Am I My Brother's Killer?
The Social Psychology of Violence Against Civilians

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In the Biblical story of the brothers Cain and Abel, Abel goes missing one day. Cain, who has killed his brother, replies to his father's query about Abel's whereabouts with the response: "I know not. Am I my brother's keeper?"[2] Social psychological accounts of the participation of nonspecialists in collective violence against civilians lead us reformulate the question: Am I, or would I be, my brother's killer? Many accounts suggest that under certain conditions the answer for most of us, as for Cain, might be yes. But this participation poses a puzzle – why would someone turn against a neighbor, or murder a child? Upon reflection, the puzzle only multiplies. We wonder not only why many kill, but also why many others do not. And why, if the goal is to eliminate a people, are the victims often first brutalized, rather than killed in a more "efficient" manner?

Many have turned to social psychology for answers to the difficult questions about the participation of nonspecialists in collective violence against civilians.[3] The result has been numerous plausible social psychological accounts, often undergirded by both strong experimental evidence and well developed theories. But the leap from the theoretical and the experimental to empirical explanations has been awkward and has usually fallen short of the mark, for several reasons. Most social psychological accounts by scholars of violence ignore or poorly explain: 1) individual-level difference in participation in violence, 2) noninstrumental violence, 3) the inability to distinguish between several social psychological explanations because of the observational equivalence of their predictions, 4) participation in violence in the absence of the specified social psychological pressures, and 5) other plausible, non-social psychological mechanisms.

Motivated by these questions and concerns, this essay examines the existing literature on the social psychology of participation by nonspecialists in collective violence against civilians, as well as primary sources in the form of perpetrator and survivor testimonies, in order to highlight the theoretical and evidential strengths and weaknesses of the proposed causal mechanisms. I proceed in four sections. First, I present a brief portrait of participation in the Shoah and the Rwandan genocide. This essay does not apply exclusively to genocide; the discussion also applies to participation by nonspecialists in violence against civilians in the context of massacres, pograms, riots, or other forms of collective violence. However, genocide scholars are among those who most frequently invoke social psychological explanations, so I have chosen two cases of genocide to illustrate my argument. Second, I discuss the more prominent mechanisms that have been proposed to explain the participation by nonspecialists in collective violence against civilians. I group these mechanisms broadly into two categories: explanations of why people would initially commit acts of violence and explanations of how participation in violence is sustained psychologically over time. Next, I highlight the problems left unaddressed by social psychological explanations of participation in violence. I argue that the social psychological mechanisms in most common currency in explaining participation in violence are overly simplistic. I conclude by suggesting that theories that deal with effects of interactions between social context and different individual personalities, such as social identity theory, are the most promising way forward for scholars of violence who use social psychological accounts.

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[2] Genesis 4:9

[3] This essay leaves aside theories of intergroup relations and social psychological explanations for the emergence of intergroup conflict. I assume conflict is already present and focus on participation in violence.

Participation in the Shoah[4] and the Rwandan Genocide

Why do formerly nonviolent people kill innocent civilians during episodes of collective violence? This question has always haunted accounts of genocide.[5] In this section, I show that this question deserves the attention it has received because: 1) many people have participated in the perpetration of genocide, and 2) a nonnegligible portion of these people were what Browning (1992) calls "ordinary men" and what I refer to as "nonspecialists" in violence. By nonspecialists, I mean people who have had little or no training in the use of violence prior to their participation in it. I employ the Shoah and the Rwandan genocide as illustrative examples, because much of the literature on the social psychology of genocide focuses on these two cases.

Many thousands of people took part in both the Shoah and the Rwandan genocide. Straus estimates, based on careful calculations, that the Rwandan genocide was committed by 175,000 to 210,000 perpetrators, or approximately fourteen to seventeen percent of "active adult" male Hutus (or seven to eight percent of all "active adult" Hutus) in 1994, when the genocide occurred.[6] For this calculation, perpetrators were defined as "those who directly killed or assaulted civilians and those who participated in groups that killed or assaulted."[7] Few estimates of the number of perpetrators in the Shoah are available. Goldhagen[8] estimates that there were between 100,000 and 500,000 perpetrators; I have not found any other estimates.

Of those who participated in the Shoah and the Rwandan genocide, many were "ordinary men[9]"; that is to say, prior to the genocide, they were not hardcore ideologues, nor were "specialists in violence[10]," like members of the police, army or militias. According to Hilberg, "[t]he German perpetrator was not a special kind of German" – rather, perpetrators were "a remarkable cross section of the German population."[11] Indeed, the reactions of many perpetrators of the Shoah suggest that they were profoundly troubled by their actions.[12] One SS Police Leader said to Himmler: "Look at the eyes of the men of this Kommando, how deeply shaken they are. These men are finished for the rest of their lives. What kind of followers are we training here? Either neurotics or savages!"[13] In Rwanda, too, "the overwhelming majority of perpetrators in rural areas were ordinary men."[14]

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[4] In this essay, I prefer the Hebrew word "Shoah," meaning "destruction," to the term "Holocaust," meaning "sacrifice by fire." Though the meaning of "holocaust" has changed in the popular mind over time, it was originally a religious term with the positive connotation of giving something up to God. For more on this question, see for example: Calamani 1999 and Garber and Zuckerman 1989.

[5] Arendt 1977, Dicks 1972, Adorno et al. 1950, Browning 1995, Lifton 1986, Mamdani 2001, Hinton 2005, Straus 2006, Waller 2002, Midlarsky 2005, Valentino 2004

[6] Straus 2004, 2006, 117-18. The Rwandan census categorizes people from the ages of 18 to 54 as "active adults" (cited in Straus 2006, 118).

[7] Straus 2004, 87

[8] Goldhagen 1996; cited in Mann 2005 and Waller 2002

[9] Browning 1992; see also Waller 2002

[10] Tilly 2003

[11] Hilberg 1985, 277

[12] Hilberg 1985; Browning 1992, 1995

[13] von dem Bach, cited in Hilberg 1985, 274

[14] Straus 2006, 96; see also Prunier 1995, 247.

There is not unanimity on the "ordinariness" of perpetrators. Several scholars maintain that the majority of perpetrators acted either strategically or ideologically, in intentional pursuit of goals that benefited them. Valentino proposes that mass violence is usually the result of elites acting strategically, rather than "a popular enterprise in which neighbor turns against neighbor."[15] However, the existence of a small group of central planners can coexist with the presence of ordinary killers. Mass violence is rarely spontaneous. Leaders usually play a key role in inducing the participation of others.

Others argue that perpetrators are ideologically motivated. Goldhagen believes that an "eliminationist anti-Semitism" common to all Germans was at the root of the Shoah. Goldhagen neglects, however, the fact that many perpetrators were not German and many victims were not Jews. Mann also questions the "ordinariness" of Nazi perpetrators by examining the biographies of 1,581 perpetrators. He finds that perpetrators were more likely than the average German to have been associated with Nazism and to have been "specialists in violence" before the war. However, he acknowledges that he is less likely to have captured "ordinary" people in his sample, because he discovered that elite, "hardcore" perpetrators were greatly overrepresented in his sample.[16] He concludes by noting that the large number of perpetrators indicates that "[m]any ordinary people must also have been mass murderers…"[17] In both the Shoah and the Rwandan genocide, there is convincing evidence that a nonnegligible percentage of the perpetrators were motivated by reasons other than ideology. As Jean-Baptiste Munyankore, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, states, the violence was "the abnormal actions of perfectly normal people."[18] Whether the majority or merely some part of the perpetrators are ordinary, it is these nonspecialist perpetrators that form the object of study of this essay.

Engaging in Violence: Social Influence Versus Removing Restraints

Scholars have proposed that several social psychological mechanisms may explain the participation of nonspecialists in collective violence. Some mechanisms are purported to cause initial engagement in violence, while others are hypothesized to facilitate continued participation in violence. In this section, I discuss these mechanisms of initial engagement in violence using evidence from the Shoah and the Rwandan genocide. In the following section, I turn to mechanisms that sustain violence once it has begun

In discussing how people have become perpetrators of violence, scholars depart from one of two assumptions: either most people are not inclined to violence and must be persuaded to participate, or most people are inclined to violence and will participate as long as they are not hindered from doing so. The reality is probably much more complex: people's capacity for violence may change over time and people probably have a range of different probabilities of committing violence under different conditions, rather than either tending or not tending toward

[15] Valentino 2004, 2
[16] Mann 2000, 341, 357; 2005, 239
[17] Mann 2005, 189
[18] cited in Hatzfeld 2005, 222. Several scholars of Rwanda question the accuracy of interview material published by Hatzfeld. They have not found his perpetrators to resemble their own conversations with perpetrators. Furthermore, Hatzfeld does not publish the questions that he asks. I occasionally use quotes from his interviews, but never rely on them for my argument.

violence. Although this article cannot address this question, it is important to note that these two assumptions exist and directly counter one another.

Theories of social influence assume that most people (sadists or ideologues being exceptions) will not commit violence unless induced to do so. While all of social psychology is, to some extent, a study of how the social influences the individual, social influence can perhaps best be described as pressure from a person or group of people that induces a change in the target person's behavior and sometimes also in her attitude. In the case of genocide, to argue for the causal relevance of one of these mechanisms is to argue that non-elite perpetrators would not have participated in the genocide of their own volition.[19] The mechanisms commonly included in the category of social influence are compliance, identification, and internalization.

Compliance, in simple terms, is doing what someone wants in order to receive a reward or avoid punishment (these rewards or punishments are frequently intangible, such as acceptance by a group or avoiding the wrath of one's boss). A child who stops running in the school halls because her teacher tells her to is complying. A college student who drinks with her friends, although she hates alcohol, is complying. Compliance thus includes both obedience to authority and conformity with peer behavior. More formally, "[c]ompliance can be said to occur when an individual accepts influence from another person or a group in the hope of achieving a favorable reaction, or avoiding an unfavorable reaction, from the other…. [Individuals] adopt the induced behavior… not because they agree with its content but because its expression is instrumental to producing a desired social effect."[20] Compliance should not occur when someone is unobserved, because the person does not like the behavior. We would not expect the college student to drink when alone. Experimentally, where it is possible to carefully control the type of social influence, the mechanisms of compliance have been shown to be robust, even in situations in which nothing is at stake for the participants or when the experimental construct consists of a task with an objectively correct answer and no uncertainty.[21]

Identification, or role adoption, is stronger than compliance. A young man believes that soldiers always act disparagingly toward the natives of the country where they fight. Drafted for Vietnam, he undergoes intense training and comes to identify with his role as a soldier. Though he has always been the most mild-mannered of men, he curses and spits at any Vietnamese whom he comes across. Upon arriving home, he returns to his mild-mannered prior self. Believing that people in certain roles act in certain ways can lead someone who is placed in that role, if she identifies with it, to act according to her beliefs about the role (regardless of whether she originally approved or disapproved of the behaviors of people in that role). Experimentally, the evidence for identification is controversial. In the most famous experiment on identification, students were randomly selected to play guards or prisoners in a simulated prison.

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[19] Note that arguing that non-elite perpetrators would not have participated in genocide in the absence of influence neither absolves the perpetrator of responsibility for his or her actions nor implies that the perpetrator was incapable of acting otherwise otherwise. See, for example, Sofsky 1997, Browning 1992, Sabini and Silver YEAR, and others.

[20] Kelman and Hamilton 1989, 104.

[21] Sherif 1937, Asch 1956, Sheridan and King 1972, Milgram 1974, Blass 1999; see Bond and Smith 1996 for a meta-analysis of studies of conformity. Given space constraints, I assume internal and external validity of the experiments. To learn more about these debates, see for example: Berkowitz and Donnerstein 1985, Mook 1983, Sears 1986, Orne 1962, Orne and Holland 1968, and others.

Experimenters argued that after about a day, both sides had identified with their roles, with prisoners becoming depressed and guards becoming cruel.[22] The findings of the experiment have long been questioned on numerous grounds.[23] For example, it may be the case that the experiment, in which the experimenter gave instructions to participants, better demonstrates obedience, rather than identification. The account is certainly problematic, because it portrays a deterministic view of human behavior and a uniform reaction to being placed in a role, which did not happen even in the experiment.

Finally, internalization is the *strongest* form of social influence, in which the influencing agent succeeds in changing not only the target person's behavior but also her attitudes.[24] Internalization is now usually encompassed in the study of attitudes and is divided analytically into the study of attitude formation and attitude change. Like identification, internalization has mixed experimental support. For example, the internalization of new attitudes has been found to be highly contingent on source characteristics, message credibility, and attention level.[25]

Many social psychologists have hypothesized that: 1) experiments on social influence capture mechanisms which are likely to be the same mechanisms triggered in situations of genocide, and 2) these mechanisms are likely to operate even more strongly in situations where more is at stake or when the interpretation of the situation is more subjective.[26] Even when participants in the experiments seem to disagree with their own actions, as demonstrated by tension, hesitation, and post-experimental interviews, experiments seem to show that social influence mechanisms can, under certain circumstances, incite people to conform, obey, adopt roles, or internalize the attitude desired by the influencing agent.

Although the experimental evidence for some social influence mechanisms is reasonably strong, the historical evidence is both mixed and hard to document. First, the counterfactual definition of social influence – causing a behavior that would not have occurred absent the influencing agent and that is not desired by the target, all else equal – poses clear methodological difficulties. What are the observable implications of these mechanisms? First, "[o]pinions adopted through compliance are likely to be expressed only when the behavior is observable by the influencing agent."[27] If we were to observe perpetrators shirking when the influencing agent is absent, then this would be consistent with compliance. However, shirking is also consistent with other hypotheses, such as laziness. Furthermore, this implication only suggests how to identify the absence of compliance, rather than its presence. If we see a perpetrator committing violence absent the influencing agent, we may suspect that compliance is not the primary

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[22] Haney et al. 1973; Zimbardo 1989; Zimbardo 2007.

[23] Haslam and Reicher 2003, Haslam and Reicher 2005, Reicher and Haslam 2002a, Reicher and Haslam 2002b, Reicher and Haslam 2006, Turner 2006. The experiment has not been replicated for obvious ethical reasons.

[24] Kelman and Hamilton disagree, arguing that internalization in the weakest form of influence and occurs when people already hold the beliefs that someone is trying to induce. Their description of internalization differs little from performing an act of one's own volition and hence appears to stand in contradiction to their own definition of social influence.

[25]Petty and Cacioppo 1981; for recent reviews, see Petty and Wegener 1998, Eagly and Chaiken 1998, Wood 2000, and Crano and Prislin 2006.

[26] Milgram 1976, 178; Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo 1973, 91; Kelman and Hamilton 1989, 150-53; Ross and Nisbett 1991, 32; Bond and Smith 1996; Miller 1986, 186-87 and 190-204; Blass 2002, 95.

[27] Kelman and Hamilton 1989, 104.

mechanism causing her behavior. But if we observe the targeted behavior in the presence of the influencing agent, it is not possible to distinguish whether it results from compliance or one of the other many mechanisms with the same observable implications. Results from Milgram's obedience experiments suggest that an additional observable implication of compliance should be tension: if people kill while internally disagreeing with their behavior, the resulting cognitive dissonance should allow us to observe visible signs of this internal debate, such as tension.[28] Indeed, Browning provides example of members of the Einsatzgruppen in Poland who drank heavily, felt physically ill, or otherwise manifested signs of stress when ordered to kill.[29] However, symptoms of tension, too, are consistent with other hypotheses, such as visceral repulsion at the act of killing or nervousness about doing something one has never done before. Role adoption and internalization prove to be even more problematic, because they are theorized to be observationally equivalent to performing an act of one's own volition. Certain behaviors, such as discontinuing violent behavior after being removed from one's role, are consistent with role adoption, but are also consistent with compliance, a desire to escape punishment, and multiple other mechanisms. The observable implications of social influence mechanisms, then, do not allow us to adjudicate between competing hypotheses with the historical data that we have available.

What if we were to ask the perpetrators themselves to explain their behavior? Unsurprisingly, they do commonly cite social influence as a cause for their violence.[30] For example, a perpetrator in the Rwandan genocide, when asked how he could kill people who were former neighbors, suggests that his actions were the result of compliance: "It was not my will. It was because of the authorities who asked me to do it. If you are my authority and you tell me to kill this Hutu [points to researcher's assistant], I could kill him, even if I had no disagreement with him."[31] Many scholars have used social influence mechanisms to explain mass participation in genocide.[32] However, it is not obvious how one could show perpetrators' claims to be more than a post hoc justification for their behavior, since it is clearly in their interest, psychologically if not legally, to attempt to attribute responsibility to someone else.[33] Thus while social influence is often suggested as a reason for perpetrators' behavior during episodes of collective violence against civilians, proof is hard to come by.

In addition to the observational equivalence of different types of social influence mechanisms and the difficulty of knowing whether they are truly active in historical situations, these mechanisms have other significant theoretical weaknesses. First, scholars of violence have not addressed the fact that social psychological accounts cannot explained why these

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[28] Milgram 1974.

[29] Browning 1992, 68-69; see also Hilberg 1985. Note that Browning argues that this is a case of obedience to authority and conformity, not coercion, because he provides evidence both that officers told soldiers that they could refuse to kill and that people did in fact refuse without objective negative consequences (1992, 170-71).

[30] Arendt 1977; Straus and Lyons 2006, 39, 96; Gross 2001, 56.

[31] Straus and Lyons 2006, 88.

[32] I include a very non-exhaustive list of the scholars who argue for various social influence mechanisms. Obedience: Arendt (1977), Hilberg (1985), Prunier (1995), and Valentino (2004). Conformity: Browning (1992), Prunier (1995), Fujii (2006), and Scherrer (2002). Role adoption: Midlarsky (2005) and Valentino (2004). Internalization: Aronson (1987), Naimark (2001), and Fujii (2006). For arguments against obedience, pure and simple, as an explanation of genocide in Rwanda, see Mann (2005) and Straus (2006).

[33] Since the Nuremberg trials, the defense of following superior orders has been ruled legally invalid, when the orders are illegitimate under international law (Article 8, Charter of the International Military Tribunal).

mechanisms are triggered in some people and not others, as tests of the disposition of the participants in many of the experiments were normal[34] or subjects were believed to be representative of the population from which they were drawn.[35] Second, these mechanisms do not easily account for excessive violence. If we assume that the perpetrators would not have killed absent the influencing agent, then it is difficult to explain the brutality that frequently precedes murder.[36] Finally, these social psychological explanations do not adequately address how the mechanisms of social influence are co-opted for genocide. If social influence is present in almost every mundane interaction and genocide is a relatively rare occurrence, why are these mechanisms triggered where and when they are? If we have assumed the masses of non-elite perpetrators to have a preference against killing, why would the norm to which people conform in genocide be to kill, rather than to resist?[37]

While social influence mechanisms assume that people prefer not to kill one another and that some intervention must occur in order to override their preferences, other scholars suggest an alternative explanation, based on the opposite assumption: humans are naturally inclined to evil. Reminiscent of the Christian doctrine of original sin or the Hobbesian state of nature, his argument asserts: "To produce violence, it is not necessary to promote it actively. All that is necessary is to stop restraining or preventing it."[38] Under this assumption, violence is the preferred human response in an unconstrained state. Usually, an emphasis on the presence or lack of punishment is a deciding factor in releasing violence from its habitual restraints: "Where terror has been let off its leash and its accessories need fear no punishment, an essential barrier has been removed. Violence, always an option in human action, has a free hand, its way now clear."[39] Research on sexual violence lends some support to this emphasis on punishment. Studies that ask men to self-report their likelihood of raping have shown that a significant percentage (34-37%) reports some likelihood that they would commit rape, if they could be assured that they would not be caught.[40] Nonetheless, an emphasis on violence under conditions

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[34] Haney et al. 1973, 90; Zimbardo 2007. In a recent study, Carnahan and McFarland (2007) throw doubt on the claim that Zimbardo's subjects had normal dispositions. They recruited subjects for two fictitious studies, one which sought volunteers for an undescribed psychological study and one which, like Zimbardo's, sought volunteers for a psychological study of prison life. They found that volunteers for the prison study were significantly more aggressive, narcissistic, and socially dominant than volunteers for an undescribed study. Their results suggest that the wording in the advertisement recruiting subjects for the Stanford Prison Experiment may have led to self-selection on the part of the volunteers.

[35] Milgram 1974, Asch 1956.

[36] Some argue that this brutality is either demonstrative – meant to inspire fear or acquiesence in others – or a way to dehumanize the victim as a defense mechanism to make killing easier psychologically for the perpetrator. These arguments will also be discussed in greater detail below.

[37] One possible explanation is a combination of the phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance and the fundamental attribution error. The fundamental attribution error is the principle that people are likely to attribute their own behavior to situational factors while simultaneously attributing others' behavior to dispositional factors (Dawes 1988, 29; Ross and Nisbett 1991, 87-89). This means that perpetrators are likely to assume that their comrades' behavior follows from their convictions. The pluralistic ignorance hypothesis simply argues that, because of the fundamental attribution error, it is possible to have a large group of people who all prefer not to do something but who each believes that he or she is the only one to hold that preference (Allport 1924). There most be some initial signal as to what the group believes, but a dissenter will feel faced with a crowd of assenters, when in fact nearly everyone may wish to be a dissenter.

[38] Baumeister 1997, 263.

[39] Sofsky 1997, 224.

[40] Malamuth et al. 1980, Briere and Malamuth 1983, Tieger 1981.

of impunity again obscures the issue of individual heterogeneity. While most, if not all, of us may find it truly shocking that such a high percentage of men admit that they might rape, a much higher percentage claim that they would not.[41]

The central assumptions of social influence mechanisms and the mechanism of removing restraints on violence are contradictory. If simply removing restraints on violence generates widespread violence, then actively inducing violence through social influence mechanisms is unnecessary. Nevertheless, without knowing exactly which restraints matter and how strong they are, it is impossible to tell whether their removal would precipitate violence. Clearly, however, removing restraints is not sufficient to cause universal participation in violence. Even in situations like Rwanda where restraints seem almost nonexistent and the possibility for punishment would have seemed extremely remote, a large majority of Hutus did not participate in the genocide.[42] We obviously cannot adjudicate this debate which philosophers like Augustine and Rousseau have studied for centuries. Regardless of which theory one accepts, both contain unresolved difficulties to the question of why nonspecialists would kill civilians.

Sustaining Participation in Violence: Living with Killing

While certain social psychological mechanisms attempt to explain why nonspecialists would initially participate in violence, another class of social psychological mechanisms describes ways in which different aspects of the situation help the perpetrators to psychologically justify their behavior. These mechanisms that sustain participation in violence are secondary or mediating mechanisms which do not cause initial participation in violence against civilians but without which, in the opinion of some scholars, participation could not be sustained. Many scholars pick a mechanism that they believe fits their case, without considering whether other mechanisms might fit equally well. Mechanisms that fall into this category include cognitive dissonance reduction, diffusion of responsibility, deindividuation, dehumanization, scapegoating, and habituation. Because these mechanisms are secondary and none is easily observable, I spend less time discussing them.

Cognitive dissonance occurs when one's actions conflict with one's beliefs. When in this situation, people tend to try to reduce the dissonance, by modifying either their behavior or their beliefs.[43] Since we are examining how people justify their violence to themselves, our focus is changing preferences. To conjure up a vivid image of the adaptation of preferences to the situation, we can remember the story of the hungry fox who decided, once he ascertained that he could not reach a bunch of grapes, that they were sour and he did not want them anyway.[44] Festinger and Carlsmith first demonstrated this phenomenon experimentally, by having subjects report to a confederate that a boring task that they had just performed was, in fact, fascinating.[45] Recent studies have shown that behavior-induced attitude change is such a powerful

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[41] Of course, given the unreliability of self-reports and the stigma associated with admitting a desire to rape, it seems likely that these percentages are quite conservative estimates.
[42] Straus 2006
[43] Festinger 1957; for a more recent discussion, see Petty and Wegener 1998, 335-37.
[44] Elster 1983, 109-11, from the fables of La Fontaine (following Aesop).
[45] Festinger and Carlsmith 1959.

phenomenon that even people who do not remember performing a counterattitudinal act, such as amnesiacs or subjects who are distracted, change their attitudes in favor of the induced behavior.[46] With regards to violence, this experimental paradigm suggests that, after committing an initial act of violence, perpetrators are likely to shift their attitudes in favor of violence in order to reduce cognitive dissonance, even if previously they had disagreed. Cognitive dissonance could thereby facilitate internalization, although it cannot explain the initial act of violence. The experiments also suggest a caveat, however: Festinger and Carlsmith found that the smaller the amount of external pressure used to induce the counterattitudinal behavior, the greater the subsequent attitude shift. This effect is presumed to operate through a sort of unconscious rationalization on the part of the subject.[47] If a great deal of external pressure is applied, then the subject can easily attribute her behavior to a natural response to pressure, whereas if only minimal pressure is applied, the subject cannot find a way to explain her behavior without reasoning that it must have come from her attitudes.[48] Thus cognitive dissonance would be predicted to produce a larger effect in situations where the initial act of violence was induced by a lesser pressure, such as in some situations of conformity, and to have a smaller effect when the initial act of violence could be attributed to a strong external pressure, such as obedience to an authority figure.

Diffusion of responsibility and deindividuation are closely related mechanisms. Diffusion of responsibility refers to the feeling that one's role is so small and the responsibility for the consequences belongs to so many that one's behavior is irrelevant to the outcome.[49] The importance of diffusion of responsibility in allowing people to avoid feelings of guilt was first brought to the fore after World War II and made famous by Eichmann's argument that he was just a cog in the Nazi machine, that responsibility did not lie with him since the genocide would have nonetheless occurred without him.[50] Note that this part of Eichmann's defense is not based on obedience to superior orders, although he makes that argument elsewhere, but rather on the idea that the system was so complex that no one person could make a difference in any direction. Many scholars argue that diffusion of responsibility was key in the Shoah because the contribution of each individual to the "Final Solution" was, by design, only one bit of a very large endeavor.[51] Similarly, in Rwanda, many perpetrators forced others to participate, sometimes explicitly to share the guilt.[52]

Darley and Latané developed the idea of diffusion of responsibility more formally. They ran several experiments demonstrating that a person was less likely to act to help others when she thought that she was one of many to overhear an emergency, versus when she thought that she alone could help.[53] Their finding has been robust to subsequent testing. Diffusion of

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[46] Lieberman et al. 2001.
[47] see discussion in Chirot and McCauley 2006, 54-57.
[48] In Festinger and Carlsmith's study (1959), they offered subjects either $1 or $20 to tell a confederate posing as the next subject that the experiment in which they had just participated was very interesting, when in fact it consisted of an extremely repetitive and boring task. Those subjects in the $1 condition manifested a greater attitude shift than those in the $20 condition.
[49] Staub 1989, 83-84; Niewyk 2004; Markusen 1987.
[50] Arendt 1977.
[51] Hilberg 1985, 292.
[52] Taylor 1999, 132.
[53] Latané and Darley 1968; Latané and Darley 1968.

responsibility is thus theorized to sustain participation in violence both by assuaging feelings of guilt and by creating a sense of one's irrelevance vis-à-vis the magnitude of the situation. Like diffusion of responsibility, deindividuation transfers feelings of responsibility away from the individual. However, unlike diffusion of responsibility, deindividuation includes a sense of anonymity on the part of the perpetrator.[54] When people feel unable to be identified within a group, they seem to exhibit more violent behavior than when they are identifiable.[55] Deindividuation does not seem to have been important in the Rwandan context, when victims were frequently able to identify their attackers. However, it is highly possible that anonymity may have contributed to the willingness of perpetrators in the extermination camps to gas their victims.

Dehumanization and scapegoating are also related mechanisms, in which the perpetrator degrades the victim, in order to psychologically justify his or her actions. It has been argued that these mechanisms facilitate mass participation in genocide[56] or increase the level of brutality observed alongside the killing.[57] Dehumanization refers to the brutal or debasing ways in which perpetrators have frequently treated or thought of their victims, which made the victims seem less human to the perpetrators.[58] Paradoxically, their own initial cruelty renders their subsequent cruelty easier to handle psychologically, and they do not seem to realize that the so-called inhuman behavior of their victims is a product of their own making. Adalbert, a perpetrator in the Rwandan genocide, stated: "The perpetrators felt more comfortable insulting and hitting crawlers in rags rather than properly upright people. Because they seemed less like us in that position."[59] Scapegoating specifically refers to blaming the victim group for the ills of the perpetrator group or of society in general as a way to justify mistreatment of the victim group.[60] There are numerous accounts of Nazis believing that the Jews had been the cause of the German defeat in the first World War, or that they were part of a global conspiracy, or that they were in other ways the root cause of Germany's problems.[61] In Rwanda, as well, Tutsis were frequently blamed for various problems in the country, from instability to seducing foreign troops away from aiding Hutus.[62]

Habituation is perhaps the most theoretically complicated of the mechanisms sustaining genocide. It can refer either to habituation through gradual escalation or habituation through repetition. In the case of the former, habituation is commonly called the "foot-in-the-door" technique. It has been demonstrated experimentally that people who comply with small requests are subsequently more likely to comply with larger requests.[63] Thus while the foot-in-the-door technique assumes an initial act related to violence on the part of the future perpetrators, this first act may be small and not seem worthy of protest at the moment. It may then be harder to resist subsequent acts, for two reasons: 1) psychologically, it would be inconsistent with one's

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[54] Diener 1980, Waller 2002, Zimbardo 2007.
[55] Zimbardo 1969, cited in Waller 2002.
[56] Kuper 1981; Markusen 1987; Chalk and Jonassohn 1990, 28.
[57] Smith 1987, 23.
[58] Gross 2001, 61; Hatzfeld 2005: 37, 47, 132; Levi 1987; Hilberg 1985.
[59] cited in Hatzfeld 2005, 132.
[60] Staub 2003, 299.
[61] Hilberg 1985.
[62] Taylor 1999.
[63] Freedman and Fraser 1966.

previously compliant behavior, and 2) logistically, as the scale of the genocide increases, both the possibility for effective individual resistance and the ease of coordinating collective action may decrease. The foot-in-the-door mechanism may help explain the lack of massive resistance to genocidal programs which proceed gradually. Indeed, the history of the Shoah shows that the exclusion of Jews from society and their eventual expulsion and extermination proceeded in fitfully increasing, although not necessarily teleological, steps.[64] In Rwanda, genocide also escalated by steps, which may have led people to participate in low levels of violence and then be drawn into ever increasing violence: "In some places, authorities apparently deliberately drew hesitant Hutu into increasingly more violent behavior, first encouraging them to pillage, then to destroy homes, then to kill the occupants of homes."[65]

Habituation does not require escalation, however. It is also used to describe desensitization to violent behavior through repetition.[66] Furthermore, habituation may be a facilitator because it removes the need for active decision-making: "Habit releases the perpetrator from purpose and decision. Habitual violence is unmotivated violence."[67] Perpetrator testimony does suggest that people adapt through repetition to even the most horrific of behaviors.[68] A perpetrator in the Rwandan genocide states, "As the days passed, people became increasingly habituated [to the killing]."[69] Like cognitive dissonance reduction, habituation can entail internalization, but it cannot cause initial participation in genocide.

These mechanisms that sustain participation by nonspecialists in collective violence against civilians, which have been only briefly discussed, are all plausible mechanisms to help us understand how this violent behavior is sustained and reinforced over time. However, the extent to which these mechanisms are important or operative cannot be easily demonstrated in instances of collective violence, because, like the mechanisms which are hypothesized to precipitate initial participation in violence, they are usually observationally equivalent in nonexperimental settings. The end result that is predicted in each case is the same: increasing the psychological ease with which a perpetrator can commit acts of violence. These mechanisms remain important primarily because perpetrator and survivor testimonies overwhelmingly suggest their presence. Nonetheless, only cognitive dissonance and habituation have strong experimental support, and it is not clear that any of the mechanisms can be proven to exist in empirical cases of violence. Unless further evidence can be harnessed, scholars should be cautious about privileging one mechanism over the others, or over alternate non-social psychological explanations.

Missing Pieces: Questions Left Unanswered by Social Psychology

Scholars who use social psychological accounts to explain the participation of nonspecialists in collective violence against civilians usually fail to acknowledge several severe limitations. First, as mentioned above, these accounts often do not allow us to adjudicate

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[64] Hilberg 1985; Schleunes 1970; Mann 2005; Rees 2005; Gellately 2003; Browning 1992, 1995; Dawes 1998, 508; Waller 2002.
[65] Des Forges 1999, 11. See also Fujii 2006, 187.
[66] Staub 2003, 293; see also Baumeister 1997, 282-93; Staub 1989, 80-83; Mann 2000, 359; Browning 1992, 161.
[67] Sofsky 2003, 28.
[68] Sofsky 1997, 226; Hatzfeld 2005: 36, 47, 49; Baumeister 1997.
[69] Straus and Lyons 2006, 64.

between competing causal mechanisms. The observational equivalence of most social psychological accounts is highly problematic in attempts to explain participation in violence.[70] Given the multitude of mechanisms all predicting the same result, participation in collective violence would seem to be overdetermined – we should expect participation by all. However, we know that there exists substantial individual heterogeneity, both in social psychological experiments and in empirical cases of collective violence. Other topics not adequately addressed by social psychological accounts include noninstrumental violence, participation in violence when action is less constrained, and the salience of some mechanisms whose root is not social psychological. In this section, I point to issues not yet addressed in social psychological accounts; in the next, I will suggest ways forward.

Individual Heterogeneity

"Even in the concentration camp, that place of institutionalized cruelty, there were overseers and guards who did not show brutality…. A small, unpredictable factor remains, defying explanation: the freedom to act with violence or to refrain."[71] In all cases of collective violence, some individuals commit acts of violence, while others do not. Individuals commit violence for different reasons; reasons for committing violence change over time.[72] Social psychological accounts have been largely silent on the question of individual heterogeneity of participation in genocide, after several attempts to classify the personality types who would commit genocide met with limited success.[73] Although social psychology deals primarily with the effect of the situation on the individual, the average treatment effect typically reported as an experiment's results is inherently unsatisfying, because it conveys nothing about any particular individual but only statistical probabilities about the group of subjects. That is, if we take Milgram's (in)famous obedience studies, they tell us that in the baseline condition approximately 65% of subjects will continue shocking the "learner" until they have reached 450 volts and shocked the "learner" at this level three times (1974). But this, in fact, only tells us that we are more likely – about two times more likely – to find ourselves faced with an obedient person than a resister.[74] After meeting a person on the street, we may have a better chance of being right by guessing that the person would obey, but we have no way of knowing *a priori* whether this person would fall into the 65% that obeyed or the 35% who resisted.[75] Most of social psychology cannot – and indeed does not intend to – explain individual heterogeneity.

What, then, can social psychology contribute to the question: why do some people kill in genocide while others are passive and still others resist? The answers are largely unsatisfying. After the Shoah, this question took on a note of particular urgency. Adorno et al. famously

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[70] I do not include additional discussion of observational equivalence in this section, as it has been addressed above.
[71] Sofsky 2003, 20-21.
[72] Mann 2005, Straus 2006, Hinton 2005.
[73] Adorno et al. 1950.
[74] If we both accept the internal and external validity of the experiment, assume the subjects to be representative of the general population, and ignore for the moment that obedience is, to some extent, a continuous rather than a dichotomous variable.
[75] Using the average treatment effect as a shorthand for the results of an experiment, as is typical, has the additional serious problem of dichotomizing a continuous variable.

began to attempt to account for individual-level variation in *The Authoritarian Personality*.[76] Others continued this line of dispositional research with psychological studies of S.S. killers and Nazi doctors.[77] In more recent times, scholars have begun studying stable individual-level differences in tendencies toward violent behavior, such as the Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale and the Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) scale.[78] However, these individual-level explanations are not compelling on their own in explaining participation in violence, because perpetrator interviews and investigations into the backgrounds and personal characteristics of perpetrators do not appear to reveal systematic personality differences between individuals who killed and individuals who did not.[79]

Social psychology is probabilistic. Clearly, we cannot expect individual-level point predictions about behavior in violence situations. Scholars of violence, rather than choosing a mechanism to fit their account in an *ad hoc* manner, should acknowledge the complexity of human behavior. Some mechanisms may be operative for some people at some time, while other may be operative for others at another time. Regardless of how they decide to deal with the issue, scholars of violence who use social psychological accounts need to discuss individual heterogeneity.

Noninstrumental Violence

Jeannette Ayinkamiye, survivor of the Rwandan genocide, recounts the story of her mother's murder, while her family tried to hide in the swamps of Nyamata:

> "One day, the *interahamwe* discovered Mother under the papyrus. She stood up, she offered them money to be killed by a single machete blow. They undressed her to take the money tied to her underclothes. First, they hacked both her arms, and then both her legs…. Mother lingered on death's doorstep for three days before finally dying…. She was named Agnès Nyirabuguzi."[80]

Many of the social psychological explanations discussed above cannot easily account for this type of noninstrumental or excessive violence,[81] and there are accounts of such violence in both the Shoah and the Rwandan genocide.[82] Indeed, Dutton et al. note the recurring and perplexing presence of what they call "overkill," but fail to provide an explanation.[83] All scholars acknowledge that an unknown number of sadists probably participate in genocides. However, it is difficult to believe that they account for all reports of brutality. If social psychological mechanisms explained participation in violence, in general, we would not expect to observe perpetrators brutalizing, torturing, raping or committing any act beyond that which was required of them. And such brutality is often not only not required but even actively discouraged by those in charge, when their goal is efficiency.[84]

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[76] Adorno et al. 1950.
[77] Dicks 1972 and Lifton 1986.
[78] Altemeyer 1998, Pratto et al. 1994.
[79] Browning 1992; Straus 2006; see also discussion in Dutton et al. 2005, 469.
[80] Hatzfeld 2000, 27-29; my translation.
[81] Hinton 2005, 279,
[82] Weitz 2003; Hatzfeld 2000, 2005; Sofsky 1997, 2003; Levi 1987[1958].
[83] Dutton et al. 2005, 460-64.
[84] Hilberg 1985.

Excessive violence is sometimes argued to serve a demonstrative function, to instill fear in other potential victims or to impress fellow perpetrators: "demonstrative excess was a performance, a spectacle directed to an audience. It was a staging meant to spread fear and earn respect."[85] But in these cases, it is highly instrumental. Excessive violence is also reported to have occurred in isolation, when only the victim and the perpetrator could know what occurred.[86] This violence seemingly cannot be instrumental.

Noninstrumental excessive violence might arguably derive from overzealous role adoption or internalization. Zimbardo and his colleagues found that the guards in their experiment were much harsher than could conceivably have been necessitated by the situation.[87] Similarly, if the values internalized included excessive violence, observing these levels of violence would be expected, rather than unusual. However, while noninstrumental violence was certainly common in both the Shoah and the Rwandan genocide and seems frequently to have been tolerated in collective violence, there are reasons to doubt the explanatory power of social psychological mechanisms in this instance. First, noninstrumental violence seems to have occurred even in situations where it was not encouraged. Second, even where excessive violence was incited, it was not practiced by all guards all the time, suggesting again that internalization and role adoption are overly simplistic answers.

Space of Action

We have noted that individual heterogeneity results in response to the same, clear stimulus – a command does not produce perfect obedience among a large group of people. There is another situation which scholars who use social psychological explanations for violence typically avoid: what occurs when there is a space of action, when the perpetrators have leeway as to whether and to what extent to be violent? This space of action arises when a measure of freedom is given to actors, either through presenting an explicit choice to participate or not to participate in violence, or through the intentional or unintentional creation of a situation of ambiguity, where actors must both interpret the meaning of a situation and make a choice as to how to act. The case of explicit choice may be rare in episodes of collective violence, but Browning has demonstrated that the Einsatzgruppen in Poland was presented with the opportunity to avoid, without sanction, participation in genocide:

> "After explaining the battalion's murderous assignment, [Major Trapp] made his extraordinary offer: any of the older men who did not feel up to the task that lay before them could step out…. after some moments, one man from Third Company, Otto-Julius Schimke, stepped forward…. After [Trapp] had taken Schimke under his protection, some ten or twelve other men stepped forward as well."[88]

Experimentally, we know that being the first one to initiate action different from the rest of the group in a situation is psychologically difficult. However, the presence of just one dissenter has

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[85] Sofsky 1997, 228-29. See also Sofsky 2003, 29-30.
[86] Sofsky 1997, 228.
[87] Haney et al. 1973; Zimbardo 2007.
[88] Browning 1992, 57.

been shown to "break the spell" of compliance almost entirely.[89] It is thus interesting and perplexing, from a social psychological perspective, that only a small minority (estimated by Browning at between 10-20%) avoided participating in the killing, even when given an explicit choice and after observing the noncompliance of compatriots.

In other cases, rather than being faced with either an explicit choice or clear-cut orders, the situation is ambiguous: "orders are often vague…. There is thus room for individuals to construe the order in ways that are congruent with their preferences."[90] On the day of the massacres in Jedwabne, for example, an occasion for initiative either toward killing or resisting seems to have existed, in a more implicit fashion:

> "On this day a cacophony of violence swept through the town. It unfolded in the form of many *uncoordinated simultaneous initiatives* over which Karolak [the mayor] and the town council exercised only general supervision…. They monitored progress and made sure at critical junctures that the goal of the pogrom was advanced. But, otherwise, *people were free to improvise as best they knew how*."[91]

Commenting on this very event, Chirot and McCauley note, "It turns out the mass killing of civilians by civilians under conditions of drastic political upheaval, when the authorities seem to approve, and when normal law and social restraints have broken down, are not an unusual part of genocides."[92] They thus emphasize that violence can occur on a massive scale when ambiguity and freedom, rather than direct social influence, govern the situation.

Are these accounts of individual initiative inconsistent with the social psychological mechanisms posited? Not necessarily. In the case of what appears to be a free choice, if role adoption or internalization occurred prior to the moment of decision, then social influence mechanisms have already had their say. However, Browning's account of the Reserve Police Battalion gives us no reason to believe that such a high percentage of the battalion would have internalized the need for violence or adopted their role so dramatically by this point; instead, he presents them as a rather unqualified and unmotivated group of people. As Kelman and Hamilton's description of the My Lai massacre suggests, ambiguity must be combined with some other motivation, such as revenge, in order to explain why people would participate in genocide.

Other Mechanisms

Social psychological mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. But some mechanisms that are not social psychological also seem anecdotally to play important roles in the occurrence of the participation of nonspecialists in collective violence. Specifically, revenge, material self-interest, and coercion all reappear throughout accounts of collective violence. Perpetrators often cite revenge for real or imagined offenses as a reason for their participation in violence.[93] This revenge can be directed either against the victim group as a whole, or against a specific person or

[89] Asch 1956, Milgram 1974.
[90] Kelman and Hamilton 1989, 97.
[91] Gross 2001, 59; emphasis added.
[92] Chirot and McCauley 2006, 93.
[93] Hinton 2005, 46; Straus and Lyons 2006.

group of people within the victim group. In the case of the former, revenge is perhaps best seen as a subcategory of scapegoating, which was discussed above. In the case of the latter, the violent context merely provides a pretext for the perpetrators' actions. Indeed, in other contexts, individual-level motives, such as interpersonal revenge,[94] have been theorized to be an important factor in the occurrence of violence.

Material self-interest also seems to have been a factor which motivated some perpetrators. Gross argues that the desire to plunder was central to the massacre of the Jews of Jedwabne by their Polish neighbors.[95] Additionally, secondary sources, as well as perpetrators and survivor accounts of the Rwandan genocide, suggest that the benefit of looting may have motivated many to participate in the genocide.[96] Indeed, some accounts note that looting was monitored to some extent and seen as a reward for participating in the genocide; those who did not kill could not loot.[97] In addition to plundering goods, several scholars have suggested that the scarcity of land in Rwanda may have motivated people to participate in the genocide in order to access land.[98] In the Shoah, participating in the genocide was a good career move, and some perpetrators seem to have participated with an eye to promotion.[99] Although some scholars consider material self-interest to be a motivating factor, others disagree: Straus finds that most perpetrators describe it as taking place subsequent to, but independent of, the killing.[100]

Finally, and on a very different note, some scholars suggest that coercion was a major factor in some cases of genocide.[101] Whereas social influence relies on the pressure of the situation without the presence of harmful consequences for noncompliance (though, recall from above, that negative consequences are almost always present), coercion involves a threat of harm for noncompliance. Straus argues that intra-ethnic coercion was a key factor in mass participation in the Rwandan genocide: "the mechanism during the genocide appears less Rwanda's often-claimed 'culture of obedience' and more intra-ethnic enforcement and coercion. In dry terms, there was a credible threat of sanction for noncompliance."[102] Indeed, a majority of the perpetrators that he interviews cite coercion as a cause of action,[103] and in the Rwandan case, claims of coercion are very plausible. People were killed for not participating, or forced to kill close friends or relatives as punishment, among other things. Furthermore, Straus tests and finds support for an implication of his argument: if people are coerced into participating, we expect them to be less violent than those who participate voluntarily. He additionally asks self-defined leaders of the violence whether they forced others to participate, and they all acknowledge that they did. Finally, he asks Hutus non-participants in the genocide whether they experienced coercion, and they also agree that coercion was rampant.[104]

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[94] Kalyvas 2006,
[95] Gross 2001, 69.
[96] Straus and Lyons 2006, Fujii 2006, Prunier 1995, Des Forges 1999.
[97] Des Forges 1999.
[98] Des Forges 1999, 236-37; André and Platteau 1998.
[99] Niewyk 2004, Browning 1992, Mann 2005.
[100] Straus 2006, 149.
[101] Straus 2006, Fujii 2006, Des Forges 1999.
[102] Straus 2006, 151.
[103] Straus and Lyons 2006: 45, 48-50, 65, 79; Straus 2006.
[104] Straus 2006, 140, 141, 145-48.

Straus's evidence convincingly shows that some percentage, perhaps even a very large percentage, of those who say that they participated as a result of coercion is telling the truth. However, it is impossible to identify the size of that percentage. As Straus notes, there is a strong motivation for people to cite coercion even in its absence,[105] because the presence of coercion is frequently considered to absolve people of legal, if not moral, responsibility. Others argue that coercion, while perhaps sometimes present, plays a minor role in genocide: "[perpetrators] tend to repeat stock phrases to excuse themselves or else claim that they were really insignificant pawns who had no choice or did not really know what was happening."[106] Gross argues that, despite the claims of some perpetrators, the Germans did not coerce the Poles into killing their Jewish neighbors.[107] Gross's book is controversial, with a number of scholars disagreeing with his claims (CITE). However, this debate will quickly become less significant as an overall account shows situations like that described by Gross to be common. Recent research shows that the phenomenon of neighbors killing Jewish and communist neighbors occurred frequently in former Soviet territory conquered by the Nazi army (Burds 2007). Even in the Rwandan genocide, where reports of coercion are widespread, there are convicted perpetrators who state that coercion was not the primary reason for participating. A perpetrator states: "There were people who killed voluntarily and others who were obliged" but asserts that the majority was not obliged.[108]

The presence of mechanisms other than social psychological mechanisms that seem to have a substantial impact in initiating or sustaining participation in mass violence does not imply that social psychological mechanisms are unnecessary or even insufficient. Rather, it simply complicates the situation further, indicating that it is inadvisable to place too much emphasis on any one mechanism without carefully designing tests to rule out other mechanisms.

Contributions of Social Psychology to the Study of Participation in Violence and Ways Forward

Despite the difficulties noted with social psychological explanations of participation of nonspecialists in collective violence against civilians, social psychology has led to many advances. First, it has engendered a decisive move away from explanations, which have found scant empirical support, that blame cultural deficiencies for the occurrence of collective violence. Second, it focuses our attention on the micro-level dynamics, which we know to be important, since macro-level factors have not been found to be sufficient for the occurrence of collective violence. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, social psychology has brought to the fore, through numerous experiments, the fact that most people succumb to social influence relatively easily. For many people, this finding may now be so intuitive as to seem banal. We grew up with the refrains "just say no" to remind us not to cave to negative peer pressure and "friends don't let friends drive drunk" to remind us of the positive influence group pressure can impose. However, the strength of social influence was not at all intuitive before social psychology

[105] Straus 2006, 140.
[106] Chirot and McCauley 2006, 92.
[107] Gross 2001, 87.
[108] Straus and Lyons 2006, 71.

brought it to center-stage. Before Milgram released the results of his study, he ran a check to see whether his results would be predicted: several different groups of people, including psychiatrists, faculty members in the behavioral sciences, average middle-class citizens, and others, were asked to predict the distribution of obedience of one hundred average subjects. The vast majority predicted that only one to two percent of subjects would comply with the experimenter's demands until the end of the experiment.[109] They were very wrong: the baseline experimental condition found that 65 percent of subjects complied until the end. And even now, despite attempts both to increase awareness of the possible effects of social influence and to counter it, a recent meta-analysis of conformity has shown that significant conformity persists in the United States.[110] Social psychology, in this regard, has clear policy prescriptions: vigilance against social influence is always required.

If current social psychological accounts have so many problems, how to proceed? The way to advance the debate and to combine our knowledge of the power of the situation with the persistence of individual heterogeneity in participation and manner of participation, as well as the presence of multiple mechanisms, seems to be to focus on interaction effects: to study how different conditions have differential effects on different people. Hinton provides a clear discussion of the ways in which our thinking about individual participation in genocide should become more nuanced: different perpetrators can differ in their motivations, not only because of their own desires but also because of the ways in which they interpret the context.[111] Interactionism is not by any means new to social psychology or to political science. But when political scientists try to explain the participation of nonspecialists in collective violence against civilians as part of a larger explanation for violence, they often simplify that step to one social psychological mechanism.

Although I do not have space to do it justice here, social identity theory (for details see: Tajfel and Turner 1986, Haslam 2004, Reicher and Haslam 2006, Haslam and Reicher 2007), an interactionist theory that takes into account both individual-level differences and the situation, proves promising. In contrast to the theory of role adoption, which proposes a largely static and one-dimensional theory of group behavior (people adopt any roles to which they are assigned relatively rapidly and maintain these roles as long as situation is stable), social identity theory is dynamic and interactive. Under this theory,[112] people who belong to a privileged group are likely to self-identify with their group and act to maintain their privilege. People belonging to a less valued group, however, are predicted to have more varied identification responses, depending on the social environment, as well as more varied action responses, including either resistance or passivity. The social factors influencing the identification and behavior of the "out-group" include permeability, legitimacy, and cognitive alternatives. When the group boundaries are permeable – when out-group members have the possibility of moving into the in-group – individuals do not self-identify with the group and tend to act on their own in order to attempt to move into the in-group. Impermeable boundaries results in identification with the group and can also result in collective action in the form of organized resistance, if and only if the group divisions are seen as illegitimate and the out-group can imagine effecting change. The out-group

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[109] Milgram 1974, 31.
[110] Bond and Smith 1996.
[111] Hinton 2005, 26-31.
[112] The description that follows is a brief summary of part of Reicher and Haslam (2006).

will remain passive if it views its lower status as legitimate or if it does not possess cognitive alternatives.

Reicher and Haslam (2006), in a study designed to test various implications of social identity theory, describe two additional findings of great interest. First, effective groups, even if they are unequal, lead to the maintenance of social order, whereas the failure of groups leads to a willingness to accept a social hierarchy imposed by others: "rather than people 'naturally' preferring any given form of social order, it appears that, when group members fail to impose an order based on their own existing norms and values, they are willing to adapt those values (or to adopt new ones) in order to create a viable order rather than have no order at all" (Reicher and Haslam 2006, 32). In many ways, this argument is reminiscent of Roger Gould's *Collision of Wills*, where he argues that group conflict originates in contested or uncertain status hierarchy. Gould places emphasis on the role of group cohesion or solidarity in demonstrating the stability of unequal positions, which may correspond to Haslam and Reicher's idea of group identification when boundaries are impermeable. Finally, Haslam and Reicher note that a group follows the influence of strong personalities within the group only when these personalities reflect current group norms: "far from reflecting individual differences… differences in behaviour were actually the *product* of emergent differences in group dynamics…. it was these dynamics that brought *particular* guards and *particular* prisoners to the fore" at different point in the study (2006; italics in original; see also Haslam and Reicher 2007). Social identity theory is a vibrant subfield in which much research is being conducted. Scholars have already begun to investigate its potential to shed light on historical events. For example, Reicher et al. (2006) use social identity theory to explore why Bulgaria saved its Jews during the second World War. Social identity theory may eventually resolve some of the difficulties with the social psychological accounts of genocide described in this paper.

Conclusion

Scholars have used and continue to use overly simplistic social psychological accounts to explain mass participation in genocide. Browning cites the studies by Zimbardo and Milgram to explain how ordinary people committed mass murder.[113] Midlarsky mentions Zimbardo's study as an explanation of the cruelty of Nazis toward Jews.[114] Valentino also argues social influence is one of two factors responsible for mass participation; to support his claim, he discusses primarily the experiments by Milgram and Zimbardo.[115] Social psychological accounts of mass participation in violence have become much more advanced and much more nuanced since the 1960s and early 1970s, when Milgram and Zimbardo conducted their research. Some recent works by nonspecialists in psychology[116] have developed arguments that are partly social psychological, using much greater nuance, but many accounts by historians, political scientists, and sociologists remain out-of-date.

[113] Browning 1992.
[114] Midlarsky 2005, 280.
[115] Valentino 2004, 43-46.
[116] Hinton 2005, and implicitly in Fujii 2006

Going forward, it is important to update our use of social psychology in accounts of genocide, to avoid treating social psychological variables as unproblematic, extending experimental results to historical cases when clear evidence is lacking, privileging one mechanism over others without good reason, or leaving aside the unexplained twists in the social psychological story. A twelve-year old survivor of the Rwandan genocide states, "the real truth of the killing of the Tutsis escapes us all [victims, as well as the world] equally."[117] Social psychology is one of the few disciplines that has the potential to help us understand that which escapes victims, bystanders, and sometimes even perpetrators alike. And we have an obligation to work to understand, in the hope that understanding might aid prevention in the future. Eerily echoing Primo Levi, Jeannette Ayinkamiye, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide cited earlier in this essay, reminds us of the importance of understanding: "When there has been a genocide, there can be another, anytime in the future, in Rwanda or elsewhere, if the cause remains present and unknown."[118]

[117] cited in Hatzfeld 2000, 21; my translation.

[118] cited in Hatzfeld 2000, 33; my translation. Primo Levi, survivor of the Shoah, in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989 [1986]), states: "It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say. It can happen, and it can happen everywhere."

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