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Obeying, Joining, Following, Resisting, and Other Processes in the Milgram Studies, and in the Holocaust and Other Genocides: Situations, Personality, and Bystanders

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Stanley Milgram was motivated to show how something as horrible as the Holocaust could happen. To what extent does his research provide understanding of this? This article reviews a conception of the origins of genocide and other mass violence, based on case studies of actual instances, ranging from the Holocaust to the genocide in Rwanda and great violence in the Congo, in which psychological and social science principles were applied to historical data. This analysis and comparison shows that a multiplicity of societal conditions and cultural characteristics together lead to group violence. Under certain societal and cultural conditions, many people rather than obey, seek, and join, and then subsequently follow, leaders, and groups. However, one cultural characteristic that is usually present and is relevant to Milgram's work, strong "authority orientation," promotes the tendency to obedience and reduces the likelihood of resistance. The article also discusses the multiplicity of influences present both in Milgram's experiments and other violence-producing situations, which includes people following rules of conventional behavior, and the multiplicity of psychological processes that arise, and questions some interpretations of Milgram's findings. It discusses the neglected but important role of personality, and the potential inherent in socialization and education to promote inclusive caring and resistance to violence producing situations. It points to the great potential of bystanders, their "authority," in preventing violent behavior.

Stanley Milgram, whose office was next door to mine at Harvard when I started there as a young assistant professor, wanted to bring light to how something as

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horrible as the Holocaust could happen. He intended to show that authorities can lead people to engage in great cruelty.

In the many years since I have studied the origins of genocide, including the Holocaust, and mass violence in general, their prevention, and reconciliation between groups (Staub, 1989, 2003, 2011, 2013). This article considers the extent Stanley Milgram's experiments help us understand such extreme societal events—and the ways we need to extend his thinking. I have also studied positive behavior, ranging from helping, altruism, and heroic rescue to resistance to incitement to violence. I explored the role of passive bystanders in the evolution of violence, and active bystanders in its prevention (Staub, 1978, 1989, 1997, 2005, 2011, in press; Staub & Pearlman, 2006). Milgram's experiments are also relevant to bystanders, resistance, and the prevention of violence (see also Einwohner, 2014).

In this article, I will discuss the influences leading to extreme group violence. The emphasis by Milgram, and in the literature discussing Milgram's experiments, has been on the power of the situation. I will consider varied aspects of situations, and of the Milgram situation, that give them power, only one of which is people with authority. I will argue that personality also has an important role, both in Milgram's experiments and in leading to group violence. If so, socialization and experiences that shape personality are important in group violence, and its prevention. The ordinary person—a term Milgram (1974, p. 6) has used, which then has been used by others to indicate the capacity of most of us to do evil (Browning, 1992; Waller, 2007)—varies in personality and therefore also in the potential for obedience, followership, violence, and resistance. In addition to socialization, I will discuss educational experiences that can increase resistance to harm-producing situations (Staub, 2011; Staub & Pearlman, 2006).

The power of the situation also resides in bystanders exerting influence, “witnesses who are in a position to know what is happening and in a position to take action” (Staub, 2005). Passive bystanders encourage perpetrators. Active bystanders can exert influence through their words, such as defining the meaning of a situation and the appropriate action, or their actions, such as refusing to cooperate, or inciting others to resist.

The Roots of Genocide and Mass Violence, and Their Relationship to Milgram's Findings

The following analysis is based on case histories of genocide and other group violence—in the Holocaust, in Cambodia, in Turkey of the Armenians, the disappearances in Argentina (Staub, 1989), in Rwanda, and in violent conflict between Israelis and Palestinian, and in the Congo (DRC) (Staub, 1999, 2011). In these analyses, I applied psychological and social science research and theory to historical data. The usual starting points for extreme violence by groups are difficult conditions of life in a society (economic deterioration, political confusion and

chaos, and very great social changes), or group conflict (Fein, 1993) that becomes intractable, and often their combination. These frustrate material needs, but even more universal psychological needs for security, positive identity, feelings of effectiveness, connections to other people, some degree of autonomy, and a comprehension of reality (Staub, 1989, 2003, 2011).

Especially when there are also certain cultural characteristics present (including a history of devaluation of a group in the society or mutual devaluation, strong “authority orientation,” past victimization of the group and unhealed psychological wounds), people tend to attempt to satisfy frustrated psychological needs in ways that can lead to violence. They shift from an individual identity to identity as a member of some group. Together they scapegoat another group. They create an ideology, a vision of a better future for the group, such as nationalism or racial purity. In chaotic times, the ideology provides a new, and hopeful, understanding of the world, but it is often destructive in that it identifies enemies that stand in the way of its fulfillment. Being part of a group and ideological movement increase security, affirm identity, connection, and world view, and make people feel more effective (Staub, 1989, 2003, 2011).

Extreme violence is the outcome of a psychological, social, and behavioral evolution. People learn by doing. As they turn against and begin to harm others, they change as individuals, the norms of the group change, new institutions are created that serve violence. There is also transformation in morality. First, there may be disengagement from moral beliefs, as Bandura (1999) has proposed. But since violence often begins or at least becomes intense after a combination of devaluation, scapegoating, and a destructive ideology, for some people harming these others may be morally right almost from the start. But for many, both direct perpetrators and those in supporting roles, and passive bystanders, there is a progressive *moral transformation*. Harmful actions are increasingly justified by further devaluation and dehumanization of victims and by excluding them from the moral universe, so that moral values become inapplicable to them (Fein, 1993; Opatow, 1990; Staub, 1989). In the end for many participants, there is a reversal of morality so that killing the designated victims becomes morally right (Staub, 1989, 2011). Passivity by internal bystanders, as well as outsiders or external bystanders, allows the unfolding of the evolution of violence. It also changes the passive (and often also complicit) bystanders, who in order to reduce their empathic distress distance themselves from victims.

This discussion suggests that many people *join* leaders, and even *search* for leaders and groups. I have stressed *followership* as an important aspect of the road to genocide (Staub, 1989). It is likely that once people join a group, over time they progressively relinquish an independent agency to leaders and group. Both in self-generated terrorist groups (McCauley, 2004), and in the special troops the Germans sent to kill Jews behind the front lines (Browning, 1992), the influence of the group on members was very substantial. The same is likely to be true of

people who are part of larger social movements. But even as they increasingly become followers as part of an ideological and increasingly violent movement, people may *feel* more agentic, more powerful, and more able to exercise control over events.

As a result of varying combinations of initial inclinations (e.g., frustrated psychological needs, devaluation of another group, psychological woundedness, and seeing the world as a dangerous place), followership, group membership, and learning by doing, individuals can develop intense commitment to their cause, comrades, and leaders. It is unlikely that Eichmann was just a bureaucrat at the start, as Arendt (1963) claimed, since people in significant perpetrators roles were usually chosen for their already demonstrated inclinations and ideology (see Haritos-Fatouros, 2003; Lifton, 1986; Staub, 1989). But even if he had been, he would have changed as a result of his role, actions, and participation in the system.

The above analysis, pointing to the multiplicity of influences leading to extreme violence by groups, suggests that Milgram overemphasized the role of obedience in the Holocaust. However, one of the cultural characteristics that in my analysis has an important contributory role, a strong *authority orientation*, is relevant to Milgram's work. This is an especially strong respect for authority that is part of the culture, and is maintained by child rearing (Staub, 2005, 2011) and hierarchical social institutions (Straus, 2006). In authority-oriented cultures, people rely on authorities for guidance; in difficult times, they are likely to look for (new) authorities to follow. They are also likely to be "obedient," to follow authorities without evaluating the rightness of what they propagate, and perhaps even if they consider it wrong. Speaking out against authorities is less likely, and bystanders will tend to remain passive in the course of the evolution of increasing hostility and violence. Thus, the behavior Milgram found in participants who continued to administer shocks would be more likely in such societies.

Many writers have described what I call authority orientation as a powerful characteristic of pre-Nazi German culture (Staub, 1989)—and of other genocidal societies. In Rwanda, there is someone appointed as a leader of every eight to nine families in villages, with a long line of hierarchy above this person (Staub, 2011; Straus, 2006). One of my experiences there strikingly demonstrated behavior that seemed due to overly strong respect for authority. I interviewed perpetrators of the genocide in a prison. One of them was introduced as someone who has confessed, but he told us that he did not engage in killing, he was only present when people were killed, which was inevitable because if he had tried to leave he would have been killed. Afterward, over tea, I asked my interpreter whether he believed this prisoner. He said yes. I gently told him that I did not and gave some reasons for my view. In the ensuing conversation, my interpreter talked as if he had never believed this person, presumably because as a professor and with connections to authorities there, he saw me as an authority figure. Authority orientation that is part of the culture is absorbed by individuals. It becomes a personal disposition.

But it is also a situational influence in that people believe that they are expected by their culture and members of their group to follow the dictates of authority—as many participants did in Milgram’s experiments.

Are there among the multiplicity of influences I have identified some that make mass violence especially likely? In response to difficult life conditions, group conflict, culture, and their psychological and social effects, *people joining with and then following destructive leaders and ideologies, and submerging themselves in groups even as they become increasingly destructive, and others remaining passive or complicit bystanders, seem crucial.*

Understanding Influences and Psychological Processes in the Laboratory and the Real World

Among the many explanations offered for Milgram’s findings (see Miller, Haslam, & Reicher, 2014), Haslam and Reicher (2012, 2014), and Reicher, Haslam and Smith (2012) have proposed that rather than an agentic state or obedience, the Milgram paradigm is actually an example of the dynamics of leadership and followership. This is similar to my analyses of genocide and mass killings (Staub, 1989, 1999, 2011), as discussed above, where I stressed the importance of followers and followership (and their role in creating and enabling leaders) (Staub, 1999, 2011).

Haslam and Reicher (2014) proposed that in the Milgram experiments “. . . participants go along with the Experimenter’s requests because—and to the extent that—they identify with, and believe in, the scientific enterprise to which they are contributing. Rather than simply “follow orders,” on this basis, participants orient themselves to the general task that the Experimenter outlines, with a view to “doing what is necessary” to achieve an important shared goal: tackling scientific ignorance “about the effect of punishment on learning . . .” However, while we share the concept of followership, in the Milgram situation there seems to be insufficient opportunity to develop followership.

One source of suggested support for this analysis is a study by Reicher et al. (2012) in which they had naïve and expert participants (such as professors of psychology) estimate the extent to which each of the different procedures in the Milgram studies would induce identification with the Experimenter and the scientific community he represents, versus identification with the learner and the broader community he represents. They found strong positive correlations between the former and the willingness to administer the highest level of shocks, and strong negative correlation between the latter and the willingness to administer the strongest shocks. However, the raters in this study were given the specific language of identification with one or the other party. It was the only language available to them in making their ratings, based on brief descriptions of each of Milgram’s experimental situation. The ratings are likely to express the power of

the influence of the experimenter and everything in the experimental situation, on the one hand, versus any and all aspects of concern about and reactions to the situation of the learner.

Identification and followership require some process of evolution and commitment. Instead, there were a variety of elements in this situation that directly gave it power. They include the structure of the situation—the different roles, in particular the role of “teacher” which people were likely to feel an obligation to fulfill; the influence of the experimenter/scientist/presumed authority; the scientific rationale; the shock apparatus; the direct pressure by of the “scientist” who set up the situation, defined its meaning and the appropriate action. It is difficult for people to resist a direct request or demand. It is likely, especially given the protests many participants made along the way (Gibson, 2014; Milgram, 1974), that even if at the beginning they adopted the task and role as their own, many of them were ready to abandon both. But even though they attempted to resist in response to the loud distress of the learner, many continued to *comply* for various length of time with demands and orders, such as “It is absolutely essential that you continue (Prod 3).” In the end, those who still were complying, resisted a final demand, usually made when the learner again loudly protested (Prod 4) “You have no other choice, you *must* go on,” probably both because it was made at a time when they were very intent to disengage, and its *style* or manner was rather absurd and resistance-generating.

Norms of Conventional Behavior

A likely contributor to participants’ actions was that most of us learn and strongly hold such norms; that you don’t break an agreement, or fail to fulfill a role assigned to you that you have accepted, or go contrary to the direct request of another person, especially a person in charge of the situation you are in. We don’t learn well enough, and therefore are slow to make the judgment, that under certain circumstances, moral rules supersede such conventional norms/rules. This was strongly shown in two of my early studies of emergency helping with children.

In the first study, children either alone or in pairs worked on drawings, when they heard a crash and sounds of distress from an adjoining room (Staub, 1970). Helping increased from kindergarten to first grade, from first to second grade, remained at about the same level in fourth grade, and sharply decreased in sixth grade, to about the level of helping by kindergarteners. As this pattern began to emerge, we started to interview the older children about their experience. Many of them told us that they did not go into the other room because someone (the person in charge, who was not in the room) might have gotten mad at them. They believed that they were not supposed to stop working on their task, or to go into a strange room.

To assess whether this situation functions as a prohibition for children, we conducted another study, with seventh-grade girls (Staub, 1971). Each child was working alone on a drawing task. In a *no information* condition, they were simply left in the room. In a *prohibition* condition, they were told not to go into the adjoining room because someone else is working there. In a *permission* condition, they were told that if they needed more drawing pencils, they could go into the adjoining room to get some from the windowsill there. As they were working on their task, each child heard a crash and sounds of distress from the adjoining room. In the no information and prohibition conditions, exactly the same percentage of children attempted to help, less than 30%. In the permission condition, almost 90% of the children did so. One girl before she rushed into the other room broke the edge of her drawing pencils, in an obvious need to have the right justification for doing so. The learning of conventional rules is likely to continue in the course of development. In these studies, they inhibited helping. In Milgram's studies, they were likely to inhibit resistance to the demands of the situation and the experimenter.

There are a variety of psychological processes that are likely to result from the influences present in the Milgram situation; the desire to fulfill a role, commitment to science, the experimenter and experimenter, and acting according to rules and norms of appropriate or conventional behavior. Some people may also be motivated by reciprocity, giving appropriate service for one's pay, and even if ready to return that pay, not wasting the time the experimenter invested in them.

Learning by Doing

This was also likely to have an important role, the changes in teachers that resulted from administering weaker shocks. Learning by doing is strongly evident in the evolution of group violence, and there is experimental evidence for it in both doing harm and helping others (Staub, 1989, 2011). For example, in one of Buss' (1966) studies with a teacher– learner paradigm, when teachers could themselves decide about the shock levels, they progressively increased levels over trials. As they harm others, people justify their actions, devalue the people they harm, and engage in just-world thinking. Milgram (1967, p. 7) noted that this happened in his studies, with comments by teachers such as “He was stupid and stubborn and deserved to be shocked” common. On the positive side, children who were led to engage in helping were later more helpful (Staub, 1979). Some rescuers who intended to help one person for a limited time, after doing so continued to help extensively (Staub, 1989, 1997, in press).

The behavior of German reserve police involved in killing Jews in the East (Browning, 1992) was also likely shaped by influences such as role, cause, loyalty to comrades—and not wanting to be seen as weak. But learning by doing also likely had a role. The German people underwent significant evolution under the

Nazis (Staub, 1989). The reserve police underwent further evolution before they were ordered to kill Jews, as they organized pogroms and created local militias (Rhodes, 2002). In addition, people who join the police are likely to have personal characteristics that make violence easier.

The situation of the learner, and the learner's distress, were likely to evoke what may be called *moral concern*. This includes empathy, the feeling of responsibility for others' welfare, living up to moral values and one's image of oneself as a moral person, the possibility of being made responsible for harm, and fear of moral failure and the shame and guilt inherent in that. It is unlikely that a single psychological process led to either continued compliance/cooperation, or refusal to cooperate. Varied processes can arise from the interaction of situation and personality.

The influence of circumstances and the resulting psychological processes in real-world situations are even more complex. There the situation has more layers: the overall conditions of life in society, the influence of leaders and group, and the properties of the immediate situation. When a person is part of a group, physically or in terms of identification, what this person believes are the group's values and beliefs, and the desire to maintain membership and esteem in the group exert powerful influence. But in my view, a social identity perspective with regard to relationship to a group is incomplete. It is also feelings of security, effectiveness, connection to other people and the group as a whole, and the understanding of reality that one gains from the ideology/world view of the group that tie people to groups and move them along with it as it becomes more extreme and violent (Staub, 2011, 2013). In some analyses, social identity theory is expanded in these directions (Haslam & Reicher, 2007) Thus, understanding the ways and extents that groups fulfill psychological needs can help us understand their power.

Personality in the Milgram Situation and in Genocide/Mass Violence

In most variants of the Milgram procedure, a substantial portion of participants did not continue to the maximum level in administering shocks. The role of personality was studied only to a limited degree, but two studies have shown that it matters. In one study, authoritarian personality, as measured by scores on the *F*-scale, was associated with continuing to administer shocks (Elms & Milgram, 1966). Elms and Milgram also found that "obedient" participants tended to glorify the experimenter and downgrade the learner. In another study, participants with more advanced moral reasoning, or according to a reanalysis with a "responsibility" focus in their moral reasoning, stopped administering shocks earlier (Kohlberg & Candee, 1984).

Other aspects of personality might be even more powerful in reducing cooperation in the Milgram situation, for example, a *prosocial value orientation* consisting of a positive view of human beings, concern about others' welfare,

and a feeling of responsibility for others' welfare. This was associated with helping people in both physical and psychological distress (Feinberg, 1978; Staub, 1974, 1978, 1980). It was positively associated with constructive—in contrast to blind—patriotism, which involves speaking out and taking action when one's country deviates from humane values (Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999), and with less aggression in boys (Spielman & Staub, 2000). This characteristic combined with belief in one's capacity to influence others' welfare was especially strongly associated with self-reported helping of many kinds (Staub, 2003, Chapter 9).

Both what happens in genocide, and in the Milgram situation, are best seen from a system's perspective, as the outcome of the joining of situational elements, their psychological effects, and an evolution. But people vary in how they respond to circumstances, or whether they enter violence producing systems (Staub, 2011, 2013). I proposed that people who *volunteered* to participate in the Stanford Prison Study were likely to have relevant characteristics (Staub, 1989). Carnahan and McFarland (2007) studied people who responded to newspaper ads for participants either in a *psychological study of prison life*, or a *psychological study*. The former scored higher than the latter on measures of hostility and Machiavellian orientation and lower on empathy. Steiner (1980) found that former SS members grew up in authoritarian families and developed authoritarian personalities. Such people tend to willingly submit themselves to authorities, while enjoy exercising authority over others. He proposed the concept of the "sleeper," a person who shows a radical shift under violence-inducing conditions.

According to personal goal theory (Staub, 1978, 1980, 2011), people have values/goals that can be arranged in a hierarchy according to their importance. But these hierarchies are not static. Situations have activating potential for particular values/goals, which may become dominant over other, normally more important ones. Research showing less response to someone in psychological distress by people who have both prosocial and achievement goals when achievement goals are also activated (Feinberg, 1978; Staub, 1978, 1980), research on morality shifting (Leidner & Castano, 2012), and the behavior of government officials in real life situations (Staub, 2011) all support this view. In the Milgram experiments, while initially the situation and then learning by doing overwhelmed moral concerns, the powerful activating potential of the learner's distress increased or reinstated their dominance in some people.

Individuals with *relevant* personal dispositions are likely to be more resistant to doing harm. It is perhaps for this reason that members of the general public doubt situational explanations of violent, evil behavior, and prefer dispositional, or at least interactionist accounts (Newman & Bakina, 2009). However, the interactionist tradition in psychology has in recent times been subverted by primarily situational explanations. We need to study more what are the limits of the power both of the situation, and of personality. However, the findings of Milgram's pilot study (Reicher et al., 2014) in which teachers, who heard no reactions from the

learner to the administration of shocks, all continued to the end, suggest that to activate moral concerns requires more than abstract knowledge that one might be doing harm. With regard to group violence, information provided by the media and freedom of communication—absent in highly authoritarian societies—-are of great importance in creating the potential for resistance.

Implications for Social Issues: Socialization and Education

Socialization can develop caring about others. Warmth and affection, combined with guidance that stresses the value of other people's welfare and one's responsibility for it, are central in developing caring. Pointing out to the children the consequences of their behavior for others contributes to both empathy and responsibility (Eisenberg et al., in press). Guiding children to engage in helpful behavior can both develop feelings of responsibility and lead to learning by doing. If such helpful behavior is also directed toward members of other groups, even others devalued in the society, this will contribute to inclusive caring. Children participating in developing rules for the classroom and home can help them gain confidence in their voice and the value of their opinions. So can adults encouraging them to act on their values. Both contribute to moral courage, which is essential in resisting, or becoming active bystanders in response to harm-doing (Staub, 2005, in press). Such socialization requires that adults develop the motivation and capacity for it.

Educational experiences can activate relevant values and develop capacities (Staub, 2003, in press). They can also create resistance to doing harm. In Rwanda, my associates and I have conducted trainings, and developed educational radio programs about the influences that lead to violence and avenues to prevention and reconciliation. Such education can enable people to use their "critical consciousness," their own judgment, in evaluating the meaning of circumstances and to foresee their consequences. Evaluation studies (Staub et al., 2005; Paluck, 2009; Staub & Pearlman, 2009; Staub, 2011) showed positive effects, which included less trauma, greater empathy, and people saying what they believe and acting independently of authorities.

The Role of Bystanders

The influence of bystanders in the Milgram studies, and beyond, suggests that not only authorities, but any person who assumes authority by defining in words the meaning of a situation and appropriate action, or leads through example, can exert influence. In one variation, there were three teachers, two of whom were confederates of the person in charge (Milgram, 1974). In response to protests by the learner first one of them, and soon after the other, refused to continue. Although the experimenter insisted that the remaining real participant takes over their tasks, only 10% continued to administer shocks till the end. Perhaps, these "teachers"

influence was enhanced because they were participants themselves who refused to go along. In another variation, with two experimenters, in response to the first intense protests of the learner, one of them ordered to stop the procedure. All except one participant stopped, even though the other experimenter insisted that they continue.

One of my emergency helping studies provides further evidence of the power of bystanders. Two people were working on a task, one of them a confederate, when they heard a crash and sounds of distress from an adjoining room (Staub, 1974). In different conditions, when the confederate said different things about the meaning of the sounds and what action to take, helping by the real subject ranged from 25% to 100%. In real-world situations as well, sometimes even single individuals, at other times, groups and nations have exerted substantial and effective influence (Staub, 2011, in press; Thalhammer et al., 2007).

Conclusions

In summary, it is a multiplicity of influences that lead to extreme violence by groups. In a sense, Milgram was optimistic; people don't just obey, they join and participate in the creation of destructive movements. This helps them fulfill psychological needs frustrated by life conditions or group conflict. The prevention of violence between groups also includes many elements, such as overcoming devaluation, decreasing the authority orientation in a culture/society, and creating constructive ideologies (Staub, 2011, 2013), positive visions that can benefit all people. This article shows the limitations of Stanley Milgram's powerful experiments in helping us understand mass violence, and suggests the potential of socialization and education to develop personal dispositions that lead to active bystandership that can prevent violence and promote positive social relations.

Socialization and experience can generate caring and moral concern, and motivate people to shape situations around them, and in the larger world. They can develop values, and the capacity to use one's own judgment, one's critical consciousness, so that people can resist the harmful influence of difficult social conditions and people in authority. To be effective, active bystanders, people need to also develop skills for action and for attracting allies for joint action.

A final world is warranted on Hannah Arendt's famous phrase "the banality of evil"—a term embraced by Milgram on the bases of his observations of the behavior of participants in his studies. It is true that evil is not something extraordinary. It is the result of normal psychological and social processes that under certain circumstances lead to *extraordinary consequences*. This makes evil normal, if tragic, but neither banal nor ordinary. Our work as psychologists can help identify the processes that lead to extreme human destructiveness, and both identify and attempt to foster the countervailing processes required to prevent evil (Staub, 2011, 2013, in press).

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