Seth Izen
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Strategies of Conflict Transformation

Roots of Moral Courage

Abstract

In the midst of the Holocaust, courageous non-Jews saved Jewish strangers, neighbors and friends from death. Yet, it was only decades after the Holocaust that research begin into what led ordinary people to risk their lives to save others. Over the past 30 years, researchers have identified key orientations (extensive relationships and a sense of responsibility for others) and personality traits (empathy, high moral judgment and risk-taking) that distinguish the rescuers from non-rescuers. The findings are significant for two reasons: First, it is internal traits, rather than external circumstances, that led people to rescue Jews. Second, the findings point to a childhood development path that is conducive to fostering these traits. This research leads to a significant conclusion: Moral courage can be taught.

Following the Holocaust, one of the darkest chapters in human history, researchers tried to understand how it could have happened. For instance, Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments were an attempt to understand how a continent of educated and cultured people could allow and participate in genocide. Against the indifference and cruelty of millions, the thousands of rescuers who saved Jews without monetary compensation seemed insignificant. Any attention on the brave men and women who risked their lives to save Jews was lost in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. Only after the Nuremberg trials – which gave voice to the actions of some rescuers – did the public start to focus on why some people refused to stand idly by while Jews were slaughtered. Rabbi Harold Schulweis, founder of the Institute of Righteous Actions, called for recognition and research on rescuers,

> "Wisdom, faith, and truth urge our search to know, record and hallow these acts of the righteous. Which code of ethics argues that evil be allowed to eclipse the good? Which perverse logic holds that we obliterate the memory of man's nobility so as to preserve the memory of his degeneracy? In unearthing the crimes of villainy, the virtues of humanity must not be buried."[i]

The Commission of Martyrs and Heroes, set up by the State of Israel in 1953, only began to fulfill its charge to identify and honor rescuers of Jews in the Holocaust in 1963, two years after the Nuremberg Trials.[ii]

Research was also hindered by the small population size of the rescuers. To date, Yad Vashem - The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority - has recognized 23,788 people as rescuers or "righteous among the nations."[iii] To be considered a rescuer, someone needed to be non-Jewish, have risked his or her life to save a Jew, and been motivated only by humanitarian concerns – they could not have received any compensation or been motivated by a desire to convert or adopt. There are undoubtedly thousands of rescuers who have not been properly recognized. However, even upper estimates of the total number of rescuers (250,000)

would only account for ¼ of 1 percent of the total population under Nazi control during World War II.[iv] Only a few brave men and women risked their lives to save Jews.

The first research to learn more about these heroes was commissioned by Rabbi Shulweis and conducted by psychologist Perry London in 1970. In his article, "The Rescuers: Motivational hypotheses about Christians who saved Jews from Nazis," Perry found three characteristics shared by rescuers: a spirit of adventurousness, an intense identification with a parent who set a high standard of moral conduct, and a sense of being socially marginal.[v] In the 1980s, Samuel and Pearl Oliner, Co-Research Directors of the Institute for Righteous Acts and faculty at Humboldt State University in California, examined over 400 rescuers and 275 non-rescuers to identify traits shared by rescuers. They found that rescuers displayed higher levels of extensivity, defined as a "strong sense of attachment to others" and having "feelings of responsibility for the welfare of others, including those outside their immediate familial or communal circles."[vi] Using a 27 item extensivity survey, the Oliners were able to predict with 70% accuracy whether a randomly drawn participant in their study was either a rescuer or non-rescuer.[vii]

Whereas the Oliners looked primarily at relational measures, Stephanie Fagin-Jones and Elizabeth Midlarsky of Columbia University's Teacher's College generated a higher level of accuracy in predicting rescuer versus non-rescuer by using personality measures of moral judgment, empathy, social responsibility, and risk-taking. In their 2007 study of 79 rescuers and 73 non-rescuers, Fagin-Jones and Midlarsky produced a 96.1% accuracy level in determining the proper group of a randomly drawn participant using their personality measures.[viii]

<u>Demographic and Situational Variables</u>

"It was not a whim that led these people to risk their lives and those of their families, but a response, almost a reflexive reaction in some cases, that came from core values developed and instilled in them in childhood."[ix]

This observation from Eva Fogelman, who interviewed dozens of rescuers, is confirmed by the research. While external circumstances may have facilitated rescue, they were not determining factors in whether one decided to risk their lives to save Jews. Instead, core values and orientations led to the rescuers' decisions.

To test whether external circumstances distinguished between rescuers and non-rescuers, the researchers focused on demographic and situational variables. Demographic variables included age, religion, gender, education and socioeconomic status. Indeed, some significant differences were found. Both studies found that rescuers tended to be older, more educated, and more likely to be Catholic than non-rescuers. 18% of rescuers were students compared to 33% of non-rescuers and 12% of rescuers were professionals compared to 4% of non-rescuers.[x] Fagin-Jones and Midlarsky posit that older people might have been less susceptible to the Nazi propaganda. Oliner suggests that access to resources explains the difference in education and age. No significant differences were found for socioeconomic status or gender. While there were demographic differences, the researchers concluded that these were not decisive factors for two main reasons. First, the rescuers themselves cited other reasons for describing why they took action. Second, internal traits and orientation were far more distinguishing factors than any demographic variable.

One situational variable where the researchers had mixed findings was on the presence of children in the rescuers' household. As saving Jews was punishable by death, a rescuer with children would be risking their own family's lives and facing the uncertainty of whether a child could keep the presence of the Jews secret. While the Oliners did not find any difference between rescuers and non-rescuers in whether they lived with children under the age of 10, Fagin-Jones and Midlarsky found significantly more rescuers lived with their spouse and child during the war. While the researchers' findings were different, the situational variable of children does not appear to be a significant reason for why people did not become rescuers.

The theory that rescuers may have been people with less fear is debunked by Oliner's findings that rescuers an ever greater understanding of the risk of being caught than non-rescuers.[xi] 70% of rescuers had witnessed Nazi mistreatment of non-Jews while only 40% of non-rescuers had witnessed such actions. More than three quarters of the rescuers (77%) reported that they felt extreme or moderate risk the first time they helped Jews.

Type of dwelling and location were also not predictive of whether one became a rescuer. Fagin-Jones and Midlarsky found no difference in sheltering capacity, proximity of neighbors, or home ownership. The Oliners found that while rescuers tended to have larger homes, with respect to other conditions, including access to cellars or attics and renting or owning, there was no difference between rescuers and non-rescuers. Location was also not a distinguishing factor; rescuers were from both rural and urban areas. Both rural and urban areas offered advantages and disadvantages to sheltering Jews. The urban environment offered more anonymity but also faced an increase presence of German troops. Rural communities offered more separation but it was harder to hide the presence of a sheltered person.

The act of rescue implies that the rescuer had information about the danger faced by the Jews from the Nazi government. While the Nazi antipathy towards Jews was evident from racial laws, during World War II the Nazi plan to exterminate all the Jews was not public information. The Nazis went to great lengths to hide this fact from the general public and the world community. If the rescuers reported greater knowledge of the Nazi plan than non-rescuers then information would be a distinguishing characteristic between rescuers and non-rescuers. Maybe the non-rescuers did not know the dangers faced by the Jews. The data shows that while more rescuers than non-rescuers knew about Hitler's plan before he came to power (23% of rescuers versus 16% for non-rescuers) almost all the rescuers (99%) and non-rescuers (93%) knew about the Final Solution during or soon after World War II began.[xii] There was, however, one main distinguishing factor between the two groups: The rescuers were more likely to have heard about the dangers faced by Jews through personal connections with Jewish neighbors, coworkers, and friends while the non-rescuers reported learning about the killings of Jews by rumors and word of mouth. Therefore, the way in which each group learned about the violence against Jews differed between the rescuers and non-rescuers.

Rescuers were more frequently asked for help than non-rescuers, according to both studies. In only 1/3 of cases did rescuers take action before being asked through seeking out Jews to help through informal or formal networks.[xiii]The remaining rescuers only took action after being asked either by the Jews or by intermediaries. Non-rescuers were asked significantly less than rescuers for help (25%). Both teams of researchers conclude this was not due to chance. An intermediary or Jew who asked for help was risking death so careful consideration was given to whom to ask. Those who were asked would be expected to be more willing to offer meaningful

assistance, either because of past actions, perceived allegiances, associations, or suggestions of others.

Oliner also distinguished between rescuers of Jews and resisters who opposed the Nazis but did not rescue Jews. He found that the motivations for the rescuers and resisters were different. Resisters were primarily motivated by patriotism (44%) and hatred of the Nazis (37%).[xiv] The rescuers were motivated by different factors; patriotism was a main reason given by only 8% while hatred of the Nazis was a main factor for 16% of rescuers. Rescuers were primarily motivated by ethical considerations (87%) with (50%) of rescuers explaining that they felt a universal ethic at stake. Only 35% of resisters cited ethics as a driving force for their actions. Patriotism and hatred of the Nazis propelled resistance activities but rescuing required a sense of ethics.

Research has been mixed on the extent to which marginalization spurred rescuers to help. In Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed, Philip Hallie argues that it was the French Huguenots long history of persecution in primarily Catholic France that contributed to their insistence on aiding victimized groups such as the Jews. This finding is in line with London's original research that rescuers tended to be marginalized individuals. Fagin-Jones and Midlarsky found that rescuers reported having more experience of persecution than non-rescuers. On the other hand, Oliner found that 80% of rescuers did not feel marginalized in their social circles. In general, it seems that rescuers did experience more persecution but and some reported feeling marginalized within their communities. Those who have experienced persecution may be more likely to develop empathy for those who are suffering.

The Defining Traits of Rescuers

<u>Extensivity</u>

The Oliners' primary finding was that rescuers tended to be more extensive than non-rescuers. As previously defined, extensivity represents a strong sense of attachment to others and feelings of responsibility for the welfare of others, including those outside an immediate familial or communal circle. The Oliners found that rescuers developed their extensive worldview from one of four sources: Strong family attachments, relationships with Jews, community involvement, and an egalitarian perspective. While there was overlap among each category, rescuers tended to derive their extensive views primarily from one of those four areas. Those with strong family attachments identified intensely with at least one parent, displayed more religiosity, and had a greater sense of personal potency to effect change. Other rescuers developed an extensive perspective through close contact with Jewish co-workers, neighbors, and friends. Some rescuers were committed to social justice and promoting the welfare of the community. These rescuers were more independent from their families but derived their sense of obligation from their need to stand up for their beliefs. The final group of rescuers saw themselves as similar to all of humanity, including marginalized groups. Rescuers from this group were deeply moved to relieve the pain of others, regardless of who was suffering.

<u>Personality</u>

  Oliners' 27 variables on extensivity included minimal emphasis on personality. Fagin-Jones and Midlarsky's study attempted to fill the void in the research by focusing on these internal traits. They found that the rescuers and non-rescuers showed the greatest differences on personality variables including social responsibility, altruistic moral reasoning, empathy and risk-taking. Using these four factors, the researchers were able to accurately classify 96.1% of participants into the correct group. Fagin-Jones and Midlarsky define social responsibility as "a personal norm that requires people to help those who are dependent on them for help without expectation of gain, because it is the right thing to do."[xv] Altruistic moral reasoning "reflects the progressive development of values of caring and compassion as the basis of reasoning about dilemmas involving human needs." [xvi] It was measured based on the Altruistic Moral Judgment Scale which rates responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas on a six level scale, the lowest level being responses based on fear of authority and punishment while the highest level was decisions based on internalized reasoning.

  While the Oliners' 27 variable extensivity score did not emphasize personality, other data from their survey creates a similar portrait of a rescuer to Fagin-Jones and Midlarsky's in three key areas: Rescuers had greater empathy for other's suffering, more loyalty to core principles of justice and caring, and a stronger commitment to social responsibility. The empathy showed by rescuers was only different to non-rescuers in how they reacted to witnessing people in pain and anguish. Generalized empathy scores, such as susceptibility to other's moods, were the same for both rescuers and non-rescuers. Therefore, rescuers were not more emotional but rather had a unique capacity to connect with another's suffering and pain.

The rescuers also displayed a fierce commitment to principles of justice and equality. Over half the rescuers cited a type of universalistic obligation (e.g. Jews are people just like everyone else) in describing why they decided to act. This universalistic obligation is seen in this rescuer's description of why they acted,

> "The reason is that every man is equal. We all have the right to live. It was plain murder and I couldn't stand that. I would help a Mohammedan just as well as Jew. We have got to live as humans and not as beast. [The Nazis] were worse than beasts."[xvii]

Justice, equality, and respect were the core principles driving rescuers. They saved Jews because a violation of the rescuers' moral code was occurring and so action was required.

The rescuers scored high on tests of social responsibility indicating they felt a commitment to help others and a potent sense of being able to effect change. For rescuers, it was not an option to be disconnected from what was occurring around them. They also scored high on measures of personal efficacy, the feeling that they could alter events. Non-rescuers tended to believe that external circumstances were more responsible for affecting situations.

The key question raised by the research is how did these rescuers gain the capacity to empathize with other's pain, internalize morals of justice and equality, and develop a sense of personal efficacy and commitment to bringing positive change? After examining the data, the researchers in the field have come to one primary conclusion: Differences in the childhood experiences are the primary cause of why most rescuers developed these capacities – and why most non-rescuers did not.

<u>Childhood Development</u>

Rescuers described their relationships with their families and parents as significantly closer than non-rescuers. Discipline among the two groups was also different; rescuers' parents tended to use reasoning and communication as the main response to infractions. In the rescuers' families, physical punishment was rare and gratuitous violence against children was almost nonexistent. In contrast, non-rescuers reported significantly more physical punishment as discipline and gratuitous violence. The key values taught by the rescuers parents emphasized others rather than self and were far less materialistic than the values taught by non-rescuers' parents.

Based on the data, Samuel Oliner created a generalized portrait of a rescuers' childhood. It begins with close family relationships where parents model caring behavior and communicate those values. The children internalize the values so that any violation causes distress to the child and spurs them to action. The parents also model selflessness by caring for others without expecting compensation and they convey these high standards to their children. Since they are securely rooted in their family and have strong attachments to their parents, the children are able to take risks and form relationships with others outside their circle. As they have learned that relationships and not status are keys to happiness, the children choose friends based on personality and not religion or race. Mistakes made by the children are considered learning experiences, not deficiencies of character. This improves the child's self-esteem and gives them an internal sense of security which allows them to open to other's pain.[xviii]

Research has found that nonphysical discipline foster children's ability to empathize with others.[xix] Empathy has been defined as, "the action of understanding, being aware of, being

sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another."[xx] A parent who uses reasoning as discipline is modeling behavior that respects the other's feelings, viewpoints and body. This helps foster an awareness and sensitivity towards other viewpoints. Ervin Staub writes that "parents who transmit altruism most effectively… use a combination of firmness, warmth and reasoning."[xxi] Thus, reasoning as a form of discipline models respect for others, even when the other is in a weaker position.

On the other hand, physical punishment teaches that might makes right and that the stronger party can do as they see fit. It stifles empathy and compassion for oneself and others.[xxii] Yet, corporal punishment goes even further in harming the child. Greven explains that, "Authoritarianism… is actually a reaction to the hurtful violence children experience and the rage and hatred that violence creates."[xxiii] Physical punishment and treatment of children as unequal was taught as the proper means of childrearing in Europe in the early 1900s. Some authors, such as Alice Walker, have suggested that the rise of authoritarian governments during World War II in Europe can be traced to the childrearing practices.[xxiv]

Abused children also learn to be indifferent to suffering. This is because a child who must withstand pain as punishment learns to be indifferent and apathetic not only to their own pain, but to the natural impulse to resist perceived injustice. In their book *Child Abuse,* Ruth and Henry Kemp explain that,

> "Another outstanding characteristic of young abused children is their compliance and acceptance of whatever happens. They are passive and obedient… They will remain in uncomfortable positions for a long time if asked to do so… That this truly is compliance is proved by their gradual growth of assertiveness and resistance, if they are removed to a more permissive environment."[xxv]

Therefore, even if they perceive an injustice or another's suffering, a person who has been abused will be more likely to remain indifferent to the urge to take action.

In contrast, children brought up in an environment conducive to fostering moral courage will naturally take action when moral violations are evident. Their wide social circle might include members of the victimized group. Alternatively, their social circle, which embraces inclusivity, will alert them to the infractions. Since they view relationships in terms of respect and care, rather than costs and benefits, the rescuers will focus more on the personal side. Since they were not abused in childhood, the rescuers will have less internalized pain to project onto others and will be able to still have the capacity to care. Taught that they have the capacity to influence their world, the rescuers will believe they can succeed in saving others.[xxvi]

There can be no single means of fostering moral courage. Yet, the data from the studies on rescuers in the Holocaust indicates that moral courage is often fostered by parents who can model caring behavior for everyone including the marginalized, use reasoning instead of physical punishment, withfrain from gratuitous violence, and impart values of focusing on the "other" rather than the "self." Of course, some people will gain moral courage even without such a supportive environment, as did some of the resucers in the studies. Others will grow up in a similar environment and not take action in the face of injustice. For instance, it is noteworthy that while only 1% of rescuers reported facing gratuitous violence from parents, only 9% of non-rescuers did. Nonetheless, it is clear that a child who grows up with a family that treats them with respect, uses minimal or no physical punishment, and teaches values of justice and equality, will be more likely to possess the moral courage necessary to take a stand in the face of evil.

Gene Sharp identified 198 forms of nonviolence action within three general categories: Protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and intervention.[1] The majority of these actions involve the public display of disobedience including strikes, sit-ins, and boycotts. Many of the most celebrated occurrences of nonviolence were public displays such as Ghandi's salt march, the Civil Rights counter sit-ins, the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement. Indeed, the success of those movements relied on their public nature; when the opponent responds to nonviolence with force, the nonviolent movement often gains a moral high ground and public support. The opponent is thrown off-balance by the ineffectiveness of their violent response. This "moral jujitsu" therefore relies on an opponent knowing about the nonviolent action.

The nonviolent actions of the rescuers was decidedly different because, in general, it was entirely secretive.[2] Their actions fall under Sharp's general category of "citizens alternatives to obedience." It is important, therefore, for students of Peace and Conflict Studies to understand that not all nonviolence needs to involve public displays. Some of the most powerful nonviolent actions can be a refusal to obey an immoral law.

Martin Luther King Jr. urged his followers to make the distinction between moral and immoral laws. A moral law, he argued in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, is a law that uplifts humanity. An immoral law degrades humanity and provides the oppressors a sense of superiority. Those who engage in non-violent action constantly distinguish between laws that are moral and immoral. On the Altruistic Moral Judgment Scale, the lowest level of moral judgment is following a law because it is commanded by an authority figure. The highest level – and the

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[1] Sharp, Gene. *The Politics of Nonviolent Action, Vol. 2: The Methods of Nonviolent Action*. (Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1973)

[2] Exceptions include the villagers of Le Chambon, France who harbored Jews with the knowledge of the Vichy and German governments .

level embodied by the rescuers and other practitioners of nonviolence – is to make decision based on an internalized sense of right and wrong, regardless of the law at hand. The Villagers of Le Chambon, France, who saved hundreds of Jews during the Holocaust, pointed to the double meaning of the French word "mal" as both "harm" and "evil" to illustrate that in their moral view, any harm done to someone is evil. Since all evil must be opposed, regardless of the laws, the villagers were compelled to act.

Questions

The first and most significant question that arose from my research is whether I would be a rescuer. I often feel a strong sense of responsibility when I see someone marginalized in a group or victimized; I try to help that person regain their status or sense of belonging. At the same time, I don't know if I would be willing to risk my life and my family's lives to save someone else. In the midst of a war, one's focus is likely to shift towards survival rather than moral action. Knowing the risk that harboring someone would pose, I honestly can't say whether or not I would be a rescuer.

The research raises the question of whether the finding that childhood experiences were determinative in whether one became a rescuer in the Holocaust would apply to all rescue situations in a genocide or ethnic cleansing. Would there be similar findings on rescuers in Rwanda or Bosnia?

What extent did the focus on corporal punishment as a general means of childrearing contribute to the rise of fascism during World War II? Several authors, including Alice Walker, argue that corporal punishment breeds authoritarianism. Children learn that power structures operate on "might makes right" and that control is held through fear. Much of the practices for

raising children that were in vogue in Europe in the 1800 and 1900s involved fostering strict obedience through any means necessary. A corollary question is whether the widespread violence and ethnic killings in Africa relates to the childrearing practices there. Due to political correctness, there can be a tendency to blame human nature, rather than cultural differences, for the behaviors of other peoples. This does a disservice to everyone for we fail to recognize actual causes of violence. Based on conversations I have had with other Peace and Conflict Students, it appears that corporal punishment is extremely widespread practice in many parts of Africa.

If nonviolent childrearing helps foster moral children and corporal punishment fosters violence, then does the general trend towards less corporal punishment (at least in the Western world) mean that violence will decrease in the future? Or, will we have more people ready to stand up against evil?

[i] As quoted in Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (New York, Anchor Books: 1994) p. 12

[ii] Fogelman, Eva. *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (New York, Anchor Books: 1994) p. 12

[iii] http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/statistics.asp. The Righteous Among the Nations. Yad Vashem. Retrieved Nov. 28, 2011

[iv] Oliner, Samuel and Pearl. *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe.* (New York, Free Press, 1988) p. 2

[v] Perry, London. *The Rescuers: Motivational hypotheses about Christians who saved Jews from Nazis.* In J. Macauley and L. Berkowitz (Eds), Altruism and Helping Behavior (pp. 241-50). As quoted in Fogelman, p. 323

[vi] Oliner, p. 249

[vii] ibid, p. 323

[viii] Fagin-Jones, Stephanie & Midlarsky, Elizabeth. *Courageous Altruism: Personal and Situational Correlates of Rescue During the Holocaust.* The Journal of Positive Psychology. April 2007. p. 143

[ix] Fogelman, 253

[x] Oliner, 279

[xi] ibid

[xii] ibid, p. 276

[xiii] ibid, p. 132

[xiv] ibid, p. 287

[xv] Fagin-Jones, p. 139

[xvi] ibid

[xvii] ibid

[xviii] Oliner, p. 249-260

[xix] Greven, Philip. *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse.* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf: 1991) p. 128

[xx] Greven, p. 128

[xxi] Ervin Staub, A Conception of the Determinants and Development of Altruism and Aggression: Motives, the Self, and the Environment," as quoted in Greven, p. 33

[xxii] Greven, p. 127

[xxiii] Greven

[xxiv] Walker, Alice. *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Childrearing.* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1990)

[xxv] Kempe, Ruth and Henry. Child Abuse. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA. 1978. P.32 As quoted in Greven, p.34

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