

Conformity in Rwanda: A Case Study of Social Psychological Forces in Genocide

“It is always a simple matter to drag people along whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. This is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in every country.”

—Hermann Goering, Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe, at the Nuremberg Trials

In April of 1994, after 3 years of increased violence, nonstop anti-Tutsi propaganda broadcasted by the Hutu-controlled government radio, and decades of prejudiced policies from both local and colonial governments, the tensions between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority erupted. In the following months, 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu who would not join the slaughter were raped, maimed, and killed by armed Hutus (Dutton). Perpetrators, or *genocidaires*, were made up of men, women, and children, many of whom previously coexisted peacefully with Tutsis, and by the end of the violence in July, the Hutu government had “succeeded in exterminating 77 percent of the Tutsi population” (Dutton, 35). Genocide as a phenomenon has surfaced throughout the 20th and 21st century as a disturbing contrast to the achievements of modernity; even as technology and human knowledge have continually advanced, it seems the propensity for inhumanity lingers unchanged throughout time. The question of how people can come to commit such violence against others is at the core of attempting to understand genocide, as well as at the root of the field of social psychology. Two pioneers in the discipline, Solomon Asch and Stanley Milgram, designed and performed experiments that investigated the power of conformity in social situations, and their findings imply that behaviors studied in the laboratory

present useful solutions to real life instances (such as the case in Rwanda) when conformity becomes dangerous. Donald G. Dutton defines genocide as “the annihilation of an entire group of people”, and this paper focuses specifically on a case study of the 1994 Rwandan genocide through a lens of social psychology. The experimental data in this field offers several suggestions of ways to temper the power of a conformity-inducing social situation and potentially decrease and deescalate genocidal situations. By examining a case study of the Rwandan genocide, this paper will compare the phenomenon of conformity in regards to authority and groups in order to explore the real world implications of experimental social psychology’s findings on decreasing conformity.

In Rwanda, gradual normative shifts were key in the escalation from centuries of prejudice against the Tutsis to a full-blown genocide. In 1994, the Rwandan president, Juvenal Habyarimana, and his close advisors foresaw an imminent loss of power. They responded by exaggerating the risk of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (or RPF), a group of Tutsi “freedom fighters” to declare the need for Rwandan unity against the group and to cement their hold on power (Dutton). This decision had two major effects that are near-textbook examples of social psychological principles: it created a renewed designation of who is in the ingroup and the outgroup, which in turn shifted the societal norms, leading to an escalation of violence against those not within the ingroup. Additionally, since this exaggeration came from the President, the ultimate authority in a nation, the decision primed the people of Rwanda for obedience to the decree of an authority. Once enough people obeyed, the power of conformity to groups through the escalation of ingroup/outgroup tensions took over, seen in the Human Rights Watch report that, once

the killings began, the perpetrators could not stop until all local Tutsi and any suspicious Hutu were dead (Dutton).

Just as the normative shifts against Jews in World War II-era Germany were encouraged by “pre-war propaganda [that] prepared a belief [that the Germans were] so righteous and [the] enemy so vile that only the timing and techniques of an ultimate war remained in doubt” (Beisel, 372) the Rwandan government also shifted norms toward violence against the Tutsi outgroup by broadcasting “nonstop propaganda... where they demonized the Tutsi as interlopers who unfairly benefitted from Belgian rule” (Dutton, 101). These radio broadcasts heightened Hutu anxieties about a supposed insurgency of Tutsis, allowing the genocide to be defended as a preemptive strike by the Hutu ingroup against all Tutsi as potential members of the RPF. Strongly anti-Tutsi Hutus developed conformity “through extreme social pressure and terror ” (Dutton, 101) by slaughtering any Hutu that was not complicit with the slaughter of Tutsi, and this indiscriminate killing caused many *genocidaires* to give in to the pressure to escape harm. In many regions of pre-genocide Rwanda, Hutus and Tutsis were friends, neighbors, and even intermarried. However, when the shift in norms toward violence and the strengthening of ingroup/outgroup divisions began, a vestige of community attachment remained: *genocidaires* did not kill their neighbors, but they also did not help them. Just as soldiers in the My Lai massacre have claimed, just as members of the Third Reich have claimed, just as many of the obedient subjects in the Milgram experiment stated, these perpetrators were “just following orders”. The bloodiness of the Rwandan massacre comes from the combined

power of the forces behind it: the divisions between ingroup and outgroup were reinforced by authority and later, by the group, which creates maximum obedience in the laboratory.

Stanley Milgram's experiments on conformity to authority at Yale University in the 1960s have been popularized and sensationalized in the media for over fifty years. For those unfamiliar, the original, or baseline, experiment required subjects to supposedly test the memory of another participant and deliver a painful electric shock when the participant was incorrect. Approximately 60% of subjects obeyed the authority of the researcher all the way until the end, which leads to the question of why rational, ordinary people would go so far simply because someone instructed them to (Aronson). The presence of an authoritarian figure decreases the personal responsibility of the subject: if someone asked them why they went so far, all they needed to do was point a finger at the figure in a lab coat: they were all "just following orders". Authority and social situations that take advantage of it are powerful, even in a seemingly individualistic, nonconforming culture such as the United States. And, as seen in many genocidal situations, groups too can become a sort of authority, one who wields an even greater range of influence than that of just an individual. Just as Milgram's subjects experienced a diffusion of responsibility when they were ordered to hurt another person by an authority, the cultivation of a norm of violence against Tutsis and the acceleration of ingroup ties kept perpetrators in the Rwandan genocide from feeling personally responsible for the atrocities committed.

The normative influence in groups is also found when one frames the international response (or lack thereof) to genocidal situations as an upscaled version of the bystander effect. Consider the case in Rwanda: the French, Belgian, Italian, and U.S. governments sent

in troops to retrieve their citizens but denied aid to Tutsi people; UN troops attempted to keep the peace for mere hours before they “withdrew to their posts, as ordered by superiors in New York, leaving the local population at the mercy of assailants” (Dutton, 105). And, as the situation intensified, the media spun the conflict as “infighting”, not genocide to diffuse the peacekeeping and human rights responsibilities of the international community. The Bibb Latané and Judith Rodin experiment, in which subjects were working on a questionnaire when they heard what sounded like a person falling off of a ladder and calling out, found that when alone 70% of subjects offered aid, but when in pairs with a stranger, only 20% offered help. As Elliot Aronson writes, “the presence of another bystander tends to inhibit action” (Aronson, 50). When considering the international scale involved in the question of how to react to a potentially genocidal situation, there are entire nations of bystanders. If the instance cannot be quickly labeled an emergency, the norm of non-intervention is adopted, the responsibility of the international community is diffused, and the “infighting” is ignored. This response repeats cyclically: it occurred in Armenia, during the Holodomor in Ukraine, and in Cambodia.

Following these revelations about the humanity’s historical responses to genocide, the question naturally occurs of how, or even if, the more harmful nature of conformity can be avoided or suppressed. As outlined in Elliot Aronson’s *The Social Animal*, conformity in the Milgram experiment dropped in several conditions: when subjects were joined by dissenters to the researcher’s commands, when the study was conducted in a random building rather than the laboratory of a prestigious university, when the authority figure of the scientist was replaced with a nonauthoritative substitute, when the authority figure

was physically absent, and, most significantly, when the subject was in eyesight and close physical proximity to the person being shocked. These variations of the baseline experiment offer several intriguing possibilities of how to face factors that lead to genocide, and indeed, the last factor of physical proximity echoes the decision by many Rwandan genocidaires to not kill their Tutsi friends and neighbors in regions where the two groups previously lived in peace. This is also reminiscent of how segregation of groups fosters ingroup/outgroup hostility and, eventually, prejudice. So, a possible solution to avoid acceleration of ingroup/outgroup ties is the integration and interdependence of groups of people, an experiment which is still in the works in many previously segregated nations such as the United States and South Africa.

Another key step to avoiding causes of the tensions that lead to extreme violence such as genocide is instilling checks and balances on the power of authority. Two of the factors that decreased conformity in Milgram's subsequent experiments (as listed above) included reducing the power of the authority, first by removing the qualifications of the one giving the orders, and second by physically removing the authority's observation of the situation. When authority is capable of wielding such power, institutions such as the court system, human rights watch groups, and a free press are essential to temper unquestioned obedience. Propaganda and misinformation are tools used by authority to tighten their hold on power, and in genocides, ranging from Rwanda to the Holocaust to Armenia, it was used by the agents responsible (Dutton). To illustrate a more modern example, the current administration in the White House frequently derides any unfavorable press as "fake

news”, eerily familiar to how many of the above regimes stifled the free press and circulated misinformation to scapegoat a target group.

Genocide is the coalescence of several escalating factors, many of which have not been discussed in this paper, and the tentative solutions outlined here are far from a cohesive plan for ending all hate, war, and genocide. Rather, this means to be a suggestion, the posing of the question of whether science can lead to greater understanding of ourselves, the institutions we create, and why they fall apart. Conformity is not always a harmful thing; in many situations it is better to work with cooperative so-called conformists than a non-conformist deviant. Yet, when conformity is used for negative goals by leaders, it often has terrible consequences. Rwanda serves as an example of how the power of several social psychological principles can combine into one terrible event ignored by the international community. Despite more than 20 years of distance between now and the Rwandan genocide, even today there is an ongoing humanitarian crisis involving the scapegoating and persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority of Myanmar, and the extreme peril many Rohingya refugees face in fleeing to Bangladesh (Sullivan). The insights gained and the discoveries still to come in social psychology offer hope of solutions to situations such as that in Myanmar, as well as greater understanding for the horrors of the past.

Works Cited

Aronson, Elliot. *The Social Animal*. Worth Publishers, 2012. pp 13-57.

Beisel, David R. "Building the Nazi Mindset." *The Journal of Psychohistory*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2010, pp 367-374

Dutton, Donald G. *The Psychology of Genocides, Massacres, and Extreme Violence: Why "Normal" People Come to Commit Atrocities*. Praeger Security International, 2007. pp 27-140.

Sullivan, Michael. "Deal Allows Rohingya Refugees To Return To Myanmar." NPR.org, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/27/566677594/deal-allows-rohingya-refugees-to-return-to-myanmar>