

Special Thematic Section on "20 Years after Genocide: Psychology's Role in Reconciliation and Reconstruction in Rwanda"

Messages of Hope: Using Positive Stories of Survival to Assist Recovery in Rwanda

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Abstract

For the past twenty years, the overriding story of Rwanda has been centred around the events and consequences of the genocide. In Rwanda, public expressions of that story have occurred in the gacaca courts, where survivors and perpetrators testified about their experiences and actions, during ongoing annual remembrance and mourning commemorations, and in memorial sites across the country that act as physical reminders of the genocide. While important as mechanisms for justice, testimony, and commemoration, on their own such events and installations also have the potential to re-traumatise. Accordingly, Rwandan agencies have encouraged a focus on the future as the overarching theme of recent national commemorations. Yet, opportunities for Rwandans to recount and disseminate positive, future-oriented stories of survival and healing remain sparse. Creation and awareness of positive stories have the potential to assist in recovery by increasing feelings of hope and efficacy; and recent research has demonstrated the value of hopefulness, well-being, and social support for vulnerable people. The Messages of Hope program seeks to leverage those ideas into a framework for generating positive messages by Rwandan survivors, providing an opportunity for everyday Rwandans to record and transmit their own positive stories of survival to demonstrate recovery and growth after the genocide, and to reinforce connectedness by sharing their challenges and aspirations. We describe the development and early implementation of this initiative and its potential longer-term application in other contexts of vulnerability.

Keywords: genocide, hope, support, well-being, positive stories, cooperative communities, recovery, resilience

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A message I would give to survivors is not to give up, but rather to go forward, do our best and make the pride of our lost loved ones who, in their rest, would be happy to see us in their footsteps and accomplish our mission.

Message of Hope from Richard, Rwandan survivor

So they should struggle to make a step forward. One step at a time, they can do it just like we managed.

Message of Hope from Jeanne, Rwandan survivor

On April 7, 2014 the world commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. The events of the genocide are familiar ones – one million or more Rwandans were murdered, and countless others were displaced from their homes and country while the international community failed to intervene.

For most members of the international community Rwanda is still largely defined by those tragic events. Within Rwanda, the genocide created a mental health burden not only for survivors but also across generations. It also poses significant barriers to reconciliation in a society made up of survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders living side-by-side. A legacy of fear and distrust among social and political groups constitute further challenges to reconciliation and recovery (Ajdukovic, 2004). Inevitably then, given the enormity of the genocide, Rwanda's own development since 1994 reflects its efforts to recover and rebuild.

Rwanda has adopted a number of initiatives designed to overcome the ongoing physical and psychological effects of the genocide. For example, the gacaca community court process was one platform for the search for justice and reconciliation. Memorial sites across the country present physical displays as reminders of the genocide while drawing on traditional story telling and narrative traditions, and major annual genocide commemorations in Rwanda encourage public remembrance and mourning. These activities and installations serve a valuable role in encouraging remembrance, ensuring that events and testimony are preserved for the historical record, and promoting the search for truth and justice – all of which (by analogy to the South African experience) can be important in facilitating both national reconciliation and reconstruction (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1999).

On the other hand, while commemorations and testimony can serve societal functions such as encouraging genocide prevention, recalling mournful events also has the potential to create obstacles to well-being and reconciliation by reinforcing negative feelings and world views among survivors (see, e.g., Kanyangara, Rimé, Philippot, & Yzerbyt, 2007, for the mixed effects of the gacaca). Accordingly, memorialisation and testimony also have the potential for harm if not balanced by measures that highlight positive characteristics of people and communities (Brounéus, 2008; Ibreck, 2010; Skillington, 2013).

Remembrance is especially problematic for genocide survivors because of complicated grief reactions associated with protracted trauma symptomatology (Momartin, Silove, Manicavasagar, & Steel, 2004). Survivors can experience a deep-seated psychological anguish that involves a loss of identity, beliefs, and values and that has been likened to being the “walking dead” (Ebert & Dyck, 2004). Moreover, while reconciliation models based on apology and forgiveness are intuitively appealing (Staub, 2006), implementing strategies such as collective apology, community-based justice, and negotiating about rights, responsibilities and the allocation of resources remains problematic in the wake of mass violence. The contestation of victim-perpetrator roles, and fractures in familial, community, and political frameworks can be significant contributors to this problem. For example, Braithwaite, Braithwaite, Cookson, and Dunn (2010) discussed how complexities of social and political structure can influence peace building following political unrest and violence. While the nature and consequences of intergroup relations between

victims and perpetrators remains under-studied, [Vollhardt and Bilewicz's \(2013\)](#) overview of research highlights the complexity of relationships between perpetrator, victim, and bystander groups. These and other factors conspire to obstruct the extent to which survivors can begin to fully achieve recovery.

In this paper we discuss an approach that we believe will complement other strategies to promote reconciliation and recovery in Rwanda. We were seeking an approach that was unlikely to be retraumatising for survivors and that would have legitimacy through being culturally licenced by Rwandan survivors. Additionally, we sought to involve Rwandans speaking in their own voices, but also to allow a means for outsiders to respectfully position themselves as supporters of the reconciliation process. Finally, we were keen to avoid a program primarily based on forgiveness, guilt, and apology in order to provide focus on future-oriented outcomes such as hope, healing and growth.

Foundations of the Initiative

The initiative that we describe here is called “Messages of Hope” and commenced through a partnership between Ibuka (the peak survivors’ organisation in Rwanda), the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre (KGM), and an interdisciplinary team including social and clinical psychologists, and media and communications researchers at Murdoch University. The program involves recording brief audiovisual messages by Rwandan survivors speaking in Kinyarwanda (subtitled in English) and making those available through online means to other survivors and the international community (see www.youtube.com/100messagesofhope). Compared with other forms of survivor testimony that document genocide (and contest the denial of it), Messages of Hope focuses on the stories of recovery of ordinary Rwandan citizens who had experienced trauma and loss.

Messages are brief (typically two to three minute long) testimonies in which a survivor tells the story of their personal journey since the genocide, and relays their hopeful feelings for their own and their country’s future. The majority of messages are delivered by people who were in Rwanda during the genocide. However, messages have also been created by Rwandans who were outside of the country or who were not yet born but whose families were directly affected by the genocide. Messengers are encouraged to tell their stories in their own words and to talk about aspects of their lives from which they themselves have found hope. For example, survivors frequently mention the importance of recovery as a means to honour those who were killed. The role of education in transforming lives is another common theme, as is the need for community support, reconciliation and healing. Examples of themes addressed by survivors in messages of hope are presented in [Table 1](#).

While acknowledging the reality of harmful experiences during the genocide, survivors’ messages of hope have focused on their own efforts to recover and rebuild and include advice and encouragement to other survivors that acknowledges suffering but celebrates resilience.

The project aims to provide a practical framework through which Rwandans can tell their own personal stories of healing and hope for the future, listen to similar stories from other survivors, and share those stories more widely with the international community. [Hobfoll et al. \(2007\)](#) and [Pearlman \(2013\)](#) emphasise that effective interventions need to be culturally relevant, and that recipients of services should have a sense of ownership and empowerment in relation to the programs. Moreover, while collective trauma is representative of significant suffering, it is equally

associated with resilience (Ajdukovic, 2013). Building resilience and reconciliation in a context of communal trauma cannot be achieved through individualised treatment alone and requires community approaches (Pearlman, 2013).

Table 1

Examples of Common Themes

Theme	Message Extracts	
Education	When genocide took over, I tried to undertake different things, but more importantly I went to school and tried to do better than I did in the past. Today I am about to complete my University studies and am involved in different initiatives to make the survivors future better and hopeful. (Richard)	... now on I am doing my studies. I am in University, and I hope to graduate successfully. (Fidele)
Honour Family	I realised I had to live for fulfilling my loved ones mission they would have achieved if they were alive. I stayed strong and studied, until now I am studying with hope to fill their absence and be their pride. (Josiane)	My message would be to wish everyone who survived to be strong because myself I grew up with a higher vision, committed to make pride of my fellow survivors as well as my father who I never knew. (Mireille)
Build Future	My message to my fellow survivors is to be confident and work for the development of our country in general. (Damian)	I will have to help my younger brothers, contribute to the welfare of the society I live in, and the welfare of the Rwandan society in general. (Unnamed Survivor)
National Unity	I would like to call on everyone to listen to Genocide survivors because that would give them hope, feel supported, and reconcile the national unity that was broken. (John)	Prayers and hard work are the key tools to successful achievements, because where there's will there's power and we will make it possible if we help each other. (Rachel)
Reach Out	My message of hope is: don't engulf yourself with what happened or in loneliness, reach out to other people. (Esther)	I call upon my fellow young people to help and love each other, and keep in mind that they have to live. (Blaise)

Note. Extracts appear as originally translated from Kinyarwanda and are identified by survivor name where available.

With these concerns in mind, the rationale behind Messages of Hope is threefold: a) to facilitate personal well-being by allowing individual survivors to see the possibility of renewal and a positive future through the positive stories of others, b) to facilitate community cohesion and social well-being by encouraging the sharing of positive stories to act as beacons of hope for the wider community, c) to promote a wider view of Rwanda as not only a place where infamous atrocities occurred, but where compellingly positive expressions of resilience can be found.

Why Promote Hope?

While there are significant barriers to realising recovery from and balancing distressing events and promoting positive human characteristics in societies affected by mass trauma, recent work has identified important frameworks that can help achieve these goals. Hobfoll and colleagues (2007) suggested five crucial principles to guide recovery after major human disasters, arguing that recovery efforts should promote safety, calm, self- and community-efficacy, connectedness, and hope. Pearlman (2013) identified similar themes to aid recovery from collective trauma. Examining three different recovery programs applied across distinct societal contexts, Pearlman used the RICH

(Respect, Information, Connection, and Hope) framework to explain common elements of programs' operationalisations, goals, and outcomes.

There is clear overlap between the five principles proposed by Hobfoll and colleagues and the RICH framework described by Pearlman—not only in the specific elements they identify as necessary to achieve successful recovery, but also in their general rationale. Both analyses argue for the utility of a broad set of principles to guide the implementation of specific programs, and both acknowledge the importance of adopting clinical and community interventions appropriate to relevant cultures and customs.

Hope, along with connection, forms a core element of both approaches. Hope is a positive, future-oriented emotion that is central to coping processes because it corresponds with a belief in the possibility of a favourable outcome (Lazarus, 1991; Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2005). Hobfoll and colleagues (2007) argue that hope plays a central role in recovery after trauma, suggesting that hopefulness for the future is critical to favourable recovery outcomes. Similarly, Pearlman (2013) argues that all elements in the RICH framework contribute towards the restoration of hope and that hope leads to a “life worth living” (p. 115).

Other authors have identified the importance of hope where groups or communities are marginalised or in conflict. For example, Bar-Tal (2001) investigated the role of collective hope in overcoming intractable conflict and achieving peace in conflicted societies. Similarly, J. Braithwaite (2004) examined how hope could foster empowerment among marginalised groups (see also Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009b), while V. Braithwaite (2004, p. 7) describes the importance of “institutions of hope,” which “refer to sets rules, norms, and practices that ensure that we have some room not only to dream of the extraordinary but also to do the extraordinary.”

Along similar lines, Gee and McGarty (2013a, 2013b) have explicitly highlighted the connections between hopefulness, well-being, and social support for vulnerable people (see also Gee, Khalaf, & McGarty, 2007). Their work raises the possibility that positive stories may have the capacity to increase social engagement and cohesion by encouraging the development of cooperative communities built around shared ideas or opinions (Gee et al., 2007). Gee and colleagues describe three relevant constituencies in contexts where marginalised or vulnerable groups exist – vulnerable groups and their supporters, those involved in a direct power relationship with vulnerable groups, and members of the general community (c.f. politicised collective identity, Simon & Klandermans, 2001, where the importance of triangulation between ingroup, outgroup, and third parties is also highlighted). They found that facilitated small group interactions involving general community members could lead to reductions in stigma and facilitate work towards outcomes that align with positive values and goals important to vulnerable communities.

Halperin and Gross (2011) also found links between hope and the provision of humanitarian support for others. Investigating the use of cognitive reappraisal and emotion regulation in a context where active violent conflict was underway (the Gaza war in late 2008), they found that engaging in reappraisal was positively associated with feelings of hope that, in turn, led to endorsing humanitarian support for others. Interestingly, their results suggested that support for others was not contingent on reduced negative emotion. While participants retained negative emotions (particularly anger), it was positive feelings of hope that influenced support for humanitarian aid. Halperin and Gross's work is particularly relevant because it was conducted during wartime and participants were directly affected by hostilities, and so this research provides important insights into the real-world influences and effects of hope. On the other hand, the Gaza war involved two adversaries who had engaged in hostile actions against the other. In contrast, the genocide in Rwanda involved one group taking overwhelming, unilateral action against a largely defenseless minority group. We should be cautious, therefore, when considering how reappraisal

and regulation might be applied in the Rwandan context. Nevertheless, Halperin and Gross's work does demonstrate that, even in seemingly intractable conflicts, people can come to a positive reinterpretation of context and that positive emotions can coexist with and guide behavior over negative emotions (see also Halperin, Porat, Tamir, & Gross, 2013).

There are other theoretical reasons why delivering positive messages of hope should have positive effects. At a personal level, an individual can hope for their own personal recovery (personal hope), as well as the recovery of those within their immediate network (family and friends; an interpersonal hope). At a collective level, one can feel hope for the future of one's own minority or ethnic group (sub-group hope) as well as hope for the future of the Rwandan nation (a superordinate hope). Moreover, Cohen-Chen, Halperin, Crisp, and Gross (2014) showed that hope in intractable conflict encompasses feelings of conflict malleability (i.e., that the conflict can be changed).

To the extent that creating and publicly espousing a message of hope for the future is experienced as an act beyond personal self-interest, it can be likened to other prosocial activities and might be expected to accrue similar benefits. Put another way, where sharing a hopeful message is seen as a social act it can transform an expression of personal affirmation into an action that has positive consequences for others, and so has the potential to generate outcomes in line with similar prosocial activities. For example, social movement participation, activism and volunteerism have all been linked to increased happiness and well-being (Klar & Kasser, 2009; Mellor et al., 2008; Mills & Smith, 2008; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). In this way, generating messages of hope may have both direct effects on well-being, but also indirect effects because it allows those creating the messages to participate in a meaningful prosocial activity. Indeed, it is worth noting though that it is rare for people from vulnerable groups such as genocide survivors to be positioned through interventions as empowered supporters or helpers rather than as beneficiaries or victims.

While hope may play an important role in assisting recovery from collective trauma and in empowering vulnerable and marginalised groups, hope itself is not a unidimensional construct. For example, Snyder et al. (1991) argued for at least two components of hope – agency (related to goals or the “will”) and pathways (how to achieve goals or the “ways”). In the case of intergroup conflict and post-conflict reconciliation, hope seems more multifaceted still and can be applied as readily to personal or collective circumstances.

As a final point we note that in Kinyarwanda (and in some other East African languages) there is a single word (in Kinyarwanda *icyizere*) that means both hope and trust. That linguistic equivalence supports the idea that generating personal hope might also lead to beneficial social outcomes. Where, on some dimensions, hope and trust are perceived to be interchangeable, increased feelings of hopefulness for one's own future may also translate into trust in one's surroundings. In post-conflict Rwanda then, it seems plausible that efforts to promote hope could generate intergroup trust.

Mechanisms for Fostering Hope

If we accept that fostering hope – and in particular, the form of emotional reappraisal documented by Halperin and colleagues (Halperin et al., 2013; Halperin & Gross, 2011) – is desirable, it is worth asking how to go about achieving that. Neuropsychological research indicates that repeated exposure to positive messages can facilitate the rescripting of trauma-based memory sets and create new mental connections that aid formation of a more

positive outlook (Arden & Linford, 2009). Work on the social role of emotions and its consequences for social action further illuminates how the use of communication and narrative can lead to change at individual and social levels. Researchers have observed that people confronting emotional experiences tend to be driven to talk about those experiences (Rimé, 2009), and have explored the individual and collective consequences of the social sharing of emotions (Paez, Basabe, Ubbilos, & Gonzalez-Castro, 2007; Rimé, 2007). In particular, Rimé was interested in the ways that sharing emotions can create an *emotional climate*, which “reflects how individuals think the majority of others are feeling in a society’s current situation” (Rimé, 2007, p. 307). The extent to which the society’s climate is seen as positive or negative is predicted to have many consequences for social behaviour, including increased feelings of social cohesion, solidarity, trust, and resilience in the face of collective trauma, and the construction of collective memory (Paez et al., 2007; Rimé, 2007).

In the context of the gacaca trials, Kanyangara et al. (2007; also Kanyangara, Rimé, Paez, & Yzerbyt, 2014; Rimé, Kanyangara, Yzerbyt, & Paez, 2011) showed that those trials entailed mixed consequences for perceptions of the emotional climate in Rwanda generally. Kanyangara et al. (2007) reasoned that, because the trials inevitably reactivated the memory of “a dark past” (p. 390), this would promote a negative emotional climate that would also be mirrored in more negative emotions at the individual level. Conversely (and perhaps paradoxically) however, mere engagement in such collective rituals where emotions were publicly shared and acknowledged also acted to foster feelings of communality and belonging, thereby reducing hostile intergroup attitudes. Rimé and colleagues (2011) concluded that the transmission of a negative emotional climate is an inevitable and important part of such restorative processes.

Similar arguments can be found in the work of Gable and Reis (2010) on *capitalization*. The process of capitalization involves sharing positive events with others, and Gable and Reis argue that this is likely to produce benefits for the communicator of that event and for the recipient. These benefits can be personal such as improved well-being and reduced loneliness, and interpersonal such as improved trust and commitment.

Another strand of literature relates to the ways that emotion talk shapes what Peters and Kashima (2007) call the *social triad*. They suggest that talking about emotions simultaneously creates links among people, informs them about their (shared) position in the environment, and coordinates social action. Peters and Kashima used experimental methods to show that emotion sharing in the context of social talk shapes what they called the “narrator–audience–target triad” by creating a connection between individuals, organising their relationship with the target, and mobilising these individuals to engage in coordinated social action. Elsewhere, Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor (2009a) have argued that communication— in particular, emotional communication — performs an important role in the generation of novel identities and social action.

If hope does provide a plausible basis for creating content that is useful in post-conflict Rwandan society then it is also worth asking how that content should be delivered. Our interdisciplinary collaboration was influenced by a narrative or storytelling tradition as realised through African cinema and contemporary community participatory video. Video is a rich medium that can be used to convey emotion in personally impactful ways. It is also increasingly accessible for sharing through television, public screenings and online means using desktop computers or handheld devices such as phones. The earlier observations of our team suggested that in Rwanda mobile telephones were increasingly overtaking cinema and broadcast television as mechanisms for information delivery. It seemed natural therefore to seek to record messages of hope that involved testimony from survivors that could be shared using those new tools of dissemination. Unlike other forms of survivor testimony the Messages of Hope program

was not part of a legal process, or intended to document genocide for the benefit of future generations, or to assist with fund raising for reconstruction or genocide prevention (see [Zorbas, 2009](#)). Rather, the goal was to produce positive psychological effects through the act of communication.

As with many other cultures, storytelling plays an important part in Rwandan life and narratives can offer powerful resources for dealing with trauma and building the case for social change (see [Berndsen & McGarty, 2010](#)). In Rwanda those resources transcend traditional media to encourage community reconciliation (see [Bilali, 2014](#), for a recent review). A new generation of artists is connecting narrative traditions with modern digital media technologies to produce a steadily increasing output of short and feature-length documentaries and dramas exploring the genocide ([Broderick, 2009](#)). Productions such as these tell stories of genocide in ways that are familiar to Rwandans and emphasise cultural processes and expressions that actively work through trauma, rather than having survivors purely relive their experiences.

However, what is still lacking across the spectrum of programs and services is the opportunity for Rwandans to recount, share, and access positive stories of healing and hope from their everyday peers, as opposed to dramatized accounts from fictional characters or speeches delivered by high-profile individuals. As the research suggests, the ability to readily tell and listen to these types of stories is important because they can aid the recovery process by facilitating a sense of connection, hope, and efficacy. For many, the formal commemoration period is associated with intense grief and re-activation of negative personal emotions (see [Kanyangara et al., 2007](#)). Providing a platform for Rwandans to create and view future-oriented affirmative expressions provide an alternative resource to those commemorations and offers one way to redress the shortage of positive stories. The Messages of Hope project was developed with that goal in mind.

The Messages of Hope Program

In 2007, a small team of media and communications researchers from Murdoch University travelled to Rwanda to learn more about reconciliation and recovery efforts. Meeting with leaders from Ibuka and the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre (KGM), the team helped record testimony from survivors and assisted in training local Rwandans to record testimony themselves, helping enable local ownership and control of the story of Rwanda's path towards justice and recovery. While the original purpose of those recordings was to document the experiences of survivors during the genocide, one recurring theme that emerged was the extreme distress survivors experienced while telling their stories. In large part this was because, for many, it was the first time they had spoken about their experiences.

The manifestations of distress were so pervasive and intense that the research team felt an ethical responsibility to try to assist survivors. Rather than simply recording testimony, they wanted to facilitate healing and aid recovery. More specifically, they wondered if it was possible to develop networks incorporating traditional wisdom and Rwandan cultural practices with applied scientific solutions to address the longstanding trauma of survivors.

That desire broadly aligned with a developing recognition within Ibuka and the KGM that testimony, commemoration, and remembrance should start to move from an overwhelming focus on the horror and tragedy of the genocide towards including a positive focus on survival, healing, reconstruction, and personal and social development. In pursuing the idea of positive, future focus, both organisations had expressly recognised the potential for primarily

mournful remembrance to lead to retraumatisation (Brounéus, 2008). Indeed, that recognition reflected a broader awareness among Rwandan agencies about a need to include positive counterpoints to the often extreme ritual mourning that occurred during the official commemoration period.

The initial idea for using hopeful messages to facilitate well-being among survivors originated within Ibuka and was brought to the present research team by Yves Kamuronsi, then Head of the KGM Documentation Unit. As the team grew to include researchers from clinical and social psychology, the theoretical and practical rationale for creating and sharing video recordings of positive testimony to enhance well-being crystallised, based on the team's relevant cross-disciplinary knowledge. Drawing on previous experience, including extensive clinical work on the resilience of trauma survivors (Ebert & Dyck, 2004), and the potential for group-based interventions to enable and encourage social change and activism (Gee et al., 2007; Thomas & McGarty, 2009; see also Thomas, McGarty, & Louis, 2014), the team proposed recording brief, positive messages of hope from everyday survivors in Rwanda and sharing those stories with other Rwandans. Both Rwandan partners and the Murdoch University team saw the potential for such an initiative to counter potential retraumatisation effects utilising a culturally familiar technique of storytelling.

As the proposal took shape, the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide (CNLG), the Rwandan Ministry for Sports and Culture, and the Aegis Trust (a UK based charity that works to prevent genocide and that operates the Kigali Genocide Memorial) added their support. In early 2009, having adopted the title "100 Messages of Hope", the project set out to record one hundred short video messages (one for each day of the genocide) in which Rwandan survivors spoke about how they had overcome trauma and about their hopes for their own and their country's future, and disseminate those messages within Rwanda on video and internationally through a dedicated website (messages are available online at www.youtube.com/100messagesofhope).

Having secured seed funding, an initial set of four survivor messages was recorded in Rwanda by staff at the KGM and the CNLG. Those four messages of hope were uploaded to a website before the 15th official commemoration of the genocide in 2009, and a set of specially recorded messages formed a centrepiece of the 17th commemoration in 2011 where they were televised nationally and presented on large screen during the central commemoration ceremony in the National Stadium in Kigali. A short documentary screened during those commemorations can be viewed online (Broderick, 2014).

Initial reactions to the messages were positive both at an official level, where organisers and officials recognised the strategic role of positive narratives of hope, and at a community level, where people who watched the messages appreciated the contrast with and relief from established methods of mourning and commemoration the messages provided. Based on the positive anecdotal response to the original trial messages, the CNLG provided funding for an additional fifty messages in 2012, eighteen of which have so far been recorded.

Future Directions

Our intention is to continue recording messages from survivors in Rwanda with an aim to include a more comprehensive portfolio of messages of hope as part of official commemoration ceremonies in this and future years. As during the earlier commemorations, we anticipate that messages will be screened in stadiums to large audiences during official events, and televised locally in Rwanda over the commemoration period.

At the same time, one of the key aims of Messages of Hope is to begin to normalise hopefulness and future focus among survivors. Thus, while it is important that hopeful messages are available to balance overpoweringly sorrowful remembrance during specific periods of commemoration, it also follows that it is important that exposure to positive messages is not restricted to specific occasions or events. While presentations to large groups at official ceremonies and local television broadcasts during commemoration periods will reach a significant audience during a highly relevant period, the project will also explore alternative forms of broadcast. Messages will continue to be available online. However, even though the associated website is openly accessible, the population of Rwanda remains largely without access to the Internet. Moreover, while recent initiatives have extended coverage of digital television to over 95% of Rwandan territory, relatively high purchase costs mean that there are very low levels of actual ownership of and access to television across the country (Itumanaho, 2013).

However, other established forms of media do have large penetration across the population and remain popular sources of information and opinion. In particular, there is widespread access to newspapers and radio across all areas of Rwanda. Consequently, we also propose that there will be benefits in distributing messages in alternative formats to local audiences; for example, transcriptions of messages might be regularly published in local newspapers, and large billboards presenting key positive quotes from survivors could be displayed in population centres or roadsides. Radio is a relatively affordable and easily accessible medium across Rwanda. Given its prominence, audio versions of messages of hope could also be played regularly on local radio stations. The power of radio to inform and shape ideas and opinions has been long recognised in Rwanda (Bilali, 2014; Bilali & Vollhardt, 2013; Paluck, 2009; Paluck & Green, 2009). We anticipate that radio versions of messages of hope would represent a particularly poignant mechanism for distribution, given the significant role played by some radio broadcasts in inciting the original genocide (Des Forges, 2007). That poignancy may add extra power to messages of hope transmitted through radio—where a medium once associated with inciting and organising terrible violence now becomes a vehicle demonstrating people’s resilience and their capacity to overcome tremendous adversity.

Challenges

Notwithstanding these long-term aims, there are at least three issues that will influence the nature and scope of recording and distribution of messages. The first consideration is logistical – the ability to record and distribute messages is contingent on the capacity for Rwandan partners to recruit and meet with survivors, and to prepare and process recordings ready for distribution. Compared with some other programmes aimed at building well-being, costs associated with creating and distributing messages of hope are relatively modest. However, in a country where financial and technical resources are limited and the availability of trained personnel may be constrained, resource issues will nevertheless bear significantly on the pace at which activities can proceed.

The second consideration relates to the potential consequences of widespread publicity for individual survivors who create messages for the project. Although we are confident in our arguments about the likely positive effects of creating and sharing messages of hope for both individuals and communities, we also acknowledge the socio-political reality of Rwandan society since the genocide. It is, in broad terms, a post-conflict society, but there is ongoing political violence. For example, survivors who record and share positive messages may become beacons of hope in their communities but also expose themselves to potential abuse from others who oppose the project’s mission. Put another way, creating a message of hope opens the creator to psychological and physical retaliation from those who disagree with rapprochement and reconciliation (including genocide deniers and actual génocidaires). In a country where genocide took place so recently, and where perpetrators live side-by-side with sur-

vivors, the possibility of such retaliation should be considered (e.g., both [Brounéus, 2008](#), and [Rettig, 2011](#), found community concerns about security as a result of statements made by survivors at gacaca). Although increasing trust may seem generally desirable, if that increased trust is misplaced then that may serve to increase risk (a point made by [Bilali, 2014](#); see also [Bhavnani & Backer, 2000](#)). Indeed, given that one of the key premises behind Messages of Hope is the public display of messages, survivors must, by definition, risk potential retaliation if they are to take part in the project. While we consider the risks to be low, this may still pose a dilemma for survivors who are considering creating and sharing their messages of hope.

Without diminishing potential doubts about sharing messages of hope, that some survivors have already done so creates an environment where others may also feel comfortable sharing stories. It also demonstrates the value of the experience. As we have suggested, creating and sharing a message of hope demonstrates a level of faith in one's immediate community and a measure of trust in one's broader society. By definition, message creators have confidence in the power of individuals to heal and grow and believe in the capacity of their nation to reconcile and rebuild. Their messages affirm those beliefs and demonstrate to others that recovery is possible, and that they are not afraid to state their beliefs publicly. Public demonstrations of recovery may represent acts of defiance against those who continue to support violence – there is no clearer proof that genocide has failed than to show that survivors can recover and thrive. Sharing a message of hope declares a belief in the capacity for people to do the right thing, and shows trust that they will do so.

While the potential for retaliation remains real, the only real antidote to the fear of speaking out is to witness others speaking out without experiencing harm. The cycle of rapid growth of expressions of nationally loyal opposition in the face of fierce repression in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring illustrates how speaking out can rapidly contribute to social change as people formed what [Castells \(2012\)](#) called networks of outrage and hope (see [McGarty, Thomas, Lala, Smith, & Bliuc, 2014](#), for a recent social psychological treatment of the phenomena). The Messages of Hope program is only one way for people to speak out, so we can anticipate that as access to shared messages of hope grows, so will the willingness of others to contribute. This is particularly true because the messages do not come from “super-copers” or from celebrities, politicians, or famous musicians or athletes, but from ordinary survivors describing in their own words their own everyday efforts. Therefore, these messages also reinforce beliefs in efficacy both in surviving and in preventing genocide.

The third issue that could influence the success of the program relates to its origins. The program developed with the support of Rwandan government agencies, in particular the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide, and such support positions Messages of Hope as officially sanctioned by the government. The program's provenance lies in the direct experiences of our Rwandan partners and without their participation and the contribution of associated government agencies it is unlikely that the program would be viable. On the other hand, the process of commemoration, grieving and recovery is a complex and contested one within Rwanda and outside, and not all Rwandan citizens (including Rwandan survivors) share the same views. For example, it is clear that some groups and communities have negative perceptions and experiences of a range of government interventions (see [Straus & Waldorf, 2011](#), for comprehensive reviews of these areas), and so how Rwandans view their government, and their attitudes towards government agencies, policies and actions, may affect participation in and reception of the Messages program.

Our program sits clearly within the spectrum of initiatives designed to promote reconciliation and, as such, is open to challenge from those who disagree with the Rwandan government's direction and directives in that area. This

also relates to participation in the Messages program itself. While all current messages have been recorded by Tutsi survivors, the program does not preclude the inclusion of Hutu voices and we consider there are potential benefits to having both Hutu and Tutsi voicing their hopes for the future. We recognise, however, that there may be difficulties negotiating the presence of messages from Hutu participants. Set against those factors, we argue that the Messages of Hope program avoids some of the most problematized and contestable aspects of post-conflict reconciliation processes. The program does not present survivor testimony of harm and traumatic experience, or create expectations of admissions of guilt, apology, and forgiveness. By avoiding engaging with those processes we seek, in the first instance, to do no further harm, but we also aim to navigate around implementations of reconciliation policy that may cause inter-group and inter-community tensions. Ultimately, it is difficult for external actors to judge how political and cultural differences impact on participation in the program and reception of the messages. We would expect that in Rwanda, as would be the case anywhere else in the world, these factors would have profound effects. We acknowledge the importance of recognising and understanding those factors and effects when implementing future evaluations of our program's effectiveness.

International Objectives

While the principal focus of Messages of Hope is to assist the recovery effort within Rwanda itself, the project also has broader goals related to building international support for recovery and changing the way in which Rwanda is perceived in the international community. Following the arguments of [Gee and McGarty \(2013b\)](#), an important part of the strategy of sharing positive survivor messages online is to present examples of recovery and healing to international observers in order to generate a community of common cause united behind the idea of support for recovery and reconciliation. The formation of such a community has the potential to benefit both survivors and observers alike. Sharing positive stories demonstrates the resilience and healing power of survivors, and promotes a view of Rwanda beyond a place where genocide occurred. Advancing these ideas serves a number of purposes - most obviously, it educates observers about Rwanda, providing a more accurate view of the complex reality of Rwandan society. Similar to our expectations about how positive messages can build support for recovery within Rwanda, messages also have the power to build support for the recovery process in the international community. [Gee and colleague's \(2007; 2013a, 2013b\)](#) work on cooperative communities suggests that exposing international audiences to African voices expressing the cause of peace could lead to growing confidence and support for international development efforts.

External support for recovery is important for at least two reasons. We argue that expressions of support for statements made by survivors about recovery can build on the psychological benefits of survivors' original statements. A second potential benefit of building a broad community united behind support for recovery is that membership of such a community is more likely to generate material support and activism for recovery and reconciliation efforts ([Gee & McGarty, 2013b](#)). Put another way, [Gee et al.'s \(2007; 2013a, 2013b\)](#) work suggests that observers who voice support for survivors' hopeful efforts may be more likely to engage in more supportive efforts than others who voice no support. This point is reinforced by the idea of capitalization and associated research ([Gable & Reis, 2010](#)). If sharing positive events is to produce benefits, it is important that the audience be responsive. To the extent that the audience of a message of hope is seen to affirm the message, to themselves become hopeful and inspired to take action in line with the thrust of the message, then we should expect the messenger to be validated.

Evaluating and Extending the Program

It is also our view that until we can demonstrate that there are positive benefits in disseminating messages we should avoid mass broadcast in Rwanda, and so we have developed targeted proposals for testing the efficacy of messages. We have not yet attracted funding for the evaluation program but our proposals involve a number of elements. First, we plan to conduct clinical interviews with messengers after presenting them with evidence of positive responses to their messages from members of the international community. We expect this to have a positive impact on the psychological well-being of survivors. Second, we propose to conduct field experiments as part of educational outreach programs at the Kigali Genocide Memorial, where we will evaluate the impact of hopeful messages on school-age Rwandans. In this case we expect the hopeful messages to have an impact on a positive orientation to a peaceful society, and we will seek to assess this through interviews and behavioural measures (e.g., by allowing children to select neutral branded or “hope” branded gifts such as footballs, carry bags, pens and t-shirts after watching messages of hope, and comparing selections to responses in control conditions). We have also proposed helping to resource a healing space in the Kigali Genocide Memorial with video monitors that will present messages of hope for survivors (including staff members) and international visitors to the memorial. We will assess engagement by measuring the amount of time spent watching the messages and willingness to record a response, and measure psychological well-being through computer-based surveys before and after viewings.

Finally, we also propose to test the efficacy of exposure to messages in a context where reminders of the genocide are less prevalent, by presenting messages of hope to young Rwandans on a local university campus. In that context we will compare two conditions of exposure to messages of hope: firstly, where participants regularly view messages over a period of eight weeks (with measures at bi-weekly intervals), and secondly, where participants view one-off presentations of messages.

Messages of Support

We have also focused on disseminating the messages for positive impact internationally, through the associated Messages of Support research program. In this work we are considering benefits that may flow to people who support survivors of genocide, driven by the insight that providing a message of support in response to survivor messages may act to promote personal and social well-being (e.g., see [Klar & Kasser, 2009](#), for evidence that activism and engagement promotes well-being). Indeed, data from a pilot study, which we outline below, support that view.

In this pilot research, we asked thirty-three young Australians (sixteen male, seventeen female, aged between 14 and 25 years old) to view a selection of video messages of hope from Rwandan survivors and then to create their own messages supporting and affirming survivors' efforts to heal and rebuild. Each participant created an individual support message, and participants were given free reign over message content and length. We were careful to emphasise that all support messages would be shared publicly online to an international audience that could include Rwandan survivors. All messages of support are available online (www.youtube.com/sppru).

Qualitative data collected during the pilot study supported the idea that creating and sharing supportive messages could have beneficial effects. For example, participants perceived their messages as examples of positive social engagement (e.g., as demonstrations of social connectedness and shared human values). Moreover, participants believed that messages would positively impact survivors (e.g., by showing that others were aware and supportive

of survivors' efforts), and facilitate participation in helping activities (e.g., by offering people a way to contribute where they might not otherwise have the opportunity or capacity to do so). In the next phase of the project recruitment has been extended to include participants who are expressly identified as vulnerable (e.g., cancer survivors, people receiving support for mental health issues). This extension of the study brings its own challenges, but also further tests our ideas with the very communities that we are confident will benefit most from taking part.

In April 2014, on the 20th anniversary of the genocide, we also asked young Rwandan genocide prevention activists from the nongovernmental organization Never Again Rwanda to watch messages recorded by supporters in Australia and then interviewed them about their reactions. All of these young activists had been raised in a post-conflict society in families and communities that had been ravaged by genocide. In keeping with the imperative to first do no harm, the purpose of these interviews was to assess the suitability and utility of the messages before translating them into Kinyarwanda for viewing by survivors. In targeted interviews with one of the research team members the interviewees (together with specific suggestions to improve the content and presentation of messages) strongly affirmed the value of the messages of support. One noteworthy reaction was that hearing a member of the international community providing a message of support for survivors was in itself affirming, because it showed that that supporter believed the genocide really had occurred. This point needs to be understood in the context that genocide denial (including in Western countries), and the inaction of the international community in 1994, receives a great deal of media attention in Rwanda and features heavily in the education system. Perhaps the most powerful affirmation was that the interviewees recommended that the messages from survivors and supporters should be translated and disseminated to people in other post-conflict societies, and even to current conflict zones such as Syria, to help prevent young people from participating in violence. They volunteered to help form a social network to promote the intercultural activity by working with young Australians and work is currently underway to advance this.

Without prompting then, the Rwandan interviewees had precisely articulated our overarching goal for the two interconnected Messages initiatives: that is, to i) develop a framework for generating online messages of hope (from survivors of trauma) and; ii) document messages of support (from their supporters) that can be adapted across Rwandan, Australian, and other international contexts. We anticipate that generation and distribution of hope and support messages through such a framework will result in specific beneficial outcomes for survivors and supporters. We also expect that framework to expose the wider community to positive messages from and about vulnerable groups, and so catalyse processes of meaningful support for those groups more generally.

The potential advantages for vulnerable people across different domains are particularly intriguing. Helping other people has psychosocial benefits, but vulnerable and traumatised people tend to be denied the opportunity to help others and so miss out on those benefits. The long-term goal will be to take people who experience disadvantage in one domain (e.g., homelessness, isolation) and encourage them to offer messages of support to other vulnerable groups (e.g., Rwandan survivors, those with mental illnesses). The idea here is to empower people who traditionally receive assistance (e.g., counselling services) to transform their self-perception from being passive recipients of support to active providers of it. Conceptually, the research will shed light on the ways in which shared hope for the future can promote the formation of new, resilient social identities (following [Thomas et al., 2009b](#)), while practically, we hope to demonstrate how survivors of trauma can be empowered as supporters and not just as beneficiaries.

Conclusion

The genocide in Rwanda remains a signal act representing the worst consequences of hostile relationships between groups. However, just as psychology has explanations for many of the events that occurred during that time, so too can it offer solutions to their aftermath. We believe that our work, alongside our Rwandan partners, in developing Messages of Hope and Messages of Support will encourage related efforts across a range of domains both internationally and within Rwanda to develop solutions that bring about real positive change for survivors. As that crucial work continues, we also look forward to building on our current efforts with Rwandan and Australian participants to develop and expand our messages framework so that it can be usefully applied across other areas of vulnerability and need.

Our last word goes to the survivors themselves, whose bravery and resilience gives us confidence in the power of the human spirit to heal and grow. Their capacity for hope is the greatest demonstration of the best of human achievements arising from the worst of human outrages.

I bring a message of hope to people like me that everything is possible, because the hardest moments are behind us...

Message of Hope from Rachel, Rwandan survivor

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Competing Interests

The second author is the editor of the special thematic section in which this manuscript is included, but played no editorial role in relation to this manuscript.

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