

Looking for Post-Traumatic Growth in Perpetrators of the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda:

A Discussion of Theoretical and Ethical Issues

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Abstract:

The theory of post-traumatic growth claims that, in the struggle to overcome difficult experiences, individuals may identify positive ways in which the experience has changed them. There is extensive evidence of survivors of extreme adversities reporting the phenomenon across different cultures. Although reconciliation involves facilitating positive changes in the identities of perpetrators, post-traumatic growth has not yet been studied in relation to perpetrators of political violence. In this theoretical review article, we draw upon existing research to evaluate the applicability of the concept of post-traumatic growth in the context of perpetrators of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda and discuss the unaddressed theoretical and ethical issues that need to be considered in this context. We conclude that it is feasible for post-traumatic growth to manifest in this population. However, we suggest that the current definition of this concept needs considerable revision including a focus on measuring behavioural change. We further conclude that researchers need to navigate this topic very carefully, given the ethical issues surrounding misrepresentation and inappropriate dissemination.

Key Words: Post-traumatic growth, perpetrators, violence, genocide, Rwanda

The belief that we can learn from our misfortunes and grow stronger from our sufferings has great intuitive appeal, and is central to many religious and philosophical traditions.¹ Indeed, this notion has been investigated extensively in the past twenty years in the psychological literature and is most commonly known as post-traumatic growth,² a concept that refers to the positive psychological changes an individual can experience when coming to terms with a challenging, and often traumatic life experience. While the memory of a traumatic experience may remain distressing, the theory of post-traumatic growth posits that some individuals may find that the struggle to overcome adversity encourages them to make meaningful and enduring changes to their identity, relationships with others, and spiritual worldviews.³ The precise nature of these psychological changes varies according to the specific model of post-traumatic growth consulted; for example, the dominant model in the field has proposed that it manifests in five domains: as greater appreciation of life; exploration of new possibilities; increased spirituality; more intimate relationships; and enhanced personal strength.⁴ Alternatively, other theoretical accounts of post-traumatic growth have viewed it more broadly as a process of meaning-making through the re-telling of an individual's life story in attempt to connect their past and present identities;⁵ or in terms of increases in other well-researched constructs such as psychological well-being.⁶ However, in spite of these differences, most theoretical accounts have argued that post-traumatic growth is more than the total sum of positive changes: it is a transformative

¹ Joanna Collicutt McGrath, 'Post-Traumatic Growth and the Origins of Early Christianity', *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 9.3 (2006), 291–306.

² Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, 'Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence', *Psychological Inquiry*, 15.1 (2004), 1–18.

³ P. Alex Linley and Stephen Joseph, 'Positive Change Following Trauma and Adversity: A Review', *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 17.1 (2004), 11–21.

⁴ Tedeschi and Calhoun.

⁵ Jennifer L. Pals and Dan P. McAdams, 'The Transformed Self: A Narrative Understanding of Posttraumatic Growth', *Psychological Inquiry*, 15.1 (2004), 65–69.

⁶ Stephen Joseph and others, 'The Psychological Well-Being—Post-Traumatic Changes Questionnaire (PWB-PTCQ): Reliability and Validity', *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 4.4 (2012), 420–28.

experience that alters the identity of a person and leaves them profoundly different, improved compared to their past self.

Aim of Current Article:

Post-traumatic growth has not been investigated in relation to perpetrators of political violence; instead researchers have focused almost entirely on victims of tragic circumstances. However, the question of whether post-traumatic growth is possible or even likely in this context is worth considering given that reconciliation in post-conflict zones is more likely to occur when both survivors and perpetrators have come to terms with past trauma and denounced derogatory views of one another.⁷ The aim of this article is to evaluate the extent to which the existing theory of post-traumatic growth is relevant for the study of perpetrators of genocide, and discuss the theoretical and ethical issues that need to be carefully considered by researchers in this field. This is important because we are considering the study of not only individuals who witnessed or directly experienced trauma, but also those who actively participated in creating it. While many of our arguments could be applied to violent perpetration in other contexts, we will focus on the relevance and appropriateness of studying post-traumatic growth among perpetrators of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

Between April and July 1994 an estimated 800,000 to 1 million individuals were brutally killed during the genocide. The causes of the genocide have a long history rooted in colonial rule, as the Germans and Belgians had elevated the Tutsi minority into positions of social and political power, enabling Rwanda to be led by an elite Tutsi aristocracy. However, in the years preceding independence in 1962, Belgium switched allegiance to support the Hutu majority whose political movement had steadily grown since the 1950s. In the years that followed the election, there were several episodes of mass violence as the Hutu-led party became more authoritarian and sought to establish their power-base. Thousands of Tutsi were killed and thousands more fled. In October

⁷ Ervin Staub, 'Building a Peaceful Society: Origins, Prevention, and Reconciliation after Genocide and Other Group Violence', *American Psychologist*, 68.7 (2013), 576–89.

1990, the Tutsi-formed political and military party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), invaded from Uganda. The UN was unable to broker a lasting peace accord between the government and the RPF, and eventually international troops were withdrawn. The massacres of the 1994 genocide began after the President's plane was shot down on 6 April 1994, but the planning and training of Hutu-militants had started long before this event. The genocide ended when the RPF captured Kigali in July 1994.⁸ Since 1994, the Genocide against the Tutsi has received significant scholarly attention. Scholars emphasize the number of individuals killed in a short time period, the mass involvement of ordinary civilians, and the brutal nature in which individuals were killed by neighbours, friends and family members, mostly with machetes and other agricultural tools.⁹

The military victory of the RPF ended the genocide, but the newly established government was left with the challenge of returning political stability and social unity to a divided Rwanda. National unity and reconciliation have therefore been central to RPF government policy, and their approach has focused on both promoting the healing of survivors and the rehabilitation of perpetrators. For example, in 2005 the government introduced the *gacaca* community court system as a 'grass-roots' participatory justice system, in which respected and locally elected judges would pass sentence on suspects accused of genocide crimes in their area. Although this was initially a solution to an over-burdened judicial system, it became seen by government officials as a means to foster group-to-group reconciliation between survivors and perpetrators through public apology. Through *gacaca*, it was hoped that dialogue enabled between groups and a commitment to work towards common goals of justice would help to restore unity within local communities.¹⁰ Reconciliation involves positive changes in the way former

⁸ Phil Clark, *The Gacaca Courts, Post-Genocide Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁹ Alette Smeulers and Lotte Hoex, 'Studying the Microdynamics of the Rwandan Genocide', *British Journal of Criminology*, 50.3 (2010), 435–54.

¹⁰ Phil Clark, *The Gacaca Courts*, pp. 308-341.

adversaries think, feel and act towards each another,¹¹ The theory of post-traumatic growth, which posits that trauma can be a catalyst for positive and enduring identity change, is therefore particularly relevant in this context. In the following section, we outline the limited research that has examined post-traumatic growth among perpetrators of harm, and we use this research to evaluate when post-traumatic growth might manifest among genocide perpetrators in Rwanda. We end our article with a discussion of the theoretical and ethical implications of applying post-traumatic growth in this context.

Research into Post-Traumatic Growth and the Perpetration of Harm:

There is an extensive literature that demonstrates the reporting of post-traumatic growth cross-culturally, even by survivors of extreme violence, for example: individuals affected by war or civil-war¹² survivors of the Holocaust¹³ and survivors of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.¹⁴ It is important to note however, that all of these studies measure individuals' beliefs or perceptions about the extent to which they have shown post-traumatic growth, as is common in this area of study. Empirical studies have rarely measured actual change over time from pre- to-post trauma. Thus, unless explicitly stated otherwise, all of the empirical studies we discuss in this article have

¹¹ Herbert C. Kelman, 'Reconciliation From a Social-Psychological Perspective', in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Reconciliation*, ed. by Arie Nadler, Thomas Malloy, and Jeffrey Fisher D (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 15–32.

¹² Adrienn Kroo and Henriett Nagy, 'Posttraumatic Growth Among Traumatized Somali Refugees in Hungary', *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 16.5 (2011), 440–58.

Adriana Feder and others, 'Posttraumatic Growth in Former Vietnam Prisoners of War', *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, 71.4 (2008), 359–70.

Steve Powell and others, 'Posttraumatic Growth after War: A Study with Former Refugees and Displaced People in Sarajevo', *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 59.1 (2003), 71–83.

¹³ Janine Karen Lurie-Beck, Poppy Liopsis and Kathryn Gow, 'Relationships between Psychopathological and Demographic Variables and Posttraumatic Growth among Holocaust Survivors', *Traumatology*, 14.3 (2008), 28–39.

Rachel Lev-Wiesel and Marianne Amir, 'Posttraumatic Growth Among Holocaust Child Survivors', *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 8.4 (2003), 229–37.

¹⁴ Caroline Williamson, 'Towards a Theory of Collective Posttraumatic Growth in Rwanda: The Pursuit of Agency and Communion.', *Traumatology: An International Journal*, 20.2 (2014), 91–102. Jobb Arnold, 'A Psychological Investigation of Individual and Social Transformations in Post-Genocide Rwanda', in *Confronting Genocide*, ed. by Rene Provost and Payam Akhavan (Springer Netherlands, 2011), pp. 305–17.

measured individuals' own perceptions of post-traumatic growth. These studies do nonetheless assuage concerns that the belief in post-traumatic growth is a western concept,¹⁵ because the evidence points to a universal meaning-making process that manifests across diverse cultures and different types of adversity. However, this is not to say that the specific positive changes reported by individuals do not differ across cultures;¹⁶ qualitative research in particular has identified new domains among non-Western populations.¹⁷

With a few notable exceptions, however, existing research has focused almost exclusively on individuals who are victims of tragic and unforeseen circumstances, and not on those who have inflicted harm on others. The question of whether post-traumatic growth applies in the context of perpetration of harm or indeed whether this should even be studied is certainly a sensitive one. One context in which post-traumatic growth has been investigated in relation to perpetration is in motor vehicle accidents.¹⁸ Here, authors argue that this population has not been studied with respect to post-traumatic growth, as both researchers and clinicians have a tendency to empathize with victims. However, they found that perpetrators of serious motor accidents in which at least one other person was injured did report experiencing post-traumatic growth. Participants reported higher levels of post-traumatic growth when they were higher on the personality trait of conscientiousness and experienced a greater number of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms as a result of the accident they had caused. This study is unique in its exclusive focus on perpetrators. Other studies of post-traumatic growth among similar accidental

¹⁵ Katie Splevins and others, 'Theories of Posttraumatic Growth: Cross-Cultural Perspectives', *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 15.3 (2010), 259–77.

¹⁶ Powell and others.

¹⁷ Williamson.

Dilwar Hussain and Braj Bhushan, 'Posttraumatic Growth Experiences among Tibetan Refugees: A Qualitative Investigation', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 10.2 (2013), 204–16.

¹⁸ Dorota Merecz, Malgorzata Waszkowska and Agata Wezyk, 'Psychological Consequences of Trauma in MVA Perpetrators – Relationship between Post-Traumatic Growth, PTSD Symptoms and Individual Characteristics', *Transportation Research Part F: Traffic Psychology and Behaviour*, 15.5 (2012), 565–74.

injury populations rarely restrict their analysis to individuals whose behaviour has resulted in direct harm to others.¹⁹

However, while the drivers in these studies were responsible for injuring other people, it is unlikely that most of them intended to cause harm. The context is significantly different in the case of perpetrators of political violence, such as with those who have participated in war and genocide. There is now a growing literature starting to explore this topic among combat veterans,²⁰ and former political prisoners of war.²¹ A recent study demonstrated that at least one third of their sample of American veterans reported a moderate level of post-traumatic growth with the most commonly endorsed item being an increased appreciation of life.²² In addition, greater cognitive flexibility, greater sense of wrongdoing (a sub-scale of trauma-related guilt), and being an ethnic minority were associated with higher reports of post-traumatic growth in this population. This study adds to a growing body of research that has demonstrated that soldiers will report post-traumatic growth under certain conditions such as a perception of unit cohesion, experience of greater post-traumatic stress symptoms, and a feeling of being socially supported.²³ However, these studies have yet to identify why some veterans report post-traumatic growth

¹⁹ Yanbo Wang and others, 'Prevalence and Predictors of Posttraumatic Growth in Accidentally Injured Patients', *Journal of Clinical Psychology in Medical Settings*, 20.1 (2012), 3–12.

²⁰ Richard G. Tedeschi and Richard J. McNally, 'Can We Facilitate Posttraumatic Growth in Combat Veterans?', *American Psychologist*, 66.1 (2011), 19–24.

²¹ Jari Salo and others, 'Individual and Group Treatment and Self and Other Representations Predicting Posttraumatic Recovery Among Former Political Prisoners', *Traumatology*, 14.2 (2008), 45–61.

Jari A. Salo, Samir Qouta and Raija-Leena Punamäki, 'Adult Attachment, Posttraumatic Growth and Negative Emotions among Former Political Prisoners', *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping*, 18.4 (2005), 361–78.

²² Alaa M. Hijazi, Jessica A. Keith and Carol O'Brien, 'Predictors of Posttraumatic Growth in a Multiwar Sample of U.S. Combat Veterans', *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 21.3 (2015), 395–408.

²³ Mary M. Mitchell and others, 'Combat Exposure, Unit Cohesion, and Demographic Characteristics of Soldiers Reporting Posttraumatic Growth', *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 18 (2013), 383–95.

Robert H. Pietrzak and others, 'Posttraumatic Growth in Veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom', *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 126.1 (2010), 230–35.

Christopher Erbes and others, 'Posttraumatic Growth among American Former Prisoners of War', *Traumatology*, 11.4 (2005), 285–95.

while others do not. A recent longitudinal study that examined soldiers from the 1973 Yom Kippur War is perhaps able to offer some insight into this question. The authors of this study found that feelings of guilt and the distress that arose from such guilt were associated with an increase in post-traumatic growth over time.²⁴ Thus, reports of post-traumatic growth may be dependent at least in part, on the experience of guilt and wrong-doing. We return to the centrality of guilt in more depth when we evaluate the applicability of this concept among perpetrators of the Rwanda genocide.

Furthermore, there is research that demonstrates that post-traumatic growth is reported by some prisoners who have inflicted serious harm against others²⁵ and even controversially by imprisoned sex offenders who were receiving therapy²⁶. Some researchers have claimed that it is the challenges and solitude of imprisonment that encouraged some offenders to question their past behaviours. As a result some individuals reported that they had come to greatly value the social and emotional support of their visiting loved ones, to appreciate the small things in life, and to make plans to improve their future.²⁷

Is Post-Traumatic Growth Applicable to Perpetrators of Genocide in Rwanda?

Against this nascent evidence, what conclusions can researchers draw about the feasibility of post-traumatic growth in perpetrators of genocide? In the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, perpetrators engaged in politically sanctioned violence that in most cases involved killing their neighbours, friends, and family members. Given the intimacy of the genocide in

²⁴ Sharon Dekel and others, 'Can Guilt Lead to Psychological Growth Following Trauma Exposure?', *Psychiatry Research*, 236 (2016), 196-198.

²⁵ Esther F. J. C. van Ginneken, 'Making Sense of Imprisonment Narratives of Posttraumatic Growth Among Female Prisoners', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 60 (2016), 208-227.

Ian O'Donnell, *Prisoners, Solitude, and Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁶ Siebrecht Vanhooren, Mia Leijssen and Jessie Dezutter, 'Posttraumatic Growth in Sex Offenders A Pilot Study With a Mixed-Method Design', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 61 (2015), 171-190.

²⁷ O'Donnell.

Rwanda, what can researchers learn from the existing literature? In this section, we are concerned only with the plausibility of post-traumatic growth in this context; we reserve discussion of the ethical issues associated with studying this topic until later in the paper. However, we acknowledge that asking such a question about genocide perpetrators feels different to asking it about soldiers, which is likely in part to be a reaction to the horror of the crimes committed. It is also possible that our view of war and soldiers is interpreted through the lens of defending and protecting a nation, which might lend a degree of moral credence to the soldiers' actions that cannot be attributed to the ideology of genocide. This issue was raised by Hijazi and colleagues who noted that soldiers in morally controversial wars (e.g., Vietnam or Iraq) might have greater difficulty in justifying their actions.²⁸

A central question in this debate rests upon whether the concept of trauma is relevant to perpetrators of violence. The theory of post-traumatic growth was originally developed based on Janoff-Bulman's theory of shattered assumptions.²⁹ According to Janoff-Bulman's model, people rely on a foundational set of assumptions to guide their understanding of the social world. These assumptions claim that the world is predictable, meaningful and benevolent, and that the individual has the power to control the outcomes unfolding in their lives. Traumatic life events have the potential to shatter all of these assumptions, leaving an individual feeling vulnerable and exposed in a world that is unpredictable, uncontrollable and unjust. Janoff-Bulman was concerned with providing an explanatory account for why people experience PTSD following traumatic events. As such, her approach to treatment was to help individuals cope with the negative intrusions triggered by the shattering of their assumptions and to facilitate the rebuilding of a conceptual model of the world that integrated their experiences of victimisation. Post-traumatic growth uses this theory as a starting point, arguing that positive changes to

²⁸ Hijazi, Keith and O'Brien.

²⁹ Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma*, (New York, NY US: Free Press, 1992).

individuals; goals and outlook only occur when they are engaged in an effortful process to rebuild their assumptive world and search for meaning from their trauma.³⁰

The perspective of trauma employed in these accounts is that of an act that happens to an individual against their will. The individual is therefore positioned as an innocent and underserving recipient. Such a conception of trauma cannot be applicable to someone who has perpetrated harm, which likely explains why post-traumatic growth has rarely been studied in this context. However, an alternative view to this restrictive definition of trauma has been proposed more recently by MacNair who has put forward a new clinically diagnosable disorder called perpetration-induced traumatic distress.³¹ This disorder is characterised by the same symptoms as PTSD, but the source of the symptoms is the act of killing or perpetrating violence. MacNair argues that there is no research explicitly disputing the claim that the perpetration of a trauma can be traumatizing. In fact, empirical evidence now demonstrates that active participation in killings during military combat is associated with higher levels of PTSD than is found among soldiers who witness rather than participate.³² MacNair has claimed that this historical omission in the field is the result of inattention rather than a dispute of the validity of such a disorder. Her analysis identifies a social-emotional basis for this omission: for example, she argues that some supporters of military action have trouble accepting that soldiers can be traumatized, because it calls into question the morality of warfare. However, the focus of research into the applicability of trauma among active military personnel is gradually changing. Emerging research seeks to

³⁰ Stephen Joseph and P. Alex Linley, 'Growth Following Adversity: Theoretical Perspectives and Implications for Clinical Practice', *Clinical Psychology Review*, 26.8 (2006), 1041–53.

³¹ Rachel M. MacNair, 'Causing Trauma as a Form of Trauma', *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 21.3 (2015), 313–21.

³² Elizabeth P. Van Winkle and Martin A. Safer, 'Killing versus Witnessing in Combat Trauma and Reports of PTSD Symptoms and Domestic Violence', *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 24.1 (2011), 107–10.

prevent the deleterious emotional and physical disorders that can arise if a soldier questions the morality of his/her actions after combat.³³

This corpus of research shows that the perpetration of violence can be traumatizing. As such, it implies that the boundaries between perpetration and victimhood are not always as clear-cut as might be expected. So far however, the morally injurious and traumatic consequences of combat have been investigated only among military personnel who are contracted to protect and defend the interests of their own nation. When we read the published testimonies of perpetrators of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, we find that they often talk about how the Rwandan authorities at the time made them believe that the Tutsi targets were a threat to the country. For example, Hatzfeld reported one convicted perpetrator reflecting on his actions:

“The intimidators made the plans and whipped up enthusiasm; the shopkeepers paid and provided transportation; the farmers prowled and pillaged. For the killings though, everybody had to show up blade in hand and pitch in for a decent stretch of work.”³⁴

These explanations are not uncommon in perpetrators’ testimonies, and although it is very difficult to know whether these individuals are manipulating the truth in order to pass blame for their own actions, it does imply that for some perpetrators the act of killing might have been seen as a duty to their government. In which case, the research on post-traumatic growth in soldiers is relevant, and implies that it is at least psychologically feasible in this context as well.

Furthermore, published testimonies also demonstrate that some perpetrators feel remorse for the killings they committed. For example, another convicted perpetrator said:

“You do not forget anything that happened during the killings. The details are truly there when you want to dip into them. Still, certain colleagues tend to remember the grim and unfortunate moments, while others recall the good times, like the comfort and

³³ Brett T. Litz and others, ‘Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy’, *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29.8 (2009), 695–706.

³⁴ Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak*, trans. by Linda Coverdale, Reprint edition (New York: Picador USA, 2006), p.13.

abundance. Me, I don't rid myself of the serious memories; I regret misjudging events and I regret the people who were killed. I thought wrong, I went wrong, I did wrong."³⁵

As Hron notes, these testimonies should be interpreted with caution since they were given to a foreign researcher and then translated and edited by him for publication.³⁶ However, assuming that this sentiment is true for at least some of the perpetrators, then we know from the research in soldier populations that feelings of guilt and wrong-doing can be precursors of post-traumatic growth.³⁷ Experiencing guilt and shame over one's actions may also trigger perpetration-induced traumatic stress disorder³⁸ and prior research has found that symptoms of PTSD are positively correlated with reports of post-traumatic growth over time.³⁹ Theorists explain this relationship by relying on Janoff-Bulman's⁴⁰ account, arguing that post-traumatic growth may follow the onset of PTSD if the individual engages in an effortful process to disengage from prior worldviews and rebuild their assumptive world with an eye towards finding meaning from their traumatic ordeal.⁴¹ Here again, the evidence implies that the experience of post-traumatic growth is at least psychologically feasible among perpetrators who feel remorse and distress over their

³⁵ Jean Hatzfeld, p.157.

³⁶ Madelaine Hron, 'Gukora and Itsembatsemba: The "Ordinary Killers" in Jean Hatzfeld's *Machete Season*', *Research in African Literatures*, 42.2 (2011), 125–46.

³⁷ Dekel and others.

Hijazi, Keith and O'Brien

³⁸ MacNair.

³⁹ Sharon Dekel, Tsachi Ein-Dor and Zahava Solomon, 'Posttraumatic Growth and Posttraumatic Distress: A Longitudinal Study.', *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 4.1 (2012), 94–101.

Claire Pollard and Paul Kennedy, 'A Longitudinal Analysis of Emotional Impact, Coping Strategies and Post-Traumatic Psychological Growth Following Spinal Cord Injury: A 10-Year Review', *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 12.3 (2007), 347–62.

Zahava Solomon and Rachel Dekel, 'Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Posttraumatic Growth among Israeli Ex-Pows', *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 20.3 (2007), 303–12.

⁴⁰ Janoff-Bulman.

⁴¹ Joseph and Linley, 'Growth Following Adversity'.

crimes. In further support of this claim, PTSD was found to be clinically prevalent among convicted perpetrators in one Rwandan sample.⁴²

Finally, one reason why it might be particularly useful and important to determine the feasibility of post-traumatic growth among perpetrators is the potential role this could have in promoting genuine and lasting reconciliation in Rwanda. There are different definitions of reconciliation in the peace studies literature, but in this article we adopt a model that defines reconciliation as involving a positive change to intergroup relations by addressing the harm to each group's identity caused by past conflict.⁴³ This definition requires more than peaceful co-existence between groups, and strives to create identity change in each individual in a way that will eventually facilitate an integrated single group and collective identity. It proposes fostering reconciliation through the apology-forgiveness model, in which perpetrators admit their crimes and ask for forgiveness. In this model, a survivor regains a sense of power and agency through their ability to grant or refuse forgiveness. At the same time, a perpetrator's moral image can be restored and he or she can be shown empathy (if forgiveness is granted). Given that this process requires a positive change in how the perpetrator views himself, other people, and also how others view him in his society, it seems plausible to assume that a request for forgiveness will be facilitated by the extent to which the individual perpetrator is able positively to change himself (i.e. show post-traumatic growth).

These conclusions were supported by a recent empirical study that found that encouraging members of perpetrator groups to construct a redemptive narrative in response to a historical transgression increased their feelings of collective guilt and willingness to make

⁴² Susanne Schaal and others, 'Mental Health 15 Years after the Killings in Rwanda: Imprisoned Perpetrators of the Genocide against the Tutsi versus a Community Sample of Survivors', *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 25.4 (2012), 446–53.

⁴³ Arie Nadler and Nurit Shnabel, 'Instrumental and Socioemotional Paths to Intergroup Reconciliation and the Needs-Based Model of Socioemotional Reconciliation', in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Reconciliation*, ed. by Arie Nadler, Thomas Malloy, and Jeffrey Fisher D (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 37–56.

reparations.⁴⁴ The expression of a redemptive narrative also increased the likelihood that members of the victim group would show a willingness to reconcile. However, we would advise applying caution to the generalizability of these particular findings, because in this study the participants – both perpetrators and victims - were asked to recall an event in World War II that they or their immediate family would have had no role in. Although the psychological processes involved in redemption may operate similarly in the Rwandan context, it is likely to be far more difficult to construct a redemptive narrative for those who perpetrated crimes of genocide.

Theoretical Revisions Needed to Study Post-Traumatic Growth in Violent Perpetrators:

In the previous section, we drew upon existing evidence to argue that it is at least theoretically feasible for some perpetrators to show post-traumatic growth. In this section, we evaluate some of the problems with existing theories of post-traumatic growth. Although these they apply to the concept of post-traumatic growth more generally,⁴⁵ they are exacerbated when we consider the potential application of the concept to perpetrators of genocide. The first issue that requires careful consideration is whether both the existing definition can be applied to this population. If we take the dominant model of post-traumatic growth⁴⁶ as an illustrative example, is it reasonable to expect an increase in the domains of relationships, personal strength, spirituality, appreciation of life and exploration of new possibilities among this population? These domains were originally developed through clinical interviews with U.S. civilians who had suffered spousal loss, physical disabilities and other such life crises, all of which are markedly different from having been a perpetrator of violence. It does not hold that all these domains would necessarily transfer; for example, would an imprisoned perpetrator have any opportunity

⁴⁴ Katie N. Rotella, Jennifer A. Richeson and Dan P. McAdams, ‘Groups’ Search for Meaning: Redemption on the Path to Intergroup Reconciliation’, *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 18.5 (2015), 696–715.

⁴⁵ Christian Miller, ‘A Satisfactory Definition of Post-Traumatic Growth Still Remains Elusive’, *European Journal of Personality*, 28, (2014), 344–46.

⁴⁶ Tedeschi and Calhoun.

to explore new possibilities for his life or to report that killing people had made him better able to handle subsequent challenges? There has also been some debate about whether the spirituality domain should be seen as an expression of post-traumatic growth at all because it could be more representative of a coping mechanism.⁴⁷ For perpetrators, religion could provide a means of coping with the harm they inflicted on others, especially among those whose religious beliefs allow for atonement from sin.

If we were to return to the drawing board and create a new inventory for this population, what would qualify as an expression of post-traumatic growth? Tedeschi and Calhoun's definition of post-traumatic growth as positive psychological change is suitably broad to allow for almost any change insofar as it can be seen as an improvement.⁴⁸ In which case, would expressions of remorse be an appropriate indicator? Although remorse cannot be identified as a positive experience, in the case of genocide perpetrators it could indicate that they have accepted responsibility for their behaviour and this in turn could lead to other positive outcomes such as the denouncement of the Hutu-Power ideology, which was the main driver of the genocide in Rwanda. Remorse fits the evaluative criteria for post-traumatic growth under the current definition: it is a positive change and arguably reflective of the adoption of a more inclusive worldview. The same logic could be applied to asking for forgiveness. Could an apology be classified as an indicator of post-traumatic growth? It could also be interpreted as a positive outcome. These examples bring to light an important issue in the literature on post-traumatic growth: the breadth of the concept allows for predictors and outcomes to be conflated, especially in qualitative research, which may take a more explorative approach and not require an *a priori* definition.

⁴⁷ Stephen Joseph, 'Religiosity and Posttraumatic Growth: A Note Concerning the Problems of Confounding in Their Measurement and the Inclusion of Religiosity within the Definition of Posttraumatic Growth', *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 14.8 (2011), 843–45.

⁴⁸ Tedeschi and Calhoun.

Returning to the examples of remorse and apology, research has specified remorse as a predictor of post-traumatic growth.⁴⁹ Furthermore, as stated earlier, post-traumatic growth is more than the total sum of positive changes; it is a transformative experience that redefines an individual's personality. This interpretation of post-traumatic growth echoes Stephen Joseph's person-centered approach, which interprets it as a process and a move towards authenticity, optimal psychological adjustment, maturity, and openness to experience.⁵⁰ Although showing remorse and asking for forgiveness from the individuals harmed are necessary for the healing process,⁵¹ it is not clear that these acts alone show the worldview of a convicted perpetrator to be qualitatively different from what it was before the genocide.

Relatedly, the measurement tools used in post-traumatic growth have been criticized for an over-reliance on self-reported change in thoughts and feelings and the absence of behavioural measures.⁵² For these authors, post-traumatic growth is essentially positive personality change – a change in an individual's characteristic and enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. According to this perspective, it is implausible for significant changes in an individual's self-concept, relationships and worldviews not to result in parallel changes in their behaviour. This view is endorsed by other theories focusing specifically on behavioural changes following adversity, such as an increase in prosocial behaviour,⁵³ or participation in political

⁴⁹ Dekel, Ein-Dor and Solomon.

Hijazi, Keith and O'Brien.

⁵⁰ Stephen Joseph, 'A Person-Centered Perspective on Working with People Who Have Experienced Psychological Trauma and Helping Them Move Forward to Posttraumatic Growth', *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, 14.3 (2015), 178–90.

⁵¹ Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, 'Remorse, Forgiveness, and Rehumanization: Stories from South Africa', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 42.1 (2002), 7–32.

⁵² Eranda Jayawickreme and Laura E. R. Blackie, 'Post-Traumatic Growth as Positive Personality Change: Evidence, Controversies and Future Directions: Post-Traumatic Growth', *European Journal of Personality*, 28.4 (2014), 312–31.

⁵³ Ervin Staub and Johanna Vollhardt, 'Altruism Born of Suffering: The Roots of Caring and Helping After Victimization and Other Trauma', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 78.3 (2008), 267–80.

resistance movements in the case of the Israeli-Palestine conflict.⁵⁴ The focus on behavioural change is even more important when applying this research to perpetrators of the Rwanda genocide. In an effort to promote unity and reconciliation, the government issued a Presidential decree in January 2003 releasing over 10,000 convicted perpetrators who had admitted all their crimes and showed repentance.⁵⁵ Thus, given that perpetrators could show repentance to seek early release from prison, it is essential to define the conditions of post-traumatic growth through examples of how perpetrators are acting on such positive change in their own lives.

This view is echoed in a very comprehensive and diverse set of interviews with individual Rwandan survivors who reported that reconciliation would only result from sustained interaction and cooperation between perpetrators and survivors.⁵⁶ The question that needs to be addressed here is how such personality change would manifest in perpetrators' behaviour. It is impossible to answer this question without access to detailed interviews with perpetrators and also with individuals in their community who have observed their behaviour, but it does seem reasonable to assume that such change could take the form of active participation in memorial activities, willingness to offer help to disadvantaged others, and encouraging tolerance in Rwandan youth. It is likely that these behaviours would be preceded by internal emotional and cognitive shifts in personality, for example an increase in compassion and an enhanced sense of responsibility for the welfare of others, but we propose that, for post-traumatic growth to manifest, the perpetrator must also find ways to act on these internal changes.

One final theoretical issue that deserves attention is what it means to be a perpetrator: how do we categorize an individual into this group? Obviously, an individual who killed, raped,

⁵⁴ Stevan E. Hobfoll and others, 'Refining Our Understanding of Traumatic Growth in the Face of Terrorism: Moving from Meaning Cognitions to Doing What Is Meaningful', *Applied Psychology*, 56.3 (2007), 345–66.

⁵⁵ Eugenia Zorbas, 'Reconciliation in Post-Genocide Rwanda', *African Journal of Legal Studies*, 1.1 (2004), 29–52.

⁵⁶ Phil Clark, 'Negotiating Reconciliation in Rwanda: Popular Challenges to the Official Discourse of Post-Genocide National Unity', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 8.4 (2014), 303–20.

or grossly harmed another person can be identified as a violent perpetrator, but a crime such as genocide involves many other types of perpetrator. Smeulers for example, has developed a typology of perpetrators outlining the social-psychological processes that enable ordinary and law-abiding citizens to become violent perpetrators under specific conditions and the differences between how and why some individuals get involved in collective violence.⁵⁷ Her research builds on existing work to posit a typology that is not restricted to perpetrators in a specific situation, time period or type of perpetration. For example, Smeulers' typology separates the criminal mastermind who plans and orchestrates the violence for political gain from the profiteer who participates for material or economic gain, and the conformist who participates in violence as a result of social pressure from others. The importance of this typology for the current discussion is that it raises the intriguing question of whether the manifestation of post-traumatic growth is the same across these different types of perpetration. In Rwanda, there were people who did not directly participate in the killings, but who revealed others' hiding places to the killers or profited by looting abandoned houses.

Post-traumatic growth theory proposes that the experience of trauma may cause a transformation in an individual's characteristic and enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.⁵⁸ Here, the focus on changes in enduring patterns implies that a perpetrator would have had to view the world with an 'us versus them' distinction before their involvement in the genocide. There were certainly ethnic tensions in the decades preceding the 1994 genocide, but did all perpetrators believe that the Tutsi were wicked people and that their eradication was necessary? Following Smeulers's model of differentiation between types of perpetrator,⁵⁹ then not all perpetrators had the same motivation. In the published testimonies, some perpetrators explain their actions as motivated by what they stood to gain from taking their neighbours'

⁵⁷ Alette Smeulers, *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Towards a Typology* (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 22 January 2014) <<http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2383085>> [accessed 16 February 2016].

⁵⁸ Jayawickreme and Blackie.

⁵⁹ Alette Smeulers.

property; other justify their participation by saying they were forced or coerced.⁶⁰ Theoretical accounts of the reasons why ordinary and usually law-abiding citizens participate in collective violence discredit the notion that all perpetrators are sadistic, inherently cruel or mentally ill.⁶¹ Instead these accounts offer a more complicated approach, thereby calling into question whether a perpetrator is likely to experience post-traumatic growth if they are able to shift the blame for their involvement onto situational circumstances. The distinction between assimilation and accommodation might provide insight into which perpetrators are likely to experience post-traumatic growth.⁶² To experience post-traumatic growth, a perpetrator must be in a supportive social environment that enables him to accommodate the lessons he has gained by modifying his prior worldview. However, the perpetrator who passes blame is unlikely to show post-traumatic growth, as he has found a way to assimilate his involvement without changing his worldview (e.g. I had no choice but to do as I was told). Drawing upon some initial evidence from soldier populations, it seems possible that remorse and guilt-induced distress might be critical predictors in facilitating the accommodation process and in turn post-traumatic growth.⁶³

Ethical Considerations of Studying Post-Traumatic Growth in Violent Perpetrators:

If it is uncomfortable to ask whether perpetrators of motor vehicle accidents have shown any positive development as a result of their experience, is it even reasonable to ask such a question in the Rwandan context given the severity of the crimes committed by perpetrators of genocide? Just because it is theoretically possible that some perpetrators could show signs of

⁶⁰ Jean Hatzfeld.

⁶¹ James E. Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Murder*, 2 edition (New York; Oxford University Press, USA, 2007).

⁶² Stephen Joseph and P. Alex Linley, 'Positive Adjustment to Threatening Events: An Organismic Valuing Theory of Growth Through Adversity.', *Review of General Psychology*, 9.3 (2005), 262–80.

⁶³ Dekel and others.
Hijazi, Keith and O'Brien.
MacNair.

post-traumatic growth, it is not necessarily ethically responsible for researchers to study this question. In this final section, we discuss three central ethical issues we have identified as requiring careful consideration, and make a few recommendations as to how these issues could be handled by members of the research community. The first is whether post-traumatic growth is the most appropriate concept to study in this population? Anyone familiar with the literature is aware that this term implies that overcoming trauma has to some degree made the individual better than they were before – the individual’s post-trauma identity is considered superior to their former one in significant ways. For example, Tedeschi, Park and Calhoun write “In the face of these losses and the confusion they cause, some people rebuild a way of life that they experience as superior to their old one in important ways. For them, the devastation of loss provides an opportunity to build a new, superior life structure almost from scratch.”⁶⁴ It is important to note that these authors were not discussing post-traumatic growth in relation to violent perpetration, and even in a later publication when Tedeschi specifically writes about how experiences of violence may lead to personal and social transformation, he refers only to the survivors of violence.⁶⁵ Given the negative implications of this theory when applied to a population of perpetrators, there might be value in using other similar and well-researched constructs instead; redemption⁶⁶ and meaning-making⁶⁷ both capture the notion that perpetrators can reform without encountering the same ethical concerns. However, researchers would also need to consider whether this solution of re-labelling would in fact violate the scientific principle

⁶⁴ Richard G. Tedeschi, Crystal L. Park and Lawrence G. Calhoun, ‘Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Issues’, in *Posttraumatic Growth: Positive Changes in the Aftermath of Crisis*, ed. by Richard G. Tedeschi, Crystal L. Park, and Lawrence G. Calhoun (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998), p. 3.

⁶⁵ Richard G. Tedeschi, ‘Violence Transformed: Posttraumatic Growth in Survivors and Their Societies’, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 4.3 (1999), 319–41.

⁶⁶ Dan P. McAdams, ‘The Redemptive Self: Generativity and the Stories Americans Live By’, *Research in Human Development*, 3.2-3 (2006), 81–100.

⁶⁷ Kate C. McLean and Michael W. Pratt, ‘Life’s Little (and Big) Lessons: Identity Statuses and Meaning-Making in the Turning Point Narratives of Emerging Adults’, *Developmental Psychology*, 42.4 (2006), 714–22.

of parsimony and create an extra literature on essentially the same topic, particularly if their arguments could in the first instance be framed in such a way to address this problem.

A second and related issue is whether investigating post-traumatic growth in perpetrators would devalue the post-traumatic growth observed in survivors of the Rwanda genocide, on which there is already a growing literature.⁶⁸ Many survivors are still traumatized, and some are the only surviving members of their extended family. Researchers must consider how their research could impact this population, and how survivors' mental health might be adversely affected if they were to believe that the perpetrators who killed their loved ones had experienced positive change as result of their actions. If this is accepted as a significant and likely risk, then the research should not be conducted within the theoretical framework of post-traumatic growth unless a strong case for therapeutic benefits could be made. For example, the long-term benefit of identifying specific behavioural changes that facilitate reconciliation might out-weigh the short-term cost of dealing with the controversy of the subject. However, it would be imperative to assess the likelihood of these potential long-term benefits ahead of time and develop a plan to mitigate the other short-term risks. Additionally, as discussed in the previous section, it would be important to hold to a high standard the bar for what counts as a behavioural indicator of post-traumatic growth. For example, the explicit denouncement of genocide ideology might be used as an indicator in social science research, but this behaviour might not be reliable as an indicator of change in a rehabilitation programme. Given the ethical concerns discussed in this paper, we propose that both theory-driven and applied research needs to rely on several different indicators of post-traumatic growth. The validity of claims of post-traumatic growth is stronger when it can be shown that the perpetrator's behaviour has consistently changed across multiple contexts and roles in his or her life.

⁶⁸ Williamson.
Arnold.

Our third and final issue concerns our responsibility as researchers. Even though a topic might be theoretically relevant and interesting, the ethical guidelines that researchers are bound to honour dictate that care should be taken over how research is represented and disseminated. Researchers ought to be concerned with who will see their work and how it could be used. For example, imagine if a research report on this topic was used to justify the claim that rehabilitation programmes in perpetrators' communities were an unnecessary use of public funds, as positive change in these individuals was extremely rare. Although this and many other issues arising from inappropriate dissemination are outside of any researcher's control, it is within their control to ensure that the concept, conclusions, and importantly limitations of the study are clearly defined. This makes it harder for the research to be taken out of context, and applied beyond the domains for which it was intended.

Conclusions

We have evaluated the extent to which the concept of post-traumatic growth applies in the context of violent perpetrators, specifically perpetrators of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Although our discussion has raised several important theoretical and ethical issues associated with this research question, we nevertheless believe that it could be a topic worthy of future investigation. First and foremost, research in this area could shed light on relevant psychological processes through which enduring reconciliation might be achieved. Some models of reconciliation specifically require this process to involve a positive change to the individual identities of perpetrators and survivors.⁶⁹ As such, this process is essentially akin to that described in theories of post-traumatic growth. That said, given the ethical issues associated with studying this question, we would caution researchers to define clearly how they are using the construct and specify any deviations from the models that apply to survivor populations. Furthermore, we would advise avoiding the construct altogether if there is another more suitable

⁶⁹ Nadler and Shnabel.

framework with which to answer the research question that would serve to avoid the negative implications that have been discussed in this article. Finally, our article makes it clear that the current theory of post-traumatic growth requires several theoretical revisions before an empirical research programme can be effectively developed and tested among a population of perpetrators of genocide.

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