

Fetishizing Evil and the Holocaust

(FYI: At the time of writing, this was part of the Grade 11 and 12 social studies curriculum in Alberta)

How might students understand how otherwise normal people can take part in a genocide like the Holocaust?

This lesson assumes that students already have a general sense of the events of the Second World War, including the Holocaust.

Introduction:

- Remind students about the economic situation in Interwar Germany (e.g., show them a photo of Germans burning money because that was cheaper than buying coal: <https://imgur.com/r/OldSchoolCool/sf9P7ww>), and how some (but not all) Germans blamed the Allies, some (but not all) blamed the German government, and some (but not all) blamed the Jews.

and/or

- Assess prior knowledge: What are the similarities and differences between prejudice and discrimination? Students (individually or in groups) could make a Venn Diagram.

and/or

- Ask students to think of situations when someone blames an innocent person, and there are unintended consequences (e.g., you blame your little brother for something, and then your parents punish him more harshly than you thought they would)

Content:

The Banality of Evil (based on the theories of Hannah Arendt)

- “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or to do either evil or good” (Arendt, 1977, p. 180).
- Evil intent is not required to do an evil deed—sometimes people are part of horrific actions because they fail to see how they are responsible for the suffering of others.
- This thoughtlessness can be from mindlessly following orders (i.e., just doing what you are told, rather than thinking that you can defy authority when they ask you to do terrible things): “Gas chambers were built, death camps were guarded, daily quotas of corpses were produced with the same efficiency as the manufacture of appliances. These inhumane policies may have originated in the mind of a single person, but they could only be carried out on a massive scale if a very large number of persons obeyed orders” (Milgram, 1963, p. 371).
- This thoughtlessness can also be more general, such as the lack of critical thought about how you part of a larger system that is harming others (e.g., those who did not actively contribute to the Holocaust, but stood by while others did)

Fetishizing Evil (based on the theories of Ernest Becker)

- From Arendt we know that some ordinary people contributed to the horrors of the Holocaust without necessarily intending to, but we also know that others delighted in these atrocities. How can this be?
- Becker talks about fetishizing fear by localizing all of one’s fear and anxiety into a single, manageable source. We often scapegoat marginalized groups, but we can fetishize any group as the embodiment of evil. We take all that threatens to overwhelm us, confine it to a particular group of people, cause, ideology, or, in some cases a specific person, which is then labelled as evil. Our heroic quest, then, is to annihilate it. One’s own group is “pure and good” and others “are the real animals, are spoiling everything for you, contaminating your purity and bringing disease and weakness into your vitality” (Becker, 1975, p. 93).
- Before the Holocaust, the Jews were blamed for Germany’s loss in the First World War as well as Germany’s economic problems more broadly. Jews were depicted as evil and dehumanized (e.g., as rats, spiders, and so on). Killing them, thus, was akin to exterminators ridding a household of vermin. How do humans get to this point of willingness to kill others?

Patterns of Thought and Behaviour

- A *stereotype* is an oversimplified generalization about an entire group of people without regard for individual differences. *Prejudice* is pre-judging, making a decision about a person or group of people without sufficient knowledge. Prejudicial thinking is based on stereotypes. Prejudice is an attitude. *Discrimination* is the behaviour that can follow prejudicial thinking. Discrimination is the denial of justice and fair treatment in many arenas, including employment, housing and political rights.
- Scapegoating is assigning blame to a person/group (based upon prejudice), and fetishizing evil is the drive to eliminate these scapegoats whose removal/extinction you see as beneficial. You are the hero who is eradicating evil.

For example:

1. All immigrants milk the system. (stereotyping)
2. I don't like immigrants. (prejudice)
3. Let's not hire or interact with immigrants. (discrimination)
4. Immigrants are the reason that our economy is terrible. (scapegoating)
5. If we get rid of the immigrants, then our economy will flourish again (fetishizing evil)

Both banal and fetishized evils are an extraordinarily harmful process, and yet it is perpetuated by otherwise ordinary people. Some (but not all) ordinary Germans thoughtlessly contributed to the Holocaust, while some (but not all) ordinary Germans came to embrace the destruction of the Jews. It is also important to note that some (but not all) ordinary Germans stood up to the Nazis and refused to be part of the atrocities (e.g., the [White Rose resistance](#) group). Ordinary people acting together change the world—both for good and for evil.

Possible Applications of Knowledge:

- Class discussion regarding who takes responsibility for what occurred (e.g., to what extent: Hitler, the Nazis, all or some German citizens, etc.). What (if any) is the difference between blame and responsibility? What might we have to do in order to prevent something similar today?
- In small groups, have students brainstorm situations in their own lives where it might be important to defy the orders or desire of an authority figure (e.g., a parent, teacher, influential peer): When is being disobedient a good thing? Then, they pick one scenario and examine why they would find it so hard to think and act independently.
- Compare the content from the Holocaust with the complexities of ordinary people (not [villains](#)) contributing to great harm in another context (e.g., the Rwandan genocide, the My Lai Massacre from the Vietnam War, or even something more broad and contemporary, like food insecurity or violence against immigrants)

Suggestions for Assessment:

- Compose a 250 word summary of how ordinary people can both intentionally and unintentionally contribute to terrible events.
- Talk about "[The Eternal Jew](#)", and then have students film and edit short movies on how to breakdown stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, etc. to become more accepting in society.
- Two roses, one thorn activity: Students write about how genocides make them feel (thorn) and then two ways we as a society can become better at breaking down all forms of stereotypes and discrimination (two roses)

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Arendt, H. (1977). *The life of the mind: Thinking* (vol. 1). New York, NY: Harcourt Brace.

Arendt, H. (2006). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. New York, NY: Penguin. (Original work published in 1963)

Becker, E. (1975). *Escape from evil*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Hayes, J., Schimel, J., & Williams, T. J. (2008). Fighting death with death: The buffering effects of learning that worldview violators have died. *Psychological Science*, 19, 501-507. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02115.x

Browning, C.R. (1993). *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

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- Solomon, S. (2012). Terror management theory: Why war?" In D. J. Christie (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of peace psychology*. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell.
- van Kessel, C., & Crowley, R. M. (2017). Villainification and evil in social studies education. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 95(4), 427-455. doi:10.1080/00933104.2017.1285734



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<https://omeka-s.library.ualberta.ca/s/Grim-Educator/>

C. van Kessel, K. Edmondson, & F. Catena (2018)