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978-0-521-71392-4 - The Psychology of Genocide: Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Rescuers

Steven K. Baum

Excerpt

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Introduction

As I walked into the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance at the Simon Wiesenthal Center, I was confronted with a choice of two doors: one was marked *Prejudiced*, while the second door was marked *Not Prejudiced*. With the best of intentions, all visitors try to enter through the second door and cannot, as that door remains permanently locked. Consequently all must pass through the prejudiced door. Initial perplexed looks soon subside giving way to the realization that all of us harbor prejudiced and hateful beliefs. Visitors are left to explore more of their assumptions as they move through a maze of photographs and exhibitions.

Meandering through the gallery of inhumane indignity, I saw something else – a look in the eyes of those in the photographs. Several of the photos seemed to capture a feeling state that appeared quite distinct and quite different from others. The eyes of the perpetrators had a mocking and gleeful quality to them. By contrast, the eyes of others who were helping the victims held an alertness, alacrity, and kindness. And a third group's eyes remained a mystery; they appeared to be staring into space as if they were watching the whole thing on television.

The victim's eyes were all the same – sad and scared. I did not know any of them but through an austere museum's exhibit sixty years later our eyes locked and they asked me a question – why? Why was it that in the hell called the Holocaust, some people rescued and others maimed and the majority remained immobilized?

Note: I have all but avoided the term "evil" since it carries religious and philosophical overtones. Instead I would offer the idea that in a population there will be some who will be perpetrators, and they will harm innocents.

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"It is easier to denature plutonium than to denature the evil spirit of man," said Albert Einstein. I didn't think so. For several years in Canada I worked for the Ministry of Corrections, often noting that the dark side of people had more to do with pedestrian psychological processes than an ethereal "evil." By the same token, when one looks towards traditional psychiatry and psychology for answers regarding genocide, one finds none. Even Sigmund Freud once wrote to a colleague regarding antisemitism and threw in his hat: "mankind on the average and taken by and large are a wretched lot." Several months later he was proven right as he and his daughter Anna narrowly escaped his beloved Vienna for London, never to return or to speak about it again.¹

Before it had a name, Holocaust research by the mid-1960s was the interest of a select few historians who believed something major had occurred and began to document the event. While the first wave of researchers had searched for flaws in the German character and culture, this next wave of researchers looked more towards situational determinants. About that time, psychologists' attentions began turning towards the social psychological forces involved in prejudice.

The search for a German national character, as with all national character research, proved futile. It was not until psychology began to focus on ordinary people that an understanding of such horrors shifted from character to cultural setting, though it would take another decade or two to fully integrate the research on ordinary people into a comprehensive understanding of genocide.

Conformity was key to understanding how people were seduced by the power of the situation. Yet, the social psychological approach had its limitations as well. For instance, social psychologists often gave short shrift when findings contained anything that

¹ Freud never spoke about genocide though, through a series of letters to Einstein in 1931–1932, he tried to explain the purpose of war in "Why War?" See O. Nathan & H. Norden (1960) *Einstein on peace*. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 186–203.

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resembled a “trait” component. Like an allergy, the researchers interpreted their findings to avoid, downplay, or explain away that which would have anything to do with the personality.

Let me provide an example. In the often-cited Milgram study, most (65 percent) subjects were prepared to shock one another into unprecedented levels of danger and alleged death. A small group even forced the resisting victim’s hand down onto a shock plate. According to social psychology, the fate of humankind was sealed. We are all genocidalists. Put the average person in a similar situation and they will “just follow orders.”

While it is frightening to think that most (65 percent) people will comply with a legitimate authority’s request to injure another, that was not the whole story. Downplayed were the findings that *one third of the subjects*, and another third in other key conformity experiments, *defied* the researcher’s demands to harm one another. In fact, some delayed or sabotaged or went out of their way to help those they thought would be victims. While not a formal cover-up, an important finding received subsequent attention – those who defied Dr. Milgram’s orders had a constellation of personality traits that revealed a bigger story. These *defiant traits* appear as polar opposite to the *obedients* – those who followed orders and continued to shock another to a lethal level. “I am certain,” concluded lead researcher Stanley Milgram, “that there is a complex personality basis to obedience and disobedience. But I know we have not found it.”²

What Milgram had yet to discover was that those who defied authority, those who questioned him and chose to stop, those who were not as vulnerable to the social forces were more *emotionally developed*. The converse was equally as true. Those who were

² S. Milgram (1974) *Obedience to authority*. New York: Harper & Row, p.205. Also see A. C. Elms & S. Milgram (1966) Personality characteristics associated with obedience and defiance toward authoritative command. *Journal of Experimental Research in Personality*, 1, 282–289; L. Kohlberg (1969) Stage and sequence: The cognitive-developmental approach to socialization. In D. A. Goslin (ed.), *Handbook of socialization theory and research* (347–480). Chicago: Rand-McNally.

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compliant and conformed to the experimenter's orders and "just followed orders" were less emotionally developed. Between both those extremes lay a middle group who were moderately developed and ranged between the two extremes. Milgram's elusive "complex personality basis" of conformity appeared to be linked directly to emotional development. But what is emotional development?

As Stanley Milgram was lamenting the complexity of obedience findings, a research psychologist named Jane Loevinger and her colleagues at St. Louis's Washington University were developing a separate line of research called ego development. Ego development theory suggested that people complied and conformed based on how mature they were.

Maturity for the average person is generally defined socially. For developmentalists, maturity has to do with nuances of cultural conformity, ideas that were a bit ahead of their time. Even today there is more evidence and budding data, but mainstream psychology rarely mentions the name Jane Loevinger. Part of the problem is that the instrument she developed to measure maturity, the Sentence Completion Test (WUSCT) was cumbersome, unwieldy and difficult to score, making it an unlikely tool for dissertation work and related scientific use.

Yet, at the same time, there was plenty of related research data to back up Loevinger's theory and findings, especially in development, e.g. adult development, lifespan development, moral development, cognitive development, and religious development.

Loevinger's theory and research findings are actually quite simple and can be understood as follows – in terms of development, we are not all equal. Regarding maturity, some of us grow, some of us flounder, and in others growth remains stunted. In a general population, Loevinger said the vast majority of adults are somewhere in between the middle and lowest echelons of maturation.

While Loevinger's research did not address genocide per se, her research pointed towards the same psychological processes I had observed at the genocide exhibition. People who were emotionally

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developed were more independent minded – they conformed less to their social group and surrounding culture. People who were emotionally developed functioned at the highest levels of living. In civilian life, they helped others much more than the average person. In genocide, they rescued.

Conversely, the opposite was true of those in the least emotionally developed group. The least evolved people were the ones who were most likely to adhere to social standards and tradition. These were the ones who most closely identified with their social group and were more susceptible to the culture's norms. The less emotionally developed people were the ones who would comply with orders. In daily life, they ranged from misfits to true believers. In genocide, such persons would turn in Jews, round up the Gypsies and shoot Tutsis on sight. Like Milgram had suggested, all that was required was an authority (state, church, popular opinion) to deem the killing legitimate or, in the case of copycat killing, just the perception of permission.

While the proportions of each of these groups in a population can be debated, there is usually little debate on those who are mid-point between the two extremes. Bystanders constitute the majority of any population and are characterized by their moderate stance between the highly conforming perpetrators and the independently minded rescuers. Bystanders appear to play it safe by alternating between the two extremes.³ Yet they are wrong. There is no stance that is safe.

Disparities of all sorts (e.g. economic, educational) exist in life, but such disparities do not account for hate, terrorism, and genocide. While prejudice seems to decrease with education and income, only emotional development can explain the following exceptions – some very educated and wealthy people hate and prepare for jihads and genocides. By contrast, some very poor and uneducated people know to “do the right thing,” helping where they can and rescuing. The

³ S. K. Baum (2004) A bell curve of hate. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 6, 118–132.

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great spiritual teachers have suggested the same thing – life's inequalities were never so much about racial, economic, religious, or cultural differences, as about levels of conscious awareness.

I ask the reader's indulgence with some aspects of my model as levels of emotional development are difficult to see and even harder to prove. At the time of writing, Jane Loevinger has emeritus status from Washington University and though her ideas are esteemed, outside of adult development her work is largely unknown. Hampered by small numbers of subjects and unpublished doctoral dissertations, her work is yet to be introduced into those disciplines that currently dominate genocide studies. Many of the ideas that appear in this book are based on other nascent survey research studies as well.

Genocide experts write about the causes of genocide from a top-down approach, e.g. utopia or authoritarian regimes. By contrast, this study is a bottom-up perspective of genocide that has to do with what the average person thinks and how they act when the rules change or in the absence of rules.

The top-down genocide theorists would tell you that manipulative elites orchestrate genocide from the get-go and they may be correct in that genocides seem to be led by demagogues, some charismatic and others not so charming: Stalin (Russia), Mao/Chiang Kai-shek (China/Taiwan), Tojo (Japan), Agha Mohammed Yahya Khan (East Pakistan now Bangladesh), Pol Pot (Cambodia), Milosevic (Yugoslavia), Hitler (Germany), to name a few. But from a bottom-up analysis, by the time a demagogue has emerged on the scene, he is preaching to the converted. From this perspective, Hitler and his ilk said nothing new, nothing that the *volk* hadn't heard before. For years, people had retained all the social myths about Jews in the back of their minds. Such myths were reflected in fairy tales (the Grimms' *Jew in the Bush*), children's rhymes, state-sponsored statues (such as the Judensau) and church-sanctioned pilgrimage sites that honored sainthood for children martyred by "The Jews." Like a good populist, Hitler echoed what everyone "knew." It was as if God had read their minds.

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Manipulative leaders will always exist, but they cannot succeed without the support of a following. Without the masses, without the support of ordinary people, a demagogue's diatribe would be dismissed as the rantings of a madman on his soapbox. Whether the soapbox is in Central Park, Hyde Park, or Dam Square matters not. "What really matters," observes Bard College's Ian Buruma, "is that the seductive quality of hate appeals to the average person's irrational fears, their vanities, their greed and their blood lust."⁴

This book focuses exclusively on identity formation and membership in each of three groups: perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers. Chapter 1 presents an overview of the current state of research and pleads a case for an adult developmental perspective. Chapter 2 begins to fashion an answer by proposing a normal population or bell curve of hate and rescue and linking it to perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers. To better understand how each of these categories form, the psychological makeup of perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers is delineated in the next three chapters. Chapter 3 explores the genocidal proclivities inherent in ethnic fundamentalists, religious fanatics and political ideologues – those that have become known in and out of genocide research as the perpetrators. Chapter 4 extends the inquiry into an examination of bystander psychology and the ease of transition into provisional perpetrator or rescuing mode. Chapter 5 highlights those who function at the highest levels of psychological health, examining why rescuers function as they do. The final chapter summarizes the material and invites the reader to ponder whether it is the individual or culture (or both) that needs to develop beyond the fray of social forces.

Like all other genocide scholars, I am trying to find a cure for the malignancy of hate. Often the evening news reminds us of the pervasiveness of jihadi terrorism and the genocidal mindset it

⁴ I. Buruma: see *New York Times Book Review* 12/10/2000, p. 13. For an interesting parallel between 9/11 and World War II Japanese rationale of war against the West see Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit (2002) *Occidentalism*. In *New York Review of Books* 1/17/02, pp. 4–7.

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engenders. Usually we just shake our heads and resign ourselves to the notion that this oldest and most primitive form of relating is here to stay. What has changed is that the scientific inquiry into hate and genocide has come of age. Perhaps, this time, a developmental approach can lead us to do something about it. From such a perspective – the only way out is up.

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Prologue

The history of the world is a history of hate and genocide. At one level, it is difficult to deny this reality. In the 1980s, anthropologists in Belgium found more than 30 wounded, battered, and perforated skulls, of men, women, and children, believed to be at least 7,000 years old.¹ And while ethnic conflict and group hatred may not be the only motives for war, such enmity seems to play a large part in most armed conflicts around the world. Only 16 of the world's 193 countries currently remain untouched by war. At any given time, an average of 50 nations are engaged in armed conflict, with some employing children as young as 6 years of age in combat.²

But the actual investigation, cataloguing, and defining of genocide is very recent. Following attorney/survivor Raphael Lemkin's (1900–1959) lead, Article 2 of the United Nation's *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* defines genocide as:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such: Killing members of the group; Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.³

At this time, Lemkin's United Nations definition remains the most widely accepted, even with its limitations. Definitional limits notwithstanding, we can see that the cost of genocide over the past century is particularly high. While the victims' only "crime" was

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their identity as members of the “wrong” social group, e.g. in religion, race, culture or politics, the effects are particularly lethal. With fifteen major genocides, and non-combat victims estimated at more than a quarter billion, the twentieth century has the dubious honor of being the bloodiest.

Experts remain uncertain about how to acknowledge unrecognized genocides, e.g. South American colonization death rates (13–30 million), and what to make of the more recent state governments’ La Violencia (1970–1990s) campaigns, which made an estimated 3,000 Chileans, 30,000 Argentinians, 180,000 Colombians, and 200,000 Guatemalans simply “disappear.”

Then there are the estimated third of Armenians (2.5 million) who marched their way to death in the Syrian Desert. Should you speak to a Turk national, you would be told that the claims of genocide are exaggerated or wholly fabricated. Armenians understandably, had a different experience.

What is to be made of the various colonizations which took an estimated 10,000 Sudanese, 64,000 of 80,000 Namibian Herero, and 4 million Congolese? What of the lesser known South African Dutch (25,000 Boer) who died in what may have been the first concentration camps by the English? What of Cambodia’s Tonle Sap and other massacres not well known? At one point, the US government offered bounties on the heads of Native Americans, and Central and South Americans.

“Many of the problems we have today are because of hatred,” observed the Dalai Lama, in exile in northern India since his own nation of Tibet was occupied in 1959. A little over a decade ago, cards identifying people as White, Black, Indian or Colored (mixed race) reduced the civil rights for South Africans, Coloreds and Asians. Such apartheid notions were believed to be natural, and ordained by God. Such thinking paved the way for assimilation efforts by their Commonwealth cousins. In Australia, from 1910 to 1970, 55,000 Aboriginal children were adopted out to white Christian citizens; these children are now known as the stolen generations. Public