

JUST FOLLOWING ORDERS

How can obedience and carrying out orders lead to horrific acts such as the Holocaust or the genocides in Rwanda, Cambodia, or Bosnia? For the most part, it is a mystery why obeying instructions from an authority can convince people to kill other human beings, sometimes without hesitation and with incredible cruelty.

Combining social and cognitive neuroscience with real-life accounts from genocide perpetrators, this book sheds light on the process through which obedience influences cognition and behavior. Emilie Caspar, a leading expert in the field, translates this neuroscientific approach into a clear, uncomplicated explanation, even for those with no background in psychology or neuroscience. By better understanding humanity's propensity for direct orders to short-circuit our own independent decision-making, we can edge closer to effective prevention processes.

Emilie A. Caspar is a professor at Ghent University, Belgium, specializing in social and cognitive neuroscience. She is one of the few neuroscientists worldwide working on the topic of obedience and she has received many awards for her research, which combines neuroscience with field interviews involving former genocide perpetrators.

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Atrocities and the Brain Science of Obedience

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Preface

If someone had told me a couple of years ago that I would find myself at the age of 33 talking to, testing, and interviewing genocide perpetrators in Rwanda and Cambodia while pursuing a career in neuroscience, I would never have believed them. It is fascinating to look back and see where life has taken you when you decided to take the opportunities that arose. Many of the studies conducted with the populations mentioned in this book, such as the military or the genocide perpetrators, are mostly the result of chance meetings with the right people, not something that I had planned at this stage of my career.

Admittedly, I have always been interested in criminal behavior and eager to understand why people choose to conduct violent acts against others. As part of this quest, while I was working on my PhD in neuroscience, I also completed a two-year course in forensic sciences and forensic psychiatry at the Université libre de Bruxelles in Belgium. Forensic psychiatry was of deep interest to me because it offered insight into the research conducted on individuals – sometimes with highly psychopathic or narcissistic personality traits – who committed atrocities. However, I never thought that I would have the opportunity to do such research myself. And at no point did I think my research interests might take me to Rwanda or Cambodia.

It started in 2016, when I published a seminal study on how obeying orders impacts brain functioning in a high-impact scientific journal. I had developed an experimental study where I ordered people to administer electric shocks to each other to see how frequently they would comply with my orders and to study what happened in their brains. This work received a high degree of media coverage across the world,

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with many interviews. In one of these interviews with a journalist for BBC Future, I talked about my work and what it takes to stand up against authority. I also mentioned my scientific dream to be able to develop programs targeting individual responsibility to prevent atrocities from being committed on the grounds of obedience. Spoiler alert: I am still unfortunately very far from succeeding, but I remain hopeful. I did not know at the time, but this specific interview was about to unexpectedly and positively influence the trajectory of my career.

The idea of conducting field research actually followed the BBC interview in 2018, when I received an email from Georges Weiss, the director of the nonprofit organization Radio La Benevolencija Humanitarian Tool Foundation. Radio La Benevolencija is a Dutch NGO that develops radio soap operas and educational programs, targeting citizens from vulnerable societies to recognize and resist hate speech and manipulation to violence. Georges reached out to me after reading that interview, as he considered that we were sharing some strong humanitarian values and ideologies. The headquarters of Radio La Benevolencija are located in Amsterdam, and I was a postdoctoral researcher at the Netherlands Institute for Neuroscience at the time, so we went for a hot chocolate (for me) and a coffee (for him).

In Rwanda, Radio La Benevolencija is famous for having created *Musekeweya* (which can be translated as “New Dawn”), a radio program broadcast throughout the country, whose messaging is based on the academic research of Erwin Staub, an emeritus professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts who wrote a book on the origins of genocide and other group violence. *Musekeweya* is a radio drama that tells the story of people living in two villages in Rwanda situated in opposite hills with marsh land in between. As the quantity and quality of land available is limited, disputes between the two villages developed over the years. These disputes are exacerbated by the fact that the two villages have different ethnic identities. By displaying the stories of different characters in those villages, *Musekeweya* seeks to explain how group violence can escalate and how to actively prevent it.

Georges told me that they were looking for scientists to help them test their interventions aimed at reducing group conflict, be it in Rwanda or elsewhere. The approach was very interesting because, unfortunately, it is

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not that frequent that stakeholders try to validate the efficacy of their interventions by collaborating with (neuro)scientists.

When he talked to me about Rwanda and the genocide, my mind started racing. I was already studying how obedience influences cognition, but I was far from thinking about going into a country where a genocide had actually happened relatively recently. I had not yet considered meeting with real perpetrators at that moment, and I was instead focusing only on university students who have a very limited experience of the disastrous consequences of obedience. As I will explain later in this book, in neuroscience, we are not really taught about the fact that we can recruit populations in other countries and contexts. During our education and from the huge majority of the scientific papers we read, we hear mostly about studies conducted on university students. Thinking differently requires stepping outside the box and entering into the unknown.

After meeting with Georges, I decided to go to Rwanda to study the question of obedience. Over the years, many colleagues have asked me how I thought conducting such neuroscientific projects in Rwanda was actually feasible or a “good idea,” in their own words, considering no one had done this before. Honestly, I don't really remember; there is a sort of “black hole” between conceiving that idea and its conceptualization. But certainly, I do not regret seizing this opportunity as it ended up being an incredible scientific and human adventure.

Uniquely, the research I present in this book has thus been conducted in the lab *and* in the field, presenting a new and necessary perspective on how obeying orders affects our cognition in such a way that we could commit acts of violence against others.

Like previous scholars, I have observed a form of “violence” in laboratory contexts under orders, with striking results. Over the last eight years, I have given 45,000 orders to individuals to administer a real painful electric shock to someone else. Only about 1,340 orders were refused (roughly 2.97 percent). In other words, only about 54 individuals out of 1,500 refused an order to hurt another person – although they did not necessarily refuse every order they were given.

When I started working on obedience and designed this experiment that was about to attract massive media coverage, I really thought that no one would ever agree to administer a real and painful shock to someone

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else, especially not for a monetary reward as small as €0.05 per shock. In addition, the majority of the people I tested knew the experiments of Stanley Milgram, a famous scientist in social psychology who studied destructive obedience in the 1960s and the 1970s. So why would they obey orders that involve inflicting real physical pain on someone else?

The capacity for humans to obey orders, even atrocious ones, does not have to be proven anymore. As Howard Zinn famously pointed out in his book published in 1997, “Historically, the most terrible things – war, genocide, and slavery – have resulted not from disobedience, but from obedience.”* Many societies rely on hierarchical institutions. Without a strict organization in which citizens follow the rules mandated by societal representatives, humans would probably not have achieved such an advanced degree of networking and interaction. However, the dark side of obedience results in societies being able to orchestrate the extermination of entire populations. Sadly famous examples include the Nazi genocide (1939–1945), when the Nazis exterminated millions of Jews and other ethnic minorities, as well as those they considered to be pariahs, such as homosexuals, Roma and Sinti, communists, or disabled persons. Another example is the Khmer Rouge army, led by Pol Pot, which exterminated between 1.7 and 2.2 million Cambodian citizens who were perceived as enemies or opposed their values and political vision between 1975 and 1979.

But such examples have been observed not only in soldiers given orders in the context of genocidal wars. Numerous historical episodes have shown that civilians are also capable of atrocious acts against other groups while following figures of authority. As an example, the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994 included a high number of civilians who joined the Interahamwe militia, the Hutu militia often cited as being responsible for the genocide, even though they had never killed anyone before.

But how have such terrible events been successfully instrumentalized, and how did the orchestrators of such violence convince civilians to join their campaigns?

* H. Zinn. *The Zinn Reader: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy*. (Seven Stories Press, 1997), p. 420.

PREFACE

Answering the *How* is one of the main objectives of this book. Across its chapters, I will delve into qualitative interviews conducted with former perpetrators in Rwanda and Cambodia, alongside an examination of experimental research in psychology and neuroscience.

I first considered dedicating the present book to the “Righteous.” The Righteous are individuals who were able to resist propaganda and save threatened human beings from extermination during genocides. However, dedicating this book only to the Righteous would be too reductionist. Plenty of rescuers worldwide died before being recognized as Righteous. Others refused to accept any credit for their heroic actions and are thus not officially recognized. Further, plenty of brave acts have been conducted worldwide by human beings without any official status and in contexts other than genocides. Resisting immoral orders is not only important during extreme examples such as genocide, but also in daily actions. For instance, resisting the pressure of your boss to discriminate against people when hiring, or speaking up and intervening to protect the victims of acts of bullying, harassment, or discrimination, are also examples of brave resistance.

This book, therefore, is dedicated to every single human being who once, no matter the context, refused an immoral order despite the consequences associated with this decision. Motivated by the diverse concerns and questions that I regularly receive from people from various parts of the world who are in distress, I hope this book will be a source of inspiration and answers.

Acknowledgments

This book and the scientific studies reported would never have been possible without the help of a number of people and institutions.

I would first like to thank the professors who supported me during my doctoral studies and my postdoctoral positions. Professor Axel Cleeremans, director of the Center for Research in Cognition and Neuroscience at the Université libre de Bruxelles (Belgium), has supported me since the very beginning of my academic career, by accepting me as a PhD student. He granted me the invaluable freedom to cultivate my independent thinking and research, allowing me to develop my unique line of scientific investigation. I am eternally grateful for this exceptional opportunity. During my doctoral studies, I was fortunate to work under the guidance of Professor Patrick Haggard from University College London (United Kingdom) for a year and a half. His mentorship was instrumental in developing my seminal study on obedience to authority, which laid the foundation for my entire research trajectory. I am deeply thankful for the countless meetings and hours devoted to refining this paradigm. Additionally, I extend my sincere appreciation to Professor Christian Keysers and Professor Valeria Gazzola for hosting me as a postdoctoral researcher for two transformative years at the Netherlands Institute for Neuroscience (The Netherlands). Their expertise in human behavior and the neural underpinnings of empathy for pain proved invaluable in shaping and guiding many of the experiments I conducted.

The guidance, support, and mentorship of these professors have been pivotal in my academic growth and achievements. Their belief in my potential has been a driving force in propelling my research forward.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am truly fortunate to have had the privilege of working with such outstanding scholars.

Throughout the years, I have also received support from stakeholders working in different institutions and organizations worldwide, without whom I would never have been able to recruit the populations I mention in the book. I would like to start by expressing my deepest gratitude to Georges Weiss, the director of Radio La Benevolencija Humanitarian Tool Foundation. Georges gave me the idea to initiate research activities in Rwanda, which probably would never have crossed my mind otherwise. We have worked together on other projects not directly mentioned in this book, and I have always appreciated his extraordinary enthusiasm. For research with the military, I warmly thank Professor Lieutenant-Colonel Salvatore Lo Bue from the Royal Military Academy in Belgium, who helped me gain access to this rare population. For access to prisons in Belgium, I must thank Karim El Klimchi, as well as the many prison directors for authorizing our access with all our electronic equipment and assisting us with the recruitment of inmates. In Rwanda, I received assistance from Professor Darius Gishoma and Dr. Clémentine Kanazayire from the University of Rwanda, as well as from people working for Prison Fellowship Rwanda, including Félix Bigabo, Silas, and François. In Cambodia, I was aided by Ratha Seng from the National University of Battambang, and I also received support from Youk Chhang, the director of the Documentation Center Cambodia, as well as from the local directors of three local centers across Cambodia: Ly Sok-Kheang at the Anlong Veng Peace Center; Seang Chenda at the Kampong Cham Documentation Center; and Pheng Pong-Rasy at the Takeo Documentation Center.

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My relatives also greatly contributed, directly or indirectly, to this book. Guillaume Pech, my life partner, offered me the greatest support I could have imagined. Despite having to work on his own research, he nonetheless accompanied me in Rwanda and in Cambodia in order to provide technical and emotional support during the research activities. I also would like to thank my mother, Anne Hauzeur, who has shown me her passion for science since I was a child, and my grandmother, Hendrica Cramer, who shared with me her humanitarian values.

I also need to express my gratitude to my closest friends, for their support throughout the years: Katarzyna Suchanecka, Sarah Miller, Jennifer Michiels, Laurène Vuillaume, Lola Seyll, Juliane Farthouath, Irene Cogliati Dezza, Anna Atas, Aurore Bouyer, Pedro Alexandre Magalhaes de Saldanha da Gama, Albert De Beir, and Whitney Stee.

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