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Three Stories and Three Questions about Participation in Genocide

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On Behavioral Variation in Genocide

My first time walking into the Mutobo Demobilization Center for ex-combatants in Musanze, Rwanda, I thought I would feel confident. After all, I had been reading and thinking about the Rwandan Genocide for six years, and about genocide more generally since I was ten. I knew perpetrators were most often people like you and me – ordinary men and women caught up in awful situations who participated in gruesome crimes for countless reasons; some we knew and already had well-established evidence of (obedience to authority, peer pressure), and some we didn't (what *is* the role of ethno-racial categories in genocide?). I therefore surprised myself when, walking past the detainees, I began to feel nervous and afraid. These men and women were my age, but they had murdered someone; I hadn't. Could I ever truly understand what motivated them to kill?

For better or worse, my initial trepidations quickly gave way to confusion. I met with one man, then another; I observed as a large group of men, boys, and women took lessons on national history and politics; I went for a walk with one woman, recently repatriated from Democratic Republic of Congo, and then sat with her and another woman as they showed me pictures of their children and described their experiences fleeing Rwanda in summer 1994 and, now, returning home. Repeatedly, as these ordinary Rwandans told me about their experiences during the genocide, I heard something new: *Yes, I participated in the genocide. I killed one man in a large group with many others. I also saved my sister-in-law. But to save her, I had to join the group the next day to prove I wasn't a traitor.*

These testimonies – evidence of behavioral variation during the genocide – puzzled me. Why had I never heard them before? I returned from Rwanda determined to figure out where I went wrong. I read my now-tattered books about the genocide, human rights organization reports, ICTR transcripts, and more. And slowly, I realized these stories were all there, right in front of me, but in focusing on *perpetrators*

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throughout my nascent career, I had ignored evidence that, sometimes, those classified as perpetrators in our research were occasionally resisters, rescuers, and victims as well. The result has since been a dedication to examining behavioral variation at the micro-level of genocide and a simultaneous effort to argue against the use of terms such as 'perpetrators' in our research, in favor of behavioral and action-oriented categories instead. Typically, I prefer the word *participant*.

Participants participate in violence. They can also *not* participate in violence at different moments in time. But in labeling them participants, the emphasis is placed on their actions, whereas in classifying the same individuals as perpetrators, we define them as *kinds of people* instead. Thus when in their response to Christian Gudehus the editors of the *Journal of Perpetrator Research* write 'there cannot be a single, a-moral, non-normative position on [the] question' of how to define a 'perpetrator,' I agree.[1] But I would argue that making moral judgments about the subjects of our research should always be explicit rather than implicit in the terms we use to conduct our analyses (more on this below). For those of us who wish to study what shapes decision-making in genocide, or other forms of violence for that matter, kinds of actions rather than kinds of people should be placed front and center. The puzzle, then, isn't 'how perpetrators are made and unmade'[2] (unless, that is, we are studying the classifiers), but rather *how do individuals make choices to participate in violence, or to resist, or rescue,* and so on and so forth. An advantage of this approach is that it brings into relief aspects of decision-making that might get overlooked when the focus is on killing only.[3] This, in turn, facilitates the identification of mechanisms for intervention: where people make choices, other choices are possible.[4]

1 Kara Critchell and others, 'Response to Christian Gudehus', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 33–36 (p. 33).

2 Kara Critchell and others, 'Editors' Introduction', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 1–27 (p. 2).

3 See, e.g., Aliza Luft, 'Toward a Dynamic Theory of Action at the Micro Level of Genocide: Killing, Desistance, and Saving in 1994 Rwanda', *Sociological Theory,* 33.2 (2015), 148–72.

4 Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 22. For examples of this in practice, see Aliza Luft, 'What We, as Citizens, Can Do to Fight Genocide', *The Washington Post,* 26 January 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2018/01/26/what-we-as-citizens-can-do-to-fight-genocide/?utm_term=.a2ab7058910f> [accessed 2 November 2019]; Aliza Luft, 'Once a Killer, Always a Killer? Here Are 4 Lessons about Stopping Mass Violence', *The Washington Post*, 29 October 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/10/29/once-a-killer-always-a-killer-here-are-4-lessons-about-stopping-mass-violence/> [accessed 2 November 2019]; Aliza Luft, 'Not Just Victims and Perpetrators: Understanding Rwanda's Genocide Twenty Years-On', *Political Violence at a Glance*, 9 April 2014, <http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2014/04/09/not-just-victims-and-perpetrators-understanding-rwandas-genocide-twenty-years-on/> [accessed 2 November 2019].

On Timing and Dehumanization

When I pushed my interviewees on these points, they kept coming back to me with two different sets of answers. One was: the Tutsi was the enemy, that was the law, those were our instructions, that is what we had to do. The commonality of this response prompted me to call my book The Order of Genocide. *The other response was: I lost my mind, I became 'seized by the devil', or I stopped thinking, or my heart stopped. What does that all mean?* – Scott Straus[5]

As the days passed, people became increasingly habituated. We were no longer afraid, like in the beginning. – Hutu participant in the Rwandan Genocide[6]

In Scott Straus' interviews with participants in the Rwandan genocide, individuals frequently describe multiple motivations for their actions but also, in some of the data, there is evidence of a shift over time in how people felt about killing and how this shaped their ensuing behaviors. In particular, participants sometimes felt pressured to participate and, other times, felt as if killing was meaningless. Straus is right to expresses puzzlement at how multiple motivations, including some premised on coercion, can exist alongside a numbness to participating in violence. But, my research suggests, attention to behavioral variation at the micro-level of genocide can help us here, too. In particular, a focus on variation calls attention to the crucial influence of *timing* and how repeat participation in violence can lead to a decline in variation as people adapt to the experience of killing other human beings. We miss out on this process when we presume people are organized into perpetrator and victim groups before violence has even begun.

Consider research on dehumanization: commonly defined as the act of perceiving victimized people as not completely human, research on dehumanization argues that others must be considered outside the 'moral universe of obligation' for participants to kill them.[7] This research also suggests that dehumanization explains participation in genocide because victimized categories of people are no longer perceived as individuals but as monolithic others. As the argument goes, such 'group-making' – often the consequence of dehumanizing propaganda in the months and years prior to genocide – decreases normal human constraints against killing since, if participants were able to perceive

5 Scott Straus, 'Studying Perpetrators: A Reflection', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 28–38 (p. 36).

6 Robert Lyons and Scott Straus, *Intimate Enemy: Images and Voices of the Rwandan Genocide* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), p. 64.

7 Helen Fein, 'Genocide: A Sociological Perspective', *Current Sociology*, 38.1 (1990), 1–126.

their neighbors' humanity and individuality, they would be able to distinguish between dehumanizing propaganda, real threats, and people they have long known and lived beside.

But is this really how it works? Increasingly, research on the role of propaganda in genocide finds that it has a minimal effect, if any, in modifying civilians' perceptions of their neighbors.[8] Some scholarship even finds that dehumanizing propaganda can produce a backlash effect among those who disagree with extremists' agendas, thus encouraging them to ramp up their efforts at resistance.[9] This isn't to say that propaganda does not matter – for example, dehumanizing public discourse can normalize extreme perspectives on how to address social problems and raise the costs of dissent.[10] But evidence that people kill because they have been ideologically persuaded by extremists' messages is rare.

Instead, micro-level research on genocide suggests people participate in violence for many reasons, including – but not limited to – in-group social pressures, direct coercion by authorities, a lack of access to financial resources that might otherwise enable people to resist, and difficult negotiations whereby people sometimes engage in violence as a strategy to save others with whom they are close. Concerning the latter, consider the following quote from one of Straus's respondents asked to describe how the genocide unfolded in his commune:

> I asked [the conseiller] to help me and not touch my parents-in-law because I had just learned Tutsis were being killed. He gave me conditions [...]. On Wednesday, gendarmes came, and so did the conseiller, and everyone had guns. They showed us the road by which we had to attack [...]. They gave directions. We began [...]. *Were you leading the attack?* When I approached the conseiller to save my parents-in-law, I was put among the people in front. I could not refuse this direction to lead.[11]

8 Gordon Danning, 'Did Radio RTLM Really Contribute Meaningfully to the Rwandan Genocide?: Using Qualitative Information to Improve Causal Inference from Measures of Media Availability', *Civil Wars*, 20.4 (2018), 529-554; Scott Straus, 'What Is the Relationship between Hate Radio and Violence? Rethinking Rwanda's "Radio Machete"', *Politics & Society*, 35.4 (2007), 609–37; David Yanagizawa-Drott, 'Propaganda and Conflict: Evidence from the Rwandan Genocide', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 129.4 (2014), 1947–1994.

9 Maja Adena and others, 'Radio and the Rise of the Nazis in Prewar Germany', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 130.4 (2015), 1885–1939.

10 For an extended discussion on these points, see Aliza Luft, 'Dehumanization and the Normalization of Violence: It's Not What You Think', *Social Science Research Council: Items*, 21 May 2019, <https://items.ssrc.org/dehumanization-and-the-normalization-of-violence-its-not-what-you-think/> [accessed 2 November 2019].

11 Lyons and Straus, *Intimate Enemy*, pp. 66–67.

Another explained: 'As many of us had asked for our friends to be pardoned, [the authorities] gave us a condition, for these people to be left alone, they had to kill the others on the list.'[12]

These statements reveal how, early in the genocide, participants did not perceive all Tutsi as outside a 'moral universe of obligation'. Rather, they were able to distinguish among Tutsi and made complex choices about how to behave given pressures on them to kill. However, over time, they adapted to the experience of violence and began to perceive their neighbors less and less as human. In addition to the quote describing this habituation process above, consider the following statement from Jean Hatzfeld's *Machete Season*:

> At one point I saw a gush of blood begin before my eyes, soaking the skin and clothes of a person about to fall – even in the dim light I saw it streaming down. I sensed it came from my machete. I looked at the blade, and it was wet. I took fright and wormed my way along to get out, not looking at the person anymore. I found myself outside, anxious to go home. I had done enough [...] most appeared uneasy with the awful suffering [but] the more we saw people die, the less we thought about their lives, the less we talked about their deaths, and the more we got used to enjoying it [...]. We became more and more cruel, more and more calm, more and more bloody. But we did not see that we were becoming more and more killers. The more we cut, the more cutting became child's play to us.[13]

These statements matter because they reveal not only that people can participate in genocide for many reasons, but also that *how they feel* about participating in genocide can change over time. Straus' puzzlement about his interviewees' diverse answers is therefore explainable once we take the fact of behavioral variation into account. Killing neighbors can be horrific at first, and an action some people engage in to save others with whom they are close, but it can also become normalized later on. In turn, the dehumanization process can follow rather than precede participation in violence.

Subsequently, in focusing on actions and on behavioral variation, I do not believe we are at risk of having too many findings – a point made by Christophe Busch in his thoughtful essay, whereby he expressed con-

12 Lyons and Straus, *Intimate Enemy*, pp. 60–61.

13 Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), pp. 21, 129, 226, 50. Importantly, Hatzfeld's *Machete Season* has been critiqued by scholars such as Fujii (2007) for not explaining how his presence might have altered the kinds of answers his respondents provided during the interview process. See Lee Ann Fujii, 'Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak', *African Studies Review*, 50.1 (2007), 155–156.

cern over 'the gigantic increase in correlates, patterns, and models from several research disciplines' not to mention the 'incalculable number of concepts and explanations'.[14] Rather, a focus on actions over actors can help us determine more precise explanations for the mechanisms we already know or suspect matter. Concerning dehumanization, evidence of behavioral variation can alert us to the significance of timing for explaining when people struggle with their murderous actions and when, to reference Straus, they stop thinking and instead feel as if 'the enemy Satan moved into [our] […] hearts'.[15]

On Moral Judgment

> *That very night our landlady went over to her son-in-law, [a* Volksdeutsche*], without our knowledge and gave him an ultimatum. She told him that unless he saved us she would commit suicide. The son-in-law did not have much of a choice. He told her that we should be ready to leave her house at 5 a.m. sharp. She immediately came to our room and told us what she had done and told us to be ready to leave at 5 a.m. Her son-in-law would get us out of town because otherwise we would be killed like the others. She kissed us good night and remarked that she would be there to see us off and that she would pray for our safety.* – Emil Kroo[16]

> *[At Auschwitz], we had to line up for the* Appell[17] *five in a row, and there was one row where nobody wanted to move, and this mother and child didn't want to separate, so there were six in a row, and when [Mengele's girlfriend] came… this girl who knew who I was pointed me out and said 'send her, send her'. Well, they pulled me out of the row… and right away, the soldiers pointed their guns at me, and [Mengele's girlfriend] said 'No, no, no. I gave her permission'. Well, I ran back to that barrack of mine […] I don't think my feet touched the earth […]. It was the biggest miracle that ever happened […]. When the* Appell *was over, [Mengele's girlfriend] came to the barrack, she had a whip […] she put the whip on my shoulder and said 'you will never die in Auschwitz'.* – Elizabeth Kroo-Teitelbaum[18]

14 Christophe Busch, 'Some Remarks on the Complexity of Collective Violence: Understanding the Whole', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 26.

15 Straus, *Studying Perpetrators*, 36; Lyons and Straus, *Intimate Enemy*, p. 86.

16 Emil Kroo, private memoir.

17 *Appell* is the German word for roll call. In Auschwitz, roll calls were held multiple times every day where prisoners were counted, inspected, humiliated, and selected for death if they were perceived to no longer be healthy.

18 Elizabeth Kroo-Teitelbaum, *USC Shoah Foundation Institute*, online testimony video, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=42541&returnIndex=0> [accessed 22 December 2019].

Our brother-in-law, my sister's husband, knew some people [...] they took them both in to hide. They didn't know about me. On top of us, pigs were there, and we were there for 11 months [...] it was a basement but above the basement was a shed. Those people in the family didn't know about me at all. And when they brought in food for the pigs [...] my brother-in-law took from them and that's what we ate. One day, they became afraid people might catch us [...] so we had to leave. – Rosa Magien Kroo[19]

Emil Kroo is my grandfather. Elizabeth Kroo-Teitelbaum is my great aunt. Rosa Magien Kroo is my grandmother. I do not know how to classify the people who saved them – I do not even know if 'saved' is the right term to use in this context. In my grandfather and great aunt's case, these were Nazis; men and women who both murdered and facilitated the murder of many other Jews. The couple who saved my grandmother did not, in fact, know they were saving her, and, in the end, they put her (and her sister and brother-in-law) in a precarious position by not letting them stay longer. I am recounting these stories for two reasons.

First, Ernesto Verdeja's question on how we, as scholars, ought to theorize moral responsibility is profound.[20] I do not know the answer to this, but I do know that any time we engage in moral judgment and assignment, we ought to be clear that this is our goal. Parsing through individuals' behaviors and allocating them weight is a heavy task. It is also not one that I, as a sociologist, feel equipped to do (my non-academic judgments differ). This is distinct, of course, from the social scientific analysis of how moral judgments have or have not been applied to different categories of actors throughout history. But given that we *know* the use of the term perpetrator necessarily entails judgment,[21] I believe it is vital to be extremely cautious when we use such language and to be aware of its implications each time we do. Perhaps I can judge the people who saved or killed my family, but my knowledge that they – like many others – shifted stances throughout the Holocaust reminds me that simple terms such as 'perpetrator' or 'protector' are never that simple after all. For example, in the case of Mengele's girlfriend, I *know* she was responsible for the deaths of countless others.[22] To me, she is a

19 Rosa Magien Kroo, *USC Shoah Foundation Institute*, online testimony video, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=38779&returnIndex=0> [accessed 22 December 2019].

20 Ernesto Verdeja, 'Response to Christian Gudehus', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 9–12.

21 Critchell and others, 'Response to Christian Gudehus', 33.

22 Through comparative and historical research, I have determined this woman was Irma Grese, SS guard at Auschwitz and Ravensbrück and warden of the women's section of

monster. And yet, had this same woman not made a decision to protect my great aunt, I would not have grown up with this remarkable and beloved family member. Explaining this personally is difficult enough. Intellectually? That's a whole other issue.

Second, I am sharing my family's stories to describe my positionality as a scholar of genocide, and of the Holocaust and the Rwandan Genocide in particular. Since writing about 'perpetrators' implies making moral judgments, we must also recognize when such language indirectly positions us, as scholars, as morally superior. Yet if we are to take seriously the possibility that anyone, when put in a terrible situation, can become complicit in terrible crimes, then this is yet another reason to avoid using implicitly judgmental language in our research. My position as a grandchild of four Holocaust survivors, and as a white North American woman, is central to understanding how I approach my research, the relationships I form with my respondents, and the power dynamics embedded in those relationships that shape both how I interact with participants in violence when conducting my fieldwork, and also how I explain their experiences to others. We can never be neutral when writing about violence, but not simply because violence – and those who engage in it – is *bad*, but also because the histories we embody as people, what we bring to each encounter, and what we publish, is always already mired in complicated power dynamics. Moral and ethical issues are present at each stage of our research; we must be clear about this all the way through.

Final Thoughts

I am excited about the *Journal of Perpetrator Studies* and the promises it holds for researchers interested in studying how and why people participate in violence. I am also concerned about its emphasis, as stated in the editors' introduction, on perpetrators *qua* perpetrators, given the clear awareness of the editors and also of many contributors that using such language is both analytically confounding and morally judgmental.[23] Of course, the introduction does mention a growing turn towards the study of *perpetration* and not just *perpetrators* but, in my opinion, this

Bergen-Belsen. Irma Grese was known for her brutality and frequently referred to as "The Hyena of Auschwitz" and "The Blonde Beast of Birkenau and Belsen." In the end, at 22 years old, she was the youngest of the concentration camp guards to be hanged.

23 Critchell and others, 'Editors' Introduction'.

does not go far enough because it still inherently assumes an action trajectory that operates in one direction only (from not killing to killing) rather than the dynamic process of behavioral variation in genocide alongside questions of when and why such variation might stop. If we always look to explain why people kill, we can miss times when they do not, and these times when they do not kill might, in fact, improve our understandings of when and why they do. Political scientist Stathis Kalyvas explains: 'Instances of violence cannot be considered independently of instances where violence does not occur.'[24] I have therefore sought to articulate in this essay why I believe focusing on actions (and not kinds of people) helps researchers elide some of these dilemmas but also why, if researchers choose to rely on terminology they know is troubling, at the very least, they ought to be explicit about their choices and implications.

Relatedly, through a brief review of contemporary research on dehumanization, this essay demonstrates how a focus on actions over actors helps explain variation, and when variation stops. The result is an improved understanding of what we know to be true – people participate in violence for many reasons, and they can also start participating for one reason but continue over time for another.[25] What explains these shifts? In this example, I provide one explanation based on my research: cognitive adaptation to violence over time.[26]

Finally, I discuss my own position vis-a-vis my stance taken in this essay with the goal of highlighting yet another moral issue posed by research on violence – as scholars committed to examining the worst of human behavior, we must always simultaneously be sensitive to the ethical issues implicated in our own analyses, in how we describe our findings but also in how we construct our research projects and carry them out.

24 Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 48.

25 Indeed, Evgeny Finkel and Scott Straus make this very point in their article 'Macro, Meso, and Micro Research on Genocide: Gains, Shortcomings, and Future Areas of Inquiry', *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 7.1 (2013), 23.

26 Luft, 'Toward a Dynamic Theory', 162–164.

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