
Genocide, Rescue, and Prevention: Understanding and Fostering Rescue Behavior in the Face of Mass Killing*May 8, 2009*

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On Friday, May 8, 2009, the Yale Center for Bioethics held a day-long symposium titled *Genocide, Rescue, and Prevention: Understanding and Fostering Rescue Behavior in the Face of Mass Killing*. The General Motors Room at 55 Hillhouse Avenue was filled to capacity with students, faculty, and members of the community who came to hear experts from diverse disciplines present and discuss the dynamics of rescue behavior. Scholars from the fields of history, psychiatry, social psychology, and neuroscience shared their perspectives on how their disciplines might approach an analysis of the determinants of heroic acts described in a series of documented rescue behavior scenarios.

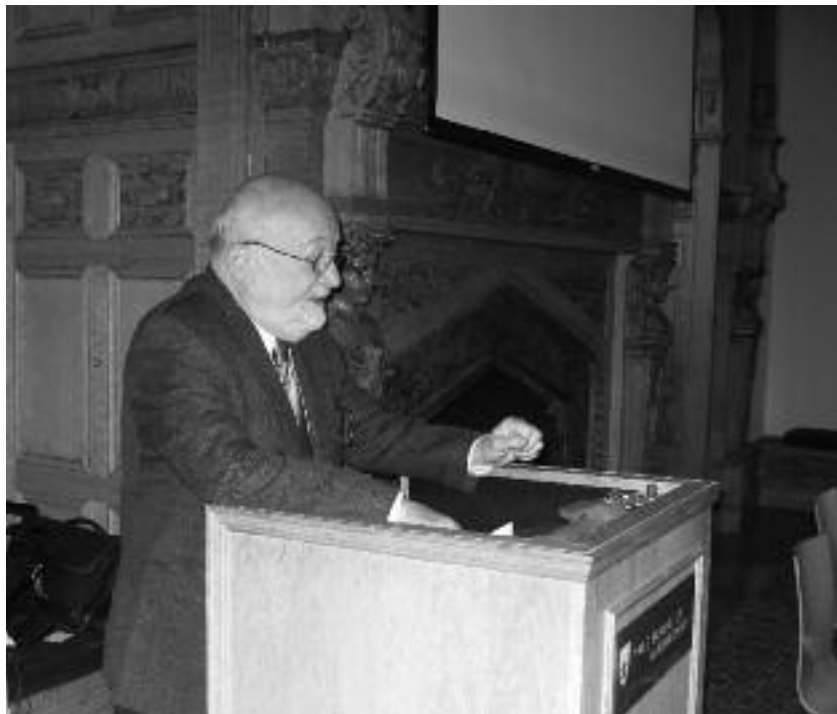
Part I of the day's symposium was entitled "Challenges for Research," and the morning session began with remarks from Moderator Ben Kiernan (Director of Yale's Genocide Studies Program) who introduced Dori Laub (Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Deputy Director of Trauma Studies in the Genocide Studies Program at Yale University, and Director of the Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimonies). In his remarks, Dr. Laub focused on research on the memory of rescue. He was introduced to this aspect of rescue by one of his patients who told him a story that he later documented to illustrate how a community of people can be effective in rescue behavior. This led to his extensive research and video taping of survivors of the Holocaust.

The morning's next speaker, Ron Dudai (Visiting Lecturer, Center for Applied Human Rights, University of York, U.K.), advocated understanding society and perpetrators as key elements to bringing justice into the equation of researching rescue behavior. Understanding and commemorating rescue behavior is important for human rights work, but the field in general does not incorporate consideration of such behavior because of its predominant orientation toward international law. He went on to say that while international law may provide a point of reference for research across cultures, it does not answer the question, "What does one do when one risks a life to rescue another life?"

Ervin Staub (Professor Emeritus of Psychology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst) spoke next about altruism and rescue behavior. Some of the factors that he explained as contributing to the behavior of rescuers included the belief in one's capacity to influence the life of others, the ability to have a separate perspective, and the sense that what the rescuer sees happening is an outrage. He further explained that child-rearing practices such as warmth and affection, guidance with regard to rules and values, and pointing out the consequences of one's behavior on others, were heavily influential in the behavior of rescuers.

Nechama Tec (Professor Emerita of Sociology, University of Connecticut) then discussed the phenomenon of rescuers who were paid to rescue Jews during the Holocaust and groups of Jewish rescuers who rarely receive credit for what they did. She spoke from her own personal experience as she described groups of rescuers: those who were paid; those who were anti-semitic; and those who were altruistic. She narrated in detail her story of being in a forest where three Jewish brothers rescued other Jews and eventually grew into a group of more than 30 people. These people became an organized unit of "Jews rescuing Jews," a type of rescue unit that is rarely credited with assistance during the Holocaust.

The next part of the program was a roundtable discussion on "Comparative Rescue Behavior in Diverse Settings of Genocide." Kristen Monroe (Professor of Political Science, University of California/Irvine) spoke about the Holocaust. Gerd Hankel (Senior Research Fellow, Lecturer, International Public and International Criminal Law, Hamburg Institute for Social Research) spoke about Rwanda. Sacheata Poev (Director, Khmer Legacies; Visiting Fellow, Genocide Studies Program, Yale University) spoke about Cambodia. Jasmina Besirevic-Regan (Lecturer, Program in Ethics, Politics & Economics, Yale University) spoke about Bosnia. Etelle Higonnet (Analysis Director, Iraq History Project, International Human Rights Law Group, DePaul University School of Law) spoke about Iraq.





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Part II of the symposium titled “Implications for Genocide Prevention: Can Rescue Behavior Be Taught?” began with remarks from Moderator Julius Landwirth (Associate Director, Yale Interdisciplinary Center for Bioethics) who introduced a presentation on promoting rescue behavior as a strategy for genocide prevention. The first presentation was given by Andrea Bartoli (Professor of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University and Founder, Genocide Prevention Program, Columbia University). Dr. Bartoli began by asking, “If you do nothing during a situation of mass killing are you supporting genocide behavior?” He explained that “rescuers do extraordinary things in exceptional circumstances in order to liberate others.” Genocide, he went on to say, is a series of positive feedback behaviors; rescuers actually tell us how to “author” genocide and the memory of victimhood (genocide) is not going away.

Rescuers “interrupt” genocide and move to counter the movement. He suggested that we can understand a society by the way it rescues.

The next speaker of the afternoon, Olivia Dreier (Associate Director, Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, Amherst, Massachusetts) spoke about the relevance of understanding rescue behavior for peace building programs.

The subsequent round table discussion explored topics regarding what some of the implications of the earlier material might be for education and began with Elizabeth Midlarsky (Professor of Psychology and Education, Columbia University) who addressed the topic of whether rescue behavior can be taught; her conclusion was that it could. Leora Kahn (Visiting Fellow, Genocide Studies Program, Yale University) demonstrated the role of graphic arts in teaching about rescue behavior through the power of photography and film. She showed how rescuers look like “regular” people, but through photography these “regular” people can be identified as role models. Jan Holton (Assistant Professor, Pastoral Care and Counseling, Yale Divinity School) spoke about religious studies and heroic rescue behavior. Lasana Harris (Post-Doctoral Fellow, Psychology, New York University) discussed research regarding the brain, dehumanization and altruism. One of the conclusions reached by this panel was that there are many forms of rescue and as a result there is some consensus that the definition of the words “rescue” and “rescuer” should be broadened.

The afternoon finished with agreement and renewed interest in continuing research on the potential value of understanding rescue behavior for genocide prevention and peace building strategies. The plan is to continue our collaboration to build on our past work and the new insights presented at this last meeting.

