Special Thematic Section on "20 Years after Genocide: Psychology's Role in Reconciliation and Reconstruction in Rwanda"

Twenty Years After Genocide: The Role of Psychology in the Reconciliation and Reconstruction Process in Rwanda

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Abstract

This Special Thematic Section brings together eight papers that showcase different aspects of the contribution of psychology to the processes of recovery in Rwanda following the 1994 genocide. The Section is noteworthy in part because a majority of the papers have Rwandan authors. In summarizing the contributions I make six observations about the remarkable context of the genocide and its aftermath: a) it was distinctive from previous mass violence in its intensity and character; b) it has been characterized by bystander inaction and the problems of positioning outsiders to help; c) hundreds of thousands of accused or convicted perpetrators have lived alongside survivors; d) electronic media played a profound role not only in promoting violence but also in building peace; e) Rwanda has been the site of unprecedented societal interventions with political goals that have the character and content of social psychological experiments; and f) the role of memorialization in repairing or sustaining harm needs further examination. I conclude by noting that the study of recovery is clear proof that the genocide in Rwanda, as is the case with genocides of the past, failed to achieve its aims.

Keywords: reconciliation, intergroup conflict, psychology and history, social change, societal interventions, Rwanda, genocide

In contemporary conversation, the Genocide against the Tutsis and the associated mass killing of thousands of Hutus serves as a shorthand for mass brutality. Thus, when people seek the quintessential example of ethnic conflict they may reach for the labels Hutu and Tutsi (even if they struggle to remember which group comprised the perpetrators and which was the victim).

Given the shocking and visible nature of the events in 1994 it is not surprising that the events are used that way in discussion. The same phenomenon can be seen in educational materials and psychology textbooks. The widespread but superficial knowledge of the genocide allows people to use it as a placeholder for mindless mob

violence, dehumanization, and the tyranny of the group, sometimes without a close examination of whether the facts of the case supports the application of the preferred concept to it. In this way it serves much like the Holocaust as a case study in inhumanity. Given the greater familiarity of Western audiences with the events of the Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda is less commonly used to illustrate other arguments about mass violence such as the roles of unconstrained authoritarian leadership, racist ideologies, and the effects of economic frustration on aggression.

My purpose in making this observation is not to be sharply critical of the practice of equating Rwanda with the genocide (as galling as that can be for Rwandans). The genocide was shocking and attention grabbing and it merits very close public and academic scrutiny, but if we restrict a focus on Rwanda to the terrible events in a period of 100 days from April 7, 1994, we risk missing much that is extraordinary. In short: Instances of mass violence cannot be understood at a single point of time without an accompanying close consideration of the causes and consequences.

With that in mind, the social and political history of Rwanda and the region prior to 1994 is vitally important background for those who wish to understand the genocide. Any close analysis of that history demonstrates that the events of 1994 cannot be reduced to an ethnic conflict that spontaneously grew at that time, or that somehow flowed inexorably from a long-standing history of conflict. The reality of the genocide, as with any other important human event, is that it was complex and there were multiple causes. Anybody who seeks to persuade you that the events had a single direct cause ("it's all about X" or "it boils down to Y") may be helping to advance their preferred political or intellectual line, but they are unlikely to help us advance understanding by doing so (unless they inadvertently succeed in demonstrating the folly of simplistic explanations). To take a single example: if you think that the Genocide against the Tutsi is the paradigmatic case of ethnic conflict then you may need to think again. Contemporary scholarship suggests that Hutu and Tutsi are not ethnicities but are better understood as classes or castes (argued by many to have been superimposed or reinvented by the Belgians, see Moss, 2014), and this is certainly what is taught in Rwandan schools.

If we accept that instances of mass violence are complex events that have multiple causes, then we need to accept that they also require careful historiographic analysis and not simplistic single factor explanations. The science of psychology can be used as a tool to aid historical analysis (see Staub, 2006), but the coordination of that intellectual task is one for history, not psychology. It is, however, equally important to recognize that such tragic events also have complex, long-term consequences. Many of those consequences exist through the lived experiences of human beings and that is one area where the discipline of psychology comes to the fore. As it turns out, although psychologists, in their conversations and lecture classes, may repeat the broader cultural use of Rwanda as a simple symbol of inhumanity embedded within the 100 days of genocide, this is not reflected in the research effort of psychologists. In short, the balance of the research efforts of psychologists have been directed to understanding and supporting the recovery in the aftermath of the genocide, rather than analysing the causes of the genocide itself (but see Staub, 2006, 2011).

A sample of these contributions to supporting reconciliation and reconstructions is showcased in this special thematic section. Yes, Rwanda is a well-known symbol of human-induced disaster but it is less well-known as a country that is brim full of inspiring stories of recovery, reconciliation, and survival. This recovery has occurred in the fraught, contested and intensely complex political environment of a post-conflict society (with a political system that has both democratic and authoritarian aspects). Since 1994 Rwanda has been a participant in devastating

regional conflicts (that are less well known than the genocide but no less subject to misunderstanding and contestation) that makes the process of researching them difficult, but it also makes the instances of recovery all the more remarkable.

One compellingly clear demonstration of the recovery process can be seen in the pages you are about to read. A majority of the papers in this special section are authored or co-authored by Rwandan academics (with four of the eight first authors being Rwandan). It may seem unremarkable for Rwandan voices to figure prominently on issues of deep concern to Rwanda, but I would be remiss if I were to fail to note how extraordinary that proportion is in the contemporary academic world (and I refer readers to the forthcoming Special Section on "Decolonizing Psychological Science" in this journal). The best guide we have is Quayle and Greer's (2014) analysis of the contribution of African authors to social psychology (though, of course, several of the papers in the present special section are more properly considered to be clinical or political psychology). That survey of (Web of Science) listed papers between 2000 and 2010 did not identify any social psychology papers by authors from Rwanda (M. Quayle, personal communication), though this is in part because academics from developing countries will often have institutional affiliations with universities outside their countries of origin. This special section thus represents progress, but it also sets benchmarks for future progress. We can hope that the next special issue of a journal on these themes would also have a Rwandan editor (a point that resolves for me with the tight focus of hindsight as I type these words).

In order to provide context for the special section it is useful to provide some background on the events and their ramifications. I have (reluctantly) decided not to provide an account of the events of the genocide and post-genocide history. This is in part because the contested nature of the events means that it is inevitable that errors of omission and commission (whether real or perceived) on my part could detract from the reception of the works in this section. I do, however, want to introduce a small number of provocations that I hope will help to contextualise the contributions.

Intensity and Character of the Genocide: A Low in Human Affairs

My first observation is that the scale and intensity of the violence involved a qualitative and quantitative departure from previous standards of human conduct. The killing of up to one million people in one hundred days is 10,000 murders per day (imagine the World Trade Center attacks being repeated five times per day in New York City, every day for 100 days), mainly using hand-held weapons and implements (or no implement at all). If you have seen the documentaries, news reports or dramatized accounts of atrocities that are readily available in the public domain, then you almost certainly have not heard the worst of it. There were widespread acts of violence (and I am referring here especially to the mass murder of, and torture used against, very young children) that are more horrific than the acts routinely attributed (sometimes misattributed) to the most infamously villainous groups of the past. Much of the violence could not be legally screened in many countries if it was presented as filmed works of fiction. The end result is that, even where graphic and disturbing depictions of the genocide are provided to the general public, they have already been sanitized (just as I have chosen not to provide the detail here).

You may come to a different conclusion than I do as to whether the violence represented a qualitative departure from historical levels of brutality, but the discontinuity in the intensity of the violence is difficult to dispute. One way to access an understanding of this is to turn to the paper here by Gishoma et al. (2014). You will see in Table 1

that the typical genocide survivor who participated in their study had experienced the loss of five siblings during the genocide. The conceit (loosely based, it seems, on a historical case) in the film *Saving Private Ryan* was that Ryan was special, and must be saved, because he had already lost three brothers in war and his family must be spared the pain of losing a fourth. Of course there is no calculus that allows us to compare the loss of four family members and five, but the point I am making is that the device of the Hollywood film (about WWII, the deadliest conflict in human history) intended to make Ryan's case remarkable for Western audiences is a level of loss that was commonplace in Rwanda.

As is common in mass violence, the killings were accompanied by widespread sexual violence that also took new forms. As Kantengwa (2014) discusses, many of the perpetrators of sexual violence were recruited for their HIV-positive status. Many rapes were thus explicit attempts to pass on what was, at the time, an inevitably fatal disease to victims, their children and future sexual partners. The widescale birth of children of survivors of rape represented a challenge that had to be navigated by people who were survivors of violence that was intended not just to harm them, but to reduce their chances of survival by dishonouring them (as a victim of rape, as a carrier of disease, and as the mother of a child of a perpetrator). Kantengwa (2014) explores the journeys of mothers of children born of rape in a qualitative analysis. Her paper shows how access to the culturally valued role of motherhood provides a possible way for the survivors of rape to overcome the burden of trauma.

If there is any doubt about the mental health burden of these intensely traumatic events, then the paper by Gishoma et al. (2014) should put these to rest. Gishoma et al. document a local intervention to promote well-being in a country where many of the emerging health services were destroyed during the violence. The relatively recent and worrying emergence of the traumatic crisis phenomenon, where people attending commemoration events collapse in paroxysms of uncontrollable grief, demonstrates that trauma has long-term consequences that are chronic in their time course but that have intense acute episodes. The group-therapy strategy trialed in that paper suggests that it may have some encouraging positive effects, but that the number and severity of traumatic episodes was not diminished. The paper is a clarion call for new intervention research.

If we accept the claim of a discontinuity in the intensity and character of the violence then that also calls into question the deep characterological account of the genocide. If the violence is new and different, it does not make sense to attribute its cause to the underlying disposition of Rwandan people and their culture. The chilling downside, of course, is that it also suggests that the same, or worse, could happen somewhere again.

Bystander Inaction and Positioning Outsiders to Help

Secondly, the genocide was marked by a level of bystander inaction that may be a common feature of mass killing, but is nevertheless remarkable and painful for anybody who recognizes that we all have a responsibility to protect vulnerable people from harm. The world did almost nothing to stop the events of 1994 from taking place. Despite, or perhaps because of, that egregious inaction at the time the world, collectively, continues to have problems in coming to terms with the aftermath of genocide, not least due to the prominent activities of those who would deny that genocide took place. If you were to say that the Jews invented the Holocaust, or that the Jews provoked or tricked the Germans to attack them, or that Germans (or for that matter Europeans) are violent, barbaric, tribal people and that the Holocaust was all that could be expected of such people, then in each case your views would be roundly condemned and you would even face legal sanctions for expressing some of these views

in many countries. Equivalent claims are routinely made about the events in Rwanda with few or no repercussions for the people making the claims (and Rwandans are shocked to hear the cases of genocide denial when they are reported in the media). Arguably, this double standard is a form of racism or neo-colonialism that provides part of the context for interpreting responses to genocide.

The contemporary international communicative context of the genocide, where malicious provocation, denialism and racism may be as close as the comment thread of the next blog you visit (do a web search on "truth about Rwandan genocide" and click through some of the links), provides the backdrop for the paper by Lala et al. (2014). How is it possible to promote open, positive intercultural communication between genocide survivors and supporters of peaceful reconciliation in Rwanda when opponents of reconciliation, provocateurs (trolls) and others can use the protection of online anonymity to attack people who have experienced great loss or who promote peace?

Furthermore, in a post-conflict society comprised of survivors, perpetrators and bystanders and the descendants of all these (but where many bystanders may feel as if they are tainted by the actions of their group or feel that they are treated as such), how can members of the international community position themselves respectfully in ways that help rather than harm? These are some of the deeper questions that Lala et al. (2014) grapple with, given that the status of bystanders is so deeply problematic in this case. They propose that members of the international community can position themselves as members of an opinion-based group (McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009) that supports international development (see Thomas, Mavor, & McGarty, 2012; Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2010). The program they describe is based around promoting hope for the future (see also Cohen-Chen, Halperin, Porat, & Bar-Tal, 2014).

The potential for hope stems from its future oriented positive connotations and the fact that it does not carry some of the baggage of other emotions (e.g., guilt, pity, anger and sorrow). One of the cross connections there is that many of the victims in 1994 were Hutus (sometimes called moderate or democratic Hutus) who were killed simply because they were not willing to kill their fellow Rwandans. This reminds us that the conflict was an intergroup conflict, but it was not so much a conflict *between* Hutus and Tutsis as *about* Hutus and Tutsis (see Bliuc, McGarty, Hartley, & Muntele Hendres, 2012).

Hundreds of Thousands of Perpetrators Living Side by Side With Survivors

The third point I will highlight in emphasizing the extraordinary context of the genocide is the continued existence of perpetrators and survivor groups in close proximity across thousands of communities in what is, in physical terms, a very small country. Although many perpetrators and their supporters have fled Rwanda (and a tiny number of these people have been prosecuted for crimes against humanity in international tribunals), there continue to be hundreds of thousands of people who have been accused of participation in the genocide and have been subject to judicial or custodial process in Rwanda. Many people who have been convicted have returned to live in communities (often integrated with survivors).

The Rwandan Government's response to the burden of prosecuting hundreds of thousands of murder and rape cases has been to invigorate (perhaps reinvent) a community court process called gacaca, where local communities hear the testimony of victims and accused perpetrators and make determinations. Although these gacaca courts are sometimes thought to be diversionary restorative justice processes along the lines of the South African Truth

and Reconciliation Commissions, the gacaca functions as courts by establishing guilt or innocence and in handing down sentences (see Kanyangara, Rimé, Paez, & Yzerbyt, 2014; Staub, 2014). Gacaca has been widely criticized on human rights grounds because it does not allow legal representation or guarantee that the accused will be tried by an unbiased tribunal (the court is made up of members of the local community who may have a direct stake in the events).

Gacaca has also been criticized for its limited, potentially negative, contribution to healing (see Brounéus, 2008) and this is a theme taken up by Kanyangara et al. (2014). Their paper suggests that gacaca was problematic for both survivors and accused perpetrators and the evidence they report suggests that survivors may have been looking forward to gacaca (as something that might help provide closure), but were then disappointed by the lack of genuine remorse of victims.

The Role of the Electronic Media in Promoting Violence and Building Peace

The role of public radio in disseminating the ideology that promoted genocide (des Forges, 2007), along with direct encouragement to participate in violence, is of course infamous. The genocide therefore provides an early fore-runner of the mobilization of mass action through electronic means (cf. the role of social media and satellite television in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010-2011; McGarty et al., 2014).

It is fitting then that the jewel in the crown of the psychologically oriented work on reconciliation and reconstruction is the program delivered by Radio La Benevolencija and in particular the radio serial Musekeyewa that has provided a narrative of healing, recovery and peace. We are fortunate to have papers in this section by Staub (2014) and by Bilali (2014), who have played instrumental roles in this program (of which the best known output in social psychology is probably the paper by Paluck, 2009a). Staub (with Pearlman and others) implemented a range of reconciliation and recovery programs, and his treatment covers a range of issues that span the range of his involvement and provides invaluable context. For example, Staub makes the point that they fast-tracked the peacebuilding radio initiative due to concerns about the tensions that gacaca could create. Bilali (2014) explores the more specific details of the composition of the radio serial and its effects. The sensitivity of the approach of these scholars working with large scale societal interventions in potentially explosive contexts can be seen in the paper by Bilali (2014), reminding us of the findings of Bhavnani and Backer (2000) that increased trust (which many of us would think was a positive in itself) can lead to greater violence (where that trust is misplaced). The approach is also used increasingly in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi and this points to one way that we can learn, not just from the tragic history of Rwanda, but from the steps taken to repair harm.

Social Psychological Theory Writ Large: Societal Interventions
With Political Goals

Several papers in the section draw our attention to another layer of the remarkable. Rwanda has been the site of massive government-run social engineering programs that draw, deliberately or not, on social psychological principles. The Rwandan Government has outlawed the use of the labels "Hutu" and "Tutsi" (except in relation to gacaca and the Commemoration of the Genocide against the Tutsis) and has instead emphasized national unity

as Rwandan. As Moss (2014) explains (and similar points about government interventions are made by Bilali, 2014; Staub, 2014; and Kanyangara et al., 2014, all of whom draw on the relevant literature in political science), this reproduces in massive scale the idea of recategorization in terms of a common ingroup identity (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Moss's qualitative analysis of the views expressed by political leaders and reconciliation officials suggests that the government has been highly successful in creating an elite consensus in the validity of the national identity and the tarnished, illegitimate nature of the subgroup identity. Staub (2014) argues that the appeal of the idea of national unity needs to be balanced by a gentler and more flexible form of inclusion.

Within the social psychological literature, the merit of unitary social identities has been questioned and recent approaches have supported dual identities where subgroup membership in a broader collective is sustained. Moss points to these problems, but it is difficult to gauge the buy in of the public to these views. If Rwandan citizens are prohibited from using labels such as Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, will they return to these when the restrictions loosen, or does the prohibition push tensions beneath the surface so that they intensify? The work of Kanazayire, Licata, Mélotte, Dusingizemungu, and Azzi (2014) provides some guidance here. Their results from (non-representative) samples of survivors and others suggest that national identification is linked to support for reconciliation, especially for the non-victim group. This would suggest that the Rwandan government's approach may be achieving its intended effects, but I would urge caution without further research on the issue.

Memorialization and Links to Other Atrocities

The final piece of context that I want to draw your attention to is the positioning of Rwanda in relation to the process of Commemoration of the Genocide against the Tutsis (as it is known officially in Rwanda). Rwanda has created memorials at a number of mass burial (in several cases mass execution) sites and has a tightly regulated annual commemoration process involving 100 days of mourning from April 7 of each year. The bullet holes and explosion damage in the house of parliament remain unrepaired as a deliberate reminder of the violence of 1994. The most prominent permanent commemoration site is the Kigali Genocide Memorial that is operated by an international genocide prevention NGO, the Aegis Trust, and was founded as part of the tenth commemoration of the genocide.

The annual commemoration events are highly visible reminders of the genocide that for a very brief point of the news cycle reprise the story of Rwanda and provide an opportunity for messaging from the Rwandan Government to the world community that are not afforded to the governments of other post-conflict societies. The rhetoric and symbols of commemoration are in many cases closely synchronized to the forms of commemoration used for the Holocaust (in the design of public commemoration spaces and in phrasing such as "never again").

One of the services that the paper by Gishoma and colleagues (2014) does for the special section is to remind us of the level of retraumatization that is experienced by Rwandan people during the commemoration period. Victims, perpetrators and witnesses together represent millions of cases of largely untreated post-traumatic stress disorder. The best provided mental health systems of large, wealthy countries would fail to deal with that treatment burden, and Rwanda is both small and poor.

Difficult questions then must be raised about the role of commemoration in retraumatization. It is undeniably important to document and disseminate the events of genocide for all time, but survivors also need to feel hope for

the future (see Hobfoll et al., 2007). Finding a sustainable balance between these two demands continues to be crucial.

What is Missing and Where Next?

The current contributions sample the range of psychological research that has focused on interventions to build peace. One clear omission is the absence of research that has focused on the economic side of reconstruction (but see Hansen & Postmes, 2013, for a treatment of the role of psychology in that field).

I imagine that it will be obvious that the process of doing research on Rwandan issues is complex and that for outsiders there are key problems. It is easy to argue that further research is needed (a point I have made in a number of places above), but that encouragement needs to be balanced with a recognition that such research is expensive, and that it involves a complex political and security context where the national government is a major participant in relevant research and has very strong views about the processes being researched (see Paluck, 2009b).

The central point I would like to leave you with is that the main claim that a 20 year record of research on recovery is itself profound proof that the genocide in Rwanda was a failure. We could not be talking about the prospects of reconciliation now if the Hutu extremists had been successful in wiping out the Tutsis or in eliminating moderate Hutus. The genocidal attempt, as is the case with so many similar attempts of the past, failed to destroy its targets and failed to achieve its political aims. The fact that genocidal attempts fail is no reason not to celebrate survival, or to fail to be vigilant in protecting vulnerable people now or in the future.

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