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Ordinary Organizations

Simulated Brutality Reinterpreted from an Organizational Sociology Perspective ¹

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Stefan Kühl

This article presents a reinterpretation of important social-psychological experiments on obedience. It proposes the thesis that Frank's Soda Cracker Experiment, the Milgram Experiment, the Stanford Prison Experiment and the Deportation Experiment do not reproduce general behavior in contemporary society; rather, the experiments only allow conclusions about behavior in organizations. It can be shown that the experiments simulate (more by chance than intentionally) typical features of behavior in organizations: the membership issue, the member's self-commitment to the organization, and behavior within a zone of indifference and resistance in control gaps.

¹ The thesis of this article has been presented in seminars that I have given at the Venice International University, the University of Munich and the Bundeswehr University at Hamburg. I am especially grateful to my colleague André Kieserling. When presenting the deportation experiment in a seminar he was proposing that the Milgram experiment good be interpreted with the tools of organizational sociology.

1. Introduction: What organizations are capable of doing

Since its inception, organizational sociology has been focused on issues concerning organizational routines. Research in this field may analyze the day-to-day decision-making behavior of management personnel in public administrations, study the "functional dilettantism" of organizations in the non-profit sector, explain the repeated "successful failure" of group work concepts in manufacturing companies, or examine why developmental assistance organizations benefit from not being informed too much about the details concerning their programs.

With very few exceptions, however, organizational sociology has until now hardly been concerned with topics such as those violations of civilized behavior that are regarded as a major infraction of modernity, due to the atrocious nature of the deeds (see Bauman 1989: 8ff.). How was it possible for such events to occur in modern society, events that are so contrary to the concept of modernity? Questions which have hardly been discussed so far from an organizational sociology perspective might include the following: What organizational developments had to take place as essential prerequisites for the act of genocide on the Armenians in 1915? (Dadrian 1995) What sociological explanation can be given for the functioning of the Gulag? (Applebaum 2003) What sociological conclusions can we draw from the murders committed on mental patients and mentally handicapped people during the Nazi period? (see Bock 1991) How was it possible that the mass deportations of Jews and Gypsies to extermination camps in eastern Europe could be conducted without even as much as a public protest? How was it possible to maintain the "order of terror" in the Nazi concentration camps? (Sofsky 1997) What organizational processes played a role in the "war without mercy" between the United States and Japan? (Dower 1986) What explanation could possibly be given for the My Lai massacre and the other acts of murder committed by American soldiers on Vietnamese civilians during the Vietnam War? (Kelman 1973, Kotek and Rigoulot 2000)

While organizational sociologists – and sociologists in general – have so far largely evaded such topics, researchers in the field of experimental social psychology have shown surprisingly little hesitation or fear of dealing with these issues. Social psychologists have conducted experiments in which the subjects were induced – under controlled conditions – to perform acts that are considered "problematic in moral terms" when looked at from the perspective of an external observer. Such social-psychological experiments have asked the crucial question of whether it is in man's nature to be disposed toward violence and brutality, or whether people can be induced to such behavior by making them assume certain roles (Sabini and Silver 1983: 147, Bauman 1989: 153).

This article aims to present a reinterpretation of seminal social-psychological experiments on obedience from an organizational sociology perspective.² This reinterpretation mainly concerns the Soda Cracker Experiment, the Milgram Experiment, the Stanford Prison Experiment and the Deportation Experiment. According to the critics, the interpretation of these experiments suffers from an error that is typical for interpretations of laboratory experiments: overgeneralization. The findings from the experiments are not restricted to specific social systems (e.g. an informal group situation), but are generalized and applied to behavior in general (e.g. in spontaneous interactions, groups, social movements, organizations, etc.).³

The thesis of this article is that these four experiments on obedience unintentionally simulated behavior in organizations. The experiments thus allow conclusions about the behavior of people in organizations but not about behavior in modern society in general. It is in the nature of such laboratory experiments that the interpretation of their results can (only) be based on plausibility.⁴ A psychological experiment conducted in a laboratory primarily involves ("only") the interaction between a scientist and one or several subjects. But the behavior during the experiment is of interest only to the extent that it represents behavior outside the experimental situation. This is the paradox in the use of such methods. And it is precisely this relation between the social situation in the experiment and the social situations outside the laboratory that cannot be proved in an experiment but can only be made plausible with a well-designed experiment and through convincing reasoning in the interpretation of the experiment (Greenwood 1989: 175ff.).

Section 2 below will first present a brief description of Frank's Soda Cracker experiment, the Milgram experiment, the Stanford Prison experiment and the Deportation experiment. These experiments will be analyzed in Section 3 under the aspect of membership. Section 4 is concerned with how the commitment

² A (re)interpretation of social-psychological experiments from a sociological perspective may be unfamiliar ground for both sociologists and psychologists. Back in the seventies, Johan Goudbloom (1979: 22f.) has already observed that sociological interpretations of experiments conducted in psychological laboratories are only treated with disdain by psychologists. This attitude has not changed during the last 30 years, which can only be explained by the fact that there is a clearly established division of labor between sociologists and psychologists.

³ See Kühl 2005a on typical sources of error in laboratory experiments. In addition to the error of overgeneralization there are other typical errors of laboratory experiments. One source of error in interpreting experiments concerns the statistical validity. It is always necessary to question whether statistical methods were applied properly and can be relied on to confirm the hypothesis. Regarding the Stanford Prison experiment we must ask whether the results can justifiably be generalized, considering that the experiment was only conducted once. Surprisingly, this experiment plays a major role in social psychology, despite this "n = 1" situation and despite the fact that research in this field is usually based on large numbers of cases. That is why I have included it in my argument. Another source of error is the relationship between statistical hypothesis and the actual thesis. Even if we assume that the statistical methods were applied correctly, the hypothesis may not confirm the thesis due to operationalization errors. In the Milgram and Stanford Prison experiments, for example, it is unclear whether the (hopefully correctly calculated) statistical results are a true indication of obedience or are more likely to reflect an inborn or acquired willingness to commit acts of brutality.

⁴ From a methodological point of view, the reflections presented in this article are ad-hoc hypotheses deduced from the data of the four experiments. In quantitatively oriented experimental research, formulating ad-hoc hypotheses is an important step in the interpretation of experiments. But these ad-hoc hypotheses cannot be regarded as confirmed or falsified by the results of the experiments; rather, in compliance with the social psychology paradigm they should be tested in a second step by performing new experiments.

to membership expectations is created. It seems that once a member has decided to join an organization, his commitment to this decision plays a more important role than money payments. Section 5 analyses why it is that in the experiments, the behavioral demands made on subjects can perpetually be increased. A significant role is played by the zone of indifference into which the subjects enter when they agree to take part in the experiment. Section 6 shows how the subjects can make use of "control gaps" to at least partly evade demands. Section 7 discusses some prospects for further research. There are good reasons to believe that organizations operating on the basis of voluntary membership can go further in formalizing their expectations on behavior than organizations that resort to forced membership.

2. The unintentional simulation of behavior in organizations in the social-psychological experiments on obedience

In the early phase of social psychology, under the primary influence of Kurt Lewin's work, research was focused on issues concerning pressures to adapt. Muzafer Sherif, for instance, showed how the judgments of people change if they are influenced by other people who are present. In his experiment, subjects were asked to describe the movement of a spot of light in a dark room. The presence of other people frequently induced subjects not to rely on their own judgment but to accept spontaneously established norms, that is, the views of other people who were present (Sherif 1936: 93). In another experiment, largely influenced by Lewin, Solomon E. Asch showed how willing people are to submit to peer pressure. In his experiment, seven persons were asked to estimate the length of three lines. Six of the seven persons were members of the research team, but unknown to the seventh person (the subject), they were only playing the role of a subject and systematically gave incorrect answers. As a result, the real subject based his assessments on the incorrect statements of the other people (Asch 1951: 177; 1955: 31). Inspired by these experiments conducted earlier by Sherif and Asch, the field of social psychology developed a strong interest in issues concerning the willingness to obey and submission to authority, but no thought was given to whether these new experiments still simulated spontaneous interactions or some other social phenomena.

One of the first experiments to study obedience was the Soda Cracker experiment conducted by Lewin's student Jerome D. Frank (1944). This study was done in the mid-thirties in order to examine children's resistance to feeding. In this experiment the experiment coordinator asked adult subjects to eat twelve unsalted and rather tasteless crackers. A first group of subjects was told that this scientific experiment required them to eat soda crackers. As a rule, most of the subjects ate the crackers without making any objections (Situation 1). A second group of subjects was told it made no difference for the experiment whether they ate the crackers or not, but the experiment coordinator would try to make them eat. In this group, the subjects soon showed various forms of resistance to the partly rather violent endeavors of the experiment coordinator to make the subjects eat the crackers (Situation 2). In the third group of subjects, the subjects were given this information only after they had eaten a cracker together with the experiment

coordinator. In this case the typical reaction of the subjects was a considerable uncertainty as to whether they should continue to eat the crackers or not (Situation 3).

Inspired by the Soda Cracker experiment, Stanley Milgram conducted what is probably the most well-known experiment on obedience to authority.⁵ In the basic experiment, the experiment coordinator was equipped with key insignia of scientific authority, and he told the subjects that the experiment in which they were about to take part dealt with the learning ability of students. The subjects were to assume the role of teacher, and a "student" sat in the adjoining room. If that "student" gave an incorrect answer, the subject had to administer electric shocks of increasing severity to him. The subject was not aware that the role of student was being played by a member of the research team and that the student's reactions to the electric shocks, such as shouts of pain, protests and sudden bouts of silence, were merely simulated. Both in Milgram's basic experiment and in replications of the experiment by other researchers, the majority of subjects were willing to administer electric shocks up to the level of 450 volts, that is, electric shocks that would have inflicted extreme pain to the student (see Milgram 1963; see also Ancona and Pareyson 1968, 1971/1972, Rosenhan 1969, Edwards et al. 1969, Mantell 1971a, 1971b, Kilham and Mann 1974: 699, Burley and McGuinness 1977, Shanab and Yahya 1978, Miranda et al. 1981, Schurz 1985, Meeus and Raaijmakers 1986).⁶

The Stanford Prison experiment was performed by a group of researchers led by Philip Zimbardo. This experiment was conducted only once in the early seventies, but it achieved a notoriety similar to that of the Milgram experiment. The experiment coordinator randomly divided a group of "normal" men into a group of prison guards and a group of prisoners. In a fictitious prison located at Stanford University, the two groups were to play the roles of prison guard and prisoner for a few days. The guards were equipped with uniforms, sunglasses, whistles and truncheons, while the prisoners were dressed in prisoner uniforms with identification numbers at the front and back. The experiment was intended to last for two weeks, but after six days it was called off by the experiment coordinators because half of the prisoners began to show symptoms of apathy and depression, while some guards exhibited forms of sadistic behavior (Haney et al. 1973: 69ff.; see also Zimbardo et al. 1973, Zimbardo et al. 1975).

⁵ For the reference to Frank's experiment, see Milgram 1963: 372.

⁶ The research of Meeus and Raaijmakers (1986) is included with reservations because their experiments were not concerned with the physical punishment of a student but with the unjustified rejection of an alleged job applicant. The Kilham and Mann study is not completely comparable because they did not do Milgram's baseline experiment but a variant in which a peer delivers the electric shocks and the subject only has to give orders to deliver them. For comparison purposes, in the case of Jordan only the sample with young adults and an obedience level of 62.5% was used (Shanab and Yahya 1978), not the earlier study with children and an obedience level of 73% (Shanab / Yahya 1977). For South Africa the results could only be inferred from the secondary literature (Edwards et al. 1969).

The Deportation experiment, which has so far largely been ignored in the literature, was originally designed as a planning game (see Kraus 1987: 50ff., Berg 1988: 121ff.)⁷ to simulate the deportation of hundreds of thousands of "guest workers" from eastern Germany to an area in southern Germany said to be radioactively contaminated. For this mass deportation, a group of subjects was asked to plan overnight transports through Germany. The task included equipping railway cars for transports of large numbers of people, arranging food rations for these people as cost-effectively as possible, and examining the workers when they arrived in the contaminated area to determine whether they were fit to work. The subjects had to assume different roles during the course of the operation. They were only allowed to communicate with each other in writing. The trains to be used in the game only existed in symbolic form. In contrast to the Milgram and Stanford Prison experiments, the "victims" in this study of organizational behavior were only "virtual victims". Such a distance to the victims largely corresponds to the situation that prevailed in the administrative organizations that were responsible for mass deportations during the Nazi period.⁸ The participants were informed that the purpose of these simulated operations was to transport people and goods as effectively and efficiently as possible, a formulation that was taken directly from an official statement of objectives of a railway corporation. However, from the information supplied to the participants of this game, they could infer that the transports were forced deportations of foreigners to a radioactively contaminated area. This experiment has been performed repeatedly since the early seventies with 350 different groups consisting of an average of 15 participants, but in only one single case was the resistance by the subjects so strong that the game was called off by the participants themselves. In all the other cases the game was called off by the game coordinator, but only after a significant number of trains had passed through the entire hierarchy of the railway company and had reached the contaminated region, with all the subjects that participated in the game having played their part (Kraus 2003: 3).⁹

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the methodological differences between experiment, role play and experimental game, see Berg 1988: 149f. The differences are not so much in the methods as in the aims. While explicit aim of an experiment is to gain new knowledge, role plays and experimental games are frequently used for didactic purposes. Frank's Soda Cracker experiment and the Milgram experiment come close to the ideal type of social-psychological experiment, while the Deportation experiment contains many elements of the experimental game. The Stanford Prison experiment has role-play components and lies between the other two. In both experiment and experimental game it is important that behavior cannot be justified with statements like "It was just an experiment" or "It's just a game". In the Deportation experiment, this is ensured by instructing the participants at the start of the experiment that during the game they should behave as they believe they would in reality and in such a way that they can justify their actions; see Kraus 1987: 75, Berg 1988: 154.

⁸ Franz Novak, Adolf Eichmann's Transport Officer in the Reich Security Head Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*), did not go on any official trip to the German-occupied territories in the East between 1940 and his transfer to a post in Hungary in March 1944. There are many indications that during the time when he was responsible for planning mass deportations to Auschwitz and other extermination camps, he was not present even once for such a transport; see Pätzold and Schwartz 1994: 30.

⁹ The Deportation experiment was usually conducted from the perspective of youth and adult political education. Therefore the results were never documented so accurately that it would have been possible to establish time series or make comparisons between participant groups. It was not possible to standardize the game sessions to an extent that would have made it possible to vary the progress of the game in a controlled manner in order to observe what effects the variations had on the game. Some of the games might still be reconstructed by doing "archival work", because the notes sent through official channels, the train timetable forms (*Zuglaufzettel*) and the food ration forms

The prevalent interpretation of these experiments is interesting from a sociological point of view. This research is fundamental to social psychology because it has provided experimental proof for Durkheim's primal perception that behavior patterns should not primarily be attributed to character traits but must be understood as the result of "situational constraints" (see Milgram 1974: 138; Blass 2000a: xiii). These experiments showed that it is not the subject's acquired or even inborn behavior that is most important; rather, what is important is the behavior that is appropriate to a person's role in the respective situation, and this varies only slightly with age, sex, cultural background, and political orientation.¹⁰

In the subsequent discussion of the implications of this "primal perception", the research teams led by Philip Zimbardo and Stanley Milgram had a tendency to generalize their results into statements about a willingness to obey and a submission to authority in modern society in general. Zimbardo made use of his experiment as an occasion to point at the effects of "labeling" in modern society, and suggested that the experiments made it possible to draw conclusions not only about behavior in prisons but about behavior in society in general (see Zimbardo et al. 1975: 280ff.). According to Milgram, the subjects behaved the way they did because in his experiment they were caught up in social structures such as value systems and authority relations from which they could free themselves only with great difficulty. Typical of this tendency to generalize is Milgram's question about what governments might be capable of doing in light of all their authority and prestige, in view of the fact that even an unknown experiment coordinator was able to persuade adults to oppress a 50-year-old man and to inflict painful electric shocks upon him.¹¹

Methodological critics of the Milgram experiment felt that there were some problems with generalizing the findings from these experiments.¹² Erich Fromm (1973: 74), for example, maintained that Milgram's

(*Lebensmittelzettel*) for these games were retained. Particularly striking game situations can still be reconstructed by conducting interviews with game coordinators. The (so far only provisional) analysis was based on five deportation experiments. In one experiment (1987) there are very well documented results (Kraus 1987, Berg 1988), and in two experiments (2001 and 2002) the train timetables, written communications and some of the evaluation records have been retained, so that it was possible to reconstruct these games. Two other experiments were performed with two different groups of students in 2000 and 2002, in cooperation with Eric Treske and Ursula Bohn.

¹⁰ See the replications of the Milgram experiment by Shanab and Yahya 1977: 534 (influence of age, sex), Mantell 1971a (influence of cultural background, political attitudes), Schurz 1985 (influence of twenty personality traits). In regard to obedience levels, various follow-ups to the Milgram experiment show few variations according to sex, age, race, education, or political attitudes; see Sheridan and King 1972: 165f., Kilham and Mann 1974: 700ff. There were only some positive correlations between obedience levels and low ego strength (Larsen et al. 1976) with the inability to put oneself in the position of others (see Burley and McGuinness 1977); however, these do not cast doubt on the basic situational explanation for the experiment.

¹¹ Milgram 1965: 75.

¹² All experiments can be criticized for being only partly representative of social reality. From a methodological point of view, an experiment is, after all, "just an experiment" and not "social reality". The four experiments that are discussed here differ from each other in terms of the extent to which they "distort" reality. Against the validity of the Deportation experiment one could say that under the conditions of role play and games, behavioral patterns emerge that would normally not develop in "real organizations". This argument was also used against the Stanford Prison

findings cannot be generalized as statements about "real life". In his view the experiments merely showed that science is held in such high esteem in modern society that hardly anyone could imagine that "wrong" could be done in the name of science. Just as Abraham could not imagine that God could be wrong when He ordered Abraham to kill his son, Milgram's subjects could not imagine that injustice could be done in the name of science. Steven Patten expressed a similar view, arguing that Milgram had only simulated the authority of experts, and therefore it was impossible to draw conclusions about behavior such as that of Adolf Eichmann in the Holocaust or of Calley in the My Lai massacre during the war in Vietnam (see Patten 1977a: 438f., 1977b: 350ff.).¹³

However, it is difficult to show plausibly that a willingness to obey in experiments is connected with the willingness to obey scientific authorities. In the so-called "Bridgeport experiment" Milgram was able to show that relocating to a building outside the university and doing away with some insignia of scientific authority did not significantly reduce the obedience levels (Experiment 10; see Milgram 1974: 72ff.).¹⁴ Among the most remarkable phenomena in the Stanford Prison experiment is the conflict that emerged between guards and the experiment coordinators, who tried to intervene (Zimbardo et al. 1973: 55ff.). Most of the deportation experiments avoided simulating scientific authority in any form, and in the teacher training experiment the experiment coordinator had less academic education than the subjects.

The main question that is raised by these different social-psychological experiments is why people are willing to do things that they would not do under "normal" circumstances. Why should people eat twelve totally tasteless soda crackers only because an experiment coordinator tells them to do so? Why is it that people are prepared to administer highly severe electric shocks to students when ordered to do so by an authority? Why is it that people who call themselves pacifists can take on the role of a prison guard who drills prisoners over a period of many hours? What explanation can we give for a person's willingness to

experiment, since the prison was only simulated. But the behavior patterns which emerged *during* the experiment were hardly attributed to the nature of the experiment as a game (along the lines of "Great, now I can finally play *Contaminate the Foreigners*" or "Great, I always wanted to give prisoners a good bashing"). The game-like nature of the experiment only becomes evident in the analysis, when justifications for the behavioral patterns are assessed. Milgram deftly avoids this problem by designing his experiment such that the subjects do not have the possibility of justifying themselves by saying it's just a game. The subject actually believes that the students are given real electric shocks. However, see the criticism in Orne and Holland 1968, where the results are nevertheless said to be of limited reliability. Interestingly, it is at this point in social psychology that criticism of research ethics begins, according to which it is unethical not only to mislead the subjects about the actual aims of the experiment but also to make them believe that they are seriously hurting people; Baumrind 1964. Understandably, the idea of make-believe experiments ("I will now tell you something about the set-up of the Milgram experiment, and then I will ask you to behave as if you didn't know anything about it") did not produce the same results as the original experiments did.

¹³ This form of criticism is traditional in social psychology. The general concern is that experiments primarily model behavioral patterns prevailing in experiments but say little about life outside the laboratory; Greenwood 1989: 177ff.

¹⁴ Milgram's assessment in this regard (1963: 373) is contradictory. In his original article he indicates that there were "consequences for performance" as a result of relocating the experiment to buildings outside the university.

participate in the simulated deportation of minorities to a radioactively contaminated area, despite all the information they have received about the atrocities committed in the Holocaust?

3. The experiments raise the membership issue

In the interpretation of these experiments, particularly the Milgram experiment and the Deportation experiment, there is a tendency to look to Weber's concept of bureaucracy for an explanation. The high level of obedience is explained by the ways in which work is distributed among the various hierarchical levels or on the same hierarchical level. In the experiment called "A Peer Administers Shocks", Milgram was able to show that dividing up the work even further increased the obedience level to 93 percent. The obedience level is highest in those variants of the experiment where the subject only does the preparatory work and the electric shocks are administered by someone else.¹⁵ Perdita Berg attributes the high level of obedience in the Deportation experiment to the "pseudo-objective functional constraints and structures of the bureaucratic organization" into which the subjects are integrated. According to Berg, the Deportation experiment suggests that even without group pressure, without psychological agitation of the masses and without the influence of personal authority relationships, "Fascist-like processes are possible" merely as a result of "situational influences and conditions".¹⁶

Here we can see some obvious parallels to Weber's theory of bureaucracy (see Baumann 1989: 160ff.). According to Max Weber, bureaucracies consist of a continuous flow of official business that is based on regulations, the hierarchical principle, a set of procedural rules, and the documentation of processes and decisions. The members of a bureaucracy simply perform their official duties. They have clearly defined responsibilities, are integrated into a clear hierarchy, and they are subject to the official discipline that is controlled by this hierarchy (Weber 1976: 548ff.). Weber saw administrative bureaucracies as machines that perform their tasks in an objective, precise and neutral manner. In Max Weber's view, the functional superiority of such a bureaucratic mechanism was just as obvious as the technical superiority of a modern manufacturing machine compared to traditional manual labor.

But is such an explanation based on Weber's theory sufficient for the analysis of these experiments?

What the four experiments have in common is that they test what people are willing to do in order to prevent their (self-)exclusion from the experiment to which they have committed themselves, without

¹⁵ See Milgram 1974: 122, Experiment 18 and his original grant application to the National Science Foundation, Milgram 1962: 22ff. Wesley Kilhan and Leon Mann (1974: 699) found in their experiments that the willingness to obey is greater when the subject only has to give orders to administer electric shocks than when he has to press the button himself.

¹⁶ See Berg 1988: 330 and 339. These explanations have some similarity to the attempts to explain the Holocaust from a Weber-based perspective; see Bauman 1989: 18.

having received more detailed information. The concept of Milgram's experiment is to find out whether the subject is willing to ignore an essential "if-then program" ("If the learner makes a mistake, then I will give him an electric shock that is 15 volts higher than the previous one"), knowing that refusal to comply will lead to his immediate exclusion and the termination of the experiment. If the subject hesitates, he is reminded with increasing firmness that a refusal to continue is a violation of the experiment's conditions. This is done with reminders like "Please continue", "The experiment requires that you continue", "It is absolutely necessary that you continue", and "You have no choice, you must continue" (see Milgram 1963: 372ff.). In the Deportation experiment, if a subject expresses his doubts about the purposes of the operations, attempts will be made to make that subject stay in the organization by using delays, calming him down, or making concessions. The question of whether to continue or not is deliberately not raised by the experiment coordinator; rather, the subject is put to the test to see whether he wants to "quit" of his own accord (Berg 1988: 236). Obviously, in the Stanford Prison experiment the prisoners cannot decide for themselves whether to "quit", since they are playing a passive role that is typical for life in prison, in a mental hospital, or in the army (see Goffman 1961). Even more interesting are the restrictions imposed on the guards. The experiment is based on the condition that the guards are left unclear about the possibility to quit, in order to permit observing how they adapt their behavior to the requirements of the experiment (see Haney et al. 1973: 70ff.).

Focusing experiments on the issue of whether to "continue or quit" is not typical for social psychology, but this way a phenomenon was simulated (perhaps inadvertently) that is characteristic of organizations: membership. Since the time of Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy, organizational sociology has made great progress not just by abandoning the concept of "instrumental rationality" in organizations but also by introducing the concept of "membership". (For a review of the concept of "instrumental rationality" and its abandonment, see Luhmann 1973; for the concept of "membership", see Luhmann 1964).¹⁷

In the early phase of research on organizations it was already realized that people who are members of specific organizations behave completely differently within their organization than they do outside the organization or in other organizations. For example, a woman who is a loving and caring mother at home may simultaneously be capable of managing "her" company with an iron hand. Or the division chief who has a reputation for his authoritarian manner in his ministry may show extremely polite behavior towards his fellow shoppers at the supermarket. For decades, an application-oriented management research has

¹⁷ In the 1960s Niklas Luhmann seemed to be aware of the soda cracker experiment and the Milgram experiment and he seemed to have played with the idea to interpret at least the soda cracker experiment with the membership concept. In the 1990s André Kieserling proposed a reinterpretation of the Milgram experiment with the membership concept. See for an interpretation of the Milgram experiment as a "legitimate order in a miniature format" Kieserling 2002: 4.

been working hard on the question of how it might be possible to persuade an assembly line worker who demonstrates impressive management skills when running his football team or when building his house, to apply at least some of these skills at his workplace, as well, where he has to fit fenders on car-bodies.

In organizational sociology, this apparently "strange" behavior is explained with the expectations that organizations have of their members. When people join an organization they are automatically subject to its specific limitations on the behavioral spectrum that is available to the members. In that organization, the members will not have the same spectrum of behavior patterns available as they have in a pedestrian zone, on a playground, or in the family. Such a regulation of behavior is based on a condition that is the starting point for all further formalizations of behavioral expectations. The condition for membership in an organization is that the members must recognize and accept the organization's expectations about the behavior of its members. It follows that non-recognition of the organization's expectations is incompatible with membership (see Luhmann 1964: 54, 2000: 113). This principle makes it possible for organizations to ignore the question of what motivates individuals to become members. For the organization it is only a matter of secondary importance whether a person has joined because the organization pays high salaries, provides a more attractive job, or offers a chance to learn from colleagues. An organization can proceed on the assumption that its members are generally motivated to obey the organization's rules, orders and programs, and that it is not necessary to convince the members that the various regulations and directives of the organization are justified and actually make sense (Luhmann 1964: 89ff., 1973: 128ff.).

What makes expectations linked to membership so special is the fact that if a member refuses to accept even a single demand from the organization, he has already violated the expectations placed on members. A member who refuses to obey even "*one single* order from his superior" or who "refuses out of principle to recognize *a single* rule" has already rebelled "against the system and all its formal expectations" (see Luhmann 1964:63). For example, if a clerk working in a university students' grant office refuses to hand over to his superior a student file which the superior requires, the clerk will give rise to a considerable commotion in the organization, not because that file is essential for the activities of the grants office but because the refusal to comply with even a simple order is inevitably interpreted as a rebellion against all formalized expectations in that organization.

Only by focusing the fundamental membership rule on just a *single* explicit case of non-compliance can organizations generalize such formalized behavioral expectations. Such a generalization of expectations is otherwise hardly found anymore in modern society. In an organization, all communications are occasions for the member to ask himself whether his current behavior is in compliance with the formal expectations or not, and whether he would jeopardize his membership if he refuses to accept a formal expectation. The question that is always asked, particularly when requirements are problematic, is: "Can I continue to be a member if I openly reject this or that unreasonable demand?" (see Luhmann 1964: 40).

The point of the argument is that only by focusing the four experiments on whether to "continue or quit", the fundamental rule of membership in organizations was simulated – even if only inadvertently – and the behavior of the subjects in the experiments was made quite similar to that of members in organizations.¹⁸ In the Soda Cracker experiment, for example, there were discussions between the experiment coordinator and the subjects who had made efforts to avoid meeting the demands without openly refusing to comply. The discussions may be interpreted as a conflict over the fundamental membership rule. In the Milgram experiment, the experiment coordinator explicitly ordered the subjects to continue with the experiment and reminded them that even *one* refusal to comply would violate the conditions of participation in the experiment. In the Deportation experiment, some of the participants showed signs of resistance, and the pressures they experienced arose from the fact that although they believed that their non-compliance was morally correct behavior, they still felt obliged to stay in the experiment due to the "membership rule".

How can we explain the willingness of subjects to submit to the conditions of the experiments?

4. The binding effect of membership: An explanation between incentive theory and self-commitment

Both industrial sociology based on Karl Marx and behavioral decision-making theory in the tradition of Chester Barnard emphasize the vital importance of money payments. Not surprisingly, money payments are an effective way of binding people to organizations. In contrast to special interest organizations that are dependent on having their members identify with the purposes and the leadership of the organization, and where the information provided must have a strong motivating effect on the members, organizations that use money payments as a way of obliging their members can afford to have purposes, managers and communications that do not have a very motivating effect on the members (see Luhmann 1964: 89ff.).¹⁹

¹⁸ It could also be argued, vice-versa, that an experiment whose design does not culminate in the issue of whether to continue or quit simulates membership only to a limited degree, which is why it is difficult to draw conclusions from them about behavior in organizations; see also the early experiments of Adams and Rosenbaum (1962) on the simulation of membership.

¹⁹ The distinction made in organizational research between industrial organizations and special interest organizations is substantially based on this difference. Industrial organizations such as companies, administrations, universities or hospitals do not depend on having the objectives, aims and interests of their members correspond with those of the organization. Since these organizations retain their members through money payments, they can generally afford to ignore the individual motives of their members. Special interest organizations like churches, associations and political parties, however, are structured "from the bottom up". Since they usually do not pay their members but, on the contrary, are often financed by their members, these organizations must mobilize their members with motivating purposes. The objectives of such organizations must not necessarily correspond entirely with the purposes, aims and interests of their members, but they must at least be compatible. After all, the reason for their commitment is not a monthly salary but the conviction that the organization makes it easier for the individual to pursue his aims: his commitment to Jesus Christ, his fight for (and sometimes against) a by-pass road, his struggle for the victory of Socialism in the next elections; for a more recent treatment.

Since the need for money is "chronic", in industrial organizations the members are committed not just temporarily but permanently. With money payments the members can be persuaded to accept a change from a motivating purpose (e.g. saving children suffering from AIDS) to a less motivating purpose (e.g. selling AIDS medicine to make a profit). With money payments members can also be induced to tolerate non-motivating information, such as about the fatal side-effects of a newly developed medicine, for long periods of time. Organizations can employ management personnel who may be competent in their field but who do not have a very motivating influence on their subordinates. Since obedience from members is secured through money payments, the organization can do without a charismatic leader (Luhmann 1964: 94ff.). Max Weber was right to emphasize that the development of the money economy was an essential precondition for the development of bureaucratic administrations and (one should add) for bureaucratic industrial organizations in general (Weber 1976: 558f.).

In the experiments it is evident, however, that the binding force of money is weak. While in the Soda Cracker experiment, the Milgram experiment and the Stanford Prison experiment the participants did receive fees for taking part – from an organizational sociology perspective, this can be regarded as a substitute for wages – these comparatively small sums of money did not seem to be the decisive reason for the participants' willingness to obey. The \$4 paid for participating in the Milgram experiment for an hour and the \$15 per day that were paid in the Stanford Prison experiment most likely were an incentive for the participants to register for the experiments, but these amounts cannot explain why the participants continued to take part in the experiment to the end. Milgram repeated his experiment with students from Yale University who were not paid, but the results were quite similar to the results obtained with subjects who were paid (see Milgram 1963: 377). Philip G. Zimbardo and his research team found that during the course of their experiment, the \$15 paid for an 8-hour shift as a guard and for 24 hours of imprisonment increasingly became an abstraction and was only a "weak source of extrinsic satisfaction" that was much less enticing than the motivation generated by the "dynamic relationship between guards and prisoners". Thus the guards worked unpaid overtime and did not ask for more money even when they realized how tiring their task was. At the end of the experiment, all prisoners except two were willing to leave without the money they had already earned, if only they could be released "on probation" (Zimbardo et al. 1975: 276ff.; quoted from the German translation, Zimbardo et al. 2002: 75). In the Deportation experiment it was even clearer that money did not have much of a binding effect. Since the experiment was integrated into courses held at schools and universities, the participants received no payments (Berg 1988: 181ff.).

How can we assess how much influence money payments have on subjects? It seems that it is only in exceptional situations that actors base their decisions on calculations according to rational choice theory. This kind of rational calculation takes place when persons can determine how much effort is required, the benefits they will gain, the side effects, and the alternatives which they will probably miss. The classical situation for such a rational choice calculation might be a deliberation about whether to spend a night with

a wealthy man for the sum of one million euros, or whether to allow oneself to be locked up in a container for a hundred days in return for the vague possibility of receiving 250,000 euros and a record contract. It seems rather questionable, however, whether the administration of health-damaging electric shocks, the beating of prisoners and the killing of members of ethnic or religious minority groups can be understood as the result of a rational cost-benefit calculus.

In these experiments, money payments seem to play a role only to the extent that they are necessary to persuade people to decide that they will let themselves be subjected to an experiment. In fact, it seems to be of secondary importance whether a subject's commitment is created through a payment to the subject or a payment made by the subject. In view of the fact that the participants in the Deportation experiment paid for the cost of their participation, it can be assumed that in terms of the binding effects achieved, a "payment by the participant" is the functional equivalent of a "payment to the participant".

Once the decision to "join" has been made, subjects adapt their level of ambition and their expectations to the prevailing conditions. Kurt Lewin (1936) found that a person's level of ambition is not only decisive for whether an action is interpreted as a success or a failure, but the level of ambition itself changes with success or failure. For example, if someone aspires to achieve a sales turnover of € 100,000 per year and fails to reach that goal, this will not only lead to disappointment about the results of his efforts but also to an adaptation of ambitions (either consciously or subconsciously). When a subject realizes that he has to administer electric shocks for \$4 an hour, he not only has the option of reacting with disappointment to this morally onerous demand; he also has the possibility of lowering his level of ambition.

What conclusions on the binding effect of membership can be drawn from the experiments?

It is characteristic of organizations in modern society that people can decide *for themselves* whether they want to join. In modern society, becoming a member of a specific organization is always a matter for the member himself to decide, irrespective of whether he is urged to join as a result of parental pressure, a calling from God, or economic circumstances. The member himself will sign the employment contract, make vows to God and His Church, or fill out a check for membership fees to be paid to a workers' welfare association.

In modern society, the decision to join an organization is contingent on the possibilities for leaving the organization. Nearly all organizations in modern society make it easy for members to leave. Off-hand we can say that it is easier to withdraw from most organizations than it is to opt out of a telephone contract with a mobile phone company or a purchasing contract with a book club. Even the Israeli army, which is surely an organization with very harsh methods to prevent people from leaving, has a large number of tricks and possibilities available to allow its members to leave.

The experiments can be seen as indicating that it is precisely this freedom to decide about one's own membership that makes it so difficult to quit (see Milgram 1974: 140ff.; Miller 1986: 225f.). Since the decision to join was not forced but was voluntary, the members feel committed to their decisions. They would "lose face" if they decided to quit only shortly after joining. In Erving Goffman's words, to quit would be a source of "embarrassment", not only for the members themselves but also for their partners. Goffman's idea is that when people interact, they make demands as to how they want their character to be perceived, and the interaction partners will respect these demands if they want the interaction to continue. But the individuals are then expected to present themselves with a coherent "self" that corresponds to the requirements of the situation. An infraction of this image creates an embarrassment that not only poses a problem for the person concerned but for the entire interaction. That is why the efforts of the interaction partners will be aimed at avoiding embarrassments (see Goffman 1956: 268; Silver et al. 1987: 47ff.).

But those who want to quit an experiment are forced to justify their decision by referring to an incident in the organization, and by doing so they not only discredit the organization but also their recent decision to join. In his evaluation of the Soda Cracker experiment, Jerome D. Frank says that his subjects suppressed any refusal to eat soda crackers because that is just what they had voluntarily agreed to do. One of Frank's subjects explained his willingness to obey by saying that he had made a conscious decision to take part in the experiment, and he therefore believed that he was obligated to do whatever the coordinator asked him to do (Frank 1944: 37). Milgram refers to a number of binding factors that made his subjects administer electric shocks, including the commitment to their original "promise" to help the experiment coordinator and the "embarrassment" that they would cause if they decided to quit (see Milgram 1963: 377).

This is made even clearer if we look at the behavior of people who "quit" their membership by leaving the experiment. What is so interesting in the Milgram experiment is not only the high level of obedience but also the behavior of the subjects who decided not to give the student any further electric shocks. In none of these documented cases did even one of them jump up after the experiment to help that presumably injured student. As a rule they stayed seated and remained depressed in their chairs. In the Stanford Prison experiment, one of the guards who wanted to quit felt ashamed, not only towards his "colleagues" but also towards the experiment coordinator. In one of the more accurately documented deportation experiments, one of the people who quit her "job" as a car equipper said she felt guilty when she gave up her job. She said that when she registered for the seminar she had declared she was willing to participate. In another case, one person – the only one who had quit her job – took part in a thirty-minute discussion during the evaluation phase in which suggestions were made on how the transports could have been conducted more efficiently, but she did not dare to express her doubts about the experiment (Zimbardo 1974: 567, Miller 1986: 252).

The reason why it is so difficult for subjects to quit the experiment may be that this is obstructed by the lack of many of the "face-saving" devices that are normally available when someone decides to quit his membership in an organization. For example, the subject cannot explain that he or she is unable to take part in the experiment because his wife or her husband has suddenly been transferred, or that he or she has received a more lucrative offer from another experiment. The subjects are faced with the dilemma of either giving in to their doubts about the correctness of their actions, thus risking a loss face, or avoiding embarrassment by continuing with the interactions.

5. Gradually rising demands in the zone of indifference

The design of most experiments on obedience is such that the demands made on subjects are gradually increased. In the Soda Cracker experiment, the relevant question is how many crackers the subject will eat before refusing to continue eating (Frank 1944: 48ff.). In the Milgram experiment, the intensity of electric shocks administered is continuously increased, and the entire set-up of the experiment is designed to determine the maximum voltage that subjects are willing to administer (see Milgram 1963: 376). In the Deportation experiment, the focus is on whether additional information or a rise in demands meets with resistance. When do the participants draw appropriate conclusions and bear the risk of being discharged: When they are told that the wagons used for transports will hold not 50 but 150 people? When they are told that people will come to harm during the transports? When they incidentally learn from newspaper reports that the destination is most likely to be a radioactively contaminated area, and that the migrants are effectively sent to their deaths? (Kraus 2003; see also Kraus 1987: 80, Berg 1988: 199)

The analysis of the Milgram experiment, in particular, made evident that obedience is linked to a gradual rise in demands. Punishment of the "student" begins with a harmless electric shock of 15 volts, and each subsequent shock is only a relatively small increase in voltage compared to the previous one (see Gilbert 1981: 691ff.). Considering that the increase is only gradual, what is the right point at which to break off the experiment? At the first sign of protest from the student? Or when the student suddenly falls silent, after a continuous increase in voltage? John Sabini and Maury Silver have pointed out that the difficulty for the subjects is that if they leave the experiment they must justify to themselves (and the experiment coordinator) why they had actually delivered an electric shock that is only slightly weaker than the one they are not prepared to administer. In this dilemma of self-portrayal, many subjects seem to be prepared to administer shocks of even higher voltage, as this allows them to avoid the problem of having to justify their previous actions (see Sabini and Silver 1980; Kelman 1973: 44ff., Gilbert 1981: 691f., Baumann 1989: 157).²⁰

²⁰ In a secondary analysis of the tape recordings made during Milgram's Bridgeport experiment, Rochat, Maggioni and Modigliani (2000) were able to show that subjects who had voiced their doubts early in the experiment were more likely to quit than subjects who did not express doubts. Of the 21 persons who eventually refused to continue,

In social psychology, this phenomenon is called the "foot-in-the-door principle". Social psychologists Jonathan L. Freedman and Scott C. Fraser gave a simple explanation for it: If someone has agreed to do something that is not very complicated or demanding, it will be difficult for him to resist the increasing demands of a communication partner. For example, someone who has consented to sign a petition for careful driving will find it hard to refuse to erect a large sign against reckless driving in his front yard – harder than a person who refused to sign the petition in the first place (Freedman and Fraser 1966: 200). Once someone has let himself (or herself) be talked into going out on a date with somebody, it is difficult to say no to a goodbye kiss on the doorstep, or even to refuse further advances. Due to the effects of the "foot-in-the-door principle", the first question that pollsters ask when voters leave a polling station is not "Who did you vote for" but "Did you vote?" – a question which is so ridiculous that any voter unfamiliar with social psychology should be left dumbfounded. After all, what other reason could there possibly be for an adult to visit an elementary school converted to a polling station on an election Sunday?²¹

This phenomenon is generally applicable to social systems and can be specified even further from an organizational sociology perspective. All experiments discussed in this article applied a fundamental expectation that all organizations have of their members: they demand obedience within an unspecified zone of indifference. Chester Barnard has already observed that membership establishes only a general agreement between the organization and the member. It establishes a time frame within which the rules of the organization must be obeyed, the limits of the member's subjection to the organization's authority, and the compensation the member will receive for his willingness to be subject to that authority. The services that a member must provide to the organization, however, are not specified in detail. Every member that joins an organization issues a kind of "blank check" upon entering the organization. Thus there emerges a "zone of indifference" for the members in which they cannot refuse to observe the rules, orders, demands, directives and instructions issued by superiors, which has very significant consequences for the members (Barnard 1938: 161ff.).²²

Obviously, this phenomenon is highly functional for organizations. The members pledge a kind of general allegiance to the organization and swear to obey its instructions, which are initially not specified in detail.

57.1 % had challenged the experiment coordinator prior to or at the level of 150 volts; of the 19 "obedient" subjects, none had objected before reaching the 150-volt level; also see Neubacher 2002: 57.

²¹ I thank André Kieserling for sharing with me his election example. For the societal level it is possible to establish a connection between the population's gradual habituation to Nazi repression, a thesis of proposed by historians, and the foot-in-the-door phenomenon; for an overview see Lang 1990: 8ff., Trommler 1992: 92ff.

²² The term "indifference" can be defined more precisely, with reference to Gregory Bateson. "Indifference" can be understood as the opposite of "difference". It means that the expectations of an organization make no difference to the members. Organizations produce a kind of indifference that makes it unlikely to say "no", even in situations when we would normally expect it. I would like to thank Veronika Tacke for referring me to this specification of the zone of indifference.

The management can thus quickly adapt the organization to changing requirements without a complicated internal negotiating process. But it is only this freedom of disposition that permits organizations to secure their interests in a continuously changing environment. According to Niklas Luhmann, a precondition for the survival of organizations in problematic environments is that "decisions on indeterminate subjects can be adjourned and still secured". For members, the zone of indifference ensures that they can endure much change, disappointment and strain before they decide to leave the organization (see Luhmann 1964: 94).

It is precisely this effect of the zone of indifference that is (inadvertantly) exploited in the experiments, since the subjects are given only rudimentary information about the experiment when they "apply". The advertisement for the Milgram experiment, for instance, only contained the information that participants are wanted for a one-hour experiment on memory functions (see Miller 1986: 39). The participants in the Stanford Prison experiment merely learned that this is a psychological study on life in prison (Zimbardo et al. 1973: 36). In the Deportation experiment, the participants are only given the information that this is a simulation of transports to be conducted by a railway company (see Kraus 1987: 74ff.). By agreeing to take part in the experiment, the participants declared that they were prepared to obey within the zone of indifference.

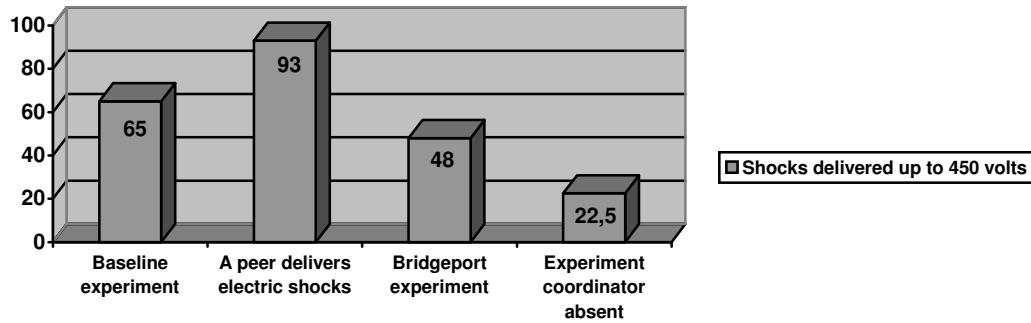
But what exactly lies within such a zone of indifference that the member must accept? In organizations there normally exists a consensus on what can be expected from a member in all events and what cannot be expected by any means. But in between there is a large gray area that is continuously being redefined. For example, a store manager working for a drugstore chain is expected to fill in for his absent cashier if that is necessary, and obviously, he will not be asked to assist the regional manager. But does arresting a shoplifter with the use of force lie within the zone of indifference that he must accept? A professor in the chemistry department of a university is expected to supervise, correct and grade the theses submitted by students of her field, and it is equally clear that she will not be asked to evaluate any papers submitted by students of the social sciences. But what about the expectation that she advise students specializing in a field that is not her own, students who need a second advisor? Is this within her zone of indifference?

This shows how the gradual rise in demands differs inside and outside of organizations. In interactions outside of organizations, demands can be evaded in many different ways. There will only be problems of self-portrayal in a specific interaction, such as in the case of the civic action group, the ardent admirer, or the pollster. For processes inside of organizations, however, a person's membership depends entirely on the willingness to submit to the formalized expectations of the organization.

6. Resistance to authority: The problem of control in organizations

From this perspective we can now give an explanation for acts of covert resistance in the experiments. Organizational sociologists in the tradition of Herbert Simon have already noted that it is impossible to control each and every move. Their argument is that while the zone of indifference gives an organization the advantage of flexibility, there is also a disadvantage in that the rather vague definition of the member's responsibilities will cause problems of control. In Marxist industrial sociology we find a similar notion in the idea of the transformation problem. The basic idea is that while the capitalist's obligation (the payment of wages) is precisely specified in the work contract, the performances expected from the workers are not precisely specified. According to this argument, which is based on Karl Marx (1962: 532f.), the capitalist's purchase of labor-power (in which the worker is formally subsumed) cannot be equated with the capitalist's real use of labor-power (in which the worker is really subsumed). This is the point where the struggle over the exploitation of labor-power begins. This problem is also dealt with in the Principal Agent theory. The agent performs certain services for a principal, and since he wants to profit from his own work, the agent has a tendency to obtain compensation from the principal by reducing his services to a minimum. The principal cannot always react to this reduction of services because he has to keep an eye on several agents at the same time, he does not have the required technical skills to assess the service performance, and he does not always have ways of imposing sanctions (see Moe 1984).

The experiments reproduce this control problem, though inadvertently. In the Soda Cracker experiment, in the first run of the experiment the strategy of the subjects was to delay the consumption of crackers as long as possible and to divert the experiment coordinator from enforcing the consumption by conducting conversations (Frank 1944: 58ff.). In the Deportation experiment, the subjects who realized the purpose of the experiment hesitated for a long time before quitting. They haggled for reductions in the numbers of people to be allocated to railway cars, claiming that the migrants were "no slaves" and that their ability to work had to be maintained (see Berg 1988: 236ff., 258). It seems that it is easier to lower one's own work performance than to quit the organization. In one of the interesting variants of the Milgram experiment, the experiment coordinator left the room and gave his instructions by phone. The proportion of subjects who administered the highest possible electric shocks of 450 volts dropped to less than one quarter. Many subjects then reported to the experiment coordinator that they had delivered the required electric shocks, while in reality they had applied a clearly lower voltage or no voltage at all (Milgram 1974: 62, Miller 1986: 48; also see the results of a similar experiment conducted by Meeus and Raaijmakers 1986: 317).



The Baseline experiment, in which the subject merely gives orders to administer electric shocks, compared to the Bridgeport experiment and the experiment in which the coordinator is absent (Milgram 1974: 56, 62). Measured values are percentages of subjects willing to deliver the highest-level electric shocks (450 volts).

It seems exaggerated to use the term "resistance" for this kind of behavior, but in his studies on the Nazi system of repression, Martin Broszat suggested using the term "Resistenz" for behavior that remains just below the level of direct opposition. Broszat wanted to emphasize that actions like keeping crucifixes in classrooms, avoiding the Hitler salute or listening to foreign radio stations were not about challenging the Nazi system as such. Rather, such actions were aimed at using the little bit of freedom that had remained and to evade the constraints of the regime in particular instances (Broszat 1981; Hirschman 1970: 23ff.).

In organizations, the dividing line between "Resistenz" and "opposition" is quite concrete, because in organizations, violations of rules are a matter of daily routine. The members may make mistakes, may circumvent directives, may reduce their work output, or may express dissatisfaction with the instructions of the superiors. Members of organizations know that such violations of rules are tolerated to an extent; however, they also know that such rule violations must not be interpreted as a general refusal to obey a particular instruction or regulation. Only after a member has been reprimanded for such a violation, and if that member then still persists in this conduct, only then the rule will be applied that a refusal to obey the instructions of a superior or even one single regulation is regarded as a rebellion against the organization as a whole and all its formal expectations in their entirety (see Luhmann 1964: 63). As a rule, if such a violation continues, this will usually lead to a termination of membership or a modification of the rules.

However, if the deviation from the expected behavior is represented to the superior as an oversight, an accident, a misunderstanding, the result of inattentiveness or a momentary weakness, there may not be much of a problem in having the rule violation regarded as an occurrence that is still compatible with the basic membership rule. Behavior that deviates from the formal expectations can still be considered as a mistake and will cease to be a threat to the organization as a whole, if the member concerned can accept this label. Once the member has admitted that he has made a mistake, the organization has the option of intensifying its supervision of the member. It can monitor whether the member observes the rules, it can

avoid expecting the member to behave according to the rules, and it can even overlook further offences (see Woodard 1944: 333f., Luhmann 1964: 256f.).

The experiments in question did not systematically examine whether the subjects exploited control gaps. To distinguish between "Resistenz" and "opposition" it would be necessary to see how a person reacts if his attention is drawn to his deviating behavior. How do the subjects in Frank's Soda Cracker experiment react when they are told that they should eat the cracker a bit faster? How do the subjects in the Milgram experiment react when the experiment coordinator returns to the room? Do they continue to cheat, do they administer the expected shocks, or do they break off the experiment? How do the Deportation experiment subjects who are delaying their work react when they are ordered by their superiors to complete at least a part of their assigned work?

7. Summary and prospects

Experiments on obedience are important to social psychology because they explain "inhuman behavior" with an adaptation to role expectations. They thus advocate a "situational approach" in which allowance is made for even "normal" people behaving in an "inhuman" way when faced with a certain set of role expectations. The conclusion that is drawn from these experiments is that all of us have the potential to become a "little Eichmann". All one must do is to become part of a suitable organizational apparatus.²³

But these considerations contradict those approaches in which organized brutality is mainly explained with a mental disposition or with the effects of socialization. Theodor W. Adorno, who is probably the most well-known advocate of such an approach, seeks to explain Auschwitz with the development of a "social character" whose distinguishing feature is a lack of emotional relationships, an inability to have normal human experiences, a mania for organizational work, and a hypostatization of activities (Adorno 1970). Adorno's earlier studies on the authoritarian personality were already focused on the potentially Fascist individual who is extremely prone to prejudice and stereotypes and whose personality structure makes such an individual highly susceptible to anti-democratic propaganda (see Adorno et al. 1950).

In my view, the situational approach has so far not yet been developed far enough. In interpreting the experiments there has been a tendency to be satisfied with the explanation that the cause of an individual's willingness to obey is the situation and not the person's disposition. But there is no detailed specification of what type of social system has been simulated in the experiment. Considering this lack of specifics, it is not surprising that general conclusions are drawn about human behavior in modern society as a whole,

²³ Particularly the research of Zimbardo and his team is set in this tradition of social psychology. With reference to Mischel 1969 and Argyle / Little 1972, they claim that personality traits are only of limited use for predicting future behavior, and the decisive variable for explaining human behavior is the situation (Zimbardo et al. 1975).

and that the explanatory potential of the experiments is being overemphasized. In order to counteract this trend toward an overgeneralization of experimental findings it would make more sense to differentiate the social-psychological experiments according to what they simulate: spontaneous face-to-face interactions, group interactions, or interactions in organizations.²⁴

The first category of experiments simulates spontaneous interactions. Interactions develop into social systems when individuals become aware of each other and feel the need to adapt their behavior to that of other people. The interaction partner knows that others are aware of him, and he also knows that these other people realize he knows this (Luhmann 1975: 10ff., Fuchs 1989: 171f., Kieserling 1999: 15ff.). Interactions take place in groups or organizations; however, they can also take place spontaneously and unfocussed, such as when people meet at a party, wait in line, or bump into each other on the street, which is the category that interests us here. This category includes experiments on adaptations to norms during interactions (known under the imprecise term "group pressure"), such as those of Muzafer Sherif and Solomon E. Asch (Sherif 1936, Asch 1951, 1955). Unfocussed spontaneous interactions were also simulated by the segregation experiment of Hagen Kordes. This experiment was conducted in front of a university dining hall, where students were segregated into "Germans" and "foreigners" under the pretext of making a statistical survey. With the use of flyers, markings on doors and by personally addressing the students, the experimenters prompted students to use separate entrances for "Germans" and "foreigners". The instructions were followed by 95 % of the students, who accepted the segregation like a herd of sheep (Kordes 1994: 14ff., 46).

The second category of experiments seems to simulate group processes. However, in the early phase of small group studies, Erving Goffman already had some doubts about equating "interaction" and "group" (Goffman 1962). Groups are not limited to *one* interaction, and a person can belong to a group even if he is not part of an interaction. In Hartmann Tyrell's definition, a "group" is more than a "loose network of personal relations"; there is also a sense of affiliation and solidarity (Tyrell 1983: 83). This category of "group" experiments includes those in which the formation of different cliques is encouraged at youth camps to observe which factors lead to an increase or decrease of conflicts between groups (see Sherif 1958; also Sherif et al. 1955).

In the third category of experiments, fundamental elements of organizations are simulated. This category includes those experiments that specify the commitment of members to hierarchical structures and rules (on distinguishing organizations from interactions and society, see Luhmann 1975: 12). One of the first experiments to study the interaction of membership rules, organizational hierarchies and programs was

²⁴ In the context of organizations I use the term "communication" because, as in the experiments, there is not only verbal and nonverbal face-to-face interaction but also written communication between persons.

the series of experiments conducted by John French and his team. The main purpose of these experiments was to study how the legitimacy of a superior's instructions affects the subordinates' willingness to obey (see French et al. 1960; also French and Raven 1958a, 1958b). One of the first studies to look at the ways in which members of organizations behave when faced with contradictions between instructions from the hierarchy and their organizational programs was a field experiment on deviating behavior in hospitals that was conducted by Charles K. Hofling and his team. It showed that hospital nurses are prepared to violate basic organizational rules when instructed to do so by doctors (Hofling et al. 1966).

In the world outside the laboratory, the boundary lines between interactions, groups and organizations are not always self-evident. Group processes can occur anywhere, whenever there is a series of interactions of people, such as when people have to take the same way to school, or when they regularly meet at a disco. Frequently, however, neither the participants nor the interested social scientists can determine the exact point in time at which a group is formed. Sometimes small organizations don't have much use for clear membership rules and instructions from a hierarchy. A company, a political party or an association may look more like a clique than a clearly differentiated organization. For many interactions in organizations, such as company parties, canteen queues or elevator rides, it is not clear whether such interactions can be explained by the ways in which organizations function or by the logic of social interactions.²⁵

A differentiation is made difficult by the fact that aspects like self-commitment, indifference and control can occur in spontaneous interactions, in groups, and even in families. During a spontaneous interaction at the information stand of a political party, for example, the disputants will in the end still be committed to the same views they held at the beginning of the discussion. In a clique, the members of the group will be indifferent to many demands of groups, if they want to be accepted. Even in families there may be the problem of children eluding their parents' control (or "surveillance" of the children by the parents is only partly successful). But in organizations, these aspects will be present in a different form because the self-commitment of members, the acceptance of zones of indifference, and the (always incomplete) exercise of control is taking place in an environment of formalized role expectations to which the members feel bound by their entry into the organization and by the threat of being excluded from the organization.²⁶

²⁵ The difficulties of demarcation between interaction, group and organization are reflected and even increased in experiments, since there the boundaries between the simulated social systems are often blurred. Given the fact that experiments are limited to very short periods and mainly to one-time interactions between persons unknown to each other, group and organizational processes are frequently only indicated. Other types of social systems like crowds and social movements are practically impossible to simulate in experiments, since that would require large numbers of participants, and these would be difficult to mobilize for an experimental set-up.

²⁶ A visit to the doctor or participation in an entertainment event cannot be simulated with the experiments discussed here because in these cases the subjects are witnesses to an act rather than in a performing role themselves. Only the Stanford Prison experiment gives information about the behavior of persons in the role of witnesses.

What conclusions can we draw from this reinterpretation of the Soda Cracker experiment, the Milgram experiment, the Stanford Prison experiment and the Deportation experiment?

Even if we reject over-generalizing the results of these experiments and restrict their explanatory potential to behavior in organizations, such a "moderation" of the findings can give us very little consolation.

Firstly, it is hardly possible to imagine a modern society without organizations. Certainly, any premature diagnosis that we are living in an "organization society" is contested by the fact that individuals are faced with role expectations, not only in organizations but also when among family and friends, when shopping in a supermarket, when stuck in a traffic jam on the highway, or at a student demonstration against rising tuition. But when compared with early advanced civilizations, it seems that a modern society cannot do without the regulating function of organizations. We must then conclude that such acts of brutality that are planned, supported and performed by organizations are typical of modern society.

Secondly, nothing supports the assumption that coordinated acts of brutality can only be committed by organizations. The pogroms against Jews in Europe, even if they were frequently coordinated, can better be described as a mass phenomenon than as an organizational phenomenon. And although studies on the genocide in Rwanda have found a high degree of planning and coordination, the bloodlust seems to have been more the expression of a social movement than the work of an organization with a membership, a hierarchy, and organizational objectives. Studies of gangs, cliques and bands have shown that even non-formalized groups are capable of high levels of brutality, towards their own members and non-members. Fellow-traveling in the form of a silent acceptance of violence would be very difficult to explain with the concepts of organizational sociology, and rather seems to reflect the lack of a disposition to engage in unfocussed and unpredictable interactions.

Thirdly, there is little consolation in the view that the acts of simulated brutality described in this article and manifested in the experiments are quite ordinary processes in organizations. The phenomena used in the interpretation of the experiments, such as the membership rule, the adaptation of ambition levels, the zone of indifference and control gaps, exist in all organizations. They can be observed every day in any organization, whether it produces computers, manages the unemployed, or educates students. And to use the language of Christopher Browning (1993), it is "ordinary organizations" that commit acts of brutality, just as the "ordinary men" of Police Reserve Battalion 101 from Hamburg performed mass executions in eastern Europe during World War II.

My reinterpretation of the experiments from an organizational sociology perspective leads me to the following conclusion: If the results of the experiments are to be applied to society in general, then the explanation for bureaucratic acts of brutality should not be sought in the constraints that organizations

impose on their members, but rather in the voluntary nature of organizational memberships.²⁷ Modern states can no longer exercise control over the organizational memberships of their citizens. Most modern states even refrain from depriving people of their citizenship. An exception may be the death penalty that is still enforced in some "civilized countries"; however, states that do enforce the death penalty inevitably raise questions about their level of "civilization". In modern society, the fundamental structural feature of organizations is the issue of membership or non-membership. Membership determines who is part of an organization and who is not. It draws the boundary lines, and inside those boundaries the members (and the members only) are required to submit to the rules of their organization (Luhmann 1995: 16).

My thesis is that it is only due to the contingency of membership that organizations can go especially far in formalizing their expectations (Luhmann 1964: 44). It is not those organizations that force people into membership and that make it difficult for their members to leave that can pose high expectations, such as to commit acts of brutality. Rather, it is organizations based on voluntary membership, from which it is easy to leave, that can precipitate forms of behavior in their members which are bound to provoke great moral outrage outside of the organization, even a long time after those acts of brutality were committed.

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²⁷ Max Weber (1976: 70f.) makes this distinction by using the (formal) terms "free labor" and "non-free labor".

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