IDENTITY, RITUALS, AND NARRATIVES
LESSONS FROM REENTRY AND REINTEGRATION
AFTER GENOCIDE IN RWANDA

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“Widespread reintegration following brutal, intimate violence was not easy, and reintegration remains an ongoing process that some people—especially survivors—continue to view with unease.”

FAST FACTS

→ The process of reentering and reintegrating former participants in violence must incorporate more than physical return to a community. It should also involve meaningful inclusion in society.

→ Rituals not only enhance a sense of belonging—they also help returning Rwandans dissociate themselves from their former identities.

→ One critical reason many Rwandans are willing to consider re-engaging with people who committed genocide is the presence of a common narrative about why the genocide happened.

Context

During the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda, hundreds of thousands of civilians picked up machetes or clubs, joined killing groups, and targeted their neighbors.\(^1\) Such mass civilian participation resulted in upwards of one million deaths—along with widespread sexualized violence, torture, forced displacement, and property damage—in just over three months.\(^2\) In the aftermath,


a state-implemented court system—known as gacaca—sentenced roughly 250,000 people to prisons and community service camps for their engagement in the genocide. Over the past decade, many of these formerly incarcerated individuals have been returning to their villages, often to live side-by-side with those they harmed.

This widespread reintegration following brutal, intimate violence was not easy, and reintegration remains an ongoing process that some people—especially survivors—continue to view with unease. Nevertheless, Rwandans are once again living together; and in the vast majority of instances, family members and communities are not rejecting formerly incarcerated individuals when they return.

This policy note outlines core findings from a case study of the experiences of approximately 200 Rwandans as they left prison or community service camp and returned to their communities. Specifically, it relies upon interviews with each of these individuals before, 6 months after, and again 1 year after their release—as well as interviews with over 100 community members. Although reentry and reintegration are multifaceted processes, this policy note focuses on identity, rituals, and narratives with an emphasis on initial reentry, which sets the stage for broader reintegration. In doing so, the note highlights insights that are relevant to reentry and reintegration following not only genocide but also mass violence, war, insurgency, violent extremism, and other forms of political violence. It simultaneously recognizes, however, that the case of Rwanda has exceptional elements and addresses these elements throughout.

Relevance to Policy and Practice

Criminologists have been studying reentry and reintegration after incarceration for violent crime for decades. Scholars have assessed reentry and reintegration following individuals’ release
from prison, with success often defined as an absence of recidivism or, more broadly, as the (re-)establishment of positive relationships with oneself, one’s family, and one’s community.\(^8\) Much of this work examines reentry and reintegration within the context of one’s life course, emphasizing how those who return to their communities—or to society more broadly—adapt to their new lives over time.\(^9\)

Although this research has identified numerous factors that aid or hinder reentry and reintegration, criminologists have paid particular attention to the role of labels. Essentially, people’s identities and behaviors are impacted by the terms others use to describe and classify them. Once individuals have been labeled as deviant, they often face new problems that stem from their and others’ reactions to these labels. For instance, when society’s reaction is to stigmatize or demonize, people with deviant labels can be left with limited opportunity for achieving respect and affirmation in mainstream society.\(^10\) This suggests that paying attention to labels, as well as community reactions, is paramount.

However, knowledge gleaned from this robust body of research on formerly incarcerated people is often not integrated into conversations about the reentry and reintegration of people who engage in violent extremism, join militias, commit genocide, or participate in other political violence.\(^11\) This policy note consequently emphasizes four lessons learned regarding initial reentry in Rwanda, informed by criminological scholarship. The note focuses on the roles of identity, rituals, and narratives and their importance in the development of a prosocial identity and sense of belonging, both of which are fundamental human needs across contexts and cultures. Policymakers designing programs to reintegrate those who participate in political violence should thus consider the following aspects in programming and policy.

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\(^8\) The latter, broader definition is the definition of “success” used in this policy note.


Recommendations

Encourage rituals that mark the transition back to the community.

The process of reentering and reintegrating former participants in violence must incorporate more than physical return to a community. It should also involve meaningful inclusion in society—a significant indicator of reintegration success.\(^{12}\) Such inclusion may be particularly vital when an individual’s crimes were committed against and/or transgressed the norms of the community to which they are returning, as norm breaking often leads to exclusion.

Although inclusion is a process, a symbolic gesture signifying a community’s openness to reacceptance is especially important to mark initial inclusion in a family and/or community upon return. This gesture is also a rite of passage. Rites of passage—or rituals that signify changes of place, social position, and age\(^{13}\)—exist in every culture. While many rites of passage are associated with parties and celebrations—such as weddings or baby showers—they need not be extravagant and can take the form of small acts that recognize a change in the individual’s status. In Rwanda, for example, simple rites of passage mark the change in status from a person who committed violence to someone who is a member of the community and simultaneously indicate that members of a family or a community are open to integrating or reintegrating the individual.

When Rwandans who were incarcerated for genocide reenter their communities, they are often greeted with family dinners that symbolically mark their reentry. Neighbors also typically bring gifts, such as soda, food, or a few coins to pay for a drink at a local bar. In return, the people who were incarcerated partake in the gifts and engage with their visitors. These minor yet meaningful acts signify the return of formerly incarcerated people to their communities and thus are rites of passage. The rituals concurrently signal the possibility of reacceptance by families and community members—something that was a surprise to many people in this study. One individual, for instance, said that the gestures “corrected my feeling that people hated me.”

Though these rituals may be specific to Rwanda, the need to symbolically rejoin one’s community is not. Much research on reentry and reintegration in other contexts has highlighted this necessity as well. For instance, a survey of former combatants in Liberia asked respondents about the conditions that would influence their return to violence, finding that a lack of acceptance from their families and/or communities was among the most commonly-stated reasons.\(^{14}\) In much the same way, criminological research emphasizes the importance of prosocial relationships upon return from prison,\(^{15}\) illustrating the universal need to belong. Thus, a culturally symbolic ritual may help signal possible reacceptance and mark the transition back to a community in any context.

Still, there are a number of issues that may impact the feasibility of reacceptance rituals. First, there


\(^{15}\) Visher and Travis, “Transitions from Prison to Community”; Morenoff and Harding, “Incarceration, Prisoner Reentry, and Communities.”
could be opposition and reluctance within a community to extend such gestures of reacceptance or to consider reacceptance in the first place. To be certain, some Rwandans—including but not limited to genocide survivors—expressed great reluctance about people returning from prison and hesitancy to welcome them. One individual told us, for instance, that he originally thought 20 years was a long sentence until he saw the people who killed his parents return to his village. In this sense, it is critical to highlight that the gestures do not absolve people from guilt but rather signal a willingness to try to engage with returning individuals and their new identities going forward. The feasibility of rituals also varies across communities,\textsuperscript{16} which are not monolithic and differ in their degree of willingness to engage with reintegrating individuals.

More broadly, the case of Rwanda is unique to the country’s history, and numerous factors—such as the relatively large amount of time that had passed between the violence and people’s reentry or specific government programs tied to unity and reconciliation—impact community members’ readiness to engage in rituals. It is also important to note that the authoritarian government encourages reconciliation, although it is equally important to highlight that while such encouragement impacts reentry, the processes we observed were not occurring out of fear.

Communities and countries with different experiences require further contextual considerations. As such, policymakers and practitioners should assess the following when seeking to implement similar initiatives:

\begin{itemize}
\item The nature of the individual’s violent engagement;
\item The individual’s willingness to reintegrate;
\item The community’s and/or country’s socio-cultural rituals; and
\item The community history of violence.
\end{itemize}

\textit{Adopt person-first language.}

Rituals not only enhance a sense of belonging—they also help returning Rwandans dissociate themselves from their former identities. Identities are shaped by how we view ourselves, how we believe others view us, and how others treat us. Identities are also dynamic and can be impacted by the experiences one has and the groups to which one belongs.\textsuperscript{17} With respect to violence, armed and radicalized groups often enact rituals to strip away old identities and create new ones. The rites of passage discussed in the previous recommendation symbolize another shift in identity away from identities tied to stigmatized violence. Within research on desistance from crime, this process is often referred to as “knifing off” one’s violent past and severing the associated identity.\textsuperscript{18}

Labels can be particularly impactful for this process. For instance, the formerly incarcerated Rwandans interviewed for this project vehemently rejected the label of “genocidaire,” making a point to clarify that they were no longer \textit{genocidaires}. They also developed narratives of redemption, suggesting they are “different” today, that they are “Rwandans once again,” and

\textsuperscript{16} The concept of “community” varies culturally and should be considered in each context as well.


that they are “citizens again.” Though the terminological distinction between “genocidaire” and someone who committed genocide (or “terrorist” and someone who committed terrorism, or “insurgent” and someone who engaged in insurgency) may seem small, focusing on the person before the violent action helps to reinforce their identities as persons who no longer engage in violence.

Breaking the link between people and their violent acts is also key to a criminological concept called reintegrative shaming. Reintegrative shaming recognizes individuals’ wrongful acts yet still accepts them as moral members of society—as opposed to stigmatizing them for their past actions and thus rejecting their inclusion in society.\(^\text{19}\) As such, shaming is important to reinforce that their violent actions were wrong; yet, it can be done in a way that acknowledges people are redeemable and not defined by their past actions. Labeling people by their actions can have consequences for future violence. Research finds that when society labels people as deviant, they are more likely to engage in deviance.\(^\text{20}\) A study of almost 100,000 Americans found that those whom courts formally labeled as “felons” were significantly more likely to recidivate as compared to those who were not.\(^\text{21}\)

In the case of Rwanda, person-first labels are not currently a major aspect of government or nonprofit responses to the genocide. Many of the community members interviewed likewise use the term “genocidaire.” Still, policymakers in Rwanda and in other contexts should encourage person-first language in any narratives regarding the violence, ranging from news reports to textbooks to reentry and reintegration-related programs. Labels are especially important when they come from people in power\(^\text{22}\)—thus families, communities, organizations, and states should employ person-first language that emphasizes the person over the action.

The government of Rwanda and policymakers and practitioners in other contexts following political violence should consider the following:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Encourage person-first language that centers the person before the violent act;
  \item Avoid negative terms like “the enemy” or even common terms like “perpetrators” that conflate identities with past actions;
  \item Ensure that people in power, such as government actors and policymakers, employ person-first language; and
\end{itemize}

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\(^\text{21}\) Chiricos et al., “The Labeling of Convicted Felons.”
\(^\text{22}\) In April, 2016, the U.S. Department of Justice adopted a policy that changes the language used to describe individuals with criminal records by using person-first terms (e.g., “person with a felony”) rather than “felon” or “offender.”
Include person-first language in official narratives of the violence presented in museums, commemorative events, and similar spaces.

**Adopt a structural narrative of violence.**

Broader narratives are also significant for the reentry and reintegration process. One critical reason many Rwandans are willing to consider re-engaging with people who committed genocide is the presence of a common narrative about why the genocide happened. Throughout the country, sources like public school curricula and government-run memorials paint a complex picture of the violence as the result of colonialism and other historical processes. These sources also place blame on former government officials who discriminated against Tutsi and the local leaders who encouraged violence—a narrative that is notably possible due to the regime change that occurred in Rwanda. Accordingly, when asked why individuals committed genocide, the vast majority of Rwandans interviewed for this study discussed the structural factors (rather than only individual factors) that led to the violence.

There are certainly issues with state narratives of violence, as they inevitably omit some people’s perspectives and are framed to support the state and cement its power. Yet, one important benefit of a dominant narrative of the violence is that most Rwandans share a common understanding of the causes of the genocide—causes that are generally framed as external to the people who committed violence. By placing some blame on historical colonialism and governments, this narrative contextualizes the actions of the individuals who perpetrated the violence on the ground, in contrast to many settings where common knowledge attributes violence exclusively to individual qualities (e.g., greed or impulsiveness).

In turn, this contextualization facilitates reentry and reintegration by impacting community members’ understandings of violence. Though a structural narrative does not eliminate individual blame and should simultaneously recognize individual factors, a structural narrative can make individuals’ violent actions more comprehensible and can lessen associated stigma. Thus, in addition to breaking the link between the person and the violent act by using person-first language, it is important for narratives of the violence to include explanations that are external to the individual. Again, these explanations do not exonerate individual guilt but rather should be viewed as complementary to the individual-level factors that influenced participation in violence. Furthermore, as noted above, individuals who engaged in violence can and should still be shamed for their actions in ways that productively reintegrate them rather than stigmatize them. Shaming recognizes individual agency with the simultaneous acknowledgement that this agency was impacted by social structure.

It is important to note that community members’ willingness to accept structural narratives alongside individual ones may be impacted by whether people were held accountable for their actions. In the case of Rwanda, many community members indicated the importance of justice as they discussed the return of formerly incarcerated people. Those found guilty of crimes of genocide were charged individually at *gacaca*, and even bystanders were often charged for their actions.

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23 This aligns with the psychological concept of integrative complexity, the ability to move beyond binary thinking to achieve complex thinking that recognizes multiple viewpoints and complex structural processes.

24 This conceptualization likely impacts people’s identities as well, as does treatment by community members.
role. Although there were varying views of these punishments and the broader court process,\(^\text{25}\) many community members suggested that punishments aided their willingness to consider reintegration. It is inappropriate to suggest that punishment should always be implemented, or even that *gacaca*’s punishments were the best course of action. Yet, in this case, punishment likely impacted Rwandans’ willingness to accept structural explanations.

**Generalizable lessons from this specific case include the following:**

- Identify the structural factors that caused violence, such as broader political reasons driving violent extremism rather than purely individualistic ones;
- Incorporate structural explanations of violence into history textbooks, museums, memorials, and other narrative-facilitating spaces;
- Integrate individual and structural explanations into narratives such that a more complete understanding of violence is achieved; and
- Pay attention to pitfalls in the narratives, such as how they may privilege certain versions of history over others.\(^\text{26}\)

**Recognize diversity among those reentering and reintegrating, including gendered differences.**

Finally, individuals reentering and reintegrating into their communities are not a monolithic group. Many social factors—like age, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity—shape reentry and reintegration experiences. Among those social factors, one is particularly salient in the case of Rwanda: gender. Put simply, women’s paths to reentry and reintegration have been paved with more obstacles than those of men. For instance, most formerly incarcerated men in this study remarried and reside in dual wage-earner households, while the majority of women in the study do not have partners. Women in this study are also living in comparatively worse economic conditions.

Although many factors may explain such differences, community members’ perceptions are telling. When asked about women who participated in the genocide, many Rwandans express concern that these women are “not normal” or even “evil.” This finding suggests that there is much stigma surrounding women who engaged in genocidal violence, as they transgressed gendered norms.\(^\text{27}\) While men’s violent actions are sometimes considered understandable in light of the complex structural factors that shaped actions, many community members see women’s actions as aberrant. This phenomenon is not unique to Rwanda, and other research has addressed how women who commit extreme violence are often stigmatized by their communities.\(^\text{28}\) Furthermore, many of the husbands of the women who were formerly incarcerated remarried, while many

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\(^{25}\) To be certain, the process had numerous issues. For instance, the process relied on eye-witness testimony; people rarely had lawyers; community members sometimes falsely accused people as a way to retaliate for petty squabbles; and only violence tied to the genocide (and not the concurrent civil war) was tried in the courts.

\(^{26}\) As noted above, the strong state narrative of the violence in Rwanda has limitations, as it often propagates a narrative of the genocide that excludes certain suffering and, like any government narrative, purposefully supports the state.


of the wives did not. Community members and formerly incarcerated people alike exhibited a
genral cultural belief that women could survive without their husbands but that men could not
be expected to live without their wives.  

More broadly, this finding underscores the gendered dynamics of reentry and reintegration and
illustrates that the experiences of returning individuals are shaped by other aspects of identity.
Programs and policies must accordingly consider intersectionality—or how various identities
intersect and overlap to produce social experiences. For instance, policymakers and other
influencers should explicitly address gender or other aspects of identity in narratives of past
violence. Programming should also be tailored to serve the special needs of certain segments
of the reentering and reintegrating population. For example, in Rwanda, half-way houses—
places where women could go after completing their sentences but prior to returning to their
communities—could help prepare women for community members’ responses. Community
programs could simultaneously help teach Rwandans about gender bias.

Thus, those attending to reentry and reintegration across contexts should:

→ Analyze how different social factors—such as gender, age, religion, or ethnicity—impact
the reentry and reintegration process;
→ Recognize that the factors that will be most salient vary across cultural contexts and may
even vary across communities; and
→ Design programs that are sensitive to intersectionality, which again involves the
recognition of how multiple identities intersect to impact people’s lived realities.

Conclusion

Reentering and reintegrating individuals who committed extreme violence is far from easy. The
case of Rwanda represents a unique case given the widespread public participation in violence
and the subsequent large-scale reentry and reintegration effort. Though the factors associated
with long-term reintegration in Rwanda have yet to be understood, this note has focused on
factors associated with initial reentry which has, largely, been better than expected for this case.
As such, some lessons gleaned from this exceptional case can inform other contexts. This policy
note has accordingly emphasized lessons tied to encouraging rituals, using person-first language,
propagating a structural narrative of the violence, and recognizing diversity among reentering and
reintegrating populations with an emphasis on initial reentry. These lessons speak to the universal
human need to belong, which in turn is important for more secure, stable, and peaceful societies.

29  Furthermore, it is rare for middle-aged women and older women to remarry, though Rwandan men can culturally remarry
at most any time.
30  To be clear, half-way houses have yet to be implemented but are being considered in the Rwandan case.
Suggested Further Reading

On Labeling


On Narratives and Rituals


On Reintegrative Shaming


On the Case of Rwanda


About the Note

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Hollie Nyseth Brehm is an associate professor of sociology at The Ohio State University. Her research agenda is motivated by the fundamental questions of why and how atrocities occur and who commits them. She is equally interested in the process of transitional justice after atrocities, including how societies rebuild, how international actors respond to the violence, and the lasting effects of mass violence. In other words, Nyseth Brehm studies multiple processes of mass violence, human rights violations, and mass crime — why they occur, how they occur, their effects, and responses to them.

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