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Constructions of Genocide

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ABSTRACT

The topical question of what is construed as constituting genocide is considered from a personal construct theory perspective. Amongst the issues discussed are the construed uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust, the permeability of the construct of genocide, and the commission of genocide by those who have experienced genocide. A pilot study is reported in which university students completed a repertory grid in which the elements could be regarded as situations involving genocide. The content of the elicited constructs was analyzed, and the construing of the situations was examined in relation to whether each participant's group could be considered to have been involved in them, as perpetrators or victims, and the extent to which the individual's identity was fused with this group. Examples of participants' construing are provided, and the willingness of some of them to view particular situations of mass killing in very positive terms is highlighted. Implications for countering the processes of construing that may underlie acts of genocide are considered. However, it is contended that what are involved in these are not acceptable alternative constructions, and that condemnation of the constructions concerned is fully compatible with the values of personal construct theory.

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Introduction

On a visit to a memorial in Rwanda to the at least half a million (and probably closer to a million) Tutsis and their sympathizers who had been massacred by Hutu militias in the space of 100 days in 1994, one of the authors of this paper was told by a Tutsi survivor that members of a delegation to the memorial had maintained that what he and his compatriots had experienced was not genocide since this term needed to be reserved for the Jewish Holocaust. This comment had been profoundly invalidating for the survivor, whose life was now devoted to preserving the memories of the victims of the killings, photographs of whom covered the walls of several of the rooms at the memorial site, while others were filled with their bludgeoned skulls.

The question of what constitutes genocide is tragically topical at a time when incidences of mass killing of members of a population and/or destruction of its means to survive and its culture are all too common. That it also continues to be relevant

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to construing of past such incidents is demonstrated by graffiti still much in evidence in Belgrade (the location of the congress¹ where this paper was first presented) with messages such as “The only genocide in the Balkans was against the Serbs.” This paper will consider some of the issues involved before presenting a method for investigating the construing of genocide and a pilot study in which it was used.

History of the term

The term “genocide” was coined by Raphael Lemkin, who, when working as a public prosecutor in Poland at the time of Hitler’s rise to power in Germany in 1933, had proposed that acts of barbarity and of vandalism involving the destruction of a cultural heritage should be classed as offenses against the law of nations (Lemkin, 2002). He later defined genocide, stating that:

Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be the disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups. (Lemkin, 1944, p. 80)

He also made it clear that the destruction of the oppressed group’s “national pattern” is linked to the imposition of the oppressor’s national pattern, as in situations of colonization; and that victims of genocide may be racial or religious, as well as national, groups (Lemkin, 1945).

The Articles of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (United Nations, 1948), while greatly influenced by Lemkin’s work, did not go as far as him in their definition of genocide as:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
 - (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
 - (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
 - (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
 - (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.
- (p. 1)

Amongst the differences of this definition from Lemkin’s is the omission of mention of the destruction of a group’s culture and of its political institutions.

Alternative constructions of genocide

That there are numerous constructions of genocide is entirely consistent with George Kelly’s (1955) personal construct theory, which, in its underlying philosophical assumption of constructive alternativism, asserts that there are

innumerable alternative ways of viewing the world. For Kelly, the building blocks of these views are bipolar *personal constructs*, some of which are more important to an individual, or *superordinate*, than others. Not only do people differ in their construing, but so do members of different social groups (Kelly, 1955, 1962; Procter & Winter, 2020).

Some of the major controversies about whether particular situations can be regarded as genocide can be usefully viewed from a personal construct theory perspective, as will now be illustrated.

The construed uniqueness of the Holocaust

Some authors have argued that no other situations of mass killing can be compared with the “Holocaust,” as it has become known², in which some six million Jewish people were murdered by the German Nazi regime in its attempted “final solution” to the “Jewish problem.” This has led to the view, expressed to the Tutsi survivor of mass killing mentioned above, that the Holocaust is the only situation that merits the term genocide (Katz, 2001). However, notwithstanding the magnitude and state-sponsored and industrialized nature of the Holocaust as a policy directed toward the complete elimination of a people, there are many other situations that have been construed in this way, including some involving greater loss of life than the Holocaust. To regard the Holocaust as the only genocide can be viewed as similar to what Kelly (1955) termed regnancy, in which, in this case, the construct of “victims of genocide—not victims of genocide” is regnant over the construct “Holocaust victims—not Holocaust victims,” all Holocaust victims being construed as victims of genocide and people who were not Holocaust victims as not victims of genocide. As Kelly (1955, p. 482) remarked, “This kind of simplified thinking...accounts for a lot of wooden-headed conflict in the world.”

In this instance, it also arguably considerably downplays the suffering of others who have been subject to the mass destruction of a people and/or its social institutions, and has been argued as allowing denial of responsibility for genocides associated with colonization, for example in Africa, the Americas, and Australia (Barta, 1985). As Charny (1994, pp. 91-92) put it, “the passion to exclude this or that mass killing from the universe of genocide, as well as the intense competition to establish the exclusive ‘superiority’ or unique form of any one genocide, ends up creating a fetishistic atmosphere in which the masses of bodies that are not to be qualified for the definition of genocide are dumped into a conceptual black hole, where they are forgotten.”

The limits of genocide

Even if it is agreed that the term genocide can be applied to situations other than the Holocaust, there are still questions about the breadth of these situations (or, in the terms of personal construct theory, the permeability of the construct of genocide). These include whether genocide is necessarily state-directed, whether it is applicable to discrimination toward and oppression of a racial group, such as African Americans, whether it can be applied to situations involving warfare, and whether victims of

genocidal mass killing have to be members of a particular group (Curthoys & Docker, 2008; Moshman, 2008).

Although it might be questioned why it is of any consequence whether a situation is regarded as genocidal or not, Saul (2001) has pointed out that in international law genocide is regarded as particularly heinous because, unlike murder, it targets not just the individual but their social group. It is because of this special legal status that the United Nations Security Council can authorize military intervention in any situation designated as genocide.

Commission of genocide by those who have experienced genocide

The Israeli response to the Hamas attacks on Israel of October, 2023 has been construed not only as genocidal but as only the latest stage in long-standing genocidal and apartheid policies toward the people of Palestine. This argument, as expounded by representatives of a country that has been all too familiar with such policies, South Africa, has been considered to be plausible by the International Court of Justice (2025). While it has been counter-argued that the policies of Hamas are genocidal toward Israel (a claim that is inconsistent with the view that the Holocaust is the only genocide), even if this were so it would not justify acts of genocide toward a people who are by no means all, or mostly, members or supporters of Hamas. Regarding them as so, or as “human animals,” in the words of the Israeli Defense Minister at the beginning of the current conflict in Gaza (Karanth, 2023), is an example of what Kelly (1955) termed preemptive construing: Palestinians are Hamas/human animals and nothing but Hamas/human animals. Such construing, no less than it did when preemptive constructions of Jewish people were used by the Nazis, can facilitate brutal actions being taken with assumed righteousness and absence of guilt against the people so construed as it requires no inconvenient acknowledgement of these people’s humanity and of their basic commonality with oneself (Winter, 2025).

Constructions of Israel’s actions as genocidal have also been repudiated on the basis that “charging Jews with genocide is to declare them guilty of what was done to them” (Jacobson, 2023, p. 46). However, an experience of being abused does not, of course, confer immunity from becoming an abuser, as evident from the histories of many abusive individuals. Indeed, from a personal construct theory perspective, if a person or group has been subjected to abuse, the construct of *abuser vs. abused* may become superordinate in their construing of interpersonal relationships and may be one on which the individual or group is at risk of “slot rattling” from one pole to the other (Winter, 2007).

The South African case against Israel, and the fact that a final ruling on it by the International Court of Justice will take several years, does at least indicate, as have previous cases, the considerable variation in constructions of genocide and the difficulties in applying the genocide label, particularly to a country or group that has, and/or is supported by others with, considerable power and influence and/or has been construed as a victim itself.

Exploring constructions of genocide

Research on perceptions of genocide has focused on the effect on public opinion of labeling a situation as genocide (Leidner, 2015; Valentino & Weinberg, 2017). Some

of this research has indicated that this effect may be mediated by individuals' degree of glorification of, or identification with, their national group (Leidner, 2015), and there is also evidence that in-group glorification and perceived in-group threat reduce acknowledgement of in-group responsibility in relation to possible genocide (Bilali, 2013).

There has been little or no research on the particular ways in which individuals construe situations that could be labeled as genocide, or their differentiation between such situations. Personal construct psychology provides not only a theoretical perspective on such issues, but also a methodology that allows their exploration. For example, repertory grid technique (Fransella et al., 2004; Kelly, 1955), although originally primarily used to investigate people's construing of themselves and others, is sufficiently flexible to be adapted to study of the construing of events (e.g., Sewell et al., 1996). If these events were situations of possible genocide, the grid could perhaps be used to investigate the construing of genocide, and this possibility will be explored in the pilot study to be reported in the present paper.

Since genocide has been regarded as "rooted in identity" (Moshman, 2007, p. 132), the degree to which an individual's identity is "fused" to a particular group may be relevant to the way in which they construe situations of genocide, particularly if these involve the group with which the person identifies. Identity fusion, a blurring of the barrier between an individual's personal and group identities, has been associated with such extreme pro-group behaviors as willingness to fight and self-sacrifice for a group (Gómez et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009, 2014a, 2014b; Varmann et al., 2024), including in studies that have combined measures of identity fusion with repertory grid technique (Mason et al., 2022, 2025). Given their more extreme views concerning matters affecting their group, people with a high degree of identity fusion might be expected to show more polarized views concerning what does and does not constitute genocide. They might also be expected to show less differentiated construing, since this has been associated with willingness to take extreme actions on behalf of a group (Mason et al., 2025).

The research aims of the study to be reported were therefore:

1. To examine the viability of a repertory grid method designed to explore whether, and in what way, participants differentiate between situations of possible genocide;
2. To investigate whether such differentiation is related to aspects of their identity, specifically being a member of a group that was either the victim or perpetrator of the possible genocide and the degree to which participants are fused with the group with which they identify.

Specifically, it was hypothesized that:

1. Members of a group that were victims or perpetrators of a possible genocide will construe this situation as more distinct from other situations of possible genocide than are the latter situations from each other.
2. People with a high degree of identity fusion will show more polarized construing of situations that might be labeled as genocide.
3. People with a high degree of identity fusion will show less differentiated construing of situations that might be labeled as genocide.

Method

Participants

Participants were 10 university students in the U.K., who were selected through opportunity sampling and asked to sign a consent form after reading an information sheet. Three were male and seven were female, and their ages ranged from 19 to 30 years, with a mean age of 21.6 years.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire

Participants were asked to indicate their age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and religion.

Repertory grid

The elements in the grid were the following 10 situations that could be regarded as instances of genocide: mass killing of Albanian Muslims in Kosovo; mass killing of Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire; mass killing of Native Americans during colonization; mass killing of Australian Aboriginals during colonization; mass killing of Yazidis by ISIS; mass killing of Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge; treatment of Uighur Muslims in China; mass killing of Tamils in Sri Lanka; the Holocaust; and mass killing of Tutsis in Rwanda. A short description was provided for each element. For example, for “The Ottoman empire mass killing of Christians,” the description was “1.2 million Armenian Christian people are reported to have been killed by Ottoman Empire Turks from 1915 to the early 1920s. During this time there was also systematic deportation of Armenians.”

Each participant was presented with each element in turn and asked to describe it. When a pole of a construct (a descriptor, e.g., “horrifying”) was mentioned by the participant, they were asked to provide what they considered to be the opposite of this pole (e.g., “peaceful”). After 10 constructs had been elicited in this way, the participant rated all of the elements on each construct on a 7-point scale.

A content analysis, involving the inductive development of themes, was conducted of the constructs elicited by the grid. Grids were also analyzed by IDIOGRID software (Grice, 2002), from which the following measures were derived:

- mean distance between element in which the group with which a participant identified was involved, as perpetrator or victim, and the other elements: the higher the mean distance, the greater the construed dissimilarity between the first element and the others;
- mean distance between elements in which the group with which a participant identified was not involved: the higher the mean distance, the greater the construed dissimilarity of the elements;
- total sum of squares: the higher the score, the more polarized the construing of the elements;
- percentage variance accounted for by the first component from principal component analysis: the higher the percentage, the less differentiated the individual's construing.

In addition, a plot of elements in construct space was generated for each participant from the principal components analysis. This is derived from the loadings of the elements and constructs on the first (horizontal axis) and second (vertical axis) principal components. The greater the distance between elements on the plot, the greater their construed dissimilarity.

Pictorial measure of identity fusion

Participants were presented with images of circles representing the self and their ethnic group, with different degrees of overlap between them, and asked to pick which image best represented how close they felt to their group (Swann et al., 2009). The images had the following degree of overlap: A, 0%; B, 25%; C, 50%; D, 75%; and E, 100%. Percentage of fusion was treated as an ordinal variable in the data analysis. The participants who displayed 100% identity fusion were selected as case examples, as was a contrasting example of a participant showing 0% identity fusion.

Ethical approval

The study was approved by the Health, Science, Engineering and Technology ECDA of the University of Hertfordshire (protocol number LMS/UG/UH/05193).

Results

Group identification

On the basis of their ethnic group identification, a judgment was made for each participant of the genocide situation/s with which their group had some involvement either as victims or perpetrators. For four participants, their group was a victim in at least one such situation, for four it was a perpetrator, and for two it was neither.

Content of constructs

As indicated in Table 1, the content of the constructs fell into themes of emotional impact (47% of constructs), characteristics of perpetrators (21%), context (14%), morality (12%), and impact on victims (6%), each of which was divided into various subthemes.

Differentiation between elements

The median distance between an element in which the participant's group was involved (median = 1.02; interquartile range = 0.62) and other elements was significantly greater than the median distance between the other elements (median = 0.91; interquartile range = 0.22) (Wilcoxon $Z(8) = 1.752$, $p = 0.04$, one-tailed), with a medium effect size (0.62). This supported Hypothesis 1.

Table 1. Thematic analysis of the constructs.

Theme	Subthemes
Emotional Impact	Fear, e.g., <i>terrifying – safe</i> Sadness, e.g., <i>sad – happy</i> Horror, e.g., <i>horrifying – peaceful</i> Shock, e.g., <i>shocking – expected</i> Interest, e.g., <i>historic – boring</i>
Characteristics of Perpetrators	Selfishness, e.g., <i>selfish – thoughtful</i> Dominance, e.g., <i>bossy – caring</i> Delusion, e.g., <i>deluded – acceptable</i> Cruelty, e.g., <i>dehumanizing – friendly</i>
Context	Colonization, e.g., <i>invasion – welcoming</i> Terrorism, e.g., <i>terrorism – peace</i> Prejudice, e.g., <i>racist – understanding</i> Politics, e.g., <i>coup – election</i>
Morality	Necessity, e.g., <i>necessary – unnecessary</i> Injustice, e.g., <i>unjust – just</i> Immorality, e.g., <i>unethical – ethical</i>
Impact on Victims	Pain, e.g., <i>painful – helpful</i> Extent of killing, e.g., <i>extinction – growth</i>

Relationships between construing and identity fusion

Identity fusion scores were positively correlated with the total sum of squares (Spearman's $r(10) = .69, p < 0.05, 1\text{-tailed}$) and the percentage of variance accounted for by the first principal component (Spearman's $r(10) = 0.63, p < 0.05, 1\text{-tailed}$). Greater identity fusion was therefore associated with more polarized but less differentiated construing, supporting Hypotheses 2 and 3 respectively.

Plots of elements in construct space

Examples of plots of elements in construct space are first provided below for the three participants who showed 100% fusion with the ethnic group with which they identified. This group was different for the three individuals, but in each case it was a group that had been regarded as a perpetrator, or as supporting the perpetrator, in one of the possible genocide situations. The fourth example, provided for contrast, is of the only participant who showed 0% identity fusion, and whose group was considered neither the perpetrator nor victim in any of the situations. As can be seen in Table 2, these participants differed markedly not only in identity fusion but also on the repertory grid measures of percentage variance accounted for by the first principal component and total sum of squares, indicating that the construing of the participants showing 100% identity fusion was considerably less differentiated and more polarized than that of the participant showing 0% identity fusion.

Example 1

Burak's³ grid showed very undifferentiated construing, with 82.23% of its variance being accounted for by the first principal component. This contrasted "horrific," "disgusting," "selfish," "careless" (this construct pole was used twice, with different contrast poles), "aggressive," "bossy," "nasty," "arrogant," and "cruel" situations with those which were "fantastic," "nice," "thoughtful," "lovely," "loving," "caring" (this construct pole was used twice, with different contrast poles), "friendly," "excellent," and "passive." While

Table 2. Scores of selected participants.

Example number	Identity fusion	% variance Cpt. 1	Total sum of squares
1	100%	82.23	297.80
2	100%	79.21	303.50
3	100%	65.06	311.10
4	0%	41.36	143.30

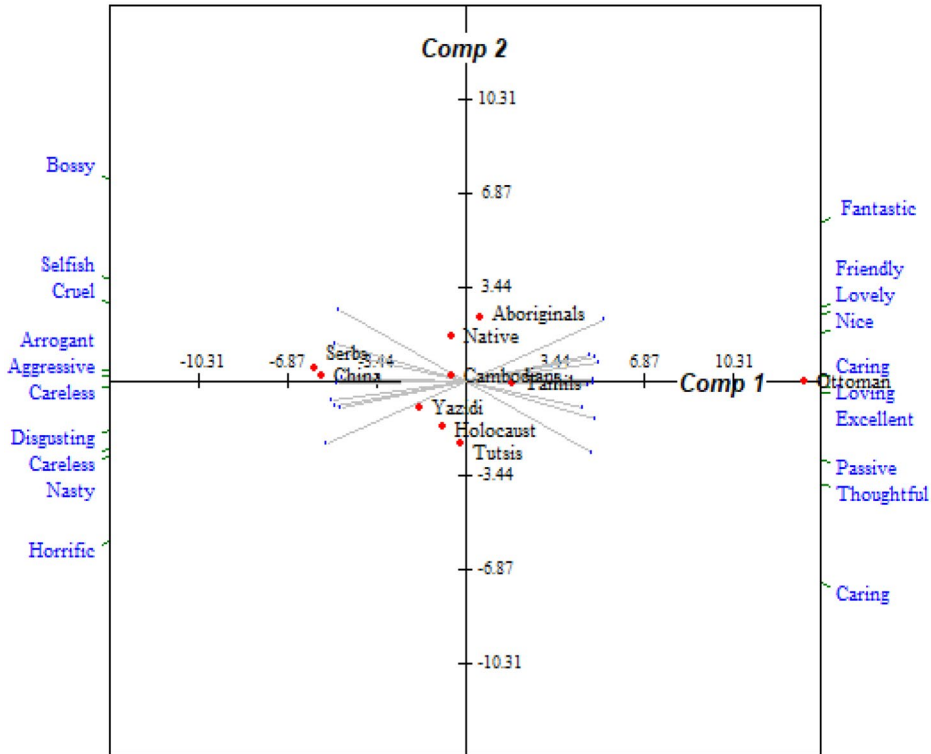


Figure 1. Plot of elements in construct space for Burak.

most of the potential genocide situations were construed in the former terms or as relatively neutral on this dimension, the situation in which Burak’s group was viewed as the perpetrator (the killing of Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire) was construed very much in the latter terms, as indicated by its placement at the extreme right edge of the plot of elements in construct space (Figure 1). The two situations that were construed most negatively (the killing of Albanian Muslims in Kosovo and the treatment of Uighur Muslims in China) were ones in which members of Burak’s religious group had been victims.

Example 2

Adessa’s construing was also quite undifferentiated, with 74.21% of the variance being accounted for by the first principal component. This contrasted situations that were “violent,” “unethical,” “horrific,” “disturbing,” “lacking in ‘morals,” “heart-breaking,” “unnecessary,” “dehumanizing,” “agonizing,” and “unexpected” with those that were “gentle,” “ethical,” “nice,” “natural,” “moral,” “heartfelt,” “necessary,” “normal,” “harmless,”

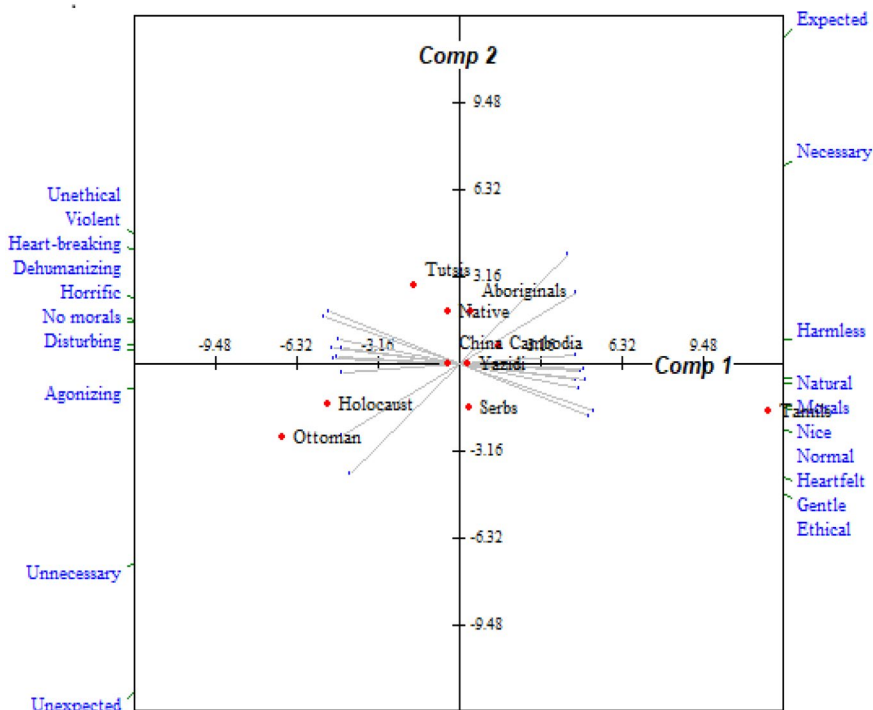


Figure 2. Plot of elements in construct space for Adessa.

and “expected.” As can be seen in Figure 2, two of the situations (the killing of Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire and the Holocaust) were construed very much in the former terms and the rest in a very neutral way except one, which was construed very extremely in the latter terms. This very positively construed situation (killing of Tamils in Sri Lanka) is one in which the group with which Adessa identified was the perpetrator.

Example 3

In Katya’s grid, 65.06% of the variance was accounted for by the first principal component. This contrasted situations that were “unexpected,” “surprising,” “shocking,” “barbaric,” “tragedies,” and “painful” with those that were “expected” (a construct pole that was used twice, with different contrasts), “ordinary,” “gentle,” and “normal.” As indicated in Figure 3, two of the situations (killing of Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire and the Holocaust) were viewed extremely in the former terms, and the rest fairly neutrally apart from one (killing of Albanian Muslims in Kosovo), which was construed extremely in the latter terms. This situation was one in which Katya’s country of origin was allied with the perpetrators of the possible genocide.

Example 4

John’s construing was very differentiated, with 41.36% of the variance in the grid accounted for by the first principal component. This contrasted situations of “ethnic cleansing” with those that were “unnecessary.” None were construed extremely on this

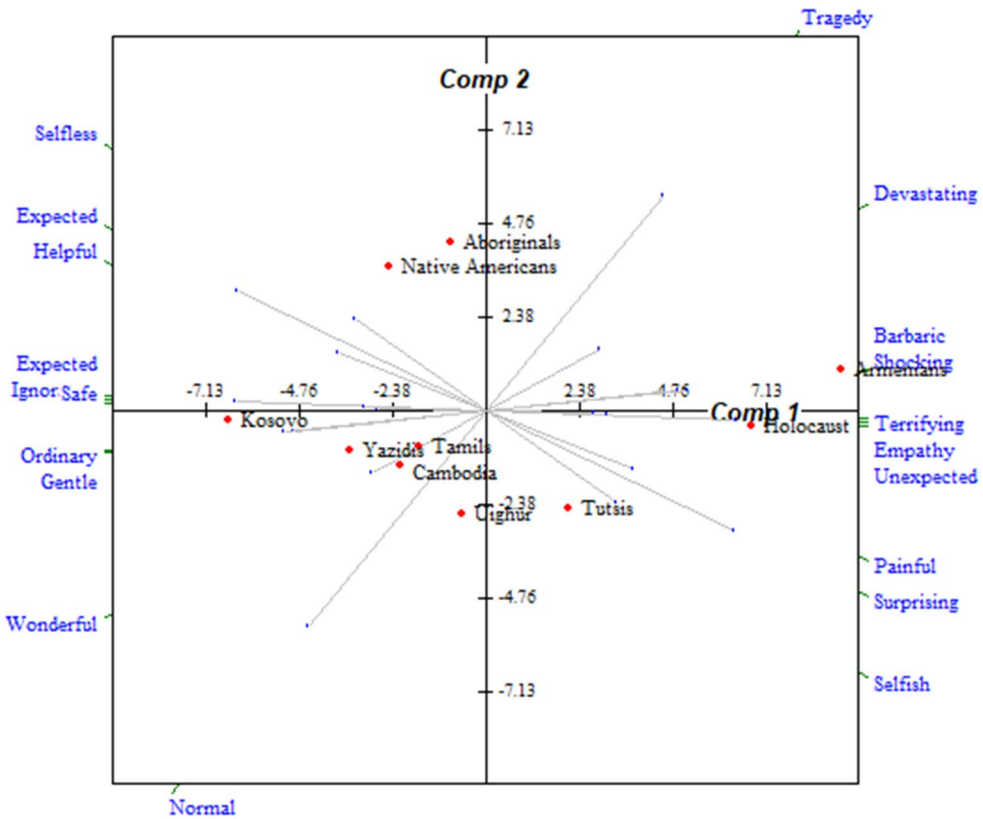


Figure 3. Plot of elements in construct space for Katya.

component apart from the mass killing of Yazidis by ISIS, which was viewed as very unnecessary.

Discussion

Results in relation to research aims and hypotheses

This pilot study has indicated that the repertory grid is a viable method for the exploration of the construing of genocide. It allowed the elicitation of constructs relating to the emotional impact of possible genocide situations, characteristics of perpetrators, the context of the situations, morality, and impact on victims. Not surprisingly, in view of the nature of the situations considered, the largest single number of constructs fell in the emotional impact category. As hypothesized, situations in which a participant's group was considered to have some involvement were construed more distinctly than those where this was not the case. Participants who were more fused with their groups showed greater polarization in their construing of the elements, but less differentiated construing.

Individuals therefore appear to differ in their construing of situations that might be regarded as genocide depending upon the extent to which a group with which they identify was involved in these situations, either as perpetrator or victim, and their

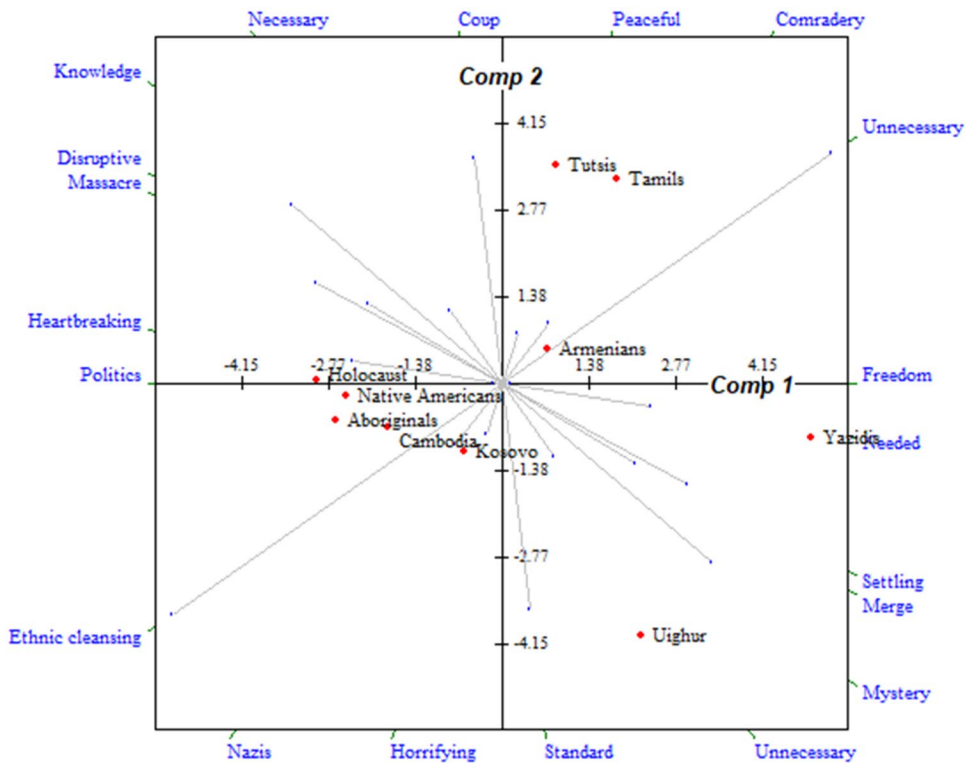


Figure 4. Plot of elements in construct space for John.

degree of identity fusion with this group. Thus, the study can be considered to add to research evidence of the association of identity fusion with extreme attitudes and behavior, either intended or actual, in support of one's group and/or in opposition to another group (Varmann et al., 2024). Some stark examples were provided of differences in construing between participants with different patterns of identity fusion, including the use of such construct poles as "lovely," "thoughtful," "fantastic," "excellent," and (perhaps most chillingly) "necessary" to describe situations of mass killing in which their group could be regarded as perpetrators, in contrast to poles such as "horrific," "disgusting," "unfair" and "nasty" to describe situations in which groups with which they identified were victims.

Implications for theoretical perspectives on genocide

The present findings highlight the importance of considering both social and individual psychological processes, particularly those concerning identity construction, in understanding genocide. For Moshman (2007), these are processes of *dichotomization*, in which one identity dimension is elevated and used to divide people into "us" and "them," and of the *dehumanization* and *destruction* of "them," followed by *denial* in order to maintain a view of the self as moral. Identity processes such as these may be further understood by considering the socio-political conditions that instigate them. For example, Staub (2001) has argued that difficult life circumstances and intergroup

conflict may lead to a threat to basic needs, which in turn may result in the elevation of an ingroup compared to a devalued outgroup. Subsequent scapegoating, and further changes in individual and social identity, as well as in norms and institutions, can culminate in genocide. As has also been described in relation to Nazi Germany (Bartov, 2000), this may be accompanied by “a reversal of morality” in which “killing the scapegoat or ideological enemy may become a ‘higher good’” (Staub, 2001, p. 162). Another analysis of the historical and political background to genocide, in this case one that has been explicitly presented as constructivist, has been provided by Hiebert (2008, 2017). She focused upon economic, political, or security crises which act as triggers within an atmosphere of authoritarian and exclusionary intergroup norms, practices, and approaches to conflict management. There are then “three switches” to identity reconstruction of the victims of the genocide, who are first construed as outsiders, without rights, then as mortal threats, and finally as subhuman. Further descriptions of how identity politics may legitimate genocidal acts against a group construed as an existential threat have been provided by Zartman and Anstey (2011) and Hintjens (2001), who reflected on “when identity becomes a knife.”

These various analyses of genocide essentially adopt a view that it is not an aberrant phenomenon, or a manifestation of psychopathology or evil, but rather a “rational choice” from the perpetrator’s perspective (Fein, 1979), and one which is explicable in terms of the same processes that underlie the social behavior of all individuals. As du Preez (1994, p. iii) put it, “genocide, far from being a freak occurrence, is a psychologically intelligible and, to that extent ‘normal’ response to a particular kind of social and political crisis.” Although du Preez (1975) used a personal construct approach in his previous research on political debates in South Africa, he did not directly draw upon personal construct theory in his presentation of a classification of different types of genocide. Detailed analysis of genocide in terms of personal construct theory is also beyond the scope of this paper, but the personal construct model of radicalization (Winter & Feixas, 2019) is of relevance to the understanding of genocide. As in the literature reviewed above, this model focuses on the reconstruction of identity following major invalidation, with the new identity being strengthened by its contrast with an extremely negatively construed other group. It is intended to extend this model to encompass genocide by, for example, incorporating consideration of the construing of social groups as well as of individuals.

Strengths, limitations, and further research

One of the strengths of the present study is that it provides a further indication of the benefits of complementing a measure of identity fusion with repertory grid technique, which allows more idiographic exploration, both quantitative and qualitative, of individuals’ construing (Mason et al., 2025). A particular advantage of both of these methods, indicating their potential for further cross-cultural research on constructions of genocide, is their adaptability for use in different cultural settings (Varmann et al., 2024; Whitehouse et al., 2014; Winter & Muhanna-Matar, 2020).

Further research might also use a grid with a broader range of elements, including some that have not been considered as examples of genocide. The use of a supplied construct of “a genocide—not a genocide” would allow investigation of the meaning

of this construct by exploring which other constructs are associated with it. The construct content categories identified in the current study could also be used as a basis for the selection of other supplied constructs in further research on larger samples, which is, of course, necessary before any conclusions drawn from the findings of the present study can be more than tentative.

In an attempt to reduce the demands of the current study on participants, the procedure for construct elicitation involved considering each element in turn rather than Kelly's (1955) original triadic method. A monadic method such as this has been successfully used in previous studies, for example when considering complex elements (Epting et al., 1993; Leitner, 1985), and although this also seemed to be the case in the present study, further research might explore whether triadic elicitation would produce similar results. Also in relation to the construct elicitation process, arguably the use of the opposite method (in which, to elicit the contrast pole to the pole that is initially elicited, the participant is asked for the opposite of this characteristic) in the current study might have produced more extreme contrasts than had the difference method (in which the participant is asked for a pole that characterizes the third element in a triad) been used (Epting et al., 1971). Nevertheless, during the rating of the grid elements, several of the participants seemed to have little hesitation in giving extreme positive ratings to some of these if, for example, their group had been perpetrators of the killings concerned. Therefore, although it might have been thought that situations involving mass loss of life could have been construed by the participants in a uniformly negative way, this was not the case.

A particular limitation of the study is that it was conducted on university students, who were asked to construe events that had mostly occurred many years previously and of which, at least in some cases, they may have had limited prior knowledge. Future research might usefully focus on individuals selected because they, or groups of which they are active members, have expressed contrasting views on particular current situations of possible genocide, such as the Israeli policy in regard to Palestine. However, in some ways it is of particular concern that, as we have seen, participants from a general student population were clearly not averse to construing some situations of mass killing very favorably, especially if conducted by groups with which they identified. These findings provide a timely reminder that, as was documented, for example, in relation to the Holocaust and the killings of Tutsis in Rwanda (Browning, 1992; Hatzfeld, 2003; Sibomana & Mafeza, 2020), it is not just the primary architects of genocide but "ordinary" people who may support, and even be willing to engage in, genocidal acts. "Ordinary people," and their governments, have also often turned a blind eye to the commission of genocide, and are continuing to do so today.

Conclusions

Evidence has been provided that there may be highly polarized construing of situations of possible genocide, and that this may be related to fusion with the group with which one identifies. Differences between people in the construing of these situations appear to be not so much in the constructs that they apply to them but in the poles of the

constructs that are used to describe particular situations. As in a previous study of political activists (Mason et al., 2022), opposing groups may, in fact, share similar superordinate constructs but just display mirror images in how these constructs are applied to the elements of their political concerns.

Polarization, and such other features as regnant and preemptive construing, may not only be relevant to the construing of genocide but to the commission of acts of extreme violence, including genocide, toward people who are construed in this way. The countering of these processes of construing, as by interventions aimed at discovering common ground with others whose views may seem very different from one's own (Mascolo, 2022), may therefore have an important role to play in reducing the likelihood of such acts.

Much of the work of one of us has been concerned with taking a credulous approach to the construing of perpetrators of extreme violence (e.g., Winter, 2007). However, such efforts, as with attempts to find common ground between opposing parties, should not detract from a position that, no matter how much we might acknowledge the viability of alternative views of the world, the particular constructions that underlie and justify acts such as genocide should be roundly condemned. Such condemnation is fully consistent with the humanitarian and egalitarian values underlying personal construct psychology (Winter, 2026).

Notes

1. 26th. International Congress of Personal Construct Psychology, Belgrade, Serbia, June 27-29, 2025.
2. It should be noted that, although the Greek word Holocaust has been appropriated to apply to the Nazi persecution of the Jews, its impermeability is as open to question as that of the term genocide. Indeed, not only has it been applied to the persecution of non-Jewish people, such as Gypsies, by the Nazis (Burleigh & Wippermann, 1991; Reinhartz, 1991), but also to other genocides, such as that of Armenian Christians, and conflagrations (e.g., Churchill, 1929; Crowe, 2008). However, for convenience, in this paper its use will be limited, as in common parlance, to refer to the Nazi persecution of the Jews.
3. All names of participants are pseudonyms.

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