

Rescue Efforts during Genocide in Rwanda

“I Decided to Save Them”: Factors That Shaped Participation in Rescue Efforts during Genocide in Rwanda

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Collective action scholars have long examined why people choose to participate in social movements. This article argues that this body of scholarship can be productively applied to understanding rescue efforts during genocide, which have typically been associated with altruism and other psychological explanations. We analyze the case of Rwanda, where people worked collectively to save Tutsi from the violence that swept across the country in 1994, and ask: What social factors shaped Rwandans' decisions and abilities to save persecuted individuals? To address this question, we draw upon 35 in-depth interviews and a survey of 273 individuals who participated in rescue efforts, which constitutes one of the largest samples of rescue efforts to date. Although much previous literature has emphasized the role of stable personality traits in influencing such high-risk decisions, conceptualizing rescue as dynamic collective action enables us to examine social and contextual factors. Specifically, we illustrate how biographical availability, socialization, and situational contexts may influence rescue efforts. These findings contribute to scholarship on high-risk, clandestine collective action by illuminating how a combination of factors, including biographical availability, socialization, and situational contexts, coalesce to make rescue possible. As such, these findings inform our understanding of collective action that resulted in thousands of individuals being spared from torture, sexualized violence, and death.

Introduction

In the early weeks of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, Hutu militias asked Pastor Augustine¹ to use his authority as a Hutu religious leader to assemble Tutsi so that they could be killed. Rather than acquiescing to this request—which likely would have afforded him and his family safety—he refused to participate in the

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genocide and instead began rescuing Tutsi. Augustine hid hundreds of people in his home, his church, and inside deep holes used as toilets. Militias repeatedly threatened him and his family as he performed these rescues, but he continued helping others with the assistance of his family and fellow church members, ultimately saving over 300 lives.

Augustine's actions were atypical considering that the majority decided not to help those targeted during the genocide. Previous scholarship on rescue has accordingly emphasized the seemingly uncommon psychological characteristics of those who rescue, with many scholars arguing in favor of what has become known as an altruistic personality (e.g., [Oliner and Oliner 1992](#)). While psychological traits are undoubtedly important, this article contends that rescue efforts should be theorized as collective action, drawing on and contributing to theories of mobilization and social movement participation. Specifically, we ask: What *social* factors shaped Rwandans' decisions and abilities to save persecuted individuals?

Relying on 35 in-depth interviews and a survey of 273 Rwandans who engaged in rescue efforts, we suggest that rescue during genocide can be understood as collective action, contributing to a line of sociological inquiry exploring the pivotal question of what makes collective action possible ([Gross 1994](#); [Tarrow 1994](#)). Rescue efforts in Rwanda provide a theoretically rich case study of high-risk collective action because those engaging in rescue did so through covert, coordinated actions in an extremely repressive environment. Indeed, Augustine, his family, and his fellow churchgoers hid their joint attempts to save Tutsi, and these clandestine actions depart from existing scholarship's emphasis on *public* collective action. Augustine's efforts also exposed him and his family to the Hutu militias that targeted people who rescued Tutsi. This analysis consequently contributes to scholarship on collective action in repressive and/or authoritarian settings and heeds calls for research on collective action in high-risk situations (e.g., [Einwohner 2006](#); [McAdam et al. 2005](#)).

We begin by briefly examining previous scholarship on rescue, which has generally conceptualized rescuers as a discrete category of individuals and relied heavily upon stable personality traits to explain their actions ([Monroe 2008](#); [Staub 1993](#); [Varese and Yaish 2005](#)). Next, we address social movement theories of participation and mobilization, theorizing rescue as a dynamic form of collective *action* rather than as a category of actor. After describing our interview and survey data, we then illustrate how social factors—including biographical availability, socialization, and situational contexts—have the potential to shape high-risk rescue efforts that can ultimately save thousands of lives.

Theorizing Rescue as Collective Action

Scholarship on Rescue Efforts

Scholarship on rescuers—also known as upstanders or the “Righteous Among the Nations”²—dates back to the Holocaust ([Hilberg 1992](#)). As Nazis were executing “undesirables” throughout Europe, civilians in numerous countries risked their lives to save others. Rescue efforts have also taken place during many other

episodes of mass violence—such as in Argentina (e.g., Casiro 2006), Armenia (e.g., Hovannisian 1992), and Bosnia-Herzegovina (e.g., Campbell 2010)—though these efforts remain understudied. In fact, rescue is not mentioned in recent reviews of genocide scholarship (Finkel and Straus 2012; Karstedt 2013; Owens, Su, and Snow 2013), and existing work on rescue has focused on the Holocaust.

This small but growing body of scholarship has generally examined rescuers as a category of individuals and has consequently emphasized personality traits. In *The Altruistic Personality*, Oliner and Oliner (1992) compare 406 rescuers and 126 bystanders, concluding that rescuers were distinguished by ethical values of care and inclusiveness. Midlarsky and colleagues (2005) likewise suggest that positive personality characteristics associated with prosocial and altruistic action differentiate those who rescue. Tec (1986, 2013) similarly posits that rescuers (specifically those who do not accept any form of payment) have high levels of individuality and display commitments to helping people in need, and many other scholars highlight the role of altruism and related personality traits.³

However, recent scholarship has suggested that actors and actions during genocide should be disaggregated (e.g., Campbell 2010; Fujii 2009; Luft 2015), as delineating types of actors based on their actions—like rescuers, bystanders, or perpetrators—precludes the possibility of multifaceted behavior. Fujii (2009) shows, for instance, that some Rwandans participated in violence even though they also participated in acts of rescue, casting doubt on the sufficiency of accounts that conceptualize rescuers as a type of person. Arguing that rescue actions are collective in nature, we therefore turn to research on collective action, which considers joint expressions of individual actions and agency within the context of structural forces.

Rescue as Collective Action

Collective action, which occurs when a group of people act in order to achieve a common goal, is typically analyzed by examining traditional social movements, such as the American civil rights and anti-war movements (McAdam 1986; Tarrow 1994). As McAdam and colleagues (2005, 2) explain, treating these social movements as the norm “tends to equate movements with (a) disruptive protest in public settings, (b) loosely-coordinated national struggles over political issues, (c) urban and/or campus-based protest activities, and (d) claims making by disadvantaged minorities.” This can, in turn, lead to a limited understanding of collective action, and scholars have consequently called for broader conceptualizations that incorporate both nonviolent (Polletta 1999) and violent (e.g., Wood 2003) movements. These calls have likewise highlighted that collective action can occur in much more repressive and clandestine settings than those that characterized American social movements of the 1960s (Einwohner 2006).

Extending this scholarship, we argue that rescue is a form of collective action and that social movement theory regarding participation in collective action can accordingly inform understandings of rescue efforts. We conceptualize collective action as distinguished by several key characteristics. First, it is *action* and thus involves participation in pursuit of a shared goal. The actions that constitute

collective action vary widely, however. For instance, scholars have theorized participation in violence, such as counterinsurgencies or genocide, as collective action (Hagan and Rymond-Richmond 2008; Wood 2003). Studies of social movements have deemed attending protests or registering people to vote as collective action (McAdam 1986; Schussman and Soule 2005), and new scholarship has even theorized digital collective action through analyses of Twitter, blogs, or digital networking (McDonald 2015). Notably, these actions are sustained over varying lengths of time. Participating in a singular protest may take a few hours, while prolonged engagement in collective action campaigns could last months (e.g., Freedom Summer) or even years (e.g., counterinsurgencies).

Second, it is *collective* action. Tilly (2003, 4) suggests that collective action excludes purely individual acts and is instead undertaken by two or more individuals. Studies of collective action have accordingly examined small groups, such as Animal Liberation Front cells (Pellow 2014), as well as comparatively large efforts, such as the tens of thousands of people who protested during the Arab Spring (Lynch 2014). These collectivities vary in terms of coordination among the actors involved, with brawls as an example of low coordination and gang violence as an example of high coordination (Tilly 2003).

As with these other forms of collective action, rescue efforts vary both in terms of the actions employed and their level of sustainment over time, as well as the level of coordination between actors. Previously documented rescue efforts have involved many forms of action, ranging from providing safe passage during a single evening or hiding someone in one's home for months, years, or even a lifetime, as was the case for some British families who took in Jewish children in the rescue effort known as Kindertransport (Fast 2010).

Importantly, these actions are almost always collective. At times a family chooses to rescue via a joint decision between spouses—sometimes through a spontaneous decision when someone shows up at their door or through a premeditated plan (Oliner and Oliner 1992; Varese and Yaish 2000). Other times rescue efforts unfold through vast, coordinated networks like the Hechalutz youth network, which smuggled hundreds of Jewish individuals into France, Spain, and Switzerland during the Holocaust (Oliner and Oliner 1992).

Rescue efforts could also be seen as part of a broader collective movement that opposes genocide. These acts could thus be conceptualized as *reactive* collective action, much like human rights movements that emerge in response to abuses (Loveman 1998). Yet, genocide's repressive setting means that those engaging in rescue efforts cannot coalesce into a public social movement that openly resists the government and utilizes traditional communication mechanisms (Einwohner 2003; Johnston 2005). Indeed, Johnston (2006) argues that collective action and claims making is often "smaller" in repressive states due to the high risk, while Scott (2008) suggests that rather than seeing resistance as organization, it is important to consider the less visible forms of resistance practiced every day. Nevertheless, some rescue efforts—like those undertaken by people who also participate in the violence—may not constitute resistance from the standpoint of the individual engaging in them, aligning with other actions undertaken by

individuals with personal motivations rather than a sense of shared interests (McPhail 1991; Palmer 2014).

We thus examine rescue efforts as a case of collective action, and we draw upon theories of collective action to assess the social factors that shaped Rwandans' decisions and abilities to save persecuted individuals. Although we analyzed our data for the presence of themes aligning with theories developed to understand participation in traditional social movements (like framing, resource mobilization, and political process theory—see Walder [2009]), we contend that some social movement theories are less applicable in the case of rescue during genocide because the repressive setting requires clandestine, high-risk collective action. Instead, we focus on three major factors associated with collective action that emerged from our data: biographical availability, socialization, and the situational context.

Biographical Availability

Biographical availability pertains to the responsibilities a person has (such as a job or children) that shape their availability to participate in collective action. While biographical availability is notably tied to individual characteristics, it differs from psychological factors because biographical characteristics are relational and contingent on social situations. For instance, McAdam's (1986) seminal study found that students who participated in the Freedom Summer movement in Mississippi did not have financial or familial obligations and were, therefore, able to leave for the summer.

Biographical availability has long been theorized as a core aspect of social movement mobilization, though scholars have debated whether and which demographic factors influence action, with recent work finding that characteristics differ by movement (Brown and Brown 2003; Nepstad and Smith 1999), population (Corrigan-Brown et al. 2009), and over time (Schussman and Soule 2005). For instance, some scholarship finds that younger people participate in social movements at higher rates (Dalton 2006), which may be linked to age-graded social controls since younger individuals are less likely to be married, hold steady employment, or have children. Nevertheless, other work argues that increased age may facilitate participation in collective action, especially when participation is framed around unique cultural identities that are associated with privilege (Sherkat and Blocker 1994). Much literature also points toward the varying effects of socioeconomic status and employment on mobilization, participation, and retention (Winston 2013).

Biographical availability can also shape a person's identity as well as others' expectations of them. Accordingly, scholarship has highlighted how identity shapes collective action (Loveman 1998; Walder 2009). For example, participants have deployed critical identities like "mother," "activist," "peasant," and "youth" in El Salvador's guerrilla movement (Viterna 2013), and Irons (1998) observed differing motivations for Black and white women's participation in the Civil Rights Movement.

Taken together, this scholarship suggests that relational individual characteristics matter, differing significantly from existing work on rescue efforts that emphasizes personality traits. As the prominence of biographical availability in studies of

collective action suggests its potential importance for understanding high-risk action, we examine the concept here as it relates to rescuers (Dalton 2006; Goodwin 1997; Schussman and Soule 2005). Yet, studies of high-risk collective action caution that although relational characteristics can facilitate activism, they cannot fully explain action (Nepstad and Smith 1999). We thus turn toward socialization.

Socialization

Socialization involves the social dynamics of one's upbringing and subsequent experiences that influence the internalization of norms, such as the gendered or class expectations resulting from one's family, community, culture, or religion. We thus conceptualize socialization as a dialectical relationship between an individual and their social worlds, rather than a passive process in which an individual is the recipient of beliefs, values, or interpretations and lacks agency. Unlike theoretical perspectives that view personality traits as stable, this conceptualization emphasizes the social processes by which someone may acquire a particular worldview that facilitates participation in high-risk collective action.

Although less central in social movement scholarship, scholars have argued that socialization can influence participation in high-risk protest activities by providing normative orientations toward or against political participation (McAdam 1986; Sherkat and Blocker 1994). Religious socialization and parental involvement in politics have been cited as particularly salient factors that may be associated with participation in social movements (Brown and Brown 2003; Loveman 1998; Spellings, Olsen, and Barber 2012).⁴ Such socialization often influences attitudinal affinity toward a cause (McAdam 2003, 62), which can stem from a socially constructed sense of concern over a threat or grievance (Berry 2015). In fact, recruitment to high-risk activism may be strongly linked to an intense ideological identification with the values of a movement or a cause, which may justify high-risk actions (Loveman 1998; McAdam 1986; Nepstad and Smith 2001).

Some scholars have also analyzed religion as a motivation for rescue actions (e.g., Gross 1994), though much of this work emphasizes membership in a particular religious community rather than socialization itself. This scholarship has suggested that minority religious groups may be particularly inclined to rescue due to their identification as minorities (Hoffman 2001). More recent work has likewise argued that minority religious groups may be better positioned to develop clandestine networks (Braun 2016), indicating that past socialization is deeply intertwined with the present-day social networks. This brings us to the third and final factor we examine—the situational context.

Situational Context

We conceptualize the situational context as the specific spatial and temporal factors affording an individual the chance to act, including opportunities and social ties. In line with political process theory's emphasis on macro-level political opportunities (McAdam 1982), micro-level studies of mobilization highlight the importance of perceived opportunities for action (Klandermans 1984). Bosi and

Della Porta (2012) argue that the escalation of political conflict may influence mobilization into armed groups, while Luft's (2015, 159) work on contradictory behavior during genocide finds that decisions to rescue were "heavily mediated" by context. This suggests that the events in one's immediate social surroundings may influence the opportunity and subsequent decision to participate in high-risk collective action.

The situational context is deeply connected to social networks, which scholars argue are the basis through which movement ideologies spread and new actors are recruited (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988). In fact, the presence of supportive social ties is one of the most consistent predictors of recruitment to and sustained participation in high-risk activism (Spellings, Olsen, and Barber 2012). Nepstad and Smith (1999) indicate, for instance, that individuals who participated in a high-risk peace campaign in Nicaragua were primarily recruited into activism through organizational and relational ties.

Scholarship on rescue efforts has likewise noted the importance of opportunity and social ties. Some studies that prioritize psychological characteristics acknowledge the impact of social situations, such as risk level and urgency (e.g., Oliner and Oliner 1992; Staub 1993), and others highlight the importance of simply being asked to rescue (e.g., Fagin-Jones and Midlarsky 2007; Varese and Yaish 2000). Yet, the majority of these studies ultimately argue that personality traits wield the most salient influence on decisions to rescue.

Finally, emerging scholarship emphasizes the role of social networks. For instance, Braun's (2016) analysis of rescue efforts during the Holocaust illustrates how church networks facilitated evasion, suggesting that supportive social networks may influence participation in rescue efforts. Other scholarship focuses on social ties with those in need of rescue. Specifically, people may be particularly inclined to rescue friends (Casiro 2006) or those to whom they have intimate (e.g., marriage) or functional (e.g., work relationship) ties (Block and Drucker 1992). These ties may also act as a gateway to other rescues (e.g., Tec 1986). We thus examine how biographical availability, socialization, and the situational context coalesce to make rescue possible.

Case Background and Methodology

Operationalizing Rescue Efforts in the Case of Rwanda

To examine the social factors that shape rescue efforts, we explore the case of Rwanda. On April 6, 1994, unknown assailants shot down Rwandan president Habyarimana's plane as it was landing in Rwanda's capital city. This assassination followed decades of tension between Rwanda's two main ethnic groups, the Hutu and the Tutsi, as well as a civil war, an economic downturn, and much social unrest. This assassination also signaled a shifting political opportunity structure, with targeted killing beginning a few hours afterward. Radio broadcasts and local leaders urged all Hutu to kill Tutsi. Many people listened, including army officials, political leaders, and numerous civilians throughout Rwanda (Straus 2006). Several months later, up to one million people had been killed,⁵ and millions were displaced.

In this article, we focus on efforts to save Tutsi during the genocide. We consider a wide range of rescue efforts, including failed rescues, such as if someone attempted rescue but was not able to save an individual due to external circumstances (e.g., a neighbor found out she was hiding a Tutsi). Our emphasis on *actions of rescue* rather than on *rescuers* enables us to include not only those who rescued but also individuals who rescued as well as engaged in genocidal acts by killing, looting, or providing information on where to find Tutsi.

Our conceptualization of rescue actions departs from the government of Rwanda's definition of rescue, which designates *people* as rescuers. In order to be deemed a rescuer by the government, one must have committed an act of rescue but also could not have committed any dishonest or genocidal acts during the genocide. Although this definition aligns with previous scholarship that emphasizes rescuers as actors, it nevertheless ignores the complexities inherent in social action.⁶ We thus utilize a broader conceptualization of rescue actions, drawing upon interview and survey data.

In-Depth Interviews

We rely upon 35 in-depth interviews with people who participated in rescue efforts in Rwanda. Working with translators, we conducted the majority of the interviews between 2012 and 2016, while a trained research assistant conducted several more, as further explained below. We identified interviewees in several ways. First, we located 16 interviewees through IBUKA, an umbrella organization that provides services to genocide survivors. IBUKA adheres to the government definition of rescue and thoroughly vets stories of rescue. While we do not bind ourselves by this definition, IBUKA remained an important resource because it has sought to document rescue actions across the country and because including acts committed by those who only rescued diversified our sample. Second, we located eight individuals who engaged in rescue acts through a reconciliation program at a memorial in central Rwanda. This program used testimony as a reconciliatory tool and likewise adhered to the government definition of rescue. Finally, we drew upon 11 interviews conducted by the second author through part of a separate project (see [Nyseth Brehm, Smith, and Gertz, 2018](#)). This project involved interviews with people who served as judges, witnesses, or defendants in the post-genocide *gacaca*⁷ courts. Three of the individuals who were judges, as well as two witnesses, shared stories of rescue. Additionally, six of the randomly selected defendants also shared stories of rescue, meaning that they likely engaged in rescuing and in genocidal crime, like killing, looting, or standing at a checkpoint.⁸

We conducted these 35 interviews in four out of the five provinces in Rwanda.⁹ Respondents were able to use the language they felt most comfortable with—English, Kinyarwanda, or a combination of the two—and we worked with a translator when interviewing respondents who preferred Kinyarwanda. Our research assistant speaks fluent Kinyarwanda and conducted 10 of the interviews in Kinyarwanda.

Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were semi-structured. We asked questions about whom they saved, the situational context, and why they

rescued. Interviews were then transcribed,¹⁰ imported into Atlas Ti, and coded for emerging themes. As such, it is important to note that the major factors around which we organize the findings—biographical availability, socialization, and the situational context—inductively emerged from the data, though we recognized them from prior reading of social movement scholarship. In a second round of coding, we deductively coded interviews for the presence of factors that would align with major theories of social movement participation, such as political opportunity structure, resource mobilization, or framing.

These data are retrospective, meaning that participants provided accounts for their actions years after these actions occurred. Retrospective data are common in studies of social phenomena (e.g., crimes, fertility decisions), and all studies that rely upon interviews to understand past actions must accord with the fact that narratives of the past are (re)shaped by present-day conditions. Analyzing retrospective data in the case of post-atrocity communities involves paying attention to what Fujii (2010, 232) describes as “meta data,” or how rumors, silences, inaccuracies, or evasions of specific subjects can shed light on dynamics of past violence or present-day political climates. Fujii (2010, 240) stresses the importance of “sustained self-reflection both during and after fieldwork” in such cases, including discussions with local interpreters to gauge puzzling social dynamics. Our research assistants no doubt assisted with this process, and we are cognizant that the stories told by those who rescued are the ones they *wanted to be told* rather than those that may be shared with spouses, counselors, or family members.

Furthermore, stories were likely shaped by how participants interpreted their own experiences as well as by the present-day situation in Rwanda—one of state control over narratives of violence (Longman 2017; Purdeková 2011; Thomson 2013). Discussions regarding ethnicity can be very sensitive in Rwanda (Hintjens 2008) and thus constrained the questions we asked. We consequently spent much time developing rapport with our participants and attempting to gain as much trust as possible in addition to assuring anonymity. In line with Ingelaere’s (2015) recommendation that immersion is vital, we have also each spent considerable time in the country through a combined total of 14 trips, which have resulted in countless informal conversations with Rwandans and much time experiencing daily life while living with Rwandan families.

Finally, one could also suggest that those who engaged in violence discussed (or even falsified) rescue efforts as a technique of neutralization during the interview (see Bryant et al. 2018). Although we cannot be sure, it is important to note that the interviews occurred after people had served their sentences and that references to rescue were often brought up in passing—and then probed by the interviewer—rather than highlighted by the respondent. Additionally, the notion that people engage in both acts of rescue and acts of violence is well supported by previous studies of Rwanda (e.g., Campbell 2010; Fujii 2009; Luft 2015).

Survey of Rescue Efforts

We supplement our interviews with data from a survey that was conducted by Rwandan scholars on behalf of IBUKA, the survivor organization mentioned

above. This study sought to document people who rescued in each of Rwanda's 30 districts, and 273 individuals were interviewed as part of the project in 2009. To locate participants, the survey authors randomly selected two sectors (small regions) within each Rwandan district. Within each sector, they strategically chose four cells (a smaller geographic unit)—the two cells with the largest populations of genocide survivors and the two cells with the smallest. Then, they engaged in focus groups with people who survived the genocide, people who committed violence, community leaders, *gacaca* court judges, religious officials, and others to arrive at lists of people who rescued, again employing a restrictive definition of rescue. The 273¹¹ resulting interviews were brief and included basic questions about the individuals, such as their age at the time of rescue, sex, religious identification, educational background, profession, and motivations. We use these data to supplement our 35 in-depth interviews—especially to assess biographical availability—but remain cognizant that they present an incomplete picture of rescue efforts. We likewise do not claim that our interviews are representative of all rescue efforts but rather highlight commonalities to assess general themes.

Findings: Rescue in Rwanda

Our data illustrate that rescue efforts in Rwanda were typically coordinated actions among several individuals, such as family members, friends, fellow congregants, and neighbors. Numerous individuals report hiding Tutsi in their homes or in nearby holes and explained that neighbors helped provide them with food or warned them when militias were approaching. Others worked in groups to develop elaborate plans to help people through roadblocks, to hide people in churches, or to provide safe passage as they fled. In fact, only two of the 35 interviewees engaged in a rescue effort alone.

In what follows, we assess three interconnected social factors that were salient in the narratives of rescue. We begin with biographical availability, which we argue sets the stage for rescue efforts but cannot fully explain participation in high-risk, clandestine collective action. Although biographical availability may run the risk of appearing individualistic, we emphasize how social location shapes decision-making processes. We then turn to religious and familial socialization and the motivations that emerge out of such social processes. Finally, we address the situational context, including the opportunities and present-day social networks that influence situations in which rescue occurred.

Biographical Availability

Because genocide is a chaotic period of turmoil, one could assume that all individuals (or at least all who are not being targeted¹²) are equally biographically available during such chaos. If this were the case, we would expect each person to be equally likely to participate in rescue efforts and the characteristics of these individuals to mirror the general population. While we again caution that our data are not representative, the survey data and our interviews suggest the importance of

Table 1. Biographical Availability of Those Who Engaged in Rescue Compared Against the General Population of Rwanda (1991 Census)

	Survey N = 273	Interviews N = 35	General population N = 7.5 million
Average age	40.0 years	37.0 years	20.8 years
Percent women	18.6 percent	25.7 percent	52.2 percent
Percent farmers	65.7 percent	70.6 percent	88.9 percent

Note: Although the survey had 273 respondents, sex and profession were known for 269, while age was known for 247.

biographical availability, as those engaging in rescue did not mirror the population in terms of age, gender, or socioeconomic status, as seen in table 1.

Individuals in our data reflect a comparatively older age distribution than the general population. Average life expectancy in Rwanda in 1991 was 53.7, and the average age was 20.8, largely due to 30 percent of the population being under age 10 (Census 1991). Yet, 80 percent of the survey respondents were between 26 and 57 in 1994, and their average age was 40 years old. Among the 35 individuals interviewed, the average age was 37, with ages ranging from 21 to 64 in 1994.

Women are comparatively underrepresented in our data. Approximately 20 percent of those surveyed and 29 percent of those interviewed (10 people) were women, compared against 52 percent of the population at the time of the genocide (1991 Census). The survey estimates of women's involvement are conservative, however. Families who were surveyed often rescued together—a theme echoed in our interviews—and when this was the case, IBUKA chose to interview the man as the presumed head of the household and consequently did not take women's roles into consideration.

Our sample had slightly higher than average socioeconomic status. Approximately 66 percent of those interviewed were farmers (23 people), and 71 percent of those surveyed were farmers. Almost 90 percent of adult Rwandans were farmers¹³ at the time of the genocide, indicating that those engaging in rescue may have been more likely to hold formal employment.

Taken together, this information suggests the importance of biographical availability. First, the age distribution of those who engaged in rescue efforts skews older than the general population. This may be linked to agency that accompanies age, as elders in Rwandan society have long been revered and are often able to exert influence within families (Adekunle 2007; Palmer 2014). It may also be linked to age-graded expectations about participation in the violence. Prior to 1994, political elites actively encouraged the formation of youth militias to protect the population against “dangerous” Tutsi. Gendered recruitment efforts targeted young men with no homes or jobs (Des Forges 1999), and men in their early to mid-thirties were prominently represented among those who engaged in violence (Nyseth Brehm, Uggen, and Gasanabo 2016). By contrast, those in their forties, fifties, and beyond arguably faced fewer expectations to participate in efforts to

defend the country against “enemy” Tutsi—which were instead aligned with the expectations of men of “fighting age”—and consequently may have been more biographically available to rescue.

While this could also suggest that women were more biographically available to rescue because they faced fewer societal expectations to commit violence due to gendered norms, women are comparatively underrepresented in our data. In general, men have received more attention for rescue efforts, which may have influenced our interview data. This may also be tied to the marginalization of women in Rwandan society, as they were relatively constrained by the patriarchal structure (see [Burnet \[2012\]](#)). Several women in our sample thus used techniques of what [Boltanski and Thévenot \(2006\)](#) term “regimes of justification” in which they challenged their partner’s passiveness. These women began the justification process by following gender norms and asking permission to rescue before stating the moral imperative to do so.

Finally, our data suggest that socioeconomic status may be associated with participation in rescue efforts, as both survey and interview participants were more likely than members of the general population to hold formal employment. It could be that high-status individuals were able to consider rescue efforts because their basic needs were being met, mirroring privilege that sometimes accompanies participation in collective action ([Sherkat and Blocker 1994](#)). Additionally, one of the most prominent forms of rescue involved hiding someone in one’s home, which implies a certain level of economic well-being. Individuals with homes, as well as eminent individuals who held formal employment, may have consequently been more likely to be approached for help. This aligns with [Oliner and Oliner’s \(1988, 280\)](#) finding that over 50 percent of their sample self-reported average socioeconomic status, while 45 percent owned a house, representing a financially stable group.

Nevertheless, a few respondents also discussed how they were able to rescue with limited means. For instance, Claire explained that “I had a small house but managed to rescue 70 people.” Some participants even remarked that having a modest house protected them because those engaging in violence did not suspect their rescue efforts. Others shared that they did not have enough food but that they were able to make do, suggesting that while socioeconomic status may have been important for many, others chose to engage in rescue despite their limited means.

Socialization

Socialization—which we conceptualize as a process of past social patterns and dynamics shaping present values, interactions, and networks—is also associated with rescue efforts. Participants routinely described how their upbringing and other previous social interactions influenced their decisions. Although numerous forms of socialization were undoubtedly at play, familial and religious socialization were particularly prominent in our data.

Turning first to religion, only three of the 273 individuals surveyed adhered to no religion. Among the rest, 52 percent were Catholic, 20 percent were Adventist, and 16 percent were Pentecostal. Four percent identified with other Protestant denominations, 3 percent were Muslim, and the rest followed other faiths. Among

those we interviewed, the majority reported some level of religiosity or belief in God, even though questions about religious affiliation were not part of the interview. Out of the 35 participants, 15 said they believe in God but did not state whether they identified with a specific religion; two identified as Catholic; four identified as Seventh Day Adventist; five identified as Christian; one identified as “very religious”; and eight did not reference religion or God during the interview. At the time, 63 percent of the country was Catholic, followed by 19 percent Protestant (including Pentecostal), 9 percent Adventist, 7 percent no religion, and 1 percent Muslim (1991 Census). Though these data may thus suggest that religious minorities may have been more likely to rescue, we unfortunately do not have enough data to fully assess this.

Additionally, 14 percent of the individuals surveyed said that faith was the reason for their actions. Twenty of the individuals we interviewed (57 percent) mentioned faith as connected to their rescue actions, referencing values they learned through religious socialization and often invoking a general moral code.¹⁴ Importantly, the interviews highlight that faith is not limited to belief in a higher being—as many previous studies of rescue have suggested—but rather may be important because it shapes belief structures. Augustine, described in the introduction, saw his efforts as aligned with a broader worldview that emphasized equality—a worldview he credited to his faith. Joseph likewise explained, “The Bible says that God created one person, so it is in those teachings that I got to rescue these people. Because we are all one people. I had that spirit of all of us being together as one because we are all human beings.”

Others explained that their belief in God’s “plan” or “strength” provided courage during their riskiest rescue efforts. Claude mentioned that thinking about God “kept him strong enough to continue rescuing people.” Likewise, Claire explained, “It was not my strength; it was God.” This does not mean that those engaging in rescue efforts never experienced fear. Rather, in moments where fear could be paralyzing, their socialization to believe in a divine plan provided them with the strength to act. Participants rarely stated that they did not want to disappoint God or betray their faith but rather spoke of God as making rescue seem possible.

For some respondents, religious socialization may have also created a social buffer from those who recruited others to participate in violence. For example, Seventh Day Adventists spoke of how their religious practices, such as abstinence from alcohol, created a social divide between them and those who participated in the violence. Oliver explained that unlike those who would drink beer in preparation for killing in his community, “In 1994...I was in a section [of Seventh Day Adventists] where [we] were not supposed to eat meat, use sugar, take beers, and many other things. This helped me to distance myself from all people who did that.” Similar processes may have also been at work for those who were socialized as Muslims, as Islam likewise prohibits the consumption of alcohol.

Familial socialization—especially narratives of previous rescue acts—also prominently surfaced in participants’ narratives (though unfortunately the survey did not ask about family socialization). In fact, 20 of the 35 people we interviewed had parents or grandparents who had rescued Tutsi during previous periods of violence in Rwanda. Deborah explained, “My mother rescued three people [in the past], so

I never had that bad heart of not rescuing people when the time came.” Like Deborah, Alphonse noted that his parents “rescued Tutsi and Tutsi properties in 1959...and then gave [the properties] back.” He explained that he derived strength to act because of “what his parents had done in previous years.” Similarly, Samuel remarked that he learned from his grandfather, who hid Tutsi during social upheaval in the 1960s. Pastors Benjamin and Augustine—who each saved hundreds of Tutsi—likewise discussed memories of their parents’ rescue efforts. Pastor Benjamin explained, “In 1959, my father rescued a lot of Tutsi. He never would have killed them.”

Beyond these stories and experiences of past rescue, familial socialization may have shaped decisions through the lessons regarding coexistence. Indeed, all participants referenced growing up in interethnic communities (though this was often the norm in Rwanda), and many mentioned that they had Tutsi neighbors with whom they often interacted. Alfred explained, “Violence started in 1959, when my father was living with a lot of Tutsi and they were living together in peace. My dad used to tell us that ‘we are living with [Tutsi] people in peace,’ [and] that I, too, should live in peace without conflicts with these people.” This instruction from his father resonated in 1994 when his Tutsi neighbors came to him in need of assistance, and he hid them in his house until the genocide ended. Claude similarly noted, “Early in my childhood, I lived with my grandpa, a Hutu who was very rich...He lived peacefully with everyone. He lived with Tutsi, he lived with Twas and Hutu, and...they were living in peace.” Paul likewise remembered his grandfather’s friendships with Tutsi, explaining how his grandfather and a Tutsi man exchanged cows as “a sign of brotherhood.” When the killing began, many of these individuals may have accordingly experienced a “moral shock” or outrage due in part to their familial socialization (Jasper and Poulsen 1995; Loveman 1998), which in turn influenced their decisions to rescue.

Situational Context

Finally, while biographical availability and socialization are important, the situational context compelled individuals to decide whether to rescue. In our sample, few respondents sought out individuals to rescue; rather, they were asked for help. We delineate two important aspects of the situational context: 1) social ties, specifically ties with those asking for help, and ties with other Hutu who could aid rescue efforts; and 2) the community setting, including the level of violence and the presence of active militias.

Participants often knew the person asking them for help. In fact, one-third of the survey respondents participated in rescue efforts because the people they were rescuing were their friends and/or neighbors, which stands in stark contrast to rescue acts during the Holocaust, in which the majority rescued strangers (Oliner and Oliner 1988). Additionally, 32 of the 35 interview participants rescued people they knew, such as family members or friends. Lisette said that she “welcomed them [Tutsi] into my house because they were my neighbors and my friends,” while Seth saved his brother-in-law. Pascal explained that he stumbled upon “a friend of mine who had been shot by soldiers” while out with a killing group. He then decided to

contact his deceased friend's children and hide them, noting that "I had to protect those people." Other participants described saving their friends as "saving my brother" and as something they "had to do" because of their years of friendship or intergenerational friendship.

Others had only weak ties with those that they rescued. Joseph explained:

I heard some people knocking on the door. When I asked who they were, they replied that they were being hunted and people wanted to kill them. I opened my door for them. I recognized that these were my neighbors, not so close, but I recognized them from the area.

Similarly, while Lisette knew the first two groups of people that she rescued, the third group "was a wife and her kid, who was coming from the stadium, and she had escaped after many people were shot." She recognized the wife and child but did not know where from.

As previous research has suggested (Varese and Yaish 2000), being asked to rescue significantly influenced these individuals' initial decisions to rescue. However, rescuing those they knew also became a gateway to rescuing strangers. Alfred explained that after he started hiding his close neighbors and friends, people began to "know him as a rescuer" and would bring more people to him. Joseph shared a similar story, explaining that after he rescued one family, another one came over, mentioning the first family. The word of mouth continued until he had four families living with him, illustrating the role of social ties within the broader social context.

Social ties with other Hutu also may have mattered, as having a supportive social network may have influenced whether some participants felt rescue was possible, in line with theories of social ties and social movements. For example, Alphonse felt able to participate in rescue efforts because he had the help of a neighborhood watch group that was keeping guard at night. While having a neighborhood watch group was likely rare, having the help of friends was not. Benjamin's neighbors helped him when his house became full; he was able to "send some [of the children] to the neighbors" and knew they would be fed and protected. Paul's neighbor likewise provided food for those he rescued. He and his neighbor agreed upon a signal to use when they needed food: "[Those rescued] would throw a stone in the bush one time, and then he would bring the food out. Then one person would come out and get the food the [neighbor] brought."

Neighbors and community members also warned those engaging in rescue efforts when they heard that a militia was approaching. Alice explained, "My neighbor warned me. One of them told me that when they [militia members] come back, they are going to throw grenades among us [at her house]." Agnes similarly stated that neighbors and friends "would warn us that the killers were on their way," which gave Agnes time to move the people she was hiding.

Apart from immediate social ties, the community context of violence may have also shaped decisions to participate in rescue efforts. Violence occurred country-wide, though it started at different times and reached different levels of intensity throughout the genocide. Most immediately, those who participated in violence may have benefited from their social ties with others committing violence, shielding

them from any suspicion of rescue. Jon Claude explained, for instance, that those participating in killing “were not aware that those people [Tutsi] were inside my home.” Relatedly, Pascal explained that he was able to use inside information about where militias would be to tell friends the routes to take to help Tutsi escape. To save a woman and child, Patrick negotiated with people he knew who were committing violence, while Benjamin lied about the ethnic identity of two children he was trying to save, noting, “I lied to those guys who were killing that two of those children were not Tutsi.”

Macro-level patterns in violence may likewise have been associated with rescue efforts. Most notably, several participants reported that they were able to rescue more easily because militias thought their village had been fully “cleansed” of Tutsi. For example, Grace explained that she saved several families because the militias thought they had killed all Tutsi in her village. Oliver, one of the few participants who saved someone he did not know, similarly explained that the killing groups had moved on to another village when he came across a severely wounded man among the dead bodies in the road. Oliver realized the man was still alive and “helped him with some treatment, and he survived.” Thus, Oliver was able to rescue this man in part because violence had ebbed within his community, again highlighting the importance of the social context.

Discussion & Conclusion

The collective efforts to rescue described above were no small feat: securing food for others and hiding people in modest homes were incredible acts of bravery undertaken in a repressive and dangerous environment. Although much previous scholarship has analyzed such acts by emphasizing psychological characteristics like altruism, we argue that rescue is productively conceptualized as collective action. Drawing upon theories of social movement participation and high-risk collective action, we suggest that biographical availability, socialization, and the situational context coalesced in ways that made rescue acts possible.

In line with much social movement research, biographical availability likely set the stage for rescue efforts. In this case, comparatively older men of relatively high socio-economic status may have been more likely to rescue. Socioeconomic status may have had more of a bi-modal distribution, however, in that those with nothing to lose actively rescued (in part) because they had less to sacrifice, while those with comparatively more resources participated because they had the means to facilitate such acts. This is the inverse of [Oliner and Oliner's \(1992\)](#) sample, who identified as neither poor nor wealthy. Again, we suspect that the prominence of men in our sample was a result of methodology rather than a gendered difference in performing rescue acts. Although several women in our sample convinced their husbands to rescue, gendered dynamics may have nonetheless kept others from making a high-cost decision for their families.

Socialization prominently surfaced in our data in two distinct ways. Religious socialization (though not a specific religion) and the resulting worldview were described as a source of strength and a reason for rescuing. Familial socialization was likewise evident, as the majority of respondents remembered family lessons of

peaceful coexistence or recalled that their relatives had rescued during previous periods of turmoil. In fact, 20 of the 35 interviewees described how memories of intergenerational rescue flooded their minds when genocidal violence broke out. These participants imagined themselves as part of a collective of people who act bravely in times of social unrest. Such intergenerational stories of rescue are not unlike other social factors that shape participation in collective action—including previous contact with a social movement participant or prior activism (Fendrich and Lovoy 1988; McAdam 1988)—and they build upon scholarship suggesting that prior exposure to repression influences mobilization against repression in other contexts (Finkel 2015).

Finally, although situational context is not a prominent factor in social movement theory, we conceptualize it as the moment in which biographical availability and socialization interact, enabling a potential rescue to materialize. This context often involved social ties—which are consistently among the most salient factors associated with collective action—along with other aspects of the immediate social situation, such as the level of violence and the presence of active militias. Rescue consequently involves the coalescing of multiple factors and processes, such as having a place to hide people (biographical availability), having experienced a form of socialization that makes rescue feel possible or a decision *not* to rescue feel like a “moral shock” (socialization), as well as the power of social networks in connecting those asking for help with those who could assist (situational context). While salient, biographical availability, socialization, and the situational context are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive. For example, socialization influences present-day social networks, meaning that a situational context may arise in part due to social ties from previous religious or familial socialization.

Although our study is not representative, it nonetheless draws upon the largest survey of rescue efforts in Rwanda. As such, this study contributes to existing scholarship in several core ways. First, we do not restrict our study to those who only engaged in rescue efforts. This departs from much previous scholarship on rescue as well as many studies of social movement participation that assume attendance at an event qualifies someone as a “participant.” Indeed, while much previous scholarship has solely focused on “rescuers,” we also include individuals who engaged in both violence and rescue efforts. This shifts the focus from altruism and other psychological, stagnant characteristics to relational and situational factors.

Second, the three factors we identify may have been more salient in our case—when compared to cases of “traditional” collective action—due to the high-risk, clandestine nature of the actions and the authoritarian environment. Our analysis lends credence to previous studies finding that biographical availability may be particularly important in situations of high-risk collective action (Dalton 2006; Schussman and Soule 2005). It also suggests that additional attention should be paid to socialization, which has been minimally studied in such contexts (Sherkat and Blocker 1994) but surfaced as a particularly prominent factor in this case. This may be because the high stakes associated with action required ideological identification with the values of rescue—ideologies that participants in retrospect attribute to intergenerational memories of rescue and other previous socialization.

Likewise, unlike previous studies, we highlight the precise situational context of the high-risk action, which includes the immediate circumstances of violence. The situational context also includes social ties with others engaging in rescue—in line with previous scholarship that underscores the importance of ties with those in the movement (Spellings, Olsen, and Barber 2012)—as well as ties with those engaging in violence and with those asking for assistance, which provides for a more robust treatment of social ties.

Third, the three factors examined here illustrate that some social movement processes, such as political process models, framing, and resource mobilization, may be less salient in global cases of clandestine collective action. As noted above, we analyzed our interviews for evidence of the explanatory power of these theories but did not find any evidence. Although the opening of political opportunities was important for those who mobilized to commit genocidal violence, there were few structural opportunities that influenced rescue efforts. Framing processes may have likewise been comparatively less possible because rescue acts were not public efforts. The lack of a broad, coordinated movement also meant that a solid base of resources was not available.

This analysis opens many avenues for future research. First, because biographical availability, socialization, and the situational context emerged inductively from the initial coding of our data, we have focused this analysis on established theories of collective action. This was a purposeful decision to examine the utility of existing theories, and future research should thus assess how such theories should be expanded and augmented for the case of rescue or broader cases of intervention. The prominence of socialization in our data provides an especially promising point of departure.

Second, though it was not a part of our study, our interviews suggest that some of these same factors might be associated with the *form* of rescue effort. For instance, socioeconomic status may influence whether one decides (or has the ability) to bribe a potential assailant to keep someone safe. More broadly, the actions we identified were typically undertaken by smaller groups of people rather than by vast networks, and future research could examine whether larger networks existed in Rwanda or if certain factors—such as the relative brevity of the violence—impeded larger clandestine networks from forming. Our analysis also does not consider how factors associated with the impetus to rescue may vary from those that make a rescue effort *successful*. Furthermore, future scholarship should assess differences between instances in which individuals rescue once and instances in which they decide to sustain their rescue efforts over a period of time. These studies should likewise assess the factors that influence some individuals to participate in violence in some instances and engage in rescue in others, which was beyond the scope of this study.

Rescue efforts in Rwanda present a unique case that allows us to gain insight into the dynamic nature of collective action in high-risk clandestine situations. In this case, we highlight a combination of factors, including biographical availability, socialization, and the situational context. As a result, acts of rescue spared thousands of individuals from torture, sexualized violence, and death.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. This phrase specifically denotes non-Jewish individuals who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.
3. Others have emphasized the “banality of good” (e.g., Casiro 2006).
4. These factors may vary by time and place (Petrie 2004).
5. This figure includes Hutu who were killed.
6. There is also no way to know whether some chose to rescue every time rescue was possible.
7. *Gacaca* courts tried suspected *genocidaires*.
8. Out of six respondents who were tried for genocide crimes, four admitted during interviews to committing crimes. The other two alluded to being in prison because of a failed rescue attempt, but did not want to discuss the details of their crimes/behavior outside the specific rescue attempt. For additional information regarding interview methodology, please contact the second author.
9. We did not interview anyone from the Northern Province.
10. We modified some quotations to correct grammatical errors.
11. The final report includes an *N* of 372. We recompiled the raw data ourselves and arrived at an *N* of 273, indicating an error in the final report. Regrettably, we have no information regarding the number of people who declined to participate.
12. None of the people who were interviewed or surveyed were members of the targeted group (Tutsi) during the genocide. As would be expected, this suggests that those being persecuted are significantly less likely to rescue, though evidence of Jewish people rescuing other Jewish people during the Holocaust illustrates that one’s ability to rescue may not be perfectly correlated with group membership.
13. This is calculated based on an adult age of 15 and by using the population that was formally employed to ascertain the percentage of non-farmers.
14. Forty percent of those surveyed suggested that their primary motivation for rescue was a moral code that likely stemmed from socialization.

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