

# Toward a Dynamic Theory of Action at the Micro Level of Genocide: Killing, Desistance, and Saving in 1994 Rwanda

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## Abstract

This article is about behavioral variation in genocide. Research frequently suggests that violent behaviors can be explained by or treated as synonymous with ethnic categories. This literature also tends to pre-group actors as perpetrators, victims, or bystanders for research purposes. However, evidence that individuals cross boundaries from killing to desistance and saving throughout genocide indicates that the relationship between behaviors and categories is often in flux. I thus introduce the concept of behavioral boundary crossing to examine when and how Hutu in 1994 Rwanda aligned with the killing behaviors expected of them and when and how they did not. I analyze interviews with 31 Hutu, revealing that transactional, relational, social-psychological, and cognitive mechanisms informed individuals' behaviors during the genocide. The result is a dynamic theory of action that explains participation without homogenizing individual experience due to presumptions about behavioral and categorical alignment.

## Keywords

genocide, behavior, boundaries, action, Rwanda

This paper is about behavioral variation in genocide. Research on genocide tends to pre-group actors—as perpetrators, victims, or bystanders<sup>1</sup>—and to study each as a coherent collectivity (often identified by their ethnic category). This “groupism,” what Brubaker (2002:164) defines as the “tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis,” mires our understandings of how individuals make decisions about whether to participate in genocide by concealing variation in who kills—let alone when, why, and how. For example, the terms *Germans* and

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*Nazis* and *Hutu* and *génocidaires* are often synonyms in much research on the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide, respectively. However, evidence that individuals cross the boundary from killing to desistance and saving throughout a violent conflict indicates that the relationship between behaviors and categories is often in flux. I thus introduce the concept of *behavioral boundary crossing* as a way to overcome research problems that emerge when categories are treated as groups and behaviors are treated as fixed and unchanging.

Understanding the conditions under which we observe behavioral boundary crossing—defined here as individual defection from the expectations of a behavioral script, without any change in the categorical definition of the boundary—can improve research on what influences actions during genocides for three reasons.

First, one way to determine the mechanisms that explain a given historical episode is to identify puzzling features of that episode in systematic comparison with others (Tilly 2001). Behavioral boundary crossing (for short, behavioral variation) is one such puzzling feature of a genocide. During genocide, the pressure for individuals to align with others who share their social category is high. Desistance from or resistance to alignment can be deadly. What explains such risky behavior? Analyzing the conditions that facilitate behavioral variation can illuminate the mechanisms that inform decisions about participation during genocide more generally. Second, as Kalyvas (2003:481) notes, “the concept of group conflict or group violence (and, hence, ethnic conflict and ethnic violence, and so on) entails the total interchangeability of individuals, either as participants and perpetrators or as targets.” As a result, research that merges social categories with behaviors in genocide conceals individual experiences and obscures diverse motives and behaviors. Many participants move back and forth between killing and not killing, and they can straddle multiple social categories at once (Fujii 2009). The concept of behavioral boundary crossing brings diverse motives and behaviors to the fore, complicating theories that hinge on notions of “group conflict.” Third, pre-grouping individuals for research necessarily results in biased findings. Negative cases (times when participants choose to desist) are ignored. But without negative cases, we cannot explain why some participate in violence consistently, others cross the boundary once or more, and others refuse to participate entirely. Kalyvas (2006:48) is succinct: “Instances of violence cannot be considered independently of instances where violence does not occur.”<sup>2</sup> I thus decouple social practices from social categories to analyze participation in the 1994 Rwandan genocide and argue for a dynamic theory of action.

The dynamic theory of action asserts that transactional, relational, social-psychological, and cognitive mechanisms combined in the 1994 Rwandan genocide to produce violence at the macro level, but at the micro level, each mechanism functioned to produce behaviors on either side of the boundary and behavioral boundary crossing. As such, the theory explains participation in genocide without homogenizing individual experience by dint of race or ethnicity due to presumptions about behavioral and categorical alignment. While it is doubtful that the mechanisms identified here are exhaustive, in terms of understanding how people act in a violent conflict, this study is a beginning and an invitation. The dynamic theory of action in genocide holds the potential to extend our knowledge of the processes behind mass violence across a number of settings.

## EXPLAINING PARTICIPATION IN GENOCIDE

Scholarship on genocide has proliferated in recent years, examining mass violence as a processual, rather than a static, phenomenon (Schneiderhan 2013). Owens, Su, and Snow (2013:70) write, “there is a promising recent movement in the literature away from explaining episodes of genocide and mass killing as holistic events,” with newer works articulating

the “different processes and mechanisms at various levels of analysis.” Such research helps account for the complexity inherent in any genocide, a fundamentally sociological phenomenon that for too long remained outside the purview of mainstream social scientific research (Hagan and Raymond-Richmond 2008).

In addition, genocide scholarship is now focusing on the micro level of killing rather than macro-level state and institutional processes or elite motivations and policy decisions. Works in this vein, which I will review in further detail, emphasize obedience to authority, including the power of hierarchical and bureaucratic structures to pull civilians into participation; the construction of social identities and resulting antagonistic divisions between them; the significance of in-group norms and social pressures for drawing civilians into violence; and the dehumanization of victimized civilians that makes society-level killing possible.

The first theoretical perspective on why civilians kill in genocide stresses the power of hierarchical and bureaucratic structures, including obedience to authority. The focus is on vertical relationships. Stemming largely from Milgram’s (1974) famous study and Arendt’s (1963:252) renowned argument on “the banality of evil,” works of this kind propose that participation in genocide can largely be explained by people (often unthinkingly) following elite orders (see also Bauman 1989; Hilberg 1992; Kelman and Hamilton 1989). Owens and colleagues (2013:77) articulate further: “Seen in this light, participation is a product of formal institutional incentives, official authorization of killing, and the banal routinization of action within hierarchical institutions.” Applied to Rwanda, scholars have argued that Hutu’s unquestioning obedience to authority explains their participation in genocide (Gourevitch 1998; Khan 2001; Scherrer 2002) and that a culture of conformity in Rwanda, institutionalized through customary obligations such as *umuganda* (communal work), facilitated mass killings (Des Forges 1999).

A second approach to genocidal participation emphasizes intergroup antagonism. Scholars call attention to the social construction of ethnic, racial, or other cleavages; note the history by which intergroup divisions were developed and institutionalized; and then argue that feelings about these differences explain genocide. In the case of Rwanda, Prunier (1995:39) provides a classic example:

The racialization of consciousness [during colonialism] affected everybody. . . . As a consequence, [Hutu] began to hate all Tutsi, even those who were just as poor as they. . . . The time-bomb had been set and now it was only a question of when it would go off.

Others argue that a “monstrous” racial ideology saturated Rwandan society and made “the idea of genocide a part of life” for years before it began (Melvern 2004:7–8), that Hutu violence against Tutsi was motivated by “the scourge of racism” institutionalized during colonialism (White 2009:471), and that long-dormant “racialized prejudice” radicalized by economic and political factors explain why Hutu mobilized to kill Tutsi in 1994 (Uvin 1997:91). These arguments draw on a variety of works on other cases, most notably the Holocaust, where scholars have suggested that in-group solidarity and out-group antipathy explain civilian participation in genocide (i.e., Goldhagen 1996; Horowitz 1985; Kuper 1981). The central theme is that deep divisions and distrust, stemming from a process of ethnicization or racialization in a community’s past, must exist between social groups for genocide to occur.

A third theoretical perspective focuses on how perpetrators’ in-group dynamics influence participation. These works draw on a large body of social-psychological research (see Cialdini and Goldstein 2004) to focus on how social interactions, such as group norms and

peer pressure, explain participation in violence. For example, Fujii (2009) studies two Rwandan communes: one in the north that had been experiencing periodic civil war before the genocide and one in the central zone that saw no violence prior to 1994. Fujii explains this variation as the result of two intra-Hutu social mechanisms: the density of local ties, which facilitated opportunities for recruitment, and within-group social pressures to conform to behavioral expectations of killing. Fujii also finds that friendship ties led perpetrators to save Tutsi, especially when alone (a point to which I return later), but the main focus of her analysis is on “joiners,” people who chose to participate in killings, and the role of social ties and group pressures for motivating them to murder. Similarly, Bhavnani (2006:653) argues that reluctant Hutu perpetrators were pulled into participation as a result of “rules instituted and enforced *within* [the Hutu] ethnic group to shape the *behavior* of its members toward rivals.” Straus (2006:136) finds that participation was often the result of “face-to-face mobilization: individuals, leaders, or groups directly solicited . . . at commercial centers, on roads and pathways, or at their homes.” And McDoom (2011) determines, through a study of 3,426 residents from one Rwandan community, that participants often lived in the same neighborhood or household as other participants, suggesting intra-Hutu social influence as the driving mechanism for murder here, too. Similar arguments have been made in studies of other cases, including the former Yugoslavia (Gagnon 1995; Kuran 1998; Somer 2001), Cambodia (Hinton 1998, 2004), and the Holocaust, particularly Browning’s (1998) famous study, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. Browning concludes that the deaths of 83,000 Jews in Poland were due to “the peer group [exerting] tremendous pressure on behavior, [setting] moral norms” (p. 189).

The final approach requires the dehumanization of a victim group predating the violence (Alvarez 1997; Fein 1979; Hagan and Raymond-Richmond 2008; Hilberg 1992). Classically defined by Fein (1979, 1993) as the construction of others as outside the “moral universe of obligation,” dehumanization is said to explain genocide because those doing the killing do not see their neighbors as people anymore. Victims become a monolithic “other,” devoid of variation, which eliminates constraints that would otherwise prevent civilians from joining in mass violence. By contrast, if would-be killers perceived their neighbors’ humanity and individuality, they would not kill: They would distinguish among real threats, propaganda promoted by extremists, and people they have long known and lived beside. Expected perpetrators with this view of common humanity would also, in Kelman’s (1973:49) words, “be saddened by the death of every single person, regardless of the population group or part of the world from which he comes, and regardless of our own personal acquaintance with him.”

Research that considers dehumanization fundamental to participation in genocide frequently emphasizes genocide organizers’ promotion of negative visions of victims through propaganda. In this view, civilians join in genocide because their perspective on their neighbors is transformed. Mamdani (2001), for example, argues that identification with the Hutu Power movement, which framed the Tutsi in radio and other propaganda as external alien settlers threatening to take over the country, explains why Hutu who long coexisted with Tutsi heeded extremists’ calls to kill. Fujii (2004:99) similarly writes that “the diffusion of a genocidal norm” in Rwanda was taught through education, public speeches, and media and transformed the Rwandan moral landscape prior to genocide into one where civilians believed in “the need to exterminate an entire group of people because of some innate and immediate threat” Tutsi possessed. Other work also describes radio as holding crucial significance in Rwanda in “convincing” Hutu that their Tutsi neighbors were threatening, dangerous, and deserving of death (i.e., Chrétien et al. 1995; Kellow and Steeves 1998; Schabas 2000; Thompson 2007). Straus (2006:225), although he does not agree with the emphasis on radio,<sup>3</sup> supports the dehumanization thesis, arguing that “collective ethnic

categorization”—the transition from “seeing people of another ethnic or racial category as neighbors to seeing them as ‘enemies’ who must be killed”—was necessary for civilian participation in Rwanda’s genocide.

All of these theories provide powerful explanations. Although my review separates dominant theoretical strains within the literature, a number of scholars (e.g., Baumeister 1997; Browning 1998; Hinton 2004; McBride 2014; Straus 2006) draw attention to the fact that within any group of perpetrators, several mechanisms may be at play.<sup>4</sup> As Finkel and Straus (2012:73) note, “some individuals may have multiple reasons why they participate in violence. Others may participate at one point in time for one reason but continue at another point in time for another reason—that is, motivation changes over time.” Still, “relatively little work . . . explains internal differences across space and time” (Verdeja 2012:312), and almost no scholarship on genocide systematically focuses on negative cases at the micro level: times when individuals who otherwise kill choose not to (but see Campbell 2010<sup>5</sup>). In much of the research reviewed, it is presumed that once people kill, they are always a perpetrator. Their motivations might change, but the fact that these same people might actually *not kill* at different points in time (and even sometimes save a victimized civilian) is generally ignored. To be sure, there are exceptions: As noted, Fujii (2009) examines moments at which individuals desist from killing in her analysis focused on “joiners,” Des Forges (1999) details when resistance occurs (but does not theorize about what informs such behavior), and McDoom (2011) compares killers with non-killers, rightly recognizing that Hutu were not an undifferentiated mass but still treating “killer” as a category in and of itself. In contrast, I treat killing as one *behavior* among many that the same individual can engage in throughout the course of a genocide. Furthermore, I propose that analysis of behavioral variation helps reveal the mechanisms that underlie individual actions during genocide, mechanisms that remain obscured when social practices and social categories are treated as synonymous and it is assumed that once a perpetrator, always a perpetrator.

Considering behavioral variation complicates existing theories for the following reasons. First, if obedience to authority explains genocide, theories also need to specify the circumstances under which individuals *resist* authoritative commands. Second, if the construction of social cleavages leads to antagonism and therefore genocide, we need to explain when this construction of meaningful social categories does not work or which factors override the historical development of in-group versus out-group antagonism. Third, if in-group norms and social pressures lead to genocide, we need to explain what enables individuals to overcome these pressures and desist from killing. Fourth, if dehumanization preexists genocide, we must account for how and when individuals in a victimized population are suddenly seen as human, motivating occasional killers to stop and save them instead.

To preview the argument, I find that Hutu with economic capital were more likely to desist or save Tutsi, whereas some who lacked such resources felt compelled to enact the behavioral scripts demanded of them: killing. This is the *transactional* mechanism. The *relational* mechanism explains how connections among individuals shaped behavioral outcomes. Some Hutu with close ties to Tutsi saved them. However, proximity to other killers and experiences with direct repression mediated decisions to save or kill. The *social-psychological* mechanism asserts that in-group norms and social pressures depended on the diffusion of consequences for desistance as the consequences came closer to home over time. In places where the consequences of desistance did not diffuse throughout the population, individuals did not kill. Finally, the more that Hutu killed or participated in group killings, the more they adapted to killing and the more dehumanized their former Tutsi neighbors became to them. This transformation in self- and other-perception is explained through the *cognitive* mechanism. Prior to the cognitive shift caused by ongoing

participation, Hutu who killed only once or twice were still able to make complex distinctions among Tutsi and even try to save them. Each mechanism improves on existing work by accounting for behaviors on either side of the boundary, providing a more accurate understanding of how previously nonviolent civilians choose to behave in genocide. Combined, these mechanisms form a dynamic theory of action that explains civilians' behaviors at the micro level of genocide while accounting for the fact that killing was not one-directional, fixed, or synonymous with *Hutu* as a category. But first, what is behavioral boundary crossing, exactly?

## BEHAVIORAL BOUNDARY CROSSING

The concept of behavioral boundary crossing decouples social practices from social categories to bring variation to the center of analysis. All social boundaries display both a categorical and a behavioral dimension. Wimmer (2013:9) defines the categorical dimension as “acts of social classification and collective representation” and the behavioral dimension as “everyday networks of relationships that result from individual acts of connecting and distancing.” The categorical aspect of a boundary divides the world into social groups, whereas the behavioral aspect provides “scripts of action—how to relate to individuals classified as ‘us’ and ‘them’ under given circumstances.” This distinction is useful for understanding participation, desistance, and saving behaviors during genocide. By decoupling categories from behaviors, we can generate a dynamic theory of action that looks at how and when classes of behaviors intersect with classes of people.

According to Loveman and Muniz (2007:917), boundary crossing is “individual movement from one side of a boundary to another, without any change in the social definition of the boundary itself” (see also Alba 2005; Zolberg and Woon 1999). In much research, this definition is applied to make sense of shifts in the categorical aspect of social boundaries: “[changing] one’s individual ethnic membership or [repositioning] one’s entire ethnic category” (Wimmer 2013:58). For example, Loveman and Muniz (2007) analyze how the Puerto Rican population became whiter in the first half of the twentieth century, identifying miscegenation and changes in the social definition of whiteness as mechanisms that drove racial reclassification. Likewise, Schwartzman (2007), studying Brazilian social classification, finds that nonwhites of higher socioeconomic status tend to marry into white families and incorporate their children into the “white” category, perpetuating the relationship between race and socioeconomic status while allowing for some boundary crossing at the categorical level. Finally, Saperstein and Penner (2012) analyze two decades of longitudinal U.S. data to demonstrate that an individual’s racial category shifts in response to changes in unemployment, incarceration, and marriage. These and many other examples show how individuals change categorical membership or reposition their entire category. By contrast, I examine boundary crossing at the behavioral level: individual defection from the expectations of a behavioral script, without any change in the categorical definition of the boundary. The categorical boundary is not contested, nor is the hierarchy; what changes is an individual’s behavioral position relative to the system.

The concept of behavioral boundary crossing asserts that individuals can shift their behaviors while still identifying with the same social category. Applied to the case at hand, this means that in 1994 Rwanda, Hutu were expected to kill Tutsi because of their shared ethnic affiliation with genocide organizers. However, if Hutu did *not* kill a Tutsi, this did not make them any less of a Hutu in their own eyes. These individuals crossed the behavioral boundary separating Hutu from Tutsi without any change in the definition of group divisions during the 1994 genocide. When individuals refuse to kill in genocide, even though killing

behaviors are expected of them as members of a shared social category, this is an example of boundary crossing at the behavioral level.

Of course, shifts in behaviors from killing to desistance or saving had important—and costly—implications, due to how genocidal extremists recategorized desisters according to their own logics. Hutu resisters were labeled traitors and threatened with death for not allying with extremists. Simultaneously, to analyze defection from participation in genocide as crossing ethnic (categorical) as opposed to behavioral boundaries would be to draw on the language of extremists, as if boundary crossing implied a shift in ethnic category identification, and there is no evidence this happened. A resistant Hutu did not become less Hutu or a Tutsi. The boundary crossed was a behavioral one, thus killing cannot be synonymous with ethnic categories (in this case Hutu).<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, even though the categorical boundary between Hutu and Tutsi was highly salient at both the individual and political levels, this tells us nothing about what informed individual civilians' decisions on how to behave. In the Rwandan genocide, there was a categorical boundary and a behavioral boundary, and these were distinct. However, when ethnic categories are used as synonyms for perpetrators and victims, this distinction is obscured, and it mires our theories of participation in violence. By contrast, the concept of behavioral boundary crossing remedies these errors by not presuming behavioral alignment with ethnic categories throughout a conflict. It brings the fact of variation to the fore and contributes to genocide literature by challenging the assumption, present in much research on genocide, that killing was expected and even *predictable* for the majority of Hutu because of their shared ethnic affiliation with genocide organizers.

In turn, the concept of behavioral boundary crossing differs from the idea of violating a social norm because it asserts that the idea that Hutu *should* kill Tutsi (in other words, that killing was a condition of “Hutuness”) was not internalized among Hutu who varied in their actions throughout the genocide—killing was not yet a “social fact” for them, to use Durkheim's ([1893] 1984) definition, even though extremists aimed to make it such. While norms can be thought of as behavioral regularities or standards of conduct based on widely shared beliefs about how people should act in a given situation (Hechter and Opp 2001), the idea of behavioral boundary crossing proposes that killing was a behavioral *script*, promoted by genocidal extremists, that was not widely shared among Hutu before the genocide, nor was it internalized by them, even though extremists claimed that to be a “true Hutu,” one was expected to kill Tutsi.<sup>7</sup> Put otherwise, killing was not seen as *normal* for many Hutu at the start of genocide, nor was it caused by internalized modes of conduct or preset ideological templates prior to the onset of violence. The concept of behavioral boundary crossing brings this fact to light, which we miss when we pre-group actors and presume behavioral and categorical alignment.

Bringing behavioral variation to the fore of analysis requires explicit consideration of individuals' actions and the mechanisms that underlie their choices for how to behave. In a genocide, ruptures caused by extreme violence typically (and this was especially so in Rwanda) result in sudden institutional and political upheavals and torn relationships. In such contexts, Ermakoff (2010:544) writes, “positions can only be a starting point.” Likewise, but with reference to social movements, Jasper (2010:971) explains: “Individuals pursue a variety of goals through their interactions with others, not all of which are easily predicted from the setting itself, or from the relations they have with others.” To theorize how individuals respond to the crisis of genocide, I examine the full range of possible responses, including killing, desistance, resistance, and saving, and then specify which mechanisms explain them. This is a *dynamic* theory of action: The theory proposed here outlines the mechanisms that explain both when people *do* align with the behaviors expected of them as members of a

shared social category in a genocide as well as when they *do not*. During the 1994 Rwandan genocide, some mechanisms were more likely to foster resistance or desistance, and some were more likely to foster alignment, but each mechanism in the dynamic theory of action is able to explain behaviors on both sides of the boundary.

## A BRIEF BACKGROUND: THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE

Beginning in October 1990, Rwanda's Hutu-dominated government was engaged in on-again, off-again civil war with the mainly Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). In August 1993, the international community brokered a power-sharing deal, known as the Arusha Accords, between President Habyarimana's regime, the RPF, and Hutu moderate parties. The Rwandan genocide began one year later, on August 6, 1994, when Habyarimana was assassinated returning home to Kigali, Rwanda's capital, from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where regional leaders had encouraged him to implement the terms of the Accords. Attacked by two surface-to-air missiles, Habyarimana's plane exploded. Everyone on board was killed immediately. That same night, Hutu extremists seized control of Kigali and began to massacre political opponents and civil society leaders suspected of being open to negotiations with the RPF. They also instigated a genocidal campaign targeting all Tutsi for elimination, regardless of political affiliation or status. By the time genocide ended 100 days later, approximately 800,000 Tutsi had been massacred in Rwanda. According to Barnett (2003:2), this amounted to "333 1/3 deaths per hour, 5 1/2 per minute."

At the macro level, the Rwandan genocide unfolded as follows: In prefects throughout the country, local leaders held meetings, often with authorities from Kigali, to give orders. They told citizens their country was at war, but it was a different war than any they had faced before. Tutsi *within* Rwanda were the enemy, no matter their status. The RPF threatened to take over Rwanda and reinstall Tutsi rule. Under Belgian colonialism, Tutsi alone had served as administrative officials; now, Hutu authorities explained to civilians that no Tutsi could be trusted. All Tutsi were described as *ibytso*, "actual or potential collaborators with the RPF," and as enemies who must be killed (Prunier 1995:138). This term was also applied to Hutu moderates targeted for not allying with genocidal authorities.<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes in these local meetings, authorities would kill Tutsi in front of civilians or direct individual Hutu to immediately begin pillaging and attacking their neighbors' property. Few meetings did not have an important person from Kigali present to lend legitimacy to these orders (Bhavnani and Backer 2000). One perpetrator interviewed by Straus (Lyons and Straus 2006:87) recounted the start of genocide in his prefecture vividly:

Before the president's death, we had no problems. . . . The killings reached our sector because of a businessman, in collaboration with the burgomaster. They were the ones who created divisions in the population. . . . They held a meeting to separate people. They said that the country was being taken over by the Tutsis and that the Hutus were finished. They said that we had to defend ourselves. There were Tutsis who worked in the hospital and a Tutsi pastor. After this meeting, the businessmen and the burgomaster told people to go and hunt these Tutsis.

This respondent killed four Tutsi during the 1994 genocide and helped lead one attack against others. He also had two Tutsi sisters-in-law.

While his recollections of peaceful relations with Tutsi prior to the genocide might seem like rosy nostalgia, data indicate that his experience was common: According to Newbury (1998), an estimated 20 percent to 25 percent of Rwandans can claim to have both Hutu and

Tutsi great-grandparents, and in Straus's countrywide sample of 210 genocide perpetrators in Rwanda, nearly 70 percent of Hutu had a Tutsi family member (Straus 2006:214–15). Inter-marriage is typically seen as an indicator of relational closeness and a mitigating factor for genocide (Campbell 2009; Carnegie 2013; Chirot and McCauley 2010). Moreover, nearly all Rwandans shared the same religion (Roman Catholic), spoke the same language (Kinyarwanda), and lived in shared communities. The intimacy of the genocide in Rwanda has often puzzled scholars.

## METHODS

This article is based primarily on two full sets of transcribed interviews contained in *Intimate Enemy: Images and Voices of the Rwandan Genocide* by Robert Lyons and Scott Straus (2006) and *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak* by Jean Hatzfeld (2005).<sup>9</sup> It also includes partially transcribed interviews from *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* by Lee Ann Fujii (2009). In all three works, the Rwandans interviewed were local-level killers during the genocide: “farmers, fishermen, and carpenters from all around Rwanda who made the genocide possible” (Lyons and Straus 2006:17).<sup>10</sup> Combined, there are 31 interviews.

This small sample size cannot be considered statistically representative. As a result, I follow Small's (2009) guidelines for generating logical (good) hypotheses and making empirical statements when faced with the problem of statistical generalization. Specifically, I treated these data as a set of 31 cases, which Small (2009:25) suggests is “probably more effective [than sampling logic] when asking how or why questions about processes unknown before the start of the study.” I conducted analyses using the extended case method and a variant on sequential interviewing, with saturation as the ultimate aim (Small 2009). Once the 31 cases yielded patterned findings with similar mechanisms at play and no new or surprising information, I considered findings to be valid ontological statements about mechanisms informing behaviors in genocide that can (and ought to be) further verified with future comparative work. Rather than emphasizing generalizability, I highlight behaviors that are frequently overlooked in studies of genocide to generate a dynamic theory of action that accounts for variation when explaining civilians' actions.

Moreover, I triangulated interview data with the full set of reports from Human Rights Watch (HRW) concerning violence in Rwanda from 1990 to 1995 and with judicial trial transcripts from the International Criminal Tribunal from Rwanda (ICTR). I compared these accounts to ensure reliability and validity. If a respondent's statement deviated significantly from other testimonies or HRW and ICTR reports, I rejected it as an outlier from more general patterns of resistance, desistance, and participation in genocide.

I systematically coded all interviews, HRW reports, and ICTR documents using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. I derived patterns from data through grounded analysis, with specific attention paid to when, under what circumstances, and with what motivations (if stated) perpetrators participated in or resisted genocide or described others' behaviors. I considered self-reports and reports about others' actions as valid for considering boundary crossing during genocide. Notably, many who shifted stances from perpetrator to rescuer during the genocide were killed and cannot provide firsthand accounts of boundary crossing. Secondhand accounts are essential to give those actors voice.

Additionally, I spent three months in Rwanda in 2009, interviewing prisoners incarcerated as a result of their participation in genocide and subsequent escape to Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These prisoners had been recently returned (sometimes forcibly) and repatriated to Rwanda as part of a government-mandated demobilization and

reintegration process (Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Program, or RDRP). At the time I conducted these interviews, respondents were undergoing intense training as part of the RDRP. I do not include my own interviews as a data source due to these respondents' unique situation, which precluded formal study participation under institutional review board standards. These accounts simply helped inform my reading of the other data.

Finally, a note about mechanisms—what I identify as the producer of behavioral outcomes in this study. Research on mechanisms and their function is the subject of much debate in sociology (e.g., Gross 2009, 2010; Hedström and Swedberg 1998; Stinchcombe 2005; Tilly 2001). The dynamic theory of action understands mechanisms as social events or processes that underlie decisions about actions. Following Tilly (1986; as discussed in Krinsky and Mische 2013), I suggest that mechanisms unfold together but at different points and different speeds. This unevenness explains part of the dynamism inherent in the theory, and it remedies problems with past work that suggests motivations for participation in genocide function in uniform ways across swaths of a population identified by ethnic category. The concatenation of mechanisms identified here—transactional, relational, social psychological, and cognitive—explains the phenomenon of the Rwandan genocide while accounting for behavioral variation at the micro level of individual action.

## MECHANISMS AT THE MICRO LEVEL OF GENOCIDE

### *Transactions: Economic Capital and Agency*

The first finding to emerge among respondents' recounting of the genocide in their communities is that economic capital (defined here as capital that is immediately and directly convertible into money or goods such as property [Bourdieu 1986]) enabled some Hutu to refuse participation in violence. When Hutu desisted from killing Tutsi by drawing on economic resources, they were motivated by a transactional mechanism: the exchange of economic capital for *agency* in the highly constrained setting of genocide. Consider the story of Frédéric, interviewed by Fujii (2008:585–88). Frédéric joined Hutu on patrols during which Tutsi were attacked, but he claims he never personally killed. Frédéric describes having had past conflicts with Jude, a local organizer of genocide in his commune who came to power at the start of the conflict. When Jude ordered him to join the MRND, Frédéric recalls telling Jude “he shouldn't make my choices for me.” Jude threatened Frédéric, who then paid Jude 7,000 Rwandan Francs to leave him alone. A wealthy man, Frédéric drew on his economic capital to resist participating in genocide.

Likewise, three Hutu men interviewed by Hatzfeld (2005) described how they and others sometimes engaged in economic transactions to avoid killing without suffering the consequences of not behaving how a Hutu was expected to act. Alphonse explained, “For someone caught cheating, it could be serious. He had to pay a fine determined by the leaders. . . . A cash fine, for example two thousand Rwandan Francs or even more” (Hatzfeld 2005:72). Cheating, of course, meant refusing to kill in this context. Fulgence corroborated, “Anyone who sneaked off behind his house [to avoid participating] was denounced by a neighbor and punished with a fine” (Hatzfeld 2005:72). Pio added, “Whoever got caught shirking was punished with a fine. Ordinarily it cost two thousand francs, but it depended on the seriousness” (Hatzfeld 2005:73). Supporting these statements, Marie-Chantal, a Tutsi, compared those who could afford to avoid killing with those who could not: “The farmers were not rich enough, like the well to-do city people, to buy themselves relief from the killing. Some doctors and teachers in Kigali paid their servants or their employees so as not to dirty themselves” (Hatzfeld 2005:74).

In the monumental HRW report "*Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda*," Alison Des Forges frequently details the significance of economic capital as a resource that some Hutu mobilized to help Tutsi survive the genocide. Describing one example in which two militiamen came upon a Tutsi girl who had been pushed into a hole by a sergeant who intended to kill her later, Des Forges (1999:450) writes,

She stayed in the large hole near the barrier until about 11 a.m., when another soldier came by and greeted her. She was too exhausted to do more than make a gesture of acknowledgement. This angered the soldier, who said, "You see how they are! I'm going to kill her." But as he took aim, one of the militia, who knew Marthe, intervened. . . . [He] told the soldier, "Why are you killing this girl instead of going to find the Inkotanyi and fighting them? You shouldn't kill this girl. There's no point in that." He pushed the soldier away and gave him 5,000 Rwandan francs (about US\$25) to leave.

Des Forges (recounted in Verwimp 2005:319–20) puts it succinctly: "During this period when the guy with the gun was the one who gave the orders, the poor and weak—who had no way to get a gun—had precarious little means of defense except to join the strong." In the 1994 Rwandan genocide, economic capital became a resource some could draw on to avoid participation, and transactional mechanisms—here, the exchange of economic capital for resistance or desistance in the context of extreme violence—informed individual decisions about how to act. Those with capital had options and opportunities to cross the boundary from killing to desistance. Others did not.

A large body of work in sociology argues that individuals' structural positions influence the resources available to them (Bourdieu 1977, 1986; Burt 1982; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992). Furthermore, capital in one form (e.g., economic) can sometimes be converted to capital in another (e.g., political), such that one's position in a field of social relations is improved (Bourdieu 1986). Not surprisingly, economic transactions inform the extent and conditions under which actors can exert agency when faced with political or social constraints, even in a genocide. In the examples from Fujii and Hatzfeld, individuals marshaled economic resources to elevate their position in relation to genocide organizers and avoid participation in violence. Killing was expected of them as Hutu, but economic transactions allowed them to deviate.

The significance of transactional mechanisms for shaping behaviors in genocide also sheds light on the puzzle of the relationship between poverty and violence. Much research finds that poor countries are more prone to conflict and poor people are more likely to participate in violence (Collier et al. 2003; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Elbadawi and Sambanis 2000, 2002; Fearon 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Stewart 2002). Per capita income is one of the best-known predictors of violent internal conflict. However, existing research offers few systematic accounts of the micro-channels through which high poverty levels affect the variability of violent conflict (Justino 2009). Guichaoua (2010:16) reminds us that "the observation that the poor have a greater propensity to join armed groups does not tell us if they fought out of the expectation that they will achieve material benefits, out of grievance, or out of some other confounding factor." One assumption is that low per capita income correlates with large group-based grievances (i.e., Gurr 1970; Scott 1976) and low economic opportunity costs to fighting (i.e., poorer people are more likely to participate because they have less to lose and more to gain). Interviews with Hutu who both killed and saved Tutsi in the Rwandan genocide, or who observed others trying to resist participation at some points while killing at others, indicate another possible

mechanism: Sometimes poverty means not having the resources to desist. Economic resources equip actors to exert agency and opt out of participation in the highly constrained setting of genocide. The transactional mechanism links economic capital to behavioral outcomes in genocide.

### *Relations: Social Networks and Spatial Proximity*

Personal ties and relationships often influenced when and for whom Rwandan civilians were willing to utilize their resources. Given the high risk of refusal, civilians were unlikely to desist from participation unless they were asked to kill someone with whom they were close—a family member, friend, or neighbor. Des Forges (1999:14) explains, “Hutu who protected Tutsi ordinarily helped those to whom they were linked by the ties of family, friendship, or obligation for past assistance.”

At the same time, the decision to risk desistance in the Rwandan genocide was also heavily mediated by the context in which civilian Hutu found themselves. In particular, geographic proximity to others participating in killings made it less likely Hutu would save Tutsi, even when the Tutsi in question was a relative or friend. As a result, the mechanism undergirding behaviors in this case is a relational one—what Tilly (2001:572) defines as “alternations of connections among people, groups, and interpersonal networks.” Here I add that the alternations, at least in this case, are dependent on the immediate context and how that context shapes the hierarchy of relevant relations at any given moment. In other words, social ties were important for pulling people away from violence *and* for pulling people into it. In turn, social closeness alone is insufficient for explaining behavioral boundary crossing from killing to desistance or saving in genocide. What matters is social closeness *as mediated by the immediate context*, a point made by Fujii (2008:568), who studies “joiners” and finds that in Rwanda, leaders used kinship ties to target male relatives for recruitment into genocide but that “which ties became salient depended on the context.” Like Fujii, I find that spatial proximity was a confounding factor in the final actions of sympathetic Hutu.

The relationship between social networks and spatial proximity is evident in testimonies by Rwandans who killed people close to them as well as testimony by Rwandans who saved people when they were physically distant from the authorities in charge of genocide. One respondent interviewed by Straus (Lyons and Straus 2006:41) described killing his brother:

My older brother had a Tutsi wife. She was there [at a church] with their children. When he went there, the head of the parish asked for food and beer. He went to get them at a center. But while he was at the center, the burgomaster came and said, “Where are you going with those things?” When my brother explained that the priest had asked for food for the refugees, the burgomaster found the killers and took them to kill my older brother. The group did this. But my brother was not dead; he was in agony. The priest came to see what had happened. The priest then went back to the church to get a car to bring my older brother to a health center. I went to see him there. When I arrived, the burgomaster said, “You, you have brought food for the Tutsis. So that you do not begin again, you take a machete and you have to decapitate your brother.” I refused. The burgomaster asked the reservist to force me to decapitate my brother and said if I refused the reservist would kill me. The reservist took me and gave me a machete. He put a gun behind my head and said, “If you do not cut, I will fire.” So I cut. That is my crime.

Likewise, a respondent named Olivier, who Fujii (2008:594) describes as “every bit the willing executioner,” explained “it was impossible [to save someone during the genocide] because when you would say something about saving someone, [the other *Interahamwe*] would tell you to kill him yourself.” And yet, Olivier saved a Tutsi during the genocide. The boy was his neighbor, and Olivier was alone when he saw him trying to escape the violence. Olivier pointed the boy toward a path to safety. When asked to explain, Olivier said he acted this way because “I ran into [the boy] when I was alone.” He later added, “When you ran into someone when you were in a big group, it was hard to save someone.”

Of course, as mentioned earlier, McDoom (2011) finds that participants were more likely than nonparticipants to live in the same household and within close proximity of other killers, and Bhavnani (2006) argues that reluctant Hutu perpetrators were pulled into violence as a result of within-group norms that compelled them to join. Both scholars focus on what they call “perpetrators,” and McDoom contrasts his subjects with Hutu who did no killing at all. However, the relational mechanism asserts that even among people who killed at some points in time but desisted or resisted at others, social ties as mediated by spatial proximity to extremists powerfully shaped ensuing behaviors.

As a result, and as with high-risk mobilization more generally, intimate relationships and face-to-face interactions are crucial for informing how civilians choose to act in genocide. Kinship and close friendships can draw people into dangerous mobilization (Loveman 1998; McAdam 1986; Morris 1984; Wickham-Crowley 1992) or away from it (Zwerman and Steinhoff 2012). Research on gang violence reveals that network processes play an important role in violence, and these processes are influenced by geographic factors (Papachristos, Hureau, and Braga 2013)—just as these examples from the 1994 Rwandan genocide show. Relative geographic isolation increases the likelihood that someone who has already killed will refrain from killing again when face to face with a target. In fact, they might even help their would-be victim, as Olivier did. Studying behavioral boundary crossing further validates Fujii’s (2009) argument that social closeness is insufficient for explaining when and why people desist from violence or engage in saving behaviors, whereas the geographic proximity of individuals to others who might kill them for not participating heavily influences individual actions during genocide.<sup>11</sup> The relational mechanism proposes that social networks are mediated by situational factors to explain behavioral outcomes in violent contexts.

### *Social Psychology: Diffusion of Punishment and the Passage of Time*

The third mechanism influencing whether and when individual Hutu crossed the behavioral boundary from killing to desistance or rescue and vice versa is social psychological: It is social in that individuals determine their stances of alignment with or against the expected behavioral script of Hutu through observations of local authorities and interactions with their peers; it is psychological because it alters individual beliefs about how to act (even if the individual in question does not align ideologically with extremists’ framing of the conflict). The consequences of not participating in violence moved closer to home and increased in severity as Hutu extremists traversed the state, and individuals thus became more likely to align with behavioral scripts promoted by extremists. When Hutu moderates, including authorities, were killed for refusing to participate in the violence, their visible punishment informed how other Hutu acted. In communities where moderate authorities remained in power and diffusion of punishment for not participating in genocide did not occur, individuals did not join in the killing.

Des Forges’s (1999) description is indicative of how the consequences of refusing to participate spread throughout Rwanda and influenced some Hutus’ decisions to conform to the

killing behaviors expected of them. In central and southern Rwanda, the MRND had little support before genocide began. Many Hutu initially refused to attack Tutsi. Later, moderate political authorities were replaced with extremists who began publicly harassing, fining, threatening, and destroying the property of resisters, and eventually killing them, too. These extremists policed the boundary separating Hutu from Tutsi and prevented crossing behaviors through increasingly violent punishment. Des Forges (1999:167) explains:

Authorities and political leaders defined aiding Tutsi as helping the “enemy.” In many places, they specifically ordered Hutu not to assist Tutsi and threatened them with death or other punishment if they did so. Hutu who disobeyed such orders and were caught often had to pay fines. In some cases, the protectors, like those whom they were trying to protect, were raped, beaten, or killed. These cases were widely known in local communities and often led other Hutu to refuse or end their assistance to Tutsi.

In this example, we see the early efforts by some Rwandans to avoid killing through economic transactions, as detailed earlier. However, we also see how witnessing a similarly situated peer killed for desistance or resistance exerted a powerful social-psychological effect: It caused would-be or past protectors to join in the violence regardless of how they felt about killing Tutsi at the start of the war.

The case of Butare versus Giti demonstrates how diffusion of punishment for resistance led Hutu to alter their actions and cross behavioral boundaries. Butare remained peaceful for two weeks after President Habyarimana was assassinated and was seen by many as a safe haven for Tutsi due to its high levels of integration pre-genocide (about 25 percent of the population was Tutsi) and its status as a way station en route to Burundi. Des Forges (1999:337) writes that this made Butare a target: “For leaders of the genocide, [Butare] was a troublesome obstacle to completing the national campaign to exterminate Tutsi.” Once extremists took over the commune, violence unfolded rapidly. First, Prefect Habyalimana was killed. He had been trying to calm people in Butare and encouraged subordinates to prevent violence throughout the prefecture. Second, moderate leaders who had not yet been killed shifted their stance and began to openly advocate for genocide. Third, Interim President Théoneste Sindikubwabo accused Butare residents of indifference toward the war and told them to “get out of the way and let us work,” a code used to incite killings throughout the genocide (ICTR-99-47). Fourth, outside agitators were brought in to begin massacres. They targeted Tutsi and Hutu who refused to participate. Finally, Hutu were organized by mayors, militia, and communal policemen to kill. Although many Hutu resisted killing earlier in the genocide, once they saw others attacked for trying to protect Tutsi, they were more likely to participate. Des Forges (1999:367) writes of the murder of the widow of a former Rwandan ruler and her family:

The news that this gracious lady and others from her household had been taken away by soldiers in the back of a pickup truck spread rapidly and alarmed Tutsi and all others who opposed the genocide. They concluded that if soldiers dared to seize even this revered person, then no one was safe.

Former resisters decided to join the violence after witnessing authorities and peers kill or be killed. This shift in local authorities’ orders, as well as the use of violence against moderates, “flipped the script,” so to speak, and changed the expected behavior of Hutu from resistance to killing. It also heightened Hutus’ awareness of the costs of resistance with concrete examples, making it more likely they would join.

By contrast, in Giti, most Tutsi survived the genocide. No group massacres occurred. Unlike Butare, extremists never entered the area to instigate the violence its leaders argued against. Giti's burgomaster explained that violence could have occurred had "neighboring invaders" entered the commune, but because they stayed away and RPF opposition forces conquered Giti so quickly, he was able to prevent mass killings (Bangwanubusa 2009:138). A former deputy governor in Giti recalled, "leaders did not give a go-ahead" (Bangwanubusa 2009:137), and the burgomaster traveled throughout the region to deter attacks (Des Forges 1999:385). There were also no prominent displays of genocide or violent targeting of resisters like what happened in Butare. This comparison shows how important diffusion of violence *against Hutu* was for influencing how they observed and understood the consequences of desistance or resistance. It also reveals the significance of timing: In contrast to theories that treat Hutu as a mass prepared to kill before the start of war because they shared the same social category as extremists, the examples of Butare and Giti show how, to mobilize some Hutu for violence, extremists had to seize control of local communes (which they did throughout the course of the war), promote a genocidal script, and tie violent consequences to refusal to align with this script.

In Giti, Hutu civilians and authorities who promoted alternative scripts did not suffer consequences for resistance, whereas in Butare, individuals' decisions to kill were a reaction to the perceived consequences of nonparticipation. The violence in Butare was not only physical, it was social and psychological: It indicated to past desisters that they were expected to kill and that continuing to try and save Tutsi would likely result in their own death. In this case, opportunities for opting out decreased as levels of violence increased and came closer to home. This had a direct impact on how, when, and why some Hutu participated in genocide, while the lack of diffusion of punishment in Giti facilitated continued resistance. The relational mechanism explains behaviors as the outcome of interactions between social networks and spatial proximity to extremists, whereas the social-psychological mechanism is about learning and modifying behaviors through perceiving others' actions and their consequences.

### *Cognition: Adaptation and Combat Socialization*

Finally, timing mattered for shaping the likelihood of alignment through unfolding processes of combat socialization and in turn dehumanization in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Many scholars argue that victimized civilians need to be dehumanized for perpetrators to kill them (e.g., Browning 1998; Fein 1979, 1993, 2007; Gamson 1995; Hagan and Raymond-Richmond 2008; Kelman 1973; Kelman and Hamilton 1989; Opatow 1990). Defining dehumanization in opposition to "identity"—a perception of victimized civilians as individuals "independent and distinguishable from others" (Kelman 1973:48)—these works look to the presence of racial epithets in state media prior to genocide, as well as propaganda describing victims as animals or insects, for evidence that dehumanization has taken place (Haslam 2006). In Rwanda especially, scholars have argued that the radio station Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) played a critical role in dehumanizing Tutsi before the genocide, leading to the "diffusion of a genocidal norm" (Fujii 2004) such that killings of Tutsi by Hutu became possible.

It is, of course, not wrong to note the significance of boundary-making projects that aim to change the content of ethnic categories (what Barth [1969:15] calls "the cultural stuff" of ethnic boundaries) and how people understand what it means to identify with one category over another. In Rwanda, as many have noted, Hutu extremists made major efforts to identify and then classify Tutsi as subhuman, evil others threatening to take over the country.

However, the mere presence of dehumanizing propaganda and racializing discourse reveals little about how this discourse was received by Hutu who long lived beside and with Tutsi. In fact, interviews with Hutu indicate that in the beginning, they did not see their Tutsi peers as dehumanized others. Even after extremists entered their communes and mobilized them to kill, their first few times participating in violence were horrific. These Hutu fully recognized the humanness of victimized Tutsi and struggled to cope with the consequences of their behaviors. Some even participated in killings to save Tutsi with whom they were close; this indicates that the risk analysis of nonparticipation was a complex decision-making process, heavily influenced by an understanding that Tutsi were not a monolithic group of dehumanized others. Theories of dehumanization presume that before killing began, the social boundary separating Hutu from Tutsi was already high and perpetrator and victim groups had already formed. Participants' recollections do not square with this idea.

Consider the following quote from one of Straus's respondents in reply to a question about how the genocide unfolded in his commune (Lyons and Straus 2006:66–67):

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

Another of Straus's respondents explained (pp. 60–61): “As many of us had asked for our friends to be pardoned, [the authorities] gave us a condition, for these people to be left alone, they had to kill the others on the list.”

In both examples, victims were seen and perceived as individuals. The killers engaged in complex decision-making processes about how they would participate given the pressures to do so. Early in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, Tutsi were not thought of as outside the “universe of obligation.” Instead, Hutu made choices about when to kill and when to save. Only over time did they stop perceiving their actions as murder and their neighbors as equal. This implies that a cognitive shift took place whereby Hutu individuals adapted to the action of killing and peers became dehumanized “others.”

Jean-Baptiste's description of his first time killing a Tutsi is indicative of how participating in the genocide transformed Hutu civilians' perception of themselves and their peers. Jean-Baptiste felt he had to commit murder to save his wife, also a Tutsi. Because of his intermarriage, he was threatened: “Jean-Baptiste, if you want to save the life of your wife Spéciose Mukandahunga, you have to cut this man right now. He is a cheater! Show us that you're not that kind.” Jean-Baptiste described the scene as crowded and hectic: “Someone blocked me from behind and shoved me forward with both elbows.” After striking a first blow with his machete, Jean-Baptiste recoiled in horror: “When I saw the blood bubble up, I jumped back a step.” Afterward, he said, “I drew back. . . . I never looked back in that unhappy direction.” Yet, “[l]ater on, we got used to killing without so much dodging around” (Hatzfeld 2005:23). Jean-Baptiste described how “at first killing was obligatory; afterward we got used to it. We became naturally cruel. We no longer needed encouragement or fines to kill, or even order or advice” (Hatzfeld 2005:74). Similarly, one of Straus's respondents (Lyons and Straus 2006:64), a Hutu with a Tutsi aunt and sister-in-law, killed three Tutsi during the genocide and said, “As the days passed, people became increasingly habituated. We were no longer afraid, like in the beginning.”

Hutu who killed during the Rwandan genocide repeatedly describe this process, saying things like “man can get used to killing, if he kills on and on. He can even become a beast

without noticing it” (Alphonse [Hatzfeld 2005:49]) and “we became more and more cruel, more and more calm, more and more bloody. But we did not see that we were becoming more and more killers. The more we cut, the more cutting became child’s play to us” (Fulgence [Hatzfeld 2005:50]). Similar to research on wartime violence, Hoover Green (2010) and R. M. Wood (2010) argue that the experience of participating in combat can result in in-group interests overriding preexisting individual preferences. Combatant memoirs by a boy soldier from Sierra Leone and a Vietnam War veteran likewise report the harrowing effects of using and witnessing violence: habituation to killing and dehumanization of the victimized group (Beah 2007; O’Brien 1999). In 1994 Rwanda, the more one killed, the more one became a killer. Participation in violence, in contrast to the social-psychological mechanism of observing the consequences of *nonviolence*, powerfully transformed how Hutu felt about killing and how they perceived their Tutsi neighbors.

These findings contradict much research that argues for the necessity of dehumanization prior to genocidal participation, treating the boundedness of perpetrators and victims as a precondition to violence. Such work argues that the collective categorization of victimized civilians explains why people with no preexisting history of violence are able to partake in mass killings (Straus 2006). Furthermore, many researchers argue that victimized civilians must be considered outside the “moral universe of obligation” for genocidal violence to take place (Fein 1979, 1993; Hagan and Raymond-Richmond 2008; Waller 2007). However, research presented here shows how dehumanization of victimized civilians is actually an *outcome* of ongoing participation in violence, as is adaptation to the experience of killing itself. Ignace, interviewed by Hatzfeld (2005:47), was blunt: “[The Tutsi] had become people to throw away, so to speak. They no longer were what they had been, and neither were we.”

Testimony from civilians suggests that the act of killing is harrowing and difficult for those who have never killed before. It also suggests that killing does not spring from but rather *results* in the strength of a boundary dividing “us” and “them” over time. Social closure becomes high; behavioral boundary crossing decreases. Hutu may have been uncomfortable with their new role as killers in the beginning, even shifting position back and forth in an attempt to save Tutsi with whom they were close, but through the process of killing, they came to align with the genocidal agenda. As Hutu killed more, they challenged the behavioral script expected of them less, adapting to and internalizing this repertoire as part of what it meant to be a Hutu in the genocide. The cognitive mechanism made Hutu desistance and saving less likely over time, but we miss this process when we presume alignment with expected killing behaviors preexists the violence rather than emerges as a result of participation in it.

## DISCUSSION: TOWARD A DYNAMIC THEORY OF ACTION AT THE MICRO LEVEL OF GENOCIDE

Many scholars of the 1994 Rwandan genocide note how Hutu civilians’ responses to extremists’ calls for violence were variegated. Still, most research assumes that Rwandans were organized into perpetrator and victim groups even before the genocide began. Much work also presumes a neat overlap between these behavior categories and the categories of Hutu and Tutsi. While it is true that a very strong categorical boundary was erected in 1994 Rwanda by the genocidal government, which separated Hutu as rightful citizens of the country and Tutsi (and moderate Hutu) as enemies and infiltrators, this categorical division tells us nothing about the mechanisms underlying individual Rwandans’ behaviors in relation to this boundary during the genocide.

Likewise, research on ethnic boundaries calls for scholars to “avoid the Herdian fallacy of assuming communitarian closure, cultural difference, and shared identity” (Wimmer 2013:41) when studying the relationship between categories and mechanisms of boundary formation and dissolution. In turn, recent work examines processes of boundary crossing but typically focuses on crossing at the categorical level. By contrast, I introduce the concept of *behavioral boundary crossing* to theorize behavioral, not categorical, variation.

An extension of an already powerful conceptual tool-kit, the notion of behavioral boundary crossing builds on ethnic boundaries literature by asserting that in parallel with the notion of categorical boundary crossing, individuals can and sometimes do cross behavioral boundaries while maintaining their same social identification. In a violent setting, this means individuals will shift from violent to nonviolent actions (and vice versa) across different contexts and over time without any change in how they identify categorically.

In turn, although much research on genocide suggests that behaviors can be explained by, or at least treated as synonymous with, ethnic categories, this study extends concepts from the ethnic boundaries literature to suggest that one way to better understand the diverse mechanisms pulling people into participation in mass violence is to *also* study what pulls them away from it. By clarifying the mechanisms that explain behavioral boundary crossing from killer to non-killer and sometimes rescuer in a genocide, we can better understand what informs individual actions in violent contexts.

Combined, the mechanisms identified here—transactional, relational, social psychological, and cognitive—form a dynamic theory of action that explains when and how individual Hutu in the Rwandan genocide were likely to align with the behaviors expected of them as Hutu (i.e., killing) and when and how they were likely to desist. Each mechanism explains behaviors on either side of the behavioral boundary said to separate “true Hutu” in the Rwandan genocide from “traitors” who would not kill. This is what makes the theory a dynamic one. The first two mechanisms were more likely to enable saving, desistance, or rescue earlier in the conflict; the latter two were more likely to foster increased killing behaviors over time.

The first mechanism is *transactional*. Early in the genocide, sympathetic Hutu endeavored to save Tutsi through economic transactions with extremists. This exchange of capital provided agency and allowed individuals to evade participation in violence. Hutu were more likely to save Tutsi or refuse killing when they had capital to protect them from extremists policing behavioral boundaries. By contrast, Hutu lacking such resources were more likely to align with the killing behaviors expected of them, as Tutsi survivor Marie-Chantal described.

The second mechanism is *relational*. Hutu were more likely to risk punishment for desistance to save Tutsi with whom they were close, especially if there were no witnesses to report their “betrayal.” When witnesses *were* present, however, Hutu were more likely to kill, particularly when faced with the threat of being killed if they acted otherwise. The relational mechanism explains behavioral outcomes as the result of interactions between social networks and spatial proximity to extremists. Killing versus not killing is caused here by shifting connections among various people and their relevant networks.

The third mechanism is *social psychological*. This mechanism asserts that through the diffusion of violent punishment for rescuers, as well as the murder of moderate authorities who refused to join in violence, Hutu became more likely to cross the boundary from desistance to killing. Where moderates remained in power and resisters witnessed no negative consequences for such behaviors, genocide did not take place.

The fourth mechanism is *cognitive*. As time went on and reluctant Hutu were pulled into participation in genocide, they adapted to the experience of killing, and a kind of “combat

socialization” took place. Many had never killed another human being, let alone witnessed mass violence. The cognitive effects of participating in group massacres were such that the more individuals participated in violence, the more they dissociated from their actions and began to perceive victimized civilians as “people to throw away,” to recall Ignace’s description. Earlier in the genocide, Hutu were able to make complex decisions about whom to kill and whom to save. The cognitive mechanism explains their adaptation to killing. Through increased participation in genocide, Tutsi were no longer peers, and killing was no longer murder.

Of course, previous research has emphasized some of these mechanisms (most notably, Fujii [2009] stresses what I call the relational mechanism). However, the mechanisms identified here as leading to a dynamic theory of action improve on past work by identifying how people choose to act in a genocide both when they do and do not align with the behaviors expected of them. Most previous research identifies what leads to killing only through the pre-categorization of individuals into the group “perpetrator,” which muddies our theories of behavior in genocides because individuals sometimes shift stances throughout a single violent conflict. Our theories ought to reflect this fact.

Finally, micro-level variation in acts of genocide exist in many other cases. In the Armenian Genocide (Hovannisian 1992), the Holocaust (Browning 1998; Ermakoff 2012; Gushee 2003), and mass violence against Bosnian Muslims following the breakup of Yugoslavia (Hukanovic 1996), scholars have identified behavioral boundary crossing among so-called perpetrators. The dynamic theory of action is thus consequential not only for theory but also for political and policy reasons. Knowing what prompts a person to kill or not kill as a genocide unfolds has powerful implications for intervention. Crucially, if we wish to understand how intervention in genocide is possible, we need more work on how, when, and why people choose *not* to kill when killing is expected (and even sometimes demanded) of them. If one goal of scholarship on genocide is to understand the mechanisms leading to mass violence such that it can be prevented or halted in the future, we must untangle not only why people join in genocidal violence but also how and when they might stop. In quelling violence, knowledge can be a powerful weapon.

## NOTES

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1. This tripartite category comes from one of Hilberg’s (1992) classic works on the Holocaust, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945*.
2. Straus (2012:556) makes a similar argument on the need to study negative cases at the macro level, “cases that from a theoretical viewpoint have a high probability of genocide, but that nonetheless have a different outcome.” Verdeja (2012) likewise argues for increased attention to cases in which genocide does not occur even when it is expected to.
3. Straus (2007) analyzes the exposure, timing, and content of RTL messages combined with newspaper interviews and negates the argument that dehumanizing messages about Tutsi broadcast through Rwandan media were critical for motivating killers in the genocide. First, Straus finds that less than

10 percent of Rwandans owned radio transmitters in 1994, and broadcast range had little reach in rural areas. By contrast, genocide happened in every Rwandan prefecture, and 90 percent to 95 percent of the population was rural. Second, the broadcast range of radio in 1994 did not correspond to temporal variations in violence, demonstrating that even in locations where radio access was possible, it did not instigate violence in the ways typically described. Third, Straus systematically analyzes the content of RTLTM messages and finds that in the years leading to genocide, “broadcasts present Rwandan history in a tendentious, nationalist, and antirebel fashion, often accompanied by negative commentary about Tutsi behavior.” When the genocide was in its “low” phase, that is, minimal participation and killings at the local level, broadcasts only made a call to arms. In the “high genocide period,” when the majority of Tutsi were killed, there is “little evidence of direct calls for violence against Tutsi. In fact, on several occasions, announcers or interviewers urge listeners not to attack civilians; they also advocate negotiation with the rebels” (p. 624). Straus concludes that racist messages on the radio minimally affected civilian participation in genocide.

4. Likewise, recent research on the micro-dynamics of non-genocidal violence examines variation in how people participate. This includes variation in why people join in armed conflict against the state (Bosi 2012; Bosi and Della Porta 2012; Viterna 2006; 2013), variation in levels of violence against civilians during civil war (Balcells 2010; Kalyvas 2006; Lyall 2009; R. M. Wood 2010), and variation in the kinds of violence (repertoires) enacted by perpetrators toward their victims in civil war (Cohen 2012; Hoover Green 2010; E. J. Wood 2009). There is also increasing acknowledgment of defection from one ethnic category to another in civil war (Kalyvas 2008; Staniland 2012) and in genocide (McBride 2009). By contrast, this study focuses on behavioral variation, not within or across categorical variation, in a highly violent context.
5. Campbell (2010) reviews examples from the Armenian genocide, different countries during the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and the killing of Yuki Indians in northern California in the late 1850s and proposes that individuals in a genocide kill where there is social distance and rescue where there is social closeness. However, Campbell’s theory cannot account for instances in Rwanda in which civilians killed their family members, neighbors, and others who were close to them—what many scholars note as the most puzzling feature of the Rwandan genocide. Campbell’s theory of “contradictory behaviors” is helpful, but it is incomplete.
6. Likewise, even though some individuals who would have identified as Tutsi prior to the genocide took on the label of Hutu to avoid being killed, this does not mean that by joining in the killings, these people actually thought of themselves as Hutu, even if organizers of the genocide saw them as such (e.g., see the case of Eugène in Fujii 2008:589–91).
7. This distinction between behavioral norms and behavioral scripts is similar to Swidler’s (1995:31) distinction between culture from the “inside out” and culture from the “outside in.” The former refers to culture as deeply internalized in individual psyches, bodies, and habits of action, whereas the latter refers to culture as contextually situated but not deeply held. I thank Chad Goldberg for his insight on this point.
8. As mentioned earlier, there is no evidence that individual Hutu who had this term applied to them adopted it and accepted it for their own self-definition. In fact, some Hutu who desisted from killing or resisted participation in genocide likely thought of *themselves* as “true Hutu” and genocide organizers as threatening to the security of Rwanda.
9. Straus collected the data; Lyons photographed individuals interviewed for this book.
10. Lyons and Straus’s (2006) and Fujii’s (2009) data were collected following protocols of social scientific research. Both conducted semi-structured interviews. Lyons and Straus’s respondents came from 15 prisons throughout Rwanda. The authors include interview questions and prompts and present answers without any interpretation. Fujii’s respondents came from one rural community in the northern province of Ruhengeri and one rural community in the central province of Gitarama. Fujii interprets the data in her presentation, but I analyze the quotes without Fujii’s interpretation unless stated otherwise. As a journalist, Hatzfeld (2005) conducted his interviews on different terms from Lyons and Straus and Fujii. Hatzfeld’s sampling method is unclear and his interviews are presented as stand-alone dialogue among killers with very little information on his questions or prompts. It is worth considering the limitations of these quotes due to the process by which they were derived and because their presentation is different from standard academic qualitative research.

11. Many who did refuse to kill family members, neighbors, or close friends were likely killed themselves, and thus their stories are missing entirely from accounts of saving behaviors in the Rwandan genocide.

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