

Milgram and the historians

Richard Overy, Professor of History at the University of Exeter, in conversation with Stephen Reicher and Alex Haslam

In general, what influence has Stanley Milgram's work on obedience had on the work of historians, particularly in relation to study of the Holocaust?

Once historians began to look seriously at issues of perpetration in the Holocaust, and wider perpetration of National Socialist terror, the Milgram experiments became of special importance. This was partly because historians generally lacked the tools to be able to interpret social psychological situations effectively, having focused for a long time on the construction of rational narratives about social behaviour under fascism (function of capitalism in crisis, popular ideological appeal of ultra-nationalism, Hitler as charismatic leader). It was also partly to do with the shift from a focus on leaders and institutions to a greater interest in wider German society.

Did the question become how ordinary Germans could be induced to take part in atrocious acts?

Yes – they generally had no previous experience of such acts, and they were in defiance of established moral codes. It was this difficulty that Milgram seemed to answer and the simplicity of a crude situational explanation was very seductive. Christopher Browning's 1992 work on Police Battalion 101 and the 'final solution' in Poland did not rely entirely on Milgram, but it created a paradigm for understanding atrocity which relied heavily on situational psychology. This view of perpetrator behaviour has been repeated often since and is a stock-in-trade of most student

analyses of how ordinary Germans could become extraordinary killers.

Though there is now much more critical social psychology available, Milgram's surviving influence relies on his challenging question: What can explain the willingness of 'ordinary people' to do exceptional violence when ordered or asked to do so? The strength of this appeal lies in the apparent difference between organised mass murder, with its own internal rationality, and the spasms of ethnic violence in eastern Europe during the war and its aftermath, which appear to need much less psychological explanation.

How important is the link between Milgram's studies and Judith Arendt's analysis of prominent Nazi Adolf Eichmann – notably her concept of 'the banality of evil'?

For historians, the link between Milgram and Arendt is not immediately obvious. Milgram's surviving explanatory power relies on his focus on a cohort of individuals who mostly obeyed life-threatening orders in a situation where their choice seemed more circumscribed than it actually was. Arendt has been used sparingly by historians, partly because of strong objection to the idea that the evils perpetrated by the Third Reich were in any sense 'banal', or that those Germans who ordered and organised the Holocaust could be remotely regarded as simple pen-pushers, a mere 'transport official' as Eichmann characterised himself.

So the 'Eichmann-men', in the Gestapo department that masterminded the death-camps, were not 'ordinary men' in any sense?

Well, many had a visceral anti-Semitism, or were sufficiently unscrupulous and ambitious to use Jewish deaths to help their own career. Milgram makes much more sense for Browning's group of over-age reserve policemen from Hamburg, some of whom might have been persuaded that this was a shrewd career move, some of whom may have had an intense hatred for the Jews, but for most of whom the mass murders seem to have been an unpleasant day's work. These are people who did not regard themselves in any sense as evil, though what they did clearly violated what ethical norms they had hitherto lived by. They did obey orders, and the amount of latitude they had in standing aside – and a handful did on most occasions – was clearly limited.



Arendt picked one individual, but Browning and most of the perpetrator historians who have followed him have been more interested in group psychology, since perpetrators always operated as a small community whose narrow moral universe could temporarily permit them to do things they would not otherwise have done. Although Milgram's cohort did not act together, the results suggest

reading

- Browning, C. (1992). *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland*. London: Penguin.
- Herf, J. (2006). *The Jewish enemy: Nazi propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust*. Harvard, CT: Harvard University Press.
- Overy, R. (2004). *The dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia*. London: W.W. Norton.

a collective explanation for a common psychological reaction.

What would you say is the current view of Milgram and Arendt and of their contribution to historical understanding?

Neither Milgram nor Arendt is used uncritically by historians and neither is regarded today as a key figure in current historical understanding. Most historians who work on topics most likely to be influenced by Milgram are aware of the methodological flaws and the need to reconcile dispositional and situational factors in any explanation of perpetrator behaviour. Milgram's surviving influence rests on the fact that his arguments are the base from which historians set out to explore more complex social-psychological terrain. This is evident in the recent work of Hans Welzer or Olaf Jensen, where the purpose is to take

situational explanations can ever be sufficient.

The growing interest in the 'moral history' of the Third Reich, captured in the work of Claudia Koonz or my own work on comparative dictatorships, also explores the way in which irrational discourses on exclusion and social stigmatisation can create closed moral universes in which the irrational suddenly becomes rational, the immoral becomes moral. These dispositional factors clearly change the focus of explanation for perpetration.



Richard Overy

How can psychology contribute to our understanding of the Holocaust, and do we need to move on from Milgram in order to exploit psychology more effectively?

Many recent studies of perpetration in the Holocaust have relied on social psychological explanation to help elucidate not only the behaviour of the 'ordinary men' involved but to try to come to terms with the wider question of how collective behaviour (exclusion, discrimination, genocide) might be explained in social-psychological terms. The focus on what the psychologist Hans Askenasy once called 'collective madness' can be explained in straightforward historical terms – the charismatic appeal of Hitler, for example – but it is evident that the mechanisms which permit an educated and technically advanced population to endorse and, in some cases, actively participate in genocide are beyond conventional historical explanation.

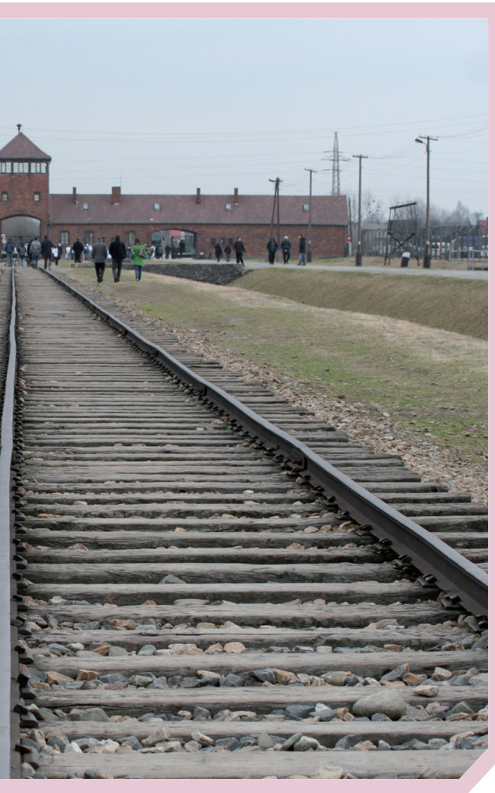
The obedience tests are perhaps, from this point of view, of limited use. The cohort was collective only in the sense that they had all volunteered, and the environment in which obedience was tested was artificial. The exploration of what binds small groups together; of their perception of the victims, or of the behaviour of the victims themselves – all too often confined in historical narratives to an entirely passive role; of the symbiosis between disposition and situation; of the cognitive processes

involved; all these require more sophisticated social psychological explanation. From the historian's point of view this is a potentially frustrating project, since the subjects are in most cases now dead and the surviving record patchy [although see tinyurl.com/josephdimow for one such account]. Projecting social-psychological experiments backwards on to historical actors carries with it a whole range of obvious methodological problems.

Do you see a place for a constructive dialogue between historians and psychologists around the sort of issues Milgram addressed – and, if so, what form should this take?

It is evident that some kind of dialogue between psychology and history is desirable to get closer to an understanding of a range of issues connected to the perpetration of atrocity and its wider social endorsement. The issue of obedience is at least a starting point, although its limitations are evident. There is much historians can learn from current psychology about how extreme collective violence, or coercive behaviour, or the definition of 'the other', is explained in psychological terms. There are things that historians could also supply to the psychologist, since the full array of historical factors that influence a particular situation or which contrive a particular disposition makes each case of atrocious behaviour unique.

What historians really need to do is to construct a set of questions to which they feel conventional historical narrative has failed to supply a convincing answer, and to throw those open to psychologists to suggest ways in which these questions might be answered using a different science. Some years ago the historian Michael Geyer suggested that historians do not explain violence well (though there is current fashion for describing it in graphic detail). The history of emotions is currently a growing subject of study, but this is unthinkable without some kind of dialogue with psychology. Yet this recent fashion has not really addressed the issues of hatred or prejudice or the disturbing exhilaration of extreme violence that Geyer was talking about. These are critical issues to be able to understand in a world where collective violence and prejudice still function.



Milgram as a possible starting point and then to posit more compelling answers to what happens when atrocity is being committed. It is also evident in the recent revival of interest in ideology and how it is communicated. The common discourses to which many perpetrators were subject, as Jeffrey Herf has argued in his recent study of anti-Semitic propaganda, challenges the view that