Analysis of the underlying social psychology philosophy essay

The hate and prejudice that began the Holocaust went hand in hand with a political agenda that was fueled by the frustration aggression theory.(1) Hitler blamed the Jews for the loss of World War I and thus, instead of targeting political aspects of the Jewish community, he displaced his aggression towards ALL Jews, even the helpless.

This, combined with religious anti-Semitism prejudice that had been present in Germany for 1500 years and the theory of " eugenics", was the political and instrumental center of Hitler's political campaign.(5) He used a system of ' elimination of freedom', which he felt was necessary in the conditioning the German people to follow him. This meant that he would slowly change the rules, allowing him to gain more and more control over his people. New laws preventing rebellious attempts to overthrow his government and the elimination of non-supporters that would possibly dissent, (disagree with his plan)(1), gave Hitler complete control over what happened within the country's boundaries.(5)

He further conditioned the Germans to accept the program for the ' final solution' of the Jews with the constant onslaught of misleading propaganda. Propaganda is the dissemination of ideas and information for the purpose of inducing or intensifying specific attitudes and actions.(4) This misleading information conditioned the German people to stereotype all Jews as evil and thus most of them became prejudice. This was an effect of what is called the availability effect.(1) That is, they made stereotypical judgements based on the information available to them. Many of the Germans had been raised under the influence of this propaganda and it was all that they knew about

the Jews, thus, the only available information with which to make judgements by.

Under the umbrella of ethical relativism,(2) these judgements were ethical in relevance to the German culture at this time, and thus, widely accepted by the German people. The German people, especially the soldiers, bonded under what is known as the self-esteem theory of prejudice. Even though being a soldier was what they may have had in common, these men bonded under the belief that they were better than people in other groups, namely the Jews.(1)

What is even more frightening is that it was not a well thought out plan, but rather a process with premises to subtly induce men to perform acts that would have ethical consequences that would cause great dissonance or uncomfortableness.(1, 5) The soldiers were given information that coerced them into an " us vs. them" state of mind, the realistic conflict theory. Due to the propaganda that they were bombarded with, they felt that they were competing with the Jews for resources.(1) This may not have been an organized plan, but it was a step by step journey that led ordinary men from acceptance of the ' final solution' to perpetrators of it.

At first, the soldiers accepted the prejudice due to all of the previous theories noted and followed orders to kill. They may not have enjoyed it and not all of them may have complied, but enough did.(4) As soon as they had killed once, cognitive dissonance set in. That is, they had conflicting emotions about murder and following orders.(1) Since they could not change the act that they had committed, they had to change their attitude about the act

they committed, thus decreasing the amount of dissonance, or discomfort that they felt due to conflicting feelings. Once they had reached that point, they were on their way to being completely desensitized, and then the committance of murder in the name of their government, culture, and way of life was justifiable.

The German people that made up the bystanders in this tragedy may not have been guilty of cold- blooded murder, but they were not innocent either. They were also victims of cultural ethical relativism,(2) believing that if their government thought that this was ethically relative behavior in their culture, then they should comply. In cultural relative behavior, rightness and wrongs vary from place to place, and in this place, this prejudice behavior was considered right.

These Germans that did not speak out against the atrocities being committed against the Jews, even if they thought it would be ethically prudent, were also victims of the above theories as well as what is called the bystander effect.(1) The bystander effect is when there is a large group of people and thus the unlikeliness of anyone to help is stronger. This is explained by a theory called the pluralistic ignorance theory.(1) This theory is based on an uncertain situation where the people around them are not reacting to help, thus, they do not see the need to help either. The information that they are receiving from others around them is telling them that it is okay not to interfere, thus they become compliant with what their culture has deemed appropriate behavior, irregardless of what they may be feeling.

These people also went through cognitive dissonance, just as the soldiers did. Once they ignored one atrocity, they ignored the rest of them in order to justify ignoring the first one. They must justify their actions by changing their attitudes about the actions they have taken, thus, decreasing the amount of dissonance or uncomfortableness that they feel.

The indifference that the bystanders might have felt may have been done without the intent to harm anyone, but their indifference and conformity were lethal. By turning a blind eye and choosing to be indifferent, the bystanders actively chose not to feel and to shut down the human response within them, as if they had aimed the gun at the back of a neck and fired, as the perpetrators did.

Fear disoriented these people and self-protection blinded them. A few, however, did not lose their way. These few are said to have taken their direction from their own ' moral compass' in this mad world where most people lost their bearings.

These people were conditioned also, but they were conditioned to be rescuers rather that passive bystanders or active accessories. They were ordinary people who became extraordinary. They were people that lived in an immoral society that acted according to the cultural relativism that was the norm at this time. These people decided to act against this cultural relativism and to act according to their own set of beliefs of virtue in the context of morality.(2)

The rescuers had a combination of courage, empathy, compassion, awareness, resourcefulness, vigilance, inventiveness, and persistence. They

also could accept people that were different in their community. They had the belief that one person could make a difference.(3)

Each rescue story is different. Many rescuers say that seeing one horrifying incident between Nazis and their victims propelled them into becoming rescuers. People rescued others for various reasons. Some were motivated by a sense of morality. Others had a relationship with a particular person or group and thus, felt a sense of obligation. Some were politically driven and were adamantly opposed to Hitler. Other rescuers were involved at work as diplomats, nurses, social workers, and doctors, and thus were conditioned to continue their involvement beyond their professional obligation.

This is where cognitive dissonance comes into effect in this instance. These people were raised to help, it was a part of their moral fabric. To go against that learned belief would cause dissonance, therefore, these people had it woven into them to rescue, to help, thus, reducing dissonance.

After the rescuers found ways to help, they took action. They were not victims of the bystander effect. Sometimes the entire transformation from bystander to rescuer took just seconds, but the effects of this transformation were life changing.

First, a rescuer had to recognize that a person was endangered. This was not always easy to know because of the propaganda and the secrecy of Hitler and the Nazis. Next, rescuers had to decide if they could and should take responsibility for helping and risk the potential consequences. The above theories that stopped the bystanders from helping were not a factor for

these people even though the risks could be great, such as public hangings, deportation to concentration camps, and on-the-spot shootings.

The scope of the rescuing activities varied, from leaving food regularly in a strategic location, to creating a bureaucracy which allowed thousands of Jews to emigrate, to hiding someone within one's house for several years.

It is interesting to note, that all of the rescuers that we read about, would not call themselves heroes. This lends iteslf to the moral philosophy of virtue ethics usually used in conjunction with heroes and saints. Heroes think they ' ought' to do what they do and thus, do not consider their actions or character to be morally optional. This shows that not all requirements of morality are universal obligations. The ' ought' in the language of heroes is a part of self-assumed moral ideals beyond that of the everyday person and their actions are not guided self-advancement or public recognition.(2)

These heroes had an intolerance for injustice and the ability to endure risk. They also had an inner core of unshakable values and beliefs as well as a streak of independence. The men and women who performed these incredible deeds of self-effacing heroism were quite unexceptional. They were ordinary people who responded to extraordinary circumstances in a morally exemplary fashion.(3)

The most important thing that I have learned in this class, and will actively implement into my life, is to keep my eyes and my mind open. I have made a promise to myself to work very hard to never be a victim of the bystander effect nor to succumb to the idiocy and shallowness of prejudice.

I find myself chastising myself if a stereotypical thought slithers into my consciousness and disseminating the thought to find out why I was thinking that way. Then I go about a reasonable debate within my mind about the pros and cons of the thought and in the end, I realize why the thought was wrong. Once I realize the why, I can then go about working on changing my attitude so that hopefully, someday, I will not be plagued my such thoughts at all. I suppose I am conditioning myself, but it is a positive conditioning.

I used to stop myself from thinking bad things about people just because the ' norm' says that it is not nice to do so. I now realize that stopping the thought was not enough. Stopping the thought just pushed it down, it did not dissolve it. It was still in there, lurking around, waiting to rear its ugly head at any moment. I now know that these things must be purged in order to change our attitudes about the world around us if we are going to break free of the vicious cycle of prejudice.

I now realize how crippling these things are in everyday life. How many missed opportunities are out there because a stereotypical judgement I made caused me to make the ultimate attribution error about someone or a situation that rendered me immobile, frightened and weak? It is almost as if these stereotypes and prejudices and cognitive dissonance that caused as a result of them are a drug. Once you do it once, you must keep doing it or you feel uncomfortable. We become servants to them and soon they are what our lives revolve around. What a waste of precious thought, time, and energy!

I am also realizing, only now, as I write this paper, how many of the negative theories that we have learned about during this class are the result of stereotypes and prejudice. They are the first dominoes in line, they are the foundation, because they are the first dominoes of cognitive dissonance. They start it, and then everyday, we conform like slaves, so that we do not feel uncomfortable.

But now, I see a pin dot of light at the end of the tunnel. For if we can eliminate our prejudices, we can topple the immense structure that seems to be devouring our culture, our children, and ultimately, our future.

I understand that this is a great task, but I would rather be on a journey of this kind than the one of blindness, confusion and subservience that I have been on. I always knew that I did not want to be this type of person, having been a victim of it as a child, but I never knew quite how to go about changing my attitude. Well, there are no excuses for such behavior now, because now I have the tools. I know I can't change the world or even a single other person, but I can change myself, my outlook on life, my actions and my attitudes.

A passage that I read once comes to mind: ' A single small pebble causes a ripple that will travel the length of the ocean. It may take a lifetime, but it reaches the other side.' This reminds me of the rescuers and that one person can make a difference, and I intend to.

References

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