Name: Article 1 Period:

**Not so easily led**

Compelling but outmoded ideas won't help counter radicalization

WHY do ordinary people do appalling things? This problem has vexed scholars for centuries. Early Christian theologians, for example, spent an inordinate amount of time trying to reconcile the idea of a benevolent and omnipotent God who could nonetheless allow evil to exist.

The darker side of human nature still troubles us, though nowadays we tend to seek more naturalistic explanations. This was never more true than after the second world war, which offered an unflinching and deeply distressing view of the depravity to which humans can sink.

One influential product of the research -- or perhaps soul-searching -- that followed was the concept of the "banality of evil". Coined by political theorist Hannah Arendt after watching the 1961 trial of Nazi SS officer Adolf Eichmann, this spare phrase captures the idea that evil acts are not necessarily perpetrated by evil people. Instead, they can simply be the result of bureaucrats dutifully obeying orders.

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That concept was supported by two infamous psychological studies: Stanley Milgram's electric-shock experiments on obedience and the Stanford Prison Experiment, both of which supposedly proved that ordinary people can **easily** be **led** into performing atrocious acts -- "just following orders" to hurt, humiliate or kill.

The conclusions were not universally accepted at the time. Nonetheless, the banality of evil became the dominant late-20th-century explanation for the problem of mass atrocities.

Its appeal is clear: it simultaneously offered an explanation for the worst crimes of the century while absolving the vast majority of the perpetrators. The horrors of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia became largely the responsibility of their leaders.

The banality of evil remains hugely influential. It is, for example, visible in relation to the responses to Westerners who travel to the Middle East to fight for Islamic State.

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In seeking explanations for the radicalization of these recruits -- and how to counter it - authorities in the UK and US have been quick to reach for the idea of brainwashing and coercion. Islamic State's slick recruitment videos and savvy use of social media only reinforce this view.

Brainwashing is "just following orders" in a different guise. But the evidence suggests that, in fact, it rarely plays a role in radicalization (see page 8). Nonetheless, Western authorities appear to be locked into thinking it is happening to their homegrown jihadis, and that they must fight fire with fire. The US government's anti-radicalization strategy, for example, uses social media in a bid to neutralize the messages of Islamic State.

We can do better. Despite huge ethical challenges, psychologists are starting to re-evaluate Milgram's research, and with it the whole notion of the banality of evil (see page 28). Their emerging conclusion is much more subtle and nuanced, and should be required reading for those who, rightly, seek to counter the threat of radical Islam.

This would be further helped if the veil of secrecy over US intelligence were lifted a little, giving researchers interested in understanding radicalization access to precious hard data.

We will never banish the human propensity for atrocity. But the only way to counter it is to understand it properly, and devise strategies based on what we know, not what we want to believe.

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**Preparing for Research & Discussion:**

What facts do you need on the Milgram experiment, the Islamic State (IS) and on the research of people doing harm to others to discuss some key questions about the question of whether humanity is more inclined toward evil or toward good?

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When you try to brainstorm proof about the basic goodness of humankind, what evidence and examples can you brainstorm here:

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What questions about this article and evil do you want to ask the other group who read this article to discuss?

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