

Reducing Intergroup Prejudice and Conflict: A Commentary

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This commentary describes an alternative conceptual framework for interpreting the effects that E. L. Paluck (2009) found in evaluating a public education radio drama in Rwanda. The radio drama included information about the origins and impact of violence and the avenues to prevention and healing, with the aim of preventing new violence. In addition to comparing theoretical perspectives and their practical implications, the commentary addresses the spread of effect through public discussion, the program content, the participants' past experience, and measurement issues shaping the impact of the radio drama.

Keywords: genocide, trauma, prevention, reconciliation, educational radio

Paluck (2009) describes an impressive experimental field study of the impact of the 1st year of an ongoing educational radio drama in Rwanda, which we developed in collaboration with LaBenevolencija, a Dutch nongovernmental organization (NGO) that produces the program, and with the Rwandan and international staff that LaBenevolencija recruited. In the study, with a rigorous methodology, Paluck (2009) found strong effects on many, but not all, dimensions evaluated. Our primary aims in this commentary are to evaluate Paluck's interpretation of the findings and to offer alternative conceptualizations of what actually changed as a result of the radio drama, and of the processes involved in bringing about change. We (Ervin Staub and Laurie Anne Pearlman) explore the spread of effect through public discussion, the conceptualization of the program versus the actual program content, and measurement issues. We note practical implications for educational media.

The radio drama, *Musekweya (New Dawn)*, grew out of educational workshops that we conducted with various groups in Rwanda—facilitators of community groups, national leaders, and journalists—in the aftermath of the genocide of 1994. The theories on which these interventions were based guided the development of the drama. The ultimate purpose of these interventions was to prevent new violence by promoting reconciliation in the aftermath of the genocide of 1994 and by promoting recovery from its psychological effects, an important element of reconciliation (Staub & Pearlman, 2006). Research in which the impact of one of the interventions was evaluated showed positive effects and is discussed later (Staub, Pearlman, Gubin, & Hagengimana, 2005; see also Cairns, 2005).

The radio drama was designed to extend the approach beyond small groups to the whole population. Instead of focusing on ethnic differences and genocide, which, in story form, would have been

highly emotionally arousing and might have limited educational impact, the educational content was embedded in the story of two villages in a conflict over fertile land, intensified by a drought resulting in scarcity in one of the villages. This village raided the better-off village. Continuing hostility and mutual violence followed and, later, reconciliation and trauma recovery, much of this beyond the 1st year of the program.

Aims of the Program and the Evaluation

Rwandan writers wove into the story educational messages that over time were to provide information about the influences leading to violence, the avenues for violence prevention, the psychological impact of violence, and the avenues to healing. This was the same kind of information we provided to participants in our earlier trainings (Staub & Pearlman, 2006). (Table 1 shows the communication messages derived from our theories; Pearlman, 2001; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995; Staub, 1989, 1996.) Paluck (2009) wrote that the educational messages "aimed at influencing listeners' beliefs" (p. 577) and suggested that the program is also "positioned to change perceptions of social norms—i.e., to demonstrate to listeners what their peers do (descriptive norms) and should do (prescriptive norms) in situations that many Rwandans face" (p. 577). Her study tests these "two strategies of influence—one aimed at changing beliefs and the other at changing perceived social norms—and the program's impact on its ultimate goal of changed behavior" (p. 577).

The project aim was to promote understanding of relations (e.g., among social conditions and cultural characteristics, psychological and social processes that they engender, and violence; Staub, 2006) "in the service of prevention, trauma healing, and reconciliation" (from the project mission statement). Consistent with our previous findings (Staub et al., 2005), we expected such understanding to generate empathy and a positive orientation to others. We hoped to motivate and to "empower citizens to become *active bystanders* who contribute to societal healing, resist influences leading to violence, and promote reconciliation and positive social processes" (Staub, Pearlman, Weiss, & van Hoek, 2007, p. 1). This national radio drama is intended to promote culture change over time, starting with individual listeners and progressing onward to change in the community, including its norms.

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Table 1
Communication Messages of the Rwandan Radio Drama

Message number	Message
1	Life problems in a society frustrate basic needs and can lead to scapegoating and destructive ideologies.
2	Genocide evolves as individuals and groups change as a result of their actions.
3	Devaluation increases the likelihood of violence while humanization decreases it.
4	The healing of psychological wounds helps people live more satisfying lives and makes unnecessary defensive violence less likely.
5	Passivity facilitates the evolution of harm-doing whereas actions by people inhibit it.
6	Varied perspectives, open communication, and moderate respect for authority in society make the evolution of violence less likely.
7	Justice is important for healing and reconciliation.
8	Significant connections and deep engagement between people belonging to different groups help people overcome devaluation and hostility and promote positive relations.
9	Trauma can be understood.
10	It is important to tell one's trauma story, and there is a way to tell it that is emotionally safe and constructive.
11	People can help their neighbors heal and help them tell their stories as part of the healing process; everyone can participate in and can contribute to healing.
12	Healing is a slow process.

Note. These messages (based primarily on Staub, 1989, 1996; Pearlman, 2001) were developed by a team consisting of Ervin Staub, Laurie Ann Pearlman, George Weiss (the director of LaBenevolencija), and other staff.

Paluck's (2009) study was conducted in 12 communities around Rwanda, with 6 treatment and 6 control groups. Participants met every month for a year to listen to four taped weekly episodes of either *Musekweya* (the treatment or reconciliation groups) or a health program (the health groups or control groups). Participants in the control groups promised not to listen to *Musekweya* in the course of the year. As Paluck noted, listening would have reduced differences between groups. The assessment at the end of the year included individual interviews, focus group discussions, and an unobtrusive behavioral measure.

Findings and Alternative Theoretical Perspectives

Paluck (2009) interpreted all of her findings except empathy in terms of her theoretical distinction between beliefs and norms. Paluck views empathy both as an outcome and a process that is important in bringing about other changes. Our discussion of alternative interpretations of the effects of the radio drama opens with empathy, in the context of which we begin to describe our theoretical views relevant to all the findings. We then review other research findings and our divergent theoretical interpretations, and we discuss various influences that in our view affected the results. We note practical implications of the different perspectives.

Empathy

In individual interviews, Paluck (2009) used responses to four statements to assess the extent to which participants "imagine the thoughts or feelings" (p. 578) of other Rwandans. She found that "reconciliation listeners expressed more empathy for real-life Rwandan prisoners, genocide survivors, poor people, and political leaders" (Paluck, 2009, p. 581). She stated that empathy was not experimentally manipulated in the study, and she accounted for its presence by listeners' emotional reactions to what was happening to the characters, suggesting that vicarious relationships with the characters transferred to members of real social groups.

However, information about the influences leading to and the traumatic impact of violence was expected to generate understanding and the capacity to take the perspective of perpetrators, survivors, and others, as well as oneself. Such cognitive empathy was likely to be amplified by the emotional involvement with characters.

Information can lead to changes in perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, & Grube, 1984), especially if people can confirm it with and use it to interpret their own experience. Information about the properties of electric shocks reduced participants' physiological responses to progressively increasing shocks (Staub & Kellett, 1972). Information about the characteristics of snakes (i.e., they flick their tongues to breathe, not in preparation to attack) enabled people to overcome their fear of snakes faster (Staub, 1968). Information also increased delay of gratification (Staub, 1972).

In our first extensive workshop in Rwanda, we communicated information similar to that embedded in the radio drama, but with a focus on genocide and on examples from other genocides, which the participants then applied to Rwanda. In the discussions, participants indicated greater understanding of and compassion for survivors (as wounded) and perpetrators (as affected by complex social forces). In a formal research study, we evaluated the impact of this workshop on members of community groups that some participants led afterward. Members of groups of mixed ethnicity reported fewer trauma symptoms and more positive orientation to members of the other ethnic group both across time (from before the training to 2 months after its end) and as compared with changes in treatment control and no-treatment control groups (Staub et al., 2005).

Understanding the reasons for others' emotions and actions can increase perspective-taking or cognitive empathy. For example, the drama showed the complex motivations of the destructive village leader. He was affected by the scarcity and suffering in his village and by personal matters, such as his antagonism toward his half-siblings who lived in the other village and whom his father favored; his daughter's drowning in a creek between the two villages, for which he blamed the other village; and his mother's incitement, presumably due to jealousy. The story humanizes and helps listeners understand him. By showing the complexity and at least partly self-focused nature of his motivation, it also aims to moderate the very strong tendency in Rwanda to respect and obey authorities (see Message 6, Table 1).

Beliefs, Norms, and Behaviors

Research findings. In individual interviews, Paluck (2009) assessed participants' agreement or disagreement with statements

intended to measure beliefs, defined as “understanding of self and environment” and norms, defined as “socially shared definitions of the way people *do* behave or *should* behave” (p. 575). Apart from one item on which the difference between treatment groups and control groups was the opposite of the expected direction (see later section on such reversals), there were no group differences on statements categorized as beliefs. Paluck’s (2009, p. 580) Table 2 summarizes belief statements—violence is a continuum, violence comes about suddenly, bystanders to violence are responsible, intermarriage brings peace, traumatized people are crazy, perpetrators can be traumatized—and two items testing health issues. In contrast, there are significant differences on all but one item that she categorizes as assessing norms. The items with significant differences are one health item and the following items: “Intermarriage should be allowed in my family, it is naïve to trust, I should dissent (when I disagree), and I should speak about painful experiences” (Paluck, 2009, Table 2, p. 580). There was no difference on one item: “There is mistrust in the community.” (Paluck, 2009, Table 2, p. 580)

A behavioral measure was obtained after participants’ last monthly meeting, at a good-bye party. Each group discussed how to manage a portable stereo and the cassettes with the year’s programs, which they received as rewards for their participation. This was an unobtrusive measure, seemingly not part of the evaluation. In the control groups, someone invariably suggested that the village headman take charge of these materials, with others immediately agreeing. In the treatment groups, there was usually the same initial suggestion, with others disagreeing. After lengthy group discussion, the treatment groups all decided to have either one member or the group collectively manage these materials. There were significant treatment–control differences in the number of possibilities proposed and debated and in the number of comments about group cooperation.

Paluck (2009) found one other behavior difference. In individual interviews, all participants agreed with the statement “there is mistrust in my community” (Paluck, in press, Table 1, p. 579). The lack of group differences is not surprising because there is great mistrust in the wake of the genocide in which neighbors killed neighbors, and the radio drama was not intended to create beliefs at odds with this reality. However, in focus groups in front of others, significantly more health group participants (39%) than reconciliation group participants (7%) changed their responses.

One of the strongest treatment effects had to do with the norm not to remain quiet when disagreeing “with something someone is doing or saying” (Paluck, 2009, p. 581). The consistency across these measures, showing the willingness to speak out and to be independent of authority (deciding not to have the headman manage the materials and having an open discussion to that effect), is impressive in a country where people generally do not express their beliefs publicly and generally do show very strong respect for authorities.

Contrasting interpretations. Paluck (2009) concluded that “the reconciliation radio program did not change listeners’ personal beliefs, but did substantially influence listeners’ perception of social norms” (p. 582). She suggests that “to change prejudiced behavior it may be more fruitful to target social norms than personal beliefs” (p. 582). Paluck also suggested that emotional reactions to the story leading to empathy and spontaneous group

discussion in reconciliation groups were the processes by which change came about.

Paluck (2009) does not provide clear conceptual or empirical guidance about how statements were categorized as beliefs or norms. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) define belief as “information a person has about an object . . . that links an object to an attribute” (p. 12), and norms as one’s “beliefs that certain referents think the person should or should not perform the behavior in question” (p. 16). Myers (1999) defined normative influence as “a person’s desire to fulfill others’ expectations” (p. 237). Definitions of norms point to beliefs about what others expect and to the pressure that this exerts on people to behave in certain ways.

Considering these definitions, some statements Paluck (2009) categorized as norms, such as “it is naïve to trust” and “there is mistrust in my community” (Table 1, p. 579), look like beliefs. Other statements might look like norms because they contain the word *should* (e.g., “for the sake of my mental health, I should never talk about experiences that have caused me great pain and suffering” (Paluck, 2009, Table 1, p. 579) “I should dissent” (Paluck, 2009, Table 2, p. 580), but rather than referring to what others regard as desirable, the statements seem to assess the respondent’s personal beliefs about the desirability of certain actions and outcomes, that is, values. Consistent with Rokeach (1973), we define values as preferences for certain modes of conduct or end states.

Research on the effects of educational radio dramas on contraception and AIDS prevention indicated that the influence of such programs proliferates through listener discussion (Bandura, 2006; Rogers, Vaughan, Swalehe, Rao, Svenkerud, & Sood, 1999). A survey conducted by LaBenevolencija (2005) to assess the audience of all radio programs in Rwanda before the evaluation study found wide popularity of the radio drama. Ninety-four percent of the population listened to the radio, and 89% of women and 92% of men among that group listened to *Musekeweya*; a substantial percentage listened to it regularly. Reconciliation group participants talked about the program to others in the community (Paluck, 2009). The relatives and neighbors of health group participants must have also talked about it, exposing health group members to information about *Musekeweya*.

As we have noted, some statements categorized as beliefs test perceptions of the reality of life in Rwanda, which the program did not aim to change. Other statements, such as “perpetrators of violence can also be traumatized” (Paluck, 2009, Table 1, p. 579), test information or knowledge. Such information can be acquired by the spread of effect through public discussion, by people overhearing or engaging in conversation with others who have listened to the program. Deeper changes, such as empathy, beliefs that represent values such as the desirability of dissenting when one disagrees, and behavior consistent with them, would require more educational influence, such as exposure to the program. One limitation of a spread of effect interpretation is that without pretest data, we do not know whether there were no changes in either group on these dimensions or whether there were changes in both groups, as our discussion suggests. There might have been changes in both on some dimensions and no change on others as we have suggested and as we discuss below.

Paluck (2009) interprets the behavioral effects in terms of social norms established within the groups listening together. She describes emotional engagement with the story and discus-

sion among the listeners. However, the only information Paluck (2009) provides on the content of discussion relevant to the findings is an exclamation by a male listener, “we should repeat those words,” (p. 582) when a drama episode ends “with a character’s comment that tolerance and respect for one another’s ideas are necessary” (p. 582).

In Rwandan society, the culture and hierarchical social arrangements (Straus, 2006) have maintained powerful social norms that tend to inhibit the kind of actions under discussion. There is no evidence that what in our view were personal beliefs, even if implicitly shared, became socially shared cognitions (Fiske, 2005) in the reconciliation groups and further evolved into norms. It is interesting in this regard that the first speakers in the reconciliation groups, as did the first speakers in the control groups, suggested having the village headman manage the materials—which subsequent reconciliation group speakers opposed. Enacting new beliefs and/or values was likely to be easier, knowing that other people heard the same program.

We see educational radio dramas engendering a developmental process, starting with changes in individuals, which over time can lead to explicitly shared beliefs and then to changed social norms. Consistent with Paluck’s (2009) view, as people express, discuss, and enact their changed views, they develop shared beliefs (Bar-Tal, 2000) and then new norms, but we see no evidence in the study yet of such normative changes.

In summary, our previous research in Rwanda (Staub et al., 2005) suggested that the radio drama was likely to lead, apart from any specific knowledge or understanding, to a general view that the origins of violence and its impact are understandable. Combined with the behavior of models and the emotional engagement and identification with characters that Paluck (2009) described, this appears to have produced personal beliefs about the desirability of certain behaviors and outcomes, that is, values. The counternormative behavior of people living in the two villages, maintaining friendships despite increasing antagonism and danger and the love story between a young man from one village and a young woman from the other who is the sister of the primary instigator of violence, who opposes her brother (and mother), and who works to organize the youth of both villages to stop hostility and violence, showed actions motivated by strong beliefs and values.

It has both theoretical and practical importance that the radio drama was effective despite the ineffectiveness of active bystanders in stopping violence during the 1st year. However, the bystanders’ action took place in the context of information about the roots of violence. They acted on moral principles and supported each other.

In violence-generating situations, active bystanders must act contrary to existing social norms. This requires personal beliefs and values (Thalhammer et al., 2007) as well as some belief in one’s potential effectiveness (Bandura, 2006), positive expectancy (Rotter, 1954), or hope. The divergence in responses to two pairs of items is relevant. There was no group difference on an item stating that intermarriage brings peace, with low agreement in both groups. This represents the reality of participants’ experience: The genocide took place despite intermarriage in the past. Nonetheless, listeners to *Musekeweya* stated that intermarriage should be allowed in their family. Both groups also stated that there is mistrust in the community, but those who listened to *Musekeweya* disagreed with “it is naïve to trust” (Paluck, 2009, Table 1, p. 579).

Information applicable to listeners’ experience, in combination with the example of models, appears to have affected not only empathy and values, which can give rise to motivation, but also expectations that actions can make a difference.

What are the practical implications of this alternative view? Paluck (2009) suggested that the stories of people’s lives influenced social norms and that informational messages were separate and didactic. In actuality, information was embedded in the story, in the characters’ actions, and in their conversations, but with the intent of avoiding didactic presentation of the messages. As Paluck wrote, people cannot be told what to think. Rather than telling listeners what is right, the substantive content aimed to foster understanding (e.g., about the value of talking about painful experience or of standing up to authority). Information and modeling was intertwined, for example, as a young boy was persuading another to talk to the headmaster of his school so that the headmaster will allow him to stay, even though his parents cannot pay tuition. The findings suggest that effective social-change media educational programs require the combination of these varied elements.

Program content. Although the conceptualization of a treatment—whether an experiment or an educational radio—shapes its implementation, the latter determines its actual content. Some responses to belief statements were contrary to expectations. Paluck (2009) suggested that they show the ineffectiveness of the program in creating belief change. However, these are significant findings, although contrary to expectations. We see them as primarily due to program content.

The radio drama was planned to last several years. Its focus in the 1st year was on the origins and effects of violence and on bystanders attempting to prevent violence. Treatment group members were less likely to endorse the statement “trauma recovery is possible” (Paluck, 2009, Table 2, p. 580). Listeners were exposed to one village attacking the other and to the resulting trauma of some characters but were not yet exposed to their recovery. However, characters encouraged others to talk about their traumatic experiences, and reconciliation participants were more likely than health participants to believe they should talk about painful experiences.

The focus group finding that reconciliation group members, more than health group members, agreed that “evil people cause violence” (Paluck, 2009, p. 580) was also unexpected. The messages are intended to communicate that group violence is a societal process with many contributing factors (see Table 1). In Rwanda, however, a powerful prevailing view is that genocide is primarily the result of bad leaders (Staub & Pearlman, 2006). The writers of the radio episodes emphasized the role of the bad leader (and his mother). Although the staff received training in our approach, and we reviewed each episode, we were unsuccessful in changing this emphasis in the 1st year. That treatment groups members saw violence as caused by evil people and that group members also empathized with leaders points to the complexity of program effects, perhaps as they joined with people’s experience of the genocide.

Paluck (2009) found that the groups did not differ in beliefs about trauma symptoms, which, she states, “parallel the reconciliation program’s list of symptoms” (p. 580). The program aimed to provide understanding of the pervasive and complex effects of violence. Trauma symptoms were included only to a limited de-

gree (e.g., a man having sexual problems after the attack, others feeling fearful). Some of the symptoms listed by both reconciliation and health group members, for example, sudden outbursts and hallucinations, are not recognized in the literature as trauma symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Pelcovitz et al., 1997).

Participants' past experience and measurement issues. The absence of group differences on some items could also be attributable to a disconnection between either program content or assessment items and participants' experience. Despite intense persecution of Tutsis in Rwanda and periodic mass killings (Des Forges 1999), both participants in the study and survivors (Ilibagiza, 2006) experienced the start of the genocide as sudden, with no difference between groups on the item "mass violence comes about suddenly" (Paluck, 2009, Table 1, p. 579, see also Paluck, 2009, Table 2, p. 580). There was also no difference on the item, "If I stand by while others commit evil acts, I am also responsible" (Paluck, 2009, Table 1, p. 579, see also Paluck, 2009, Table 2, p. 580). As Paluck's (2009) participants suggested, once the genocide began, opposition was very dangerous (Straus, 2006). It is possible that despite extensive use of listening groups (Fisher, 2005) to obtain feedback about the content of the radio drama, some of our content did not connect with participants' experience. Alternatively, a statement such as *Actions by bystanders are important to prevent violence* would have been closer to the relevant content in the program (see Message 5, Table 1) and more in tune with participants' experience.

Conclusions

Paluck's (2009) research showed that a theory-based educational radio drama can have powerful effects, including effects consistent with its aim of changing behavior. Our discussion indicates the complexity of evaluating (and creating) such an intervention. Practical implications include the importance of the inclusion of varied elements, such as information and models, consistency between conceptualization and actual program content, congruence between program content and listeners' experience, and sensitivity of measurement to both program content and participants' experience.

In Paluck's (2009) view, the findings challenge the emphasis of "modern-day psychology . . . (on) individual beliefs and attitudes" (p. 30). However, much of the study of genocides within and outside psychology (Fein, 1979; Staub, 1989; Straus, 2006) emphasizes the influence of social context. Paluck correctly suggested that normative pressure, for example, through the media, can either promote or restrain violence by groups. But this is exactly what is usually missing in a society as increasing hostility and violence evolve (Staub, 1989) or after violence as continuing hostility and social processes make renewed violence probable. In such situations, individuals must act contrary to social norms. This requires personal values. Our argument that individual beliefs and/or values were affected, rather than norms that would have arisen out of group processes, means that educational media can affect individual listeners. As they join likeminded others (or, if possible, engage in public discussion), shared beliefs, values, and norms can develop.

Researchers should compare the behavior of people listening to educational radio dramas together and the behavior of people

listening alone. If group listening amplifies the effects, assessing group behavior can point to processes by which it does so. It is also important to assess whether these effects persist outside the group or test setting and to thereby assess the extent to which the radio drama affects members of a society in ways that make violence less likely.

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