

A Phenomenographic Study of Youth Conceptualizations of Evil: Order-Words and the Politics of Evil

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Abstract

Students in secondary social studies examine descriptions of historical events and rhetoric by politicians that utilize the word and concept of evil. The label of evil can evoke specific images, feelings, and thoughts; oversimplify historical and contemporary situations; and decrease students' sense of agency. This phenomenographical study included individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The outcome space revealed five referential aspects: evil as images, evil as affects (bodily) and effects (cognitive), evil as something that is abnormal and/or extraordinary, evil as human, and evil as subjective. One salient implication of this study is that teachers, textbook authors, and curriculum designers need to more explicitly engage with naming and describing evil in social studies education in the context of Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/2008) order-words.

Keywords: social studies, phenomenography, evil, youth, order-words

Résumé

Dans leurs cours de sciences humaines, les élèves du secondaire étudient des descriptions de faits historiques et la rhétorique de politiciens qui utilisent le mot « mal » et le concept du mal. L'étiquette du mal peut évoquer des images, des sentiments et des idées, simplifier à outrance des situations passées ou actuelles et miner chez les élèves leur sentiment d'une capacité d'agir. Cette étude phénoménographique incluait des entrevues semi-structurées et des groupes de discussion. L'espace qui en résulte révèle cinq aspects référentiels : le mal en images, le mal en tant qu'affects (corporels) et effets (cognitifs), le mal comme une chose anormale ou hors de l'ordinaire, le mal comme une capacité propre à l'homme et le mal comme une notion subjective. L'une des principales implications de cette étude est que les enseignants, les manuels scolaires et les concepteurs de programmes d'études en sciences sociales au secondaire doivent plus explicitement désigner et décrire le mal dans le contexte des mots d'ordre de Deleuze et Guattari.

Mots-clés : sciences humaines, phénoménographie, mal, jeunesse, mots d'ordre

Introduction

In high school social studies, students examine historical events rife with large-scale violence often labelled as evil (e.g., genocide) as well as political rhetoric that evokes evil, such as Reagan’s “evil empire” in the context of the Cold War or G. W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” during discussions of the War on Terror. Evil is not a word that is easily conceptualized, and yet the impact of this word permeates our lives here in Canada and elsewhere. There are, of course, stereotypes of evil that rely on a simplistic binary of good versus evil, but the real power of evil lies not with identifying a specific representation or definition of evil, but with how the word and concept of evil can operate (see Youngblood Jackson, 2013). I purposefully interviewed students without providing them with a definition of evil because it is clear from the philosophical and psychological literature that the definition is up for debate. Regardless of how evil might be defined (e.g., sadism, putrid defilement, bureaucratic thoughtlessness), my research points to affects (bodily) and effects (cognitive) of contempt when someone or something is labelled as evil, and I examine some of the implications these affects and effects have for political literacy. For this article, I am limiting my discussion to participant responses, and, specifically, to how Deleuze and Guattari’s order-words (1980/2008) are helpful for my more specific purpose of demystifying political rhetoric of evil. Other philosophical engagements resulting from this research project are explored elsewhere (den Heyer & van Kessel, 2015; van Kessel, 2016; van Kessel & Crowley, 2017).

Order-Words

According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980/2008), language can transform us, not physically, but in terms of our social position, or how we interact with others (Bryant, 2011, para. 7). For example, when a judge deems someone “guilty,” the verdict changes a *person* into a *convict*. There is an “incorporeal transformation” that involves a change in *status* of a body or the change in its *relations* to other bodies; for example, when this person is on trial, the proceedings and the sentencing directly affect the body and its relationship to other bodies, most notably being “the transformation of the accused into a convict [as] a pure instantaneous act or incorporeal attribute that is expressed in the judge’s sentence” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2008, pp. 80–81). Also, a convict’s physical

body is confined and submitted to not only a prison routine but also the accompanying threats to that body within that structure. Order-words are “not a particular category of explicit statements (for example, in the imperative), but the relations of every word or every statement to implicit presuppositions” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2008, p. 79). In other words, order-words are not grammatically a specific type of command; rather, they have the thrust of a command because of the assumptions they both tap into and create. They are like computer passwords—they give power, and take it away. Order-words can shut down freedom and even the act of thinking itself, and thus are distinctly political and relevant to social studies.

Evil is an order-word. This word morphs an ordinary human into a *villain*. The application of the word “evil,” like the word “guilty,” can change social positions in a profoundly negative way. In the context of social studies education, evil as an order-word is particularly relevant to issues of political rhetoric. The political invocation of evil can have catastrophic consequences. An extreme example would be Hitler’s description in *Mein Kampf* (1925/2001) that “the personification of the devil as the *symbol of all evil* assumes the living shape of the Jew” (p. 293, emphasis added). Labelling a group as evil taps into powerful images from religion, popular media, and other sources. However, most importantly, this label of evil is its own force that influences what we think and what we do.

Evil and Education

This research study delved into youth conceptualizations of evil and how teachers might engage with the idea in secondary social studies classrooms. This study was the first in-depth exploration of evil in education; research relating to evil has primarily focused on the ethical implications of teaching about what might be labelled as evil, such as genocide (e.g., Goldstein, 1995; Parsons, 1998). The approaches of difficult knowledge (e.g., Britzman, 1998, 2013) and historical trauma (e.g., Simon, 2014; Simon & Eppert, 1997) have provided valuable ways to refine our pedagogy based upon a moral imperative to address what we might label as the evils of history on both a personal and community level, although these scholars do not engage with the idea of evil directly. Timothy Stanley (1999) thoughtfully explored how he might explain the evil of the Nazis, thinking

of the description itself, as well as small but important details like verb tenses. Stanley's (1999) work is a source of inspiration for being attentive to the idea of evil more generally in a social studies classroom.

There is a paucity of research that more directly relates to evil and education. Researchers such as Marshall (2012), Carlson (1985), as well as Schär and Sperisen (2010) have highlighted the connection of evil to ideology. Marshall (2012) examines controversial content labelled as evil and thus subject to censorship, while Schär and Sperisen (2010) and Carlson (1985) noted how ideological positioning can prevent a critical examination of the evils of history. Some research exists that involves students' views on evil peripherally, but the concept of evil itself has not been the focus; rather, these studies have assumed a definition of evil without delving into its meaning (Mau & Pope-Davis, 1993; Carter, Yeh, & Mazzula, 2008).

Research Approach

My research approach was phenomenography, a qualitative approach based on the ontological and epistemological assumptions that there is no objective Truth or closed reality. I examined the variety of conceptualizations of evil held by secondary school students. A "conception" in phenomenography has two intertwined aspects, referential and structural. The referential aspect refers to the meaning the subject places upon the object, while the structural aspect refers to the features the subject discerns and then focuses on, but both can relate to theoretical or physical experience (Marton & Pong, 2005; Wood et al., 2017). A sample group determines a range of possible ways to experience a phenomenon, not for an *individual* but for a *population*, in a specific context to which the sample belongs (Åkerlind, 2005, p. 323; Larsson & Holmström, 2007); thus, a phenomenographer does not catalogue responses of participants and how many share that view (Peck, Sears, & Donaldson, 2008).

My (inevitably incomplete) attempt to capture experience is informed by Pitt and Britzman's (2003) apt identification of "the crisis of representation" in qualitative research in the context of trying to discern difficult knowledge with a poststructuralist humility regarding experience, as researchers nonetheless attempt "to offer some contingent

observations about how individuals—including the researcher—make knowledge in and of the world” (p. 756).

Methods

This study involved semi-structured individual interviews with a participant-generated stimulus, as well as a task-based focus group with the same participants, and then a follow-up set of individual interviews. I began the initial interviews with the creation of an image or text of what came to mind when participants first heard the word “evil.” The use of a stimulus to provoke participants is a common feature of phenomenographic interviews (e.g., Löfström, Nevgi, Wegner, & Karm, 2015; Peck, 2010). I then asked open-ended questions that I had prepared in advance. Questions included:

- Are there other words you might use to convey the same meaning as “evil”?
- Do you think that people can be evil to their core or do you think that only actions are evil? If you can, describe some examples.
- What characteristics must someone or something possess to be evil?
- Do you see evil in historical or present events?
- Would you be surprised if you witnessed evil in your daily life?
- What do you think about presidents and prime ministers using the word evil in political speeches?

This project sought to explore a new topic in the hopes of provoking participants “into thinking about or seeing something differently,” and thus fits into qualitative research that can “serve as an intervention, stimulate self-reflection, [and] generate social awareness” (Leavy, 2017, p. 6). I used focus groups in addition to individual interviews because groups are helpful for ascertaining participant perceptions of issues (Ellefsen, 2016), particularly the extent to which concepts are difficult or easy to understand (Löfström, 2014), and where the subject matter is of a sensitive nature (Barbour 2007; Berg 2004; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). I asked participants (in groups of three to four) to place images and text along a spectrum of more to less evil. I had planned on using the participant-created pictures from the initial interview; however, because participants generally did not draw pictures, I added images for the task-based group activity based on their written and verbal responses as well as my own judgement with the intention of providing engaging

stimuli to provoke “vibrant discussion about the phenomenon under study” (Peck, 2010, p. 585). These images included historical figures (Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Adolf Eichmann), fictional characters (a demon, Darth Vader, Voldemort, Nosferatu, Edward Cullen), non-human entities (Hurricane Katrina and Ebola), and short text descriptions (murderer who kills adults, murderer who kills children, person who accidentally kills an adult, person who accidentally kills a child). The group task provided an opportunity for participants to discuss evil with each other instead of answering my questions, which produced a more casual dynamic than the individual interviews because the participants could converse in a more “natural” way (Ellefsen, 2016, p. 164). After the focus group, I interviewed participants individually again. At that point, I asked them the extent to which they agreed with their group’s placement of images and probed them regarding some claims arising from the earlier interviews.

Demographic Information

Interviews took place at a non-denominational, independent school with a population ranging from kindergarten through Grade 12 located in a major urban area in Western Canada. I am aware that my snapshot is of a specific place, time, and context, and thus my findings do not preclude the existence of other categories.

Fifteen participants were drawn from the 2014–2015 Grade 11 (junior) class, aged 16 to 18 years old. I asked participants to self-identify their gender, religion, and geographical background. Nine self-identified as male, and six as female. Religious self-identification included Agnostic, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Roman Catholic, Sikh, and Unitarian. All participants had been born in Canada, but their parents and/or grandparents hailed from a diverse range of countries: Canada, China, England, Germany, the Philippines, India, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Pakistan, Poland, Turkey, and the United States.

I was consistently surprised and impressed by the level of historical detail and psychological insights that the participants expressed. A factor that likely contributed to their high level of discourse was their academic courses. Several were taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses on human geography and psychology. One participant, Serena, explicitly mentioned that she was drawing from what she had learned in those two classes regarding Hitler’s personal history and complexities regarding judgements about terrorists. Many students do not take those AP courses, and so generalizability is

tentative because youths may not be exposed to similar ideas unless they have had other opportunities.

Analysis

Phenomenographers organize data into categories of description, an “outcome space” that corresponds to different meanings or ways of experiencing the phenomenon, as well as the logical “structural relationships linking these different ways of experiencing” (Åkerlind, 2005, p. 322). Following Marton (1981, 1986, 2015), I began with selected quotations from a variety of interviews, which I then decontextualized into a pool of meaning (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2017). I read through the transcripts and composed a few obvious categories about evil, and then analyzed the transcripts accordingly, revising and creating new categories. My process was a reflexive and theorizing activity, inspecting each transcript for evidence of that category (Belt & Belt, 2017; Marton & Booth, 1997), and reformulating and/or renaming categories accordingly (Åkerlind, 2005; Marton, 1986). I identified and described similarities and variations, thus establishing the structural aspect (Marton & Pong, 2005). My final step was to reread all the transcripts looking for refinements to my analysis (Bowden & Green, 2010).

In phenomenography, attention to credibility (as opposed to validity) is important throughout the study, including being open to unique participant conceptualizations, selecting an appropriate group, negotiating meaning with the participants, defending the interpretation of the results persuasively, and ensuring dependability regarding the interview conversation and transcription (Collier-Reed, Ingerman, & Berglund, 2009, pp. 345–348; Guba & Lincoln, 2013, p. 59). Because my own “voice” will permeate the study, which has been shaped by “the framework of the social, cultural, historical, political, economic, ethnic, and gender positions of the constructor” (Guba & Lincoln, 2013, pp. 57–58), there can be no objectivity in the sense of a lack of bias, judgement, or prejudice. Instead, there is a higher standard of objectivity, one that requires the recognition of subjectivities and their impact on research. Such *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 1988; Lang, 2011) require researchers to discuss how they are positioned and then seek knowledges that are translatable across subjective locations. I included member-checking with participants in the final individual interviews as well as constantly attempting to separate

my assumptions from those of my participants; however, “any outcome space is inevitably partial, with respect to the hypothetically complete range of ways of experiencing a phenomenon” (Åkerlind, 2005, p. 328).

Findings

Participants in this study provided a range of conceptualizations of evil. I separated these into five referential aspects: evil as images; evil as affects (bodily) and effects (cognitive); evil as abnormal and extraordinary; evil as a human thing; and evil as subjective (see Table 1). These aspects (e.g., differences in overall conceptualizations) revealed a variety of ways youths might think about evil. The first two categories—images and affects/effects—reveal what/how one might picture or feel evil. The latter three categories—evil as abnormal, human, and subjective—speak to how one might define evil beyond these initial reactions. Within each of these categories, there were variations (structural aspects of each referential aspect).

Table 1. Outcome space of youth conceptualizations of evil

Referential Aspect (differences in overall conceptualizations)		Structural Aspect (variation of internal structure of the conceptualizations)
Evil as images	Visualizing tropes from horror and religion	Focus on identifying particular characters and themes
	Not being able to see—darkness and the unknown	Focus on literally not being able to see (hidden, distortion) as well as that which is intentionally hidden (secrecy, the occult)
	Not liking what one sees—ugliness	Focus on geometric and/or aesthetic flaws in people and in an abstract sense
Evil as effects (bodily) and affects (cognitive)	Cold	Focus on bodily affects and/or cognitive effects
	Shivers	
	Fear	
	Unease	

Referential Aspect (differences in overall conceptualizations)		Structural Aspect (variation of internal structure of the conceptualizations)
Evil as a distinctly human (mostly)	An entity needs the capacity to choose evil	Focus on one or more of the following: awareness, intent, sadistic pleasure, and/or lack of remorse (and that plants and/or animals likely do not have the capacity)
Evil as subjective	Evil is a matter of perspective No one is purely good or evil Nonetheless there are tipping points to evil	Focus on the difficulty in labelling someone/thing as evil as participants know some background in “real” life and/or popular film and television Focus on that people can change (from good to evil and vice versa) and/or that evil is created by nurture not nature Despite subjectivity, participants focused on defining evil by one or more of the following: scale, intensity, innocent victims, awareness, intent, sadistic pleasure, and/or lack of remorse
Evil as abnormal, extraordinary	Evil as other, not “us” Evil not part of our normal, daily lives Evil for extraordinary individuals	Focus on evil as from a different place, time, or for people different than the participants

Evil as Images

Participants conjured up religious imagery, such as the Devil and evil spirits. These images overlap with tropes from religion and horror films. Participants also included what is hidden, a secret, or part of the occult, as well what is considered geometrically or aesthetically flawed. The latter two subcategories relate to other frequent images of evil—darkness/the unknown, as well as ugliness. There is power inherent in the word evil:

SERENA: I feel like evil is such an extreme word that nothing really matches it. It’s a shooting word; it’s just loaded. It’s taking it to a whole new level. It takes

it to a religious aspect as well somewhat because like evil is traditionally rooted from Satan and all that religious stuff; so it's a really loaded term and nothing really matches it.

For Nick, the image that popped into his head when he heard the word evil was “a devil with horns on his head, doing bad things to innocent people, getting others to do selfish things.” Nikolai wrote: “sharp, jagged, harsh, often darkness” at the beginning of his interview, and then described what he meant in more detail:

As a representation of that, something that is geometrically flawed that is not physically possible has that strong connotation of evil in my mind. I've seen representations of this in video games and things like that, that try to portray evil using unclear physical boundaries and just the idea of distortion. This goes back to the idea of darkness. It's not really darkness per se, but it's obscurity and the inability to see what's going on.

When asked about what makes vampires evil, Kunta replied, “they can harm you, they are sinister, they have their cloaks and keep hidden, you don't know them, they come out at night, a time of darkness, you can't see—the unknown.” The association of evil and the occult, literally “what is hidden” from the Latin *occultus* (Simpson, 1968, p. 408), is unmistakably associated with evil, as are those who are on the fringes of society. Drawing from an example of witch hunts, women, especially older wise ones, were frequently associated with the Devil and the occult. Serena, much to her own surprise, found herself drawing heavily from Disney movies, particularly *The Little Mermaid* and the character of Ursula:

It's automatically what I think of. And I find it interesting that all the evil people in Disney are always old and ugly, and they always put them out to be women, and never men. It's always an older female. It's just the stereotype kind of.

In this study, Serena was unique in her identification of a gendered aspect of evil; however, it is perhaps unsurprising given the dominant gendered relations here in Canada (and elsewhere) within which women are to be desirable and alluring, and thus older and/or independent women are objects of fear and revulsion (e.g., Anderson, 2015; Hester, 1992). The trope of evil as ugly did reappear in the transcripts with different participants,

and is also not new to Western society. The ancient Greeks had a saying, *καλός κ' αγαθός* (*kalos kagathos*), which is often translated as “the beautiful and the good” (Liddell & Scott, 1996).¹ Those who fit societal standards of attractiveness were assumed to have an equally good character or level of ability. Sociologists have noted this as a significant cognitive bias in play, dubbed the Halo Effect—the tendency to rate attractive people more favourably in terms of their other characteristics (Lachman & Bass, 1985; Thorndike, 1920). Conversely, unattractive people are assumed to have negative characteristics (Fabello, 2013).

It is likely that none of these representations are shocking—they correspond with much popular media. Perhaps more interesting is not what represents evil, but how these representations affect us.

Evil as Affects (bodily) and Effects (cognitive)

From the participants, it was clear that there is a feeling, both physical and psychological, that evil can have. This evil feeling is profoundly negative, which partially explains why the rhetoric of evil in politics and elsewhere can be so powerful. Strawberry’s feeling of evil did not take corporeal form, but rather indicated bodily affect:

When I think of evil, I think of evil spirits; more like, you are walking down in the middle of the night somewhere, probably coming back from a friend’s party, coming to your home, and all of a sudden there is this big gush of wind passing by and you feel that there is something wrong. And then you have a feeling that there is evil lurking around you... You feel really cold. It’s so weird. You have a really strong feeling that something is present and you are actually being haunted or something.

At one point, Nikolai described evil as “a general feeling” that was linked to the anxiety of the “unknown” and “darkness,” while Kunta noted that evil is linked to being “scared” when confronted with the “unknown” or by those who “are doing something to harm

1 *καλός κ' αγαθός* (full form: *καλός και αγαθός*) is the masculine, singular, nominative form, and thus the endings of the words would be different when referring to: other genders, in the plural, or when the phrase functions differently in a sentence (e.g., the nominative form as the subject of the sentence versus the accusative form as the object in a sentence).

you.” Thus, although there are clear images of evil, there are also feelings and senses of evil. As such, conjuring up such representations and bodily affects can have a significant impact when evil is invoked in political rhetoric.

Evil as Distinctly Human (Mostly)

Interconnected patterns emerged from participant responses to questions about whether plants, non-human animals, and natural disasters can be evil. Participants generally identified evil as confined to humans, such as Kira saying that “Ebola and Katrina are just things.” Some of this was attributed to an anthropocentric viewpoint as well as a lack of knowledge about animals, such as Riley remarking jovially that his “view is pretty humanity-centric, mostly because I’m a human.” Although Tom attributes his similar view to lack of knowledge (“we don’t know that much about what goes on the minds of animals”), Amnis saw a similar, but more nuanced point-of-view:

I guess not really because we aren’t really sure what goes through the brain of an animal. Most times we think it’s kind of like instinct. But then you get to like where otters rape baby seals to death. Is that evil? Or is that a weird nature thing like instinct? Is it a by-product of instinct maybe? I guess for animals and especially plants, you can’t say they are evil, but when you get to things that have more intelligence, like chimps and stuff, they kind of do realize what they are doing, the consequences, then maybe you can kind of start using the label evil there because they do realize what’s going to happen. They have a basic understanding of that. And if they still do something they know will cause harm to another chimp then maybe you can maybe label that as evil.

Participants saw evil as largely confined to the human realm because they understood the cognition involved for the criteria of evil (i.e., awareness and intention) as limited to humans. Such an anthropocentric view is interesting given the frequent association of evil and animality in popular film and television (e.g., werewolves) as well as the assumption of malign intent for some animals, such as the shark from *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975). When these participants pondered the creatures in their ordinary lives, the Enlightenment worldview of only human animals are capable of reason seemed to trump representations of evil.

For someone to be considered evil, they must make a choice to take that path and not be coerced into it. Tom and I spoke about the issue of intent:

TOM: One of the first things that come to mind [when I hear “evil”] is the intent to hurt or destroy others, especially selfishly. I think that would be evil.... the intent to hurt or destroy others that could perhaps mean someone, who personally of his own volition, believes that he has to kill or harm others; that would be one category. Another category might be selfish sadism, enjoying in seeing others being hurt. People with a destructive personality who have no reason or motive for being that way, or some malicious motive.

Of course, in order to make that choice, an evildoer must first be aware that their action is potentially evil, and then intend to do it; for example, a participant wrote “designed intentionally to inflict pain,” and later in the interview made this comment about vampires:

NIKOLAI: I mean you can think he’s evil because he kills people, but that’s just our bias because we are people. We don’t consider ourselves evil because we eat animals. It’s the same thing as long as there is no intent, no sadist intent.

Cold, rational intent was a common theme among participants. Serena remarked: “If it’s planned out and purposeful it’s evil.” Because participants staunchly conceived of both awareness and intent as inherently human capabilities, linking those two attributes with evil, the supposed uniqueness of human animals seems to be assumed.

Evil as Subjective

Most participants spoke to an idea that what we label as “evil” is subjective and that evil is created by nurture (or lack thereof), not nature:

KUNTA: It’s all really subjective. I think it’s a good thing that we have things like the Devil/Satan/Lucifer, which are kind of the ultimate evil; don’t be like that. But then somebody does that to you, and then you are like “they are evil,” but then you do it back, and they are like, “no, you are evil,” and it becomes complicated.

Related to this idea is that the more you know about someone or something, the more difficult it is to label them as evil, as Martin articulated, “the backstory is just as important

as the definition [of evil]... I mean, you can see it as an act of evil but it shouldn't be branded as evil without the full story, the context." Tom mentioned something similar, "What if the person has lived a very terrible life? What if the person had no choice? What if the person was pressured into it?" As Benedict succinctly stated, "I think people become evil. I think everybody has the potential to be good or evil in the constraints of their society. It seems like circumstances, the people around them, push them to be different." Amnis noted a similar process:

I think it's how you were raised. Your environment, the one you've been brought up in. If you are kind of taught that it's OK to do these things, that doesn't make you evil. But if you are taught what's right and what's wrong—morals and stuff—then something else in your life pushes you to go against those things, maybe like Hitler. Maybe if he had gone to art school he wouldn't have had all that pent-up rage.

An assumption of statements such as Amnis's is that evil is not inherent to our being; it is created from certain circumstances.

Despite the lack of a universal evil, certain interrelated attributes led some participants to label someone or something as evil, a "tipping point" that makes someone evil regardless of a participant's appreciation for the subjectivity of evil: choice, lack of remorse, sadistic pleasure, innocent victims, scale, and intensity. Participants developed ideas that went beyond awareness of, and intention for, evil. The scale of harm done could make someone evil. In their focus group, Amnis, Nick, and Estavan used two criteria—scale and intention—to separate some of the fictional characters on the spectrum of more to less evil. They rated Voldemort and Darth Vader as more evil than vampires because Vader blew up an entire planet and Voldemort killed many people and children. Harming children is generally seen as particularly heinous and thus extreme even on a small scale. Estavan said: "It's more serious if it's a child because they still have more of their life ahead of them. But that still doesn't give them a reason to kill adults."

The scale or intensity of an atrocity negates any positive intentions, thus still necessitating a label of evil. As Mary said, "I think your intentions are one of the most important things to make that difference, but it's also kind of what you do, like if it's something really bad then it's obviously going to be considered evil." Participants saw actions like murder and rape as always evil due to either their scale (i.e., sheer number of

victims) or intensity (i.e., severe impact on a limited number of victims). In such cases, even “good” intentions are trumped by extreme actions:

MARTIN: [Hitler] had those good intentions, but by doing that to that extreme he was throwing away his humanity to pull off those orders of the genocide and all of that. So that evil is kind of different in my opinion.

Amnis echoed a similar sentiment: “Yeah, I guess [Hitler] maybe did have good intentions to maybe get Germany out of its bad position, but like half the stuff he did he didn’t have to do. So that’s the tipping point toward evil.”

Evil as Abnormal, Extraordinary

Participants overwhelmingly conceived evil as being at the individual level, but only extraordinary ones. Organizations can be evil, but that is dependent on the individuals within them. As Tom stated,

Organizations are typically led by people. Al Qaeda was led by Osama Bin Laden; the Nazi party was led by Adolf Hitler. These organizations are based on the ideologies of the people who lead them or the people who founded them.

Evil, thus, can operate on a grand scale, but at the heart of it will be individual humans and their actions. Benedict said:

I think everyone actually sees it as individual because it’s just our nature. We need some kind of face to put to something. Like when we think of Apple, the company, we think of Steve Jobs, you know? It’s a face that’s associated with a company or circumstances...like if you think of genocide in Germany then you think of Hitler. It’s a face to put with a situation.

The problem with this hyper-individualization of broader structures and processes is that it can disperse accountability; it makes it difficult to see how individual actions are nested within, or made possible by, interconnected people working within larger structural and historical forces. As Britzman (1986) states, “The ideology which supports this notion of the rugged individual is used to justify success or failure, social class, and social inequality. This brand of individualism infuses the individual with both undue power and

undue culpability” (p. 453; see also Britzman, 2003). Hyper-individualization of Hitler or any other historical villain runs contrary to the nexus of individual and community culpability (van Kessel & Crowley, 2017).

A particularly interesting finding was that participants considered evil to be unlikely in their own daily lives, and yet also recognized that what we might label as evil (e.g., processes in play during Nazi Germany) were part of those individuals’ daily lives. In other words, evil is thought to be personally irrelevant. As Nikolai stated: “I would be surprised [to see evil in my daily life]... If I saw something bad I wouldn’t be as surprised. If I saw something that I would genuinely consider evil it would be very shocking.” Amnis echoed a similar sentiment: “It’s kind of like, it’s not like we live in a post-apocalyptic [world] or some place where there is anarchy or anything like that.” It should, however, be noted that not all participants shared that view. Jean noted that, “of course, I would be startled and uncomfortable. But I do think that I could see evil anywhere.”

Related to evil seeming foreign to our daily lives is our sense of agency (or lack thereof) in combatting evil, as Serena explained:

I would like to say [the Holocaust] wouldn’t [happen again] because it’s happened before. History does repeat itself, but we try to prevent it. But maybe I feel like it would. There is so much conflict in the world right now, I think it’s bound to happen, especially somewhere like the Middle East or something... We always hear these stories of people like Malala, she was one person who reached out to so many people, but it’s such a hard thing these days for one person to make an impact. You feel so small. You need a bunch of people to actually make an impact, I feel. But then again there are those single people who make stuff happen. You need to be an icon already to have a voice, I feel. Like Angelina Jolie would be a lot easier than me doing it. It just wouldn’t work for me; I’m a nobody.

Returning to the idea of hyper-individualization, this is another negative effect of seeing individuals effecting change. Failing to see interconnections among ordinary folks behind major societal changes and events (for both “good” and “evil”) can leave us with a feeling of disempowerment.

Evil is not a term applied to ourselves; it is a critique reserved for other people. For example, when asked if she saw any labels of evil in historical events, Kunta paused, then replied:

The first thought that came to mind was neo-Nazis. I'm personally against it, obviously. Because Hitler lost World War II, we see Hitler as the evil one, but if Hitler had won I'd probably see Jews as evil...it's about the majority view...it's not that there's evil and then there's the other people, there's evil and then there's us.

This idea interconnects the conceptualizations that evil is a matter of perspective and that the more personal details you know, the harder it is to label evil. The more familiar we are, the less evil one might seem.

Discussion

The implications of these webbed conceptualizations for education are many. From the referential aspect of evil as images, an analysis of pictures in textbooks is warranted. What pictures of figures like Adolf Hitler are chosen by authors and publishers, and what effect and affects do these representations have? What happens when students and teachers see an image of Hitler, sitting sternly in uniform? How might that change if they see pictures of him kissing babies, laughing while on the phone, or playing with dogs? Thinking more generally of the aspect of evil as affects and effects, how might images and textual descriptions of genocides and other horrific events produce sensations and feelings in students?

Politics of Evil

Although all the implications listed above are worthy of study, in this article I will focus on the need to trouble the *politics of evil*. I define the politics of evil as the invocation of evil in political rhetoric against a person or group that (intentionally or not) stifles democratic debate, and can promote hate speech, such as George W. Bush's reference to the Axis of Evil (Bush, 2002). In social studies, educators are generally expected to build students' political literacy skills and capacities for critical thinking, and these implications

arose from my commitment at the beginning of my doctorate to think seriously about how educators might teach issues like war, genocide, and systemic racism in ways that produce feelings of agency and responsibility without descending into despair.

The politics of evil encourage obedience to political authority, and thus the ability to deconstruct it is a meaningful form of political literacy—helping students to understand and navigate political rhetoric. The politics of evil is harmful to the process of thinking in a public sense—thinking independently from authority, but interconnected with others—because this rhetoric manipulates our bodily affects and cognitive effects of our nascent understandings of evil, creating an “us versus them” mentality more so than a critical engagement with policies and their effects. There is much wisdom in our bodies—in how we experience feelings and emotions—and such experiences can make learning with/through evil a generative option (e.g., Ndalianis, 2012; Thacker, 2011). The political manipulation of such affects and effects, in contrast, can be dangerous to good relations with others.

The effects of political invocations of evil can be catastrophic, such as the death and suffering resulting from the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, not to mention the proliferation of domestic policies that removes citizens’ rights. The politics of evil can shift public attention away from government (in)actions and policies:

AMNIS: I guess it’s kind of twisting the word, especially Bush—the Axis of Evil, you know... [Politicians] are just using that towards their own needs, especially for Bush. It’s much easier to become president in wartime and stay president. Like, you create an out group or an in group, it’s much easier to control your in group, it’s us versus them. It’s a lot easier to control your own population. That stops people from pointing fingers at you.

This process of shutting down critical thought is partly because of the bodily affects and cognitive effects of evil. Kira spoke about the fear produced by naming someone or something as evil: “It kind of gives a notion of fear. So, if something is bad you don’t necessarily have to be afraid of it. But if it’s evil, it sounds terrifying.” Anyone can tap into these feelings, but the impact can be more severe when a politician invokes evil:

SERENA: Everyone believes what the prime minister and president say, because they are the leaders. So if they label terrorism as evil, then we are going to think

that, and we won't want to back down or compromise. I think it hinders us from resolving issues... If you label it as evil, you are going to take it at face value, you are not going to dig deeper and see that we did this to them and that's why they are doing it back.

If a politician uses the word evil in a speech, those who hear the speech might take it as a given, rather than questioning it (as we might with a peer).

The use of the word and concept of evil produces an intensity that affects our assumptions and actions in terms of our social position, or how we interact with others (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2008). I asked participants how they would react differently if I said, "Watch out for that guy, he's evil," versus "Watch out for that guy, he's bad." Estavan responded: "Well, if he's bad, I'd just think more that he's rude, he's impolite, whereas if you said evil I'd be more suspicious about him." To partially repeat Kunta's quote from earlier: "...it's not that there's evil and then there's the other people, there's evil and then there's *us*" (emphasis added). Evil and otherness are intimately entwined. "We" can never be evil—such a term is reserved for those whom we deem as not belonging, which, of course, can never be us. Kira noted:

It's like, through the years, evil is portrayed as the one you are against politically usually. So, it's like those [World War II] cartoons we watched where the bad guys were like Japanese people with bad teeth and stuff. And then they were evil because they were ugly. Oh yeah—evil and ugly. They always make the pretty person good and the ugly person evil. [Characters in Disney movies] are also ugly and they have big noses. I heard that some of them might be a thing to attach to the Jews.

The order-word of evil shapes our interactions with these groups and the objects that are associated with them (symbols, etc.), and we can use stereotypes and other prejudices to justify our assumptions. The naming of evil has profound implications for how that body is treated, where that body is considered legitimately to be, and the intents ascribed to those bodies' actions. Here lies a link between evil and hate. When a group who is an "other," i.e., those who do not conform to and with the norms of a particular society (by choice or by default), the label of evil can very easily incite hate speech, and thus discrimination and violence. By associating an "other" (in Kira's example, the Jews) with

evil, there can be a tremendous intensity that affects us consciously and unconsciously. We can easily fall into the trap of racism, whether we are aware of that process or not. The idea of evil shapes our interactions with these groups. The evil group, the villains, can now more easily be denied even the most basic of rights—what we are willing to do to villains versus fellow human beings is profoundly different.

These processes are constantly in play. An Internet search in January 2016 revealed a Yahoo Answers section on “Why are Muslims so evil?” with 30 answers (Anonymous, n.d.). The so-called “best answer” cites violent passages from the Qu’ran, listing those who Muhammad supposedly killed. This answer was posted in 2011 and has garnered many comments over the years, some critical of the author (and the question itself), but others are clearly hate speech, powered by the effects and affects of evil, such as:

[Muslims] complain about their own lands. Move to those of others, scream RACIST every time anyone complains and try to make that land like the one they left. *They’re evil and should be exterminated.* Every group should recognise that these people are a disease on the earth that must be eliminated.

The roots of this hate speech may have been affected by the exacerbated climate of hate against Muslims since 9/11, likely stemming from both political rhetoric and popular culture. In such cases of hate speech, evil is invoked with potentially tragic consequences. Critical thoughtfulness can be diminished through the political rhetoric of fear. My participants did not necessarily disagree with the label of evil, for example, many thought it was appropriate to label the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as evil; however, a few participants were wary of the political and social repercussions, such as anti-Muslim hate speech and violence, as well as a failure to examine systemic issues that caused a group like ISIL to emerge in the first place. As Carlson (1985) noted, it is easy to distort a complex situation when it is presented in “an uncontested, taken-for granted manner” (p. 58). As I understand it, one of the main messages of the participant responses from this study is to use the label of evil with caution. This conclusion mirrors Stanley’s (1999) attention to detail when deciding how to teach his children about the Nazis. Word choice is important, including vocabulary and verb tense choice, as is careful thought regarding the consequences of the content and its delivery.

Conclusions

Participants provided a range of conceptualizations of evil. Some focused on what they visualized, and some reflected on what they felt. They spoke thoughtfully about evil as being extraordinary and abnormal, and no participant had the expectation of witnessing or being a part of something evil. This understanding is particularly heightened in historical contexts; for example, it seemed easier to label events in the past as evil than contemporary ones. Participants did not generally see plants and animals as capable of evil, and when they did, those animals' awareness and thus intent for evil were assumed to be on par (or close to on par) with humans. In many contexts, participants saw evil as subjective—that evil is a matter of personal or societal perspective. The more you know about people, the less likely you would be to label them as evil, and this understanding partially explains why it might be so difficult to label those in our daily lives as evil.

Regardless of specific understandings of evil, this study made clear the power that the order-word of evil has, particularly in political rhetoric. By identifying and then troubling the power of this word, there is an opportunity to add meaningful and important complexity to social studies classrooms. Educators in classrooms can spark discussions about the complex people and processes involved, as well as our own senses of evil and what might be produced by them. These discussions can be a helpful form of political literacy, developing independent thinkers who might challenge the simplistic political rhetoric of fear and hate, and instead engage with more nuanced perspectives. Thus, it behooves educators, curriculum designers, and textbook authors and editors to think about whether classroom resources and practices exacerbate or complicate the politics of evil. By assessing the bodily affects and cognitive effects that the word evil has as an order-word, students and teachers can guard against these dangerous political invocations.

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