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Beyond the banality of evil: Three dynamics of an interactionist social psychology of tyranny

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Abstract

Carnahan and McFarland (2007) critique the situationist account of the Stanford Prison Experiment by arguing that understanding extreme action requires consideration of individual characteristics and the interaction between person and situation. We develop this argument in two ways. First, we reappraise historical and psychological evidence that supports the broader 'banality of evil' thesis – the idea that ordinary people commit atrocities without awareness, care or choice. Counter to this thesis we show that perpetrators act thoughtfully, creatively, and with conviction. Second, drawing from this evidence and the BBC Prison Study (Reicher & Haslam, 2006a), we make the case for an interactionist approach to tyranny which explains how people are (a) initially drawn to extreme and oppressive groups, (b) transformed by membership in those groups, and (c) able to gain influence over others and hence normalize oppression. These dynamics can make evil appear banal, but are far from banal themselves.

Keywords

social identity, interactionism, evil, tyranny, prison

Carnahan and McFarland (2007) propose that if we want to understand how people behave in extreme situations, we should not overlook the character of those who place themselves in such situations. This is a simple point that has far-reaching implications. Most fundamentally, it forces us to reconsider a consensus concerning the roots of evil that has prevailed for over forty years. According to this consensus, evil triumphs because ordinary, decent individuals turn helplessly into monsters when they find themselves in monstrous circumstances — notably when their judgement is subverted by deference to a powerful group.

This view is encapsulated in the idea of the 'banality of evil' and its force derives from a unique symbiosis between the views of philosophers, historians and social psychologists. These have been mutually reinforcing and have had a profound impact on society at large. As Lozowick (2002) observes, the 'banality of evil' thesis "has become a permanent feature of Western consciousness, a staple of modern culture" (p.274).

In this paper, our concern is less with the specific details of Carnahan and McFarland's (2006) paper than with its general implications for our understanding of the human capacity for evil. In contrast to the prevailing situationism, these researchers make a plea for an interactionist approach. However there are many forms of interactionism, the most common of which is to argue that behaviour is simply the product of two independent factors: person and situation. We argue for a more radical approach which asserts that both person and situation are transformed through their interplay. Given limitations of space, our aim is not to specify this approach in detail but to explain why it is needed and to outline the elements it should include.

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The origins of the 'banality of evil'

In 1961 Adolf Eichmann stood trial in Jerusalem for his role in the Holocaust. He was subsequently found guilty and sentenced to hang — primarily for his role as a chief architect of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish question' which led to the murder of millions in Nazi extermination camps. Psychiatrists had previously claimed that Eichmann was "a man obsessed with a dangerous and insatiable urge to kill" who had "a dangerous and perverted personality" (Arendt, 1963, p.21). Famously, though, Hannah Arendt commented that the details of Eichmann's biography — as borne out at his trial — showed this analysis to be wholly mistaken. Eichmann was no psychopath. Rather he was a thoroughly normal career civil servant who simply followed orders. For Arendt, Eichmann's life thereby offered one key lesson: "the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought defying *banality of evil*" (1963, p.252).

Arendt's point (at least as it is routinely understood; but see Newman, 2001) was not just that Eichmann was an ordinary man with ordinary motives. It was that he also killed mechanically, unimaginatively, unquestioningly. For her the truly horrifying thing about Eichmann was that he had lost his capacity for moral judgment. Obsessed with the technical details of genocide (e.g., timetabling transport to the death camps), he and his fellow bureaucrats had no awareness that what they were doing was wrong.

As fate would have it, at the same time that Eichmann was standing trial, Milgram was conducting his studies of obedience (Milgram, 1963, 1974). In these, well-adjusted men participating in a bogus memory experiment proved willing to deliver electric shocks of increasing magnitude to another person who posed as 'learner'. Indeed, every single 'teacher' was prepared to administer 'intense shocks' of 300 volts, and 65% obeyed *all* the experimenter's requests, dispensing shocks apparently in excess of 450 volts (beyond a point labeled "Danger Severe Shock").

Not only did Milgram's findings support Arendt's contention that unremarkable people can commit remarkably cruel acts, but so too his explanation mirrored hers. As he saw it, when confronted by strong leaders, people enter an 'agentic state' in which they suspend their own judgment and cede responsibility for their actions to those in charge.

There is nothing coincidental in the correspondence between these accounts. For, as Blass (2004) points out, Milgram had no theory to guide him when he carried out his studies. Accordingly, he drew openly on Arendt's ideas when interpreting his data and concluded:

> Arendt's conception of the banality of evil comes closer to the truth than one might dare to imagine. The ordinary person who shocked the person did so out of a sense of obligation — a conception of his duties as a subject — and not from any peculiarly aggressive tendencies (1974, pp.23-24).

Yet when it came to their impact on popular consciousness, neither Milgram's nor Arendt's account had precedence. It was their combination that proved crucial. As Novick puts it:

> From the sixties on, a kind of synergy developed between the symbol of Arendt's Eichmann and the symbol of Milgram's subjects, invoked in discussing everything from the Vietnam War to the tobacco industry, and, of course, reflecting back on discussions of the Holocaust" (2000, p.137).

Subsequent enquiry only served to strengthen and extend researchers' confidence in the banality of evil thesis. In psychology, particular impetus came from the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE; Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973). In this, the researchers randomly assigned college students to be either guards or prisoners in a simulated prison and planned to explore the group dynamics that developed over a two-week period. The study had many twists and turns, but the feature that commentary routinely dwells on is that the guards adopted their roles with such brutality and vigor that the study was halted after only six days. At this point serious concerns were raised about the welfare of the prisoners who had been subjected by the guards to an incessant diet of ridicule, degradation, and abuse.

The key point that Zimbardo and colleagues abstracted from the complex events in their study was that these acts of guard aggression were "emitted simply as a 'natural' consequence of being in the uniform of a 'guard' and asserting the power inherent in that role" (Haney et al., 1973, p.62). According to this analysis, people do not necessarily need the influence of strong leaders (as Milgram hypothesised) in order to suspend their sense of moral judgement and commit appalling acts.

These claims are central to the impact of the SPE. As a reviewer in the *New York Times* recently argued: "Zimbardo's prison study was even more shocking [than Milgram's research], if only because the students assigned to play guards were not instructed to be abusive, and instead conformed to their own notions of how to keep order in a prison" (Stanley, 2006).

As with Milgram's work, the influence of Zimbardo's ideas has also been consolidated by

their correspondence with narratives in other disciplines — particularly Browning's (1992) historical examination of the activities of Reserve Police Batallion (RPB) 101, a mobile killing unit that roamed German-occupied Poland and murdered at least 38,000 Jews between July 1942 and November 1943. Browning shows that the members of this unit were not fanatics, they were not even particularly pro-Nazi. At the same time, however, they were not forced to do what they did. As the title of his book puts it, for Browning they were just 'ordinary men' who, like Milgram's participants, had entered an agentic state in which judgment and moral restraint were suspended. But echoing Zimbardo, Browning argues that this occurred without leadership. In 1940's Poland, the situation itself was sufficient to turn normal men into mass murderers — just as in the SPE "the prison system alone was a *sufficient* condition to produce aberrant, anti-social behaviour" (Browning, 1992, p.168, original emphasis).

Browning thus concludes his book by asking: "If the men of Reserve Police Batallion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?" (1992, p.189). In light of seemingly powerful and convergent evidence from multiple disciplines, it might seem hard to give a comforting answer.

Questioning the banality of evil

The banality-of-evil perspective remains influential, but it is not without critics. Most visibly, several historians have begun to reconsider the role of moral agency in acts of genocide (e.g., Goldhagen, 1996; Mandel, 1998; see also Haslam & Reicher, 2006a; Newman & Erber, 2002; Reicher & Haslam, 2006b). Some of the most insightful of these contributions deal with the specific case of Eichmann and his fellow Nazi bureaucrats who first inspired the notion that evil is banal (Cesarini, 2004; Lozowick, 2002; Vetlesen, 2005).

In setting about challenging received wisdom, Cesarini starts with the telling observation that Arendt only attended the first few days of Eichmann's trial in which he presented his own testimony. But here Eichmann's aim was precisely to present himself as dull and ordinary in order to blunt the prosecution's claim that he was a murderous fanatic. And by leaving prematurely, Arendt avoided a string of witnesses who testified to the fact that Eichmann was anything but a banal bureaucrat. As Vetlesen puts it, "in suggesting that he was 'merely thoughtless', she in fact adopts the very self-presentation he cultivated" (2005, p.5).

A close examination of the historical record also corrects the received image of Eichmann on a number of counts (see Cesarini, 2004; Lozowick, 2002). First, he was comfortable with Nazi anti-semitism and found the general ideology of the party congenial. Second, his views were *transformed* in the context of his *increasing identification* with the Nazi movement. In particular, his position regarding Jewish people changed from one of seeking voluntary emigration to one of enforcing transportation to the death camps. Third, he did not simply follow orders. Rather, he pioneered *creative* new methods of deportation — in part because this won him the approbation and preferment of superiors. Indeed in 1944 he was so zealous in his innovative schemes to destroy Hungarian Jewry that he even came into conflict with Himmler (his superior) over the latter's more conciliatory policies. Fourth, Eichmann was well aware of what he was doing and was constantly confronted with the realities of the deaths he caused. Fifth, he was equally well aware that others considered his acts to be wrong, but even after the war he displayed neither remorse nor repentance.

Cesarini thus concludes: "Eichmann had to learn what it meant to be a *génocidaire* and then chose to be one. It is a myth that [he] unthinkingly followed orders" (2004, p.11). Indeed, as Rees (1997) points out, the orders issued by the Nazi hierarchy were typically very vague, so that imagination — what Kershaw (1993) refers to as "working towards the Führer" — was required in order for them to be interpreted and enacted (see also Sofsky, 1993). Vetlesen (2005) too reviews a mass of evidence which shows that Nazi killers knew what they were doing, believed in what they were doing, and even celebrated what they were doing. This was deliberate policy. For instance, when the Minsk ghetto was 'exterminated', all SS officers were ordered to participate in the executions since some had not yet killed anyone. "As a matter of principle", Vetlesen shows, "even the cadres traditionally referred to as 'desk-murderers' had plenty of blood on their hands" (2005, p.44).

In this way, old images of the Holocaust which supposedly illustrate the 'banality of evil', are being challenged by evidence that mass murder is not something that happens simply, easily or mindlessly. Rather it is the endpoint of a long and arduous journey of individual socialization and social transformation. It is not a slippery slope down which individuals tumble unwittingly, but more akin to a mountain that can only be scaled with energy and application:

> Eichmann and his ilk did not come to murder Jews by accident or in a fit of absent-mindedness, nor by blindly obeying orders or by being small cogs in a big machine. They worked hard, thought hard, took the

> lead over many years. They were the alpinists of evil. (Lozowick, 2002, p.279).

What then of the "ordinary men" of RPB 101? Could one still argue that only the evil of the Holocaust planners was exceptional while that of its functionaries was banal? Not really. For when one looks at the details of Browning's analysis, there is no evidence that everyone mindlessly obeyed orders. Instead, some of those he studied were "enthusiastic killers", but others were "shooters and ghetto clearers [only] when assigned", and still others were "refusers and evaders" (1992, p.168). The enthusiasts, in particular, made *active* choices to engage in their designated tasks, just as the refusers made conscious decisions to disengage (Goldhagen, 1996; see also Rees, 1997; Staub, 1989; Steiner, 1980).

Of course, to challenge the view that Nazi killers were unwitting minions who were only doing as they were told is also to challenge the relevance of Milgram's obedience research for the Holocaust — and thereby to deprive it of much of the basis for its widespread influence (Miller, 2004). Accordingly, Cesarini argues that the analysis provided by Milgram and Arendt has actually served to impede our understanding of the Holocaust and, by extension, of human evil in general. As he puts it "[The] notion of the banality of evil, combined with Milgram's theses on the predilection for obedience to authority, straightjacketed research for two decades" (2004, p.15).

Nevertheless, even if one contends that 'the banality of evil' does not apply to the specific example of Nazi Germany, one might still argue that the work of Milgram — and, even more dramatically, of Zimbardo — shows that evil *can* be banal. Again, though, if one looks closely at these landmark studies, one begins to doubt whether the explanations that are advanced can even account for the behaviour of their own participants, let alone make sense of larger social phenomena.

To be absolutely clear, we do not deny that in these studies many 'ordinary people' were led to inflict ostensibly severe punishment and to abuse and humiliate others. What we do doubt is whether, in Milgram's case, this was simply because they entered into an 'agentic state' in the presence of a powerful authority. For such a notion does not explain the dramatic variability in levels of obedience across variations of the experiment (e.g., from 65% in the standard 'remote' condition to 30% in the 'touch proximity' condition where participants had to push the hand of the 'learner' onto the electronic plate). And it sits uncomfortably with the fact that, far from being concerned only with following orders, the transcripts of experimental sessions show that many of those who displayed total obedience experienced chronic doubt and articulated profound moral conflicts between their responsibilities to the 'learner' and their responsibilities to 'science' (Blass, 2004; Milgram, 1974). All in all, then, Milgram's theoretical account is as weak as his empirical evidence is powerful (Blass, 2004; Miller, 2004).

Similar points can be made about the SPE. As noted above, Zimbardo goes somewhat further than Milgram by arguing that the descent into tyranny is not dependent on deference to the authority of leaders, but is determined by a 'natural' tendency to conform to role. In relation to the SPE, he thus asserts that:

> Participants had no prior training in how to play the randomly assigned roles. Each subject's prior societal learning of the meaning of prisons and the behavioural scripts associated with the oppositional roles of prisoner and guard was the sole source of guidance. (2004, p.39)

As we have seen in statements by Browning (1992, p.168) and Stanley (2006), this assertion is central to reproduced accounts of the Stanford study. Yet it sits uncomfortably with the fact that during Zimbardo's "Guard Orientation" on August 14, 1971, he instructed his guards:

> You can create in the prisoners feelings of boredom, a sense of fear to some degree, you can create a notion of arbitrariness that their life is totally controlled by us, by the system, you, me — that they'll have no privacy at all. … There'll be constant surveillance. Nothing they do will go unobserved. They'll have no freedom of action, they can do nothing, or say nothing that we don't permit. We're going to take away their individuality in various ways. In general what all this leads to is a sense of powerlessness. (Zimbardo, 1989)

The significance of this passage does not just lie in the details of how to oppress the prisoners. It also lies in the fact that Zimbardo speaks of himself and his audience as 'we'. By positioning himself amongst the guards rather than as a neutral experimenter, Zimbardo acts as an 'entrepreneur of identity' who exerts *leadership* over the guards through his invocation and management of a *shared social identity* (Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005; Turner, 1987).

Yet the existence of leadership in the SPE should not be equated with the passivity of followers. For, as in RPB 101, it is clear that not all the guards were brutal. Zimbardo (1989) himself acknowledges that they could be divided into three categories: those who sided with the prisoners, those who were strict but fair, and those few who actively humiliated their charges (a structure which, as Browning observes, bears an "uncanny resemblance" to that of RPB101; 1992, p.168). Even the guard who was most engaged with his ascribed role — the participant

dubbed 'John Wayne' — was far from a simple cipher. Instead, he was thoughtful and original in the humiliations he devised. This is poignantly captured in the following post-experimental exchange:

> *'John Wayne'*: What would you have done if you were in my position?
> *Prisoner*: I don't know. But I don't think I would have been so *inventive*. I don't think I would have applied as much *imagination* to what I was doing. Do you understand? … If I had been a guard I don't think it would have been such a masterpiece.
> (Zimbardo, 1989)

Clearly, then, Zimbardo's leadership may have legitimized oppression in the SPE such that the brutality epitomized by 'John Wayne' prevailed. However, neither leadership nor role could be said to *substitute* for the agency of participants or to have left them in a state where they were no longer responsible for their actions. People chose whether or not to be brutal and they used their imaginations in exercising that choice.

Accordingly, what becomes apparent when we look behind the 'received versions' to the evidence itself, is that there is indeed considerable convergence between studies of Holocaust perpetrators and classic social psychological studies. However, this convergence serves to subvert, not support, the 'banality of evil' thesis. For while it is certainly true that their acts are inexplicable independently of the societal and group contexts in which they occurred, neither Hitler's bureaucrats, members of the killing units, Milgram's 'teachers' nor Zimbardo's guards became amoral automatons.

For this reason, the true horror of Eichmann and his ilk is not that they were unaware they were doing wrong. On the contrary, it is that they *really believed* that what they were doing was right. This is a critical difference because the awful impact of these Nazi functionaries derived not from their mechanical compliance but precisely from their creative ideological zeal (Rees, 1997, p.10). Critically too, this implies that in order to understand the psychological bases of human evil we need to do some fundamental rethinking. We need to "escap[e] our theoretical prisons" (Turner, 2006, p.41) and throw off the "mental straitjacket" by which understanding has hitherto been so constrained (Cesarini, 2004, p.15).

Beyond the banality of evil

We must start by acknowledging that human evil is not banal in the sense of being simple. As shown above, people do not follow brutal leaders or enact brutal roles in groups unquestioningly and automatically. For those who eventually succumb, the journey to the depths of depravity is conscious and demanding. We therefore have to ask questions about *when* tyranny prevails, *why* it prevails and *how* people are transformed into tyrants. These have preoccupied us since our own study of intergroup relations in a simulated prison setting produced a number of findings that challenge the view that tyranny arises because people succumb naturally to role requirements (Reicher & Haslam, 2006a). Instead, the study gelled with other research in pointing to the importance of three social dynamics that we will now consider briefly in turn.

Dynamic 1: Who is drawn to tyrannical groups?

Carnahan and McFarland's (2006) findings speak clearly to this dynamic. They suggest that those who volunteer to participate "in a psychological study of prison life" (the wording used in the original advert recruiting participants for the SPE) are not necessarily "as normal as possible" (to quote Zimbardo, 2004, p.39). They tend to be more authoritarian, socially dominant, aggressive, Machiavellian, and narcissistic than those who volunteer for more innocuous research.

Such findings accord closely with the well-documented observation that people who support hierarchy are drawn to hierarchical institutions and that the more extreme the actions of these institutions, the more extreme the individuals that are drawn to them (e.g., Sidanius, Pratto, Sinclair & van Laar, 1996). It also accords with Vetlesen's observation that those drawn to Nazism or to similar groups, do so: "on the condition that *the ideology in question resonate deeply and existentially with psychological dispositions* — needs and longings, desires and fears — to be found in the individual" (2005, p.50).

Along related lines, Vetlesen also points to the importance of strategic factors and careerism when analysing how various individuals became Nazis. Thus doctors, geneticists, engineers and others embraced National Socialism because they saw that it gave them exceptional and unfettered opportunities to pursue their professions (see also Lifton, 1986; Muller-Hill, 1988). Hence he argues that organized evil occurs not when the group obliterates individuality but when "individual and institutional factors meet halfway, when they are allowed to *merge*, to work in tandem in the same direction" (pp.50–51, original emphasis).

The implication, then, is that differences between individuals cannot be discounted when explaining how people come to act as oppressors. However, it is important not to conflate explanations of individual difference with individualistic explanations — especially those which see

collective behaviour as a straightforward expression of personality. For us, individuality should be seen as the sum of social relations, both past and present, which determine how people exercise choices about the futures that are available to them. For instance, whether a person embraces one position or group will depend critically upon its implications for their membership of other valued groups (Emler & Reicher, 1996). Whether this view is accepted or not, our core point is that we must never entirely lose sight of the individual in the collective (Postmes & Jetten, 2006) or in the explanation of collective evil.

Dynamic 2: How are people transformed by group membership?

If people join the groups they like (at least where others will let them), it is equally true that people come to like the groups they join. And if what people understand about groups leads them to join them, it is also true that what people learn about their groups as members changes the way they understand themselves. These are two core insights of self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987).

In this way, groups *transform* the individuals who join them by changing the dispositions of their members and the way they express them (Turner & Oakes, 1986). So where individual beliefs are consonant with group norms, people are far more likely to articulate, to strengthen, and to act on their convictions. This is especially relevant in the case of expressions and acts of stereotyping, prejudice and callousness that might otherwise be muted (Haslam et al., 1998; Haslam & Reicher, 2006b).

In this way too, individuals with hyper-authoritarian tendencies can act as 'sleepers' (Staub, 1989) who only become mobilized and energized when the group sanctions oppression. Thus Eichmann, in common with many other Nazis, started off with authoritarian leanings, but was emboldened through his involvement in the Party to embrace and promote ever-more extreme ideology and practice that took anti-semitism to new and ever-more abhorrent depths.

Dynamic 3: When do authoritarian views gain influence?

Yet 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. In short, to be effective, tyrants need to have *social influence*.

In this respect, a further transformation that can happen in groups is that, as social context changes, individuals who were previously marginal and uninfluential begin to be seen as representing group values (i.e., as prototypical of its social identity) and hence assume a position where they are able to define what is right and what is wrong for other group members (Turner, 1987). That is, they become *leaders* who gain the power to influence events through their influence over others (Turner, 2005). Moreover, as leaders, they do not just exploit the changed social context, they actively seek to transform the social context in order to broaden their influence (Reicher et al., 2005).

Again this is demonstrated in the success of Nazism. On the one hand, the early Nazis actively sought to destabilise the Weimar Republic and to provoke a sense of crisis. On the other, they were able to claim power by posing as a solution to the chaos they themselves had created. In such a context, authoritarian solutions based on the promise of restoring traditional German values gained attraction at the expense of those that were associated either with the existing state in crisis or else with the radical movements promising further revolutionary transformation (Hobsbawm, 1995). Moreover, once in power, this psychological dynamic became underpinned by an increasingly effective political and legislative system which shaped not only people's moral sensibilities but also the material facts of life and death. This system ensured not just that Nazis and Nazism flourished, but that they came to define the very essence of what it meant to be a normal, law-abiding citizen.

Three lessons flow from these points. First, authoritarianism is not a stable individual difference but an *emergent product* of the dynamics of group life (Haslam & Reicher, 2005, 2006b, Reicher & Haslam, 2006a, 2006b; see also Schmitt, Branscombe & Kappen, 2003; Turner et al., 2006). Second, authoritarians are only able to exercise leadership and set about creating an authoritarian world when circumstances move them from a position of extremism to one where they represent the wider group. Third, people are much more likely to embrace extreme social systems when their own groups have failed and when authoritarian leaders seem to be required to bring order to a world in chaos (Haslam & Reicher, in press). In this way, as historical analyses of the rise of Nazism suggest (e.g., Abel, 1986; Hobsbawm, 1995), the foundations of autocratic groups are often built on the failure of more democratic ones. To blame group psychology *per se* for tyranny is therefore to avoid the more complicated debate about how democratic and humanitarian groups can be made to work.

Our argument has now come full circle. We have discussed how individuals are drawn to radical groups, how this can radicalize them further and how conditions can enable them to radicalize a broader population. Note, though, that once these dynamics have played out, tyranny itself may no longer be radical — from the perspective of the given society. Indeed, at their most potent, tyranny and oppression are taken for granted. This is the real site of the banality alluded to by Arendt (Newman, 2001). At this point, the critical issue is no longer who goes along with brutality (and why), but rather why certain individuals are exceptional enough to oppose it (Billig, 1976; Oliner & Oliner, 1988).

Conclusion

> In May 1939 … Eichmann's attitude and conduct towards Jews underwent a significant metamorphosis. There was a new arrogance … He behaved like a man with power: a young god in a shiny black uniform. His appetite for promotion and power had meshed with the dynamic of the SD and the Nazi regime. For the first time, and without compunction, he took responsibility for the detention and death of Jews. (Cesarini, 2004, p.71)

In meticulously documenting this "metamorphosis", Cesarini wrestles with two seemingly countervailing facts about Adolf Eichmann. On the one hand he *was* unremarkable. Certainly, there was nothing in his personal history that marks him out as a sadist, a psychopath or a "natural born killer" (2004, p.11). At the same time, though, he *was* different. In particular, his personal background drew him towards the Nazi movement and the more he drew himself (and was drawn) into it, the more callous he became. Ultimately this meant that he played a *highly creative leadership* role in imagining, organizing and bringing about the single policy that is the most vivid and horrific testament to Nazi atrocity.

One obviously has to be very careful in drawing parallels between someone like Eichmann and the behaviour of participants in any social psychological study. Nevertheless, history and social psychology do hold out important lessons for each other. Significantly too, when it comes to the analysis of tyranny, both fields are themselves undergoing a metamorphosis. Arendt, Milgram and Zimbardo played a critical part in taking us beyond reductionist explanations of tyranny as a simple product of pathological individuals. But now their reductionist explanations of tyranny as a simple product of pathological situations — the 'banality of evil' hypothesis — seems equally untenable. Instead, the case is emerging for an interactionist understanding which sees the social psychology of individual tyrants and collective tyranny as interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

Clearly, the debate is only just starting as to exactly what form this interactionism should take (see Postmes & Jetten, 2006). For us, particular individuals with particular beliefs make tyranny possible whether in our psychological studies or in the world beyond. But this individuality is not pre-fabricated, pre-packaged or pre-potent in the sense envisioned by classical personality theory (Turner et al., 2006). Instead, whether in social psychological experiments or in Fascist bureaucracies, individual psychologies are as much an outcome as a determinant of group dynamics.

Looking at these dynamics, it is true that evil can become normal and indeed normative in groups and hence can *end up* appearing banal. However, the development of these norms and of their appeal is a long and intricate process. This process — *the normalization of evil* — is far from banal. Our theories of it should no longer be either.

Authors' note

Authorship is alphabetical. The authors contributed equally to this paper.

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