

Considering Person-First Language in Genocide Studies

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Abstract: Numerous researchers, policymakers, and activists have advocated for the use of person-first language when referring to people who engaged in crime or violence. Such advocacy is rooted in firm evidence that person-first language (e.g. a person who committed a felony rather than a felon) is associated with lower rates of recidivism, more robust reintegration into communities, and less fear amongst members of the public. In this article, we extend this important discussion to genocide studies. Specifically, we suggest that genocide scholars — as well as policymakers, reporters, and other professionals — should consider the power tied to labelling people by their actions, as well as the impacts of these labels. To do so, we rely upon interviews with 165 people who were incarcerated for genocide in Rwanda, whom we interviewed both during their incarceration and upon their release. Given that the movement toward person-first language hinges on how people want to be labelled, we emphasize how those who committed genocide speak about themselves. Ultimately, we encourage consideration of person-first language following violence, which would involve departing from terms like *perpetrator* and *genocidaire*. We simultaneously acknowledge the discomfort in this discussion and underscore that person-first language does not remove responsibility for heinous actions. Rather, scrutinizing common terminology is part of our ethical duty to reflect upon the impact of our words.

Keywords: Genocide, Person-first language, Reentry, Reintegration

Introduction

Gabriel: But I'm Rwandan, I became Rwandan since when — it's going to be three months.

Hollie: [Confused pause] Three months since you became?

Gabriel: Rwandan.

Hollie: Can you explain that?

Gabriel: I was a *genocidaire*, but now I'm a Rwandan like others ... I'm like any other citizen.

—Interview conducted by the first author in Rwanda in 2018

Journal of Perpetrator Research 6.2 (2024), 145–176
DOI: 10.21039/jpr.6.2.122 © 2024 by the Author



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At the time of this interview, Gabriel had recently completed his nine-year sentence for committing genocide. After walking home upon his release, his wife and two of his children received him with a meal. Several of his neighbors also welcomed him. He then busied himself with farming and trying to socially reintegrate into his community. It was in this context that Gabriel believed he had become a citizen again, suggesting that being a *genocidaire* — a term for someone who committed genocide that is widely used in Rwanda — was incompatible with citizenship, such that people who were incarcerated for such crimes were not citizens. In doing so, Gabriel rejected the label *genocidaire*, instead seeking to be known as a regular Rwandan rather than be forever labeled by his worst actions.

Yet, Rwandans commonly use the term *genocidaire* when speaking about people who perpetrated genocide, and the word *perpetrator* can be found in textbooks, memorials, and other educational and memory initiatives throughout the country. What is more, the term *perpetrator* is the norm within the broader discipline of genocide studies.

This trend in Rwanda and in genocide studies is at odds with how Gabriel and many other people who committed violence seek to be identified, and also with growing research on crime and terrorism, and reintegration following violence. Indeed, this scholarship highlights how refraining from crime-first terms like *felon* can lower rates of recidivism and reinforce a positive sense of self.¹ Research has also demonstrated that focusing on the evil of a crime rather than the evil of a person can aid reintegration following violence² and reduce public perceptions of recidivism,³ both of which are important for promoting peace and stability in societies recovering from violence.

We consequently suggest that researchers studying genocide should consider adopting person-first language, at least in certain post-violence cases where such language accords with how participants identify. After reviewing the shift toward person-first language in other contexts, we draw upon longitudinal interviews with 165 Rwandans who were incarcerated for genocide to further illustrate the negative impacts of labelling people by their crimes long after they committed

1 Ted Chiricos and others, 'The Labeling of Convicted Felons and Its Consequences for Recidivism', *Criminology*, 45.3 (2007), 547–81.

2 John Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame, and Reintegration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 98–107.

3 Megan Denver, Justin T. Pickett, and Shawn D. Bushway, 'The Language of Stigmatization and the Mark of Violence: Experimental Evidence on the Social Construction and Use of Criminal Record Stigma', *Criminology*, 55.3 (2017), 664–90.

those crimes. Finally, we consider how departing from terms that allocate blame may cause discomfort for those who bore the brunt of these crimes, and we suggest avenues for future research in this area.

Language and Violence

1. COMMON TERMINOLOGY IN GENOCIDE STUDIES

Political scientist Raul Hilberg's scholarship on the Holocaust laid the foundation for what researchers and educators commonly call the 'atrocities triangle' in genocide studies.⁴ The atrocities triangle organizes perpetrators, victims, and bystanders as distinct actors during genocide. Put simply, perpetrators commit violence, victims bear the brunt of it, and bystanders stand on the sidelines and watch the events unfold.

The atrocities triangle has since loomed large in genocide studies. Four decades after Hilberg's work was first published, for instance, sociologist Stanley Cohen explained: 'in the one corner, victims, to whom things are done; in the second corner, perpetrators, who do these things; in the third, observers, those who see and know what is happening'.⁵ Others have added a fourth category of 'rescuers' or 'upstanders' to reference those who are not part of the targeted group(s) but who risk their lives to save others.⁶ In doing so, these researchers have extended the notion of the atrocities triangle but have, nonetheless, reinforced the idea that there are discrete actors during genocide.⁷

In reality, however, the lines between victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and upstanders are not always clear. Indeed, Holocaust survivor Primo Levi illustrated the 'grey zone' of the Holocaust by highlighting Jewish individuals who collaborated with Nazi officials.⁸ Subsequent recognition of this grey zone was slow, but scholarship has

4 Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-1945* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992); Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961; facsimile repr. Connecticut: Martino Fine Books, 2019).

5 Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 14.

6 Samuel P. Oliner, *Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Touchstone, 1992).

7 This scholarship has been accompanied by educational curricula. For instance, Holocaust and genocide museums encourage people to be 'upstanders', again emphasizing types of individuals.

8 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), pp. 25-57.

seen a major shift toward acknowledging the difficulties inherent in categorizing people into neat boxes.⁹ For instance, the case of Dominic Ongwen — who was forced to join the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) as a child soldier and who then went on to lead a LRA brigade that committed widespread violence — illuminates what others have termed the 'complex political perpetrator'.¹⁰

This work has essentially argued that delineating types of actors based on their actions or the actions that affect them precludes the possibility of multifaceted behaviour and experiences. As such, it highlights how some people can take a range of actions over the course of a genocide — they can rescue, kill, and/or be victimized — as well as how there are important differences within such categories.¹¹

Over the past decade, genocide researchers have consequently moved toward disaggregating actors and actions.¹² For instance, research on rescue during genocide has expanded beyond the scholarship on altruistic personalities to inquiries emphasizing the role of the social situation.¹³ Similarly, political scientist Timothy Williams argues that an action-centric conception of perpetration is more helpful than a person-centric one, as action-centric models 'allow us to interrogate the connection between the actor and the action'.¹⁴

Indeed, researchers survey how studies of those who commit violence have shifted from examining *perpetrators* to *focusing on perpetration*.¹⁵ As they aptly argue, researchers should analyze the process of

9 Bradley Campbell, 'Genocide as Social Control', *Sociological Theory*, 27.2 (2009), 150–72; Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2009); Erin Jessee, 'Seeing Monsters, Hearing Victims: The Politics of Perpetration in Post-Genocide Rwanda', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 67–90.

10 Erin K. Baines, 'Complex Political Perpetrators: Reflections on Dominic Ongwen', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 47.2 (2009), 163–91.

11 Fujii, *Killing Neighbors*, pp. 1–22.

12 Hollie Nyseth Brehm, Michelle L. O'Brien, and J. Siguru Wahutu, 'Problems with Oversimplified Categories in the Study of Collective Violence', *Sociology of Development*, 7.4 (2021), 394–415.

13 Robert Braun, *Protectors of Pluralism: Religious Minorities and the Rescue of Jews in the Low Countries during the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 1–20.

14 Timothy Williams, *The Complexity of Evil: Perpetration and Genocide* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2020), p. 4; see also Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee, 'Introduction', in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 3–22.

15 Uğur Ümit Üngör and Kjell Anderson, 'From Perpetrators to Perpetration: Definitions, Typologies, and Processes', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 7–22.

perpetration with an emphasis on ‘power relations between groups of people, especially between perpetrators and victims, but also within the perpetrator group’.¹⁶ Historian Erin Jessee has similarly argued for studying those who commit violence as ‘complex political actors’, in line with work on ‘complex political perpetrators’ and ‘complex political victims’ that recognizes that the binaries invoked by actor-centred terms are sometimes not nearly as simple as they seem.¹⁷

In this article, we suggest that this turn toward action-centric inquiry within genocide studies should also result in a reconsideration of terms. Specifically, while many researchers disaggregate actors and actions in pursuit of more analytically rigorous studies, researchers, policymakers, activists, and educators still often default to the terms that comprise the atrocity triangle when discussing genocide. Even those who prefer to emphasize *perpetration* over *perpetrators* still regularly use the term *perpetrator*, as evidenced by the title of this journal and the recent edited volume *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*.¹⁸

Here, we call attention to how labelling people as perpetrators is a form of power that has important consequences.¹⁹ To be clear, recent work in genocide studies has also grappled with the complexities of labelling, and our work aligns with their arguments. In the first edition of this journal, political scientist Scott Straus encouraged readers to consider how labelling someone a perpetrator is inherently normative and that such labels can have unintended consequences.²⁰ Furthermore, Anderson and Jessee’s edited volume emphasizes, for instance, ‘the challenge of labelling perpetrators’.²¹ Each of the chapters within this volume also underscores what mass violence scholar Kjell Anderson terms the ‘perpetrator imaginary’,²² illustrating how various people — from those who bore the brunt of the violence to those in the

16 Ibid., p. 11.

17 Erin Jessee, ‘On the Margins: Role Shifting in Atrocity Crimes’, in *The Oxford Handbook on Atrocity Crimes*, ed. by Barbora Holá, Hollie Nyseth Nzitatira, and Maartje Weerdesteijn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 329–350.

18 *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).

19 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, 2nd edn (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 135–194.

20 Scott Straus, ‘Studying Perpetrators: A Reflection’, *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 28–38.

21 Anderson and Jessee, p. 11.

22 Kjell Anderson, ‘The Perpetrator Imaginary: Representing Perpetrators of Genocide’, in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 23–48.

legal sphere to artists — label ‘perpetrators’. Anderson’s other work has addressed the personhood of people who commit violence, and he has aptly argued that, to prevent dehumanization, ‘we must also recognize the humanity of the perpetrators, and something of ourselves in them.’²³ Research on survivors has similarly recommended viewing survivors of genocide as ‘whole people’ rather than defining a person by their experiences during genocide.²⁴ In this article, we are aligned with this research and scrutinize the implications of crime-first labels, with an emphasis on impacts after violence has ended. To do so, we turn next toward research in other fields that has highlighted the significance of person-first language, as well as its pitfalls.

2. PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE IN OTHER FIELDS

While numerous fields have urged researchers, policymakers, and others to employ person-first language, one of the most relevant bodies of research on person-first language stems from reactions to the American carceral system. Most notably, Eddie Ellis, a former member of the Black Panthers who was incarcerated for twenty-three years, circulated an influential letter on language tied to crimes in 2007. In his words:

One of our first initiatives is to respond to the negative public perception about our population as expressed in the language and concepts used to describe us. When we are not called mad dogs, animals, predators, offenders and other derogatory terms, we are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners and felons—all terms devoid of humanness which identify us as ‘things’ rather than as people. These terms are accepted as the ‘official’ language of the media, law enforcement, prison industrial complex and public policy agencies. However, they are no longer acceptable for us and we are asking people to stop using them.²⁵

Here Ellis implores his audience to consider the violence and dehumanization inherent in the derogatory language used to categorize those who have encountered the carceral system, and to linguistically

23 Kjell Anderson, *Perpetrating Genocide: A Criminal Account* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 261.

24 Anna Sheftel, ‘Talking and Not Talking about Violence: Challenges in Interviewing Survivors of Atrocity as Whole People’, *The Oral History Review*, 45.2 (2018), 288–303.

25 Eddie Ellis, ‘An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language’, *Parole Preparation & Appeal Resources*, 5 (2020).

shift away from such power-laden word choices. As scholars explain, other activists had simultaneously advanced similar arguments.²⁶ For instance, the organisation All of Us or None, which was established in California in 2002, likewise rejected stigmatising language and advocated for the use of person-first terminology. Think tanks followed suit, as evidenced by the Urban Institute's position statement 'People First: Changing the Way We Talk about Those Touched by the Justice System'.²⁷ Many activists and scholars — especially within critical criminology — have likewise encouraged using language like *formerly incarcerated person* instead of *ex-offender* or *ex-con*, and the *New York Times* Editorial Board even issued a statement on using person-first language as opposed to terms like felon.²⁸

These arguments accord with research that has documented the deleterious consequences of crime-first labels. Specifically, labelling theory suggests that how people are labelled impacts both their self-concept and their actions. While self-concepts are important in their own right, labelling people by their actions can also have ramifications for future violence. In fact, research finds that when society labels people as deviant, they are more likely to engage in deviance.²⁹ For instance, a study of almost 100,000 Americans found that those who courts formally labelled as 'felons' were significantly more likely to recidivate compared to those who were not.³⁰ Put simply, it is well established in criminological literature that labelling people by their crimes often leads to continued engagement with crime and violence, and critical criminologists have departed from such labels.

Beyond recidivism, breaking the link between people and the crimes they committed also encourages reintegration following harmful or stigmatised acts. Specifically, reintegrative shaming recognizes individuals' wrongful actions yet still accepts them as moral members of society, as opposed to stigmatising them for their past actions and

26 Alexandra Cox, 'The Language of Incarceration', *Incarceration*, 1.1 (2020).

27 Nancy G. La Vigne, 'People First: Changing the Way We Talk about Those Touched by the Criminal Justice System', *Urban Institute*, 5 April 2016 <<https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/people-first-changing-way-we-talk-about-those-touched-criminal-justice-system>> [accessed 22 May 2024].

28 The Editorial Board, 'Labels Like "Felon" Are an Unfair Life Sentence', *The New York Times*, 7 May 2016 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/opinion/sunday/labels-like-felon-are-an-unfair-life-sentence.html>> [accessed 22 May 2024].

29 Jón Gunnar Bernburg, Marvin D. Krohn, and Craig J. Rivera, 'Official Labeling, Criminal Embeddedness, and Subsequent Delinquency: A Longitudinal Test of Labeling Theory', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 43.1 (2006), 67–88.

30 Ted Chiricos and others.

rejecting their inclusion in society.³¹ Reintegrative shaming reinforces that violent actions were wrong, yet acknowledges people are redeemable and not defined by their past actions.³² In this sense, it accords with person-first language because one goal of person-first language is to assign responsibility for people's actions but not to define people by them.

For these reasons, programs designed to counter violent extremism are beginning to advocate for the use of person-first language. For instance, the United States Institute of Peace hosted an event on language and violent extremism in 2019 in which it encouraged panellists to discuss person-first language,³³ and has subsequently published several pieces encouraging the use of person-first language with respect to people who engaged in violent extremism.³⁴

To be certain, other fields have already departed from person-first language, including the disability community and disability studies, more broadly. This departure is typically tied to how people being labelled *want* to be labelled. Specifically, various sociopolitical factors — including, but not limited to, institutionalisation, erasure, discrimination, infantilisation, and other stigmatising mechanisms — have constrained disabled peoples' abilities to self-describe their disabilities and identities.³⁵ As such, one's ability to self-identify and employ empowering language is an important issue within the community.

The conversation around language in the disability community often centres on the tension between identity-first versus person-first language: identity-first refers to the disability descriptor before the person, such as 'disabled person' or 'autistic person', while person-first refers to the person before the disability, such as 'person who is hearing-impaired' or 'person with a disability'. While parent advocacy groups and some individuals with disabilities advocate for person-first

31 Braithwaite, pp. 84–107.

32 Carter Hay, 'An Exploratory Test of Braithwaite's Reintegrative Shaming Theory', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 38.2 (2001), 132–53.

33 See this related online commentary: Chris Bosley, 'To Truly Defeat ISIS, Describe its Returnees as 'People': Rehabilitation of those exiting violent extremism requires strategic language', *United States Institute of Peace*, 12 April 2019 <<https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/04/truly-defeat-isis-describe-its-returnees-people>> [accessed 22 May 2024].

34 Chris Bosley, 'Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reconciliation: A Peacebuilding Approach', *United States Institute of Peace*, 29 July 2020 <<https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/07/violent-extremist-disengagement-and-reconciliation-peacebuilding-approach>> [accessed 22 May 2024].

35 Chomba Wa Munyi, 'Past and Present Perceptions Towards Disability: A Historical Perspective', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 32.2 (2012).

language,³⁶ certain disability communities — including autistic people and Deaf people, among others — now advocate for the use of identity-first language rather than person-first to promote destigmatisation, among other goals.³⁷

Many claim that identity-first language emphasizes disability as a culture and a facet of diversity — something that should be recognized as a part of a person like any other human attribute.³⁸ Furthermore, a disability is and always will be a part of a person's identity. Thus, while some have suggested that person-first language may still be preferred when talking about groups of people — as opposed to identity-first terms which may present people who hold a certain identity as monolithic³⁹ — identity-first language has largely superseded person-first language in disability studies and beyond.

These conversations highlight the need to consider person-first language in genocide studies, however. In contrast to disabilities, the commission of a crime is an action with a beginning and an end, meaning that justification for identity-first language in disability studies could be a justification to depart from its use in genocide studies. There is also a distinction between an action someone commits — something they *do* — and a condition that is *of* them. Of course, one could argue that a crime is not something that is necessarily over once it is performed, as it could have life-long implications for people who were victimized. The crime (or series of crimes) may also in some way forever alter the person who committed it and could even become part of their identity.

Here, however, we centre situations in which people who committed crimes seek to shed labels tied to their crimes. The conversations surrounding the most appropriate language in the preceding examples on the carceral system, terrorism, and disability are ongoing, and genocide studies is no exception. The tension present in these debates underscores the need to continuously consult with and centre those who are most affected by and have the most stake in the language that

36 Monique Botha, Jacqueline Hanlon, and Gemma Louise Williams, 'Does Language Matter? Identity-First Versus Person-First Language Use in Autism Research: A Response to Vivanti', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 53.2 (2023), 870–878.

37 Jill Duncan and Rachel O'Neill, 'Person-First, Identity-First and the Language of Deafness', *Deafness & Education International*, 22.1 (2020), 1–2.

38 Krista L. Best and others, 'Language Matters! The Long-Standing Debate between Identity-First Language and Person First Language', *Assistive Technology*, 34.2 (2022), 127–28.

39 Dana S. Dunn and Erin Andrews, 'Person-first and Identity-First Language: Developing Psychologists' Cultural Competence Using Disability Language', *American Psychologist*, 70.3 (2015), 255–64.

academics and practitioners use. This article does just this in its examination of how 165 Rwandans who were formerly incarcerated for crimes of genocide self-identify after their release, and we turn now toward a brief case background.

Case Background: 1994 Rwanda

Scholars generally begin the story of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda with colonialism. Rwanda's antecedent Nyiginya kingdom was colonized by Germany in 1884, followed by Belgium after World War I. During the early 1930s, the Belgian colonial authority mandated that Rwandans carry identification cards that classified each citizen as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa. These groups existed prior to colonialism and were tied to social classes, with Tutsi often owning cattle and reaping associated advantages, Hutu often working the land, and Twa working as potters and comprising one percent of the population.⁴⁰ However, Belgian colonialists racialized existing identities by suggesting that Tutsi had less 'African' features than Hutu. They also instituted policies that benefited Tutsi, who dominated Rwanda's monarchy despite comprising fifteen percent of the populace.⁴¹

During the 1950s, Hutu elites and middle-class citizens began expressing discontent at their marginalisation. A Hutu emancipation movement emerged, culminating in Rwanda's independence in 1962 under the Hutu-led government of President Grégoire Kayibanda. Violence and discrimination against Tutsi accompanied this power shift, and tens of thousands of Tutsis fled. A 1973 coup brought President Juvenal Habyarimana to power, and his Hutu-led regime continued to discriminate against Tutsi.⁴²

Meanwhile, Tutsi refugees in Uganda formed an armed liberation movement called the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). On 1 October 1990, this movement's army attacked Rwanda. After several years of skirmishes, the Habyarimana government and the RPF signed peace protocols known as the Arusha Accords. Sporadic violence nonetheless

40 Catharine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 3-16.

41 Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 76-102.

42 Alison Liebhafsky Des Forges, *'Leave None to Tell the Story': Genocide in Rwanda* (New York and Paris: Human Rights Watch and International Federation of Human Rights, 1999).

continued, and an economic downturn, intra-group cleavages, and a looming power-sharing deal with the RPF threatened Hutu elites.⁴³

Then, on 6 April 1994, unknown assailants shot down Habyarimana's plane. This assassination marked the beginning of the genocide, and soon violence targeted Tutsi and Hutu moderates countrywide.⁴⁴ The interim government encouraged local leaders to incite violence against 'enemy' Tutsi, and hundreds of thousands of Hutu civilians joined killing groups.⁴⁵

Widespread violence began to subside in July 1994, when the RPF — who had reinitiated the civil war — took control of the state. Several years later, the new RPF-led government reinvented a court system known as *gacaca* to try people who were suspected of committing genocide. Broadly, this court system was a heavily modified version of a pre-colonial dispute resolution mechanism. Panels of elected lay judges presided over community trials in which community members testified about what they witnessed.⁴⁶

There were three categories of cases, with Categories one and two tied to physical violence, and Category three tied to property crimes. While Category three trials were met with fines, hundreds of thousands of people — including at least 10,000 women — with Category one or two trials received prison sentences, with average sentences ranging between ten and twenty-five years. When defendants confessed and apologized — or if they committed a relatively minor crime — they could spend fifty percent of their sentence in *Travaux d'intérêts généraux* (TIG; works of public interest).⁴⁷

Much research has levied critiques of *gacaca*, pointing to issues such as the courts' lack of engagement with crimes that occurred during the civil war, the heavy hand of the state in their creation and implementa-

43 Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 24; Omar Shahabudin McDoom, *The Path to Genocide in Rwanda: Security, Opportunity, and Authority in an Ethnocratic State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 4.

44 The exact start of the genocide is somewhat contested, with the Rwandan government recognising 7 April 1994 as its official beginning yet others arguing it was not until a few days later.

45 Charles Mironko, 'Igitero: Means and Motive in the Rwandan Genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 6.1 (2004), 47–60.

46 Phil Clark, *The Gacaca Courts, Post-Genocide Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda: Justice without Lawyers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1–4; Bert Ingelaere, *Inside Rwanda's Gacaca Courts: Seeking Justice after Genocide* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), pp. 18–28.

47 Clark, pp. 73–74.

tion, and their poor conflict-resolution capacities.⁴⁸ Though the courts may have aided some aspects of reconciliation, their primary aim was punitive.⁴⁹ Moreover, research has found that *gacaca* amplified defendants' post-release suffering.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, *gacaca* participation has also been linked to enhanced feelings of guilt and belonging among Rwandans who committed genocide.⁵¹ Such feelings of guilt may have also been impacted by government memory efforts — ranging from memorials to history curricula to public commemorations — to frame the genocide as a cultural trauma.⁵²

Indeed, *gacaca* was one of many state-led endeavours that responded to the genocide while simultaneously strengthening the current government.⁵³ Notably, memory efforts and related state endeavours in Rwanda regularly employ the term *perpetrator*, with memorials, commemorations, and textbooks often using the term or similar crime-first language. For instance, at commemorations, there is often 'perpetrator testimony', and national archives likewise use the term *perpetrator* when displaying testimony to be used for educational purposes. Similarly, many Rwandans commonly employ the terms *perpetrator* or *genocidaire* when referring to people who committed genocide. Put simply, people are labelled as *perpetrators* and *genocidaires* long after the violence has ended, and it is within this setting that we situate our analysis.⁵⁴

48 Anuradha Chakravarty, *Investing in Authoritarian Rule: Punishment and Patronage in Rwanda's Gacaca Courts for Genocide Crimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 135–164.

49 Ingelaere, p. 65.

50 Théoneste Rutayisire and Annemiek Richters, 'Everyday Suffering Outside Prison Walls: A Legacy of Community Justice in Post-Genocide Rwanda', *Social Science & Medicine*, 120 (2014), 413–20.

51 Bernard Rimé and others, 'The Impact of Gacaca Tribunals in Rwanda: Psychosocial Effects of Participation in a Truth and Reconciliation Process after a Genocide', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 41.6 (2011), 695–706.

52 Erin Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 45–80.

53 Timothy Longman, *Memory and Justice in Post-Genocide Rwanda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 91–134.

54 Margarida Hourmat, 'Victim-Perpetrator Dichotomy in Transitional Justice: The Case of Post-Genocide Rwanda', *Narrative & Conflict: Explorations in Theory and Practice*, 4.1 (2016), 43–67.

Methods

1. RESEARCH PREPARATION AND RESEARCH TEAM

We interviewed 165 individuals before they completed their sentences, and we interviewed 129 of these individuals approximately four months after their release, as well as one year later, though this paper emphasizes the transition from incarceration back to the community. The first author has conducted years of fieldwork in Rwanda, and the second author is Rwandan. We worked with a small team of Rwandan and foreign research assistants. Interviewers were white and Black, and Rwandan interviewers looked stereotypically Hutu, stereotypically Tutsi, or ethnically ambiguous in case people who had committed genocide subscribed to stereotypical beliefs regarding racialized ethnicities.⁵⁵ Foreign (mostly white) interviewers worked with Rwandan translators who were similarly diverse, and translators and interviewers included men and women. Assessment of differences by gender, race, ethnicity, or foreign status across interviewers and translators yielded no significant distinctions with respect to results presented here.

Prior to beginning the project in 2017, the research team underwent significant training, including discussing and (back)translating every question on the interview guide from English to Kinyarwanda. Furthermore, we engaged in question testing with people who had been released from TIG, conducting ten one-on-one interviews followed by focus groups to discuss how people perceived the questions and interview flow.

2. SAMPLE OF REENTERING INDIVIDUALS

Then, in late 2017, we asked all people who 1) were found guilty of crimes of genocide, 2) were in prison or a TIG camp, and 3) had a release date in 2018 to participate in the study. We visited every prison and TIG camp in Rwanda.⁵⁶ Each institution provided a list of people scheduled to complete genocide-related sentences in 2018. At TIG camps, we were able to address the entire population and hence ask all eligible individuals to participate. At prisons, we were not permitted to speak with all

55 Hollie Nyseth Nzitatira and John Gasana Gasasira, 'Identities and Interactions: Reentry and Reintegration after Incarceration for Genocide', *American Journal of Sociology*, 129.4 (2024), 1136–71.

56 Ibid.

residents and thus relied upon the list, though we typically saw a black-board in the Director's office with corroborating information.

In this way, we identified 183 eligible participants. Several people were sick or unavailable, and others declined. It was important that some people declined, as we did not want anyone to feel coerced. As such, we also stressed that staff were not invested in who was participating and that we would employ pseudonyms in reporting results.

In total, 150 men and fifteen women participated. Their ages spanned from thirty-five to eighty-four (in 2017), with an average age of fifty-five. Eighty-six percent had been farmers, and most were married (sixty-eight percent in 1994; seventy-nine percent during the first interview). Over 120 respondents were convicted of killing and/or participating in killing groups, while others were convicted of crimes such as rape, failing to intervene, burying bodies, or leading Tutsis to their death.⁵⁷ Notably, one-quarter of respondents maintained their innocence, though many were likely trying to save face. While most respondents were tried in their community *gacaca*, eighteen were tried in the national courts. Sentences ranged from three to thirty years, with a median of nineteen years. Sixty-one percent served pre-trial detention.

3. REENTRY INTERVIEWS AND ANALYSIS

We interviewed 110 people in prison, and fifty-five in TIG. Prison pre-release interviews occurred in small rooms or private outdoor spaces, and guards were never within earshot. TIG pre-release interviews took place under trees or in makeshift buildings. Questions addressed the participants' lives, trials, incarceration, plans, wellbeing, families, friends, and communities, and interviews lasted between two and four hours.

To facilitate follow-up interviews, we collected family members' contact information, as most participants did not own phones. We also asked each participant where they planned to go upon release, including the district, sector, cell, and village. Additionally, we ascertained whether they were comfortable with us traveling to them for a post-release interview.

Using release dates provided by Rwanda Correctional Services and verified by the respondents, we then tried to locate all respondents several months after their release. It soon became clear that re-

⁵⁷ For more information on their categories, see *Ibid.*

lease dates were unreliable: only one quarter of people were released on their anticipated date, likely due to record-keeping issues. Nonetheless, we conducted post-release interviews an average of four months after peoples' release, with outliers interviewed less than one month after or six-to-seven months later.

In total, 129 participants' post-release interviews inform this analysis. Twenty-two people were still incarcerated when we concluded data collection in 2020 and our follow-ups with Rwanda Correctional Services suggested their release dates were significantly later than what we had been told, often due to discrepancies in hand-written records. Three other people passed away prior to their follow-up interview, and we were unable to locate a few individuals who had returned to an unplanned location or moved. We also found nine individuals too late — for example, one year after release — and thus do not include these interviews here.⁵⁸

Among the 129 respondents, seventy-nine were released from prison, while fifty were released from TIG, after an average sentence of fifteen years. Fourteen were women, with ages mirroring those of the original sample. Additionally, fifty-nine percent were farmers, while ten percent were engaging in skillset jobs, and thirty-one percent were unemployed. Seventy-eight individuals were married, and another nineteen were in a relationship.

The first author and her research team conducted the interviews between 2018 and 2020, under the guidance of the second author. Among the 129 respondents, 115 had returned to their prior village. Eight others went to a neighbouring village, and six respondents went to new communities. Respondents resided in 101 of Rwanda's 416 sectors, including fourteen in urban sectors, 121 in rural sectors, and sixteen in semi-rural sectors.

We conducted most interviews at respondents' homes, though we arranged and paid for transport when people preferred to come to us. Respondents were much more comfortable at the follow-up interviews, and many appeared genuinely happy to see us. Interviews typically addressed their initial return, economic situation, social reentry and reintegration, wellbeing, and other factors, and lasted between 1.5 and 3.5 hours. Although it was not possible to provide anything during the pre-release interviews, people who also participated in these interviews received a nominal token of appreciation (e.g. \$2.50).

58 We moved these interviews to our one-year follow-up wave, which is not part of this paper.

With respect to the research climate in Rwanda, scholars and human rights organizations regularly highlight a climate of fear in Rwanda.⁵⁹ As such, interviewers began all interviews by ensuring that respondents felt as comfortable as possible, underscoring that respondents' names would never be shared and that interviewers and the sponsoring nonprofit were not associated with the government and were, in fact, independent. Interviewers asked light-hearted questions at the outset and spent time explaining confidentiality and developing rapport, and we also paid close attention to rumours and other meta-data in the interviews.⁶⁰ Some respondents did seem noticeably nervous during the first interview, but this would subside as the interview progressed and it became clear interviewers were not there to judge respondents or ask highly detailed questions about their crimes. Most respondents seemed much more comfortable during subsequent interviews.

All pre-release and follow-up interviews were transcribed or, for those conducted in Kinyarwanda, transcribed and translated. The first author then developed a codebook, and the research team coded interviews in NVivo. After assessing this coding, approximately one-third of the interviews were coded a second time.

With respect to the importance of person-first language, we did not have a specific question about person-first language in the interview guides. Rather, the theme emerged during the second wave of interviews as people transitioned from life in prison and TIG camps to life in the community. In fact, Gabriel's interview was among the first of many in which it became clear that respondents were seeking to distance themselves from being considered perpetrators.

Of course, respondents shared their reflections during a specific context: interviews. However, we believe that this context is important, as respondents sought to portray themselves in a certain light to strangers. They were aware that we, too, knew the details of their crimes and likely sought to appear redeemable.

We thus draw upon quotations as illustrative examples, given the breadth and depth of the data, and our dual emphasis on highlighting reasons documented in existing literature for considering person-first language. We also employ pseudonyms and do not discuss the respondents' specific crimes alongside their quotations to avoid labelling them

59 Longman, *Memory and Justice*, pp. 23–24 and p. 133; Susan Thomson, *Rwanda: From Genocide to Precarious Peace* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 226.

60 Lee Ann Fujii, 'Shades of Truth and Lies: Interpreting Testimonies of War and Violence', *Journal of Peace Research*, 47.2 (2010), 231–41.

by their actions. Finally, we made small adjustments to grammar and phrasing as needed for readability but did not alter the meaning of any statements.

Results: Labels and Language of Redemption in Rwanda

We draw from respondents' stories to illustrate two main themes. Given that advocates of person-first language pay attention to how people want to be labelled, we first illustrate that respondents did not identify with the perpetrator label in either interview setting. In doing so, we also consider their reflections on labels related to their crimes and subsequent incarceration.

Second, we analyse respondents' stories of how they changed since the genocide. We show how Rwandans who were incarcerated for genocide distanced themselves from their past actions, instead highlighting shifts in their personalities and in their behaviours. Respondents associated these shifts with varying forces, such as the passage of time, having found faith, and incarceration itself. To be clear, we do not suggest that prison or any carceral institution can bring about such changes. Rather, we share narratives of redemption as told by the respondents, and we also address how respondents sought to portray themselves to fellow community members.

1. REFLECTIONS ON LABELLING

Put simply, people in this study did not label or refer to themselves as perpetrators. Specifically, no one called themselves a *genocidaire* or *umwicanyi*, which is common *Kinyarwanda* term for people who killed during the genocide. Moreover, only two people referred to themselves as perpetrators during the first round of interviews, while two others did so in the follow-up interviews.

In no instances, however, did anyone say something as explicit as 'I am a perpetrator'. Rather, the few people who referred to themselves as perpetrators did so in a roundabout way.

For example, when speaking about when he might be released from prison, Claude explained, 'If you are a genocide perpetrator, they [prison staff] don't care really much about you being released. If you were to check the dates with them of when your sentence will be finished, they check if you are a genocide perpetrator'. In this instance, Claude did

not explicitly refer to himself as a perpetrator; rather, he discussed the norms for and staff interactions with those labelled ‘perpetrators’ more broadly. Similarly, Christophe implied he was a perpetrator when discussing reconciliation, but did not explicitly refer to himself as such. In his words: ‘Normally reconciliation is between the perpetrator and the victim. Now, the perpetrator is in prison and the victim is outside. For my victim, I don’t know he/she still exists’. By referring to his victim, Christophe implicated himself in genocide perpetration, but did so without ever referring to himself using the term ‘perpetrator’.

The most direct use of the label in reference to oneself was in a conversation with Esdras after his release. Speaking about finding construction work after his release, Esdras noted, ‘they choose us who are genocide perpetrators. Because they don’t need to pay much attention to us. They know we can come back even when we don’t have guards’. While a handful of other respondents referred to other ‘perpetrators’, the word perpetrator was strikingly absent from the conversations.

To be clear, the absence of this term does not mean that respondents did not admit their crimes. On the contrary, most individuals spoke about engaging in violence, being part of a killing group, or otherwise being present when someone was killed. They did not associate their actions with their identity, though. In fact, the only other times that the terms *perpetrator* or *genocidaire* surfaced in interviews were when respondents rejected such terms or otherwise tried to distance themselves from them. Saveri, for example, referred to himself as a ‘former perpetrator’, while Gabriel — highlighted in the introduction — explained how he was no longer a *genocidaire*.

Such rejection of the perpetrator and *genocidaire* labels likely stemmed from respondents’ awareness of how they were labelled by others. Some people in this study shared how they were mocked and ridiculed for their crimes, especially after the genocide. Josephine recalled, for instance, ‘those words of insult especially, because they could call us killers’; while Liberatha similarly explained, ‘In the first days, they used to say that we killed people’. Although these respondents seemed to expect such ridicule tied to their crimes, they were especially frustrated when fellow Rwandans labelled their children based on their actions. Placide shared, for example, that community members ridiculed his children, ‘because whatever they did, they would be told that they would be wicked like their father’. Francois likewise explained that his children ‘were mocked by different people telling them that [they were] children of a killer, children of someone who is in

prison because of killing'. Charles similarly told us how people used to 'make very bad statements about my children', later clarifying that people called them children of a wicked person. Still others explained how community members teased their children by calling them children of *Interahamwe*, a youth militia active during the genocide.

One may wonder if there are situations in which someone ever labels themselves as a perpetrator in any context. This may be rare, though we emphasize that in other contexts, people may not reject the violence as criminalized and may even celebrate their actions. This may especially be the case as violence is ongoing. We are not suggesting that people should not be labelled as perpetrators as they are carrying out violence. Rather, we explicitly focus on labels after the crimes have been committed. Additionally, we underscore that we focus on peoples' perceptions and self-labels because research on person-first language indicates it is important to consider how people label themselves.

Either way, once tried and found guilty via *gacaca*, the people in this study were officially labelled as preparators by the Rwandan state. This label was reflected in their pink and blue uniforms, as well as in their living conditions. Indeed, even those who claimed innocence discussed how they had been labelled as a perpetrator due to their sentence. Alphonse recalled, 'In prison, all of us are considered perpetrators. Lectures are given to us, telling us what you shouldn't do — and we are all taken as perpetrators, even those who never participated are taken as perpetrators'.

As Alphonse's statement indicates, the label of perpetrator was accompanied by a prison sentence and/or TIG community service camp, meaning that respondents carried a dual label of prisoner. Respondents clearly recognized this label, and during the first interview, most respondents did refer to themselves as prisoners. For instance, in response to a question, Alexis simply stated, 'I'm a prisoner', and many others referenced 'us prisoners' or life as a prisoner.

Respondents often commented on the impacts of being labeled a prisoner as well. Speaking about his time in prison, Christian recalled that custody was 'insulting', explaining that 'visitations are denied, and I was also beaten. They handcuffed me, being served with half-baked food, forced to shave my hair, to be forced to sit down in the dust and so on. ... Being a prisoner means being subjected to that'. Joseph likewise reflected on being a prisoner. In his words, 'when we are in prison, we are like animals. We are not really Rwandese. We are considered like animals'.

Upon release from incarceration, respondents returned to their communities aware that they carried their labels with them. Their communities typically knew they had been incarcerated for crimes of genocide. *Gacaca* trials took place within localized settings, and Rwandan law required that one hundred community members be present for a trial to occur.⁶¹ This meant that many Rwandans heard the precise details of the crimes they were tried for, and even those who were not in attendance often learned about the trials from others. Gabriel explained, 'The whole [of] this sector, everyone in the sector knows that I was in prison. I was tried from up there, everyone was there. ... There were people [who] were there in meetings, witnessing who was being tried and arrested after trial'.

Amiel similarly told us, 'They know that I was in prison, and they know what took me to prison'. Rwandan communities — especially in most parts of the country — are also incredibly tight knit such that neighbors regularly knew who had been absent. As Benjamin noted, 'They know because I have been missing for so long. Also, I was tried in nearby courts, and they have to know'. Indeed, at the follow-up interviews, everyone except the few people who moved to new communities explained that their communities knew they had been incarcerated for genocide. Summarizing this situation, Callixte explained, 'For us, we are labelled people who committed crimes'.

Due in part to this situation, some respondents had expressed concern that their perpetrator labels would remain prominent. As Francois shared, 'Before coming home, maybe I thought people would avoid me. ... I thought maybe because I participated in killing, like children would run away — whenever they see me — could run away'. Mathias similarly recalled:

It was the lack of confidence because of serving all those years in prison, I was not able to approach or talk to people, get out of my house and talk to people. ... When you have been isolated from people for committing a crime that you even confessed, you have a guilty conscience, and you even count your steps towards people. You start going away from people because you know the crime you committed, as they all know what you did.

61 Clark, p. 76.

Mathias's words echo many respondents' concerns that labels related to actions during genocide would beget social isolation and rejection.

Others had harboured hope that they could shed their labels and be treated like any other Rwandan. For instance, Jean Paul was optimistic about release, suggesting his neighbours might say, 'Oh, now this is time, he has been great. He confessed, he did his punishment, and now he is home. He is a good person'. Oscar likewise explained that fellow community members might treat him well. In his words, 'I admitted everything they accused me of. And I was punished for that, and I never testified wrong accusations against them. That's why they will treat me well as a man of virtue'. As Jean Paul and Oscar illustrate, many of those who wished to be received positively suggested that their reception might be due to having confessed and/or served their sentences. These hopes were often accompanied by statements about how respondents had changed since their last time in their communities. We turn next toward the language of redemption that was present in most of our conversations.

2. LANGUAGE OF REDEMPTION

Instead of labelling themselves as perpetrators, the people in this study emphasized how they had changed, especially during follow-up interviews. Most respondents wanted to present themselves as redeemed, and many continually emphasized that they were working on being 'a good person' — a stark contrast to being a perpetrator. To be clear, we did ask respondents about whether or how they changed since they had been released from prison or TIG. Many spoke about changes before we asked this question, however. And while a small subset of respondents suggested they had not changed — typically because they maintained they had always been good people — most wanted to discuss how they had changed and readily offered examples. Some of these examples emphasized avoiding negative behaviour or bad situations, while others underscored proactively engaging in behaviour the respondents viewed as positive. In both cases, respondents often associated their outward behaviour with an internal personality change. For instance, some respondents shared how they used to be quarrelsome prior to the genocide. Benoit explained:

I used to be very quarrelsome. If you had an argument with me, I would heat up, and then the heat goes up, and then we'd even — maybe fight. But I want to tell you that after going to prison, I no longer get angry at all. Even if you do whatever bad thing you can do to me, I'll never get angry.

Here, Benoit recounted a meaningful shift in his behaviour and personality since prison.

Jonas likewise recalled:

For me, before going to TIG, I can say I was still youthful. I could argue with someone, then we fight. But now I changed. I changed. Maybe even the way people interact changed. The society changed. But I also changed. I changed, because now I'm humble. I take time to take decisions. I was not like that before.

Jonas credited maturing changes to his humility as the core conduit for his behavioural change. Noel similarly told us, 'I am a better person. I cannot fight anyone like I used to. I try to avoid getting involved into danger. I cannot insult anyone or a neighbour's child. Even strangers, I cannot insult them'.

In one of many examples of trying to avoid arguments, Fidele explained how he interacted with people who had wronged him:

For example, there are people who wronged us when we were away thinking that we wouldn't come back. Someone went to my eucalyptus plantation and harvested fifty-four poles. He never even asked my wife for the permission to do so. ... When I returned, I wanted to go to him and quarrel, but I had to think twice. I decided to approach him politely. ... One day, I wanted to build my perimeter fence, I asked him to give me some fibres. He then told me that I was free to get them from his farm. He also allowed me to cut any amount of trees that I wanted. From there, I think I am a different person today. I am not like I used to be. I invite him, he comes with his children, and he comes.

Fidele thus describes meaningful reflections around his behavioural choices that, to him, make him a 'different' person.

Respondents also underscored how they had become humble — a highly valued personality trait in Rwanda. Daniel explained:

I'm humble. I am always at home, I go working on our farm, from there I come back home. We get lunch. I work on different activities, going to look for pastures [for] that animal, but before that, I never used to do that.

Mathias shared a comparable shift in his personality, noting:

as for me, before going to prison a woman was like an object, like any other instrument as well as children, I couldn't take a bicycle to go fetch water. I couldn't listen to my wife or my children. But now, I learnt that if you are married to someone, you should respect that person, you should listen to them, sit and discuss or talk about everything. If your child asks for something that you don't have, please explain and tell them that you are going to try even if you can't afford it right that way. So, I changed a lot.

Such comments are likely also linked to national shifts in attention to gender equality within the country, including much high-level discourse about the role of women in Rwandan society.⁶²

Furthermore, numerous respondents spoke about how they used to consume alcohol excessively but now refrain, or at least drink in moderation. Alcohol use was common during the genocide, and killing groups often met at bars prior to committing violence. More broadly, alcohol consumption is common in Rwanda,⁶³ though drinking to the point of intoxication is often seen as a vice, and recent policies have sought to minimize drunk driving.⁶⁴ Perhaps because of this broader context, respondents regularly discussed how they adjusted their drinking habits, often connecting such habits to their behaviours.

Sampson, for example, shared:

I used to drink a lot of alcohol, but now I am not one. I cannot drink alcohol again. I changed completely. ... Before, I was a bad person. Maybe because I used to drink alcohol, but I was very ruthless. If it was before, my wife couldn't have escaped me unhurt.

62 Jennie E. Burnet, 'Gender Balance and the Meanings of Women in Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda', *African Affairs*, 107.428 (2008), 361-86.

63 Julius O. Adekunle, *Culture and Customs of Rwanda* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), pp. 85-86.

64 See, for instance, 'More than 2500 drunk drivers penalized in 2019', *IGIHE*, 5 January 2020 <<https://en.igihe.com/news/more-than-2500-drunk-drivers-penalized-in-2019>> [accessed 22 May 2024].

Phenias likewise explained:

I used to like alcohol very much before going to prison, but now I'm changed. I can attend a wedding. People drink alcohol; they get drunk. It's not because I don't like it, but I'm not matching to that. Another thing is I was hot-tempered before going to prison. Now, I'm a changed man. ... Even I can tell my wife to do something and then she refuses. I look at her, I say maybe I praise instead of fighting. I tell a kid to do something. The kid refuses, I look at the kid, I smile instead of reacting. So, I'm like that now.

These reflections on alcohol reduction underscore the role of behavioural and personality changes after prison that make those who participated in genocide 'changed' individuals.

Similarly, others connected their changes to having found faith. Christianity is the dominant religion in Rwanda, and many people have converted from Catholicism to Protestant faiths — including Pentecostalism — since the genocide.⁶⁵ Seventh Day Adventist churches are also popular across the country, and respondents sometimes drew upon finding religion as they outlined their redemption.

Charles told us, for instance, 'I am a changed person completely, because before going to prison, I was a drunk man. I used to drink a lot, fight with people after drinking. But today, I'm a Christian, I can't even drink'. Christophe also connected his lack of drinking to his newfound faith:

Before 1994, I was a different person. I was a drunkard; I could get involved in drinking. But prison gave me a lesson. When I got there, I converted, I became a Christian — a staunch one. I started being guided by the word of God. I started becoming a man of principles, an honest man.

Numerous others explained how finding faith had impacted shifts in their personalities and/or behaviours. Louis, for example, shared his experience, stating:

65 Timothy Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 74.

Especially after confessing to the crime, I changed and also became a staunch Christian. I now have to follow what the word of God tells me. Before, I was not religious and didn't even know where the churches operate from and how they operate.

When asked why he converted, Louis continued, 'My heart told me to do so. I would meet the people I wronged and felt I could run away. I had a very guilty conscience. Now that I confessed, all that stopped, and I meet them and greet them'. Likewise, Leonard, who said he changed in a refugee camp in 1995 after reflecting on 'the life that I lived in the genocide', explained, 'We do not have to forget God even though we have done what God hates'.

We have many other examples of such language in the interviews, but the main point is that respondents sought to present themselves as changed individuals, further distancing themselves from their crimes and associated labels.⁶⁶ While we cannot know if respondents' everyday behaviours reflected the behaviours and identities they described, some interviews suggested this was indeed the case. For instance, Immaculee explained:

Before serving your punishment, you feel guilty. You feel guilty even before being arrested or being punished. Then, when you're arrested, you confess. You confess for the crime you committed. You first forgive yourself for that, and then you ask forgiveness from others. They do that to you, or they don't even do that to you. But for you, you know that you confess for the crime you committed, you apologize, and you're forgiven. ... What you do as a human being is forgive yourself — seek forgiveness and forgive yourself. You even try to convert to be a good person.

Moreover, many respondents explained how they sought to tell or show others in their community that they had changed, thus reflecting their narratives in action. A lengthy exchange with Ladislav is illustrative:

Hollie: So, I imagine that means that everyone knows why you were in TIG. Does this ever make you self-conscious?

66 As we show elsewhere, roughly half of the respondents also emphasized a language tied to being citizens, much like Gabriel underscores in the introduction; see Nyseth Nzitatira and Gasana Gasasira. While this is surely impacted by the Rwandan government's emphasis on nationalism, it also mirrors efforts to encourage those leaving carceral institutions to see themselves as members of their society.

Ladislav: Since I returned there have been two meetings. And in those meetings, they give us theatre. A spot to talk about our experience, telling people about our experiences. In those two meetings, I have been able to talk to people. Those meetings have been in the evening. They bring together heads of households. So, I have been able to talk to people and tell them my experiences.

Hollie: What do you say? If you don't mind my asking.

Ladislav: I told them where I was taken to where I had been for the crime I committed. But now I confessed, and I am a genuine person. I am back to work with you, I am back to relate with you, I am back to cooperate with you to work for the betterment of this country. I am a Rwandan just like any other Rwandan.

Hollie: What is the response when you say things like that?

Ladislav: It's not the first time, it's normal. People tell them different experiences, and it is taken as a normal thing in those meetings.

Hollie: Why do you think it's important you tell them you are a Rwandan just like any Rwandan?

Ladislav: It is to emphasize that you are a changed person. You're no longer a part of what happened. You're envisioning the betterment of the country. Working together with them, joining hands to work for the betterment of the country. And you are a changed Rwandan who is not like you were before.

In one of many other examples, Fidele relied on a religious reference to explain the need to demonstrate that he had changed. In his words: 'It is like being baptized. People make parties when they get baptized. We need to behave like new people in order for the rest of the members of the community to know that we changed'. Interviews with spouses for another part of this project largely confirmed much of what we heard, though again, the broader point is that people in this study cared deeply about presenting themselves as changed and wished that the language people used to describe them could likewise reflect such changes.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that many Rwandans who were incarcerated for genocide do not label themselves as perpetrators. Instead, they try to present themselves as redeemed individuals as they reenter and reintegrate into Rwandan society. It is perhaps not surprising that these individuals do not want the label of *perpetrator* to follow them for the rest of their lives, though the discipline of genocide studies has rarely considered the possible implications of such labels — a conversation that we seek to initiate.

In highlighting how people who committed genocide refer to themselves alongside their desires to be seen as redeemed individuals, we draw attention to the importance of considering how sticky the label of *perpetrator* is, as well as how sticky it should be. To be clear, we do not suggest that people should not claim responsibility for their violent and/or harmful actions. Indeed, it would be problematic to advocate for person-first language in lieu of accepting responsibility for one's actions. Nor do we suggest that people committing violence are any less guilty; most fully understood the harms they were inflicting as they engaged in violence, and we do not mean to minimize these harms or suggest that anyone else should be minimizing them. Rather, we propose that researchers, scholars, activists, and global citizens should reflect upon the far-reaching consequences of crime-first labels and, in doing so, consider person-first language, specifically in the aftermath of violence and as they write about their findings. In fact, we suggest that researchers have an ethical imperative to think critically about the terms we employ, including how the people we study view these terms and how such terms may affect these individuals. We urge this consideration in genocide studies but note that it should extend to other types of violence, such as crimes against humanity or war crimes — an argument that we believe is in line with a recent turn toward examining perpetration rather than perpetrators within genocide studies.

Research in other settings has made clear that labels that focus on the crime rather than the person can lead to recidivism as well as stigmatisation upon reentry and reintegration into society. This research has also illustrated that crime-first labels impact peoples' self-concepts. Here, we have underscored this impact. We have also briefly alluded to the possible effect of these labels on the family members of those who committed violence. We suspect that such language also matters for the

narratives of violence that are passed from generation to generation, perhaps especially in communities that experience cycles of violence.

We do recognize that using person-first language, or even taking seriously the wishes of people who committed genocide, may feel uncomfortable in general, and perhaps particularly for people who bore the brunt of the violence. In opening the discussion on person-first language, we suggest that additional research be done on the possible impacts of such language. As previously noted, crime-first terminology can enhance feelings of anxiety and worries about recidivism amongst community members, though it remains to be seen whether and how such language may impact communities recovering from violence. We also know little about the viewpoints of those who were victimized on this topic — an important area for future research.

We likewise underscore that we highlight situations in which people seek to shed a label and do not consider their actions a part of their identity. In instances where someone wants to be known by a crime-first label — which may be rare, but may especially be the case for those who orchestrate violence — we are less certain about the value of person-first language. In much the same way, we recognize that socio-political conditions shape whether and how those who committed violence view the label of *perpetrator*. In Rwanda, the government has framed the genocide as the crime of crimes, and crime-first labels carry great weight. In other locations, especially where past atrocity crimes are not recognized as such or where past violence has been valorised, the meaning behind the labels will vary. Researchers should consequently examine person-first language in other contexts and with respect to other forms of violence as well.

We are hopeful that future research will move forward our discipline's collective conversation about the ethics of our work, as well as the power of our words. For now, we hope that this article serves as the baseline for a reconsideration of terms, or at least additional thought regarding the words we choose to employ.

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