***How Organizations Make Murderers***

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Block: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Respond to the questions below, using the text and your own reactions to the text to build thorough and thoughtful responses.

A. Outline the three ways that Waller says “professional socialization” will turn ordinary people into killers.

B. Outline three (of the four) ways that Waller says “group identification” can lead us to extraordinary evil.

C. Outline two (of the three) ways that Waller says that groups “bind together” to become a powerful force.

**Holocaust and Genocide Studies.**

**How Organizations Make Murderers, by James Waller.**

It may be comforting to believe that evil, especially extraordinary evil—like genocide and mass murder—is the result of the actions of evil people. We could never do such things, we tell ourselves. The problem with this way of thinking, says social psychologist James Waller, is that research indicates that it simply is not true. Under the right circumstances the most ordinary of people can carry out the most extraordinarily evil actions. Contexts of cruelty create and reshape ordinary humans into creatures capable of outrageous atrocity. It may be discomforting to think that any of us may be capable of atrocity, but by recognizing that there are social situations that can shape people into monsters, we can, perhaps, work to dismantle and avoid those situations, thereby decreasing the likelihood that the most ordinary of us can become killers. Waller reviews a range of social psychological research and identifies features of social contexts that can make people into murderers and sadists.

***“Killers are more often made than born. Genocidal organizations take advantage of social instincts “hard wired” into humans to maximize individuals' ability and willingness to kill each other. By using processes that bind individuals to the group and increase group identification, evil organizations can create evil people.”***

**PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION**

People are not typically born killers. They must be socialized or trained not just to kill, but to be killers. Most perpetrators of genocide and mass murder are part of military and paramilitary organizations that use basic social psychological principles—building on ways of thinking and feeling that humans have evolved over millennia—to create people capable of extraordinary evil.

**Escalate Commitments**

People are rarely averse to making a small commitment, say donating a small sum of cash or what not. However, once people make a small commitment it is easier to ask them for a slightly larger commitment and expect that they will agree. This is often called the “foot in the door” phenomenon. By building on small commitments, organizations can gradually ask more and more of people until individuals find themselves doing things they would have never been willing to do at the start.

One example of a military program to train normal soldiers to torture shows just this sort of progression:

• Soldiers are initiated into the group using brutal initiation rituals (punching, cursing, flogging, etc.) all the while told how lucky they are to be able to be a part of this elite group—one only need think of some of the hazing rituals of some college-age groups to see that this sort of thing is not out of the ordinary,

• The soldiers are subjected to torture themselves, as if this were a normal act,

• They are then assigned to guard prisoners,

• They then move on to participating in arresting squads,

• They are then ordered to hit prisoners,

• Next, they are required to observe torture,

• Finally, they practice torture in group settings, Killers are more often made than born. Genocidal organizations take advantage of social instincts “hard wired” into humans to maximize individuals' ability and willingness to kill each other. By using processes that bind individuals to the group and increase group identification, evil organizations can create evil people.

• They are offered benefits and threatened with punishment for disobedience to keep them at their new tasks as torturers.

**Ritual Conduct**

Carrying out acts of torture, murder and sadism are debilitating for ordinary individuals—it wears you down and wears you out. How can evil organizations keep ordinary individuals at the tasks of atrocity?

One method is to use ritual—actions and exercises that make no real sense in terms of accomplishing the goal, but are repeated with some degree of protocol and perhaps even pomp. In Nazi death camps prisoners were required to be present for roll calls, participate in camp parades, perform meaningless exercises and were stripped and beaten. If these were individuals who were marked for death, why not just kill them? Why go to all the trouble to enact apparently useless rituals and actions? Frans Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka gave a simple reason for using ritual, “To condition those who actually had to carry out the policies. To make it possible for them to do what they did.”

Ritual conduct plays into deep psychological aspects of humans. In the context of atrocity, ritual can animate a sense of high purpose (give meaning to murder), authenticate what is otherwise an absurd ideology (by making people who are supposed to be less than human appear really less than human) and sustain morale and self-image in what is, in reality, a terribly difficult job.

**Merging Roles and Persons**

Most people assume that a person's acts are a result of internal dispositions. If you are basically good you act in good ways. If you are evil, then you act in evil ways.

However, social psychological research shows that dispositions shape actions less than actions shape dispositions. In other words, put a human in a role where they are required to carry out evil acts and over time the person often becomes evil.

Psychologists reason that this action-to-self transformation is a result of the way that human brains have evolved. Humans seek to integrate their internal thoughts and feelings with their external actions. So, in situations where they have no choice but to carry out roles where evil actions are part and parcel of their daily work, then it is often their thoughts and feelings that are reshaped. Of course, this is not true only for evil actions. People whose roles require caring for others can become basically good people. However, in the context of genocide and mass murder, good roles are few and far between.

The line between actions and personality is not quite automatic though. Research indicates that ordinary people who are coerced to commit evil acts do not automatically become evil. At first, people may simply comply with orders or threats when carrying out evil actions. The next stage is where the person begins to identify with the role. That is, they begin to copy other behaviors that go with a role (for example, if they are a prison guard they go beyond merely guarding prisoners to dressing, talking and acting like other guards). However, when they are not in the role, they can leave the behaviors of the role behind. A third stage is when the role and the person merge. This is called internalization. At this point the person carries out the acts required by the role because they are now congruent with their personal value system.

In sum, an evil role plus an ordinary person can lead from compliance to identification to internalization— creating an evil person.

**GROUP IDENTIFICATION**

A frog is a frog even if it never meets another frog. But the same is difficult to say for a human. Humans evolved to live in groups. So, what it is to be truly human is learned and formed in groups. Group identification is hard wired into our species. But, while this species adaptation served (and still serves) us well in many respects, it also has a dark side. Waller traces how aspects of group identification can lead to extraordinary evil

**Repression of Conscience**

Humans learn right and wrong across the different contexts in which they live: family, religious groups, the political arena, work place, etc. We internalize these notions and a sense of right and wrong becomes part of ourselves—what we often call our conscience. How can organizations undo such deeply held notions of good and evil? In other words, how can evil organizations repress the consciences of ordinary individuals?

Researchers identify several ways that organizations committed to extraordinary evil repress individual consciences:

• They can exclude all outside values. In other words, perpetrators are prohibited from examining their actions or discussing their actions in ways that might call the morality of the actions into question. For instance, in the Holocaust, perpetrators proceeded through five stages of increasing insulation to outside definitions of evil:

* They were supplied with only the information they needed to know and limited access to other information about the Nazi program, o Whoever knew what was really going on was forced to participate in the evil actions,
* Criticism was prohibited—especially criticism of the genocidal program,
* Some topics were expressly forbidden from discussion,
* All references to the program of murder had to be cloaked in euphemistic language—killing and killing installations could not be referred to directly.

• Evil actions become routine and habitual. Evil becomes a job. Once a soldier, guard, prison camp doctor or other functionary has committed their first act of evil, the next act becomes easier. After a while, evil is routine.

• When evil is routine, people become desensitized to it. Actions that cause violent emotional physical reactions lose their ability to sicken over time. While some people settle into their roles very quickly, others take more time. A guard at one Nazi prison camp estimated that it took most female guards about a month to settle into a normal routine of evil. Not all people, it seems, can accommodate themselves to evil. Social psychological research finds that a minority do not become desensitized to evil. In these cases, drug and alcohol use, madness or suicide may result.

• Finally, some individuals not only become desensitized to evil, but they learn to enjoy it. It is important to point out that many of the people who become sadists show no signs of sadistic inclinations before. However, once shaped in a context of evil they come to enjoy murder and torture.

**Diffusing Responsibility**

Organizations not only create evil people through the above processes, but the very structure of complex organizations can make evil actions easier to carry out. Waller identifies three ways complex organizations make evil actions easier on the consciences of individuals.

• Segmenting tasks. By breaking up the process of mass murder into smaller jobs, no one individual has the responsibility for the entire process. In some genocides, like the Holocaust, the process of murder was broken up into many small steps (rounding up the victims, transporting the victims, processing the paperwork and then all the duties and details that ultimately lead to the crematoria). The fellow whose job was to throw the switch to shunt a train toward Auschwitz (rather than another destination) could easily tell himself that he was just doing his job and not really responsible for what happened at the end of the line. Even the worker at the prison camp responsible for turning on the lethal gas could tell himself that his actions really were not very important since he could do nothing to stop it. If it was not him throwing the switch someone else would. He didn't bring all these people here.

• Pressure from peers. Humans need affirmation from those around them. When ordinary people are removed from situations where there are competing expectations, the level of pressure they feel to commit evil acts can become overwhelming. If the only affirmation a person can get is from others in their regiment or unit who carry out evil, then they are more likely to give into the pressures to conform to expectations.

• Displacing responsibility. People are more likely to behave in ways they would normally renounce when they have someone in authority to blame. They can claim that they were just following orders. However, this excuse only goes so far. In fact, if a perpetrator gave up all personal responsibility for evil actions, they would only commit them when commanded to and then only to the degree they had to. However, workers often seek to be “good” workers and so do their jobs more efficiently.

**Lost in the Crowd**

Complex organizations also allow individuals to shirk their moral responsibilities by being just a face in a much larger crowd. Research shows that when individuals can act as an anonymous member of a group or crowd they are likely to be more aggressive than they would if they acted alone.

**Rational Self-Interest**

Humans are also goal-oriented creatures. Often, if not always, we try to match actions to goals. Organizations can structure situations so that individuals carry out evil actions (or actions that contribute to extraordinary evil—remember the switchman who worked the train line to Auschwitz) as a way to reach such basic goals of food, wealth, status, etc.

For individuals who want to get ahead in an organization (like the Nazi party), doing their job well is a basic requirement. If the organization is committed to evil then participation in evil actions is a clear method for professional advancement. But, there may be more than just professional advancement at stake. There are numerous examples of individuals who take advantage of the chaos of war and genocide to line their own pockets. In Rwanda, an enterprising fellow could set up his own checkpoint, murder those (usually Tutsi) who came through and take what valuables they had on them.

**BINDING FACTORS OF THE GROUP**

Humans become humans in groups. We not only learn to think and communicate, we learn how to understand the world and feel about the world. So, in terms of creating killers, the things that bind people to a group can be very powerful.

**Conforming to Pressure**

There are two types of pressure that genocidal groups can put on their members.

**First** is the need for acceptance. Serving in the same military unit creates very strong bonds. This pressure is heightened if the members of a group are isolated from members from other groups. If a would-be killer is cut off from family, other types of associations, etc., then the only affirmation they can get is from the members of the killing group. This causes especially strong pressure to conform to the expectations of their comrades. Interviews with members of genocidal groups show that even when the individuals resist killing, they often say that this is because they are “weak.” What this tells us is that they support their group (and, by extension, the aims of the group), even though they cannot live up to the expectations of the group.

**Second,** group members are influenced by the information they have available. If a group strictly regulates what information the members have and how that information is packaged, then they can skew the ways that the group members understand what is going on. For instance, if the group members are lead to believe that the “enemy” is dangerous and is planning to murder people the group members hold dear, then group members may see no other option but to act violently to protect themselves and their loved ones. If the group members have no other source of information (perhaps, in reality, the “enemy” group is not armed and poses no real threat), then they must rely on the information fed to them by the genocidal group.

**Kin Recognition Cues**

Social psychological research shows that humans are likely to act more selflessly toward kin. The closer people are related, the more likely they are to act altruistically.

Genocidal groups and regimes play on this principle to maximize group members' attachment to the group. While they cannot make unrelated people kin, they can do things that “mimic” kin relations.

• Close association. Humans generally live in close association with people they are related to. So, putting group members in very close association (working, eating, sleeping, and relaxing together) creates a kinship atmosphere. Basically, close association is a sort of cue of kinship and human brains respond accordingly. Close association binds individuals to the group and makes it more likely that they will do things they otherwise might not do for the group.

• Look alike. Family members tend to look alike: shared genes, shared physical traits. Social psychologists find that humans also tend to form closer ties with people who are like them. So, by doing things to make group members resemble one another (for example, shaving heads, wearing uniforms), they mimic family resemblances and strengthen the bonds that individuals have to the group.

**Gender**

It is a truism that men go to war and women suffer the consequences of fighting. But, recent research on the roles that women have played in genocide and mass murder call this tight gender division into question. Interviews with female guards at Ravensbruk concentration camp indicate that female guards were equals in cruelty to men, and some speculate that women were more likely to participate voluntarily in the genocide than were men. Killing is and has been overwhelmingly the work of men, but this may simply be because women have not been given the opportunity to participate in mass killing.

**BOTTOM LINE** Killers are more often made than born. Genocidal organizations take advantage of social instincts “hard wired” into humans to maximize individuals' ability and willingness to kill each other. By using processes that bind individuals to groups and increase group identification, evil organizations can create evil people.

*Reference Waller, James E. 2007. Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing. London: Oxford University Press.*