



From the banality of evil to the complicity of indifference: The effects on intergroup relationships



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ABSTRACT

As the analysis of historical intergroup conflicts has shown, support for unequal policies was not conveyed just by an uncritical obedience to authorities but also by an indifference towards other social groups. Indifference for others may indeed have a role of complicity in supporting discriminatory policies and arousing intergroup conflicts on par with the obedience to authority identified by the banality-of-evil thesis. In the present manuscript, the aim is to define such indifference and to consider which socio-psychological variables foster its rise, the consequences for intergroup dynamics, as well as the factors that contrast it and support tolerant and constructive intergroup relationships. In particular, indifferent people are characterized by conservative values, less blatant forms of submission to authority and subtle prejudicial attitudes. On the other side, the assumption of social responsibility, an inclusive morality and a more critical and constructive relationship with authority are all relevant factors in contrasting such intergroup indifference.

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Those who knew did not talk; those who did not know did not ask questions; those who did not ask questions received no answers; and so, in this way, the average German citizen won and defended his ignorance. (Levi, 1965, p. 381)

The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference. (Wiesel, 1960)

The issue of intergroup relationships and the effects of intergroup contact in fostering tolerant vs. intolerant attitudes and behaviors is one of the classical and most studied topics in social psychology (Brown & Gaertner, 2001). Indeed, since the tragic events that characterized Fascist and Nazi domination in Europe during the first part of the last century and the following similar despotic political powers responsible of mass-killing (e.g. China under Mao Zedong), scholars have tried to understand which intergroup dynamics led to such high levels of intolerance towards minorities (Miller, 1999). In particular, the way people related to the authorities and the reasons why people followed these authorities even when they imparted immoral and unethical commands was

investigated (Staub, 1999). As Lang (2014) pointed out, the role of social psychology in understanding the dynamics which lead to intergroup conflicts or which may promote a tolerant cohabitation is still relevant today. Indeed, we live in a period when many countries in the world are dealing with the phenomenon of migration and the measures adopted to face it sometimes fuel divisions and intolerance. For instance, in 2015 Hungary's Prime Minister decided to erect a razor-sharp barbed wire fence to prevent migrants from entering his country and this measure was greeted by a wave of public support. On the other hand, in 2013 the Mayor of the Italian island Lampedusa (where many migrants die every year trying to reach Europe) has fought the "silence of Europe"¹ and their exclusive policies on immigration, renewing an appeal in favor of immigration rights.

However, the dynamics underpinning intergroup conflict or constructive cohabitation do not only involve those who actively oppose immigration or those who instead welcome and offer help to refugees and migrants. Social psychology has indeed often focused its analysis just on a bipolar conception of individual behaviors within societies that pits blatant intolerance towards altruism and tolerance. As Campbell and Christopher (1996a) have pointed out, in order to go beyond a narrow bipolar rhetoric about

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¹ <http://www.fairplanet.org/story/europes-shame-mayor-of-lampedusa-criticizes-the-eu-for-its-immigration-policies-and-treatment-of-migrants/>.

human motives and their consequences (see [Campbell & Christopher, 1996b](#)), many other stances and behaviors may be recognized between these two “extremes.” One of these distinct positions may be identified in an indifferent stance towards intergroup conflicts and tensions. For instance, despite the outrage that emerges among both political institutions and the general population after every tragedy of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea, the immigrant detention centers soon go back to being forgotten places, invisible to most people. Likewise, the almost daily violation of human rights that affects some minorities in many countries (e.g. Italy) also disappears from the public debate. [Bauman \(1989\)](#) underlined that the indifference and the silence of the population, and not just their obedient attitudes towards authority's demands, are relevant factors that contribute to perpetrating severe abuses. In this sense, it is important to consider the effect that such indifference has on arousing intergroup conflicts and supporting discriminative and intolerant policies. In the present manuscript, the aim is to define such indifference and to consider the socio-psychological variables that foster this unconcern for the fate of other groups, the consequences for intergroup dynamics, as well as which factors may instead contrast with such indifference, and promote tolerant and constructive relationships between social groups.

1. Sympathizers, dissenters, and bystanders

Within social psychology, people's reaction to a seemingly immoral and undemocratic request issued by an authority has been mainly analyzed as involving three different modalities. First, individuals may comply with the authority's demand and behave in accordance with its request. This obedience may be active, in the sense that goes along with a firm conviction of the rightness of the authority's policies and behaviors, or passive, by which individuals follow the authority because of a submissive conformism to its prescriptions. In the latter case, scholars have focused on the “banality of evil” as the concept that explains the behavior of these people. Second, people may oppose the request and disobey the authority. That is, they may recognize the illegitimacy of the authorities' requests and decide not to follow or even to oppose their conduct. The behavior of these people has been studied in terms of the concept of “ordinariness of goodness” ([Rochat & Modigliani, 1995](#)). Third, people may just act as passive bystanders, pretending not to be involved in such circumstances. In this case, the behavior of these people was less studied by the literature. However, as [Haslam and Reicher \(2007\)](#) pointed out,

in order for tyranny to triumph, it isn't enough for the Eichmanns of this world to become more brutal. It is also essential that others, including those originally less extreme, go along with them – or at least that they don't actively sabotage or resist them. (p. 620)

1.1. The banality of evil

Since the rise and the large appeal of extremist and explicitly xenophobic parties in Europe in the aftermath of the first world war (i.e. Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany) and in accounting for the tragic events that had occurred until the end of the second world war, social psychology has studied the impact of authoritarian ideologies on people and the effects of uncritical obedience to authority on supporting or even perpetrating so-called crimes of obedience ([Kelman & Hamilton, 1989](#)). This degeneration of the authority relationship has been analyzed in terms of two main approaches: a focus on personality and attitudinal traits ([Adorno,](#)

[Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950](#)) and a focus on situational factors ([Bauman, 1989; Milgram, 1974](#)). Indeed, until the 1960s scholars had tried to analyze what they termed “the authoritarian personality” or “the Nazi mind” on the assumption that there must be a specific and problematic psychological personality to explain why people follow destructive ideologies ([Overy, 2014](#)). Instead, after the [Arendt's \(1963\)](#) and [Milgram's \(1974\)](#) analyses of destructive obedience to authority, the attention shifted from hypothetical pathological individuals to the normal people and the influence of situational factors on them.

Hannah Arendt developed her banality-of-evil thesis from the analysis of the trial of the Nazi lieutenant colonel Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961–1962. [Arendt \(1963\)](#) stated that tragic events occurring during Nazism should not be explained by a sort of biological disposition toward cruel behaviors. People may indeed commit evil actions by obeying an authority when the meaning of such actions is rendered banal, in the sense that they are turned into something quite normal and inconsequential. As it is well-known, the banality-of-evil thesis found its empirical confirmation in [Milgram's \(1974\)](#) experiment on obedience to authority figures. In the classic condition in which the “Teacher” can hear the complaints of the “Learner,” Milgram found that 65% of participants continued to administer shocks to him. Milgram explained the results by remarking that when people are given orders by an authority, they tend to enter an “agentic state” in which they suspend their own judgment and moral restraint and transfer the sense of responsibility for their actions to the authority figure ([Haslam & Reicher, 2007](#)).

It is worth noting that many of the studies based on the banality-of-evil perspective have tended to overlook both the personality of the actors involved ([Berkowitz, 1999](#)), as well as the societal context around the perpetrators ([Staub, 2014](#)). Identification with undemocratic groups and ideologies was, for instance, a crucial point for allowing the evil to be perpetrated or supported remorselessly. As [Haslam and Reicher \(2007\)](#) pointed out, this is exemplified by the fact that Eichmann's positions regarding Jewish people became harsher as it enhanced his identification with the Nazi movement. In generating hate and discrimination, the way we define ourselves and our ingroup is indeed as crucial as our categorization of the outgroup ([Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008](#)). In this sense, repressive acts are reinforced by the fact that perpetrators actively identify with a system that promotes vicious acts as being virtuous ([Haslam & Reicher, 2012a](#)). A process used by leaders to make individuals active rather than passive participants of tyranny and domination over other social groups ([Haslam, Reicher, & Birney, 2014](#)).

Another relevant point in supporting crimes of obedience is indeed the development of belief systems that suspend the moral principles commonly applied. That is, the development of destructive ideologies which “create closed moral universes in which the irrational suddenly becomes rational, the immoral suddenly becomes moral” ([Overy, 2011](#), p. 663). The socialization and education to a banality-of-evil morality would, in this sense, create a moral universe by which the standard and common moral norms governing how people should behave are set aside. [Overy \(2014\)](#) asserted that this happens not due to blind obedience, but because of changes in people's structure of moral reference fostered by the surrounding social context. Thus, “blind” obedience is far from being unconscious and should instead be considered determined by the mutual influence between personality dispositions and experiences with the context around the individual.

1.2. Ordinariness of goodness

As some scholars (e.g. [Haslam & Reicher, 2012b; Passini & Morselli, 2009](#)) have pointed out, studies in social psychology

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