‘They were just following orders’: Relationships between Milgram’s obedience experiments and conceptions of Holocaust perpetration

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Introduction

In 1963, Stanley Milgram published his first experiment on obedience, using a procedure where participants believed they were administering harmful electric shocks to another participant under the orders of an authority figure. In formulating this research, Milgram made explicit links to the Holocaust from the outset:

Obedience, as a determinant of behavior, is of particular relevance to our time. It has been reliably established that from 1933–45 millions of innocent persons were systematically slaughtered on command. Gas chambers were built, death camps were guarded, daily quotas of corpses were produced with the same efficiency as the manufacture of appliances. These inhumane policies may have originated in the mind of a single person, but they could only be carried out on a massive scale if a very large number of persons obeyed orders.

(Milgram 1963, 371)

Milgram’s research is amongst the most famous and significant ever conducted in social psychology. While the distinctive methodology and
unsettling results have undoubtedly contributed to this reputation, the research had particular purchase on people’s consciousness because it ran concurrently with Adolf Eichmann’s trial (Benjamin and Simpson 2009, 14–15; Jetten and Mols 2014, 587). Indeed, in later publications about the obedience experiments, Milgram did identify links with Eichmann’s trial and in particular to Hannah Arendt’s analysis. In Milgram (1967, 4), he stated ‘after witnessing hundreds of ordinary persons submit to the authority in our own experiments, I must conclude that Arendt’s conception of the banality of evil comes closer to the truth than one might dare to imagine’. Over the last 50 years, the experiments have been a staple of psychology courses and have permeated popular culture (Perry 2013, 7), meaning millions of people worldwide have encountered this work and the posited link to the Holocaust.

However, the experiments have triggered accusations of unethical treatment of participants and raised numerous methodological concerns. These and other aspersions have led to debate about the validity of the research for explaining the actions of perpetrators during the Holocaust. Yet evidence suggests that students are unlikely to be exposed to a detailed critique of the experiments (Griggs and Whitehead 2015, 317–18). Additionally, while social psychology textbooks often present information about the Holocaust to give some context to the research, the historical detail is usually at a cursory level (Miller 2004, 228).

This is problematic because presenting students with superficial information about the Holocaust could engender or reinforce ubiquitous misconceptions about the reasons for perpetrators’ actions during the Holocaust. For example, a common misconception about the Holocaust is that soldiers had to obey orders to kill Jewish people; otherwise they would have been shot themselves (Foster et al. 2016, 163). However, no evidence has been found to indicate that refusing to obey an order to kill unarmed civilians resulted in members of the police or military (or their families) being killed (Browning 1992, 170). Hayes (2017, 141) noted that where soldiers experienced any compunction about killing, rather than being viewed negatively, this was seen as an opportunity for them to engage in self-pity and retaliate at the group responsible for their discomfort. Historical evidence demonstrates that Nazi campaigns to cultivate widespread antisemitism, convey the Jewish threat, and dehumanise the Jews were successful in creating a climate where ‘ordinary Germans could and did become willing executors of Nazi persecution and even in many cases willing executioners’ (Hayes 2017, 142).

The historical record is testament to the caution needed when linking Milgram’s research with the Holocaust. Psychological literature
highlighting issues with the experiments and the nuance required in interpreting the results also raises questions about the efficacy of ‘obedience to authority’ as an adequate explanation for the actions of Holocaust perpetrators. This chapter will examine the relationship between knowledge of Milgram’s studies and interpretations of the Holocaust among psychology A-level students in England. Given the prominence of Milgram in psychology curricula, both in England and worldwide, exploring this relationship is something which warrants close investigation.

**Milgram’s obedience experiments**

Milgram ran 24 experimental conditions manipulating variables such as the proximity of the participants to one another (see Perry 2013, 351–7). However, psychology A-level students tend to be most familiar with his first published condition (see Milgram 1963), also referred to as the ‘baseline experiment’ (Jetten and Mols 2014, 589) because it is often the condition cited in exam specifications and outlined in textbooks.

The baseline experiment was framed as being about the effects of punishment on memory. Naïve participants were assigned the role of ‘teacher’ and had to administer electric shocks to another participant (‘the learner’) every time they gave an inaccurate answer on a learning task. The learner was actually an associate of the experimenter. The shock generator was clearly marked with voltage levels in increments of 15 volts ranging from 15 to 450 volts and supplemented with labels such as ‘strong shock’ at 135–180 volts, ‘extreme intensity shock’ at 315–360 volts and ominously ‘XXX’ at 435–450 volts. Unbeknownst to the naïve participant, the shocks were actually fake.

Throughout the experiment, the learner was in a different room to the participant. At 300 volts the learner pounded on the wall and stopped giving answers; this happened again at 315 volts, and then afterwards there was no further sound. The participant had to continue asking the questions and the learner’s silence was taken as an incorrect answer which required a shock as punishment. If the participant indicated they wanted to stop while working through the voltage levels, the experimenter prompted them to continue using four prods: ‘please continue’, ‘the experiment requires that you continue’, ‘it is absolutely essential that you continue’, and ‘you have no other choice you must continue’. The point of disobedience was indicated when the participant absolutely refused to continue with the experiment.
Forty men took part in the baseline experiment, with none of them stopping prior to administering 300 volts. Five of the men refused to obey beyond 300 volts. The rest continued, with nine of them administering shocks between 315 and 375 volts, and 26 of them (65 per cent) going to the maximum voltage of 450 volts.

To account for participants’ obedience to authority, Milgram (1974, 133) argued for the role of the agentic state. This occurs in situations where a person no longer sees themselves as responsible for their actions, and instead views themselves as the instrument for carrying out another person’s requests. Milgram did not see this as a thin alibi for an individual’s actions, but instead as a fundamental change in their thinking (Milgram 1967, 6). The findings of his research have been used as evidence of obedience to authority from ordinary and unwilling people, and as such have been argued to provide an explanation for the actions of Nazis during the Holocaust (Mastroianni 2002, 159).

This raises key considerations about the extent to which psychology students subscribe to this interpretation of Milgram’s findings and fit it with their existing knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. In England, most students will learn about the Holocaust by the age of 14 years as part of the Key Stage 3 National Curriculum for history. Therefore, A-level psychology students will usually have learned about the Holocaust when in lower school (although, since there is no stipulation for the topics taught or the number of lessons required, students’ experiences of learning about the Holocaust will vary).

A national study conducted by Foster et al. (2016, 152–63) found that secondary school students held a number of embedded misconceptions about the Holocaust. This included notions about the perpetrators being ‘quite normal’ people who followed the orders of authority figures due to fear and intimidation. Evidence suggests knowledge acquisition is never a passive process and students will seek to make personal sense of new information they encounter, and this will draw on existing frames of reference (Foster et al. 2016, 38–9). Thus, it is possible that if psychology students hold similar pre-existing notions about the nature of perpetrators, this will limit their ability to reflect on and problematise the different interpretations of Milgram’s studies.

At a most basic level, there are numerous obvious differences between Milgram’s experiments and the events of the Holocaust (see Fenigstein 2015), and it is likely the majority of psychology students could easily identify them. A laboratory experiment where variables were manipulated and controlled, which took place at a prestigious university, and involved participants who were engaged in the experiment for a short
amount of time, is incomparable with the complex and tragic realities of the Holocaust. Indeed, Milgram acknowledged the differences between his participants and Nazi perpetrators, but dismissed these ‘surface’ differences, drawing attention instead to the similarities he perceived in the core psychological processes operating in both situations (Fenigstein 2015, 586). However, academics (for example, Fenigstein 2015; Haslam et al. 2015; Jetten and Mols 2014; Perry 2013) have cautioned against this argument, because the fundamentals of his experiments (including all the variations), raise problems in using obedience as an explanation for the Holocaust.

Concerns about Milgram’s conclusions and the ethical issues his research raised were identified at the outset. Baumrind (1964, 422–3) was especially critical, pointing out there were no parallels between Milgram’s research and the Holocaust, and the experiment was so far removed from real-life experience that the deception and distress participants were exposed to could not be justified. Recent analysis of the data held in the Milgram archives at Yale University has revealed further concerns. This includes participants who, after refusing to obey the fourth prod (when the experiment should have been terminated), were subjected to repeated commands to continue. For several participants the number of prods went into double figures and in the only condition to use female participants, one woman was ordered to continue 26 times. For these participants it probably appeared the only way to exit the experiment was to administer all the shocks (Perry 2013, 134). Not only is this scenario highly unethical, but arguably points to a study which provides insight into processes related to harassment rather than obedience.

Partial replication of Milgram’s studies using more ethical procedures (see Burger 2009, 5–8) have provided evidence to suggest that while the first three prods in Milgram’s studies do trigger participants to continue to varying degrees, the fourth prod actually triggers disobedience (Burger et al. 2011, 464). This has contributed to some researchers (e.g. Burger et al. 2011, 464; Haslam et al. 2015, 62) questioning the obedience explanation because it is only the fourth prod that gives a concrete command (‘you have no other choice, you must go on’). Consequently, it could be argued that participants continued to 450 volts for reasons other than blindly obeying authority. Haslam et al. (2015, 60) assert that participants’ behaviour can be better understood by engaged follower-ship. That is, the participants knew the consequences of their actions and administered the shocks because they identified with the scientific goals of the experiment and believed they were contributing to a moral, worthy and progressive cause.
Milgram ran 24 experimental conditions from 1961 to 1962, with obedience levels (going to 450 volts) varying from 2 per cent to 100 per cent (Perry 2013, 351–7). For example, in the touch condition, after 150 volts, the experimenter instructed the teacher (the naïve participant) to hold the learner’s hand on a metal plate to receive the shocks. In this condition, 30 per cent of participants went to 450 volts. In the group pressure to disobey condition, there were three teachers (two were associates of the experimenter and one was a real participant). By 210 volts both associates refused to continue with the experiment, leaving the participant to continue to administer shocks while the associates watched. In this condition, 10 per cent of participants went to 450 volts.

For many academics, the experimental variations provide evidence that the majority of participants actually disobeyed the authority figure. As Jetten and Mols (2014, 588) suggest, by becoming cognisant with the variations and how participants reacted, Milgram’s findings present a far more complex picture of how people respond to authority figures. Indeed, the simplistic blind obedience explanation that his baseline study has typically been reduced to becomes very problematic, and consequently the argument for its relevance to the Holocaust becomes similarly contentious. This view is further reinforced because participants administered the shocks under extreme stress, assisted the learner by emphasising the correct answer, gave lower shocks when they were able to, and repeatedly tried to exit the situation (Jetten and Mols 2014, 591–2). However, Nazi perpetrators largely expressed no such reluctance to harm or kill, and where they did abstain it was because of physical disgust rather than moral opposition (Fenigstein 2015, 591).

The brevity of the above summary evidently does not outline the full catalogue of concerns that have emerged in relation to Milgram’s research. However, it does point towards the difficulty of using Milgram’s findings as evidence of people’s willingness to obey authority, and in turn the complexity of drawing on the research to explain the actions of perpetrators during the Holocaust. Of course, it would be remiss to completely disregard Milgram’s experiments, and some psychologists and historians have argued that his research does provide insight into the processes behind the actions of perpetrators. For instance, Browning (1992, 175–6) cites Milgram’s experimental variation where participants were more likely to administer higher shocks when in the presence of other participants (actually associates of the experimenter) who proposed an escalation of shocks, demonstrating the role of conformity. Also, congruent with Milgram’s findings, Browning noted that when the officers were in close proximity to the victims they were less likely to obey
orders. Whereas, when the killing process was divided between the men and transferred to the death camps, orders were more willingly carried out because the men felt less responsible for their actions.

Milgram’s studies have also been used to inform historical thinking about the role of orders which gradually increased in brutality and perpetrators’ preoccupation with diligently focusing on procedures to perform their assigned tasks (Overy 2014, 521–4). Additionally, recent scholarship has argued the design and refinement of Milgram’s experiments to create conditions for optimum obedience resonate with the ‘trial and error’ approach utilised by Nazi officers to make the procedures for the mass shooting of Jewish people more efficient and palatable for the Einsatzgruppen (Russell 2017, 282–7).

Exploring students’ understandings of Milgram and the Holocaust

Clearly, there are important considerations for what is taught about Milgram’s experiments, the nature and accuracy of information presented about the Holocaust, and the extent to which students are able to scrutinise the link between Milgram’s research and the Holocaust. These issues were explored by conducting focus groups with psychology A-level students in England. While this data was collected from students participating in a specific course and within a particular national context, the findings are relevant to introductory psychology courses across the world.

Forty-eight schools were notified about the focus groups, and five agreed to participate. One school was based in the East of England, one in the South East, one in London, one in the West Midlands and one in Yorkshire and Humber. Although the schools were diverse in terms of their location, academic performance and composition of different ethnic groups, sampling was not done systematically because schools and students were volunteers, thus introducing bias to the sample.

In total, 9 focus groups were conducted with 47 students. All students had learned about Milgram’s obedience research as part of their A-level psychology course. Eight students were in year 12 and the remainder were in year 13. There was an almost even split of boys and girls (23 and 24 respectively) and students were aged 16 to 18 years.

Students were given a consent form and information sheet which explained the research, including how their data would be used and stored. Students could withdraw from the research at any time. Parental
consent was not required because students were aged over 16 years (although opt-in parental consent was used in one school where this was requested). Focus groups comprising four to eight students, and within each group students attended the same school. A small number of questions were used to guide the discussion, but the conversation was mainly led by the students. The discussions took place at the schools and each lasted for approximately 30 minutes. All discussions were audio recorded (with each student’s permission).

To start the discussion, students were asked to summarise what they could remember about Milgram’s research and the Holocaust. All students were able to cite key pieces of information from Milgram’s 1963 baseline experiment. The following points were also frequently made: the research was ‘only’ a laboratory experiment and not ‘real life’ like the Holocaust; only 40 participants took part; the study occurred at a prestigious university so participants would have been sceptical about the reality of being asked to harm the learner; and the participants were not really killing people. Just one student knew the fourth prod was the only concrete command and the least effective in triggering obedience. Some of the students also mentioned there were experimental variations, but did not provide much detail about what these involved.

In terms of their knowledge of the Holocaust, students tended to give the same pattern of responses found in research by Foster et al. (2016, 41–4) when students were asked to describe in one or two sentences what the Holocaust was. That is to say, foremost in the psychology students’ responses were the victims, the perpetrator(s) and an action. For example:

Six million Jewish people were murdered by Hitler basically. (Zaid, Focus Group 2)

The Germans took over and took all the Jews to concentration camps and they had like gas chambers and things like that. (Hassan, Focus Group 7)

The psychology students always identified Jewish people as the principal victims and Hitler as the key perpetrator, with some references made to the Nazis and/or individuals like Himmler. Reference was also made (though to a lesser extent) to the Second World War, other victim groups, Germany, genocide, the Aryan race, ghettos, Auschwitz and Anne Frank. The aim of this research was not to examine in detail what the psychology students knew and understood about the Holocaust. Instead, this element of the focus group sought to establish that the students were
familiar with the word ‘Holocaust’ and the history it describes. Moreover, students were only asked to briefly summarise what they knew about the Holocaust and it is probable that with greater opportunity to elaborate, other historical details would have emerged. Despite this, it is still noteworthy that the form of their descriptions shared similarities with the descriptions provided by students in the research by Foster et al. (2016, 44).

After briefly finding out what students knew about the Holocaust and Milgram’s research (as two separate entities), the focus of the discussion was the relationship between the two entities. The salient themes from these discussions are presented in the next section. The researcher asked the students if they were aware of Milgram linking his study with the Holocaust. They were all aware of this. The researcher then read the excerpt from Milgram (1963, 371) presented at the start of this chapter (excluding the sentence ‘These inhumane policies may have originated in the mind of a single person, but they could only be carried out on a massive scale if a very large number of persons obeyed orders’, so not to influence students’ opinions about who they thought might be ultimately responsible given Milgram’s reference to a ‘single person’).

After hearing this excerpt, the students discussed whether or not they thought Milgram’s studies were related to the Holocaust. Where appropriate students were asked to elaborate on their comments. The students were also invited to refer to any other relevant theories or studies. They were asked what they thought would have happened to the military or police if they refused an order to kill a Jewish person. Once they had discussed their answers, the researcher told them that on 13 July 1942, in Józefów, Poland, the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 received orders to kill all the Jews in the village. Their commander, Major Wilhelm Trapp, made an offer that if any of the older men did not feel up to this task they could step out and await another duty. A small minority did this; the rest of the men carried out their orders (Browning 1992, 57). This example was selected because it features in some textbooks to encourage reflection on Milgram’s conclusions, although none of the students in this research had previously heard about this incident. The researcher then asked students to discuss what they thought about the actions of this Battalion in relation to Milgram’s research. Finally, students were invited to make any additional comments about Milgram’s research and/or the Holocaust that they felt were relevant.

The discussions were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Drawing on guidance from Braun and Clarke (2006), the transcripts were analysed by carefully reading the text and identifying initial codes that reflected the content in each sentence and/or short segment. Codes
included ‘surface limitation of Milgram’s research’, ‘perpetrators were shot’, ‘distressed participants’, ‘antisemitism’, ‘perpetrators as ordinary people’, ‘role of situation’, and ‘Hitler-centricity’. The codes were then reviewed to explore relationships between them and to identify potential themes across students’ accounts. The themes were refined by reviewing the codes and data extracts they encompassed, and then exploring the validity of the themes across the data set. From this process, three overarching themes were identified: the role of fear, the role of propaganda in Nazi Germany and the nature of the ‘ordinary’ soldier.

**The role of fear**

Across the focus groups there was consensus that the perpetrators participated in the mass murder of Jewish people because they feared that if they did not obey orders they and/or their families would be killed.

*Didn’t they get shot? (Beatrice, Focus Group 4)*

*With the people in the Holocaust if they didn’t carry out what they’d been told to do in the camps, their families would get killed and things like that. (Dominic, Focus Group 1)*

*In the Holocaust, during that time, if you didn’t obey they would kill you. (Esmee, Focus Group 8)*

Students were aware that Milgram’s participants exhibited distress during the experiment and showed resistance to inflicting harm on the learner. Tellingly, they saw this as indicative of the responses of perpetrators during the Holocaust, arguing that perpetrators did not want to kill Jewish people, but did so under duress and fear of the consequences if they disobeyed.

*Not many people wanted to kill innocent people but because they were told to do something especially by someone in higher command like Hitler then they had no choice. But the same thing as in Milgram. . . . There was many observations to show that the teacher didn’t want to do it, there were even moments when they said that they had seizures . . . but they did it anyway because they were told by someone higher in command, which was the experimenter. So they know it was wrong, they had to do it because it was against their own morals, it was against their own will basically. So,*
it shows a relationship between the Holocaust and the experiment. (Max, Focus Group 5)

As a soldier in a concentration camp watching people die every day and then like if you didn’t carry out what you were meant to do, you’d be the same, so it’s like watching your own future. . . . It wasn’t like anything to do with the fact that they believed in it, it was just they were scared . . . the results [of Milgram’s study] showed that lots of people showed signs of distress but it didn’t mean that they stopped anyway. So, all these soldiers could have like personal turmoil and like in their heads be really against it but do it anyway because they’ve got higher figures above them that will force them to do so. (Hazel, Focus Group 6)

When students were presented with information about Major Trapp’s offer to opt out of killing Jewish people in Józefów, most suggested the men did not take this opportunity because they were conforming to the majority decision of the battalion. The students explained the men would have been concerned about fitting in with the group and worried about what others might think about them if they did not participate in the killing process.

Maybe those soldiers, that’s not them yeah, they’re just . . . ‘I want to fit in with everyone else, I don’t want to be the one who’s against everyone else’, so maybe a sense of belonging could have made some people who are good people kill other people. (Manisha, Focus Group 3)

Like they want to fit in so they’re going to do it anyway, so they are fighting for their lives themselves really. (Beatrice, Focus Group 4)

Most students expressed views alluding to the ‘choice’ to opt out of killing as not actually being a choice, as succinctly expressed by Varsha:

They still felt that they didn’t really have a choice even if they were given a choice. (Varsha, Focus Group 6)

Instead, the students suspected opportunities to withdraw from killing were a ruse; a ruse which the men would have been keenly aware of. Therefore, the students thought the fear of later reprisals contributed
to the majority of the battalion electing to proceed with murdering the Jewish population of Józefów.

It could be the fear of what the other duty is, because they’re not specifying what the other duty is. They might be lying and they might just kill them. (Max, Focus Group 5)

Maybe they could have feared that if they had like not agreed to do it that the other officers could come like later on, like the night after or something and then something bad could have happened. (Saskia, Focus Group 9)

It should be noted that across all focus groups, the students made repeated references to events in Germany and the actions and experiences of German officers, soldiers and people, without any mention of other countries. Thus, despite engaging in discussions about the incident in Józefów (which the researcher informed them was in occupied Poland), the students’ interpretations were positioned within the framework of what they thought happened in Germany and the actions and responses of German perpetrators.

The role of propaganda in Nazi Germany

While the initial response to the actions of Reserve Police Battalion 101 across all focus groups was that conformity and fear could account for what happened, this explanation seemed to sit uncomfortably with some students, triggering reflection about the validity of the obedience to authority explanation.

If they’re told ‘oh you don’t actually have to kill people, you don’t have to do this, that’s fine, you can back out’, and then they didn’t, then obviously they have some sort of attachment to it still, and it’s not about obedience then, it’s about how far they agree with it. (Nessa, Focus Group 6)

It was at this point when a minority of students began to grapple with alternative explanations related to anti-Jewish propaganda and the evolution of Nazi discriminatory policies towards Jewish people.

By 1942, they might just be desensitised to it over years of it . . . I mean Hitler has been giving these rallying speeches about Jewish
people being demons or whatever and causing all the problems for Germany, so they might truly believe that they’re doing the right thing, and might not consider them to be human anymore because they’ve just seen them as these horrible problems that they need to get rid of, and that’s the nationalist and the right way of doing it, solving things. So, I don’t know if it’s conformity still. I think at that point, you’re changing your moral basis. I think it’s a lot deeper than conformity is what I’m trying to say. (Elliot, Focus Group 2)

I think that the result of Nazi propaganda and eugenics and that sort of thing, saying that Jews were responsible for all of the failures and the collapse of Germany, I think that’s all built up that a lot of German people sort of accepted that Jews were wrong or that they should hate Jews, so I think that that, and then there were a load of laws that came in that sort of dehumanised them and took away their citizenship, so it became easier to sort of attack them. So, I think that’s probably quite a big part of it as well. (Dylan, Focus Group 3)

Data was not collected on students’ academic background (such as whether or not they were studying history at A-level), so the factors that informed their history-based explanations remain unclear. However, it should be noted this type of commentary was relatively infrequent in the discussions or, when mentioned, not comprehensively fleshed out. Indeed, there were numerous instances where misconceptions and inadequate knowledge hindered students in their attempts to evaluate the extent to which Milgram’s studies were related to what happened during the Holocaust. For example, Matilda (below) explained the soldiers’ actions with reference to factors sometimes related to authority figures (such as age and status), rather than the role of ideological indoctrination:

[The German soldiers] were young because a lot of them didn’t actually choose to be part of the army, they just got taken because they’d reached a certain age. So they could have felt like, like as younger people with older people in higher up positions and giving the orders, they might have felt like they should obey because of their status in the whole hierarchy of people. (Matilda, Focus Group 9)

Overall a paradox emerged where students could identify there were problems with linking Milgram’s studies to the Holocaust, yet without sound historical knowledge to draw upon, they struggled to articulate
what these problems were. Consequently, they returned to their original position that fear and pressure to obey were important factors in explaining Holocaust perpetration, and any limitations in linking Milgram’s research to this behaviour were thought to arise from the surface differences between the studies and the Holocaust.

I think [Milgram’s study] does help explain the Holocaust to an extent . . . it kind of let us know how they might have been thinking at that point, which can help us understand that ok, maybe they were under pressure, maybe they couldn’t resist pressure at that point, so they just went with it. But it still doesn’t explain, you know like how you said they had a choice to not kill them but they did. So I guess it doesn’t explain that part. (Florence, Focus Group 8)

I don’t think there is a link really. Because, obviously you’ve got issues with the sample sizes and that you can’t really generalise. I think they’re such different things. Like this was a major event in life, like you were possibly fighting for your life and this was sort of a small scale experiment. (Beatrice, Focus Group 4)

**The nature of the ‘ordinary’ soldier**

As part of the students’ accounts of fear and conformity, there was reference to the ‘normal’, ‘ordinary’ (and sometimes ‘good’) character of the perpetrators that belied outward appearances. For example, as previously outlined, Hazel suggested the soldiers had ‘personal turmoil’ and Manisha thought that conformity made ‘people who are good’ become murderers. Accordingly, students thought the perpetrators were not inherently bad, but instead were put in an impossible situation where they had no other choice but to follow the orders of their superiors. The behaviour of ‘regular people’ who took part in Milgram’s study seemed to reinforce this view:

I think it does relate to be honest quite well because [Milgram] was trying to show like the, sort of how being submissive to authority can be really important. So, people who went into Milgram’s study were just regular people, they weren’t like, well considered like dispositionally, you know, they weren’t seeking to harm people. So, I think it’s trying to show up, sort of Hitler’s people working under him, where those situational factors were really at play, more than probably just the fact that they were bad people I think. (Glen, Focus Group 1)
Throughout the discussions, Hitler was frequently identified as the most superior authority figure, and on occasion psychology students lapsed into narrating their stories with reference to ‘he’, ‘him’ and ‘his’. This was also seen in the research by Foster et al. (2016, 146), especially with younger students aged under 14 years. On the surface, this sort of short circuiting gave the impression of the psychology students having a narrow view of culpability. However, as the discussion developed, a notion of there being a hierarchy of responsibility emerged, sometimes stated and at other times inferred. Students tended to believe that being forced to kill against one’s will was the ubiquitous experience of the lower-ranking soldiers, an experience which made them different to the Nazis, and to some extent exonerated their actions:

I think like lower level officials, they can sort of get away with it, I think, but with like, it doesn’t provide a reason for it, but with the lower people who were just following orders, I do, to an extent, understand why they did that. (Carl, Focus Group 3)

I think it’s more of a fear thing to be honest. I have faith that they were more human than that. I’m not sympathising with Nazis, I’m sympathising with the German soldiers who were forced to do things, some of the things they did. (Elliot, Focus Group 2)

It is interesting to contrast Elliot’s comment above with another presented earlier in this chapter where he argued for the role of defamatory propaganda against the Jewish people and widespread antisemitism. Conflict in his thinking is discernible: on the one hand he argued for those being responsible as ‘changing their moral basis’, but on the other hand alluded to German soldiers being forced to kill against their will. This inconsistency suggests that while he can draw on historical evidence to better understand Holocaust perpetration, he can counter this by drawing on his ‘faith’ in humans to not innately want to act in this way.

This sort of dissonance is something for educators to be aware of. Indeed, learning about the Holocaust and the actions of the perpetrators is a challenging task which raises many difficult questions about behaviour and what it means to be ‘human’; considerations which are particularly apposite for psychology students. As shown in Foster et al.’s research (2016, 163), not only did the majority of secondary school students believe the police and military were shot if they refused to obey an order to kill Jewish people, two-thirds of students were confident this was the case. This suggests an embedded belief about the reasons for the actions.
of the perpetrators, reasons that point towards the situation determining the action, rather than the disposition or attitudes of the perpetrators. For the psychology students in this study, it is possible that Milgram’s experiments provided some extenuation for the actions of ‘regular’ or ‘ordinary’ German soldiers which was less disturbing than reflecting on the capability of normal people, indeed whole societies, to act in this way due to dispositional factors as well as situational factors.

Considerations and implications

Across the focus groups, students thought Milgram’s obedience experiments were related to the Holocaust. In particular, the experiments indicated that perpetrators participated in the mass murder of Jewish people because they were following the orders of an authority figure (typically narrated as Hitler, and to a lesser extent the Nazis). This was not seen as thoughtless obedience; instead, students erroneously believed the perpetrators acted out of fear that they would be killed if they disobeyed. When presented with an historical example of perpetrators not taking the opportunity to opt out of killing, the majority of the psychology students were unable to draw on robust or confident historical knowledge to understand why most of the men in Reserve Police Battalion 101 acted as they did. Consequently, the students maintained their view that the men acted out of fear.

There was some suggestion that Nazi ideology played a role as a motivational force, and where students had some knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust to draw upon, they were able to move beyond purely psychological theories and challenge the interpretations of Milgram’s studies in relation to the Holocaust. However, this was a minority perspective across the focus groups. Students instead tended to believe the majority of perpetrators were essentially normal people who had been put in a ‘life or death’ situation and had no choice but to kill Jewish people. Occasionally, students articulated a distinction between senior Nazi officials (who were the reprehensible ones) and the low-ranking German soldiers (who were ultimately decent people but acted out of fear). Arguably, one of the most salient issues to emerge from the focus groups was that Milgram’s experiments appeared to provide some mitigation for the actions of ‘regular’ or ‘ordinary’ German soldiers. This line of thinking perhaps afforded a protection mechanism for students in which believing these soldiers acted out of fear for their lives was easier and safer to comprehend than believing soldiers actively supported the genocide of Jewish people and willingly participated in mass murder.
It is unclear whether the psychology students’ notions were in place before learning about Milgram’s experiments. Research by Foster et al. (2016, 152) indicates students nationally thought the perpetrators were ‘quite normal’. Additionally, 66.5 per cent of students thought the military/police would be shot if they refused to obey an order, and two-thirds of that group were confident in their answer. This suggests a significant and embedded misconception. Thus, it is plausible that learning about the obedience studies reinforces a pre-existing and erroneous belief. Milgram (1963, 376) cited the extreme stress that his participants exhibited during the experiments, and academics have drawn upon this to suggest the obedience studies cannot be generalised to the Holocaust. That is, the distress shown by the participants is completely at odds with the depraved and unabating murderous acts that the Holocaust perpetrators carried out (Fenigstein 2015, 592–3; Haslam et al. 2015, 78). In contrast, the psychology students viewed the participants’ distress as evidence of the perpetrators being normal people who were not inherently bad, and instead committed these atrocities out of fear.

While the conclusions of the psychology students were contrary to what many historians and psychologists have argued (for example, Baumrind 1964; Haslam et al. 2015; Hayes 2017; Jetten and Mols 2014), they were reasonable conclusions for students to draw given the information available to them. Milgram’s research has been influential in discourse about the validity of situational and dispositional explanations for obedience. Numerous situational factors have been identified in Milgram’s studies including the incremental nature of the task and the opportunity to shift responsibility to another (Burger 2014, 491). The role of personality traits and personal values was not dismissed by Milgram, but the power of the situation was considered a potent factor in the obedience process (Milgram 1967, 7; Benjamin and Simpson 2009, 16; Burger 2014, 489). Therefore, students’ convictions that it was the situation and not perpetrators’ characters that dictated their actions are consistent with this discourse.

Milgram came from a positivist background seeking to be an unbiased and value-neutral experimenter. Therefore, despite collating extensive and complex qualitative information, he focused on statistics in the form of voltage levels and percentages as his primary data (Perry 2013, 247–8). It is this primary data, condensed (and used selectively) in textbooks, which is accessible to students and can give the illusion of more straightforward obedience processes than was actually the case. This has been exacerbated by binary conclusions that present the participants as either obeying or disobeying, and in doing so overlooking
the numerous and complex reactions they exhibited (Hoffman et al. 2015, 677).

As a small-scale exploratory study, this research evidently has limitations and cannot provide evidence of the impact of psychology teaching on students’ knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. This is because the data were collected at one point in time, and so causation pathways cannot be established. Moreover, detailed information about what students had learned about Milgram’s research and the Holocaust was not collected. However, the study can be used as a starting point to conduct further research examining the patterns that emerged.

The views of these psychology students should not be used to criticise them or their teachers. The general belief that perpetrators acted out of fear, and were at risk of being shot if they refused an order to kill a Jewish person, is a prevalent misconception in public discourse (Foster et al. 2016, 163). Furthermore, limited curriculum time for history teachers when teaching about the Holocaust, and for psychology teachers when teaching about Milgram's research, present a challenge to thoroughly examining issues related to Holocaust perpetration.

Still, these focus groups highlight significant issues, not only for teaching practice, but given the reputation of Milgram’s research, also for public discourse. In the case of the latter, Milgram’s experiments (and/or replications of them) have permeated popular culture including cartoons, game shows and films across the world (Perry 2013, 7). In light of this, and the worldwide popularity of psychology courses, it is entirely feasible that the conjectures about the motivations and actions of Holocaust perpetrators formulated by the students in this research are indicative of those held by the majority of people who are familiar with Milgram’s experiments. This is problematic because surmising that mass murder and genocide occurred because the protagonists feared for their lives is a severe distortion of what happened. It provides a means to exonerate the perpetrators and overlooks the complex interplay of factors that both historians and psychologists have argued contributed to the Holocaust occurring. This includes relentless propaganda justifying the harming of Jews and redefining morality so that inflicting pain on the Jewish ‘enemy’ was seen as moral progress (Hayes 2017, 140–1). Subscribing to Milgram’s studies also precludes understanding about broader levels of collaboration across Europe and the role of individuals and communities who were complicit in the persecution and murder of Jews. Indeed, a prevalent goal of learning about the Holocaust is to ‘learn the lessons of the past’, yet thinking that perpetrators obeyed out of fear for their lives leads to erroneous ‘lessons’ being learned (Foster et al. 2016, 163).
In terms of considerations for teaching practice, across the focus groups students were able to identify a number of complications with Milgram’s studies, but in general did not appear familiar with recent salient criticisms. For instance, only one student made reference to the fourth prod being the only command, and where students mentioned experimental variations this was done briefly. As Jetten and Mols (2014, 588) point out, engaging with the different experimental variations shows there is no simple explanation to account for the many different ways that participants responded. Consequently, it is important for teachers to highlight the existence of the variations and help students to reflect on what this means for the ubiquitous interpretations of Milgram’s research, as well as looking at other issues which question the role of obedience, like the fourth prod triggering disobedience in participants.

Some students suggested the will to make a contribution to scientific research might account for why participants administered the shocks. A few also mentioned that participants reported being glad to have taken part, though the students did not discuss this further. Recent scholarship has looked at the role of engaged followership and has highlighted the importance of reflecting on why Milgram’s participants felt happy about administering what they believed to be lethal shocks to a helpless stranger (Haslam et al. 2015, 76–9). It is thought the answer lies in Milgram’s efforts to reassure participants about the value of the study for science and humanity. But as Haslam et al. (2015, 80) argue ‘we need to ask whether this is the kind of service with which we want people to be quite so happy’. Undoubtedly, this is something psychology teachers should discuss with their students, not least as participants’ willingness to absolve themselves through justifications to helping science has particular import when talking about the Holocaust.

Milgram’s research tends to lead students into wrongly concluding obedience is ubiquitous and easy to activate (Jetten and Mols 2014, 590). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the psychology students in this study who believed participants followed the orders of the authority figure (the experimenter) could be generalised to their believing that the military and police followed the orders of the authority figure (principally narrated as Hitler). Students must therefore have sound knowledge of the different agents and agencies across Europe who were involved in the mass murder of Jewish people, including individuals and communities who were complicit in what was happening. This will better equip students to challenge the generalisation of Milgram’s experiments to the Holocaust. Teaching can also include reflection on the motivations of the perpetrators. For example, discussing the events that took place in Józefów in July 1942 led some of the psychology students
to consider explanations other than obedience and/or conformity. Arguably, it was this kind of historical knowledge that was missing from most of the psychology students’ interpretations of Milgram’s findings and in turn contributed to their impression that Holocaust perpetrators (similarly to Milgram’s participants) acted as they did under the duress of an authority figure. Their discussions highlight the importance of students considering the historical context alongside psychological explanations.

It is unlikely psychology teachers will have in-depth knowledge of the historiography of the Holocaust, and it is not the intention of this chapter to argue they should. Certainly, the aim of studying Milgram’s research as part of a psychology course will not be to conduct a detailed historical study, but instead to learn about a prominent study within the field of social psychology, to reflect on and critique the methodology, and to discuss the importance of ethical issues when conducting research. Even so, given the enduring links between Milgram’s research and the Holocaust, psychology teachers should become acquainted with some key pieces of information about the Holocaust – especially information related to responsibility, and the different agents and agencies involved.

The British Psychological Society defines psychology as: ‘The scientific study of the mind and how it dictates and influences our behaviour, from communication and memory to thought and emotion. It’s about understanding what makes people tick and how this understanding can help us address many of the problems and issues in society today’ (British Psychological Society 2019). As such, psychology students are especially well placed to scrutinise the actions of Holocaust perpetrators, grapple with matters of responsibility, and critically reflect on the relevance and significance of this for contemporary society. This is essential when learning about Milgram’s research and its connection to the Holocaust, especially as this series of experiments continue to be a staple of most introductory psychology courses. Having sound historical knowledge will enable students to more meaningfully and accurately critique the relationship between Milgram’s experiments and the Holocaust, and in doing so develop the analytical skills required to problematise, unpack and interpret human behaviour recorded in past events and observed in present-day situations.

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