What's in a Norm? Sources and Processes of Norm Change

Elizabeth Levy Paluck
Harvard University

This reply to the commentary by E. Staub and L. A. Pearlman (2009) revisits the field experimental results of E. L. Paluck (2009). It introduces further evidence and theoretical elaboration supporting Paluck's conclusion that exposure to a reconciliation-themed radio soap opera changed perceptions of social norms and behaviors, not beliefs. Experimental and longitudinal survey evidence reinforces the finding that the radio program affected socially shared perceptions of typical or prescribed behavior— that is, social norms. Specifically, measurements of perceptions of social norms called into question by Staub and Pearlman are shown to correlate with perceptions of public opinion and public, not private, behaviors. Although measurement issues and the mechanisms of the radio program's influence merit further testing, theory and evidence point to social interactions and emotional engagement, not individual education, as the likely mechanisms of change. The present exchange makes salient what is at stake in this debate: a model of change based on learning and personal beliefs versus a model based on group influence and social norms. These theoretical models recommend very different strategies for prejudice and conflict reduction. Future field experiments should attempt to adjudicate between these models by testing relevant policies in real-world settings.

Keywords: social norms, prejudice reduction, field experiment, media

In a research article examining the impact of media on beliefs, social norms, and behaviors regarding prejudice and conflict (Paluck, 2009), I described a yearlong field experiment in Rwanda in which I randomly assigned groups of Rwandans to listen to a reconciliation- or health-themed radio soap opera. I found that the reconciliation radio program did not change listeners' personal beliefs regarding the radio program's messages but that it did influence listeners' perceptions of social norms regarding behaviors depicted by the radio characters. The reconciliation radio program also shifted listeners' behaviors in the direction of these social norm perceptions.

This pattern of results points to a functionally interdependent model of belief, norm, and behavior change, in which perceptions of norms shift more readily than do personal beliefs and are more closely related to behavior. This model is consistent with concurrent findings of the health soap opera's impact on perceived norms but not beliefs. The pattern is also corroborated by findings from media campaigns in the United States (e.g., Grier, Mensinger, Huang, Kumanyika, & Stettler, 2007). Theory and evidence supporting a causal connection between perceived social norms and prosocial or destructive real-world behavior (e.g., Berkowitz, 2004; Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, & Vaughn, 1994; Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991; Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007; Sherif, 1936) are also consistent with my suggestion that "to change prejudiced behavior,

it may be more fruitful to target social norms than personal beliefs" (Paluck, 2009, p. 582).

The field experiment was designed to measure the causal effects and not the causal process of media influence. Thus, the mechanisms driving the results are open to interpretation. However, systematically collected observational evidence from the year of radio listening suggests that the reconciliation radio program influenced listeners by promoting group discussion and emotional engagement, including empathy.

In a commentary on this research article, Staub and Pearlman (2009) offer "alternative conceptualizations of *what actually changed* as a result of the radio drama and of the *processes* involved in bringing about change" (p. 588, all italics added). Staub and Pearlman write from their perspective as the radio program's academic consultants, whose role was to provide theoretically based communication messages to guide program content. It is important to underscore what is not at issue in their commentary: Staub and Pearlman do not adduce new evidence or analyses, they do not critique the experimental design or statistical tests, nor do they disagree with my conclusions about behavioral change and the importance of discussion and empathy. Staub and Pearlman instead reinterpret the data to argue that, consistent with their theoretical expectations, the reconciliation radio program influenced individuals' beliefs (not norms) through individual and educational (not social and emotional) processes. Because their reinterpretation involves no new evidence, Staub and Pearlman's comment invites a closer examination of the data and guiding theory from the field experiment.

I first address the question of what actually changed as a result of the reconciliation radio program: norms or beliefs? In response to Staub and Pearlman's (2009) claim that measurements of norms actually captured personal beliefs, I show that norm measurements significantly correlate with other variables in ways that are theo-

retically expected of norms, both within the field experimental data and in new data collected with the same radio listeners 1 year later. In response to Staub and Pearlman's concern that null and negative findings for beliefs reflect inappropriate measurement, I point out that the measures of beliefs were directly linked to the radio program's communication messages and were based on a priori hypotheses. In short, the pattern of results is consistent with my conclusion that the radio program affected norms and not personal beliefs.

Second, I address hypotheses regarding the processes by which the reconciliation radio program changed listeners. I point out that none of the study's evidence supports (and some contradicts) Staub and Pearlman's (2009) suggestion of an individual, educational process of change. I explain why it is important to draw on theories suited to the special circumstances of media influence; such theories, along with observational data from the experiment's listening sessions, suggest that the radio program influenced listeners through group discussion and emotional engagement.

In my research article, I noted, "progress on this complex issue will stagnate without rigorous field research to restart the discussion" (Paluck, 2009, p. 576), and I am grateful to Staub and Pearlman for initiating this discussion. I conclude by pointing out differences in our theoretical models of change and suggesting ways that these competing understandings could be tested further using field experimental methods.

What Actually Changed?
Definitions and Data on Social Norms

Staub and Pearlman (2009) claim that, contrary to the conclusion of my research article, the reconciliation radio program did not change norms but instead changed personal beliefs regarding the content of the program's communication messages (p. 592). They reject the field experiment's null and negative findings for changed beliefs on the grounds that the items were inappropriate measures of beliefs about radio content. They accept the results of the norm items, which revealed significant differences between reconciliation and health program listeners, only they label the significant items measures of beliefs, not norms. This makes the findings consistent with their theory.

I begin by considering whether norms or beliefs changed in the wake of the reconciliation radio program. First, I argue that null and negative results for 10 separate measures of beliefs cannot be discounted because these measures were based on a priori expectations for the show's educational influence and were designed to correspond with specific program content. Second, I show that reconciliation program listeners' responses to measures that I call norms correlate with behaviors and with perceptions of community opinion to a degree predicted by widely accepted definitions of social norms.

Belief Measures Reflected Radio Content and
a Priori Hypotheses

In close consultation with the radio production team, I developed each measure of belief about radio content to reflect a specific communication message and the a priori prediction that listeners would come to understand and accept that message. Eight of these items showed no difference between reconciliation and health program listeners; two other items revealed a difference in

the opposite of the predicted direction. Staub and Pearlman (2009) discuss "various influences that in our view affected the results" (p. 589) to explain why these null and negative results do not challenge their claim that the radio program changed beliefs. Because these are post hoc explanations for questions driven by a priori predictions, they merit careful examination.

Post hoc explanations for null and negative effects.   Staub and Pearlman (2009) explain that some null results reflect "the reality of life in Rwanda" (p. 590)—for example, disagreement with the item "intermarriage can bring peace." While I agree that all personal beliefs should be grounded to varying degrees in listeners' realities, this item was designed to test acceptance of Message 8 of the radio program: namely, that "significant connections and deep engagement between people belonging to different groups help people overcome devaluation and hostility and promote positive relations," made salient through the popular storyline of the Romeo-and-Juliet-like characters (Staub and Pearlman, 2009, p. 589). Moreover, listeners' normative positions on intermarriage (discussed below) did shift, so it is unclear why a uniform Rwandan "reality" would selectively constrain this belief but not other perceptions of intermarriage. Staub and Pearlman discount two other items yielding null results because, in their view, the relevant radio content did not "connect with participants' experience" (Staub & Pearlman, 2009, p. 592). However, one of these items, "if I stand by while others commit evil acts, I am also responsible," directly tests Staub and Pearlman's central claim that the radio program would motivate and "empower citizens to become *active bystanders*" (Staub, Pearlman, Weiss, & van Hoek, 2007, p. 1, as quoted in Staub & Pearlman, 2009, p. 588). I based this item directly on Message 5, that "passivity facilitates the evolution of harm doing whereas actions by people inhibit it." Staub and Pearlman also object to results showing no increased knowledge of trauma symptoms, claiming the psychiatric literature does not recognize some symptoms named by reconciliation listeners. However, their objection does not address the lack of experimental difference in listeners' knowledge. Finally, Staub and Pearlman claim that beliefs about trauma healing and violent people (reflecting Messages 1, 11, and 12) changed in the opposite of the predicted direction because those messages were featured too infrequently and because Staub and Pearlman did not have sufficient control over the radio storyline.

To accept Staub and Pearlman's (2009) argument that the reconciliation radio program did promote the understanding of its communication messages, one must first accept each of these explanations for 10 separate null and negative findings, which otherwise follow a strong and consistent pattern of no effect. Results from the comparison health radio listening condition replicate this pattern. Despite the repetition of AIDS information across 48 episodes, I found no change in beliefs about AIDS among health listeners compared with reconciliation listeners. If forces idiosyncratic to the reconciliation program were responsible for the 10 null and negative results, why was the same pattern of no change in beliefs (but change in perceived norms) also observed for health listeners? As Greenwald (1975) asserted, in some cases null results can be informative. At a minimum, the pattern of null and negative results for beliefs across both radio programs supports the conclusion that the radio program did not change beliefs.

Measures of Social Norms Behave as Predicted by Definitions of Norms

Definitions. Staub and Pearlman quote Fishbein and Ajzen in defining norms as "beliefs that certain referents think the person should or should not perform the behavior in question" (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, as cited in Staub & Pearlman, 2009, p. 590). Relying on this definition, Staub and Pearlman (2009) reason that the field experimental measures of norms "look like beliefs" (p. 590) and "seem to assess the respondent's personal beliefs about the desirability of certain actions and outcomes, that is, values" (p. 590).

In designing the measures of norm perception, I used a widely accepted definition of social norms: "socially shared definitions of the way people do behave or should behave" (Paluck, 2009, p. 575; see also Miller, Monin, & Prentice, 2000). Items were designed to capture perceptions of behaviors as prevalent or socially prescribed (i.e., descriptive and prescriptive norms)—behaviors that had been depicted by the radio characters. For example, one item testing perceptions of social norms about intergroup relationships (as depicted by the program's popular Romeo-and-Juliet-like characters) stated, "I advise my children that they should only marry people from the same regional, religious, or ethnic group as our own" (reverse coded).

I agree that these items "look like beliefs" (Staub & Pearlman, 2009, p. 590), because perceptions of social norms are represented as beliefs at the individual level. (Indeed, the word *belief* is even used in Staub and Pearlman's preferred definition of norms.) Norms are a special category of beliefs—beliefs that are perceived to be socially shared regarding prevalent or prescribed behaviors.[1] Thus, measuring public versus private behavior related to the social norm and measuring perceptions of public opinion should distinguish norms from beliefs by indicating whether people perceive that their belief is socially shared. Below I present these two types of measurements, from the field experiment and from a follow-up survey conducted 1 year later (Paluck, 2006), both of which suggest that social norm items did measure listeners' perceptions of socially shared beliefs about behavior.

Public versus private responses. The field experiment compared listeners' private and public behavior related to the prescription with dissent. Dissent was portrayed in the reconciliation radio program and endorsed by reconciliation listeners to a significantly greater degree than it was by health listeners. In private, all participants dissented with official government rhetoric by affirming that mistrust existed in their community. In public, only reconciliation listeners dissented with this rhetoric. Public expression suggests that reconciliation listeners believed that group members shared their idea that it is necessary to dissent when faced with views contrary to their own. Reconciliation listeners were also more likely to dissent in public against proposals to give local authorities control over a collective resource. Staub and Pearlman (2009) acknowledge this point, noting that dissenting "was likely to be easier, knowing that other people heard the same program" (p. 591). In other words, reconciliation listeners knew that dissent would be acceptable to their referent group—a social norm by Staub and Pearlman's own definition.[2]

Perceptions of public opinion. I also directly measured whether listeners believed their responses to the norm items were socially shared in a follow-up survey with listeners 1 year after the posttest (Paluck, 2006). Specifically, I posed the same norm items, (e.g., "I should talk about trauma") and then asked, "If this question were posed to other people in your community, how do you think the majority of them would respond?"[3] The average correlation between listeners' personal responses and their ratings of how the majority of people in their community would respond was .81 ("Intermarriage should not be allowed in my family," $r = .81$; "It is naive to trust," $r = .83$; "I should dissent," $r = .82$; "I should talk about trauma," $r = .80$). Correlations this high typically indicate that the items are measuring the same concept.[4] In other words, these data suggest that listeners interpreted the norm items as questions about socially shared beliefs, or norms (see Figure 1).

In summary, I find that Staub and Pearlman (2009) do not present new evidence or analyses that cast doubt on the experimental evidence, evidence that reveals a strong and consistent pattern of no change in listeners' beliefs. Future research should continue to probe issues surrounding the measurement of perceived social norms, but, in the meantime, triangulated data from the original field experiment and from a follow-up survey strongly suggest that the reconciliation radio program changed listeners' perceptions of social norms.

How Did Listeners Change? Evidence of Social Interaction and Emotional Engagement

Staub and Pearlman (2009) offer an alternative conceptualization of how the reconciliation radio program changed listeners: through individual and educational processes. Staub and Pearlman state, "We see educational radio dramas engendering a developmental process, starting with changes in individuals" (p. 591) and "deeper changes [in beliefs, values, and empathy] require more educational influence, such as exposure to the program" (p. 590). By contrast, in my research article, I suggest that the change process was social and emotional.

Because the experiment did not manipulate various avenues of change, both proposed change processes are essentially hypotheses awaiting future tests. Nonetheless, the social and emotional change processes that I propose are better supported by the study's observational data, whereas Staub and Pearlman's (2009) preferred explanation for change does not follow (and in some cases contradicts) evidence from the study. The outside evidence Staub and Pearlman use to support an individual and educational change process is largely unrelated to media interventions. I explain why I believe this mismatch presents a problem and describe how

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[1] Other researchers have noted the difficulty of distinguishing perceived norms from personal values in questionnaire responses. Crandall, Eshleman, and O'Brien (2002) suggested that internalization of a group norm is subjectively experienced and thus reported as a self-motivated process (p. 376).

[2] I found the same pattern for reconciliation program groups publicly endorsing group cooperation, reflecting a norm item endorsing intergroup interaction ("my children should marry only those from their own group," reverse coded).

[3] Note that these data are not experimental, as the control group had access to the treatment program for 1 year.

[4] The average correlation is comparable to the range of correlations ($r = .82–.96$) found in research on the correspondence between the perceived acceptability of prejudice and personal prejudice (Crandall et al., 2002).
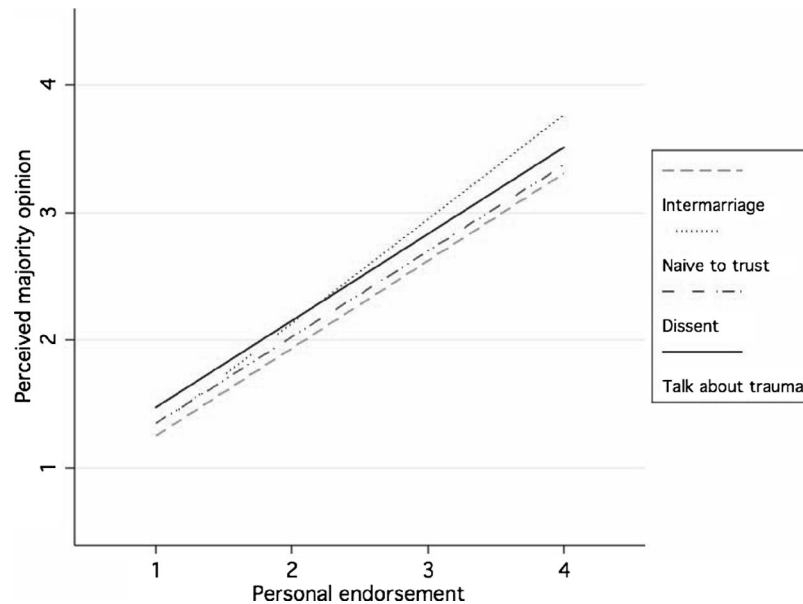
Figure 1. Correspondence between personal endorsements and perceptions of "what the majority of people in my community would say." Lines are fitted values, and the axis scale represents the 1–4 scale of agreement used in the questionnaire.

theories related to media influence and consumption predict social and emotional processes of change.

Observational Evidence for Social and Emotional Processes

In the research article (Paluck, 2009), I suggested that the socially interactive nature of group listening to an emotionally engaging radio drama contributed to the creation of new social norms. Listeners interacted with one another and vicariously interacted, often in highly emotional ways, with the radio characters. Systematically collected observations of listening group behaviors reveal high levels of discussion during and after the broadcast, in which participants evaluated characters' behaviors and predicaments. I suggested this discussion "creates another vector of social influence" on listeners, and "contributed further to socially shared cognition, which is the basis for a social norm" (Paluck, 2009, p. 584; see also Mead, 1934). Observational data also indicate that listeners vicariously interacted with radio characters by empathizing with them, calling out to them during the broadcast, and identifying them with real people in their lives (Paluck, 2009, p. 575). This emotional engagement and perceived realism may have helped listeners to transfer empathy and social perceptions generated by the radio program's fictional community to their real-life community.

Staub and Pearlman (2009) grant that the observed changes were caused in part by vicarious interactions with radio characters, citing "the emotional engagement and identification with characters that Paluck described" (Staub & Pearlman, 2009, p. 591). Why they then reject the possible influence of immediately observable face-to-face interaction within the group is unclear, given monthly data records showing that group discussion was sustained, lively, and attuned to radio program content. If the observed changes stem

from vicarious interactions, why would they not also stem from actual interactions?

Theory and Evidence Cited in Support of an Individual and Educational Process

In support of their claim that radio listeners changed individually by an educational process, Staub and Pearlman (2009) refer to laboratory studies linking information to changed behavior, such as classic learning paradigms in which information about a stimulus (snake, electric shock) reduced fear responses to the stimulus (Staub, 1968; Staub & Kellett, 1972). However, these interventions bear so little resemblance to the radio soap opera intervention that it is difficult to assess their relevance.

Staub and Pearlman (2009) also make numerous references to a nonexperimental study they conducted previously in Rwanda (Staub, Pearlman, Gubin, & Hagengimana, 2005), arguing the study "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" (Staub & Pearlman, 2009, p. 591). However, the study examined an educational workshop, not a media program, and did not measure the understanding of the origins of violence and its impact (i.e., the communication messages featured in the radio program).

In the study, Staub et al. (2005) led a workshop on their communication messages for community leaders who volunteered to attend. Later, the authors measured trauma symptoms and "orientation toward others" in community groups led by these workshop attendees. They compared these groups with groups led by nonattendees. The only information provided about increased understanding of the origins of violence and its impact is the authors' personal "observations about the seeming impact of information" (Staub et al., 2005, p. 327) on the workshop attendees.

While other evidence suggests that some types of media can educate (e.g., Bandura, 2001; Fisch, Truglio, & Cole, 1999), a long line of research indicates that media influence is distinct from educational or informational influence (for reviews, see Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001; Schudson, 2002, p. 265). In other words, the presence of information does not guarantee that audiences will absorb that information, even though Staub and Pearlman appear to endorse this assumption in their claim that "the radio drama provided information about the origins and impact of violence" (p. 588). Educational models of media influence are unrealistic, both for their suppositions about human cognition and for their neglect of the individual goals and social circumstances involved in media consumption. In sharp contrast to people who attend educational workshops, mass media audiences are less attentive and less motivated to consider messages at odds with their opinions (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001) and are influenced by peer and public opinion about the media message (Druckman, 2004; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Mutz, 1998).

Staub and Pearlman (2009) equate exposure to the program with educational influence (p. 590). This not only is inconsistent with theory and evidence on media influence but also, more important, is inconsistent with the experiment's data that do not show informational gains for either the reconciliation or the health radio program listeners.

Theoretical Support for Social and Emotional Processes of Change

As I detailed in the research article (Paluck, 2009), theory and research on media influence highlight the centrality of discussion and peer influence (Druckman, 2004; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). They also highlight audiences' experiences of fictional stories and characters as lived reality (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2002) and as vicarious experience applicable to their own lives (Bandura, 2006; Cameron & Rutland, 2006).

Theory and research on social norms emphasize that social norms are communicated through social interaction. For example, face-to-face contexts like those created by group media consumption are considered critical to the development of norms (Chwe, 2001). Sherif's group norm theory states that social norms of prejudice "are the products of contact with members of a group; they are standardized and become common property within a group" (Sherif, 1936, p. 124). This prediction has been borne out empirically (e.g., Blanchard et al., 1994; Crandall & Stangor, 2005; Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996). Advertising different community or small group norms shifts an individual's own opinions and behaviors in the direction of the norm (e.g., Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008; Schultz et al., 2007; Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001). The reconciliation radio program, which advertised the norms of attractive and prototypical Rwandan characters, can be compared with these normative intervention studies.

In summary, field experimental data, theory, and previous evidence indicate that the hypotheses of social and emotional change processes merit further testing (currently in progress; Paluck, 2008a, 2008b). Although it is possible for radio soap operas to educate listeners, Staub and Pearlman (2009) produce no persuasive evidence to this effect.

Questions for Future Field Experiments

Our different interpretations of the Rwanda radio field experiment reflect two general models of change with long histories in social psychology: a social norms and group influence model (e.g., Sherif & Sherif, 1953) and a model of individual beliefs and learning (e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). Although these models are not incompatible, they diverge sharply in their practical recommendations when applied to prejudice and conflict reduction. A norms model recommends targeting the normative climate through the influence of relevant social models, whereas a learning and beliefs model recommends targeting individuals' ingrained beliefs and values through education. These differing recommendations reflect underlying assumptions of each model. Below I discuss a few of those assumptions regarding personal agency, the connection between beliefs and behavior, and the longevity of norm change. Future field experiments should test these assumptions, because adjudicating between the two general models of change is hugely consequential for identifying the types of policies and programs that can successfully reduce prejudice and conflict.

Personal Agency

The two models nominate different roles for personal agency in reducing prejudice and conflict. Staub and Pearlman's (2009) model of education and individual beliefs recognizes the difficulty of acting against "culture and hierarchical social arrangements [that maintain] powerful social norms" (p. 591) but nonetheless places its faith in individuals' power to counter these strong social forces. My use of a social norms model emphasizes that individuals shape and are shaped by their immediate social surroundings: "alone, people become aware of ideas . . . in groups they [become] aware of other people's awareness [and] . . . their endorsement creates another vector of social influence" (Paluck, 2009, p. 584). The social cognition literature also struggles with questions of personal agency, and here too scholars have called for more real-world research testing the relative power of simultaneous influences on behavior—personal beliefs and goals, peers, situations, culture, and structural forces (Bargh, 2006).

Beliefs and Behaviors

Each model of change takes a different perspective on the specific role of beliefs in the production of behavior. Staub and Pearlman (2009) assert that personal values and beliefs "empower" (p. 588) individuals to fight against prejudice and violence and that education can instill these beliefs. However, situating this perspective in the context of the Rwandan genocide seems to imply that mass participation in violence reflects a deficiency in certain types of beliefs in this society. A social norms model of behavior does not rely on the assumption that prejudiced or violent individuals lack certain beliefs or values. Rather, it predicts that perceived social support shapes behaviors and encourages or discourages the expression of preexisting beliefs. These differing assumptions are particularly critical for focusing interventions on individual versus interpersonal strategies.

Longevity of Norm Change

My suggestion to target perceptions of social norms related to prejudice and conflict relies on the assumption that these percep-

tions can endure past the intervention and particularly in the face of a broader antagonistic environment. Again, the political situation in Rwanda brings this assumption to the fore: Can communities sustain a perception that dissent is acceptable when Rwanda's national political regime persecutes journalists and others who speak out against them (Paluck & Green, 2008)? An important challenge for future research is to learn whether changes in social perceptions of norms can endure in antagonistic political and institutional environments where social norm change is particularly needed.

It is evident that prejudice and conflict reduction interventions built to reflect these differing assumptions will vary widely—targeting individuals versus groups, beliefs versus perceived norms, and local versus societal contexts. Future research should test these assumptions and the theoretical models that endorse them by applying field experimental methods to existing programs and policies that reflect one or more of these assumptions.

I am grateful to Staub and Pearlman for initiating a useful discussion about the measurement and theory of media influence on prejudice and conflict reduction. Not only has our exchange highlighted a number of areas that are important for future research, it has demonstrated the ability of field experiments to speak simultaneously to questions of social and theoretical importance. I hope others will continue to explore the hypotheses advanced by the Rwanda radio experiment with field experimental evidence.

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