

## How could psychology explain atrocious acts towards humans, such as during war times?

**“Monsters exist, but they are too few in numbers to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are...the functionaries ready to believe and act without asking questions.” – Primo Levi, a survivor of the Jewish Holocaust**

In an oversimplification of psychological reasoning, atrocious acts in war time may be ascribed partly to conditioning to obey authority, and partly to personal disposition to obedience. The compassionate view is that the majority of those who commit atrocious acts, were good people doing bad things because they were ‘forced’ to do so by ruthless leaders, while some would be more inclined to place more emphasis on the personal responsibility of the ‘functionaries’. This essay will explore the role of society and socialisation in creating a culture in which atrocities could occur with widespread support, the responsibility of war time leaders in a position to order such acts, the danger of the disassociation which perpetrators may experience, as well as the influence of genetic disposition and personality and the elimination of the possibility of resistance.

Societal division and prejudice towards victimised groups in society can be seen as a recurring theme when considering atrocious acts throughout the ages, which in the field of psychology has culminated in social identity theory. Tajfel (1979) proposed that the groups which people belong to are a source of pride and self-esteem and give us a sense of social identity. Social categorisation, when our group (the in-group) stereotypes an out-group, can lead to pronounced differences and prejudiced views between cultures. The group socialisation experienced by members of a group committing an act of atrocity, especially in cases of militant groups, fosters an environment of supporting one another – but only those within the group. The creation of an ingroup and an outgroup has acted as a catalyst to many genocides: the Jews were seen as an outgroup and scapegoated by the ingroup for the economic hardship faced by Germany. Cultural myths and narratives exacerbated the hatred felt for the Jewish people, with tales of ‘Jewish devils’ and a supposed draining of resources by the Jews. The continuous indoctrination of the German people with antisemitic propaganda reinforces this as a cultural norm – to avoid being seen as a member of an outgroup, people conformed to the expectations of a law-abiding, obedient German citizen.

Societies and cultures differ on an ideological basis. We can see significant differences between collectivist and individualistic societies, as well as the profound effect of the idealisation of obedience, such as is a prominent feature of German socialisation. Hannah Arendt criticises the continuation of this ‘blind’ obedience to adulthood; for

instance, Adolf Eichmann (a key perpetrator of the Holocaust) claimed that he had been raised to be obedient from an early age. He asked, 'what advantage would disobedience have to me?' In almost all societies and families, legitimacy of authority is taught as the majority accept that some authority figures should be allowed to exercise power appropriately to allow society to function smoothly. This can prove a disadvantage should authority become destructive; for example, charismatic leaders such as Pol Pot or Joseph Stalin (often further legitimised by a cult of personality) can order people to behave in a cruel manner that poses a danger to others. Social Learning Theory, proposed by Bandura (1977), expanded on this theory of learned obedience, suggesting that if children observe such behaviours in their role models, they may behave similarly; this was demonstrated by the behaviour of children in the Hitler Youth organisation.

Throughout history, the majority of war time atrocious acts towards humans has involved some degree of obedience to a figure of authority. Milgram (1974) proposed that an agentic shift occurs – when someone perceives another as an authority figure with greater power because they have a higher position in the social hierarchy, they may transition from an autonomous to an agentic state. This can pose a risk as obedience to destructive authority occurs as the person acts on behalf of the figure of authority, and believes that they have relinquished responsibility for any consequences of the act. An agent feels powerless to disobey.

The Jewish Holocaust serves as a case study for atrocious acts towards humans. Christopher Browning writes that the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101, (responsible for the mass shootings and assembly of Jewish people for transportation to Nazi concentration camps), murdered Jews under the influence of numerous situational factors. In 1942, in Poland, the commander of the battalion Major Wilhelm Trapp ordered soldiers to carry out mass executions but excused any man who did not believe he could go through with the deed. Over the following 17 hours, 1,500 Jews were killed: many men refused to take part; but approximately 80% of the men did continue, despite Trapp's offer. Browning noted that many of the men probably accepted the Nazi belief that Jews were enemies of Germany, as they were told by authority. Arendt further explored this concept after Eichmann appeared at the Nuremberg Trials. She noted that his defence was that he was a low-level functionary merely obeying orders and should not be held accountable for the crimes of those who had authority over him; and that he also failed to accept responsibility for the consequences of his actions, reinforcing the concept of the agentic shift.

There must also have been significant variability between the personalities of individual Nazis. Can we, therefore, convincingly argue that atrocities are committed due to a certain disposition? Adorno et al. (1950) proposed that those with an authoritarian personality show an extreme respect for authority and believe that strong and powerful leaders are required to enforce traditional values such as patriotism. Those who do not conform to societal norms are seen as responsible for the ills of society. These people form a convenient target for authoritarian leaders as they are likely to obey orders from authority figures even when such orders are destructive. This theory could clearly be applied to the Nazi movement, given the persecution of the Jews who were seen as subhumans, or 'Untermenschen'. Individual differences can also translate to how responsive we are to normative social influence. For example, those who are 'nAffiliators', as suggested by McGhee and Teevan (1967), are more likely to conform as they have a stronger desire for the approval of others. We must consider disposition of the 'monsters' who command atrocious acts, and whether this could have influenced their ability to commit and command atrocities. A simple explanation would be to assume that all of these leaders are in some way mentally ill. There is discussion among psychologists on whether Hitler had a mental illness, specifically in relation to paranoia – Henry A. Murray, upon investigation, claimed that Hitler did not appear to suffer from a diagnosable 'mental illness' but that he did seem to have counteractive narcissism (a personality disorder).

Zimbardo et al. (1971), inquiring into whether brutal behaviour was a result of sadistic personalities or the social role ascribed to the person, carried out an investigation involving the creation of a mock prison and assigning participants randomly to a guard or prisoner role. It was found that some of the guards behaved harshly towards the prisoners, some indifferently enforced the rules, and some were 'good' and never abused the prisoners. Zimbardo concluded that conforming to a social role comes 'naturally' and easily. Reicher and Haslam (2006), however, criticise this explanation as it does not account for the behaviour of the non-brutal guards. During the Iraq war, at Abu Ghraib prison, a similar event occurred in the form of a real-life atrocity committed towards the prisoners. In 2003-2004, US Army Military Police personnel committed serious human rights violations including torture and murder against Iraqi prisoners. Given that it is, statistically, extremely unlikely that all of the perpetrators had authoritarian personalities and were pre-disposed to obeying destructive authority, this explanation has been widely disregarded as a valid explanation.

This essay would be incomplete without considering the inactivity of those able to resist the influence of authority. The vast majority of atrocious acts are met with comparatively little resistance, or at least insufficient resistance to

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overpower the dominant group. Often in the cases of totalitarian regimes, people appear obedient to a cause as they are unable to protest. Minority influence is, for the most part, weakened as resistance is not tolerated in war time as deserters and protestors are punished and silenced, creating the illusion of a united majority. Arendt refers to this issue as it faced the population during the Holocaust – they were isolated and unable to gather or even reveal their own principles in opposition to the Nazi movement.

The causes of atrocious acts towards humans are complex and multifaceted. We can approach the question posed in this essay from a more biological, genetic perspective, from a more sociological standpoint, or from a culmination of the two in a psychological discussion. Can we punish those living under totalitarian conditions for executing atrocious acts towards humans? Or should we ascribe their actions to forced obedience in the face of powerful authority, and rather allocate the blame to their superior? Should we blame the ‘monsters’ or the ‘functionaries’? The philosophical extension of the debate on whether atrocious acts are the fault of those ordering the action or of those obeying the order could raise both legal and societal issues should those prosecuted for war crimes be able to successfully defend those claims by stating that they were under the influence of a higher authority. Robert Burns’ reflection on the matter, that ‘Man's inhumanity to man/ Makes countless thousands mourn’, is startlingly poignant, as while psychological explanations can be considered to explain the occurrence of atrocious acts, we remain shocked and horrified at the very possibility that one human being could do such a thing to another.

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