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From "Rebel" to "Returnee"

Daily Life and Reintegration for Young Soldiers in Northern Uganda

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In war's aftermath, many young soldiers attempt to reintegrate and reestablish their lives. Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs are a priority intervention for youth in postconflict countries; yet there is little evidence to suggest what aids reintegration. This research uses qualitative methodology to describe the issues salient to adolescents and young adults in daily life after returning from a rebel group in northern Uganda. It explores the process of reintegration with 23 male youth abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and draws on a representative quantitative survey of 741 abducted and nonabducted youth in the region. Participants described returning home, their reception by families and neighbors, feelings after returning, and how they negotiated the transition from being a "rebel" to a "formerly abducted child' and a member of their family and community.

Keywords: *reintegration; DDR; youth combatants; child soldiers; Uganda; war; conflict*

Returning from the battlefield, many adolescents and young adults struggle to reintegrate into civilian live. In low resource countries, where national economies and infrastructure are devastated by war, reestablishing

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one's life presents even further challenges. Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs that aim to stabilize peace by integrating soldiers into their communities have been a priority intervention in postconflict countries (UN, 1998). Yet to date, there is little evidence of the success of these programs (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2006).

One of the deterrents to designing effective reintegration programs has been a dearth of knowledge on the challenges and successes youth experience in reintegrating from armed groups. Jareg (2005) points out that children and youth across various contexts might perceive their own reintegration differently from outsiders designing the programs. Understanding how returning youth perceive the process of their return from combat is an essential part of advancing the field of reintegration and providing interventions that promote both individual and community development. The purpose of this article is to describe youth's own sense of reintegration and the issues salient to them in daily life after returning from the Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel group in Northern Uganda. It uses qualitative methodology to explore the process of reintegration for 23 abducted male youth, including perspectives from 30 of their family members, friends, and community members. It also draws on a community-based representative quantitative survey of 741 youth—both abducted and nonabducted—to inform and complement emerging themes (Blattman & Annan, in press).

The Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers

Two competing views of young combatants exist. The first—the dominant image in media and advocacy—is that "child soldiers" are victims irreparably damaged, a "lost generation," rejected from their families and communities for heinous acts they have committed (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2007). Several studies focus on young soldiers' levels of psychological symptoms, showing high levels of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression symptoms after return (Bayer, Klasen, & Adam, 2007; Derluyn, Broekaert, Schuyten, & Temmerman, 2004; Johnson et al., 2008). The second and opposing view is that the majority of young soldiers are able to adjust when they return from combat. Studies supportive of this view suggest that while symptoms of PTSD and depression persist years after their reintegration, many of these young people become integrated civilians and function at par with others in their community, both socially and economically (Betancourt et al., 2008; Boothby, Crawford, & Halperin, 2006; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2006; Williamson, 2006). There is also growing consensus that children and youth are participating agents in their experiences, both while with the armed groups

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and in return and recovery, countering the perception of young people as merely passive victims (Akello, Richters, & Reis, 2006; Boyden & Mann, 2005; Wessells, 2006).

Studies in Northern Uganda

Both academic and NGO studies of northern Uganda describe the many challenges young people face in their return to families and communities—problems that are similar to other noncombatant peers in the community but exacerbated by their abduction by rebels. Loughry and MacMullin (2002) showed that abducted children were more anxious and depressed, more hostile, less prosocially active, and less confident than those who were not abducted. Both Corbin (2008) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS; 2002) emphasized the community rejection faced by those who return from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

Findings from the primary author's quantitative study of a representative sample in northern Uganda, however, portrayed a different picture of most returnees (Blattman & Annan, in press). Ninety-three percent of male youth returning from the armed group reported no blame, insult, or aggression from family and two thirds reported no community problems (Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2006). The quantitative work also analyzed differences between the abducted youth and those who were never abducted, and Table 1 provides a summary of the differences between the two groups (Table 1). The impact of abduction is explored in depth in Blattman and Annan (in press).

To further understand these findings, this study uses in-depth qualitative work to explore daily living and relationships in the transition from an armed group back into communities that are displaced and affected by armed conflict.

Background of the Conflict: Abduction and Return

Joseph Kony, a spiritual leader and self-proclaimed prophet, formed the LRA in 1988. The LRA was one of several northern rebel groups formed following President Yoweri Museveni's 1986 overthrow of a government dominated by the Acholi ethnic group. Most rebels groups were defeated by or settled with the new government by 1988, but Kony and a few remnants refused to surrender. With little support from its own Acholi people, the LRA quickly turned to abducting adolescents and young adults as its principal form of recruitment. LRA abduction was large scale and

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Table 1
Mean differences between Abducted and Nonabducted Male Youth (n = 741)

	Youth Abducted Into LRA	Standard Error	Nonabducted Youth (Never in LRA)	Standard Error
Years of education**	7.10	0.23	7.62	0.33
Days employed in the last month	8.60	0.64	7.02	0.65
Symptoms of depression and anxiety* (scale 1-47)	12.64	0.46	11.38	0.48
Aggression (endorsed any aggressive behavior 0-1)	0.07	0.01	0.07	0.04
Social Support (scale 0-17)	5.48	0.22	5.48	0.30
Serious injury** (0-1)	0.18	0.03	0.08	0.02

Note: t tests conducted for differences in mean scores between groups. LRA = Lord's Resistance Army.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

indiscriminate with estimates of over 60,000 youth abducted since 1996 (Blattman & Annan, in press; Pham, Vinck, & Stover, 2007). In the region under study, approximately one third of all Acholi males and one sixth of females between the ages of 14 and 30 have experienced an abduction of at least 2 weeks (Allen & Schomerus, 2006; Annan et al., 2006).

While there is a large amount of variation in abduction experiences, most abducted youth witnessed and experienced high levels of violence. Some also perpetrated violence—including beating, killing, and raping—against other abductees, civilians, or soldiers. Abducted youth were used as soldiers, porters, and cooks; one fourth of abducted girls were also given to commanders and soldiers as "forced wives" (Annan, Blattman, Carlson, & Mazurana, 2008). Since 2006, when a ceasefire was signed between the LRA and the Government of Uganda, few abductions or rebel attacks have occurred. Peace talks continue although the delays in Kony's signing and reports of LRA abduction in the Central African Republic leave much uncertainty about the outcome of the conflict.

When youth from the northern Acholi districts escaped (80% of those who returned)—or, more rarely, were rescued (15%) or released (5%)—from the LRA, half of them passed through a formal reintegration process. Others went directly home to their families (Allen & Schomerus, 2006; Annan et al., 2006). In 2000, the Amnesty Act granted blanket legal amnesty to any "reporter," or returnee, who had engaged in rebellion

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against the government.[1] The formal reintegration process consists of reporting to an authority to obtain an amnesty certificate and passing through the government army barracks to a reintegration center run by local or international NGOs. At the centers, the youth receive medical treatment, "counseling," preparation for return to families, and transport home (see Allen & Schomerus, 2006, for full description of services).

The reception centers promote the innocence of the returned youth, stressing to both young people and families that any perpetration of violence was forced upon them and therefore not their choice (Akello et al., 2006). Community sensitizations have been carried out to instill this message in families and community members, and consequently the innocence discourse is prevalent throughout the area. Shepler (2005) described a similar sensitization for former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, and how the use of a child rights agenda by former child soldiers in "discourses of abdicated responsibility" had helped to ease their reintegration.

Tragically, for most youth who returned to family in northern Uganda, this did not mean returning to their original homes. In 2002, the Ugandan government coerced the population into displaced camps, arguing that depopulation of the countryside would allow the government to provide adequate protection from the rebels. In 2006, there were 1.7 million people—nearly 90% of the population—in displaced camps, and most of the camps fell far below emergency standards for hygiene and availability of water (Civil Society Organizations for Peace in Northern Uganda [CSOPNU], 2006; Sphere, 2004).

Method

The fieldwork for this study was conducted over a 6-month period from July 2005 to January 2006 in Kitgum and Pader Districts in northern Uganda, during a time when the LRA continued erratic ambushes. The districts of study were chosen because they are two of the most affected in the region, with relatively little research and programming compared to a similar neighboring district. Twenty-three participants were chosen out of a representative sample of 741 male youth, ranging in age from 14 to 30 years.[2] The qualitative sample was selected to include variability in current age, length and age of abduction, level of psychological symptoms, and level of social reintegration (based on answers from the quantitative survey), and hence is not statistically representative of the quantitative sample. Five of the youth were interviewed twice to further explore topics;

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unfortunately, multiple interviews were not possible with all of the youth because of time and security constraints. To gain multiple perspectives on the youth's reintegration, interviews were also conducted with 30 friends, family members, and teachers of the youth.

This article provides context and depth to the process of reintegration while the related quantitative study allows us to explore how patterns might generalize to the broader population (Blattman & Annan, 2008; Blattman & Annan, in press). The qualitative interviews conducted with youth and the families, friends, teachers, and community members allowed for an exploration and "thick" description of the process of adaptation and reintegration. They also allowed for patterns and themes to emerge from the participants' experiences rather than limit findings to predefined variables.

Interviews were semistructured, lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and some used an interpreter. Questions focused on everyday living experiences and well-being, transitioning home after returning from the LRA, and relationships with families, peers, and neighbors. Interviews were designed with initial questions for each topic and then optional follow up questions depending on responses from participants. Examples of questions for youth included

1. Can you tell me about a typical day for you? Please describe every detail so I can imagine what your days are like.
2. Can you tell me about your family? Please describe them and your relationship with them.
3. Can you tell me about one day you remember from the bush [time with LRA]? It can be any day you want.
4. Can you tell me about your coming home after your abduction? I'm interested in what happened and also about your thoughts and feelings during the process.

Interviews with family members, friends, and neighbors aimed to understand multiple perspectives about reintegration and relationships of the youth. While the analysis focuses largely on the youth's interviews, these interviews helped to provide greater context. Questions included

5. Can you tell me about your family? Please describe the different family members and how you interact.
6. Can you tell me about when _____ came home after abduction?

Analysis was guided by grounded theory, an approach that allows theories to emerge from raw data in an inductive fashion (Charmaz, 2006;

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Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews were taped and transcribed in Luo and then translated into English. Interviews were independently coded line by line by the first two authors for the purpose of discerning patterns across participants. The authors used open coding to capture broad themes, whereas axial coding was used as a means to explicate nuances and connections between the themes. The authors developed memos about key constructs to explore theories emerging from the data. Themes were modified throughout discussions between authors.

The study was approved by Indiana University's Human Subjects Review Board and the Uganda Council on Science and Technology. Youth who showed signs of distress or emergency problems during interviews were referred to appropriate agencies. Interviewers also offered opportunities to change the topic or stop the interview if they noted signs of distress.

Participants

The 23 participants were from eight subcounties and ranged in age from 15 to 30 years—an age range approximating the construct of "youth" or *bulu*—in northern Uganda. Abduction length ranged from 1 day to over 9 years and age at the time of abduction was between 6 and 24 years. Sixteen participants were abducted before the age of 18 and would therefore be considered "former child soldiers" or "formerly recruited children" by international agencies (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2000; UNICEF, 2007). Fifteen had passed through one of the formal reception centers and 7 reported having a cleansing ceremony conducted for them. All but 5 were living in displacement camps, 3 were in town, and 2 in the capital city. There was a wide range of educational level—from 2 to 15 years—and approximately half of the youth were currently enrolled in school. Seven of the youth were orphans at the time of the interview. (See Table 2 for age, abduction status and return experiences of individual respondents.)

The youth described returning home, their reception by families and neighbors, feelings at various times after returning, and how they negotiated the transition from being an "LRA rebel" to a "formerly abducted child" and a member of their family and community. The results highlight reintegration as an ongoing process fraught with challenges that are compounded by being displaced and living in an area deeply affected, both socially and economically, by two decades of war.

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Table 2
Age, Abduction Status and Return Experiences of Participants

Name	Age	Length of Abduction	Age at Abduction	Reported Family Problems on Survey	Reported Community Problems on Survey
Matthew[a]	18	3 years	13		yes
Samuel	25	6 months	18		yes
Michael	20	1 day	9		
Okello	23	1 week	14		
Geoffrey	25	2 years	19		
Bongomin	25	10 years	12		yes
Simon	25	2 days	22		
Christopher	17	4 days	6		
Olweny	26	4 months	24		yes
Mark	20	3.5 years	13	yes	yes
David	15	1 year	13		yes
Adam	15	1 year	13	yes	yes
Ojok	28	3 weeks	19		
Timothy	18	8 years	9		yes
Komakech	17	6 months	15	yes	yes
James	28	4 years	21		
Richard	30	2 months	23		
John	28	3.5 years	13		yes
Paul	15	2.5 years	11		
Otim	15	3 years	11		yes
Peter	22	5.5 years	15		yes
Ojok	20	1 year	13		
Ayella	20	2 years	13	yes	yes

a. All names are pseudonyms to protect the participants' identity.

Results

Results include themes that emerged during the open coding process and that relate to the reintegration process. The first theme discussed is the lack of education and economic opportunities. This is a dominant problem for the majority of the population in this particular region although returned abductees describe especially difficult circumstances because of missed years of education and skills. The themes then focus on relationships between the returning abductees and their families, their community members, and their friends. Though most returnees reported positive homecoming experiences, some youth described conflicts in their relationships

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because of their previous association with the rebel group. Fear between the youth who return from the rebels and the community members also emerged as an important theme. Finally, the youth described several ways they attempted to engage with the problems they faced, such as passive responses to provocation, attempts to "forget" their difficult memories and separate themselves from the past, and understanding their abduction as part of a divine plan.

Lack of Educational and Economic Opportunities

"There is nothing to do" was a frequent statement made by youth in the interviews, a common response to questions about their typical day.

> I am okay but most times I am not free because now that people are in the camp, there is really nothing to be done. We will just survive on the food given by [World Food Program] and we just sit from morning to sunset without doing anything.

The lack of economic and educational opportunities seemed to hinder youth's reintegration for a number of reasons, including having little distraction from negative or intrusive memories and having difficulty finding a meaningful role or identity other than a returned rebel. A lack of productive activity for young people has been most problematic since the forced displacement into crowded camps of nearly 90% of the population in 2002 (CSOPNU, 2006). Samuel reported,

> When I was abducted by the rebels, I stayed in the bush for 6 months and when I returned, life was very hard at home. Since everybody is in the camps, there is really nothing much to do.

Simon, 25 years of age, also explained,

> When we, the five friends, are together, we also discuss what kind of life we would be leading if we were in the village where one would be digging and doing any other activity to earn his own decent life than the life we are having now in the camp.

The lack of activity was not unique to the formerly abducted—there was no significant difference in number of days worked between the abducted and their peers with mean of 8 days per month (see Table 1). Abducted youth, however, were less likely to be involved in skilled activities. Among

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those who were not in school (45%), only 54% had worked at least a day in the last week earning less than 75 cents per day (Annan et al., 2006).

Corbin's (2008) study in neighboring Gulu district describes military restrictions and poverty as defining features of youth's daily life in northern Uganda. Similar themes emerged in this study in relation to the lack of productive activities: feelings of idleness and lack of control over the environment, including an inability to obtain basic needs. Food aid arrived roughly once per month but even the day was unknown, kept confidential so that the rebels would not ambush the delivery trucks. Other aid projects—school scholarship, vocational training programs—often had unclear eligibility criteria for enrollment in an area where so many were in need. Simon explained,

> Each day for me is categorized with problems because when I wake up in the morning, I just sit around and do nothing until evening and eventually bed time. There is even no piece of land here in the camp where I can do any little cultivation and the lack of any form of activity to engage in so as to earn some little money escalates my problems more.

The lack of economic and educational opportunities was noticeable throughout the camp, with youth playing cards or frequenting drinking establishments throughout the day—activities that were said to be rare prior to displacement. Beyond economic need, having a livelihood and earning income are associated with important social roles, as older youth in this region are expected to help provide for their families, particularly younger siblings. Their inability to contribute was pronounced in such extreme poverty and was potentially more salient for those living with extended family members (rather than their biological parents). Ayella, who is now 20 years old, described how his lack of livelihood affected his relationships with his family,

> This is because life in the town needs when you are working where you can earn some money and contribute something for the family welfare. And because I don't do anything to earn a living, on the days that I manage to bring something home when my friends might have given me some little money, that day everyone is happy and they really treat you well. But because friends don't give me money every day, the rest of the days you are treated as a nobody.

Ayella's situation is notable, however, because his strained family relationships were part of family dynamics before his abduction, an aspect that

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is frequently overlooked in studies on war which focus only on youths' experiences with the armed groups and postwar setting.

Youth's movement and ability to engage in productive activity was further restricted by continued rebel presence in the area, as Bongomin explained,

> I just sit because there are many rebels in this area. It's therefore very risky for us who have just returned from captivity to move up to the bush and do work like chopping wood, collecting firewood and burning charcoal.

While fear of the rebels was an issue for all those in the camps, abducted youth described being more afraid of the rebels because if they were found and known to have escaped from a previous abduction, they could be killed. The restricted movement outside of the displaced camps, imposed by both the rebel activity and the government army regulations, made for even fewer opportunities to earn an income. The limited formal employment meant that most people had to create their own opportunities by starting a small business or joining a cooperative. As explained in Blattman and Annan (2009), this often took some capital and social support and was difficult for those without these supports.

Youth with physical injuries from abduction described how their injury compounded the problems of making an income, especially because the majority of work in this region involves manual labor. Even small businesses, which require less labor, demand carrying goods by foot or bicycle. Thirteen percent in the full sample reported a debilitating injury, and abducted male youth were three times more likely to report a serious injury than nonabducted youth.

Despite the limited economic and educational opportunities, some youth found ways to engage actively and establish meaningful roles—in business, dance groups, and even local government leadership. This young man, Geoffrey, described how he was motivated after he returned from abduction:

> Q: Do you have relatives or parents who helped you to start this business?
> A: I started this business on my own with the money that I had worked and saved.
> Q: You seem to be fairly successful so what do you think makes the difference between you and other youth who are not doing well?
> A: When I came back [from the rebels], I thought of the time I had wasted. I thought of what I was doing before like making charcoal. I had left my wife when she was pregnant although I didn't know it at the time. So, when I came

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> back, I wanted to work for the lost time . . . I thought to myself, "before I was able to do things, so why can't I do it now?" I don't want things for free. I want to work for them.

Other youth, however, had more difficulty engaging and described a sense of great loss from their abduction. In this region, education is deeply valued by many families and seen as essential for a better future. Both abducted and nonabducted youth lamented the inability to attend secondary school, often due to lack of funds for tuition fees. However, quantitative findings show abducted youth had, on average, over half a year less education than their nonabducted peers, and longer abductions meant great educational losses (Annan et al., 2006). A number of youth described the loss of education as one of the most significant impacts of abduction on their lives. John, 28 years old and abducted 3 times, said,

> My stay in the bush has really wasted my time and if they had not abducted me, maybe I would have completed my education now.

And Peter explained that his lost education and inability to continue education were a major source of anxiety,

> There are times when I wake up without a lot of worries but most times I have thoughts on my mind and I do not have anything to do because most of my valuable times were wasted before. And now I see some people with whom I was studying still continuing with their studies but I am now at home doing nothing and there is no way I can even get anything to help me. This is what makes me have so many thoughts [worries].

Those in school had a sense of optimism, as 17-year-old Komakech explained, "I can't predict the future; however, I believe in 10 years time I will be living a better life due to my being in school." Education and employment are not only seen as important individually but are also seen as important for future contributions to their families, especially their children's or younger siblings' lives.

> I would study anything that will enable me to help my younger brothers quickly so that they can also study to make life easy.

Acceptance by Families and Communities

Youth described the importance of their family's reaction when they returned from the rebel group. John, for example, said,

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> First, the kind of welcome people accorded me was really comforting and I was really happy such that if I had any intentions of going back to the bush, I would not go.

Many also emphasized a closeness that they maintained with family members, especially their parents, both before and after returning from the bush. Michael, who was abducted for over 3 years, shared how even though his family's living arrangements dramatically changed since his abduction; "the good thing is that people are still together. There is that kind of togetherness. It's not yet worn out. It's not like people are having quarrels." Despite the many challenges at home, many also commented on how much better life at home was from life "in the bush" with the rebels, contrasting the constraints to their freedom and the lack of food during abduction to the freer existence at home. John continued,

> Secondly I started feeling free and have no one to control me. Thirdly, food alone is a lot. I eat and get satisfied and I am even fattish now. I even stay with people now and they tell me stories. Fourthly, I now can cultivate in my garden and get some food which is better than going to steal from another person's garden.

Insults from family members were uncommon for males who returned. In our representative study of reintegration in northern Uganda, the majority of youth—over 90% of males—reported being accepted back into their families without insult, blame, or physical harm (Annan et al., 2006; J. Annan et al., 2008). The small number of youth interviewed who experienced problems in their homecomings, most often described verbal abuse from extended relatives, not immediate family members. These words could be extremely hurtful. Peter recounted one of these incidents,

> Yes, there was something that hurt me so much. When I came back they said I should have been killed instead of coming back . . . . This really hurt and I started thinking of the life I went through and I had wanted to answer that person back but I did not. I only kept quiet. This is some one so close to me and we stay in the same home. She is my mother's sister except that their fathers are different. I only asked her why she wanted me killed and what wrong I had done yet we were all staying together she therefore did not answer me.

Many more youth had difficulty with their communities—34% of males expressed having some problems with neighbors or community members when they returned. The majority of these problems with communities,

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however, diminished over time and only one fifth of those who reported problems initially continued to report problems at the time of the survey.

Where community harassment did take place, several common themes emerged. The most commonly stated reason for being insulted was that parents of other children who had not returned from abduction were upset by the presence of those who returned from the rebels. Okweny, 28 years old, explained,

> Regarding my life when I just came back, it was not really good in terms of relations with the neighbors and people around. This is because there are some people who are not happy to see people who were once abducted come back home because there are some children and youth that were also abducted with us on the same day and have not managed to escape and others have even died in the bush. This therefore makes their relatives and family members look at us with hatred.

Fifteen-year-old Daniel also described this problem,

> They like calling me names saying I am a rebel and this is because I was abducted and came back after 1 year in captivity and some children with whom I was abducted have never returned and their parents feel bad seeing me back home so they tell their children not to play together with me.

Another issue that emerged about community insults was that particular youth were insulted when the community suspected that they had been involved in LRA raids or killings, as Matthew described:

> I think they are talking like that because when I was abducted, the rebels beat me and asked me to show them where goats could be got so I showed them the neighbor's goats because we didn't have goats of our own. So ever since I returned, the owners of these goats are on my case and some have very bad thoughts about me and I think some of them can even kill me. And I think that if it were possible, I should not continue staying in [my camp].

A social worker from a reception centre later disclosed Matthew was suspected to have killed some members of the community while he was with the LRA, which was the reason for his difficulty with neighbors. This is not only the case with Matthew; survey findings show that there is a relationship between violence–both experienced and perpetrated by the abducted—and reintegration problems with families and communities (Annan, Blattman, Mazurana, and Karlson, 2009). Matthew also described

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how recent LRA attacks in the area had heightened tensions with neighbors and returned youth. Finally, in several reported cases, the use of alcohol and disputes over material goods seemed to further exacerbate existing problems with community members.

Passive Response to Conflict

When youth experienced problems with neighbors or other community members, most described reacting passively—staying silent or walking away.

> Some say that all of us should be burnt because we are the ones doing all the havoc. My response is silence and sometimes I just leave the place and go somewhere else.

Despite a common assumption that former combatants have problems with aggression, there is little evidence to support aggression as a problem for the majority of those who return from the LRA. Our quantitative findings show very little difference in self-reported hostility or aggression between abducted youth and nonabducted youth (Blattman & Annan, in press). This is not merely self-report; community leaders we interviewed reported no problems with abducted youth. A teacher described one of her students who returned from abduction as follows:

> When he has been disappointed, teased, and called names, he tends to isolate himself since he cannot react.

The interviews with youth offer several explanations for their passivity and isolation in reaction to being harassed. First, many of the youth attempted to avoid reminders of their time with the rebels. Youth described how being provoked by insults triggered past memories. If they kept silent or walked away, they felt that they could better control or avoid painful memories. John explained,

> If there is nothing that annoys me then I feel normal, there is nothing bad I feel. But when there is something hurting me, then I feel bad and thus remember the things I went through from the bush.

Second, some youth avoided arguments because they felt they did not have the physical capacity to fight due to weakness or injury. As mentioned

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previously, abducted youth are more likely to have injuries than nonabducted youth and many report significant physical pain.

> If I had the strength, I would definitely do what they do to me. If it's to quarrel, I would also quarrel and if it means to fight, that would be what I would do exactly but now I have no option but to keep quiet.

A third reason for their passive responses to conflict is that youth had strong incentives to demonstrate to the community that they were not rebels by avoiding aggressive response. Threats to identity and fear of unleashing reprisal attacks from the community may make passivity a dominant strategy. The ability to break with past identity was important because one's reintegration experience depended in part on whether one was seen as a rebel or as an abducted child/youth (Lomo & Hovil, 2004). If seen as a rebel, then they could be blamed for the atrocities committed by the rebel group. If one had the "mind of the rebels" then one was seen as aggressive and dangerous. Veale and Stavrou's (2007) study in the region described how many youth were able to make the identity transition back to being a member of the community, yet community members could quickly shift to calling returned youth "rebels" if they showed any aggressive behavior.

Responding passively, however, involved a concession of power. The community values a clever response to provocation, as often seen in interactions between community members and depicted in popular folktales. Responses can be a way of balancing power and diffusing conflict, seemingly respected across class, gender, and age. One young man, Peter, lamented the loss of this ability to answer back in a "good way."

> Before, if someone was talking to me or quarrelling on me, however much you say something, I could still answer you back in a good way, but now if someone says something bad or quarrels, I can only keep quiet or start to cry. So I find [abduction] has changed my life and the reasons as to why I cry, I even do not know.

A few youth described using silence in a more proactive way. They seemed proud of their nonaggressive response. Ayella described his perspective,

> There are others who talk things to provoke you and they expect you to answer back so as to start up a quarrel, but I am one person who keeps quiet and does not even mind what they say. So when you talk and someone looks at you, you who was interested in quarreling will definitely feel ignored and

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> will keep quiet as well. Secondly, I normally don't respond because I don't have the strength to fight back in case it breaks up and where I am beaten and hurt, I may have to report to the police but where do I get the money to pursue the case?

A few youth responded assertively, including threatening to take provocateurs to a legal authority. Matthew, for example, described the following incident with relatives:

> So I asked them how they could say such terrible things about me and yet I was their relative. I told them I could take them to the authorities but I wanted them to see for themselves how bad it was without having to throw them in jail.

Taking the issue to authorities was effective in several instances. Some youth went to the local council—the locally elected officials—to settle the case of being insulted or accused. They described this as helpful, either settling issues of accusations or stopping them because the official warned the community member, sometimes under the threat of imprisonment.

Layers of Fear

A recurring theme throughout the youth's description of abduction and return was fear: fear of being killed when with the rebels, fear that people will harm them when they return home, and being aware that communities fear them because they are former "rebels."

> From the bush, life was difficult because each time you are being threatened of losing your life and this caused fear such that life was seen a useless thing, and there was nothing one could do about it and I was never settled because I knew anytime I would die.

While with the rebels, the youth described being in constant fear of being murdered. Many described witnessing other abducted youth being beaten and killed and entering battles with the government army where they felt certain they were going to die. In order to dissuade abducted youth from planning an escape, the LRA told some that they could read their minds and would know if they were thinking of home or of escaping. Geoffrey explained,

> Each time you do anything, your life is threatened. For those just abducted, you can carry heavy luggage and if your feet are swollen, they will kill you.

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> When you are initiated as a soldier, if your feet are swollen, they know you are thinking of home. Me and my sister were abducted and we were the only two who escaped. People were killed because they were thinking of home.

Fear did not disappear when they escaped and returned home. As they attempted to transition into society, many described initial fear of people, or "civilians," and explained how they isolated themselves from others in order to cope with their fear. Geoffrey, a youth abducted for 2 years, reported,

> Life was difficult. When we came back, it felt like I shouldn't sit with people because people would harm me. And it was hard because I had nothing. So I just sat and waited for someone to give me money. I would sit in hiding because when I saw people moving, it would bother me. This went off with time because friends came to advise me to forget and to move again. Life is good now.

Youth described a process of "getting used to people," implying that their fear subsided over time when interactions did not confirm their worst fears. Others described how this process was hindered by negative community reactions. Twenty-eight-year-old James explained,

> I was full of fear even to move. You know those days, when I returned, there were few returnees from the bush and people in the community had fear for us such that they could not even associate with us. Their fear was based on the belief that returnees still have the mind of the rebels and can therefore do anything to anyone.

The initial fear expressed by returnees was often related to their experience and the socialization process with the LRA. Youth learned to be suspicious of their abducted peers after being betrayed and endangered by other abductees who revealed their plans to escape. Komakech, a 17-year-old, said,

> There are some friends [in the bush] that you can't really tell what is in your mind because you can tell him such a thing (plan to escape) and if he is one who doesn't want to return home, then he reports you and, who knows, you could be killed. So although we were close, there was need to reserve some ideas to avoid the risk of losing life.

The LRA also told some youth that if they did return home, they would be killed by community members, potentially poisoned. Some described

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initial fear that the LRA's teachings might be true and, subsequently, suspicion and fear continued for some time despite the warm welcome from most families and neighbors.

In addition to being afraid of community members, youth described how community members were afraid of them.

> Q: Do you think you were treated differently when you returned from the bush?
> A: There was no difference. Only that when I had just come back, people used to fear me. But when I got used to normal life again, people stopped fearing me. All my friends came back to me and we are together up to now.
> Q: Why do you think people feared you at first?
> A: Because the mentality we used to have in the bush is different. And because the kind of life one has been leading in the bush, they look aggressive.
> Q: How did you feel about people fearing you?
> A: I felt it was very painful because when people fear you, they think you are a bad person. And even if you are not a bad person, the fact that you bear the name rebel can make people fear you. That's why when I resumed normal life and people got used to me again, I was very happy.

In this context, where both the returned youth and the community were suspicious of one another, an ally became critical to negotiate situations. Youth explained the importance of one person who gave them specific, straightforward advice not to be afraid of others. Other youth described a friend or family member spending time with them and building (and other people's) confidence in relationships. For some youth, it took a certain kind of individual to help build that confidence. When asked to describe their close friends, the youth tended to explain that they had a small group of about two to three friends who were supportive and caring. They also described their friends as having upright personal qualities that set them apart. Richard said the following about his friends,

> All my friends are good people [un]like those who drink alcohol because their focus are always on alcohol and nothing developmental therefore we will definitely share nothing in common.

Peter said of his friends, "They are good people. They are not bad and we move together to go to church on Sundays." The emphasis placed on the moral character of their friends may reflect the youth's caution as they sought to rebuild trust in their relationships. By surrounding themselves with a small, selective group, they could feel more confident that their problems and secrets would be handled respectfully.

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Friends were also important for helping returnees cope with memories of their time with the LRA. As Samuel described, friends provided much-needed distraction from difficult memories and current stressors:

> Life is bad when I am alone because that is the time when I think about what I went through in the past but when I am with my friends, I tend to forget because they sometimes crack jokes that I laugh about so I kind of forget how hard life is and how there is nothing to be done about it.

Some youth also spoke of an important (re)socialization process to learn norms in the community. Having a family member or friend who helped teach them how to act and who served as a guide to interpret others' actions was an important resource for navigating their return. For James, it was a minister who helped others get used to him and his brother and sister who helped him cope with other people's reactions:

> This was difficult situation for me but it happened that there was a Reverend here who used to come and share with us the Bible scripture and this helped people to start getting used to me. . . . People used to say that they fear me and my brothers and sisters kept on advising them to stop fearing me because I do nothing bad to anyone. So they (brothers and sisters) used to come and tell me what people say about me and they would advise me not to mind what people say because I never wanted or went to the bush myself I was taken against my will.

"Forgetting" the Past

An important part of the advice and guidance given by friends and family was that youth should 'forget' what happened in the past. When asked whether she gave her nephew advice, an aunt explained plainly, "Yes. To stop worrying and forget what he went through." One youth reported his family members advising him "to forget the life I went through while in the bush and start a new life at home."

While this could seem callous and impossible to heed given the traumatic experiences the youth have been through, youth described this as important advice—an encouragement to leave the past behind, make a clean break, and focus on the future. One interviewee, who was fluent in both Luo and English noted that the Luo term, *wilo wic*, which was translated as "to forget," has a subtly different meaning and attempted to explain what might have been lost in the translation:

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> "Wilo wic." It is not forgetting exactly. It means that the kind of memory is reduced . . . Even if you are thinking of something, you try to suppress it, the burning thought. You try to think of something else.

The youth described an internal desire to "forget" their memories and break with the past so that they could focus on their future. They were also aware that memories and nightmares related to the rebels tied them to an identity that they were attempting to shed. They described keeping memories to themselves, afraid that they might be used against them. James, for example, explained,

> I therefore don't discuss because there are some people whom you might tell your experiences and they later turn it as a tool to judge and abuse me especially people who drink, they can easily say I did such and such a thing and that is what is making me be such a person. .

Some youth thought of their memories as a potential liability that could be used as proof that they committed atrocities in the bush. As a result, anxiety about others' reactions, in addition to the pain of remembering, developed around their difficult memories. A conversation with Paul, who was abducted for over two and a half years, describes this dilemma,

> Q: Do you talk to anyone about these things that happened?
> A: No, I don't talk about it because it doesn't help.
> Q: What do you mean it doesn't help? Does it bother you to talk about it?
> A: No, it is that sometimes after sharing, people call me a rebel. It can create hatred between the community and me.
> Q: Has this happened?
> A: It happened once at the construction site where I work. One man called me a rebel and he was later fired for this. I didn't like this at all. I said to the man, "You can call me a rebel because I was abducted and you were not. If you want, you can call me a rebel."
> Q: When I was talking to the people in the house, they told me that they didn't know you were abducted until you were working together and they saw your scars. Was there a reason that you didn't want to tell them?
> A: If I told them, they could turn it around and use it against me.

A few talked openly about their experiences with friends or family members without problems but others had good reason to fear judgment; there were instances when youth's nightmares provoked others to question whether they had perpetrated violence while with the rebels. Olweny reported,

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> The only problem I recognized with my in-laws is that they in a way doubted my personality saying I might have committed some bad acts while in the bush and this might still be in my line of thought and one day such similar things could happen. My wife, too, was a little scared although we were staying together and this was because I used to have nightmares and could scream and jump out of bed thinking I was still in the bush with the rebels. This, therefore, made her ask me time and again if at all I was being haunted by some one's spirit whom I might have killed but because I know I did not do such a thing, I told her the truth but now I no longer experience such dreams.

Nightmares were the most frequently reported psychological symptom in the survey. Linking nightmares to acts committed with the LRA, as described in the quote above, is best understood through the spiritual beliefs in the region. Nightmares are interpreted as haunting by a spirit, or *cen*, which is believed to be brought on by disturbing the spiritual world through killing someone, witnessing a killing, or defacing a body. Unless ceremonies have been performed to appease the spirits, *cen* is seen as potentially polluting to family and friends, making it a possible source of stigmatization (Allen & Schomerus, 2006; Baines, 2005; Caritas, 2005).

Cleansing rituals are commonly performed for youth who are believed to have *cen*, in order to appease the spirit. Otim describes how this was helpful for him,

> I told my family members and they performed a ritual and now this dream is no longer there. I was taken to a witch doctor who said I was afraid of killing this old man and that is why he disturbs me. A [rooster] was then slaughtered and I was given some herbs that I was eating and this helped me.

Over half of the male youth who returned had a ceremony or ritual performed to cleanse them from their past (Annan et al., 2006). Ceremonies primarily focused on cleansing the youth for acts that disturbed the spiritual world and on reconciling them with the spirits of those who have been killed. Several youth refused to have rituals, however, explaining that they had not perpetrated violence and therefore did not want to be implicated by the rituals.

Finding Meaning in Abduction

As well as trying to 'forget' memories in their past, youth found different ways of making meaning out of their terrible experiences with the rebels, including their own perpetration. Some youth struggled with blaming

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themselves for their actions while with the LRA. In the most extreme case, Peter, described painful memories of beating his brother to death under rebel orders and the relief he felt when he stopped blaming himself for what happened.

> When it had just happened, I kept thinking that since [my brother] looked at the way I was beating him till he died. I therefore saw that it was my entire fault. I should have refused to do it so that we were all killed. And if I had known that I wouldn't be killed, I would not have done such a thing.
>
> When this thought became so stuck on my mind, I then ruled out that it was not in my interest that I did such but I was forced by the rebels to do it. That time, I used to dream a lot about him and one night I got up and prayed then asked him to forgive me. I told him that "please forgive me; I did not do this because I wanted it. You and I used to stay together from home and if anyone disturbed you, he would have disturbed me as well. So this was not in my interest but I was forced."

Youth's different narratives of their acts with the LRA point to the complex way they view their actions while with the rebels. One youth reported that he did not kill anyone while with the rebels but then several minutes later explained how he was forced to take part in beating someone to death.

A common way youth seemed to understand their actions while with the rebels was that it was not their choice to be with the LRA but rather it had been God's will. When community members insulted youth by calling them *olum* (rebel), some retorted that it was God's will that they were abducted as a way to defend themselves. This became a powerful statement, implying that to accuse the youth was to question God's plan and that they were not responsible for actions while with the rebels. Community sensitization campaigns also emphasized the youth's innocence.

Some youth also used the idea of God's will as a way to understand their special status in escaping from the LRA. There seems to be great importance in thinking that one was chosen by God to escape among the thousands who did not. Matthew, 18 years of age, said,

> After the training, they started sending us to battlefields but God helped me—that is why I cannot leave God. I have also realized that it is God that can help people because I passed through very difficult experiences. Sometimes one is sent to fight where most people get killed but he returns because God has helped him.

Understanding one's survival as God's will seemed to also serve as a way to cope with survivor's guilt, especially if the youth survived when a

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close family member or friend did not. Bongomin, who was abducted for over 9 years, explained,

> But I was able to tell them that since God had allowed me to come back, we had to leave everything to God. This is because my younger brother was abducted but he died and remained in the bush. So, if God didn't want me to come back then I would have died as well.

God, fate, or witchcraft were also called upon when there was either an unjust act or an unexpected outcome (positive or negative) and when there was no other clear explanation for the event. In an area where there is so little control over one's surroundings, attributing unexplained events to God's will may be an integral part of faith and culture as well as a way of coping with consequences one does not understand or would not choose.

Discussion

In the interviews, the youth described both the struggles and the successes of reintegration and daily living. The struggles with finding work, trying to return to school, adjusting to changed or strained relationships, and attempting to understand their experiences with the LRA are intermixed with the joy of reuniting with family, laughing, talking, and dancing with friends, having children, and being "free"—a word used by several youth to describe the feeling of being away from the rebels. While each youth had a unique homecoming experience, there are also many shared experiences among them.

The voices of the youth in this article enrich the global discussions on reintegration by emphasizing that individual reintegration is inseparable from community status—something particularly poignant in the context of displacement camps in northern Uganda with such large-scale community disruption and economic devastation. The leading document on standards for reintegration of former child soldiers, The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated With Armed Forces or Armed Groups (UNICEF, 2007), addresses the importance of involving families and other children affected by war in the community along with the pitfalls of targeting only those who are formerly associated with the armed group. The challenge in specific national policies and practice is to identify and address the specific dynamics in communities that may differ according the cultural and sociopolitical context. The interviews and analysis provide

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support for viewing reintegration as a dynamic process occurring between the individual, family, and community, as described in ecological development models (Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An example is the relationship between the formerly abducted youth and the parents of children who had not returned. Finding ways to address the grief and loss of community members and parents may be a critical community intervention to help improve their relations with those who return. Programs that focus only on formerly abducted youth may instead increase the stigma of those who return home.

While the reintegration standards state the importance of considering the political, social, economic, and cultural context of programs, these interviews with youth suggest that we need to also consider the internal functioning and socialization process in armed groups. Understanding the LRA's messages during abduction and captivity helped to interpret the fear expressed by returnees, even from those who receive warm welcomes and reintegrated well over time. From a psychological perspective, the youth's fear and isolation would be viewed as common posttraumatic symptoms of hyper-vigilance and avoidance. Others have emphasized the community's rejection of youth as the reason for returnee's fear. Each of these explanations may explain some of the youth's response; however, the interviews revealed that the LRA's messages aimed to sever ties with families and communities and may contribute to many youth's initial fear regardless of their initial welcome.

The importance of having a reliable friend or family member to mitigate this fear was a crucial support for many. It is important to help youth normalize their fear and anxiety when they return and reassure them that, for most, fear dissipates with time. Exploring interventions to increase social support and encourage allies for returnees is vital for those who do not have family or friends to fill this role. Further, while there are reasons to encourage youth to associate with noncombatants (e.g., breaking command structure, discouraging stigmatization), some youth described the importance of having a friend who had also been abducted and Baines' (2008) report showed that some youth might be seeking this out on their own. While programs should avoid targeting only former child soldiers and potentially increasing stigma, they should also be careful not to negate the shared experiences and support of the abducted youth.

For the minority of youth who persist with problems in their families or communities, more intensive interventions—including family or community conflict mediation—are needed. Each case will differ according to the situation, although possible interventions include rituals and ceremonies or other forums for justice and reconciliation, which have been written about

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extensively and with much debate (Allen, 2006; Baines, 2005; Veale, 2007). For the most difficult cases, it may be crucial to find viable alternatives for youth to integrate into another setting if it is not possible to reintegrate within their own families and communities.

Finally, the youth in this study defied stereotypes of aggressive young male combatants who are a danger to their community. The dominant view in media and policy emphasizes the potential for aggression in children and youth associated with armed forces. Instead, many youth in these interviews struggled with the opposite problem: feeling unable to assert themselves in interpersonal conflicts. While the problem of passivity may be specific to northern Uganda, it is common to identify and focus on externalizing behaviors such as aggression, while internalizing behaviors and related feelings such as sadness and isolation are overlooked. Internalizing behaviors may be less threatening to family and community security, yet helping youth assert themselves and resolve conflicts is important for them to develop into full members of society with meaningful roles and identities.

Conclusion

In this article, the youth's perception of their daily experiences and their homecoming in northern Uganda brought attention to some of the factors that may be inhibiting successful reintegration between individuals, families, and communities. Among the youth, fear of being accused and judged, concerns about a jobless future, learning new norms, and anxiety about how to deal with conflicts interacted in debilitating ways with the community's fear of recurring violence, overstretched resources, and concern for children who are still in captivity. While most youth found ways of relieving their fears and obtained the social support to help them face their challenges, some youth continue to be burdened by their past association with the rebels. Moving beyond stereotypes and individuals to focus on specific problems within an ecological framework will help to develop programs that support both youth and their communities in the process of reintegration and the hardships of daily living.

Notes

1. This continues to be upheld in Uganda with the exception of the top five commanders who were indicted by the International Criminal Court and would therefore be prosecuted upon their return (two of them have reportedly died).

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2. This age range was chosen to approximate the concept of youth in northern Uganda, seen as the transition between childhood and being an elder in Uganda, and usually ranging from 15 to 30 or 35. Male and female studies were conducted separately due to the gender specific differences in war experiences. The interviews were also conducted during a different time frame (due to funding and logistics) and therefore are also analyzed separately.

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