, 2007). Addressing distress requires culturally sensitive approaches, considering individual resilience and broader socio-cultural contexts (Kirmayer et al., 2007; Zaiontz & Sarkar, 2014). Afro-centric approaches are essential, integrating psychosocial assistance with broader macro systems to rebuild civil society and promote peaceful conflict resolution. A multifaceted approach incorporating cultural sensitivity, diverse therapeutic modalities, and community engagement is vital for effective healing and recovery.

Methods

The study employed an in-depth, exploratory design to examine the nature of distress experienced by individuals directly involved in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. The methodology centred on conducting semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 15 key participants comprising former freedom fighters and war collaborators. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences, perceptions, and ongoing struggles stemming from the conflict (Creswell, 2014).

Participant selection

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants with direct involvement in the liberation struggle, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives on the emotional, psychological, and social distress resulting from the conflict (Dube, 2019). Participants were recruited through community networks and organisations supporting veterans and war collaborators, facilitating a representative spectrum of experiences.

Characteristics of the participants

The participants had varied characteristics in terms of age and sex. Seven (n=7) of the participants had an age range of 60 to 70 years. A total of 3 participants had an age range of 71 to 75 years. The oldest 5 participants were aged above 75 years. These demographic statistics included individuals who had experienced the liberation struggle as young adults and have since lived through its aftermath. The varied age groups provided valuable historical perspectives and reflections on the long-term effects of the liberation struggle on their lives and communities. There were 6 female participants, representing 40% of the study group. Their experiences offered unique insights into the roles and challenges faced by women during and after the conflict. 9 participants were male, accounting for 60% of the group. This gender distribution reflected traditional roles during the liberation struggle and the differing impacts on men and women in the aftermath.

Data collection tools

The following data collection tools were used in the study:

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to facilitate open-ended responses while ensuring that key topics were addressed. The interview guide comprised questions related to:

        i)   The nature of distress experienced in the aftermath of the liberation struggle

ii) The impact of exposure to war and violence on individuals and communities

iii) Strategies employed to cope with distress in the aftermath of the liberation struggle

This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' personal narratives, providing rich insights into the complexities of their experiences.

Semi-structured interview administration

Data collection entailed conducting in-depth interviews in a secure and confidential environment, ensuring participants' comfort and willingness to share their experiences. Each interview was scheduled to last between 45 minutes and one hour, allowing participants to express their views without feeling rushed or constrained. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. The use of audio recording enhanced data accuracy and facilitated a more nuanced understanding of participants' narratives (Gonzalez et al., 2013).

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards, obtaining approval from the Manicaland State University of Applied Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Reference No: RBC/2024/05). Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants gave their consent in writing before participating. This commitment to ethical standards is crucial in research involving sensitive topics, particularly in post-conflict settings (Chikanda, 2019). Additionally, measures were taken to anonymise data, protecting participants' identities and ensuring their safety. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names, and identifying information was removed from transcripts to maintain confidentiality.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the transcribed interviews, enabling the identification of key themes and patterns related to the nature of distress experienced by participants. This analytical process comprised several iterative steps:

Familiarisation: Researchers engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to achieve a deep understanding of the data and identify initial insights.

Coding: Initial coding was conducted to identify significant statements and concepts relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This coding process was iterative, with researchers revisiting the data to refine codes as new insights emerged.

Theme development: Codes were grouped into broader themes that encapsulated the essence of participants' experiences and perspectives.

Reviewing themes: Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and addressed the research questions. This step involved discussions among researchers to reach a consensus on the final themes.

Defining and naming themes: Each theme was clearly defined and named, providing a coherent framework for presenting the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Integration with literature: The findings from the interviews were compared and contrasted with existing literature to contextualise the experiences of participants within the broader discourse on post-conflict recovery and resilience in Zimbabwe (Moyo, 2004; Gonzalez et al., 2013). This integration highlights the unique aspects of Zimbabwe's experience, as well as commonalities with other post-conflict societies.

Results

Three themes emerged from the thematic data analysis process conducted namely: Legacy of trauma; violence and distress; and resilience and recovery.

Legacy of trauma

Participants responses highlights the long-term consequences of trauma and distress experienced by those involved in the liberation struggle, emphasising ongoing effects on both individuals and communities. The responses from war veterans and collaborators indicate varied aspects of distress in the aftermath of the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe.

The experiences of war veterans and collaborators reveal a profound and lasting impact of trauma, persisting long after the conflict has ended. This persistent trauma manifests in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, and haunting memories of the war, indicating deep-seated psychological scars. Participant narrated enduring nightmares and trauma as the following statements reveal:

> "The psychological scars of war run deep. Even years after the struggle, I still wake up with nightmares, haunted by the memories of what we endured." (War veteran 4)

> "Every day feels like a reminder of what we lost. The trauma doesn't just vanish; it's a part of who we are now, shaping our lives in ways I never imagined." (War veteran 1)

These quotes emphasise the lasting impact of trauma on individuals, emphasising the need for ongoing support and healing initiatives to address these persistent psychological scars.

The experiences of war veterans and collaborators indicate that socio-economic instability plays a significant role in their distress. The challenges of securing basic needs, economic marginalisation, and feelings of betrayal stemming from unmet expectations intensify their emotional burdens.

Some participants mentioned betrayal, unmet expectations, economic marginalisation and struggle.

> "We fought for freedom, but the socio-economic instability we face now feels like a betrayal. The sacrifices we made seem diminished in a world where basic needs are still unmet." (War veteran 2)

> "The socio-economic instability is overwhelming. We risked everything, yet we find ourselves marginalized, struggling to make ends meet." (War Collaborator 7)

These insights highlight how the fight for basic needs and the experience of economic marginalisation contribute to distress, underlining the urgent need for initiatives aimed at addressing socio-economic instability to enhance the well-being of war veterans and collaborators.

Loss, grief, and psychological distress were also part of the experiences in the liberation war. Participants expressed profound feelings of loss stemming from the deaths of friends and family, as well as a diminished sense of purpose and disillusionment with the outcomes of the liberation struggle. War Veteran 6 reflected:

> "There's a profound sense of loss that lingers. We lost friends, family, and our sense of purpose. The disillusionment is heavy; it's as if our fight was in vain."

War Collaborator 3 added:

> "There's a pervasive sense of loss among us. Friends who fought bravely are gone, and we are left with memories that often feel like a burden."

Collaborators reported significant guilt and anxiety related to their choices during the struggle, indicating a persistent psychological burden. War Collaborator 1 stated:

> "I thought collaborating would lead to a brighter future, but instead, I'm left with guilt and anxiety. The choices I made haunt me every day."

War Collaborator 8 noted:

> "Every day is a reminder of the choices we made. The psychological distress from those decisions can be debilitating, especially when we see how things turned out."

The discrepancy between the ideals of the liberation struggle and the harsh realities of post-war life leads to widespread disillusionment. War Veteran 5 shared this disillusionment:

> "We thought liberation would bring joy, but many of us are struggling with the emptiness that follows. The fight was for a better future, yet here we are facing despair."

War Collaborator 4 emphasised similar despair:

> "Disillusionment is rampant. We believed in the cause, but the reality of our lives now feels like a betrayal of those ideals."

Collaborators face stigma and marginalisation, further exacerbating their distress and sense of isolation. War Collaborator 6 explained:

> "We thought we were contributing to a noble cause, but now we're often seen as traitors, which adds to the distress we feel in our communities."

The realisation that the aspirations linked to the liberation struggle remain unfulfilled contributes to a sense of distress and loss. War Veteran 3 remarked:

> "The pain we carry is not just from the battlefield; it's the realisation that the dreams we had for our country remain unfulfilled. It's a heavy burden to bear."

The cumulative impact of these experiences leads to debilitating psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD. War Collaborator 9 stated:

> "We are often caught between loyalty and the guilt of our actions. The socio-economic hardships make it even harder to find peace with our past."

These insights underscore the multifaceted nature of distress experienced by participants, highlighting the need for targeted support and intervention. Subsequently, these responses highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of distress in the aftermath of the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, emphasising the need for comprehensive support and healing initiatives.

Violence and distress: Exposure to war and ongoing psychological and social challenges

The connection between exposure to war and violence during the liberation struggle and the subsequent psychological and social challenges faced by individuals and communities was revealed in the participants' narrations.

When asked about their socio-economic stability following the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, participants shared a range of challenging experiences, war veteran 2 expressed frustration about the lack of opportunities, stating:

> "We did not go to school as we went to war at a younger age. I now find it difficult to find work after the war to support my family. I did not receive the demobilisation benefit nor the 1994 War Veterans benefit and pension. Many of us feel overlooked."

War Collaborator 6 highlighted the neglect faced by war collaborators, saying:

> "I had to rely on my community to survive because the government didn't provide any financial benefits to war collaborators. Only war veterans received assistance, leaving us neglected despite our immense contributions."

War Veteran 5 reflected on unfulfilled promises, noting:

> "It seems like after the war we were promised a better life, but it never materialised. Our leaders from the war barracks have taken the elephant's share."

Participants also articulated their feelings of loss and disillusionment regarding the outcomes of the liberation struggle. War Veteran 2 shared the emotional toll of losing comrades, stating:

> "I lost so many comrades in the fight. It's difficult to accept that they're no longer with us."

War Collaborator 6 voiced a sense of betrayal, saying:

> "I believe we fought for a cause that was not fully realised. It's hard to view our country in its current state of oppression, with government employees living in serious quagmire."

War Veteran 1 emphasised the gap between their expectations and reality, expressing:

> "I thought we were fighting for freedom and equality, but it seems like some people are still struggling to provide food for our children."

These findings illustrate the deep sense of disillusionment and socio-economic instability experienced by war veterans and collaborators, highlighting the gap between their sacrifices and the realities they face in post-war Zimbabwe.

Resilience and recovery

Various coping strategies employed by individuals and communities in the aftermath of the liberation struggle, highlighting effective approaches to promote resilience and recovery.

Participants shared various strategies they employ to cope with the mental challenges associated with the liberation struggle, distinguishing between those that have proven ineffective, those that are beneficial, and potential approaches they believe could enhance their coping. Their accounts reveal the use of both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies.

Participants shared a variety of coping strategies to manage their post-war experiences, highlighting both challenges and resilience.

Many described avoidant coping mechanisms, which involve steering clear of thoughts and activities that trigger traumatic memories. For example, War Veteran 5 stated:

> "I just try to forget and not think about all the traumatic experiences. However, when sleeping, I sometimes experience nightmares."

This illustrates the difficulty of fully escaping the impact of their past.

Distraction emerged as a common coping strategy, though its effectiveness varied. War Collaborator 2 shared:

> "I hang out with my friends, especially drinking beer to keep my mind off things. When I get home after hanging out, I feel less depressed. We talk about funny topics, and I feel alright. I also use singing or prayer to help clear my head of negative thoughts."

In contrast, War Veteran 3 reflected on a less successful attempt to find distraction:

> "I went to a soccer match one day because I was really depressed, but my anger didn't go away. I try to keep myself busy with gardening, but it doesn't help."

Participants also mentioned engaging in behavioural strategies. War Collaborator 4 recounted:

> "Soon after the war, I engaged in risk-taking behaviours like excessive drinking and fighting, thinking it would help me feel better. However, it did not."

Social support emerged as a critical coping mechanism. War Veteran 2 remarked:

> "My church and community members make me feel loved and that I belong. My family and friends have been there for me, which comforts me and helps me deal with nightmares."

War Collaborator 9 added:

> "This friend of mine gives me advice that helps me solve problems and forget the depressing experiences I've had."

Some participants utilised techniques to aid in forgetting their traumatic experiences. War Collaborator 3 noted:

> "I'm in a WhatsApp group for liberation war collaborators, and seeing how others cope helps me forget the trauma I went through."

Social withdrawal was also mentioned as a coping strategy. War Veteran 3 explained:

> "When I'm depressed, I withdraw. Sometimes I feel people regard me as crazy. However, associating with others helps me forget my feelings of anger and depression."

Engaging in pro-social activities was recognised as beneficial. War Veteran 6 shared:

> "Since I started volunteering at the children's centre, and coordinating the community burial society, I feel useful and have no time to dwell on past struggles."

Participants highlighted their resilience, expressing a sense of strength and purpose. War Veteran 5 stated:

> "Despite everything, I'm still standing. I'm proud of what we accomplished."

War Collaborator 9 emphasised adaptability, saying:

> "I've learned to adapt and find ways to survive, even in difficult circumstances."

War Veteran 5 also noted:

> "I've found a new sense of purpose in helping others who are struggling with similar issues," illustrating a commitment to community support."

These insights reflect the diverse coping mechanisms employed by war veterans and collaborators, showcasing their struggles and resilience in navigating post-war challenges.

Discussion

The narratives from participants in this study illuminate the profound and multifaceted nature of distress experienced by both freedom fighters and war collaborators in the aftermath of the liberation struggle. These findings resonate with existing literature, highlighting the lasting psychological impacts of conflict and the socio-economic ramifications that often follow.

The accounts of War Veterans 1-6 corroborate existing literature on the enduring effects of trauma and psychological distress in post-conflict settings. War Veteran 1's experiences of recurring nightmares and psychological scars align with the work of Kolk (2014) on the long-term impacts of trauma. War Veteran 2's disillusionment and sense of betrayal reflect Ager and Strang's (2008) findings on the gap between expectations and realities in post-conflict life. War Veteran 3's expression of profound loss echoes Hobfoll's (2001) work on the impact of loss on identity and well-being. War Veteran 4's insights on trauma's integration into personal identity are supported by Herman's (1992) research on trauma's effects on self-perception. War Veteran 5's contrasting expectations of liberation align with Bracken et al.'s (2016) work on emotional disorientation post-conflict. Finally, War Veteran 6's unfulfilled dreams resonate with de Jong et al.'s (2003) findings on the perpetuation of disappointment and despair when aspirations are unmet. These accounts underscore the importance of addressing mental health and socio-economic needs in post-conflict recovery efforts to mitigate the long-term burdens of trauma.

The accounts of War Collaborators 1-9 corroborate existing literature on the psychological distress and moral complexities experienced by individuals who collaborated with liberation movements. Their perspectives align with research on moral injury (Litz et al., 2009), social stigmatisation (Kalyta, 2014), complicated mourning (Kira et al., 2013), disillusionment (Malkki, 1995), and the psychological toll of reconciling past actions with personal integrity (Shay, 1994). The social stigma and emotional pain faced by these individuals (Stiglmayer, 1994) are exacerbated by the chaos and disarray following liberation struggles (Paris, 2004), leading to long-term psychological distress (Brewin et al., 2009). The internal conflict between loyalty and guilt (O'Donnell, 2014) highlights the complexities of identity in post-conflict contexts, underscoring the need for nuanced understanding and support for those navigating their past and present identities. These accounts provide valuable insights into the multifaceted experiences of war collaborators, emphasising the importance of addressing their psychological and emotional needs in post-conflict recovery efforts.

The experiences of freedom fighters and war collaborators share common themes of regret, disillusionment, and psychological distress, highlighting the complex and nuanced nature of their experiences. These findings emphasize the need for comprehensive mental health support and community rebuilding efforts in the aftermath of liberation struggles. Research by Breslau et al. (2017) and Friedman et al. (2011) underscores the long-term impact of trauma on mental health, including chronic PTSD and depression. The disillusionment and unfulfilled expectations expressed by war veterans resonate with findings by Miller et al. (2018) and Kira

(2019), who highlight the emotional distress and sense of betrayal resulting from unmet socio-economic needs and unfulfilled expectations. These accounts demonstrate the enduring psychological burden of liberation struggles, emphasising the importance of addressing the mental health and socio-economic needs of those affected to promote healing and recovery.

The narratives of this study's participants highlight the profound psychological and socio-economic impacts of war and violence exposure, underscoring the complex nature of trauma, social disconnection, and post-conflict integration challenges. Findings align with existing literature on the long-term psychological effects of war (van der Kolk, 2014; Brewin et al., 2009) and socio-economic hardships (Kira et al., 2013). Participants' recurring nightmares and time distortion experiences exemplify the persistent nature of trauma characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Social disconnection, stigma, and gas-lighting (Herman, 1992) further exacerbate trauma's impact, leading to feelings of isolation and invalidation. These results emphasise the need for comprehensive support addressing psychological, social, and economic challenges faced by war-affected individuals, and underscore the importance of acknowledging and validating trauma survivors' experiences to promote healing and recovery.

The socio-economic integration challenges faced by participants underscore the systemic neglect of war veterans and collaborators, aligning with Ager and Strang's (2008) assertion that post-conflict recovery often disregards the socio-economic needs of non-combatants. Perceived inequities in benefit distribution, where war veterans receive support while collaborators feel marginalised, highlight structural inequalities that impede collective healing (Bracken et al., 2016). Participants' disillusionment and sense of betrayal, resulting from unfulfilled promises of post-conflict improvement, resonate with Paris' (2004) findings, which link such experiences to frustration, despair, and socio-economic instability. These results emphasise the need for inclusive and equitable post-conflict support structures that address the diverse needs of all individuals affected by war, promoting collective healing and socio-economic recovery.

This study's findings reveal a spectrum of coping mechanisms employed by participants in response to trauma, ranging from negative strategies like self-destructive behaviours (Shay, 1994) to positive approaches such as community support and traditional healing practices (de Jong et al., 2003). Avoidance coping emerged as a common strategy, consistent with research indicating its limitations in promoting long-term recovery (Schweitzer et al., 2007). Behavioural coping mechanisms, like engaging in activities to manage discomfort, were also

noted (Amone-P'Olak & Omech, 2020). The importance of social support systems is underscored by participants' narratives, highlighting the link between feelings of connection and better mental health outcomes (Roberts et al., 2008). Effective coping strategies like distraction and pro-social behaviour were also identified (Seguin & Roberts, 2017). These findings emphasise the need for a psychosocial approach to addressing traumatic experiences (Pinto-Cortez et al., 2024), acknowledging the complex interplay between individual coping mechanisms and social support systems in promoting resilience and recovery.

This study reveals social withdrawal as a coping strategy, which could help restore emotional balance after exposure to stress (Veling et al., 2013). However, prolonged isolation can exacerbate loneliness and depression (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). The findings highlight the complex interplay between psychological trauma, socio-economic challenges, and coping mechanisms in post-conflict settings. Participants' experiences emphasize the need for a holistic approach to post-conflict recovery, addressing both mental health and socio-economic integration. Acknowledging these challenges is crucial for developing effective support systems that promote healing and resilience among war veterans and collaborators. This research underscores the importance of considering multifaceted experiences and needs of individuals affected by war and violence, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of their situations and informing the development of targeted interventions.

This study's findings further highlight the diverse coping mechanisms employed by individuals affected by the liberation struggle, encompassing both adaptive and maladaptive strategies. Participants' experiences align with existing literature on trauma and coping, underscoring the complex interplay between avoidance, maladaptive behaviours, and social support.

Avoidant coping mechanisms, though providing temporary relief, hinder long-term recovery (Foa et al., 2006; Brewin, 2011). Symptoms like nightmares and social withdrawal exacerbate isolation and prolong psychological distress (van der Kolk, 2014). Maladaptive behaviours, such as substance abuse, pose significant risks for mental health and recovery (Kira et al., 2013; Shay, 1994).

In contrast, social support systems emerge as crucial for coping, mitigating stress effects and promoting resilience (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Positive social interactions, such as engagement in community activities, alleviate depression (de Jong et al., 2003). However, distraction's effectiveness is mixed, highlighting the need for addressing underlying issues (Ager & Strang, 2008). Risk-taking behaviours, like excessive drinking and violence, ultimately increase

distress and hinder recovery (Litz et al., 2009). These findings emphasise the importance of promoting adaptive coping strategies, social support, and addressing underlying trauma to foster resilience and recovery among individuals affected by conflict.

This research contributes to the understanding of coping mechanisms in post-conflict settings, informing the development of targeted interventions and support systems for individuals affected by war and violence. This is highlighted in the therapeutic potential of pro-social behaviour among individuals affected by the liberation struggle. Consistent with Piliavin and Charng (1990), participants' engagement in community service fostered self-worth, social connections, and recovery. This phenomenon aligns with post-traumatic growth theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), where helping others facilitates healing and renewed purpose. The findings underscore the complexity of coping strategies, emphasising the coexistence of adaptive and maladaptive mechanisms. While avoidance and maladaptive behaviours pose challenges, distraction and social support demonstrate effectiveness.

Pro-social behaviour emerges as a promising avenue for fostering resilience and healing (Brewin, 2011). A comprehensive, tailored approach integrating individual and community-based strategies is crucial for addressing psychological and social challenges. The nuanced interplay between adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms highlights the need for personalised interventions supporting individuals' unique healing journeys (Litz et al., 2009).

This research contributes to the understanding of trauma recovery and coping in post-conflict contexts, informing the development of effective support systems and interventions. In acknowledging the complexities of trauma recovery, this study underscores the importance of holistic, community-based approaches promoting resilience, healing, and post-traumatic growth. Furthermore, this study's findings significantly enhance our understanding of distress in the aftermath of the liberation struggle, highlighting the complex interplay between psychological traumas, socio-economic challenges, and coping strategies (Schafer, 2018). The results underscore the need for comprehensive support systems that address both mental health and community integration, aligning with recent scholarship emphasising the importance of acknowledging the complex realities faced by individuals affected by war and violence (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017; Schafer, 2018).

A holistic approach that combines individual coping strategies with community support is essential for fostering resilience and promoting recovery in post-conflict settings (Castro-Abril et al., 2024). This research contributes to the development of effective support systems and

interventions, informing strategies that promote healing, resilience, and post-traumatic growth among individuals affected by conflict.

In emphasising the importance of comprehensive support systems and community integration, this study underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of trauma recovery, acknowledging the complex interplay between individual and collective factors. The findings have implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working to address the psychological and social challenges faced by individuals affected by war and violence.

Contribution to theory

This study makes significant theoretical contributions to the understanding of trauma, coping mechanisms, social support, resilience, and contextualised trauma recovery. Key findings extend trauma theory by highlighting the long-term impact of war exposure, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support services. The study informs the development of tailored coping mechanisms frameworks and underscores the importance of social connections in facilitating post-traumatic growth. It also contributes to resilience theory by identifying effective resilience-building activities. In contextualising trauma and recovery within Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, this research emphasises the importance of considering unique cultural and historical contexts in support initiatives. These findings provide valuable insights for developing targeted interventions, supporting services, and community-based initiatives.

Contribution to policy and practice

The research findings have significant policy and practical implications for addressing trauma and distress in post-conflict settings. First, this study highlights the need for comprehensive support services, including mental health services, community-based initiatives, and social support networks, to address the lingering effects of trauma. This informs policy decisions regarding resource allocation and service provision.

Furthermore, this research emphasises the importance of tailoring support initiatives to meet unique needs, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. This practical contribution can guide service providers in developing targeted interventions that address specific coping mechanisms and resilience-building activities. By recognising the complexity of coping mechanisms, the study can inform the development of more effective support services.

In addition, the findings of this study reinforce the importance of community-based initiatives that foster social support networks, enabling individuals to rebuild and recover in a supportive environment. This practical contribution can guide policymakers in developing community-

based programmes that promote social cohesion and support. The study also highlights the importance of resilience-building activities in promoting recovery and healing among individuals affected by trauma, informing policy decisions regarding resource allocation for resilience-building programs and initiatives.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of considering the unique cultural and historical context in which trauma occurs. This would ensure that support initiatives are sensitive to these factors. This practical contribution could guide policymakers and service providers in developing culturally sensitive support initiatives that address the specific needs of affected communities.

Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations such as a small sample size of 15 participants that may not be representative of the entire population, and a purposive sampling method that may have introduced selection bias. The semi-structured interviews, while providing rich insights, may have been influenced by the interview guide and researchers' perspectives. Additionally, the study's findings may not be generalisable to other post-conflict settings or populations due to Zimbabwe's unique context. The reliance on a single data collection method (interviews) and potential recall bias due to time, memory, and personal biases may also have limited the capturing of participants' full experiences.

Conclusion

This research elucidated the profound and multifaceted nature of distress experienced by both freedom fighters and war collaborators in the aftermath of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. The participants' narratives highlighted the enduring psychological impacts of conflict, aligning with existing literature that emphasises the long-term effects of trauma on mental health and socio-economic stability. Importantly, the findings revealed the systemic neglect of socio-economic needs among war veterans and collaborators, highlighting structural inequalities that impeded collective healing. The disillusionment and betrayal felt by participants due to unmet promises of post-conflict improvement point to the necessity for inclusive support structures that recognise and address the diverse needs of all affected individuals. The study further revealed the diverse coping mechanisms employed by participants, ranging from maladaptive strategies, such as avoidance and substance abuse, to more constructive approaches, including community engagement and social support. This duality underscores the importance of

fostering adaptive coping strategies while addressing the underlying trauma that many individuals face.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following four major recommendations are proposed:

- Establishing comprehensive support services: Develop mental health services, community-based initiatives, and social support networks that address the lingering effects of trauma, ensuring sensitivity to the unique cultural and historical contexts of the affected individuals.

- Developing tailored and targeted interventions: Create specific interventions that focus on diverse coping mechanisms and resilience-building activities, catering to the unique needs of individuals, including strategies for avoidance, distraction, and social engagement.

- Fostering community involvement and social cohesion: Implement programmes that promote social cohesion and encourage community participation in the development and execution of support initiatives thereby enhancing ownership and cultural relevance.

- Monitoring, evaluating, and building capacity: Regularly assess the effectiveness of support initiatives and provide training for service providers to ensure they are equipped to address trauma and facilitate post-traumatic growth effectively.

Future research

Future research could explore the long-term effects of trauma on individuals and communities, examining how trauma experiences evolve over time and how individuals and communities adapt and cope with trauma in the long term. Another area for study is the effectiveness and applicability of coping mechanisms and resilience-building activities employed by individuals, which could inform the development of targeted interventions and support initiatives.

Additionally, exploring the role of contextual factors, such as cultural, historical, and social influences in shaping trauma experiences and recovery processes could enrich our understanding of trauma and recovery. Evaluating the effectiveness of various support initiatives, including mental health services, community-based programs, and social support networks, could also provide valuable insights into their impact on trauma recovery and community rebuilding.

Further research could also investigate trauma experiences and recovery processes among diverse populations, such as children, women, and marginalised groups, to understand their unique needs and challenges. Other potential areas for study include exploring the role of technology in trauma recovery, developing and testing interventions targeting specific coping mechanisms, and examining the impact of community-based initiatives and social support networks on trauma recovery and community rebuilding.

Finally, developing and evaluating trauma-informed care and practice models for service providers, as well as examining the impact of policy and advocacy initiatives on addressing trauma and promoting recovery, could also be valuable avenues for future research.

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