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The Psychology of Evil

Kaj Björkqvist

Åbo Akademi University, Finland
Email: kaj.bjorkqvist@abo.fi

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Abstract

The current article provides an overview of the psychology of evil, from a historical, experimental, and theoretical point of view. The psychology of evil, as a specific field of research, was commenced after WWII. The term "Psychology of Evil" was coined by Zimbardo in 1995. Several psychological mechanisms, and experiments which provide evidence for their accuracy, are described; they give an understanding of how ordinary people can be made to carry out atrocities. Among these mechanisms are moral disengagement, dehumanization, deindividuation, obedience to authorities, diffusion of responsibility, social pressure, conformity, and groupthink. The conclusion is that, if not all of us, then at least a large extent of humans can be made to carry out atrocities towards others. The findings have relevance for peace work and policy makers.

Keywords: Psychology of evil, moral disengagement, dehumanization, deindividuation, obedience, diffusion of resonsibility, social pressure, conformity, groupthink, Holocaust

Introduction

The scientific study of the psychology of evil began in the aftermath of WWII (the term "psychology of evil" seems to have been coined by Zimbardo, 1995). When the true horror of the Holocaust sank in, it left humankind in a state of chock. How is it possible that the deliberate extinction of six million Jews could take place, in the enlightened 20th century? It seemed that civilized man is not so civilized after all – or rather, that civilization is just a thin layer covering a monster.

The choice of the word "evil" in this discourse is deliberate. Evil has a moral dimension and cannot therefore be scientifically defined and measured, unlike "aggression",

which here is defined as an intentional act, carried out with the purpose of causing physical or mental pain to another individual or organism (Björkqvist, 1997). The word aggression will be used when no moral condemnation is attached to the behavior. There are forms of aggression which are not usually regarded as evil, for example aggression in the form of defense against an aggressor, since defense usually is not morally condemned. Evil is such aggressive behavior which is condemned by the norms of society. As an example, the moral imperative "thou shalt not kill" is probably agreed upon in the vast majority of societies. Torture is another form of behavior which is regarded as evil by most people and societies. Zimbardo (2004), for his part, defined evil as "intentionally behaving -- or causing others to act – in ways that demean, dehumanize, harm, destroy, or kill innocent people."

I will not discuss whether there is such a thing as universal morality, whether there are acts which are universally evil, or whether moral is relative. I leave that question for philosophers to debate.

Salomon Asch's Study on Social Pressure and Conformity

After the end of WWII, several social psychological experiments were conducted which shed light on the human propensity to behave in manners that go against social norms and cause suffering to others. These experiments may be criticized for questionable ecological validity, and certainly for their ethics; most of these studies could not be made today, for ethical reasons. However, they convey information useful for the understanding of the human potential for inflicting pain upon others.

The first experiment to be covered here was conducted by Salomon Asch, who investigated the human tendency to conform with, or yield to, social pressure by others. It did not investigate evil behavior per se, but yielding to group pressure is certainly often a prerequisite for going against one's internalized social norms. The first of his studies was published in 1951 (Asch, 1951).

Asch told his subjects that they were to participate in a perception experiment. He did not inform them about the correct purpose of the study, which would have made it impossible to conduct it (however, he did inform them in retrospect). They were told that they were to evaluate which one out of three bars in a picture were of the same length as a reference bar shown in a separate picture.

The perceptual task was not difficult, and anyone with normal eyesight should score 100% correct on all the individual tasks.

The original experiment (Asch, 1951) was conducted in a group consisting of eight college students, of which seven were confederates, "fake" participants. They knew the true purpose of the study and gave responses that they had been told in advance to give. The eighth participant, the only "true" one, who truly believed he was participating in a perception experiment, always gave his response as the last one. All participants had to give their responses by speaking out loud.

The participants completed 18 trials. On the first two trials, both the true participant and the fake ones gave the correct answer. On the third trial, the fake participants all gave the same wrong answer. This pattern was repeated on 11 of the remaining 15 trials. It was the true participants' responses on these 12 trials that showed how many conformed with the opinion of the majority, despite it being incorrect. (There was also a control group, without fake participants. They scored over 99% correctly.)

The results showed that in 36.8% of the 12 trials, the true participants gave in to the social pressure and gave incorrect answers. Seventy-five percent of the participants gave at least one incorrect answer, while only 25% or one in fourth never gave in to the social pressure and gave correct answers in all trials.

Salomon Asch replicated the study a few years later (Asch, 1955), and received similar results. However, if there were two true participants, the tendency to conform decreased remarkably; then only 5% gave incorrect answers (Asch, 1951; 1955). That is, when you are not completely alone against all the others, it is easier to stand your ground.

He also investigated whether the number of "fake" participants influenced the results. If there was only one fake participant, there was no tendency to conform at all. When the number of fake participants increased to two or three, conformity increased. However, when the number of fake participants increased beyond three, the tendency to conform did not increase any longer. A ceiling was reached (Asch, 1951; 1955).

Asch commented his results thus: "That intelligent, well-meaning, young people are willing to call white black is a matter of concern" (Asch, 1951). What his experiment shows is a strong tendency for human beings not to go against the crowd and yield to social pressure. This is relevant for understanding the psychology of evil.

The tendency to conform explains the phenomenon of *groupthink*, a term coined by Irving Janis (1982). Janis described a problem that groups face when social pressure leads to defective decision-making. Groupthink is a mode of thinking in which individual members of a group tend to accept a viewpoint that to them seems to represent a perceived group consensus, whether or not individual group members believe it to be correct. In severe cases, group members often suffer overconfidence and hold an unquestioned belief in the group's competence and morality. This is particularly a risk when the group is isolated and does not receive or accept information from the outside world. Therefore, their worldview tends to become delusional. Janis (1982) suggested that there are four group-level factors that combine to cause groupthink: group cohesion, isolation, biased leadership, and decisional stress.

Groupthink can typically be observed in religious cults and extreme political groups. However, whole nations may suffer from groupthink, as in North Korea, and in today's Russia, which is waging a war against Ukraine; information from the outside world is strictly censored, and the Ukrainians are believed to be "Nazis".

Darley's and Latané's Study on The Bystander Effect

The social phenomenon of the *bystander effect* (sometimes referred to as "bystander apathy") is in both textbooks and popular culture connected with the brutal murder of Catherine "Kitty" Genovese. The bystander effect refers to the human tendency not to help an individual in emergency but only "stand by" if other witnesses besides themselves are present.

Kitty Genovese was a 28-year-old woman who shared a flat with her girlfriend in Kew Gardens, Queens, NY. She worked as a bar manager and started driving home from work around 2:30 in the morning on March 13th, 1964. At the same time, 28-year-old Winston Moseley, a married man with wife and two sons, drove around alone with a sharp hunting knife in his pocket, looking for a victim. He spotted Genovese at around 3 a.m. at a traffic light and started following her car.

About 45 minutes from the time she departed the bar, Genovese arrived home and parked her car close to the frontdoor of her building. Moseley got out of his car and approached Genovese with the hunting knife in his hand, and, as she tried to run toward the frontdoor, he overtook her and stabbed her twice in the back. She screamed for help, and a witness, Robert Mozer, shouted: "Leave that girl alone!" (Krajicek, 2011; Ruhl, 2021). Moseley quickly fled the scen and returned to his car.

After 10 minutes, he came back. Genovese had managed to get into the building but collapsed in the vestibule in front of the stairs. Moseley stabbed Genovese 11 more times before raping her and stealing $49, which she had in her purse. He fled from the scene, while none of the many witnesses tried to help Genovese. It is unclear whether anyone tried to call the police or not. It was afterwards reported in the press that the number of witnesses was 38, but in fact they were somewhat less (Ruhl, 2021).

Just six days after the murder, Winston Moseley was arrested for suspected robbery unconnected with the murder. The color of his car was white, the same color that had been reported by witnesses in the Kitty Genovese case. He was therefore questioned about the murder case, too. During questioning, Moseley admitted to having murdered Genovese as well as two other women. He was found guilty of all three murders and sentenced to death. However, his sentence was later reduced to life in prison (Krajicek, 2011; Ruhl, 2021).

At first, the murder did not gain much publicity. However, two weeks after the murder, Martin Gansberg (1964) published an article in the New York Times titled *"37 who saw murder didn't call the police"* This time, the story created a moral outrage not only in the US but in the whole Western world.

Two social psychologists, John Darley and Bibb Latané, became interested in the Kitty Genovese murder case, and they designed an experiment to investigate the human inclination to refrain from intervening if multiple witnesses of an emergency are present. It was published four years later (Darley & Latané, 1968) under the title

"*Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility".* Here, they not only coined the term *bystander effect,* they also provided a possible psychological explanation of the phenomenon: *diffusion of responsibility.*

In the same way as in Salomon Asch's (1951) experiment on conformity, the participants (male college students) in Darley's and Latané's experiment were not correctly informed about the purpose of the study. They were told that they were to participate in a group discussion over an intercom system, together with a group of other students. They were told that all the participants were placed in separate booths and therefore could not see each other. The study included three different conditions. In the first condition, they were supposedly alone with only one other student. In the second condition, they were told that there were three other participants. In the third condition, they were told that there were six other participants. In reality, the other participants were only tape recorded voices.

The group discussion began with one "fake" participant informing that he was an epileptic, prone to having seizures in stressful situations. When everyone else had spoken, the first speaker started talking again, this time in a loud and incoherent voice:

"I-er-um-I think I-I need-er-if-if could-er-er-somebody er-er-er-er-er-er-er give me a little help here because-er-I-er-if somebody could help me out it would-it would-er-er s-s-sure be-sure be good...because-er-there-er-er-a cause I-er-I-uh-I've got a-a one of the-er-sei----er-er-things coming on and-and-and I could really-er-use some help so if somebody would-er-give me a little h-help-uh-er-er-er-er-er c-could somebody-er-er-help-er-uh-uh-uh (choking sounds)....I'm gonna die-er-er-I'm...gonna die-er-help-er-er-seizure-er-[chokes, then quiet]. (Darley & Latané, 1968. p. 379)

The dependent variable in this experiment was whether the true participant reacted and left his booth to help the epileptic before his voice was choked off, or not. In the first condition, when the participant thought he was alone with the epileptic, 85% of the participants rushed to help within the time limit. In the second condition, when the participants thought there was another bystander witnessing the seizure, 62% left their booth to help. And, in the third condition, when they thought they were one of five bystanders, only 31% left their booth to help. Darley and Latané (1968) suggested that the bystander effect is caused by an experience of *diffusion of responsibility:* the more witnesses of the emergency there are, the less likely the individual is to help.

Latané and Darley (1968) replicated the experiment with a somewhat different external condition. This time there was no epileptic seizure, but the participant sat quietly filling in a questionnaire, alone or together with other students, when white smoke (not real smoke) started entering the room. Within six minutes, the smoke was so thick that it was difficult to see. The dependent variable was in this case whether the participant stopped filling in the questionnaire and reported about the smoke or

not during the six minute period. As expected, the more people there were in the room, the less likely the participants were to report about the smoke.

In a third variation of the experiment (Latané & Rodin, 1969), the participants were filling in questionnaires when they heard a women arranging papers and opening and closing drawers in a nearby room (it was all tape recorded, of course). Then they heard her climbing up on a chair to reach some papers on a bookshelf. She fell down, started screaming and moaning, saying: *"Oh my God, my foot, ...I...I...can't move...it. Oh my ankle...I... can't get this...thing...off me."* If the participant was alone in the room, he or she rushed to help in 70% of the cases. If the participant was together with a stranger, both of them filling in questionnaires, only 40% helped.

Thus, the bystander effect seems to be a solid psychological phenomenon which is replicable over a variety of situations. According to Darley and Latané (1968), a bystander goes through a five-step decision-making process before intervening in an emergency situation: the individual will (1) notice that something is wrong; (2) define the situation as an emergency; (3) decide whether they are personally responsible to act; (4) choose how to help; and (5) implement the chosen helping behavior.

In real-life situations, a cost-benefit analysis is probably additionally applied by a bystander. In a bullying situation in a school class, bystanders might avoid helping the victim in fear of becoming bullied themselves. In WWII, a German citizen who helped or hid Jews risked their own life. Thus, in many cases, an individual may well be aware of the emergency, but decide that the personal cost of helping is too high.

Besides the Kitty Genovese case, there are other shocking real life examples of bystander apathy. For instance, a woman died in Beijing in 2013 after her neck was stuck between railings on a busy street. Over a dozen people stared or took photos, but it took 30 minutes before a person helped – and by then it was too late (Liu & Lu, 2021).

To prevent cases like these, Germany has criminalized bystanding without helping; it is an offence if bystanders do not assist in an emergency situation, unless doing so would endanger themselves. In 2017, an 83-year-old man in Germany hit his head when he collapsed in a bank. CCTV footage identified three people who stepped around the man's body and did nothing to help. The court found them guilty of failing to respond to a medical emergency and imposed heavy fines (Liu & Lu, 2021).

Stanley Milgram's Study on Obedience

Stanley Milgram drew the inspiration for his experiment from the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals; he had noticed that when asked about the reasons for the committed atrocities, they mostly said that they just *"followed orders".* Notably, he started carrying out his experiments in 1961, one year after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, who also used the same argument in his defense. Thus, it seemed to him that an important cause for the genocide was *obedience to authority*

figures. Could it be that Eichmann and his many accomplices in the Holocaust really were just "following orders"? (McLeod, 2017; Milgram, 1974).

It is worth noting that when Milgram (1963) began his series of experiments, his aim was to investigate whether Germans were particularly obedient to authority figures. He intended to conduct his experiment with German subjects, but he wanted to have a control group consisting of North-Americans. He began with the control group; the results were so shocking, that he never came to investigate the intended experiment group.

Milgram selected participants for his experiment by advertising in newspapers for male participants in the age range between 20 and 50 years to take part in a study of learning at Yale University. They received a $4.50 remuneration for participation. Again, the participants were not correctly informed about the true purpose of the study; they were told that it was a learning experiment, when in fact the aim of the study was to investigate obedience.

The procedure was that the true participant was paired with another person, a confederate pretending to be another participant. They drew straw about who was to be the 'learner' and who would be the 'teacher.' The draw was rigged so that the true participant was always the teacher, and the learner was always a fake participant.

The participants were told that they were to participate in an experiment that investigated the effect of punishment on the learning of word pairs. The punishment was to be an electric shock delivered every time the learner gave an incorrect answer. The electric shock would increase in strength for each mistake. The teacher was allowed to try out a low-level shock on himself before the experiment started to be convinced that real shocks were given (which they were not).

The learner (a confederate referred to as Mr. Wallace) was taken into a room, put in a chair, and had electrodes attached to his arms. The teacher and the researcher went into a room next door that contained an electric shock generator and a row of switches marked from 15 volts (Slight Shock) to 450 volts, which was marked with the three letters XXX (McLeod, 2017; Milgram 1963).

The learner gave, on purpose, many incorrect answers, and for each of these, the teacher gave him an electric shock. For each of the wrong answers, the teacher had to increase the level of the shock (in reality, no shocks were given). If the teacher refused to administer a shock, the experimenter was to give a series of four verbal prods to encourage the teacher to continue. If one was not obeyed, then the experimenter was to say out loud the next prod, and so on. The four prods were: (1) Please continue. (2) The experiment requires you to continue. (3) It is absolutely essential that you continue. (4) You have no other choice but to continue. If the teacher still refused to give an electric shock, the experiment was stopped at that point.

Sixty-five percent of the participants (i.e., the teachers) continued to the highest level of 450 volts, which would have been deadly if delivered in reality. All participants continued to 300 volts.

Milgram carried out 18 variations of the study with a total of 636 participants, all from the New Haven area in the US, which was regarded as being reasonably representative of a typical American town. Milgram's findings have been replicated in a variety of cultures and most came to the same conclusions as Milgram's original study; in some cases, even higher levels of obedience were observed (McLeod, 2017). A 2009 episode of the BBC science documentary series *Horizon* involved a replication of the Milgram experiment. Of the twelve participants, only three refused to continue to the end of the experiment (McLeod, 2017).

In some variations of Milgram's original study, however, the number of participants who delivered the maximum shock dropped. For instance, when the experiment was moved to a set of run down offices rather than the impressive Yale University, the number dropped to 47.5%. This suggests that the status of the location effected the level of obedience. There was a variation in which the teacher had to force the learner's hand down onto a shock plate when they refused to participate after 150 volts; the number then dropped to 30%.

However, there were also variations in which the number of participants increased drastically. When participants could instruct an assistant (a confederate) to press the switches, 92.5% shocked to the maximum 450 volts. When there is less personal responsibility, obedience seems to increase (McLeod, 2017; Milgram 1963).

The results of Milgram's study indicate that human beings have a strong tendency to obey authority figures and carry out their orders even when others' lives are at risk – as long as they experience that the authority figure takes the responsibility for the outcome. The experiment may be criticized for poor ecological validity. What people do in an experiment cannot necessarily be generalized to real life situations. However, the tendency to be obedient towards authority figures is probably a contributing explanation to why humans relatively easily can be persuaded to carry out atrocities towards others and be convinced that it is morally justified.

Philip Zimbardo and the Stanford Prison Experiment

Philip Zimbardo wanted to investigate what the psychological effects were of becoming either a prisoner or a prison guard. In order to accomplish this, he designed an experiment involving setting up a simulated prison in the basement of the psychology department of Stanford University. More than 70 males responded to an ad in a local newspaper asking for volunteers for the study. After participating in diagnostic interviews and taking personality tests, 24 were selected for the actual study; half of them were randomly assigned as "prisoners" and the other half as "prison guards". The experiment began with nine guards and nine prisoners; the remaining ones were reserves. The experiment was supposed to go on for two weeks,

but it was interrupted only after five full days (Haney et al, 1975; Zimbardo, 2007; see also the Stanford Prison Experiment's official website: Zimbardo, n.d.).

The research group made an effort to make the laboratory prison as realistic as possible. To accomplish this, they consulted prison guards and a former prisoner who had spent seventeen years behind bars.

The ”prisoners” were ”arrested” by surprise in their homes. They were charged, reminded of their legal rights, spread-eagled against the police car, searched, and handcuffed, sometimes in the front of neighbors. Then they were blindfolded and brought to the laboratory in a real police car, with wailing sirens. After arrival to the ”prison”, each prisoner was systematically searched and stripped naked. He was then deloused with a spray, to convey the belief that he may have germs or lice.

Each prisoner wore a uniform consisting of a smock, or short dress, which they had on at all times, with no underclothes. On the smock, in front and in back, was the prisoner's ID number. On each prisoner's right ankle was a heavy chain, bolted on and also worn at all times. They had to identify themselves by ID number at all times, not by name. The hair of each prisoner was covered with a cap made from a nylon stocking (this was instead of cutting their hair short, as usually is the custom in prisons). When the ”prisoners” had go to the toilet, they did it blindfolded so as not to learn the way out of the prison (Zimbardo, n.d.).

Details about what occurred during the different days of the experiment will not be presented here. However, the experiment was characterized by an ongoing brutalization of the prison guards, and a parallel degradation and humiliation of the prisoners. On the second day, the prisoners attempted a rebellion, which was not successful. After 36 hours, one of the “prisoners” had to be released due to symptoms of mental ill-being. On the sixth day, the whole experiment was called off, for ethical reasons (Zimbardo, 2007; Zimbardo, n.d.).

Zimbardo (n.d.) clarifies that the experiment was ended prematurely for two reasons. First, Zimbardo and his colleagues learned through videotapes that the guards were increasing their abuse of prisoners in the middle of the night when they thought no researchers were watching. They had escalated to ever more pornographic and degrading abuse of the prisoners.

Second, Christina Maslach, a Stanford Ph.D., brought in to conduct interviews with the guards and prisoners, strongly objected when she saw the prisoners being marched on a toilet run, bags over their heads, legs chained together, hands on each other's shoulders. Filled with outrage, she told Zimbardo, "It's terrible what you are doing to these boys” (Zimbardo, n.d.). Accordingly, Zimbardo decided to end the experiment.

In order to explain the increasing brutalization, Zimbardo (1969; 1995; 2004; 2007; n.d.) suggested that a process of *deindividuation* was taking place in the participants. Deindividuation is a psychological concept that aims at explaining how individuals

can lose their sense of personal identity and responsibility, especially when they become part of a specific group which develops negative attitudes towards an out-group. They do not experience themselves so much as individuals with personal responsibility as part of a group which develops norms of its own. Their brutal, humiliating behavior appears justifiable to them. Deindividuation implies that people feel less accountable for their actions, and their regular moral norms are disinhibited. In such situations, people may engage in behavior they would not normally exhibit when alone, as they perceive a diffusion of responsibility and reduced likelihood of being held accountable.

The Stanford Prison Experiment has been criticized; for instance by Carnahan and McFarland (2007), who pointed out that the study may have suffered from a self-selection bias. Those who responded to the ad and volunteered for the study may have possessed dispositions towards behaving abusively. Another set of criticism concerns the replicability of the study. In an attempt to replicate it, the so-called BBC prison study, the prison guards failed to identify enough with their role. This made the guards reluctant to impose their authority, and they were eventually overcome by the prisoners (Reicher & Haslam, 2006). Zimbardo (2006) was given opportunity to comment on the BBC prison study; in his reply, he criticized research conducted for commercial interests. He also pointed out that the BBC study failed to create conditions typical for a prison mentality, since the guards were overcome by the prisoners. He could have added that the experiment thus lacked validity.

All in all, the Stanford Prison Experiment showed that a group of people could, on their own without obeying specific orders from a leader (as in Milgram's experiment), start behaving abusively if the situation allows it and they are given the authority to do so. Their behavior was continuously brutalized. It is easy to draw parallels to the atrocities carried out by American soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq war.

Albert Bandura on Moral Disengagement and Dehumanization

Moral disengagement, a term coined by Albert Bandura (Bandura, 1999; see also Bandura, 2016, and Bandura et al., 1975) is a central concept in the psychology of evil. It describes the process by which individuals rationalize and justify morally questionable actions, allowing them to distance themselves from the ethical consequences of their behavior. It implies that their regular moral code is "disengaged", and ethically lower, or at least different, standards are applied in certain situations or with a certain group of people. Moral disengagement involves a series of cognitive and emotional mechanisms that enable individuals to override their internal moral compass and engage in behaviors that violate their own ethical standards. It involves processes which act as psychological defense mechanisms protecting one's self-concept from negative emotions associated with morally reprehensible actions. One such mechanism is *moral justification*, framing unethical actions as serving a greater good or a higher moral purpose. Another mechanism is

euphemistic labeling, where individuals use vague or sanitized language to describe their actions, making them appear less morally objectionable. Instead of acknowledging theft, one might refer to it as "borrowing without permission." *Moral distancing* is a third important aspect of moral disengagement; this mechanism involves minimizing one's personal responsibility for harmful actions by attributing them to external factors or higher authorities. For instance, a soldier may justify acts of violence during wartime by claiming they were simply following orders. Additionally, *displacement of responsibility* allows individuals to shift the blame for their actions onto others or the situation, reducing their feelings of guilt or shame. This mechanism is often used to justify unethical behavior in group settings, where individuals may feel less personally responsible for their actions. Moral disengagement through *diffusion of responsibility* is a related concept in which people in a group context may feel less individually accountable for immoral actions, assuming that others share the responsibility (Bandura, 1999; 2016).

Moral disengagement is closely related to what Zimbardo called deindividuation; at least it seems that moral disengagement always takes place during deindividuation.

Another key concept associated with Bandura's name is *dehumanization* (Bandura et al., 1975), although it is unclear whether he actually invented the term. It is a particularly troubling mechanism where individuals view their victims as less than human, making it easier to harm or exploit them. This mechanism can be observed in conflicts where one group may dehumanize members of another group to justify violence. Members of the out-group may for example be referred to as ”cockroaches”, ”rats”, or ”vermin”. This labeling conveys that one is actually making the world a favor by killing them.

Hannah Arendt and the Banality of Evil

Alfred Eichmann was a high ranking Nazi official responsible for organizing the logistics of the Holocaust, especially the transportation of Jews from different parts of Europe to Auschwitz and other extermination facilities. After the German defeat, he fled, like several other Nazis, to Argentina where he lived in secret under the name of Ricardo Klement. He was hunted down and captured by Mossad on May 11, 1960, and brought to Israel, where he stood trial in 1961. He was sentenced to death on December 15, 1961, and hanged on May 31, 1962.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt followed Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem and wrote a book about it (Arendt, 1963) with the title *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. The book stirred considerable controversy, especially the suggestion that participation in such a heinous crime as the Holocaust could be called “banal”. It is noteworthy that the term “banality of evil” occurred, besides in the title, only in one place at the end of the book (Arendt, 1963).

Arendt found Eichmann to be an ordinary bureaucrat, who according to her was neither perverted nor sadistic, but 'terrifyingly normal'. He acted without any motive

other than to diligently advance his career in the Nazi bureaucracy. Eichmann was not an amoral monster, and he did not hate Jews. He performed evil deeds without evil intentions, out of 'thoughtlessness', in disengagement from the reality of his evil acts.

Her book immediately sparked bitter controversy, especially among Jewish commentators. Arendt was denounced and said to be an example of "Jewish self-hatred". She was unofficially ostracized in Israel (Aharony, 2019). Ahrendt's book was not translated into Hebrew until 1999, long after her death.

Was Ahrendt correct in her analysis? Subsequent information obtained from the Willem Sassen tapes suggests that she let herself be duped by Eichmann (Jewish Virtual Library, JVL, n.d.).

Wilhelmus (Willem) Sassen was a Dutch Nazi collaborator, who, like Eichmann, fled to Argentina after WWII. In 1957, Sassen interviewed Eichmann for 70 hours over a six month period at his home in Buenos Aires. Eichmann agreed to the interviews for research purposes, on the condition that the interview would not be published as long as he was alive; "Everything here could serve as evidence against me," he said on the tape (JVL, n.d.).

However, after Eichmann was captured and brought to Israel, Sassen sold the publication rights for the tape recordings to *Life Magazine*, on the condition that the tapes would not be given as evidence for the Eichmann trial. Excerpts from the tapes were published on November 28, 1960. The Israeli prosecutor Gideon Hausner tried to obtain the tapes until the last day of Eichmann's cross-examination, without success.

On the tapes, Eichmann says, among other things, "Had we put 10.3 million Jews to death, then I would be content and would say, 'Good, we have destroyed the enemy.'" He admits, "It is a difficult thing to say, and I know I will be judged for it, but this is the truth."

"I didn't care about the Jews deported to Auschwitz, whether they lived or died. It was the Führer's order: Jews who were fit to work would work, and those who weren't would be sent to the Final Solution." (JVL, n.d.).

In the light of the tape recordings, it seems that the "Banality of Evil"-hypothesis was incorrect, at least in Eichmann's case. However, it might be applicable in other cases. The book *Ordinary Men* by Christopher Browning (1992) provides a disturbing story about how ordinary, middle-aged German reserve policemen turned into willing participants in the Final Solution. In 1942, they were ordered to liquidate a Jewish village. None of them had fired a shot at a human being before, yet they killed with little hesitation and eventually went on to slaughter tens of thousands in cold blood. Browning claims that they were by no means psychotic sadists nor filled with antisemitic sentiment, but quite ordinary men (Browning, 1992).

Discussion

The current article has been an attempt to provide an overview of the psychology of evil, from a historical, experimental, and theoretical point of view. After the end of WWII, several social psychological experiments were conducted with the purpose of shedding light on the human propensity to behave in manners that go against social norms and cause suffering to others. These experiments may be criticized for questionable ethics; the participants were not informed about the true purpose of the study, and they were sometimes poorly debriefed after completion of the experiment. Most of these studies could not be made today, for ethical reasons. However, they conveyed information about the human propensity to conduct evil deeds that could not have been obtained otherwise. On the basis of these experiments, several psychological mechanisms have been identified, providing explanations for how ordinary people can be made to carry out atrocities towards others. Among these psychological mechanisms are moral disengagement, dehumanization, deindividuation, obedience to authorities, diffusion of responsibility, social pressure, conformity, and groupthink. It is recommended that future studies would explore these mechanisms further, and investigate the conditions under which they take place. The conclusion of the research in the field so far is that, if not all of us, then at least a large extent of humans can be made to carry out atrocities towards others.

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