

## 'Who Was I to Stop the Killing?': Moral Neutralization among Rwandan Genocide Perpetrators

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**Abstract:** Genocide represents an extreme form of violence on both the individual and collective level. As such, individuals seek to reframe their participation in violence, drawing from certain 'techniques of neutralization'. These techniques may function both as 'vocabularies of motive' to ease the violation of moral norms, and as *post facto* rationalizations for violence. This paper draws from Gresham Sykes and David Matza's moral neutralization theory to examine moral neutralization among perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide. It presents an expanded list of ten genocidal techniques of neutralization, which are particularly relevant for the crime of genocide. Each technique is supported by excerpts from the author's interviews with sixty-eight Rwandan Genocide perpetrators. The article argues that perpetrators use moral neutralization to conform with contemporaneous normative expectations, as well as to maintain their self-image as 'good people'.

**Keywords:** genocide; perpetrators; moral neutralization; neutralization-drift theory; Rwanda

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### Introduction: Reconciling with the Moral Context

Genocide, the extermination of human beings *en masse* according to imputed group identity, requires the revision of moral rules. Victims must be excluded from the moral community, and perpetrator acts must be reframed as acceptable or even essential. Propaganda, ideology, and state structures are essential for the revision of the moral context. Through words and deeds, the genocidal state communicates ideal behaviour to citizens, who may then become perpetrators. Perpetrators draw from ideology and propaganda for comprehension of the current situation, action frameworks, and justifications for their acts. Genocide does not require true believers; acquiescence and rationalization of wrongful acts are enough.

This process is facilitated by the individual's need to frame their action in such a way that it remains consistent with their notions of moral selfhood. Through techniques of neutralization, perpetrators are able to reconcile their acts in an altered moral context with past notions of right and wrong. This article will draw from the author's interviews with Rwandan genocide perpetrators to argue that perpetrators utilize moral neutralization as both a *post facto* rationalization for criminal acts and as criminogenic vocabularies of motive.

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## Methodology

This article is based on sixty-eight interviews conducted in Rwanda in 2009. My broader research project also involved sixty interviews in Burundi, Uganda, Bosnia, Cambodia, and Bangladesh, but I have chosen here to focus on the case of Rwanda.

The interviews with perpetrators in Rwanda covered a broad cross-section of society (see Figure 1). Of these perpetrator interviewees, fifty-nine were male and nine were female. I strove to achieve diversity in my sample by randomly selecting interview subjects, as well as by conducting interviews in a variety of locations. Interviews in Rwanda were conducted throughout the country in both prisons and prison camps (*Travaux d'Intérêt Générale* or TIG) (see Figure 2). My interviews in Rwanda required the permission of local authorities.<sup>1</sup> I arrived at the prisons and prison camps without appointment and requested that prison officials provide me with a list of prisoners convicted of genocide so that I could undertake a random selection. Interviews were semi-open, anonymized, and audio recorded.

The use of interviews produces valuable new data, illuminating individual perspectives that are often left out of other research methodologies (such as archival research), which tend to privilege accounts from elite actors. Sensitive, micro-level narrative research, such as that of Lee Ann Fujii, Erin Jessee, and Jennie Burnet in Rwanda, and Tim Williams and Alexander Hinton in Cambodia, illustrate the complexity of individual participation in ways that macro-level conceptual or historical accounts fail to capture.

While interviews are a rich source of information and insight, they also present significant methodological challenges. The subjects may distort facts and omit details.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, their retelling of their stories may fulfil some inner psychological need.<sup>3</sup> Interviewees may feel pressure to relate what they think the interviewer wants to hear, or to align themselves with broader social expectations. Many distortions are not intentional deceptions; our experience is mediated by our understanding of the world.<sup>4</sup> The search for positivist truth can be useful, in looking at the criminal acts that constitute genocide, but there are no positivist truths to be had about the perpetrator mindset. As Lee Ann Fujii notes, stories may be 'emotionally true' even if they are 'factually false', and this emotional accuracy is in some ways more important when assessing perpetrator motivation and rationalization.<sup>5</sup> In a sense, then, inter-

1 The Ministry of Internal Security (MINITER) in the case of prisons and the Executive Secretariat of National Committee of Community Services as an Alternative to Imprisonment for the TIG prison camps.

2 Kristen Renwick Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion: Portraits of Moral Choice During the Holocaust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 283.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 284.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

5 Lee-Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (New York: Cornell, 2009), p. 152.

views may involve a combination of objective and subjective truths (subjectivities and inter-subjective truths), as well as the constitution of individual identity and relationships.<sup>6</sup> My interview analysis incorporates each of these perspectives in order to seek a critical understanding of both the content and function of narratives, and what these narratives tell us about the perpetration of genocide.

Figure 1: Rwanda Interview Sample – Occupation in 1994 (n=68; perpetrators only)<sup>7</sup>

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
Government official	9	13.2%
Other professional (lawyer, doctor)	6	8.8%
Business	4	5.8%
Farmer	41	60.2%
Other manual/low-income labourer	8	11.7%
Unemployed	2	2.9%

Figure 2: Location of Rwandan Perpetrator Interviews

<b>Location</b>	<b>Number</b>
Kigali Central Prison	11
Remera Prison	2
Gisenyi Prison	2
Ruhengeri Prison	4
Gitarama Prison	8
Tumba TIG Camp	4
Rugerero TIG Camp	5
Butare (with working TIG prisoners)	4
Rwaza TIG Camp	5
Nyarusenge TIG Camp	4
Mont Kigali TIG Camp	7
Hindiro TIG Camp	6
Nyamata TIG Camp	4

6 Lois Presser and Sveinung Sandberg, 'Introduction: What Is the Story?', in *Narrative Criminology*, ed. by Lois Presser and Sveinung Sandberg (New York: New York University Press, 2015), p. 4.

7 Twelve interviews with victims in Rwanda were also undertaken in order to compare victim and perpetrator perspectives. These interviews focused on the Nyamata region, where several perpetrator interviews were also conducted.

## The Rwandan Genocide

In order to understand the perpetrator narratives in this article, it is useful to first consider the context of the Rwandan genocide. The genocide occurred during a period of intense political competition and conflict. The 1993 Arusha Accords had forced the government into power-sharing arrangements and multi-party democracy. The Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) crossed into Rwanda from Uganda in 1994, triggering a civil war with the Hutu-led government of Juvenal Habyrimana. Additionally, a series of economic shocks had significantly reduced the economic opportunities available for young Hutu men. Extremist 'Hutu power' factions gained significant influence within several of the largest political parties, including the MRND and CDR. These same parties formed youth wings (the *Interahamwe* and *Impuzamugambi*), which were trained and armed as part of a broader militarization of Rwandan society. The rise of extremist politics was also accompanied by the emergence of virulent hate-media that singled out Tutsis and Hutu moderates as being traitors to Rwanda.<sup>8</sup>

In this environment of profound insecurity, many drew upon pre-existing ethnic stereotypes and prejudices. Propaganda narratives emphasized that Tutsis were foreigners who were determined to dominate Rwanda and the African Great Lakes region. All Tutsis were deemed to be *Inkotanyi* (RPF fighters) who had infiltrated Rwanda and could not be trusted:

At RTLM [*Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines*, a radio station known for its hate propaganda], we have decided to remain vigilant. I urge you, people of Biryogo, who are listening to us, to remain vigilant. Be advised that a weevil has crept into your midst. Be advised that you have been infiltrated, that you must be extra vigilant in order to defend and protect yourself.<sup>9</sup>

The Tutsi were therefore presented as being inhuman, and it was the duty of all Hutus to defend against this ubiquitous threat.

With the crash of Habyarimana's plane on 6 April 1994, the killings began. Violence was enacted through a mix of pre-existing structures (including a strong state exercising a high degree of local control) and improvised perpetrator coalitions.<sup>10</sup> Killing was endorsed by the interim government (the state) and implemented by around

8 See, for example, Andre Guichaoua, *From War to Genocide: Criminal Politics in Rwanda, 1990-1994* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015) and *The Media and the Rwandan Genocide*, ed. by Allan Thompson (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

9 'RTLM 0340 — extract, 14 March 1994', in *RwandaFile* ed. by Jake Freyer <<http://rwandafile.com/rtlm/pdf/rtlm0340x.pdf>> [accessed 15 February 2015].

10 Augustine Brannigan, *Beyond the Banality of Evil: Criminology and Genocide* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 94-95.

175,000–200,000 direct perpetrators with the complicity of many more individuals.<sup>11</sup> Most perpetrators were civilians without any direct experience perpetrating acts of violence. State authorities demanded mass participation in the genocidal enterprise. This norm was communicated through both state propaganda and the presence of authority figures at killing sites. Those who did not participate were sometimes fined or threatened with violence.

### **Moral Neutralization: Killing without Consequence?**

Societies impose a general prohibition on killing, with extraordinary exceptions such as self-defence. Therefore, as a general principle, genocide is deviant, a *malum in se* ('bad in itself') act. However, unlike other crimes, genocide is positively normative in the societies in which it occurs. This is because genocide is a crime driven by the state or state-like structures. Normally, crime represents a break from the social order. The normative nature of genocide derives from both cultural discourse and messages issued by the state and other perpetrators. These forces drive a reversal of morality through the coercive authority and perceived legitimacy of state power. Neutralization provides justifications for individuals to objectify themselves as servants of the group, institution, or state.

Yet if genocide is normative within its society, it remains universally (externally) deviant. For example, an individual on trial for killing mentally ill persons in Frankfurt during the Second World War claimed that 'this directive [the 'Hitler Directive'] had partially suspended the general prohibition on killing'.<sup>12</sup> Such a prohibition existed in Rwanda before the genocide, where customary law dictates '*kwicha kirazira*' ('killing is taboo') and an abominable ('*ishyano*') act. This taboo maintains that 'blood spilled in violence or "bad death" can inflict extreme mental or physical illness upon the perpetrator and anyone else who comes in contact with it'.<sup>13</sup> For example, one of anthropologist Erin Jessee's interview subjects argued that he 'will never have peace because he has touched blood'.<sup>14</sup> The authorization of genocidal killing requires the redefinition of victims as threats and the reconstitution of murder as self-defence. This occurs largely through the social production of fear.

The criminological theories of Gresham Sykes and David Matza provide further answers. Sykes and Matza's neutralization-drift theory posits that certain discursive

11 Scott Straus 'How Many Perpetrators Were There in the Rwandan Genocide? An Estimate', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 6 (2004), p. 85-98.

12 Dick De Mildt, *In the Name of the People: Perpetrators of Genocide in the Reflection of their Post-War Prosecution in West Germany* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1996), p. 122.

13 Erin Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History* (London: Palgrave, 2017), p. 169.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

rationalizations operate both as *post facto* justifications for deviant conduct and as vocabularies of motive (pre-perpetration authorization). The theory was originally developed in 1957 to explain why juvenile delinquents appear to drift in and out of delinquency. The theory has since been adapted to numerous contexts, including genocide; I present here a modified version of neutralization-drift theory adapted to specifically address the context of genocidal perpetration.<sup>15</sup> Sykes and Matza argue that techniques of neutralization create a state of drift in which people can move easily between delinquency and the mainstream. Deviancy occurs when the bond between action and legal norms is neutralized.<sup>16</sup> However, genocidal behaviour might not be deviant within the genocidal state. Consequently, neutralization entails a break from previously held (universal) moral values; the state of deviancy encompasses the entire genocidal state.

Neutralization techniques can only be effective if they invoke and amplify pre-existing beliefs among the population. They are a means for perpetrators to maintain consonance and coherence with the society in which they live. This is true both during genocide (when the techniques may constitute a vocabulary of motive) and after genocide (when the techniques may rationalize acts that are now deemed deviant within the altered moral context). In mass crimes, the motives of individual perpetrators are culturally situated and impossible to separate from social structures. If perpetrators commit deviant acts without neutralization, then they may develop a persistent 'deviant identity' with concomitant feelings of self-rejection; neutralization is therefore essential.<sup>17</sup> Both state and horizontal propaganda drive neutralization, but it may also occur in a very subtle fashion, when authority figures condone violence with statements such as 'it was understandable'.<sup>18</sup>

Moral neutralization theory is closely related to several other psychological and criminological theories. Neutralization drift theory first developed because of dissatisfaction with subcultural theory, which posited that all criminals reject conventional values when joining criminal groups.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the application of moral neutralization theory to genocide is appropriate in acknowledgement that not all *génocidaires* have rejected conventional values. Rather, many perpetrators seem to exhibit a conflict between their pre-existing values and the perpetration of genocide.

15 See also: Shadd Maruna and Heith Copes, 'What Have We Learned from Five Decades of Neutralization Research?' *Crime and Justice*, 32 (2005), 221–320 and Alexander Alvarez, 'Adjusting to Genocide: The Techniques of Neutralization and the Holocaust', *Social Science History*, 21 (Summer 1997), 139–178.

16 David Matza, *Delinquency and Drift* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2009), p. 101.

17 Howard B. Kaplan, 'Deviant Identity and Self Attitudes', in *Encyclopedia of Criminology and Deviant Behavior*, ed. by Clifton D. Bryant (Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge, 2001), p. 111.

18 This was the statement made by Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi in response to the 2002 pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat.

19 Copes and Maruna, p. 228.

Albert Bandura argues that the selective activation and disengagement of internal controls permits different types of conduct based on the same moral standards. He writes, 'self-sanctions can be disengaged by reconstituting the conduct, obscuring personal causal agency, misrepresenting or disregarding the injurious consequences of one's actions, and vilifying the recipients of maltreatment by blaming and devaluing them'.<sup>20</sup>

Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance similarly deals with reconciling competing cognitions. Festinger calls the incompatibility of these cognitions a state of 'cognitive dissonance' and argues that 'one way to reduce dissonance is to change one's opinions and evaluations in order to bring them closer in line with one's actual behavior'.<sup>21</sup> Increasingly, dissonance theory focuses on ego defence rather than solely on cognitive consistency.<sup>22</sup>

Liau, Barriga, and Gibbs emphasize individuals' 'self-serving distortions'. Primary distortions are self-centered attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs, while secondary distortions serve the primary distortions: they are 'pre or post transgression rationalizations that serve to "neutralize" conscience or guilt'.<sup>23</sup> These include 'assuming the worst', which is defined as 'gratuitously attributing hostile intentions to others, considering a worst-case scenario for a social situation as if it were inevitable, and assuming that improvement is impossible in one's own or others' behavior'.<sup>24</sup> In Rwanda in the 1990s, rumours circulated that Tutsis were poisoning the drinks of Hutus and that 'the RPF would vivisect us'.<sup>25</sup>

Moral neutralization theory has been adapted to address many different offenses, including property crimes and white-collar crimes. I have developed a modified and expanded version of Sykes and Matza's techniques of neutralization that is particularly relevant to the crime of genocide (see Figure 3). The first three techniques represent the reversal of morality, while the latter seven are primarily concerned with the reduction of moral cost. In other words, the former authorize and inspire action, while the latter mitigate individual moral responsibility. The techniques of reducing moral cost are more likely to be used as *post facto* mechanisms, although they also reflect the institutional frameworks of perpetration. Ideology and notions of duty can

20 Albert Bandura, 'Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities,' *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3 (August 1999), p. 364.

21 Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 98.

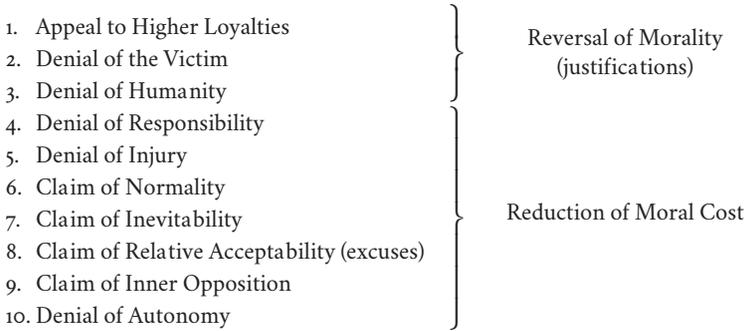
22 Anthony G. Greenwald and David L. Ronis, 'Twenty Years of Cognitive Dissonance: Case Study of the Evolution of a Theory,' *Psychological Review*, 85 (January 1978), 53-57.

23 Albert K. Liau, Alvaro Q. Barriga, and John C. Gibbs, 'Relations Between Self-Serving Cognitive Distortions and Overt vs. Covert Antisocial Behavior in Adolescents,' *Aggressive Behavior*, 24 (1998), p. 301.

24 Assuming the worst bears a close resemblance to cognitive psychologist Aaron Beck's hostile framing theory. See Aaron T. Beck, *Prisoners of Hate: The Cognitive Basis of Anger, Hostility, and Violence* (New York: Harper, 2000); See also: Liau et al., p. 302.

25 Interview R04 (Rwanda), Kigali Central Prison, July 2009.

Figure 3: The Genocidal Techniques of Neutralization



contribute to the reversal of morality, as can the projection of negative characteristics onto the victims. The fundamental importance of the techniques of neutralization is that they help to reconcile self-concept with action. Perpetrators can maintain their view of themselves as good people if their actions are considered morally correct and justified.

The techniques of neutralization may also allow the separation and coexistence (without dissonance) of the normal self and the perpetrator self, per Lifton’s theory of doubling.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the same person commits the acts of both the normal self and the perpetrator self, but the perpetrator self does not reflect the true (normal) self, because the perpetrator self is only acting for the reasons supplied by the techniques of neutralization. ‘I am not doing these bad things out of choice — this is not who I am’. This prevents the development of a deviant self-image.

The distinction between perpetrator self and normal self is not sealed or cast in stone, but wavers and fluctuates. Even as they kill, most perpetrators maintain some consciousness of wrong-doing. Perpetrators are often aware of the negative implications of their behaviour.<sup>27</sup> In my findings, this sense of moral transgression seems to have oscillated among many perpetrators, one of whom reported that ‘one day we felt we were doing something wrong and the next day we didn’t’.<sup>28</sup> However, the dissociation of self from act witnessed in interviews may be less related to separate selves and more to the desire to present an appropriate public self.<sup>29</sup> The fulfillment of social norms applies, after all, to both the process of perpetration and the interview setting.

26 Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).  
 27 Diana Scully and Joseph Marolla, ‘Convicted Rapists’ Vocabularies of Motive: Excuses and Justifications’, *Social Problems*, 31 (June 1984), p. 530.  
 28 Interview R37 (Rwanda), Rwaza TIG Camp, August 2009.  
 29 See Ervin Goffman, ‘On Face-work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction’, *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, 18 (1955), 213-231.

However, during genocide many perpetrators do lose sight of the wrongfulness of their behaviour. For example, three Rwandan perpetrators argue, 'For me, my acts were not wrong at that time', 'I thought that what I was doing was good and that it would make me famous', and 'If I'd known I was doing something wrong I wouldn't have gotten involved'.<sup>30</sup> These statements, of course, may also be reflective of *post facto* regret. Yet, in the presence of the universal prohibition on killing, such sentiments are only possible with the restructuring of morality that neutralization encourages. About half of Rwandan perpetrator respondents reported that they felt at that time that their actions were wrong, with one recounting, 'One day I told my friend I was doing something terrible. I felt like it was the end of the world!' and another saying, 'some believed they were committing a sin'.<sup>31</sup> These results represent the complexity of perpetrator motivation and the drift from universal moral values that neutralization facilitates, even when drifting perpetrators do not usually completely sever their ties to pre-existing value systems.

Neutralization originates from three sources: the state (propaganda messages, the emulation of state agents, and the externalization of responsibility), peers (social pressures and emulation), and perpetrators themselves (internal justifications to fulfil the common tendency to minimize guilt for wrongful acts). Propaganda may directly provide perpetrators with messages of inspiration and authorization, yet perpetrators may also arrive at some of these techniques independently in order to reduce their sense of guilt and maintain a positive self-image. For example, perpetrators who feel shame after participating in killing may revise their own history and come to believe that they had no choice other than to participate. Neutralization may also prevent these shameful feelings from arising in the first place. Moreover, social structures such as hierarchical organizations and group settings may ease processes of neutralization. For instance, perpetrators acting in a group may feel as though they are less responsible than if they were acting alone. Let us examine each of these neutralization techniques in turn.

### 1. APPEAL TO HIGHER LOYALTIES

*I did it to protect the Hutus.*<sup>32</sup>

Perpetrators may frame their participation in atrocities as a form of altruism, believing that their deeds were done in the service of others, such as their family, ethnic

30 Interview R73 (Rwanda), Kigali Central Prison, October 2009; Interview R55 (Rwanda), Rugerero TIG Camp, September 2009; and Interview R58 (Rwanda), Rugerero TIG Camp, September 2009.

31 Interview R78 (Rwanda), Nyamata TIG Camp, October 2009; Interview R29 (Rwanda), Rugerero TIG Camp, August 2009.

32 Interview R28, Rugerero TIG Camp, August 2009.

group, country, or ideology. The appeal to higher loyalties is often a utilitarian argument placing one moral principle or virtue over others (that is, group survival and solidarity over the sanctity of human life). When coupled with extreme dehumanization, perpetrators may come to believe that their intended victims are not fully human. Genocide requires that many individuals act in coordination to accomplish an overarching ideological goal, so it is unsurprising that many perpetrators feel their violence was committed for a higher purpose. About half the perpetrators interviewed felt their actions were beneficial to their ethnic group, while more than a third felt they were protecting their country. Propaganda often appeals to such sentiments, sometimes using guilt and threats to isolate and intimidate non-participants. In Rwanda, the state's mobilization of genocide may itself have indicated to perpetrators that their participation served a higher purpose.

## 2. DENIAL OF THE VICTIM

*'Because of our understanding, we thought that they were bad people, they were dangerous.'*<sup>33</sup>

Denial of the victim justifies perpetration by depicting the victim as a threat. Often, this is closely related to a survival discourse in which the victim is seen as a perpetrator and a threat to the survival of the perpetrator group. One perpetrator in Rwanda described how Hassan Ngeze's propaganda in Kangura demanded that 'we should hate the Tutsis and kill them before they killed us', while an RTLM on-air personality recounted her own foreboding rhetoric that, 'there are Tutsis outside who want to come back to kill us. There are Tutsis inside helping them. They have already sent their sons'.<sup>34</sup> Perpetrators see themselves as victimised. In this context, all perpetrator actions are interpreted as self-defence, and hence as morally legitimate. In the words of one Rwandan perpetrator, 'I felt they were enemies of Rwanda and myself', and thus, according to another, 'there was no problem' killing them.<sup>35</sup> This reversal of victimization is frequently invoked in genocidal propaganda. Denial of the victim may also take the form of alleging that the victim had the power to escape his or her suffering but chose not to do so, because of a stubborn character, greed, or passivity.

A final variation of the denial of victims is the 'just world hypothesis', which posits that because we live in a just world the victims must have done something to de-

33 Interview R62 (Rwanda), Mont Kigali TIG Camp, October 2009.

34 Interview R39 (Rwanda), Nyarusenge TIG Camp, August 2009; Interview R73 (Rwanda), Kigali Central Prison, October 2009.

35 Interview R73 (Rwanda), Kigali Central Prison, October 2009; and Interview R29 (Rwanda), Rugerero TIG Camp, August 2009.

serve their suffering.<sup>36</sup> ‘We asked ourselves what must they have done to deserve to be killed?’<sup>37</sup> The just-world hypothesis is based on both belief in the goodness of human nature and moral myopia — an inability to consider the suffering of others. There are strong overtones of obedience to authority as well. Genocide usually involves the participation of legitimate authority figures, and this strengthens just-world assumptions about the victim. Just-world thinking effectively reverses the burden of proof. Those accused by the state are guilty unless proven innocent, but demonstrating innocence is hardly possible.

### 3. DENIAL OF HUMANITY

*I heard [on the radio] that the Tutsis were killers and  
also that they had long tails and long ears.’<sup>38</sup>*

The denial of humanity (dehumanization) justifies violence on the grounds of victims’ allegedly inhuman characteristics. Once the moral context has changed, victims are excluded from the moral community and are not eligible for the norm of reciprocity. *Génocidaires* in Rwanda recounted, ‘they told us they [the Tutsis] were animals’ and ‘[propaganda said] cockroaches have come. Wake up so you can fight these people [...] even if you go to your plantation to dig, go with a gun [...] kill Tutsis wherever you find them’.<sup>39</sup> Victims also recall being called ‘snakes’ and ‘cockroaches’ before the genocide.<sup>40</sup> The denial of humanity allows perpetrators to deviate from norms without directly assaulting the norms themselves, which are depicted as simply inapplicable in the ‘emergency’ circumstances. By denying humanity, perpetrators seek to create social distance, not only through propaganda but through discriminatory legal regimes, such as land ownership laws and citizenship requirements.

Dehumanization fundamentally seeks to separate individuals from their inborn markers of humanity, thus driving a wedge into social relationships that transcend group membership. Language, as an ontological system, is crucial in this process. One way that dehumanization occurs is through technicalization — a discursive strategy of power involving the use of technical language and euphemisms to describe the treatment of the victims. Such technicalization facilitates the perpetration of genocide by rendering genocide as purely functional, insulating perpetrators from the moral implications of their actions. Another way to denigrate the victim group as a

36 Melvin J. Lerner and Carolyn Simmons, ‘Observer’s Reaction to the “Innocent Victim”: Compassion or Rejection?’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 4 (August 1966), 203–210.

37 Interview R35 (Rwanda), Rwaza TIG Camp, August 2009.

38 Interview R4 (Rwanda), Kigali Central Prison, July 2009.

39 Interview R36 (Rwanda), Rwaza TIG Camp, August 2009; Interview R15 (Rwanda), Gitarama Prison, July 2009.

40 Interview R48 (Rwanda), Nyamata, September 2009.

lesser form of life is by associating them with social unpalatability. For example, victims may be linked to disgust, death, dirtiness, perversion, or degeneracy. Psychologist Jamie Arndt conducted an experiment in which one group of test subjects simply read an essay about foreigners, while the other group read the same essay after the word ‘death’ was subliminally flashed on a screen in front of them. After this minimal symbolic association, the second group was much more hostile to foreigners.<sup>41</sup>

Ethnic groups are themselves cognitions (mental images), and by associating two cognitions — for example, ‘Tutsi’ and ‘greedy’ — behaviour towards individual members of the stigmatized group may be modified. Memories of past behaviour and beliefs also contribute to hostile framing, leading us to interpret all events in light of immutable, negative characteristics.<sup>42</sup> If we believe the other group has knowingly violated a rule, this may also generate anger and other negative emotions.<sup>43</sup>

In general, there are two forms of dehumanization: first, objectification (the rendering of individuals as passive objects without human characteristics or merit), and second animalization (comparing individuals to ‘lesser’, animal forms of life). In animalization, individuals may also be abused in the same manner as animals, as was the case with the ‘Gypsy hunts’ of the sixteenth to the nineteenth century in Europe. The Khmer Rouge also made the ‘new people’ perform tasks normally reserved for animals, such as pulling a plough. The use of euphemisms is crucial in dehumanization. It is well-known that Tutsis were called *inyenzi* (cockroaches) during the Rwandan genocide, but ‘*prusak*’ (‘Prussian’) is a synonym for ‘cockroach’ in Polish, just as ‘*Russe*’ (‘Russian’) is the German equivalent.<sup>44</sup> Markers of difference may even be inscribed on the body, as was the case with prisoner tattoos in Auschwitz and Tuol Sleng prison in Cambodia.<sup>45</sup> Dehumanization may also be imposed through customs and clothing (e.g. prison uniforms).

Dehumanization is often a self-fulfilling prophesy, as perpetrators consign the victims to situations in which they will manifest the desired characteristics — for example, filthy and emaciated concentration camp inmates. Marginal groups and classes often perform roles in society related to death or other unclean tasks.<sup>46</sup> Thus, victims conform to, and thereby validate, perpetrators’ image of them.<sup>47</sup>

41 David Berreby, *Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), p. 232.

42 Beck, p. 94.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

44 James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 247.

45 Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 224.

46 Berreby, p. 233.

47 Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1997), p. 172.

With action comes the transformation of hatred from a cognitive construct to a physical reality. Action also creates the need for justification: the perpetrator must come to believe that the victim deserved mistreatment. The dehumanization of victims transforms them into valueless objects that may then be acted upon by perpetrators, often in a manner that allows perpetrators to deny their free volition.

#### 4. DENIAL OF RESPONSIBILITY

*'We had to join the others in the group so that we would not be killed ourselves.'*<sup>48</sup>

*'We were supported by the government so I didn't think about the victims.'*<sup>49</sup>

*'We didn't feel pity because we were told to kill them.'*<sup>50</sup>

*'For those of us who can't read or write we support the leaders.'*<sup>51</sup>

*'If I had tried to stop the killings I would have been killed too.'*<sup>52</sup>

*'The one who did something really wrong was the person who told us to kill the Tutsi.'*<sup>53</sup>

*'I never went because I wanted to — I was forced.'*<sup>54</sup>

The denial of responsibility is a denial of individual volition that underlies many other techniques of neutralization. This includes circumstances in which the perpetrator acts within a system of control or absent personal volition. It includes justifications such as intoxication (I was too drunk to consider the morality of my actions), superior orders (I was only following orders), and coercion/duress (I was forced to do what I did). Most moral and legal responsibility involves intentionality, and to deny responsibility is to deny such criminal intent. Rather than thinking about 'the horrible things I am doing (or have done)' the perpetrator thinks about 'the horrible things I had to do'.<sup>55</sup>

Perpetrators of genocide also frequently invoke duress and obedience to authority. Among my Rwandan interview subjects, 61.3% reported that the genocide was caused by obedience to authority, while 71.9% of perpetrators believed that they had no choice but to kill: 'the authorities obliged us to kill the Tutsi or else we would become killed'.<sup>56</sup> Whether or not Rwanda is a culture of obedience, as is sometimes argued, there is no doubt that there were strong situational pressures brought to

48 Interview R60 (Rwanda), Mont Kigali TIG Camp, October 2009.

49 Interview R55 (Rwanda), Rugerero TIG Camp, September 2009.

50 Interview R67 (Rwanda), Hindiro TIG Camp, October 2009.

51 Interview R11 (Rwanda), Gitarama Prison, July 2009.

52 Interview R17 (Rwanda), Gitarama Prison, July 2009.

53 Interview R26 (Rwanda), Gisenyi Prison, August 2009.

54 Interview R79 (Rwanda), Nyamata TIG Camp, October 2009.

55 Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 255.

56 Interview R67 (Rwanda), Hindiro TIG Camp, October 2009.

bear by the interim regime, and these pressures, coupled with the penetration of the Rwandan state at the local level, undoubtedly had an impact on many perpetrators.

Intoxication and duress are viable criminal defences in certain circumstances, but superior orders do not apply to genocide, as all orders to commit genocide or crimes against humanity are considered to be manifestly unlawful (the perpetrator knows that they are wrongful, and the harm caused by perpetration is graver than the harm avoided). Intoxication may also be used as an excuse, removing individual agency.

The effects of obviating direct responsibility are clear. In Rwanda, one perpetrator who used a bulldozer to crush as many as two thousand people taking shelter in a church, reasoned, 'I did not leave my house voluntarily to kill people. I was taken there and told to do it. So I don't feel so bad about it'.<sup>57</sup>

## 5. DENIAL OF INJURY

The denial of injury technique of neutralization revolves around claims that the supposed victim was not actually hurt, that it was not the perpetrator's intention to hurt the victim, or that the perpetrator did not cause the victim's injury or death. Denial of injury may also assert that violence was a rightful, even lawful, form of retaliation or punishment.<sup>58</sup> In deploying such denial techniques, the perpetrator may use euphemisms (e.g. 'work' rather than 'killing' in Rwanda). Historian Raul Hilberg examined thousands of Nazi documents and determined that the only time the word 'kill' was used was in an order concerning dogs.<sup>59</sup> This illustrates well the ubiquitous use of euphemistic language in genocide. Laboratory studies, meanwhile, have demonstrated the disinhibitory power of euphemistic language.<sup>60</sup>

Compartmentalization, the functional division of labour, also supports the denial of injury. It is quite possible to fulfil one's task within an organization, such as passing on messages, and not feel responsible for the entirety of the atrocity. One interviewee in Rwanda reported shooting someone fleeing from a mob in the leg with a bow and arrow, causing the injured person to be killed by the mob, yet he remained adamant that he was not responsible for the victim's death.<sup>61</sup> Distancing — that is, increasing the physical or emotional distance between perpetrator and victim — also eases denial of injury.

Killers also frequently express a sense of derealization in which they feel they are playing a game, acting in a movie, or living in a dream. One Rwandan *génocidaire* recounts that killing, 'was like watching a movie — I didn't have much in my head',

57 *Rwanda: Death, Despair and Defiance* (London: African Rights, 1995), p. 405.

58 Sykes and Matza, p. 668.

59 Waller, p. 189.

60 Bandura, p. 365.

61 Interview R79 (Rwanda), Nyamata TIG Camp, October 2009.

while another claims that ‘It was like a game and nobody thought about the consequences’.<sup>62</sup> Derealization may also be accomplished through alcohol or ‘doubling’ — the creation of a somewhat separate perpetrator self that insulates the perpetrator from the reality and consequences of perpetration. Denial of injury is often facilitated by entire systems of denial — institutionalized structures, practices, and cultures that provide perpetrators with the tools for denial. Even though killing was often quite public in Rwanda, the use of euphemistic language for killing was nonetheless ubiquitous. The denial of injury may be accomplished through direct justifications, or, more indirectly, as a cognitive space that allows perpetrators to deny the consequences of their acts.

## 6. CLAIM OF NORMALITY

*‘Killing Tutsis was not only normal, it was fashionable.’<sup>63</sup>*

By claiming normality, perpetrators redefine their actions as no longer transgressive because they have become normalized through many other perpetrators performing the same actions.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, they are doing so without negative sanctions and often receive positive reinforcement. There is a strong tendency for individuals to conform, and this plays a role in perpetrator justifications. The co-action effect may also operate, wherein people work faster when they see others also working. During genocide, killing may very well be normal behaviour, while avoiding killing may be seen as shirking duty. Killing, in fact, is regularized and institutionalized — governed by explicit or implicit norms. In Rwanda, killing involved the mass participation of numerous perpetrators, accomplices, and bystanders.

Another version of the claim of normality is to assert that the existence of universal, ubiquitous evil renders individual responsibility a negligible factor. This may take the form of one of two arguments: first, a metaphysical argument (the world is full of evil, so what I’m doing is not that bad or is even normal) and second, condemnation of the condemners: ‘you (my potential accuser) have done worse things yourself than what I am now doing’.<sup>65</sup> When evil is no longer extraordinary, it loses its deviant quality.

62 Interview R78 (Rwanda), Nyamata TIG Camp, October 2009; and Interview R22 (Rwanda), Tumba TIG Camp, August 2009.

63 Interview R4 (Rwanda), Kigali Central Prison, July 2009.

64 For more on the claim of normality see James W. Coleman, *The Criminal Elite: The Sociology of White-Collar Crime*, 5th edn (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002).

65 Sykes and Matza, p. 668.

## 7. CLAIM OF INEVITABILITY

*'Who was I to stop the killing?'*<sup>66</sup>  
*'The time for Tutsis was over.'*<sup>67</sup>  
*'The people were supposed to die. I heard about people killing on the radio.'*<sup>68</sup>  
*'One person could not stop this.'*<sup>69</sup>  
*'My participation didn't mean much — those people would have been  
 killed even if I had done nothing.'*<sup>70</sup>  
*'I had no power to prevent the genocide.'*<sup>71</sup>

This common technique of neutralization is grounded in perceived impotence: 'the crime was going to occur whether or not I participated, so my contribution to the criminal endeavour made no difference whatsoever'. The perpetrator also believes that the consequences of their decision to participate are reduced because they lacked the power to stop the genocide from occurring. In Rwanda, 88.7% of the perpetrators interviewed for this study reported that they believed, at the time, that the victims would be killed whether or not they participated. Such beliefs further erode perpetrator agency and reduce the perceived magnitude of harmful acts (even though genocide is ultimately the product of many individual acts). As a state crime, driven by state power, genocide ensures that the alienation of individuals from a sense of agency is both profound and ubiquitous. In Rwanda, genocide was accomplished through mass participation and public acts of violence. These acts were in consonance with the objectives of the interim regime, even while the regime was at times unable to maintain complete control over the militias. The claim of inevitability is driven by asymmetries of power, particularly that of the state and the resulting power differential between perpetrators and victims.

## 8. CLAIM OF RELATIVE ACCEPTABILITY

The claim of relative acceptability re-frames the perpetrator's actions as being less deviant because they are less harmful than the alternatives. The claim includes two different sub-techniques: the lesser harm — my violence was less extreme than that of others, so I am less morally culpable and less evil and killing as compassion (mercy killing) — I am killing the victims to save them from future suffering. For example, a

66 Interview R01 (Rwanda), Kigali Central Prison, July 2009.

67 Interview R02 (Rwanda), Kigali Central Prison, July 2009.

68 Interview R18 (Rwanda), Ruhengeri Prison, August 2009.

69 Interview R39 (Rwanda), Nyarusenge TIG Camp.

70 Interview R62 (Rwanda), Mont Kigali TIG Camp, October 2009.

71 Interview R76 (Rwanda), Kigali Central Prison, October 2009.

Rwandan perpetrator argued that his killing was more compassionate than that of his colleagues, because he used a gun rather than the hammers and knives other perpetrators were using.<sup>72</sup> By means of this exonerating comparison, to use Bandura's term, killing is presented as an act of mercy, albeit through an additional gendered lens.

Killing as compassion transforms the acts of the perpetrator from cruel to kind. For instance, at the Józefów massacre, one man who shot only children argued, 'I reasoned with myself that after all without its mother the child could not live any longer. It was...soothing to my conscience to release children unable to live without their mothers'.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, in Rwanda, when mother of six children Juliana Mukankwaya bludgeoned other children to death, 'she was doing the children a favour, because they were orphans who faced a hard life'.<sup>74</sup> Numerous examples of mercy killing are also found in the testimonies of Nazi doctors who participated in the Holocaust.<sup>75</sup>

It seems the claim of relative acceptability is almost universal. Fully 96.6% of the perpetrators I interviewed in Rwanda maintained that other people committed worse crimes than they had. This finding is also consistent with my comparative interviews outside Rwanda. Mercy killing occurs regularly but more rarely. In Rwanda, around a quarter of my respondents reported that it was better for them to kill victims quickly to prevent them from being tortured by someone else, with one perpetrator reporting, 'we thought that if we didn't kill these people they would be more cruelly killed by the *Interahamwe*'.<sup>76</sup>

## 9. CLAIM OF INNER OPPOSITION

The claim of inner opposition acknowledges that an individual participated in violence, but did so in a state of inner opposition. While one still bears responsibility, this is reduced, along with its moral cost, because one did not participate eagerly. In other words, one may perform a criminal act with a criminal mind, but supposedly without a criminal heart. In fact, such criminal conduct, some perpetrators assert, may be merely a ruse intended to dupe the real criminals. An upper mid-level perpetrator in Rwanda argued that, 'I had to show them I was together with them but I didn't necessarily support them'.<sup>77</sup> The claim of inner opposition is also especially prevalent as a rationalization after the fact. Compliance in spite of inner opposition is embedded

72 Interview R4 (Rwanda), Kigali Central Prison, July 2009.

73 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper, 1998), p. 73.

74 Roy F. Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (New York: Freeman, 1997), p. 308.

75 See, for example, Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

76 Interview R37 (Rwanda), Rwaza TIG Camp, August 2009.

77 Interview R17 (Rwanda), Gitarama Prison, July 2009.

in hierarchical institutional structures; indeed, low-level perpetrators are sometimes explicitly absolved of responsibility for their actions.

#### 10. DENIAL OF AUTONOMY

*'I did not kill anybody. [...] The group I was in killed those six victims.'*<sup>78</sup>

The final technique of neutralization is perhaps the most extreme. In denying autonomy, the perpetrator completely denies his or her role in the violence, and instead claims: 'I did not kill — the group killed.' The individual perpetrator self-objectifies in order to remove their agency and moral culpability. For example, a Rwandan perpetrator denied having killed but, when pressed, responded, 'they were killed by us. It's not the same'.<sup>79</sup> The term 'igitero' (meaning a group of people assembled to launch an attack) was often used by Rwandan perpetrators to describe their collective attacks, with violence often being attributed to the group, rather than the individual: 'That *igitero* cut his wife on different parts of her body, and she died after three days'.<sup>80</sup> Group attacks in Rwanda also reduced the risk of spiritual contamination posed by touching the blood of the victim.<sup>81</sup>

The denial of autonomy is consistent with Sigmund Freud and Gustave Le Bon's views on crowd psychology, wherein the individual ceases to exist and cedes all rationality to the crowd. This perspective is probably overly-simplistic — the individual still feels autonomous and rational — but the larger the crowd, the easier it is for an individual to deny their own agency.<sup>82</sup> Much of the violence in the Rwandan genocide was perpetrated by crowds. Based on information gathered in the course of my interviews, it would seem that, generally speaking, the spatial position of perpetrators in the crowd roughly correlates with their level of motivation. The most extreme and eager perpetrators were at the forefront and bore the brunt of moral responsibility. Drifters, on the other hand, who lingered around the fringes of crowds, felt less morally responsible. According to one perpetrator, 'when I was in the group the last person did not use to kill the victims, but the first people, the ones who were in the

78 Interview R70 (Rwanda), Hindiro TIG Camp, October 2009.

79 Interview R30 (Rwanda), Butare, August 2009.

80 Charles Mironko, 'Igitero: Means and Motive in the Rwandan Genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 6 (2004), 47–60 (pp. 51, 54).

81 Jessee, p. 169.

82 Latane and Darley, for example, conclude that individuals are much less likely to feel responsible as independent agents when in a group. See Bibb Latane and John Darley, *The Unresponsive Bystander: Why Doesn't He Help?* (New York: Appleton, 1970). Stephen Reicher also provides a good overview of theories of crowd dynamics in 'The Psychology of Crowd Dynamics', in *The Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes*, ed. by Michael A. Hogg and R. Scott Tindale (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

front, were the ones who killed the victims'.<sup>83</sup> Groups diffuse responsibility and contribute to de-individuation, the reduction of individuality in favour of the group. The wearing of uniforms or hoods also greatly increases the de-individuation effect.

## Assessing the Techniques of Neutralization

It is difficult to determine whether the techniques of neutralization are merely *post facto* rationalizations. When conducting interviews after the fact, it can be difficult to determine whether perpetrator neutralization derives from alignment with contemporary social expectations, general tendencies to minimize moral guilt, or processes originating during the genocide itself. Excuse-making may also allow perpetrators to indicate to their audience that they remain aligned with the universal social order, even though they may have violated it.<sup>84</sup> There is a possibility that the interview subjects in Rwanda developed a kind of master-narrative through their close interaction in prison, and their participation in indoctrination programs such as *Ingando*.<sup>85</sup> Their reproduction of these narratives may have been a result of internalization or a self-interested desire to produce socially-acceptable discourses. Indeed, the narratives of perpetrators about their past transgressions are shaped by the society that they presently inhabit. Therefore, such narratives must be examined critically, and, where possible, corroborated. Some theorists also posit that rationalizations indicate that perpetrators feel their victims are owed an explanation.<sup>86</sup> This need would not exist without universal prohibitions on killing.

Yet such theorizing minimizes the possible pre-perpetration effects of neutralization. There is considerable empirical support for the effects of neutralization prior to perpetration, including longitudinal studies (which examine the same individuals through time).<sup>87</sup> Based on the evidence at hand, it seems that techniques of neutralization can contribute to the production of social distance and to the perpetrator's quest for consistency and coherence during periods of moral rupture. Perhaps neutralization reflects a tendency to minimize moral guilt and to avoid guilt-inducing actions. But the specific forms such neutralization takes are often dictated by ideology and social structures.<sup>88</sup>

83 Interview R60 (Rwanda), Mont Kigali TIG Camp, October 2009.

84 Maruna and Copes, p. 252.

85 Mironko, p. 50.

86 Maruna and Copes, p. 253.

87 Alvarez, p. 139-178.

88 This tendency to minimize moral and legal guilt has been shown in numerous studies, including one that demonstrated, through anonymous personal histories, that child molesters grossly underreported their crimes even after conviction. See Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Worse than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), p. 171.

A particularly strong correlation exists between the techniques of neutralization and propaganda narratives. Propaganda often communicates that the enemy is inhuman, hidden, foreign, barbaric, and implacable. These discourses facilitate the denial of humanity and denial of the victim. Propaganda also often communicates the need for perpetrators to band together, while also impressing upon perpetrators that violence is normal, inevitable, and committed by the group rather than individuals. The reduction of moral costs also flows partly from propaganda narratives, but is additionally located in institutional structures that facilitate moral disengagement and an externalization of personal responsibility. These structures also limit the perceived range of available alternatives. However, we can also hypothesize that direct invocation of ideological justifications ('I killed the Tutsis because they were evil') would be the narratives most intimately linked to the moral context at the time of perpetration, and are therefore the likeliest to disappear after perpetration.

The question is whether transgression would occur without neutralization. Although no linear causality can be shown, the findings indicate that transgression is eased or even erased by the enabling moral environment provided by state ideology (messages of inspiration and authorization). This ideology of motive, when combined with a genocidal infrastructure, can be difficult to resist. It is also important to note that neutralization is, to some degree, normal. As Maruna and Copes note, 'taking full responsibility for every personal failing does not make a person "normal", it makes them extraordinary (and possibly at risk of depression)'.<sup>89</sup> This statement may be truer for techniques that reduce moral costs than for those that reverse morality — the complete denial of the victim, or of their humanity, is not 'normal'.

A feedback loop is evident in moral neutralization. The criminal act is legitimized by propaganda (vocabularies of motive), but perpetration also creates the need for propaganda (rationalization). Eric Hoffer correctly notes that, 'we cannot pity those we have wronged, nor can we be indifferent towards them. We must hate and persecute them or else leave the door open to self-contempt'.<sup>90</sup> This tendency is a function of our egoistic perspective of the world. Such self-justification may contribute to a restructuring of morality. The more a goal becomes part of one's self-definition, the more it is transformed into a psychological need.<sup>91</sup> For a technique of neutralization to be effective, it must have plausibility, and perpetrators must have a strong will to

89 Maruna and Copes, p. 227.

90 Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), p. 95–96.

91 Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 15.

believe.<sup>92</sup> Thus, neutralization ‘enables crime but it does not require it’ — the will of the perpetrator remains important.<sup>93</sup>

Neutralization serves an important function in allowing perpetrators to remain ‘committed to the dominant normative system’ while conforming with ‘imperatives that violations are acceptable if not right’.<sup>94</sup> This maintenance of ties to the dominant normative system is a crucial factor in the perpetration of genocide. The techniques emphasized vary case by case, in relation to public discourses; moreover, individuals will draw upon narratives which most resonate with their own experience and perspective. The techniques not only resolve moral conflicts, but also conventionalize killing and render it comprehensible.

*Post facto* systems of denial flow directly from deniability during perpetration. These systems of denial are characterized by deceptive planning and implementation, including the use of euphemisms and coded commands, the concealment of human remains, and the destruction of incriminating orders.<sup>95</sup> Such denials draw on ‘shared cultural vocabularies’ — collusion between people (often within organizations) to back up each other’s denials.<sup>96</sup> The facts are not completely ignored, but their meaning is altered. These systems of denial function best when we are not even aware of them. Perpetrators effectively hide from the implications of their actions: present and future, personal and societal.

The law ‘contains the seeds of its own neutralization’ — in the form of justifications and excuses.<sup>97</sup> Certain techniques of neutralization do conform roughly to criminal defence strategies, such as the claim of universal evil with *tu quoque*, denial of responsibility with duress or intoxication, and denial of the victim with subjective self-defence.

## Subcultural Narratives in Genocide

It is important to note that the discourses used by perpetrators to describe their acts are highly dependent on the context in which they are speaking. They relate partly to the overall post-genocide context — who is held responsible for the acts of atrocity? What is the collective memory narrative? In violent subcultures, perpetrators may neutralize being good rather than being bad. These perpetrators have already rejected

92 Baumeister, p. 307.

93 W. William Minor, ‘Techniques of Neutralization: A Reconceptualization and Empirical Examination’, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 18 (July 1981), 295–318.

94 Sykes and Matza, p. 667.

95 Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 14.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

97 Matza, p. 61.

conventional values (at least to some degree); thus, the incentives are greater to celebrate behaviour that is conventionally viewed as wrong (like killing) and to neutralize conventionally good behaviour (such as showing empathy towards others).

Discourses that may be subcultural at one point, such as those espoused by the Nazi Party in Germany before they assumed power, may eventually become conventional as they are mainstreamed and normalized through state power and propaganda. We cannot assume that all perpetrators will feel the pull of conventional values. In other words, not all perpetrators will experience a state of cognitive dissonance requiring neutralization. Some perpetrators reject conventional values by killing, and indeed some have rejected conventional values even before they kill. This may be especially true for killers in transgressive communities, groups unified by shared transgression, such as the *Interahamwe*. Such groups often recruit from criminal ranks (though this does not seem to be the case in Rwanda).

The moral context of genocidal states is not always completely coherent, much less universally understood or adhered to. Even as the state attempts to reduce individual variance through consistent messaging and institutional structures, moral norms unique to specific subcultural groups still remain. In armed forces, restraint could reflect standards of professionalism, but such organizations could conversely use violence in ways proscribed for civilians. Moreover, individuals in contexts where violence is mainstreamed may not see themselves as active perpetrators of violence, while individuals in deviant subcultures may celebrate their acts of violence.<sup>98</sup> The layering of violence in society — from transgressive communities to soldiers to civilian perpetrators to supportive bystanders — mirrors the layering of moral norms. Although there are often overarching principles (e.g. those communicated through state propaganda), norms are not understood uniformly across society. There are processes of individual translation present, and groups often establish their own norms and interpretations of overarching norms.

## Conclusion: Tools of Adaptation

The techniques of neutralization are a crucial link between ideology and action. As tools of adaptation, they have allowed Rwandan perpetrators to adjust to an evolved moral context, thereby maintaining their adherence to state authority and ties to the political community, both during and after genocide. Paradoxically, perpetration involves contravening fundamental values (such as the prohibition of killing) which contribute to self-image. Yet this occurs, in part, to maintain ties to the group, which

98 Katherine Blee's work on the Ku Klux Klan is informative here. See Kathleen M. Blee, 'Questions of Methods and Ethics in the Study of U.S. White Supremacists', Paper for Approaching Perpetrators Workshop, May 14–16, University of British Columbia, p. 6.

is another fundamental facet of self-image (the mirror self). Moreover, the groups involved in genocide (racial, ethnic, national, and religious) tend to be ascribed at birth and relatively fixed, with the possible exception of religious groups. Isolation from one's own group, particularly in the highly polarized context of genocide, is not only tremendously stressful but potentially lethal.<sup>99</sup>

Consider also that, by means of propaganda and techniques of neutralization, the in-group seeks to persuade its members that previously held moral rules are no longer applicable. Ultimately, it becomes easier to neutralize or ignore old moral norms than to isolate oneself from the group. When confronted by overwhelming social pressures, and sometimes intimidation by the state, most perpetrators will seek rationalizations to ensure they maintain a consistent sense of self in the face of profound upheaval. Moral neutralization, therefore, facilitates perpetrator alignment with the dominant moral system both during and after genocide. During genocide, this alignment may involve committing, justifying, and excusing violent acts, while after genocide, when perpetrators lose power, alignment requires distancing oneself from an act through the mitigation of moral costs.

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<sup>99</sup> In some cases, this isolation may arise from circumstances beyond personal choice. For example, individuals who may be 'stranded' between groups due to intermarriage.

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