

1. Describe the social psychological mechanisms that might lead a nation to commit genocide. What social influence and attitude change processes might help legitimize genocide in the eyes of the citizenry? To what extent and by what means do legitimized authority figures have power to elicit the sort of moral disengagement necessary for the mass public to participate in genocide?

Most humans have enough empathy that, *ceteris paribus*, they are unwilling to intentionally act to directly kill another human, or if they do, they suffer severe psychological consequences. However, that neurological fact is loaded with exceptions.

First, in most historical genocides, most people don't *directly* participate in killing—they merely *enable* it in one way or another, or even simply fail to intervene. The farther someone is from direct involvement in an action, the less it causes an empathic response, and therefore, the less conscious “moral” offense.

This principle of detachment created through distance is evidenced widely. In the “trolley problem” variation of Judith Thomson, most people have a much stronger aversion to *directly* causing someone's death by pushing them over a bridge, than by *indirectly* causing it by switching the course of the trolley. In *On Killing*, Dave Grossman describes the qualitative difference between killing someone with a knife and with artillery. In neuroeconomics, it even infects the issue of “scope neglect”; people are willing to pay dramatically less per person to save a thousand people than to save just one. The farther someone is, the less empathic reflexes have to engage with, and the more it becomes more “somebody else's problem”.

This detachment can be deliberately increased. Demonizing one's enemies to prevent cognitive dissonance is a well known bias (cf. the “Robber's Cave” experiment). In making an “us *vs.* them” scenario even in fairly mild circumstances, this cascades in effect. Inflammatory rhetoric against despicable people is easier, and causes yet more revulsion as attitudes polarize.

If the outgroup are seen not merely as despicable and less than fully human, but as a *threat*, then people will begin to act to defend themselves from this perceived threat. In the hands of authority figures, this can easily mean legal discrimination, prosecution, harassment, etc., all of which further (in the “just world” effect) make people believe that the outgroup must have done something wrong to deserve it.

Simultaneously, everybody involved in such a process only plays a small part; collective disinhibition and social pressure to conform allow every participant to rationalize their actions as only marginal, even if in total they create a genocide. In Milgram's experiments, for instance, ~60% of people will (even if not especially willing) give others what they believe to be a lethal shock; that increases to 70% when the participant is just a bystander, 90% when they first see someone else go through with it, and 93% when they are only administering a test, with shocks given by a second person.

Collectively, such small actions as “just following orders” to arrest someone, “just providing routine service” to military and paramilitary organizations transporting prisoners, “just trying to keep things running” in prison camps where overcrowding has become a serious health hazard, etc., add up to atrocities like Dachau.

Participation in a genocide *does not require* perceived legitimacy; it requires merely a lack of positive *resistance* to strong pressures to participate in situations that become genocidal. In many cases, those pressures can be very strong. Where merely a firm voice was sufficient in Milgram's experiments, in real life people face prosecution as traitors for “aiding and abetting” perceived enemies; can face the wrath of a lynch mob themselves if

they do not take up a hatchet and become part of it; can face court martial or summary execution for disobeying orders...

If anything, given the many self-reinforcing ways that such situations can occur and the difficulty of stopping them once situational momentum takes over, it's surprising there haven't been many *more* genocides.

3. One of social psychology's major contributions has been to explain why and how people often have distorted perceptions of others' behavior. Describe why our ability to interpret the causes of others' behavior (and even to understand our own behavior in hindsight) is limited. What are some conditions that limit our ability to take another's perspective?

To start, there's a fundamental information-theoretic issue: we don't have all the data. At least until we somehow both solve the qualia problem and develop a perfect portable brain scanner, we can only go by observable external behaviors, and they are in a one-to-many relationship with internal states.

This is, for example, why polygraph machines are not "lie detectors". Even knowing blood pressure, pulse, skin conduction, and breath rate, all you have is a highly sensitive measure of physiological arousal. With "behavioral detection", such as that employed by the TSA based on Paul Ekman's work or just done reflexively by people with high empathy, you can add a certain amount of information about someone's basic, what affect they are projecting, and their congruity. I'll be extremely optimistic and further assume that you know the other person's baseline affect and so forth as well, rather than trying to interpret a stranger's behavior.

However, that information is woefully insufficient to determine whether someone is *lying*. Suppose you are under investigation for rape, and when asked whether you committed it, you spike the polygraph and display microexpression of sadness as you say "no".

Is this evidence of a guilty lie?

It's consistent with that theory... but unfortunately, it's not very discriminatory evidence. You could also be remembering the rape of yourself or a loved one; preoccupied with some baseline depression; concerned about the victim; self-pitying in advance because you think you will be punished for a crime you didn't commit; etc. There's simply no way to know.

Nevertheless, investigators will often take it as evidence, because of "confirmation bias". They will ask further questions designed to elicit expected responses if their theory is correct... but not think to ask questions that would *disconfirm* their theory.¹ This is an endemic problem among normal people seeking to understand each other. It's hardly the only problem.

What about when the other person's perspective is antithetical to our own? Accurately understanding a worldview, or even a single opinion, that merely disagrees with you is fairly hard because one doesn't have ready access to the details of supporting arguments for beliefs one hasn't rehearsed. When it's more polarized, such as trying to understand what the Phelps clan thinks about homosexuality, this is much worse; doing so requires not merely understanding disagreeable things, but empathizing with something that characterizes oneself as demonic—hardly a comfortable thought. In the face of that discomfort, most people will simply not *try* to think about it past their superficial understanding and rebuttal of strawmen.

This even happens to understanding oneself; past memories are very easy to tamper with. Even aside from outright memory manipulation à la Loftus, one usually doesn't remember the details of previous states (or almost all memories), but just chunked versions that let one reconstruct them. Reconstructing something from last week, when you still remember most of the surrounding circumstances and if placed in them would still react similarly, is not too hard. Doing so when the supporting information is lost is harder, because one has more to reconstruct. Worst, it could be an ill remembered situation where your previous self would disagree with your current self; the same temptations to mischaracterize them will still be present, even when they used to be your own.

¹ It would be interesting to see if an induction game like Zendo could be used as an intervention to reduce this.

4. Throughout the course we have discussed how more adaptive behaviors can win out of comparatively less adaptive behavior through (a) evolutionary natural selection of behavioral tendencies and (b) transmission of adaptive knowledge through culture. Discuss how these processes interact and how natural selection processes might operate differently at the group and individual levels.

At the individual level, the “natural selection” is *conceptually* simple: individuals with situationally adaptive traits will have a higher likelihood of surviving and producing offspring, thereby passing on those traits to the extent that they are genetic; genetics and thus traits are subject to random variation through mutation; therefore, more adaptive traits will eventually outcompete less adaptive traits.

This isn't quite actually the case, though. *There is no such thing as natural selection at the individual level.* That is a common myth, that you hear from people who think that evolution means that monkeys gave birth to humans, some individual fish suddenly grew legs, *velc.*

What matters is whether some particular *gene* survives, not the individual. There are many cases where it is advantageous to individuals if their entire group, including themselves, shares some trait that in isolation would be disadvantageous. Altruism is one case—the “super-rational” (à la Hofstadter) take on prisoner's dilemma is to always cooperate, and this is essentially what genetics selects for behaviorally. Though an individual acting in this way may well die—such as when someone risks their life to save another's—if that trait is shared by everyone, it's advantageous for everyone, and the gene survives.

It's sometimes fairly difficult to actually distinguish a *genetic* process from a *cultural* one when discussing psychological traits like this.

For example, olive baboons almost universally have a very dominance-based, aggressive, violent social behavior pattern. This might lead one to conclude that this social behavior is the culmination of adaptive genetic evolution. Sapolsky showed that this isn't quite true, though; in one troop he observed where all the dominant males had been wiped out by poisonous food, the rest of the troop—mostly female dominated now—took over its culture, making it far more pacific. If a more cooperative troop is in turn better able to survive and reproduce than “old-fashioned” troops, then this change would be an adaptation that could survive and outcompete the other culture.

Would this be cultural, genetic, or both? Clearly within that troop itself, what happened was a cultural shift; there was no time for genetic change to occur. But did the dominant baboons who died have a genetic difference that made them more dominant? If yes, then part of what happened was a situational change that favored those without that genetic difference, and there will therefore be *genetic* changes to match.

However, *new* baboons entering the troop (with their old behavior patterns) were successfully retrained to the new culture. this implies that the cultural pattern could potentially spread by mere social contact with other troops—a purely cultural effect, unless baboons genetically predisposed to be dominant are also disposed against being able to learn this new behavior.

5. Discuss the relationship between attitudes and behavior. When do attitudes most influence behavior and when do they predict behavior poorly? Through what processes might behavior change attitudes?

I think that distinguishing “attitude” from “behavior” implies a false dichotomy and an unhelpful framing of attitudes as traits. I prefer to think of what is commonly referred to as “attitudes” as a *particular subset* of behavior: conscious thoughts, emotional responses, etc. in certain situations.²

Take the “implicit *association test*” for instance. Cognitive associations create priming that, when activated, make salient stimuli faster to process. If one has an association between a particular race and valence, then if one is cued, the other will be faster to access. For instance, someone who has had strong negative experiences with white people would probably have a detectable IAT score.

However, this isn’t an attitude, nor even necessarily indicative of one. The same person may not experience any negative racial thoughts about white people; they may not have any conscious racial bias; they may not even act differently towards them. Are they “biased”? This is at best a philosophical question, which isn’t really our department. I think it’s more useful to just openly ask what observable behaviors (including internal ones like cognition and emotion) correlate predictably with what other ones.

One example is the research in internalization and externalization of reward. Without reward, doing some action—even just from situational pressures—leads to justifying it as desirable. Someone who is required to do some boring repetitive task will think it’s more interesting if they aren’t rewarded for it than if they are; reward is taken as the “reason” for doing it, and without the reward, the perceived reason goes away.

Of course, as the Milgram example above demonstrates, people don’t have to *believe* in something to do it. Most of his subjects had severe psychological stress... but most complied and *still pressed the shock button* anyway. In Asch’s experiments the same happened; subjects would initially reject what they thought to be clearly wrong answers by others, but soon started giving the majority view anyway.

There are three ways to interpret the Asch results³: people know that others are wrong, but comply with the pressure to conform anyway because they’re not comfortable resisting; that they doubt their own perceptions, and are willing to trust the group’s more than their own; or that their actual percept is changed. As far as I understand, all three do happen, and this is a case where the interaction between “attitudinal” behaviors and “behavioral” ones is not easily distinguished.

On the flip side, people will act in ways that reinforce their preëxisting beliefs. If someone believes, e.g., that gay people are promiscuous and psychologically damaged, then they will selectively consume news that says this, forget about information that doesn’t support it, etc. If a male goes into the Asch experiment believing that females are worse able to accurately make visual measurements, then this belief will be reinforced by example, and they will be more likely to resist conformity. Beliefs are hard to change in large part because people do not put themselves in situations that challenge them, and even when they do, it’s more likely to just polarize them further.

² I realize this sounds a bit like behaviorism... except that I consider internal behaviors extremely important to include.

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrNIuFrso8I> deserves a nod as an excellent popularization