



POLICY BRIEF INITIATIVE

# WHY DO PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN GENOCIDE?

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Why do people participate in genocide? They are motivated by group dynamics within the perpetrator ingroup, ideological or emotional reactions to the victim outgroup, as well as opportunistic factors. These motivations are supported by psychological and ideological factors that make participation easier, and the genocidal context within which individuals are acting impacts whether perpetration is even considered a legitimate and thinkable form of action. My book *The Complexity of Evil. Genocide and Perpetration* (Rutgers University Press, 2021) discusses these factors and develops a model to explain participation in genocide. The book pulls from the interdisciplinary literature and research on various cases, as well as my own fieldwork with former Khmer Rouge in Cambodia to develop a comprehensive model of perpetrator motivations. This policy brief highlights main arguments from the book and the broader literature on this important question, distilling key implications for policymakers and practitioners.

In the villages of Eastern Europe and in concentration camps, ordinary Germans under Nazi rule contributed to the extermination of the Jewish population. In Cambodia, child soldiers became the executioners of the new Khmer Rouge regime. In Indonesia, Rwanda and Bosnia, people killed friends and hunted neighbors, breaking life-long bonds with unfathomable brutality. Why do people participate in mass violence and genocide? Sociologists, social psychologists, anthropologists, political scientists, historians, theologians, criminologists, and others have attempted to grapple with this question. Several decades of research from various disciplines and cases provide a solid foundation for answering this question in *The Complexity of Evil*. I develop a model that differentiates between three different types of factors: motivations, facilitative factors, and contextual conditions.

In this work, I am not explaining why someone becomes a perpetrator, but why they engage in an act of perpetration. This is important because perpetrators are most often ordinary men and women who are in no way aberrant psychologically, demographically, or in their personality. However, the actions of perpetration they engage in are indeed extraordinary and abhorrent. Secondly, a focus on perpetration forces society to take a more temporally sensitive approach that acknowledges that over time motivations can and do shift. Furthermore, individuals do not solely perpetrate. At other points in time, they may also rescue or support victims or they may simply be bystanders, with motivations for these alternative roles interacting with their perpetration.

## Recommended Reading:

1. Fujii, Lee Ann. *Killing Neighbors: Networks of Violence in Rwanda*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009.
2. Leader Maynard, Jonathan. *Ideology and Mass Killing. The Radicalized Security Politics of Genocides and Deadly Atrocities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.
3. McDoom, Omar. *The Path to Genocide in Rwanda. Security, Opportunity, and Authority in an Ethnocratic State*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
4. Smeulers, Alette, Maartje Weerdesteijn, and Barbora Holá, eds. *Perpetrators of International Crimes Theories, Methods, and Evidence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press., 2019.

When trying to understand why people participate in genocide, motivations are the cornerstone of any approach. Motivations are the most basic impulse for participation, the fundamental driver without which perpetration would not occur. It is immaterial which motivation is present, but at least one motivation must be present for someone to participate. One can differentiate between motivations related to the ingroup, the outgroup and opportunistic motivations.

Ingroup motivations relate to social dynamics within the perpetrator group with influence being exerted hierarchically by superiors or by peers, comrades or friends. This influence can either be explicitly articulated (e.g. through orders or peer pressure), implicitly assumed when the perpetrator anticipates the wishes of others and seeks to fulfil them, or even laced with threats or actual use of violence to force someone to participate. More subtly, groups can stimulate motivations by affording active participants a higher social status or by defining expectations for social roles. An example of the last motivation can be found in Cambodia, where one of my interviewees explained that when he had joined the Khmer Rouge, he knew he was entering a “Tiger Zone” and so he knew he had to become a tiger, take on the values of a tiger and act like a tiger, a striking metaphor for the clear expectations tied to the social role of a Khmer Rouge.

Outgroup motivations focus on the victim group emotionally or ideologically. People may feel hate, fear, anger, resentment, or disgust for the victims and thus participate in reaction to these emotions. Further, individuals may be ideologically motivated through their deep-seated convictions that the killing of the victims is necessary and right, although for most perpetrators ideologies function in other ways to be discussed below.

Opportunistic motivations are rooted in individuals’ expectations of gains from participation. These can include material benefits from looting victims or being paid for involvement, career progression, pursuing personal or political rivalries under the guise of the genocidal ideology, or perks from being a member of the perpetrator group. In Cambodia, some individuals participated simply because they hoped for larger rations of rice, while others believed themselves to be more secure from the mass purges if they participated in the killing groups.

## Facilitative Factors

Facilitative factors are not necessary for someone to perpetrate violence. When present, however, they make participation easier. First, this is where ideologies play their most important role, legitimizing or even necessitating the killing and justifying attributions of the victim group as dangerous or subhuman. Ideological justifications morally unburden perpetrators and allow them to follow ingroup-focused or opportunistic motivations without the normal moral inhibitions killing entails. In Cambodia, perpetrators believed the propaganda of the regime that CIA and Vietnamese agents had infiltrated the revolution and were trying to destroy the country, manifesting a “them or us” mentality. Second, rather than moralizing the act of killing, some facilitative factors remove it from moral consideration by employing euphemistic language, dehumanizing the victims or increasing social or physical distance between the perpetrator and the act of killing. Third, as killing often happens in group settings, people can be emboldened by the anonymity it affords them. Responsibility can be effectively diffused within the group or displaced to superiors giving orders. Cambodian perpetrators were able to refer to the strongly hierarchical system of the Khmer Rouge to displace responsibility and morally absolve themselves. Fourth, time can make participation easier, as perpetrators become habituated into this form of grueling action.

No one engages in genocide alone. Instead, such action is embedded in a broader genocidal context. This context structures how individuals perceive their direct environment, creating the political, societal and ideological framework within which new events are perceived and understood. State-level political structures can influence local claims to authority, insecurities driven by war or revolution impact individuals perceptions of their own safety and can play into victims being constructed as threatening, and economic malaise can shift incentives for self-interested gain. The ideological framework for genocide that justifies and requires the annihilation of the victims or portrays them as dangerous or threatening stems from this contextual and is then rendered salient for each individual perpetrator within their own situation.

## Implications

- Individuals participate for a variety of reasons, meaning there is no “one size fits all” solution to individual-level prevention, and programs need to be tailored to address multiple motivations, as well as consider facilitative factors.
- Given the everyday nature of many of the motivations within an extraordinary context, prevention resources may be best applied in shifting the genocidal context, undermining authoritarian power structures, removing sources of insecurity (such as war) or countering genocidal ideologies.
- With social dynamics within the perpetrator group so pivotal in motivating many people to participate and the importance of the group as a facilitative factor, prevention programs that forward critical thinking towards authorities and peers and train upstanding could be fruitful, as could targeted interventions that disrupt established group structures during an already active genocide.

## Policy Recommendations

- In prevention measures, (international) civil society organizations and funding bodies should recognize the importance of individual actors and factor these low-level perpetrators into their prevention strategies.
- The complexity of motivations should be reflected in multi-pronged prevention measures that seek to tackle the diversity of individual-level dynamics.
- The most promising prevention measures at the perpetrator level will: 1) address group-level dynamics within the perpetrator group, encouraging upstanding as well as critical awareness of authority structures and peer relations; and 2) counter ideological justifications that are discursively laying groundwork for atrocities.
- The most promising intervention measures during violence at the perpetrator level will: 1) address incentive structures (opportunities for looting, enrichment, etc.; potential costs through prosecutions, etc.) to avoid opportunistic motivations; 2) intervene in the ideological justifications of a regime, demonstrating the humanity of victims and undermining discriminatory ideas; and 3) counter false constructions of insecurity that suggest the victims are dangerous, toxic or otherwise threatening to the perpetrator group.

## About the Author

Timothy Williams is a Junior Professor of Insecurity and Social Order and Chairman of the interdisciplinary research centre RISK, both at the University of the Bundeswehr Munich in Germany. He is Vice President of the International Association of Genocide Scholars and co-editor-in-chief of the ZeFKo Studies in Peace and Conflict.