Psychology and Morality in Genocide and Violent Conflict:

Perpetrators, Passive Bystanders, Rescuers

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In this chapter I will consider the roles of psychology and morality in genocide, and in intense violence and mass killing. The starting point for both can be either difficult social conditions in a society or conflict between groups. But psychology and individual-level morality have central roles. Even though there are many societal, cultural, and institutional forces at work, the proximal influences leading to genocide or mass killing are psychological. As the participants undergo an evolution, as they progress along a “continuum of destruction” (Staub, 1989) moved by psychological and social forces, moral principles and orientations can be subverted. As people respond to these forces, they may engage in profoundly immoral actions without even struggling with the immorality of their thoughts, feelings, and resulting actions. How psychological forces can overwhelm or subvert moral principles and emotions is a primary focus of this chapter. I will consider the psychology and morality of perpetrators, passive bystanders, and active bystanders who endanger themselves as they attempt to save lives.

What is morality? The Compact Oxford English Dictionary defines it as

1. *principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour.*

2. *moral behaviour.*
3. the extent to which an action is right or wrong.

4. a system of values and moral principles.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy says that the term morality is used
1. descriptively to refer to a code of conduct put forward by a society or, some other group, such as a religion, or accepted by an individual for her own behavior or
2. normatively to refer to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational persons.

I define morality differently, as principles, values, emotional orientations, and practices that maintain or promote human welfare. With the increasing awareness of our interconnected existence, and the increasing spirituality in the world, “human welfare” could be replaced with the welfare of all beings. Rather than a code of conduct in a particular society or group, moral principles and values and ways of relating to others – and the very essence of morality, human welfare (or the welfare of all beings) – are universal considerations. This is presumably what number 2 above aims at. Ultimately what is moral or immoral are actions. Principles, values, and emotional orientations are moral or immoral to the extent that they guide behavior in a moral or immoral direction.

Traditionally philosophers and moral psychologists such as Kohlberg (1976) have classified actions as moral or immoral as a function of a person’s intentions or reasoning about them. But as I write in Overcoming Evil (Staub, 2010a), “this judgment cannot be based only or primarily on the intentions of actors, especially their stated intentions. They themselves may not know what internal psychological or outside forces lead them to their actions, and if they do, what they say may not express their motives but provide justifications for them.” When they act violently “they may incorrectly perceive the need for self-defense, or act with unnecessary
violence in the name of self-defense. They may be guided by ideals and visions that aim to benefit their group or to improve the world, but have developed the belief that any means are acceptable to serve these ideals.” Guided by these beliefs they engage in harmful action against people who have not done or intended to do harm to them.

In light of these considerations, and of others spelled out below, such as the fact that individuals—and societies—change as a result of their own actions, I view judging actions as good and evil, or moral or immoral, as requiring “a consideration of intentions, the nature of the acts, their probable consequences, their actual consequences, the degree of environmental pressure on a person to act, and even their effects on the actors’ further behavior. It requires a consideration of universal principles (such as the sanctity of life and justice) and the principles of utilitarianism, the greatest good for the greatest number” (Staub, 2010a). (That both universal principles and utilitarianism need to be considered was proposed by Frankena in 1963).

I have referred to genocide as evil, because it involves extreme destructiveness (Staub, 1989). By the above criteria, killing a whole group of people in genocide, which invariably includes killing people who have done no harm, such as young children, against whom no defense is required and against whom retaliation, if one considers that moral, is not appropriate, would always be judged immoral. Group conflict is, by itself, not immoral. Unfortunately, however, conflict between groups can resist resolution, become intractable and violent, and lead to violence reaching the level of mass killing, in which many people are killed indiscriminately.

My concern is not simply to judge genocide or extreme violence in group conflict as immoral. Both are outcomes of normal, ordinary psychological processes that come together to create extreme and immoral actions and outcomes. Both are “banal,” to use Hannah Arendt’s (1963) term), not in her sense that they are not extraordinary, but in the sense that they are the
outcomes of ordinary psychological and social processes. In this chapter I will consider the influences that lead to the evolution of such extreme violence, and the nature of the evolution itself, the influences and processes in the steps along a continuum of destruction that ends in the motivation for and the perpetration of genocide or extreme violence. I will consider choices that actors make—leaders and followers who are perpetrators, witnesses who become passive bystanders, and active bystanders who are rescuers. I will consider their psychological, behavioral, and moral progressions.

Usually, discussions of morality focus on principles, or codes of conduct. However, moral action can be the result either of principles, values, and related norms that dictate certain action, or of emotional orientations such as caring about other people and empathizing or sympathizing with them. Caring means genuine concern for the welfare of others. It is an outgrowth of feelings of connection to other people and feelings of empathy or sympathy. Emotional orientations such as empathy, and moral principles such as justice or the sanctity of life, can lead to moral action or inhibit immoral action. For example, a person can help another whom he or she does not care about, guided by principles, as in the case of some anti-Semitic Christians who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. But some Christian rescuers were primarily motivated by empathic feelings for persecuted Jews (Oliner & Oliner, 1998). A person can also harm others based on principles, such as punishment for wrongdoing, or reciprocity, or refrain from harming others because of by empathic feelings.

Moral or helpful actions are especially likely on the part of people who feel personal responsibility for the welfare of others. The responsibility to act can be the result of non-moral influences. For example, conditions may focus responsibility on a person—this person being the only one present when someone needs help, or the one who has the expertise to act, or the one
who is in a role that requires action (Latane & Darley, 1970; Myers, 2010; Staub, 1978). Or the feeling of responsibility can be inherent in the person (Staub, 1980, 2003, 2010a). Feelings or the belief in one’s responsibility for another’s welfare seem to mediate between caring or empathy and moral principles, with elements of both. These same variables are likely to be important inhibitors of harmful behavior (Spielman & Staub, 2000).

To finish this brief introduction focused on morality I want to quote again from *Overcoming Evil*, where I write: “At the start, evil is the action, not the person or the group. But individuals and groups change as a result of their actions. Victims are increasingly devalued, violence intensifies as it continues. Destructive actions can become increasingly normal and probable, a characteristic of a system, a group—or a person. In such cases, we can regard the society, group, or individual actors as evil” (Staub, 2010a). We can use the word evil when actions create extreme harm; this is an extreme form of immorality. In an immoral society, where actions that harm people who have themselves done no harm have become normal, as under slavery in the U.S. or in Nazi Germany, for people to act morally they must deviate from the standards or codes of conduct of that society. A leadership group, much of a society (with the population as passive bystanders also implicated), or a small terrorist group can develop beliefs, values, and practices that normalize violence against all members of another group.

*Two Related Theories of Motivation and Action:*

*Basic Needs Theory and Personal Goal Theory.*

I will briefly review two conceptions I have developed over time about what determines people’s behavior, including their moral behavior – basic needs theory and personal goal theory – and their interrelation. I will then apply them to the understanding of genocide and violent conflict.
Basic needs theory assumes that all human beings share certain universal psychological needs. The needs I have focused on include security, feelings of effectiveness and control over important events, positive identity, positive connection to others, and a comprehension of reality (and of one’s own role in the world). While all human beings possess these needs, their forms or manifestations and their intensity (as a function of the ease or difficulty of their fulfillment) vary with culture and with individual experience. This theory was inspired by Maslow’s (1971) theory of human needs, and by the usefulness of needs in understanding the origins of genocide and other mass violence (Staub, 1989, 1996, 2003, 2010a). In contrast to Maslow, I assume that basic needs do not form a hierarchy. Instead, all are present from an early age. Only security, which includes both physical/material and psychological security, might be more important than the other needs.

When the constructive satisfaction of basic needs is blocked, people will attempt to fulfill them in ways that are destructive, insofar as the satisfaction of one need interferes with the satisfaction of another, or is harmful to other people. Fulfilling the need for competence and control by attempting to exercise control over all aspects of one’s relationships with others is a destructive mode of need fulfillment, both because it frustrates others’ desire for control and because it interferes with the development of positive relationships. Fulfilling the need for competence and positive identity by dominance and aggression is similarly a destructive mode of need satisfaction.

The second theory, personal goal theory, assumes that needs, values, and motives—and the outcomes they point to that are important for people and that they want to reach—vary in importance and can be arranged in a hierarchy. However, the individual hierarchies of personal goals are not static. Conditions in the environment can activate needs lower in the hierarchy and
raise their position, making them dominant over needs that are normally higher in the hierarchy. Working in one’s office, parenting one’s children, being at the beach, facing some threat activate different motives or personal goals (Staub, 1978, 1980, 2010a). Environmental activators can be temporary. But lasting environmental conditions can create persistent changes in the hierarchy. Moral values may be high in a person’s “resting” hierarchy, but certain environmental conditions can make other motives, such as basic needs, dominant over them.

A connection between basic need theory and personal goal theory is that some, although not all, personal goals develop out of basic needs. In the course of socialization and experience, needs can be satisfied in habitual ways. For one person, intellectual activity can fulfill the need for effectiveness, can be a basis for positive identity, and even be a primary way to develop positive connections. For another person, empathic engagement with other people may serve the same needs. While not all values, goals, or motives necessarily develop out of basic needs, many do, or at least have significant connections to basic needs. For example, a strong commitment to the principle of justice may have independent roots in socialization and experience, but it helps to meet the need for comprehending reality, and can serve other needs as well.

*The Origins and Processes of Genocide and Violent Conflict*

In my conception, the primary starting points or instigators of mass violence are either difficult life conditions, such as economic problems, political disorganization, great and rapid social/life changes, or conflict between groups. As difficult life conditions persist, as conflict remains unresolved and becomes intractable, they create or intensify threat, fear, and lead to the intense frustration of basic human needs. Especially in the presence of certain characteristics of culture, and with the underlying problems requiring persistent effort to resolve, people attempt to address their intense psychological reactions in ways that turn one group against another, or
intensify conflict and hostility. Members of one group scapegoat – blame – some other group for life’s problems, or blame the other group for starting or maintaining a conflict. They adopt or develop ideologies, visions of social arrangements and relationships between groups and individuals that promise a better future. But because these are visions of the future, not currently available and difficult to reach, people tend to identify enemies who in their eyes stand in the way. The group progressively turns against the scapegoat or ideological enemy. The conflict then intensifies (see Staub, 1989, 2003, 2010a,b, for elaboration of this conception).

This process, and the evolution of increasing hostility and violence, is more likely to occur in groups with certain characteristics. One of them is a history of devaluation of another group; the devalued group is likely to become the scapegoat or ideological enemy. Another is the past victimization of the group, and the resulting psychological woundedness. Aspects of woundedness include feelings of vulnerability and seeing the world as dangerous. This can lead to perceiving the need for self-defense when there is no real danger, and engaging in unnecessary “defensive violence,” or reacting with a degree of force greater than what is required for defense against the real danger, and/or to hostile or vengeful violence (Staub, 1998, 2010a; Staub & Pearlman, 2006). Another cultural characteristic that makes group violence more likely is overly strong respect for authority, which leads to an exaggerated tendency to look to leaders for guidance and to follow and obey leaders. A monolithic culture, which limits the range of views that can be expressed, and often excludes some group(s) from participation in public life, is another contributing cultural/societal/political characteristic. Still another is a history of dealing with conflict by engaging in violence. As in individuals, so in groups, both limited self-worth or a low group self concept, and a sense of superiority frustrated by social conditions can also contribute.
Another important process leading to genocide or intense violence in conflict is the evolution of increasing hostility and violence. As actions are taken against the other group or as already hostile actions intensify, individuals and the group change. People learn by doing and change as a result of their actions. They justify their harmful actions in at least two ways. First, they further devalue the other group. Progressively they exclude the members of the other group from the moral realm, so that the usual moral considerations no longer apply to them (Fein, 1979; Opotaw, 1990; Staub, 1989, 2010a). Second, they use the “higher” ideals of the ideology, the cause that the group is presumably serving—whether it is racial purity, nationalism, social equality, or something else. As the evolution progresses, many perpetrators, some earlier and some later, experience a reversal of morality. Killing the other now becomes the right, moral thing to do. The society also undergoes an evolution, with transformed or new institutions that serve the violence, such as offices of Jewish Affairs in Nazi Germany, or paramilitary groups created in many countries, and with evolving standards of conduct that allow such violence to occur. Other psychological processes such as adaptation and habituation, and the reduction of cognitive dissonance—“If I harm these people, they must be bad”—also serve this evolution.

The behavior of bystanders plays a crucial role in allowing this evolution to unfold. Witnesses, people who are in a position to know what is happening and in a position to take action, tend to remain passive, as their groups turns against a subgroup of society and as that group increasingly becomes a target of hostility and violence. Often they are more than passive, to various degrees complicit. They go on with business as usual, fulfilling roles and functions that support the system and even serve the violence. Their passivity, and even more their complicity, affirm the perpetrators in what they are doing. External bystanders, nations, groups, individuals outside a country moving toward increasing violence are also often passive. The
passivity of these “external bystanders” has similar effects to that of “internal bystanders.” While there has been an increase in the number of U.N. diplomatic and peacekeeping missions over the last two decades (Fein, 2007), passivity is still often characteristic of the response of the international community, as in Rwanda, Darfur, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

*The Psychology and Morality of Leaders, Followers, and Perpetrators*

Difficult life conditions and intense conflict have strong activating potential for certain goals in people’s goal or need hierarchy. Normally, basic needs, or the goals that developed from them, if they are satisfied to a reasonable degree, need not be in a strong state of activation. When life is normal, security is not a primary consideration for most people. While identity is always important, it can be fulfilled as part of work, human relations, and so on. Under normal conditions people live by the understanding of reality they have developed. But the instigating conditions for violence are powerful activators of basic needs, and the goals related to them move to the top of people’s motive hierarchy. For many people, these goals become more important than values and emotional orientation related to morality. For some others these conditions activate already important goals and values that incline them to hostility and the desire to harm. Their inclinations are normally restricted or controlled by societal standards and norms, but they become fully activated under difficult life conditions or group conflict. One researcher who studied members of the Nazi SS called such people “sleepers” (Steiner, 1980); another, a conflict specialist, wrote about the person who acts as a “crystallizing agent” in situations when he notices that people are “vulnerable to his blandishments” (Zartman, 1989, p. 11).

But even for many “ordinary” people, security, identity, connection to others, a comprehension of reality and of their role in the scheme of things become dominant over values
of justice, or the welfare of people unrelated them. While the identity of many people includes a view of themselves as good people, identity has many components that can be separated from each other. What being a good person means can be defined quite differently by different people and under different conditions. The role of identity also changes as people, finding it difficult to stand on their own, shift from a primarily individual identity to a primarily collective identity. This is consistent with social identity theory (see Straus, 2006, in relation to Rwanda; also Staub, 2010a).

This is one of the important effects of difficult life conditions and group conflict. Being part of a group helps fulfill needs for security, identity, connection, and effectiveness. But this also means that people shift from individual, personal values and goals to group values and goals. The welfare of the members of the group becomes important, with that of people outside the group disregarded. Moreover, since the group, whether an ethnic, religious, or purely ideological group, is likely to adopt or intensify ideologies in these difficult times, the ideological goals also become dominant, including their destructive aspect, identifying and turning against an ideological enemy.

In addition, in difficult times people turn to leaders who offer quick solutions to their problems. These leaders, as members of groups, are also affected by life conditions and group conflict. They are looking for the satisfaction of their own basic needs. They are also aware of the needs of potential or actual followers in difficult times or in violent conflict. Both life conditions and a culture that emphasizes respect for authority enhance the reliance on and need for guidance by leaders. Leaders also have an additional motive: to attract followers. These forces and motives lead them to promote scapegoating and develop a destructive ideology.
There is an unanswered question in my mind concerning the extent to which leaders respond to the shared needs of the group and their own, and the extent to which they manipulate the group to gain influence. To what extent do they themselves go through the “normal” although destructive processes I described, and to what extent do they instigate others while being aware of the untrue nature of their claims (for example, that another group is responsible for their group’s life problems). Prominent communists who have been studied tended to be true believers, and had great difficulty shifting away from their ideology even after the collapse of communism and in the face of evidence of the violent nature of communist systems (Hollander, 2006). It is likely that in addition to their genuine beliefs, both leaders and followers are influenced by other motives, such as the desire to advance their careers. This was true of members of the SS (Steiner, 1980). In terrorist groups, some members tend to advocate views consistent with those of the group but more radical, in order to gain influence in the group (Staub, 2010a).

The shift in the relative importance of moral versus non-moral values and goals is accompanied by people replacing moral values with other values that are not inherently moral (have no inherent connection to human welfare) but which people often define as moral. One of these is loyalty. Another is respect for and obedience to authority. These are both important in human systems, but they become destructive when they become dominant over or replace other values, especially genuinely moral ones.

Devaluation is another way that morality is undermined in the evolution of hostility and violence toward a targeted group. Combined with a vision of justice that focuses on punishment, it can lead to harmful actions. Both the evidence of real world events and research indicate that devaluation leads to harmdoing. In cases of genocide and mass killing, the victims are greatly
devalued (Staub, 1989, 2010a). A study by Bandura, Underwood, and Fromson (1975) showed that when people overhear derogatory comments about someone, they punish this person more; when they hear positive comments, they punish less. In the case of the Janjaweed in Darfur, “Arab” horseman attacking “black” Africans, survivors’ reports indicated a relationship between shouting more derogatory comments in the course of their attack and the intensity of violent actions (Hagan & Rymond-Richmond, 2008).

Morality can take a punitive form: People who are bad, who are immoral, who want to harm us, deserve punishment. Justice is an important aspect of morality in every moral system, and punishment is an aspect of most moral systems. Just-world thinking (Lerner, 1980) is a kind of morality, the belief that the world is a just place, and its corollary, that to uphold a just world, people who are bad ought to be punished. A group and its members can move from punishing bad actions, to punishing those they believe are likely to engage in bad actions, to those whose supposed nature is bad.

We might regard the devaluation of people—a negative judgment of an entire group that is frequently not based on the actual behavior of members of the group, and certainly not the behavior of all members—as inherently immoral. It is a cognitive-emotional orientation that diminishes people and is likely to lead to harmful actions. This would also mean that the justification of harmful actions against others by increased devaluation of them is also immoral. Alternatively, the harmful actions caused by devaluation are immoral.

A significant aspect of morality is good judgment, a correct or veridical assessment of events: both what is happening and the meaning of what is happening. Greek philosophers have thought that prudence, or good judgment, was one of the major virtues. To be moral requires the ability to assess whether particular claims are true or false. It requires a critical consciousness,
not accepting what leaders, the media, other people say, or even what one’s culture teaches, without examining it and judging it for oneself. This is, of course, profoundly demanding. Children simply absorb their culture. Socializers, parents and teachers, only rarely foster the tendency to critically evaluate what the culture teaches. But to be a moral person, one must ask about devaluation: Is what is being said about these people true, is this view justified, and in the rare cases when it is, what is a reasonable course of action in relation to them? A society advances morality when it prepares its citizens for such critical examination and good judgment. A critical examination to be useful for moral purposes also requires, of course, citizens developing moral values.

It is also important to consider the effects of past victimization leading to defensive (and occasionally hostile) violence. In this case, another normal psychological process, psychological woundedness that leads defensive reactions to the world, can subvert moral inclinations. Sometimes, having been victimized becomes deeply embedded in a group’s culture. It becomes a “chosen trauma” (Volkan, 1997) and a screen or perspective through which the world and events in it are seen (Staub, 2010a). Cultural self-examination becomes important to see this “screen” and its destructive effects and to develop a more veridical and constructive way for the group to view the world.

I have been discussing how societal conditions and characteristics, such as difficult life conditions and one group devaluing another, affect and shape many members of a group. Individuals can do something about how they respond to or deal with these forces. They can participate in or avoid scapegoating, accept or reject a destructive ideology. But there are also structural characteristics of a society that have elements of immorality and have the potential to lead to conflict and violence. A primary one is inequality between groups — in power, wealth,
and access. The genocide scholar Helen Fein concluded in 1993, on the basis of her analysis of many cases, that after 1945 this was the most important source of violence between groups. Inequality can lead to violence as the less powerful group demands greater equality, and the powerful group responds with repression and violence, or the less powerful group immediately moves to violence. Inequitable relations are maintained not only because those with power want to maintain their power and privilege, but also because they come to believe that they deserve and have a right to their power and privilege (Staub, 2010a). A moral course requires shifting away from a social dominance orientation (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and system justification (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). It requires a moral vision based on justice as equality, or at least reasonable forms of equity, in which the contributions of everyone, including at-home parents and manual laborers, who are essential for society, are appropriately valued. It requires a society that concerns itself with the fulfillment of its members’ material needs and basic psychological needs.

The Psychology and Morality of Passive Bystanders

As I noted earlier, the passivity and complicity of bystanders encourages perpetrators of unjustified harmful actions. It also changes the bystanders themselves. There are many processes at work to contribute to passivity: diffusion of responsibility, pluralistic ignorance (people not knowing what others think and feel; Latane & Darley, 1970), the belief in the impossibility of one person making a difference, and the difficulty in organizing and joining with others in societies that are often autocratic (Staub, 2010a). People can also rationalize their inaction when, as is often the case, the evolution toward violence moves at first with small steps. At each point, a person can think that this is something small and has limited significance. But as people remain passive, or go along as if everything were normal, they change. Just as followers who become
perpetrators justify their actions, so people justify their passivity, primarily by devaluing victims. Just-world research has shown that observers of harm to a person are likely to devalue that person if they have reason to believe that the harm—and the suffering—will continue (Lerner & Simmons, 1966).

To oppose a societal process, people need to have moral motives to act. But many of them have absorbed from their culture a negative view of the targeted group. It requires strong moral motives to oppose one’s own group for the sake of devalued others. It also requires moral courage, the willingness and ability to act according to one’s values in the face of opposition and potential harm to oneself. Moreover, if people do not act early, devaluation and the costs of action can be joined by self-protective emotional distancing as inhibitors of action. Empathizing with people who are harmed and who suffer creates distress. Distancing oneself from them diminishes distress.

There are a number of potential mechanisms of distancing: minimizing each step and suspending judgment about the meaning of events, justifying harm done, adopting an observer perspective, or avoiding information about and attention to harmful action and the other’s suffering. In research in which people were told to take either an observer orientation to what was happening to someone, or to imagine what it is like for that person or imagine themselves in that situation, those with an observer orientation responded with the least empathy (Aderman & Berkowitz, 1970; Stotland, 1969). In one of my studies of a person collapsing on the street, some passersby turned aside after a single glance and never looked back (Staub & Baer, 1974). In my conversation with Germans in 1987 who were teenagers or older during the 1930s, these young people at that time talked about sitting around camp fires and singing songs. They were so engaged with their own satisfying lives in the Nazi era that they did not even notice the very
public persecution of Jews (Staub, 1989, 2010a). Preoccupation with their own lives is a further reason that people remain passive. As a result of these processes even people who engage with what is happening to a victimized group are likely, in the course of the evolution of hostility and violence, to increasingly relinquish their responsibility for the welfare of the persecuted other. We can regard these processes as having negative moral consequences, or as being inherently immoral. Over time, some bystanders join the perpetrators (Lifton, 1986).

Passivity has also been the most common response of external bystanders. Since nations have not historically regarded themselves as moral agents, and since leaders are preoccupied with many matters, it has been relatively easy for them to ignore the increasing danger in another place, and then the actual violence against people in other countries. International conventions and laws are progressively changing legal and moral standards for the behavior of nations as bystanders, but actions consistent with these new international standards are changing much more slowly.

The Psychology and Morality of Rescuers

Groups differ, and the subversion of morality by ordinary psychological processes is more likely in some cultures than in others. Individuals differ, and the subversion of morality through the processes I have just described is more likely in some people than in others. Usually, in societies that move toward group violence there is a vanguard that initiates scapegoating and destructive ideological visions, although many members of the society often follow, and most others remain passive. There is usually little resistance. In cases of group conflict as well, there is often limited resistance to the increasing devaluation of and hostility toward the opponent in the conflict.
There is also limited acknowledgment afterwards of harmful actions by one’s own group. However, over time, there can be a change in “collective memories,” and an acknowledgment of harmdoing, which is important for reconciliation. For example, Israelis who were witnesses or participants as soldiers or in other capacities in actions to expel Palestinians in 1948 did not speak out for many years. But after decades, and after the work of “new historians” (e.g., Morris, 2004) that established that various efforts were made to expel Palestinians, and a shift toward a more critical orientation to the government, some wrote memoirs in which they described witnessing or being involved in the expulsion. Not speaking earlier had to do both with loyalty to their group still engaged in the conflict and with government censorship (Nets-Zehngut, 2009).

While there is usually little resistance in the course of the evolution of violence, as it becomes evident that the members of a persecuted group will be killed, some people endanger themselves to save lives (Staub, 1997). This has been found in most cases if genocide: during the Holocaust in countries in Nazi Europe (Oliner & Oliner 1988; Tec, 1986), in Rwanda (Africa Rights, 2002), during the Armenian genocide, and elsewhere. Rescuers hide members of the designated victim group and/or help them move to a safe area. Such people have had socializing experiences of the kind that have been found to develop caring and altruism (Oliner & Oliner, 1988; also Eisenberg et al., 2006; Staub, 1979, 1997, 2003). The resulting empathy and caring, including inclusive caring, and moral values, lead these people to act. Some of them are “marginal” to their group in some way—for example, being of a minority religion, having one foreign parent, or having been somewhat unconventional (Tec, 1986). This presumably makes it easier for them to separate themselves from the group’s increasing hostility toward the victims.

Rescuers endanger themselves, and often their families as well, as they help others. Their actions are heroic. They go beyond the requirements of ordinary morality. Their example shows
that while the reactions and processes that arise from instigating conditions and lead to mass violence are common, they are not inevitable. Even under circumstances that exert powerful influence, there is variation in how people respond. The prevention of genocide and other mass violence requires the strengthening of moral orientations and other personal dispositions that reduce the likelihood of violence, It requires creating societal systems that protect people and developing the joint capacity of systems and individuals to respond to instigating conditions in constructive ways.

**Conclusions and Prevention**

To briefly summarize the central element of this discussion, ordinary, normal psychological processes can subvert moral motives. They include the activation of pressing universal human needs and their shift to the top of people’s hierarchy of values, motives, and goals; devaluation of the other and just-world thinking; the reactivation of past trauma, a social dominance orientation and the tendency to justify existing systems; and elevating non-moral motives and punitive tendencies over moral values and motives. Some of these normal psychological processes can be regarded as inherently immoral. For many members of a group, all can diminish the relative importance of moral values and goals.

There is a profound conundrum here, in that the normal psychology of people living in difficult times, and in certain cultures, can start them on the road to extreme violence. The tendency to categorize, which includes the division of people into us and them, the information that children and adults get from outside sources about other people, from parents and teachers, the culture and its literature and media, including generalizations about groups (stereotypes), help us function in the world. But the present discussion suggests that living a moral life requires
greater awareness—a critical consciousness—and the ability to evaluate the information one receives about groups targeted for violence and, at worst, genocide.

The present discussion suggests several lines of prevention. On the individual level, we can strengthen moral values and emotional orientations through socialization. Developing inclusive caring for other people, caring for people beyond one’s own group, is an important protective element (Staub, 2005, 2010a,b). Inclusive caring makes it more likely that people expand the boundaries of their group and create broader group identities (Dovidio et al., 2009), even an identity that includes all people as members of the human family. Another aspect of prevention is to develop the capacity for critical consciousness in general, and especially with regard to both external and internal processes that can subvert moral thinking, feeling, and action.

In my and my colleagues’ work in Rwanda—in seminars, workshops, and training (seminars, workshops) with many groups ranging from facilitators working with community groups, to national leaders, to members of the media—we aimed to develop knowledge of the influences that lead to intergroup violence, and to have people use this knowledge to develop an understanding of events, past and current, in their own society. Promoting understanding of the influences leading to violence, as well as avenues to prevention and reconciliation, was one of our primary efforts (Staub & Pearlman, 2006). We also promoted such knowledge and understanding in educational radio programs, in Rwanda, Burundi, and the Congo (Staub, 2010a, b; Staub et al., 2010). Evaluation research showed both that such training (Staub et al., 2005) and an educational radio drama in which the training concepts were embedded in a story about conflict between two neighboring villages had strong positive effects (Paluck, 2009; Staub, 2010 a,b; Staub & Pearlman, 2009; Staub et al., 2010). These include more positive attitudes on the
part of Hutus and Tutsis toward each other, more empathy, a reduction in trauma symptoms, a greater willingness to speak one’s mind, and more independence of authority (see Staub, 2010a, for an overview).

Understanding the influences that lead to mass violence increases people’s prudence, their ability to correctly assess the importance of events that can lead to the evolution of increasing hostility and violence. It can make people aware of times when action is needed and lead them to resist or counteract influences that might lead to violence. It can lead to active bystandership in the service of promoting positive relations. Our training programs also brought about some healing of past wounds and greater openness of members of the two groups toward each other. This creates an openness to reconciliation.

Preventive actions on the group level include helping people constructively meet basic needs in difficult times. Constructive ideologies, visions of social arrangements that benefit all groups in a society and to which everyone can contribute, and the creation of groups in which membership provides security, connection, and identity, can prevent people from turning to destructive ideologies and violent movements (Staub, 2003, 2010a).

As this suggests, prevention requires the creation of structures. Constructive groups are structures or institutions of society. It is the way schools and work places operate, providing opportunities for significant positive contact between members of different groups, that help overcome devaluation and develop positive attitudes across group lines. Psychological changes seem necessary for generating the motivation to create positive societal structures, but these in turn are needed to maintain and further develop the attitudes and behavior that create harmonious, peaceful societies. It is essential to jointly consider the roots of immoral and moral
behavior both in the psychology of individuals and groups, and the institutions or structures that people create and live by.

References


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