

EXPERT INTERVIEW – DAVID MANDEL

Obedience and the Holocaust: Explanation or Alibi?



What aspects of Milgram’s research have been used to explain events in the Holocaust?

A: In Milgram’s best-known “voice feedback” experiment, 62.5% of participants obeyed the experimenter’s request to administer shocks to the “learner” even at dangerously high voltage levels that apparently caused the learner harm. This key finding has been used as evidence in support of the idea that Holocaust perpetrators, like Milgram’s participants, were ordinary citizens who succumbed to the influence of malign authority figures. According to this explanation, Holocaust perpetrators were motivated primarily by a need to fulfill their duties to their superiors. In short, they were “just following orders”.

Are these conclusions justified?

A: No, they are unjustified for several reasons. First, there is the obvious difference that whereas Milgram’s participants were told that the shock procedure was not harmful, Holocaust perpetrators knew that they were killing unarmed civilians. Second, when Milgram’s participants were subtly made aware of limits that the learner put on his consent to participate, obedience rates declined substantially. Holocaust victims obviously did not consent to be tortured and murdered, and any reasonable extrapolation suggests that very few of Milgram’s participants would have tortured victims against their will. Third, when participants had discretion over the shock levels they administered, the vast majority were unwilling to give shocks that (apparently) caused the learner pain. In contrast, historical records reveal that Holocaust perpetrators were willing—sometimes eager—to torture and humiliate their victims before killing them. This finding alone suggests that perpetrators’ motives to kill went far beyond “just following orders.”

What potential harm is there in trying to use Milgram’s research in this way?

A: Although Milgram’s findings are an important contribution to social psychology, their relevance to explaining the Holocaust has been greatly overstated. One danger is that an exclusive focus on obedience to authority detracts attention from other important factors including racism, prejudice, and discrimination. Another danger is that the obedience explanation can be easily misused as an alibi to exonerate perpetrators of the Holocaust or other genocides.

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