

Who becomes a hero? It is more than just a personality trait

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We tend to think of heroes in terms of a psychological profile: brave, altruistic, strong.

But a new study suggests that for at least one kind of heroism, it takes a village to save a life.

Through in-depth interviews, researchers examined what motivated some members of the majority Hutu population in Rwanda to risk their own safety to save persecuted ethnic Tutsi during the [genocidal violence of 1994](#). The violence claimed up to 1 million lives, eliminating much of the Tutsi population.

"We started this study thinking we would identify the individual characteristics that motivated [rescuers](#), because that's what most previous research had pointed to," said Hollie Nyseth Brehm, co-author of the study and assistant professor of sociology at The Ohio State University.

"But we realized very quickly that most people who rescued weren't doing this alone. It was a form of collective action. The social dynamics and situational context were key factors in determining whether someone decided to rescue."

In fact, the results of the study made clear that not all the Hutu who saved Tutsi were heroes, Brehm said. The researchers interviewed six Hutu who killed or performed other violence against some Tutsi, but also saved others.

"Some of them killed a Tutsi they didn't know, but saved someone they knew," Brehm said.

"People's behavior is complex. You can't always put them into these neat categories of 'good' or 'bad.' Psychological theories fall short when trying to explain why some people who rescued also killed other people. That's why it is important to understand the social situation, as we do in this study."

Brehm conducted the study with Nicole Fox, assistant professor of sociology at California State University, Sacramento. Their results appear online in the journal *Social Forces* and will appear in a future print edition.

For this study, the researchers conducted one- to two-hour interviews with 35 Hutu who had reported saving at least one Tutsi from violence. Six of the people the researchers chose were defendants in court for committing genocidal crimes, but had also reported rescuing potential victims. The rescues took a variety of forms, but many involved hiding Tutsi in their homes from armed militias.

They supplemented their interviews with data from a survey of 273 rescuers done by other researchers.

In their analysis of the interviews, the researchers identified three major factors associated with [collective action](#) that could help explain why the rescuers did what they did to save Tutsi: biographical availability, socialization and situational context.

Biographical availability involves the influence of people's life circumstances in shaping their ability to rescue. The study found that most people who rescued were significantly older than the general population. As elders, they had influence over their families and may not

have been expected to take part in militias committing genocide, which were dominated by the young.

Rescuers also tended to have higher socioeconomic status than most Rwandans, which often meant they had homes where they could hide persecuted Tutsi.

Socialization—especially family history and religious views—also played a key role in the decisions of people to rescue.

"The family history finding surprised us. That emerged from the data and was not something we had expected," Brehm said.

Twenty of the 35 people interviewed mentioned that their parents or grandparents had rescued Tutsi during previous periods of violence in the country. One man said he derived strength to act because of "what my parents had done in previous years."

Religion was another key factor. In the survey of rescuers, only three of the 273 respondents adhered to no religion. Most were Catholics (52 percent) and 40 percent were Protestants.

In the interviews, 57 percent mentioned faith being connected to their decisions to rescue.

One example of how religion played a role in decisions to rescue involved Seventh Day Adventists, who made up about 20 percent of the survey respondents. "They spoke about how their religious practices, such as abstinence from alcohol, created a social divide between them and those who participated in the violence," Brehm said.

The third factor involved in motivating rescuers was situational context. One important context was their social ties, specifically with Tutsi

seeking help. One-third of survey respondents said they participated in rescue efforts because the people they were rescuing were friends or neighbors.

In the interviews, the numbers were even more striking: 32 of 35 people rescued people they knew.

"Often, we found that people who rescued had people show up at their doors and they had to decide whether to help," Brehm said.

Another key situational context was the community setting, including levels of violence and active militias. Some people were able to hide Tutsi because militias thought their villages had been fully "cleansed" of Tutsi. Other Hutu rescuers (often those who also committed [violence](#)) had close ties to militia members, so they were not suspected of hiding Tutsi.

Brehm noted that the rescuers interviewed for this study were not randomly chosen. She and Fox found the participants in a variety of ways, but there is no way to tell if they are representative of all rescuers in the country.

Brehm said psychological traits undoubtedly played at least some role in people's decisions to risk their lives to rescue. But the good news from this study is that heroism is within reach of most [people](#), given the right circumstances.

"These results suggest that nearly anyone can engage in heroic deeds. You may not need a certain personality type, as long as you have the right network of friends and family and a support system that can help you."

More information: Nicole Fox et al. "I Decided to Save Them":

Factors That Shaped Participation in Rescue Efforts during Genocide in Rwanda, *Social Forces* (2018). [DOI: 10.1093/sf/soy018](https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soy018)

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