

## Healing in a Postgenocidal Country

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Rwanda experienced a ferocious genocide in 1994, with 800,000 people killed in 100 days. It remains a stain on the world's conscience because the international community failed to intervene. This article is part observation and part reflection on the country's recovery from the genocide. I have been traveling there for over 10 years and have witnessed the destruction and reconstruction of the country. This reconstruction has been on both a societal and an individual level. The article describes a number of strategies employed by the government to bring Rwanda back from its shattered state, many of which have proven successful. Addressing the trauma on an individual level remains a significant challenge. Rwanda's recovery from the genocide has been remarkable, but efforts to heal individuals need to continue in order to build a country that looks to the future rather than one that is haunted and defined by its genocide.

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When societies engage in lethal intergroup conflict, the survivors' physical wounds may last a generation. The psychological wounds take many generations to heal. In Northern Ireland, they continue to trace their mutual hostilities to the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and it continues to fuel current conflicts. In Eastern Europe, the Serbs and the Turks trace their antipathy to the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. Rwanda, where I have been working for 10 years, suffered genocide in 1994. With others, I have been attempting to facilitate the healing process but have primarily been an observer of the reconstruction of a society that was destroyed 20 years ago. This article reflects on what the challenges are and what appears to have worked in Rwanda. My goal

is to report on how Rwanda is recovering from its darkest hour and to identify factors that contributed to the reconstruction of the Rwandan society. This will be discussed at both a societal level and at an individual level.

The road back has been very long and difficult, and it continues to be a work in progress. Social institutions (e.g., the judiciary, the educational system, churches, families, communities themselves) were destroyed. For example, prior to the genocide, Rwanda had 785 judges. Twenty survived the genocide. Rebuilding had to occur on many levels. It started at the societal level where stability and safety for citizens had to be reestablished. Borders needed to be secure. The killings, attacks, sexual assaults, and harassment needed to be stopped. That helped to reduce the level of distress in the society so that fear and anxiety could give way to more rational discourse and longer term strategic planning and analysis to aid the recovery process. Social institutions were rebuilt.

Healing must also occur at an individual level. When one has lost numerous family members and perhaps seen them killed, the healing is life-long. Survivors must balance the grief and pain of their loss with the need to move forward with life. It is hoped that each passing year tips the balance more in the direction of the future.

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## Strategies for Unifying Rwanda

How then to heal a postgenocidal society? If one holds everyone who engaged in killings (directly or indirectly), assaults, and property crimes responsible, then it soon becomes a socially and financially impossible situation. At one point, Rwanda had over 600,000 suspects in its prisons for genocide-related crimes. The judicial system was destroyed in Rwanda as a result of the genocide. Consequently, the formal mechanisms of bringing perpetrators to justice did not exist. Rwanda adopted a hybrid solution. The Category 1 génocidaires were tried in Arusha, Tanzania, by the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). These génocidaires were the leaders and organizers of the genocide and those whose brutality separated them from the norm for killing. So far, 44 cases have been completed, with approximately 31 cases still open. These trials cost U.N. \$1.5 billion over 17 years. The remaining génocidaires were adjudicated through a process called Gacaca, which is a historical form of justice in Rwanda. Individuals nominated by the local community for their integrity and fairness became the judges and case after case was brought before them on a weekly basis over a period of years. The trials were held in community settings for all to witness. Estimates are that 2 million people were dealt with this way and that 65% were found guilty. The cost of the Gacaca process was estimated to be U.S. \$42 million (Mukantaganzwa, 2012). Put another way, it cost \$20 million to try each case in the ICTR and \$21 for each person tried in the Gacaca process.

The Gacaca system is not perfect but, given the number of accused to be processed and the conditions at the time, no system would have been perfect. What it did manage to do was to provide some sense of perpetrators accountability. That was one of the critical first steps in reestablishing order in Rwandan society. With the Gacaca system now concluded, guilt or innocence has been officially determined. However, the government is unable to incarcerate the hundreds of thousands of individuals found guilty. There is insufficient space, oversight, and finances to do that. In addition, to subtract out that much of the workforce from the society and the family structure is inadvisable. Therefore, a decision was made to release many of the convicted perpetrators. This decision was realistically necessary, but difficult for survi-

vors who encounter perpetrators on the street and in their villages. Therefore, tensions continue.

A second major focus of the Rwanda government has been directed at reducing corruption. Neighboring countries (e.g., Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi) are notorious for high levels of corruption. Transparency International ranks Rwanda as the fourth least corrupt country in Africa and the 50th least corrupt country in the world. In doing so, the government made a commitment not to tolerate corruption. When one crosses the border into Rwanda from Burundi (where corruption is rampant), one encounters large anticorruption billboards as one does throughout the country. Corrupt government officials in Rwanda are publicly identified and dismissed from their jobs. If citizens do not trust the government and social institutions, they will not engage these institutions or the larger society. By comparison, the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(2012\)](#) issued a report on corruption in Afghanistan. The report estimated that 50% of the Afghan population had paid a bribe to a government official in the last year and the total paid to government officials was U.S. \$3.9 billion. Corruption was ranked second to security concerns as an important issue for the country. It is hard to imagine that Rwanda would be where it is today if corruption were as rampant in Rwanda as it is in Afghanistan. Corruption is a corrosive influence that undermines the perception of fairness in a society. In a postgenocidal country, the perception of fairness is an important element in reengaging the population, particularly those who were on the losing end of the strife. In fact, the perception that one side had access to certain benefits, either implicitly or explicitly (e.g., by quotas in government appointments or in school), was a source of friction since the preindependence days of Rwanda. Reducing corruption and increasing transparency removes a source of mistrust that undermines a society that is under reconstruction.

Reducing gender inequality has also been a major emphasis. The constitution adopted after the genocide stipulates that, at minimum, 30% of Parliament must be women. Rwanda now has more women than men in Parliament; the last election brought the percentage of women in Parliament to 64%. Women are represented at all levels of government, and the literacy rates among girls equal those for boys. Perhaps some of the equality enjoyed by Rwandan women is a necessity forced on the country by the decimation of the genocide

(much like Rosie the Riveter came into being when men were overseas fighting and women were needed to produce goods). Still, it empowers half the population and provides a sense of pride that the country is ranked as the best in Africa on this dimension.

In several of the societal efforts, social psychology has provided guidance. Modeling peaceful dispute resolution and productive intergroup processes has been the goal of La Benevolencija (Dutch NGO, <http://www.labenevolencija.org/>). They have designed a number of programs to reduce the societal tension and to demonstrate alternative ways of dealing with conflicts. This work was designed by Ervin Staub and based on his book *The Roots of Evil* (Staub, 1989). One component is a series of radio soap operas designed to foster nonviolent attitudes and reconciliation. They are designed for the general population. A second set of programs, broadcasts for leaders, use the themes developed in the radio broadcasts as the basis for discussion and audience participation. The third aspect of La Benevolencija's efforts is aimed at the development of grassroots activities that bond the local residents in positive ways and serve to counter antisocial hate-based activities if they develop. The efforts are popular with the Rwandan population and have produced changes in attitudes and some social norms.

The Aegis Trust (<http://www.aegitrust.org/>) has recently produced a peace-building exhibition that travels to communities throughout the country. The goal is both to provide training for teachers on how to discuss the genocide with students and to enhance positive values and critical thinking among students. Topics include the history of the genocide, which includes how to deal with the aftermath (e.g., a discussion of forgiveness vs. acceptance). Impacting the next generation of Rwandans' attitudes toward peace and reconciliation may be easier because they have not had direct experience with the genocidal trauma the prior generation had.

Another effort to emphasize the shared goals of all Rwandans is the practice of Umuganda or day of service. On the last Saturday of every month, every Rwandan is expected to participate in a community service project from 8:00–11:00 a.m. Having everyone participate in working for the common good is a proven strategy for reducing conflict and promoting cohe-

sion. It is reminiscent of the Robber's Cave experiment (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1954) of Muzafer Sherif where boys who competed against each other developed antipathy and only when they collaborated to achieve superordinate goals were they able to build friendships. This approach provides an alternative path to reconciliation that is not dependent on the ability of survivors to cognitively process the motives of the perpetrators and the causes of genocide. It creates a basis for interaction between people who might normally avoid each other and thereby whittles away at the residual anger and trauma. Whether it reduces the survivors' levels of trauma is not known, but it does increase everyone's engagement in society and contributions on the part of both sides to the common goals of the country.

### Healing the Individual

Healing is, in part, based on one's understanding of why people take up arms against friends and neighbors and seek to kill them. If one can understand that, one can begin to heal. Social psychology provides many insights on this issue. Early explanations ascribed the carnage of the Holocaust to deviant individuals who were pathologically disturbed. For example, *The Nuremburg Mind* (Miale & Selzer, 1975) analyzed the Rorschach responses of the Nuremburg war criminals and concluded that "the Nazis were not psychologically normal or healthy individuals" (p. 287). While the methodology of this work was later found to be fatally flawed (Zillmer, Harrower, Ritzler, & Archer, 1995), the appeal of blaming individuals for the killing persists. Zimbardo (2007) has detailed the case of Chip Frederick, a seemingly normal civilian corrections officer prior to being assigned to (intentionally) abnormal circumstances in the Abu Graib prison in Iraq where he engaged in acts of torture while posing for pictures. Frederick was dishonorably discharged and suffered severe personal and professional penalties as a result of his behavior in Abu Graib because the U.S. Army held him accountable for the reprehensible acts that occurred in the prison. The theme again is to blame individuals when heinous acts are committed rather than recognizing the power of the situation.

Social psychology has spent the last 50 years constructing an alternative narrative where the

source of the murderous behavior is not the individual but the situation. Classic studies in social psychology like Milgram's (1974) obedience to authority, Asch's (1956) conformity studies, and Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo's (1973) Stanford prison study have demonstrated that powerful situations can transform normal individuals into people who will inflict pain on others, even to the point of death and beyond. Historian Christopher Browning's (1992) classic book *Ordinary Men* follows a seemingly unremarkable group of Hamburg police as they descend into a highly efficient group of killers purging villages of Jews in Poland in World War II. The social psychological emphasis on the situation is now taken as being the dominant explanation of how genocides occur. A large literature has accumulated that shows how deindividuation, public self-awareness, dehumanization, moral reframing, arousal, and a host of other factors lead individuals to engage in behaviors that are inconsistent with their personal norms for how to behave. Thus there is a strong empirical case showing how situational pressures transform average people into perpetrators of evil. Some of these insights can be used to reconstruct a society torn apart by genocide. Some survivors are able to appreciate that larger forces are at play than simply a perpetrator's moral character. At the same time, the social psychological explanation is not well equipped to speak how to heal individuals ravaged by genocide.

### Is a Situationist Perspective Sufficient?

Although social psychology's situationist perspective has been very helpful in understanding a great deal of how genocide occurs, genocides do not organize themselves. Someone trains the killers, prepares the population for what is to come, generates the propaganda, and sets the killing machine into motion. These individuals do not do any killing directly, which allows them to claim no responsibility for the genocidal events. Theoneste Bagosora, the mastermind of the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda, testified at his trial that "I never killed anyone" (Profile: Col Theoneste Bagosora, 2008) and portrayed himself as a victim of Tutsi propaganda. Thus the situationist perspective is incomplete.

If we believe that someone or something *must* be responsible for a genocide, then our models in social psychology need to evolve into more

hierarchical models where behavioral control exists at the individual level, the situational level and at the higher levels of the system where the genocidal leaders operate.

The situationist perspective also does not tell us how to heal the survivors. It focuses largely on the society. If survivors are not helped, society may not be able to mend itself. The fact that historic conflicts remain potent today suggests that mending society on a macro level does not provide a complete resolution to the problem. At an individual level, the various explanations we have just reviewed come down to explanations or attributions for who/what caused the killing. Sometimes the question is very personal. In Rwanda the attackers very often lived in the same community as the survivors. In fact, they were often neighbors or relatives. Under these circumstances, the question of responsibility for killing has a name and a face, and walks down the street every day. As noted above, the first inclination is typically a dispositional inference about the person's character. If a survivor either experiences or witnesses a machete-wielding killer chopping someone, abstract discussions of responsibility are of no value. The killer with the bloody machete striking someone is the person responsible. Those images will remain and are unlikely to change over time. In 2005, I and others taught at the National University of Rwanda. Our students responded to two questionnaires. One was a measure of how many traumatic events they had been exposed to in the genocide. The events were ordered in terms of severity and personal threat. The second measure asked how many of the symptoms on the list (common characteristics of posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD]) they had experienced in the last 2 weeks. The correlation across this 11-year time span was 0.73, indicating that the genocide was very much producing psychological consequences 11 years later. We also strongly suspect that the reports of trauma were underreported because sexual trauma was known to be widespread, but is not something that would be divulged on a questionnaire in class.

There was also evidence in our data that individuals making situational attributions for the behavior of the génocidaires experienced fewer trauma symptoms. Causality is certainly an issue here. Are those with fewer trauma symptoms better able to step back and process alternative explanations for the violence or does their openness to other explanations help reduce their susceptibility to experience PTSD? Given

the literature on how high levels of arousal constrain the processing of information, we suspect it is likely that trauma victims are less able to consider situational explanations. It should be noted that, in a sense, the victims are correct. If someone attacks you with a machete, you can reasonably hold that person responsible for your wounds. Explanations that reflect the social psychology literature more faithfully will not be of much use when trying to reduce a survivor's traumatic symptoms.

## Conclusion

It is hard to imagine a more difficult task than creating social harmony and a functioning society in the aftermath of genocide, particularly when the warring sides live side by side. The challenges faced by Rwanda were/are enormous and our data indicate that the passing of years does not diminish the level of trauma experienced by the survivors. Realistically, this is as one should expect. If you were personally attacked, raped, or witnessed family members killed, the memories will be with you for the rest of your life. No treatment will erase those events in your mind.

The goals should be more realistic. For those who suffer debilitating levels of trauma, treatment should be provided. For the rest of society, basic ground rules for how society will run and common goals will be critical. Then engaging society in common activities (e.g., community projects, sports activities) is a way to temporarily have the disparate groups engage with one another. That can reasonably be expected to enhance the humanity of each party to the other, thereby countering one of the building blocks of the genocide, namely, dehumanization.

We are now starting to see the arts playing an increasing role in the healing process, as music, poetry, books, and plays serve as means for working through the tremendous pain that lies under the surface. For example, a women's drumming troupe has been founded (and is chronicled in the 2012 movie *Sweet Dreams*). Members are survivors, and both Hutu and Tutsi. Together, they have broken new ground because drumming is traditionally the province of men in Rwanda. They now perform around the world, both providing employment and a sense of pride that facilitates the healing process.

In summary, it is important to understand that the physical and psychological damage survivors have experienced is not ameliorated by any one thing. Their road to recovery is personal and arduous, and should be as much the focus of reconstruction efforts as reengineering the society. If Rwandan society can find a way to live together in a constructive and peaceful manner, it will counter the forces of evil that tore the society apart 20 years ago.

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