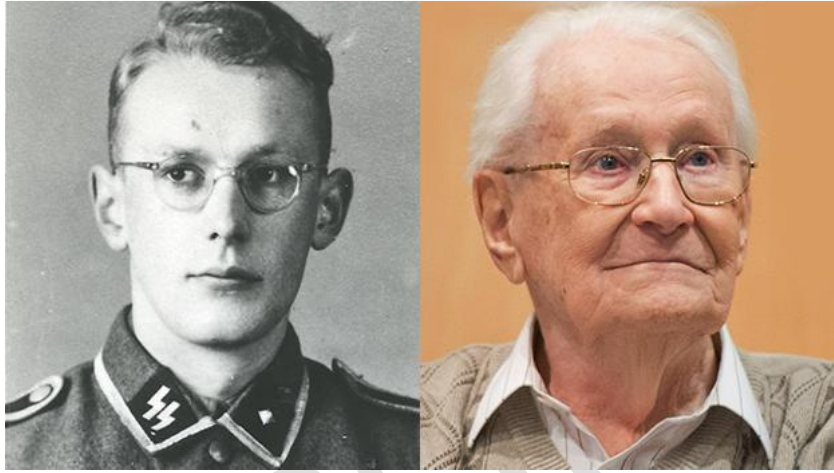


Hate crimes and the rise of Isis, a new twist on an old tale

POLITICS In April 2015, 93 Oskar Groening was put on trial for his part in the murder of 6 million Jews during the Holocaust of the 1930-40s. He is known as “The Bookkeeper of Auschwitz” because his job was to count and bank the money and precious jewels



confiscated from the prisoners as they arrived at the death camp. Like many before him, he was ordered to do it. Why do people in such circumstances lose their moral compass? With the rise of Isis and hate crime, why does history keep repeating itself ?

In July 2015 a frail-looking old man Oskar Groening was sentenced to four years in prison for his part in the Holocaust as a minor official at Auschwitz. He admitted moral culpability and stated at his trial:

"I ask for forgiveness. I share morally in the guilt but whether I am guilty under criminal law, you will have to decide."

He did this because he was "sick" of those who denied the holocaust ever existed. By this single act, he created a dividing line between himself and all others who had been put on trail for similar crimes. Groening did not kill prisoners, did not stoke the fires but he did obey or conform to the role expected of him. Does that make him guilty or merely human?

Similarly, some twenty years after Groening’s “crimes”, Lt. William Calley of the US army led a massacre of between 3-500 unarmed civilians, mainly women, children and elderly people in what has become known as the “My Lai Massacre” and possibly the worst atrocity of the Vietnam War. Calley gave the order, but the rest of C Company obeyed.

The list of similar crimes grows with the years. Isis converts, massacring Shia Muslims and Christians; Christians massacring Muslim women and children in the Balkan states and in a different arena, soldiers tortured prisoners at Abu Grahیب.

One fact remains, people behave differently in a group than when they are on their own and this may be both the crux of the problem and an explanation. One of the most studied areas in social psychology is the influence of groups on behaviour. Experiments on group influence go back 80 years, to Jennes’ experiment on conformity to a group norm (1). Putting beans in a jar, he asked participants’ to examine it and declare their estimate of the number to other members of the group. Next, they were asked to re-estimate the number of beans in the jar. In most cases, the participants’ estimates moved closer to the mean demonstrating the pull of the group on beliefs. This harmless little experiment demonstrated conformity to a group with the effect known as **informational social influence**, a belief that others may know more or better than oneself in a situation where the right answer is unknown or ambiguous.

Just after the second world war was when McCarthyism was at its height in the USA, Solomon Asch (2) also conducted an experiment on conformity in young, student, males. He arranged a room so that 8 participants, the first seven of which were part of his team (Psychology speak refers to them as "confederates") the eighth, the real participant, was seated in the final place, and last to respond to the tasks asked. Participants were asked to judge line length on cards, matching from a choice of three. In 18 trials, the confederates deliberately gave the wrong answer on 12 occasions. About 1/3rd of participants conformed and gave the same wrong answer on every occasion, 3/4 conformed on at least one occasion. When interviewed later, most participants claimed to have spotted the mistake but conformed because they feared ridicule. This suggests that the type of conformity shown here is "normative". The participants knew that answer was wrong but felt the pressure of shared group behaviour. However, it is doubtful whether the experiment could be reliably repeated now since society has changed. The cult of individualism we all live in now, did not start to exist until the 1960's and McCarthyism and the communist "witch hunts" also appeared to create an atmosphere of fear too.

Psychologist Herbert Kellman (3) investigated compliance and concluded that there are three levels of commitment to group behaviour. Compliance, identification and internalization. Compliance reflects the minimal commitment to an idea, for example as children we are taught to close our eyes and put our hands together when we pray, we do it because it is expected of us. As a young person an otherwise agnostic teen, may join a group where the majority are religious. He or she may conform to religious belief because she/he identifies with the group. On leaving to go to university, they may join another group with different values and forget their religiosity. Later on in life, the same person may have a religious experience which changes their view and they develop a deep commitment to religion and practice their religion without an external pressure. This level of commitment is internalisation. All three levels of compliance may lead to obedience.

The Second World War became the first cauldron of evil in modern times with obscenities of evil acts worked out on a range of minorities, but most of all the Jewish People. At the end of the war as the perpetrators were put on trial the main defence was:

"But I was only obeying orders"

When Eichmann was brought to trial some 15 years after his peers in 1961, the banality of his response to the charges was not lost on political theorist Hanna Arendt(4). She analysed the trial and implications of his defence. Arendt concluded that he was not a fanatic or mentally unstable, but that he had done evil things in a business-like manner and had done this all because he believed he was obeying orders.

Stanley Milgram, (5) a young psychologist at Yale, whose own parents had fled Nazi persecution, wanted to understand if Arendt's analysis was really correct. He wanted to know if good people when tested, could be tricked to do evil through obedience to an authority figure. He set up a fake scenario where participants believed they were delivering powerful electric shocks to others in obedience to a man in a grey technician's coat and with a clipboard telling them to "please continue". Asked by Milgram to predict how many would go to a lethal dose, most top professors of psychology and psychiatry said "not one in a thousand" would be so evil. The actual percentage who gave a 450V shock, believing it to be an experiment in learning was 65%. Milgram went on to develop this experiment across cultures, sexes and in different environments, the results did not vary much overall. Critics have suggested that there was no real deception and that the participants did not believe they were harming anyone. Milgram responded that if this were so people would not have been affected by the experience as some clearly were.

Having achieved his results, Milgram set about explaining why good people can do evil things in his study. He isolated four factors in his experiment which might correspond to characteristics of people involved in a group action or military allegiance. Firstly, the man in the grey coat was the "experimenter" in the experimental scenario he had **legitimate authority**. Just like Lt Calley, in command of C Company, he could tell people what to do. However, when the laboratory was shifted to a tatty venue, fewer people agreed to give higher shocks, suggesting that uniform and location are part of legitimate authority. Secondly people felt obliged to continue, since in the advert for volunteers to participate there was mention of payment. This token amount, gave a **contractual obligation** which would be similar to the

obligation of soldiers when they “signed up” or gave their allegiance. The technique of obligation is often used in sales patter, to close a sale “If I do x for you will you do y?” The third technique is **graduated commitment**. Milgram’s machine was calibrated in increments from 30v to 450v. Giving someone a 30v shock is minimal so it 40, or 50. Piling acts on top of acts the lines of what is reasonable and what is not, become blurred. A soldier may be asked to deprive a civilian of liberty, then identity, humanity and then life. The last condition for evil was Milgram suggested, **agentic shift**. If someone is acting as an agent of another: the state, a force, a government or even a gang, they lose personal responsibility for the acts they commit in that name. They become an agent of the entity. Because the man in the coat with the clipboard said he would take responsibility, the participant felt they were no longer responsible for what they did. In fact, this turned out to be a very important variable. If the researcher was not in the same room, delivery of high voltage shocks dropped, the presence or absence of the authority figure acted as a buffer. Arthur G. Miller (6) amongst a host of other critics of Milgram, suggested that this laboratory experiment did not truly represent the personalised sadism and independent acts of cruelty which were carried out on people by the guards or officials in the death camps. As an example, one only has to consider the “works” of Josef Mengele or guards murdering babies when no one was present to give an order.

Milgram demonstrated that for evil to happen good people only need to do nothing, but it took Philip Zimbardo, a veritable rock star in the field of psychology to explore the potential extent of man’s inhumanity to man and the particular power of wearing a uniform can have when combined with dehumanising of “the other”. Zimbardo’s “Stamford Prison Experiment” (7) saw a group of students randomly assigned to roles of prisoners or guards for a 2 week experiment on conforming to social roles. The guards took on their identity so well that quickly they began to bully and harass the prisoners and to dehumanise them. Zimbardo himself even lost his detachment and became engrossed in his role as prison governor. The future Mrs Zimbardo, visiting the mock Jail brought Dr Zimbardo to his senses and the experiment, now out of control, with guards brutalising prisoners was stopped after only 6 days. Yet it had achieved its aim, demonstrating how good people can learn quickly to do bad things. Zimbardo identified that the main factor at work in treating a group less favourably was the process of “Dehumanising”. The process involves taking away the humanity of the victim and reducing them to a lesser, more animalistic status. Zimbardo said this state of mind could be induced through propaganda. In his book, “The Lucifer Effect” (8) he suggested that The Nazi’s achieved this against the Jews by focussing on how they looked different in appearance and clothing, and in camps taking away hair, clothing and their name, replacing it with a tattooed.

While it appears that there are social factors at work in conformity and obedience it is often cognitive elements of a developing moral compass and the possession of a sense of control which may help to guard against evil behaviour. Kohlberg, (9) suggested that the development of higher moral reasoning allowed people to stand their ground and act as an individual. Similarly, Rotter(10) suggested the possession of an inner locus of control (a belief that one’s actions can make a difference to the life led) may also make a difference. Zimbardo incorporated these into his ideas about how to resist unjust authority but he also included additional factors too. He stated, we need to admit mistakes, be cognitively aware of language and language tools; balancing a desire for acceptance and an ability to be an individual and amongst others, the fact that all decisions have longer term consequences, something which Oskar Groening is only just beginning to realise.

When will we ever learn ?

Word count 2011

Available to purchase £100

References

- Jenness, A. (1932).The role of discussion in changing opinion regarding a matter of fact. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 27 , 279-296.

- Asch, S. E. (1951). Effects of group pressure upon the modification and distortion of judgments. In H. Guetzkow (Ed.), *Groups, leadership and men*. Pittsburg, PA: Carnegie Press.
- Kelman, H. C. (1958). Compliance, identification, and internalization: three processes of attitude change. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2, 51–60.
- Arendt, M (1963) Eichmann in Jerusalem: *A Report on the Banality of Evil (1963)*. (Rev. ed. New York: Viking, 1968.)
- Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioural Study of Obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67, 371-378.
- Miller A,B: (2004) *The Social Psychology of Good & Evil Guildford press, New York*
- Haney, C., Banks, W. C., & Zimbardo, P. G. (1973) A study of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison. *Naval Research Review*, 30, 4-17.
- Zimbardo, P: (2007) *The Lucifer Effect, How Good People Turn Evil. Random House*
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). *The Psychology of Moral Development: The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages (Essays on Moral Development, Volume 2)*. Harper & Row
- Rotter, J. B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs*, 80,(1,609).

Lynn Massey-Davis