

When Normal People Do Abnormal Things:
The Psychology of Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Upstanders

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Human Rights Seminar

May 4, 2007

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Adolf Eichmann coordinated transportation of Jews to the death camps during the Holocaust. After his capture, six psychiatrists certified him sane and normal (Arendt, 1963, p. 25). A Dutch man who sheltered a Jewish family for two years during the Holocaust said, when asked about his reasons for doing so, “I did nothing unusual; anyone would have done the same thing in my place” (Oliner, 1988, p. 113). Two ordinary men somehow took extraordinarily different roles while genocide occurred. Thousands more were bystanders, watching genocide happen without causing or stopping it. If both Eichmann and the Dutch rescuer were simply normal people, what makes anyone different from a murderer? What makes anyone different from a hero?

The literature on genocide tends to focus on top-down political and legislative causes and reactions. Nations and international agencies struggle with the issues of prevention and intervention. There is a lot of information focusing on the political and environmental causes of genocide and when and how nation-states and the UN should react. Totalitarian governments, ethnic or religious rivalries, and other large-scale sociocultural constructs can set the stage for genocide. On a sociopsychological level, however, even genocide comes down to interactions between individuals.

There are several roles people take in genocidal situations. The passive role is, of course, the victim, the one on whom genocide is inflicted. The trauma and healing of the victim has been exhaustively researched, but the original cause of victimhood needs no explanation. It is the result of another’s action. In contrast, active roles are not forced on

individuals, but chosen. I intend to focus on three active roles people can choose to fill in genocidal situations: the perpetrator, the bystander, and the upstander.

The psychology of the perpetrator is much more complex than only sadism, psychopathology, or inborn evil. In large-scale crimes such as genocide, most perpetrators begin as normal community members and only slowly shift into what the rest of the world sees as criminals. Perpetrators are always a relatively small percentage of the population, however; the majority of people in a genocidal situation take the role of bystander. I refer to being a bystander as an active role because it is not forced on a person; it is a role they choose, consciously or unconsciously. Bystanders may read news about the signing of a racist law, smell the smoke of burned human flesh coming from a nearby death camp, or even see their neighbors murdered, but they stand by. If no one chose to be a bystander, perpetrators would be completely outnumbered and crushable. The small but irrepressible minority of genocides are the people who do not stand by, but stand up: the upstanders. We know some as heroes, like Oskar Schindler during the Holocaust or General Dallaire during the Rwandan genocide, but many more remain anonymous or are killed before they are recognized by the larger world.

These three roles have one thing in common: those who take them on say, "I only did what anybody would have done in my place." The psychological pressures and responses to genocide result in normal people assuming the unusual roles of perpetrators, bystanders, and upstanders. However, I believe that people respond to genocide by taking the role they do not solely because of outward pressures, but because of inner qualities. Upstanders become upstanders while subject to the same situations as perpetrators and bystanders.

Perpetrators

While it is tempting to see the perpetrator as only evil, sadistic, or crazy, the reality is usually much more complex. As much as we would like to see the perpetrators as separate from us normal humans, genocide by definition occurs on such a large scale that it is impossible to consider millions of perpetrators abnormal. As Hannah Arendt (1963) showed in her documentation of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the perpetrators of genocide can be creepily reminiscent of our next-door neighbor. For many victims of genocide, the perpetrator is indeed their next-door neighbor. The Nazis who participated in the persecution and killing of Jews were not special. They were not picked because they showed especially inhuman characteristics, and outside their activities as Nazis, they were not especially inhuman. This holds true for perpetrators across cultures. Thousands of psychopaths do not band together for the purpose of wiping out millions of victims. Perpetrators are ordinary people who make extraordinary choices. Some of the roots of these choices can be traced to social and cultural pressures which are in some cases extreme and deadly, but in the end each perpetrator is an individual and made that choice as an individual. The question that must be asked is what causes someone to change from a neighbor, employer, customer, or friend to murderer?

Alexander Hinton (1996) explains some of the actions of the perpetrator through the theory of psychosocial dissonance, based on cognitive dissonance theory. In the field of psychology, cognitive dissonance is what happens when a person has several competing ideas or self-concepts. People try to resolve uncomfortable dissonance between these opposing cognitions by changing one or more through disregarding information, the addition of new information, or changing behavior. For example, a

person faced with dissonance between their behavior of smoking and the knowledge that cigarettes cause cancer could resolve the dissonance by discarding information and claiming that cigarettes do not cause cancer; adding information that driving a car is just as dangerous so cigarettes seem less dangerous; or changing their behavior and quitting smoking (Aronson, 1995, p. 179).

While this sounds fairly basic, cognitive dissonance theory can be applied in very interesting ways. For instance, a person who goes through a severe initiation to join a boring group ends up liking the group better than a person who goes through a milder initiation. To reduce dissonance between disliking the group and the behavior of enduring a severe initiation, the person likes the group more (Aronson, 1995, p. 214). If asked to rate the preferability of several items, chose one to keep, then rate them all again, a person will rate the item they chose higher the second time than the first (Aronson, 1995, p. 189). If they chose it, it must be better.

This can be applied to crime in individual situations and genocide in the larger sense. If a person commits one illegal act, they tend to reduce the dissonance between “I did that” and “That was wrong” by convincing themselves that it wasn’t *that* wrong. If it wasn’t that wrong, they are more likely to do it again, which can become a downward spiral. During the beginnings of the Nazi regime, each small act of anti-Semitism committed by ordinary German citizens made it a little bit easier to brush away the large acts. Henri Zukier (1994) phrases the perpetrator’s psychology this way: “[T]he individual passes a moral point of no return but does not realize it until several steps later. Since the steps were incremental, how could he, at that point, declare the next step immoral and not the previous one? How could he quit for moral reasons without thereby

acknowledging his depravity for his previous actions?” (p. 449) To save their sanity and their perception of themselves as a moral person, perpetrators must continue committing crimes.

Hinton takes cognitive dissonance a step further into the anthropological realm. Psychosocial dissonance is what occurs not when two cognitions come into conflict, but when two culturally defined self-concepts conflict. Hinton uses the example of a Pakistani woman who experienced dissonance when her concept of herself as a good daughter required getting married when her parents wished, while her concept of herself as a politician required focusing on occupational goals. Within their separate cultural spaces of family and politics, these self-concepts worked well. Only when occupying the same cultural space did they create psychosocial dissonance.

Hinton focuses his description of psychosocial dissonance during genocide on the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. He explores how a country of Buddhist farmers produced one of the most brutal regimes ever. He explains this by exploring two different cultural contexts in Cambodia: the everyday peaceful life of villagers, and the duty and honor-bound military history. While “everyday communal life [...] is frequently mediated by a high-level cultural model that fosters prosocial behavior, larger sociopolitical interactions [...] are often informed by an extremely salient, yet potentially contradictory, cultural model that promotes aggression” (Hinton, 1996, p. 821). The Khmer Rouge regime avoided creating psychosocial dissonance by putting every-day life into a military context. When placed in an accepted cultural context that condoned aggression towards the other, Cambodians were able to commit crimes that in the context of a village would have been unthinkable.

But while “a totalitarian state may help transform people into agents of death both by promoting an ideology that modifies existing cultural models and by changing the context in which the given models are salient” (Hinton, 1996, p. 823), people cannot shrug responsibility off onto that state. “Ultimately, however, psychosocial dissonance occurs and is reduced on the individual level” (Hinton, 1996, p. 824). Totalitarian regimes may provide an environment where committing terrible crimes is seemingly unavoidable. That does not absolve any individual of their responsibility for their own actions.

Bystanders

“Bystanders” can refer to international organizations, citizens of other nations who do not encourage their governments to act, or to pretty much anyone who is aware of genocide and does not directly help or hinder. In the interests of specificity, however, in this paper bystanders are those whose lives are directly affected by genocide, who watch as their neighbors are deported or shamed or murdered, and do nothing but go on with their everyday lives.

The psychology of bystanders in more common situations than genocide has been extensively studied. After the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese in New York while thirty-eight people listened to her screams from their windows and no one called the police, psychologists designed experiments to test which situations subjects would be most likely and least likely to respond to requests for help. Psychologists John Latané and Bibb Darley were spurred by the Genovese tragedy to investigate further (Keltner & Marsh, 2006). They discovered that when subjects thought other people could also respond, they experienced a “diffusion of responsibility”. Eighty-five percent of subjects who thought

they were the only witness to a seizure responded to a request for help, while only thirty-one percent of subjects responded if they were with five other people. They also discovered that participants were less likely to report a situation if people around them did nothing. The same psychological mechanisms work on people in the midst of genocide. When people feel so many others are involved that their individual actions have no effect, why should they act? Many Germans during the Holocaust (and people in many other situations as well) mentioned this feeling of powerlessness as their reason for not acting. As a result of early Nazi brutality against dissidents and propaganda placing all power in the state, “many Germans retreated into a world of their own and felt profoundly powerless on a social or political level. It was typical of individual Germans to deny having any real power over their fate and, therefore, to deny any degree of personal responsibility, even for their own actions” (Barnett, 2000, p. 18). The benefit of this feeling of powerlessness was that bystanders could feel relieved of responsibility for the situation.

Ervin Staub (2002) conjectures that many of the same mechanisms that affect perpetrators are important to bystanders as well, specifically the idea that once a choice is made to not help a victim, that choice is more likely to be made again. Staub says, “As a result of their passivity in the face of others’ suffering, bystanders change: They come to accept the persecution and suffering of victims” (p. 12). Staub suggests that devaluing the humanity of victims to justify choosing the role of a bystander leads to a downward spiral similar to the one experienced by perpetrators. “People learn and change as a result of their own actions. When they harm other people, a number of consequences are likely to follow. First, they come to devalue the victims more. While in the real world devaluation

normally precedes harm-doing, additional devaluation makes greater mistreatment and violence possible” (p. 22). Devaluation justifies harm-doing, and harm-doing only justifies further devaluation. Although we think of justice as a completely positive concept, Staub also suggests that just-world thinking can increase the tendency to stand by. “Assuming that the world is just, and that people who suffer must have brought their fate on themselves by their actions or character, ironically, perpetrators are likely to devalue people they themselves have harmed” (p. 22). If the world is just, victims only got what they deserve; if an individual is harmed, they must deserve to be harmed again.

Much of the literature on the psychology of being a bystander, backed up by quotes from those who were in the position of bystander or perpetrator, maintains that being a bystander or perpetrator was an unavoidable response to a situation. To gain a full understanding of the genocidal circumstances, however, we must be aware that this is simply not true. Many people in similar risky situations took those risks. Sometimes they paid with their lives and sometimes they saved the lives of others, but they show that compliance was never the only choice.

Upstanders

While almost all the Jews in Poland were killed during the Holocaust, few were killed in Denmark and Bulgaria (Arendt, 1963). Almost every person who has escaped genocide can point to another person who helped them. Bystanders and perpetrators may seem horribly prevalent, but in every instance of genocide normal people also stand up and become heroes. Many of them suffer the consequences bystanders are afraid to risk, and consequently much of the information on their possible motivation is second-hand. I was able to find one significant study of the psychology of upstanders.

Samuel and Pearl Oliner (1988) interviewed 682 people who lived through the Holocaust and published the results in their book *The Altruistic Personality*. 406 of their respondents were rescuers, who were designated as such according to specific criteria from Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust museum: they were “motivated by humanitarian considerations only, risked his or her own life, and received no remuneration of any kind for his or her act” (Oliner, 1988, p. 2). 126 respondents were nonrescuers, which were further subdivided into bystanders and “actives”, who reported either being members of resistance groups or helping Jews, but did not have external evidence to support the report. The remaining respondents were survivors who spoke of those who helped them.

Oliner and Oliner specified four elements of external circumstances that may have affected rescuers and nonrescuers: availability of information and comprehension of that information, the risk of being discovered and the possible consequences, the material resources available, and a precipitating occasion (p. 113). Perhaps surprisingly, they found that rescuers and nonrescuers had similar information available, ran similar risks of helping victims, and had similar amounts of money and space available.

Although many rescuers helped close friends and loved ones, the great majority helped at least one stranger and over half of them had not known those they rescued before the war. “Many rescuers said they admired and respected the Jews they helped; several even loved them. But they also admit to dislike, anger, and exasperation. Feelings of affection facilitated rescue but did not necessarily determine it” (p. 81).

Some rescuers clung to the role of being in charge of the ones they rescued. Oliner recounts one story of a rescuer who would not let the Jewish man who was hiding in his house leave. The rescuer said, “I have not gone to all this trouble in order to fail.

There is only one boss here and I am it” (p. 85). The relief from powerlessness felt by everyone during the war was too precious to lose. Once the rescuer knew they could make a difference in someone’s life, they were not willing to give that life up. “The life of the victim no longer belonged only to the victim--it was jointly owned, and death was therefore not a choice he or she could make alone” (p. 85). Once given an alternative to the terrifying powerlessness of being a bystander, upstanders frequently worked to keep that feeling of power over their own lives and that of others, and turned one rescue into many. The same psychological mechanisms that kept bystanders frozen kept upstanders moving. Along the same lines, the psychological mechanisms that sent perpetrators on a downward spiral of justification into inhuman acts made it more likely for upstanders, once one rescue succeeded, to continue on that path. 65% of rescuers interviewed by the Oliners helped more than five people (p. 50).

The greatest difference Oliner and Oliner found between the external circumstances of rescuers and those of nonrescuers was the community surrounding them. “What apparently distinguished rescuers from nonrescuers was not access to, or potential for organizing, such informal networks, but rather the sentiments and behaviors of their networks--the types of people who comprised their most intimate contacts. [...] Sixty percent of rescuers’ families had at least one member involved in rescue or resistance activities compared with 35 percent of nonrescuers’ families” (p. 131). About two thirds of rescuers began their helping activities in response to a request, and seventy percent of those were approached, not by the victim themselves, but by an intermediary. Upstanders began rescuing in the context of a culture of upstanders, and this same culture was what made it possible to continue rescuing.

However, the Oliners did note the one-third of rescuers who initiated helping victims on their own, not in response to a direct request. Not all rescuing was a result of external circumstance, so bystanders may not be excused on that count. They saw filling the role of an upstander as a lifelong decision. “Rescuers’ commitment to actively protect or enhance the well-being of others did not emerge suddenly under the threat of Nazi brutality. [...] Rescuers integrated such values into their lives well before the war began-- and remained committed to them long after it ended” (p.170). In the end, being an upstander is not a single act, but a decision that is integrated into the whole lifespan.

Creating A Culture of Upstanders

In the article “The Banality of Heroism,” Zeno Franco and Philip Zimbardo (2006) explore how heroism can become as normal as the banal evil of Eichmann. “By conceiving of heroism as a universal attribute of human nature, not as a rare feature of the few ‘heroic elect,’ heroism becomes something that seems in the range of possibilities for every person, perhaps inspiring more of us to answer that call” (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006). If heroism is something everyone can do, the next step is to make heroism something that everyone does.

Education can turn potential bystanders into potential upstanders. People who score higher on emotional intelligence tests, or who have firm moral beliefs, are less likely to feel powerless or like the risk is too great, and more likely to intervene (Reuters, 2007; Oliner & Oliner, 1988). To encourage heroism, Franco and Zimbardo believe in the importance of “the stimulation of heroic imagination—the capacity to imagine facing physically or socially risky situations, to struggle with the hypothetical problems these situations generate, and to consider one’s actions and the consequences. [...] Seeing one’s

self as capable of the resolve necessary for heroism may be the first step toward a heroic outcome.” Encouragement from family and social groups to think independently and empathically also makes someone more likely to be an upstander. Perhaps the most encouraging research, done by Latane and Darley in the wake of the Kitty Genovese tragedy, showed that when someone else says, “Maybe we should do something,” subjects were three times more likely to help. When someone else took action to help, every single subject joined in helping as well (Keltner & Marsh, 2006). This parallels the findings of Oliner and Oliner (1988) regarding upstanders coming from a social context of other upstanders. The same mechanisms that send perpetrators and bystanders into downward spirals make it possible for upstanders to create a culture of activism.

This puts responsibility for activism in the hands of every individual. During the recent tragic shooting at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, 76-year-old Professor Liviu Librescu barricaded the door to his classroom with his body long enough for his students to escape out the window of the classroom. He was a Holocaust survivor (Downey, 2007). I can only guess that his experiences living through desperate situations, most likely with the help of others, gave him the psychological strength and self-knowledge, over fifty years later, to be a hero.

The same psychological model can explain both why the crimes of perpetrators grow and why upstanders continue to stand up. Education must focus on increasing consciousness of the ease of slipping into the role of perpetrator or bystander. The crucial element, however, is that once people feel a sense of power in their ability to make a difference in the lives of others, it is harder to switch directions. If bystanders can merely watch one person stand up for what they believe, an illusion of powerlessness vanishes.

The best way to help others become upstanders is to become a role model, an example of the falsity of the thought, “Everyone else is doing it.” No one is powerless, and the best way to spread the knowledge of that is to model that power. So much of the research on perpetrators and bystanders ranges from disturbing to completely hopeless of the human race, but my fundamental conclusion is one of hope. Bystanders stand by because they don’t believe anyone could change the circumstances; upstanders stand up because they know they can. My individual contribution may be small, but when it comes to influencing my friends and acquaintances, I am never powerless.

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