



HOW HAS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR BEEN INFORMED BY THE HOLOCAUST AND THE RESEARCH IT INSPIRED?

The Holocaust challenged our understanding of how human beings behave in various situations, notions of proper human behavior to the extreme. In the ensuing decades, there have been many experiments and studies conducted researching human behavior, most notably in the academic fields of psychology, sociology, education, and ethics.

“THE FACT IS THAT THE HOLOCAUST SIGNIFIED AN IMMENSE HUMAN FAILURE. IT DID HARM TO ETHICS BY SHOWING HOW ETHICAL TEACHINGS COULD BE OVERRIDDEN OR EVEN SUBVERTED TO SERVE THE INTERESTS OF GENOCIDE.”

- Rubenstein and Roth¹

SELECT STUDIES OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR INSPIRED BY THE HOLOCAUST

Stanford Prison Experiment²

The Stanford Prison Experiment was conducted by psychologist Dr. Philip Zimbardo in 1971. It simulated a prison with male volunteers who were split up randomly into guards and prisoners. Planned for two weeks, it was abandoned after six days due to the brutality of the “guards” and the reactions of extreme stress exhibited by the “prisoners.”

Two months after the study, here is the reaction of prisoner #416, who was placed in solitary confinement for several hours:

“I began to feel that I was losing my identity, that the person that I called Clay, the person who put me in this place, the person who volunteered to go into this prison – because it was a prison to me; it still is a prison to me. I don’t regard it as an experiment or a simulation because it was a prison run by psychologists instead of run by the state. I began to feel that that identity, the person that I was that had decided to go to prison was distant from me – was remote until finally I wasn’t that, I was 416. I was really my number.”

Milgram Experiment³

The Milgram Experiment began in 1961, three months after the end of the Eichmann Trial by Yale University social psychologist Dr. Stanley Milgram. Inspired by the question of how it was possible for Nazis to obey orders that were unethical, immoral, and caused harm to others, the experiment sought to understand obedience to authority figures in a series of social psychology experiments where participants were instructed by the experimenter to administer increasing electric shocks to another person, up to and including inflicting significant pain. The study found that a very high proportion of subjects would obey the instructions, albeit reluctantly.

“While I was a subject in 1964, though I believed that I was hurting someone, I was totally unaware of why I was doing so. Few people ever realize when they are acting according to their own beliefs and when they are meekly submitting to authority.”

The Third Wave⁴

Also known as The Wave, it was a 5-day social movement created by teacher Ron Jones at Cubberley High School in Palo Alto, California, involving 10th graders in 1967. Jones conducted a series of exercises in his classroom to emphasize discipline and community while rejecting certain groups of people in an attempt to model the rise of fascism in Nazi Germany. The movement quickly grew to hundreds of students and spun out of control as students who were part of the movement claimed and acted superior to their classmates before the experiment was ended.

“Be careful who you follow because you never know where they will lead you.”

Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment⁵

Although this experiment started before the Holocaust in 1932, it continued until 1972 when public outrage forced its end. This study conducted by the United States Public Health Service and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention researched the effects of untreated syphilis in African-American men. Even though penicillin had been proven to be a viable antibiotic to treat the disease in 1947, the study continued, blatantly choosing to not treat the infected participants. This unethical study led to several federal laws and regulations for medical experiments, codifying into United States law some of the tenets of the [Nuremberg Code of Medical Ethics](#).

“Medical people are supposed to help when we need care, but even once a cure was discovered, they were denied help, and they were lied to by their government. Our government is supposed to protect the rights of its citizens; their rights were trampled upon.”

1936 photo, in which a man alleged to be August Landmesser is conspicuously not giving the Nazi salute



ACTIVITY

Considering the effect of the Holocaust and how its history affected and continues to affect our understanding of human behavior and utilizing the case studies and quotes within the handout, in pairs or in small groups, create a diagram / graphic organizer / visual chart that seeks to understand the actions of individuals and groups and the responsibilities of said individuals / groups / governments.

FINAL REFLECTION

After completing the visual characterization of human behavior and its responsibilities, how do we preserve hope in the midst of humanity's failure in a world where the Holocaust was perpetrated?

1 Rubenstein, R.L., & Roth, J.K. (2003). Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and its Legacy. Westminster John Knox Press.

2 Zimbardo, P. G. (1999). Stanford Prison Experiment. Retrieved from <https://www.prisonexp.org/>

3 Stanley Milgram. (2021, September 9). New World Encyclopedia. Retrieved from https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Stanley_Milgram&oldid=1057591.

4 TheWaveHome, & Hancock, M. (2021). The Wave Home. Retrieved from <https://www.thewavehome.com/>

5 Clinton, W.J. (1997, May 16). In Apology for the Study Done in Tuskegee. National Archives and Records Administration. <https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/New/Remarks/Fri/19970516-898.html>.