

Banal and Fetishized Evil: Implicating Ordinary Folk in Genocide Education

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Abstract:

Genocide education would benefit from a renewed focus on how ordinary people perpetuate atrocities more so than villains. Ordinary evil is often understood via Hannah Arendt's political theory, which explains how people can contribute thoughtlessly to genocide. This "banality of evil" explains an important aspect of human behavior, especially when understood in conjunction with Elizabeth Minnich's work on intensive and extensive evil, as well as with Stanley Milgram's research on obedience. Yet Arendt, Minnich, and Milgram do not explain ordinary people who become eager killers. Thus, the addition of Ernest Becker's idea of the fetishization of evil is important. Students would benefit from engaging with Arendt and Becker's theories in tandem, as well as from learning about disobedience and ways to expand fetishized perceptions of others

Key words: Hannah Arendt, Ernest Becker, genocide, social studies, terror management theory

Introduction

How might we teach about genocide with a view toward a less violent future? A common rationale for engaging with the topic of genocide, particularly the Holocaust, is that students will then work to prevent future genocides (Marks, 2017). We have cried out "Never again!" over and over, however, and atrocities continue to happen while teachers seek ways to teach about these horrors. This essay offers one way for educators to open up thinking about human-driven atrocities by shifting the focus from singular villains or mindless drones to the processes that shape ordinary folks like ourselves into killers.

This focus entails pairing Hannah Arendt's sense of the banality of evil with insights from cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, particularly his observations about the human capacity to fetishize evil. Becker's theoretical work has morphed into *terror management theory* (TMT; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015), an area of experimental social psychology with hundreds of

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studies in multiple cultural contexts (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, & Maxfield, 2006). Through Becker and TMT, we can understand how ordinary people perpetuate evil intentionally. By combining the ideas of Arendt and Becker, educators can focus on how we are all capable not only of thoughtlessly contributing to atrocities but also of killing others out of heroic joy. Although this framing is somewhat gloomy, it might give both teachers and students hope for understanding and thus preventing further violence.

Hannah Arendt, Stanley Milgram, and the Banality of Evil

Arendt has given us much insight into a process of evil. Specifically, evil intent is not required to do an evil deed. What, then, begins the process of evil? For Arendt (1963/2006), this evil is a form of thoughtlessness—the “banality of evil.” As Arendt (1977) stated more than a decade after her initial exploration of mundane evil, “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or to do either evil or good” (p. 180).

In some contexts, this situation is interpreted as our socialization to follow orders, as in Stanley Milgram’s (in)famous experiments on destructive obedience. In the early 1960s at Yale, Milgram conducted a study in which participants were told to administer increasingly powerful electric shocks as a teaching tool on another participant (who was not a participant, but a confederate of the experimenter). Also unbeknownst to the participants was that no shocks were actually administered. Milgram (1963) sought to understand why people followed orders to harm and kill during the Holocaust:

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. (p. 371)

Milgram’s study and further experiments inspired by it have prompted fruitful discussion about obedience to authority. Some people act as if they have no choice but to obey (Hamachek, 1976). Participants in Milgram’s study who completed the experiment and issued the maximum levels of electric shocks seemed to deflect responsibility to the experimenter: “You [the experimenter] want me to keep going?” “You accept all responsibility?” “You’re going to keep giving him, what, 450 volts?” (Matt, 2013). Such sentiments stand in contrast with participants who disobeyed orders: “Take the cheque back. I’m not going to hurt the guy!” “Yes, I have a choice!” (Matt, 2013). Hamachek (1976) noted that “The most disturbing phenomenon is that so many of us seem to behave as if we are robbed of free will once a directive is issued from a sufficiently

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powerful authority source” (p. 444). Those who disobeyed saw that they had a choice, while those who obeyed often did so reluctantly but did not take control of their actions.

In other contexts (and not necessarily mutually exclusively), thoughtlessness can be interpreted as a lack of critical thought about how ordinary individuals can affect others (den Heyer & van Kessel, 2015; van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). From Arendt we know that ordinary people can contribute to great harm simply by going about their business and failing to consider how they are part of a harmful system. She illustrated this idea with Adolf Eichmann, who we now know was not the best choice for her theory (Stangneth, 2015); however, there are countless others who could serve as exemplars of banal evil, such as the members of the reserve police battalion that played a central role in carrying out the Final Solution against Jews in Poland (Browning, 1993).

Extensive and Intensive Evil

Elizabeth Minnich, a student of Arendt, refined and expanded upon Arendt’s original formulation. Minnich (2014) considered evil to be in two categories: *extensive* and *intensive*. Extensive evil is a reformulation of Arendt’s “banality of evil”:

... the massive and monstrous harms carried out by many, many people for significant periods of times—months, years, decades, and more (slavery and sexualized violence: when has humanity been without these and others?). They are the evils of which we would not speak, of which we so often say, “unthinkable.” (Minnich, 2014, p. 170)

Ordinary and otherwise decent people partake in extensive evil, and the systemic level of the evil requires that sustaining it “be conventional to do its work as one’s job, daily, day after day after day after day, with supper at home and picnics on the weekends” (p. 170). This situation is what concerned Arendt, but there are also those who deliberately inflict massive harm. This type of evil is what Minnich (2014) called intensive.

Intensive evils are perpetuated by a limited number of people who “stand in shuddering contrast with the lives others are leading around them in their times [and w]hen they burst into our lives, we are genuinely spectators, not participants, not enablers, and not perpetrators” (p. 169). These are people like serial killers—individuals who cause intense harm. Are these our villains of history? Perhaps some, but certainly not all. Again, like Arendt, Minnich provides a helpful framing for thinking about evil, but all evildoers are not counted in her framework. We have records that some otherwise ordinary people (i.e., not psychopaths) can delight in killing instead

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of simply following orders or thoughtlessly contributing to harm. We know, for example, that during the Rwandan genocide, despite some participants needing to be coaxed or coerced, others became eager killers (Hatzfeld, 2006).

Ernest Becker: Fetishizing Evil

Evil as Worldview Threats

While Arendt revealed how we can perpetuate evil without intending it, Becker (1975) explained why sometimes ordinary people can indeed purposely do evil deeds. Firstly, how did Becker define evil? Evil is that which threatens our existence (literal or symbolic). All organisms have a self-preservation instinct and thus they lash out against any opposing power that threatens them. Because humans can anticipate future outcomes and are aware that death is eventually coming, we can fear death even in the absence of an immediate threat. To manage that anxiety, humans have to devise ways of “transcending the world of flesh and blood, which was a perishable one. This [we] did by fixing on a world which is not perishable, by devising an ‘invisible project’ that would assure [our] immortality” (Becker, 1975, p. 63).

We can cultivate a variety of personal immortality projects to leave an enduring imprint on the world such as having children, building monuments, or accumulating academic citations, but our cultural worldview plays a prominent role. Cultural worldviews are humanly created, shared, symbolic conceptions of reality, and serve as a powerful form of protection from impermanence. Our ideologies and symbols will live on: “Societies can be seen as structures of immortality power” (Becker, 1975, p. 63). Consequently, a threat to our worldview is akin to a threat to our very lives (Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007).

Worldview Threat as Difficult Knowledge

Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman (2003) have been examining questions such as “What makes knowledge difficult, and what is it to represent and narrate ‘difficult knowledge?’” (p. 755). Through the lens of Ernest Becker, a particular form of difficult knowledge could be linked to challenges to our worldview. Indeed, the “force of an event is felt before it can be understood” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 758) and there can be “a cascade of responses” (Garrett, 2017, p. 19).

Because humans are consciously aware of death, we have the intellectual capacity to see evil (death) in all that threatens us, which can be anything at any time. It would be impossible to function while experiencing constant existential terror, so we develop coping mechanisms. Defensive behavior can be somewhat banal, such as decreased reading comprehension of

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worldview disconfirming information (Williams, Schimel, Hayes, & Faucher, 2012): We can avoid difficult knowledge without even knowing it.

Fetishizing Evil

Defensive behavior can also be destructive. Those who threaten our worldview are evils that must be eradicated. People “use one another to assure their personal victory over death” (Becker, 1975, p. 108). Becker talks about fetishizing fear by localizing all of one’s fear and anxiety into a single, manageable source. We often scapegoat marginalized groups, but we can fetishize any group as the embodiment of evil. We take all that threatens to overwhelm us and confine it to a particular group of people, cause, ideology, or, in some cases, a specific person, which is then labelled as evil. Our heroic quest, then, is to annihilate it. One’s own group is “pure and good” and others “are the real animals, are spoiling everything for you, contaminating your purity and bringing disease and weakness into your vitality” (Becker, 1975, p. 93). We have seen this in the Nazis conceptualizing Jews as infectious vermin and the Hutus labelling the Tutsis as cockroaches. A disturbing TMT study found that a worldview threat is buffered if worldview violators have been killed (Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008).

There are countless examples of this process throughout history: One group demonizes another group, often by labeling them as evil. In 1979, the Iranian leader Ruhollah Khomeini called the United States “the Great Satan” due to the U.S. government’s imperialistic (and threatening) behavior (al-Balaghah, 1969); in the United States in 2002, George W. Bush called Iraq, North Korea, and Iran the “Axis of Evil,” which has associated Muslims with evil (Bush, 2002; Semmerling, 2008; van Kessel, 2017). Such fetishization is not a thing of the past; for example, U.S. president Donald Trump (2017) tweeted, “We must keep ‘evil’ out of our country!” in reference to the refugees he sought to suspend from entering the United States (e.g., Syrians) as well as the barred visa applications from seven Muslim-majority countries.

Why do people fetishize evil? It is ultimately a way of dealing with our own sense of vulnerability and death. Fetishizing evil is a way of confining our fear to a specific, manageable object. It is a way of making our fear concrete and controllable. Then, by coming against the evil, lashing out against it and in some cases eradicating it, we assert our own purity, specialness, and our own status as heroes. Thus, from Becker’s perspective, many forms of aggression aimed at annihilating others with a “lust for killing” is a result of the fetishization of evil.

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Fetishizing Evil and Shrinking Perspective

In order to deal with our sense of vulnerability in life and to go on living and expanding, we may shrink our perception to fetishize our fears. As we seek to defend our worldview, we narrow our focus, and our tolerance and understanding are reduced. This process is destructive because when our perception narrows, we become blind to the consequences of our actions. And here is a link back to Arendtian thoughtlessness: When we operate with a narrow outlook as heroes blindly fighting evil, we fail to think about the harm we are inflicting upon others. Thus, otherwise ordinary people seem to have a lust for killing (e.g., genocide) in an attempt to eradicate evil.

Furthermore, as we attempt to destroy the evil ones, our actions can arouse the same desire in them to annihilate us, which leads to an endless cycle of violence. By seeking to eliminate evil, we cause it:

The thing that makes man [sic] the most devastating animal that ever stuck his neck up into the sky is that he wants an earth that is not an earth but a heaven, and the price for this kind of fantastic ambition is to make the earth an even more eager graveyard than it naturally is. (Becker, 1975, p. 96)

The fetishization of evil and its intensely destructive consequences have repercussions for how we might teach about the atrocities of historical and contemporary times.

Implications for Education

It is all too easy to name a single villain as the face of systemic harm, and thus let ordinary individuals off the hook, so to speak (van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). Instead, we need to arrange our curriculum in ways that encourage the study of ordinary people like ourselves. In this paper, let us focus on three interrelated strategies: teaching Arendt and Becker in tandem, teaching disobedience, and expanding fetishized perceptions.

Teaching Arendt and Becker

From Arendt and Becker, we have come to understand how people like ourselves can perpetuate extraordinary death and destruction, both intentionally and unintentionally. Teaching both thinkers in tandem has powerful explanatory power because it explains both intentional and unintentional evil acts done by ordinary folk. It broadens our understanding of evil doers.

Although Becker has been largely ignored in the field of education, scholars have engaged with Arendt's "banality of evil" in helpful ways. For example, Spector (2017) discussed Maxine

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Greene's engagement with the banal evils that threaten public education, particularly "technocratic thoughtlessness" (p. 42) and judgments enforced by "general codes or best practices" (p. 45), both of which are in opposition to meaningful engagements with imagination. In a different context, Lange (2012) discussed the "thoughtlessness" that is part of the banality of evil in the context of preventing it through education for *action* (p. 6), and the Utica City School District (1976) in New York issued a curriculum redesign and teacher in-service document, "The Nature of Good and Evil," which engages with Arendt's concept of the banality of evil directly. As part of Project SEARCH for an interdisciplinary humanistic curriculum, the authors of the document called for students to define good and evil for themselves and accept responsibility for their actions (Utica City School District, 1976). Through literature, film, and other media, Grade 10 students would develop an understanding of how their own (in)actions impact the world around them. The Utica curriculum provided a reading list for teachers, reading/viewing lists for students, and classroom activities and assignments. Such excellent work can be updated in terms of historical context as well as with a complementary engagement with the work of Becker. Future work needs to be done developing specific resources for teachers to present Arendt and Becker's work to students, notably in history, literature, psychology, and social studies.

Teaching Disobedience

Blind obedience has been revealed again and again as an incredibly harmful situation. Although it is tempting to ascribe obedience to either a personality trait or a particular situation, psychological studies show that both are in play (Blass, 1991). Obedience is learned, but the process is complex: "different individuals are motivated in different degrees to be more or less obedient because of a complex socialization mix of learning to live up to expectations and of learning to trust and/or fear authority" (Hamachek, 1976, p. 445). Students need to learn that those in power (e.g., governments) are "not always ethical or moral" (Marks, 2017, p. 131) and can enact (and have enacted) perfectly legal but horrific deeds. The study of these instances (e.g., in Nazi Germany or during the Rwandan genocide) can be paired with discussions of personal tendencies toward *authoritarian submission*, defined as a "submissive, uncritical attitude toward idealized moral authorities of the ingroup" (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950, p. 228). The hope here is that educators will encourage the sort of critical thinking that is independent of authority. As we know from Milgram's (1965) work, the presence of others who show disobedience heightens our capabilities to stand up for what we know is right.

In terms of curriculum, we need to address the issue of obedience. Some students may assume that, for example, Nazi soldiers were simply following orders and, if willing participants, they

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were merely products of their education and background—there is little room for individual responsibility (Lang, 1990). Salzman (2000) has taught a course on the psychology of the Holocaust, where personal and social factors are considered regarding those who participated in genocide. After beginning with historical context, the class considers “dispositional explanations for perpetrator behavior” that include Milgram’s work, as well as psychiatric research on the Nuremberg war crimes defendants (Borofsky & Brand, 1980; Zilmer, Harrower, Ritzler, & Archer, 1995) and Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford’s (1950) work on the authoritarian personality, among other works.

We also need to be careful to avoid unintentionally teaching blind obedience through our daily classroom activities. Gordon (1999) discussed the banality of evil in terms of day-to-day pedagogy. He calls for educators to avoid indicators of thoughtlessness in their teaching practice such as using “clichés and stock phrases” as responses to student input, encouraging students’ “blind devotion and admiration” to the teacher, and creating climates of “falsehood and self-deception” (Gordon, 1999, pp. 26-28). We can encourage reasonable, not unconditional, obedience. Drawing from Hamachek (1976), there are many interrelated strategies, including teachers providing opportunities for students to: disagree with any intimidation or penalty, see authority figures as capable of mistakes, discuss reasons for rules and regulations, and explore examples of when it is acceptable or even desirable to be disobedient.

Expanding Fetishized Perception

A certain amount of personal and collective growth needs to happen in order to counter humans’ propensity for fetishizing evil. To borrow from den Heyer (2017), it is not about motivating students (or ourselves), it is about animating “intention and willfulness” (p. 4). In the context of this article, I call for us to attend to our defensive compensatory actions to find helpful rather than harmful ways to reduce worldview threats: “the best defense would be one that reduces the threat without escalating conflict and that allows for positive relations among people of different worldviews” (Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008, p. 506).

Such a task involves relatively easy components such as attending to how we talk about others (e.g., avoiding labelling other individuals and groups as evil), as well as more complex tasks such as seeking helpful rather than harmful immortality projects. For this latter task, however, there are no easy, universal solutions; thus, further research and thought is needed.

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Concluding Thoughts

Thinking about genocide in and out of the classroom is a complicated task. The framing of Arendt's concept of banal evil is helpful because it explains the behavior of many ordinary people, but it is incomplete without the addition of Becker's concept of the fetishization of evil because banality does not account for those who come to delight in their harmful work. Categorizing otherwise normal people who contribute to atrocities through multiple lenses can at least somewhat help. There are some who perpetuate genocide in very banal ways, others who feel compelled to be obedient and deflect responsibility to the authority figure, and those who fetishize evil and participate in the killing with glee. For some, more than one of these dispositions might be operating in the same person, more or less, over time. The combination of Arendt (informed by the work of Minnich and Milgram) and Becker can help us comprehend why genocides continue to occur.

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