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How ordinary organisations produce brutality

On the variations of Milgram's obedience experiment[1]

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The concept of "ordinary organisations" implies that mass murders can be organised using mechanisms that we know from ordinary organisations. The plausibility of this thesis can be established not only by historical case studies involving, for example, the German Reichsbahn, police battalions, or the French administration during the Vichy regime but also by social psychological experiments such as the Milgram experiment or the Stanford prison experiment. In this article, the ordinariness of the simulated organisations is established on the basis of three central features of organisations: membership, hierarchy and purpose. The ordinariness of the simulated organisational mechanisms is proven using variations of the Milgram experiment that have thus far been rarely interpreted.

In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a tendency towards explaining the Holocaust with an "extraordinary" willingness of leaders to use brutality and an increasing brutalisation within the executing organisations. In these early publications, SS units, which were considered to be the driving force behind the mass murders, were seen as being a collection of sadists. The behaviour of concentration camp personnel was explained by their special disposition for brutal acts.

It was only when Hannah Arendt (1986) discussed the issue of National Socialism against the background of Adolf Eichmann's trial that it became increasingly clear how ordinary the people were who were involved in the Holocaust. Arendt introduced the thesis of the "banality of evil" to describe Eichmann and to emphasise that the bureaucratic behaviour of ordinary people was an essential condition for the Holocaust.

Arendt's position stimulated a wide variety of research activities that showed how relatively "ordinary" the people were who were involved in the mass murders. Christopher Browning (1992; 1993), for example, investigated Hamburg Reserve Police Battalion 101 and – similar to Hannah Arendt – referred to its personnel as "ordinary men". By contrast, Goldhagen wrote in his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996) that the brutalities were performed by "ordinary Germans", sometimes through great personal initiative.[2] A different aspect of this approach to the Holocaust is accentuated by the concept of "ordinary organisations", which has its roots in a study on the trains to Auschwitz by Raul Hilberg (1981) and implies that brutalities performed by organisations are the result of ordinary organisational mechanisms.

Although these scholars all use the term "ordinary", they differ fundamentally in what they identify as "ordinary". When Christopher Browning (1998: 252 ff.) uses the term "ordinary men", his intention is to emphasise that these men – who were involved in the Holocaust – were an average population group and did not show any particular affinity with National Socialism. When Daniel Goldhagen (1992: 49 ff.) talks about "ordinary Germans", his intention is to use a term that is clearly distinguishable from Christopher Browning's phrase and stresses that the men who were involved in the Holocaust were not "ordinary men" but belonged to a people that was characterised by deep racial anti-Semitism (see also Goldhagen 1996). The term "ordinary organisation" emphasises that an analysis of brutal behaviour or even mass murder reveals not only the ordinariness of the participating men (or women or Germans) but also the ordinariness of the organisational mechanisms that play a role in the process (see Kühl 2005 a: 90 ff.).

The "descriptions of ordinariness" can be combined only to a limited extent. Whereas Browning's concept of "ordinary men" and Goldhagen's concept of "ordinary Germans" are intended to express different views, Browning's thesis of "ordinary men" can be combined with the thesis of "ordinary organisations".

	Ordinary men	Not ordinary men
Ordinary organisations	Organisations that do not require any fundamental changes in instructional structures, routines or personnel in order to commit mass murders	Ordinary organisations whose members, however, have a strong disposition to brutal behaviour

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[2] The role of personal initiative had already been emphasised by Jacob Robinson (1965) in his discussion of Eichmann.

Not ordinary organisations	Organisations that are characterised by strict hierarchical control and are difficult to exit and thus make ordinary men become mass murderers	Killing organisations that are, for example, extremely difficult to exit and are characterised by a strong binding force; these organisations recruit members with a strong disposition to brutal behaviour

Historical sources about the Holocaust provide a suitable basis for investigating the various hypotheses about "ordinary men", "ordinary Germans", and "ordinary organisations". For this reason, there are now a wide variety of detailed studies suggesting that many different factors influence the behaviour of members of an organisation and thus the behaviour of perpetrators.

Since the early 1960s, attempts have been made to explain at least some aspects of the Holocaust on the basis of social psychological experiments. Stanley Milgram, certainly the best known social psychologist to have attempted to simulate the willingness to act brutally, completed his obedience experiments only a few days after Eichmann's death sentence had been executed. In his work, Milgram made many references to the book written by Hannah Arendt and he introduced phrases such as "ordinary people", which were later used by Christopher Browning (see, for example, Milgram 1967: 5; Milgram 1974: 5 f).[3]

Likewise, the plausibility of the concept of "ordinary organisations" has been established through social psychological experiments. It has been suggested that the Milgram obedience experiments as well as other social psychological experiments including the soda cracker experiment (Frank 1944), the Stanford prison experiment (Zimbardo 1971) and the deportation experiment (Berg 1988) do not allow conclusions to be drawn about behaviour in modern society as a whole but only about the behaviour of people in organisations. It was possible to show on the basis of descriptions of the experiments that behaviour in "ordinary organisations" was simulated – more by chance than on purpose – through the membership issue, the self-commitment to the decision to become a member once this decision has been made, the behaviour within zones of indifference and resistance (or *Resistenz*) within control gaps (see Kühl 2005 a: 90; see also Kühl 2005 b: 213-242 for methodological aspects).

In response to the concept of "ordinary organisations", criticism was raised that the experiments reflected very unusual organisations. It was argued that the barriers to exit were extremely high in the experiments, the subjects were under unusually strict hierarchical control, and the victims were devalued in a way untypical of organisations (see Klatetzki 2007).

The objective of the present article is to use the three central concepts of organisational theory, i.e. hierarchy, purpose and membership, to define the ordinariness of the organisational mechanisms simulated by Stanley Milgram. The basic focus of the article is to find a convincing explanation for the brutalities simulated by Milgram. This would allow the argumentation developed on the basis of Milgram's experiment to be verified using real organisations that participated in genocides.[4]

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[3] See Novick (2001: 184) on the "synergy between the symbol of Arendt's Eichmann and the symbol of Milgram's subjects" in discussions since the 1960s.

[4] A research project addressing this issue is currently being developed. Its aim is to use the instruments of organisation theory for analysing three organisations involved in genocides.

The purpose of this approach is to prevent findings from social psychological experiments from being used for an interpretation of the Holocaust in a directly causal way. As is widely known, Stanley Milgram's proposal (1963: 371) to use the experiment for explaining the Holocaust was received with immediate strong reactions (see, for example, Baumrind 1964: 848 ff.) and the debate on what is known as the Milgram-Holocaust thesis has not yet closed (see the recent critical assessment by Fenigstein 1998 and an excellent overview in Miller 2004: 200 ff.).

This article is empirically based on Stanley Milgram's variations of his obedience experiment. The baseline experiment, in which 65% of the subjects were willing to administer 450-volt electric shocks, has long been – and sometimes still is – the only Milgram experiment known to the general scientific public. In the mid-1960s, there were rumours that Milgram had conducted many variations of his experiment (see, for example, Milgram 1964 a; 1964 b; 1965 a; 1965 b), but the design and results of these variations were published in book form no earlier than the mid-1970s (see Milgram 1974) and then reluctantly received by the scientific community.

Very few attempts have been made to systematically include the eighteen experiment variations within a theoretically grounded analysis of Milgram's experiment (see, however, the presentation of the variations in Kelman and Hamilton 1989: 156 ff., Browning 1993: 225, and Sandkühler and Schmuhl 1998: 12 ff.). The purpose of this article is to investigate the experiment variations in an attempt to discover what they reveal about organisational mechanisms.

1. Hierarchy: Under what conditions can hierarchy be escaped?

It has never been doubted that the system of authority was one of the factors influencing the behaviour of the participants in the Milgram experiment and the Stanford prison experiment. In Milgram's experiment, a hierarchy between the experimenter and the subjects was established from the beginning. This hierarchical structure implied that the experimenter assumed full responsibility for the action. In the Stanford prison experiment, a hierarchy was simulated between the superintendent, his assistant and the guards.

The discussion about whether the simulated organisations are ordinary or not revolves around the question of what was the basis of authority. Those who do not consider the simulated organisational mechanisms to be typical of organisations focus on aspects of authority and legitimacy and attempt to identify conditions under which subordinates are willing to obey authorities recognised as legitimate: ideological justification of an action, devaluation of the victims, assumption of competence on the part of the superior (see Klatetzki 2007 and Kelman 1974; Perrow 1986).

All these aspects – ideological justification of an action, devaluation of the victims and assumption of competence on the part of the superior – can play a role in organisations.[5] There is, however, an important aspect in organisational sociology that is reflected in the Weberian distinction between traditional, charismatic and bureaucratic authority. Hierarchies in organisations do *not* necessarily need to be based on additional forms of legitimacy. People

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[5] It is interesting, for example, that the devaluation of victims was simulated in the Stanford prison experiment whereas neither the soda cracker experiment nor Milgram's experiments involved devaluing victims (see Milgram 1967: 5 and Guenther 1987: 445).

who become members of an organisation recognise the existing formalised hierarchy. The recognition of "objectively delineated competences" of a hierarchist by "socially assigned subordinates" provides the basis for every hierarchic organisation, which does not necessarily require additional support, for example in the form of exceptional charisma on the part of the hierarchist or special attractiveness of an order (see Luhmann 1964: 209).

Only if the legitimacy of a hierarchist is "automatically" recognised through membership in an organisation is it possible for a superior to demand something unusual from a subordinate. Unlike a "natural leader" in a group, a superior does not require "personal respect as a basis of influence" in the decision-making process and is thus independent of factors that influence the respect of subordinates to superiors. Only then is a superior released from the task of simultaneously motivating his subordinates. A superior can demand from his subordinate that he administer electric shocks to students with learning difficulties, break up a revolt in a prison, or send immigrant workers to radioactively contaminated regions. A subordinate may consider these tasks to be extremely inhumane, but these orders are legitimate as long as they are given by a superior on the basis of his authority (see Luhmann 1964: 209).

This is not to deny that obedience to orders that are considered legitimate due to membership is facilitated if the individual to be punished is devalued *beforehand* or if the leader develops charisma *beforehand*. In an experiment that was inspired by Milgram's experiment, Albert Bandura, Bill Underwood and Michael Fromson (1975) were able to show that the doses of electric shocks that were administered by the subjects was disproportionally high when the learners had been described in a dehumanized fashion as one of a "rotten bunch" (see also Bandura 1999: 200 ff.).

Likewise, however, it is conceivable that an individual to be punished is devalued or a leader is considered charismatic *after* an action was ordered by an authority recognized as legitimate. This is a kind of a later or additional legitimisation of an action that was ordered by an authority recognized as legitimate. The actions must be justified afterwards by the person executing the order on the basis of reasons going beyond the order that was obeyed. The most obvious justification is, of course, that the victims deserved their punishment (see Lerner 1980 for a detailed description of the "just world phenomenon")

This phenomenon of a later devaluation was proven by Timothy C. Brock and Arnold H. Buss (1962) in electric shock experiments, which were conducted at almost the same time as the Milgram experiments[6] but were neither as varied nor as popular. These experiments revealed one additional aspect: when individuals commit an act of brutality against another person in response to an order, their perception changes. The subjects devalue their victims *after* they hurt them. In order to justify their own actions, they look for reasons why the victims deserve the punishment (see also Buss 1961: 47 ff. on the aggression machine).

There remains an interesting question about hierarchy: why are some experimental designs associated with a higher percentage of persons defying hierarchy?

Elliot Turiel (2002: 130 f, 285 f; see also Turiel 1983: 203 ff.) is, of course, right when he points out that the knowledge about conventions in organisations competes with the knowledge about social morals in Milgram's experiment. This is, however, banal. Only because of this difference did the subjects show reactions such as sweating, trembling,

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[6] It is not clear who copied whom or whether the very unusual electric shock experiments were conducted independently of each other. We know from Milgram's biography, however, that he suspected plagiarism (see Blass 2004: 111).

stuttering and mumbling when they administered electric shocks (see Milgram 1963: 122). And only because of this discrepancy can observers profess themselves (morally) appalled by the willingness of subjects to obey in the experiments. This finding that there is a difference between the requirements of an organisation and moral standards, however, cannot explain under what conditions obedience to conventions in organisations is likely to prevail over obedience to higher moral values, and vice versa.
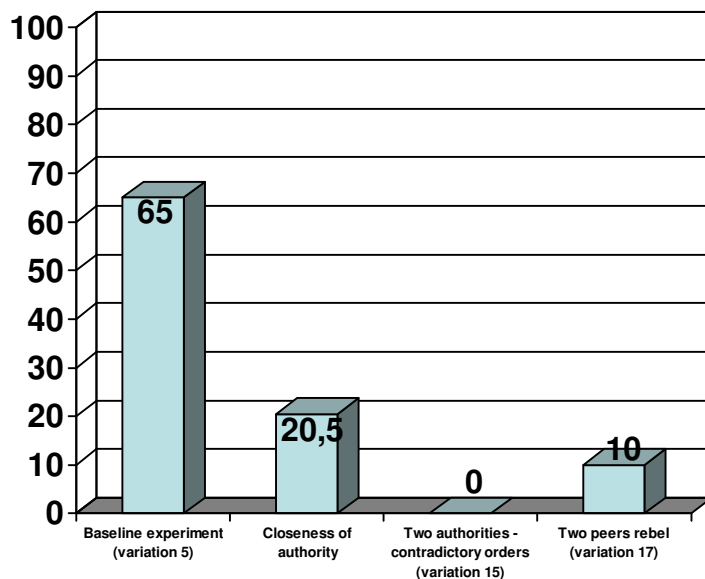
Variations of Milgram's experiment show that resistance to hierarchies has more to do with structures than with actors. Stanley Milgram performed two experiments in which an (organisational) situation was simulated where it was possible for the participants to refuse to administer electric shocks. In one experiment (variation 15 – two authorities: contradictory commands), there were two experimenters (instead of one as in the baseline experiment) who disagreed at 150 volts. Whereas one authority figure gave the command to proceed with the experiment, the other experimenter asked to stop. Milgram observed that many subjects attempted to reconstruct a hierarchy between the two experimenters in order to find out whether to continue or stop (see Milgram 1974: 107). Since the experimental design made it impossible to detect a hierarchy, more than 90% of the participants stopped administering electric shocks because of these contradictory commands, which is a situation also known from matrix organisations (see Milgram 1974: 105 ff.).

In another experiment (variation 17 – two peers rebel), the task of administering electric shocks was divided into three subtasks, each of which was performed by a different person. The first teacher, who was a confederate of the experimenter, read out the task. The second teacher, another confederate, told the others whether the answer was correct or incorrect. The third teacher, the naïve subject, had to press the button to administer electric shocks. It was interesting to see what happened when, in accordance with the experimental design, the first confederate who read out the task and then the second confederate who informed the others whether an answer was correct or incorrect refused to continue (the first at 150 volts and the second at 210 volts). In both cases, the naïve subject was ordered to perform the other tasks as well. It was particularly noteworthy that a mere 10% of the subjects were willing to administer electric shocks of 450 volts once an authority figure lost his authority as a result of the behaviour of other members of the organisation (Milgram 1974: 118 f).

It should be noted that these two variations gave the participants the opportunity to *openly* rebel against one or two experimenters. This was possible because the subjects received contradictory orders from the hierarchy or because the hierarchy failed to ensure compliance. Milgram, however, was able to simulate not only overt disobedience but also *covert* refusal.

Particularly interesting is a variation ("closeness of authority") in which control or transformation problems were simulated (variation 7, see Kühl 2005: 104 for "absent experimenter") and which showed how subjects used control gaps in the experiment. In this variation, the experimenter left the room and gave his instructions by telephone. The proportion of subjects administering the highest possible electric shock of 450 volts dropped to less than a quarter. It is interesting to note that the subjects reported delivery of the required shock to the experimenter while actually applying a lower voltage or not administering a shock at all (see Milgram 1974: 62). This experiment simulates disobedience of hierarchical orders, which is typical of organisations. The person in charge is informed that a particular instruction will of course be executed but in reality this instruction is not followed, which is

often impossible to control in practice.[7] This disobedience can be termed *Resistenz* (immunity) in accordance with the historical research on the Holocaust (see Broszat 1981).

Figure 1. Variations of Milgram's experiment that help explain resistance or *Resistenz*. The figures represent the percentage of subjects who were willing to use all 30 switches and to administer the final 450-volt shock (obedient subjects).

In summary, these variations can be interpreted in the following manner. In my opinion, these variations simulate a number of practices that we know from organisations and that allow members of an organisation not to comply with instructions from superiors. In the case of conflicting rules, it happens that compliance with one rule inevitably leads to non-compliance with the other rule (see the comments by Luhmann 1971 a: 120). Members of an organisation are thus faced with a double bind situation – whatever they do, it will be wrong. At the same time, they can use these conflicting rules to justify their behaviour. In many organisations, there are conflicting hierarchies (matrix organisations), which ultimately leave it to the members of an organisation to decide how to behave. Obviously, there are rules that are broken without sanction by the hierarchy, which results in the erosion of this rule.

I believe that the processes that were simulated in the experiments rather than the absence of required additional conditions such as a charismatic leader, the devaluation of the victims or the ideological justification of an action are mainly responsible for eroding the legitimacy of the hierarchy. This explanation is pure "situationism". Whether and how an experiment is performed does not primarily depend on the state of the "psychic system", the "person" or, if you prefer, the "actor" but on the concrete situation in which the subject finds himself. Here,

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[7] When I wrote this section, I received a call from our dean of study who told me that, in future, I had to give the names of the students who would take part in my seminars one month before the start of a semester. She said that this was required by the electronic enrolment system, the university administration and the latest EU regulations. When I pointed out to her that the required information would not be available until the first weeks of the semester, I was told to please comply with the rules. Since it was clear to me that neither the dean of study nor the university rector or the EU was able to check whether I fulfilled this requirement, I answered that, of course, I would always willingly comply with this wise requirement.

however, the situation is no longer only described as an experiment but can be compared with typical processes in organisations.

2. Purposes: Testing the zone of indifference

The thesis of "ordinary organisations" implies that a zone of indifference was created in the experiments, in which the members of the organisation were indifferent to the actions that they were asked to perform. The influence of such a zone of indifference on the production of behaviour can vary between organisations.[8] Organisations that pay their members for the work they do (e.g. companies, administrations, professional armed forces) can usually expect a larger zone of indifference from their members than organisations that offer their members nothing more than motivation-based purposes, interesting actions or sometimes services that can also be obtained elsewhere (e.g. citizens' initiatives, political parties, trade unions, liberation forces).

In many cases, the question of acceptance (or indifference) does not primarily depend on the larger purposes that an organisation communicates internally and externally since organisations always legitimise themselves in their "shop windows". Motorway operators emphasise their central role in providing mobility. Armed forces describe themselves as guarantors of worldwide peace. Universities not only present themselves through their routine research, development and teaching activities but also define their purpose on the basis of their contributions to the further development of a knowledge-based society for the benefit of mankind. Even organisations that participate in genocide manage to justify their actions by claiming that mass murder serves the ultimate purpose of creating a peaceful paradise without enemies, frontiers and fear (see Norfolk/Ignatieff 1998 for an impressive discussion of this phenomenon).

When it comes to the orientation to the different programmes, however, it is necessary that members do *not* orient their behaviour towards larger purposes. Compliance with programmes within organisations virtually prohibits an orientation towards larger purposes. Organisations are successful if their members do *not* consider their actions to be a means to an overriding purpose (see Luhmann 1973: 266 ff.). A soldier cannot decide that it would be better to fight in Berlin rather than on the Eastern Front. Such a high level of personal initiative would probably lead to the soldier's execution for desertion. A secretary who has been told to cut expenditures should not overdo it by asking visitors to pay for a coffee while waiting. A university professor marks his students' work, irrespective of whether or not he considers marks to be a useful educational instrument.[9]

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[8] I use the term "zone of indifference" in a different way than Chester Barnard does (1938: 168f). Barnard does not use a clearly defined term for membership. In my definition, a zone of indifference comprises all those actions that a person would not have performed on his or her own initiative but that are, however, acceptable in the context of membership expectations. I believe that whether these actions are performed because the person thinks "I don't mind" or "What must be done must be done" or "I'll do it although I don't like it" is of minor importance from an organisational sociological perspective.

[9] The attraction of acting on one's own initiative in order to achieve a larger purpose is referred to as the Prince-of-Homburg effect (see Bosetzky 1973; Dittberner 1998). The Prince of Homburg ignored an order of Frederick William, Electoral Prince of Brandenburg, because he believed that the battle could only be won if he did not fully comply with his orders. As a result of his behaviour, he was celebrated for having won the battle but was threatened with execution for his "wrong" behaviour as an organisation member. Fortunately, there was a happy ending for him. He benefited from the existence of love as a symbolically generalised communication means, which has more to do with informality, and married the Princess of Orange (see Kleist 1986).

Niklas Luhmann believes that it is this mechanism that allows individuals to "impersonalise" aspects of their behaviour, which they cannot choose due to an order that they received. These aspects are not ascribed to their personality and do not dictate their future self-presentations. "This explains", as Luhmann writes in a passage that is rarely cited by the moralists among his critics, "why so many National Socialists were unable to involve their conscience and are today *the most helpless victims* of National Socialism since they continue to be identified with something that they cannot wish to have as their own" (see Luhmann 1981: 346; my emphasis).[10]

In my opinion, the experiments clearly reflect this decoupling of legitimised larger purposes and a person's behaviour, which is detached from the direct orientation towards the larger purposes. The Milgram experiment was legitimised by the absence of experimentally derived results for the question of how people learn best and thus how electric shocks can support learning processes (see how the experimenter impressively legitimised the experiment in Milgram's documentary film; Milgram 1965 c: the second and the following minutes). Below the level of this legitimation facade, however, members can be expected to behave in a way they would not have considered without membership.[11]

Milgram used the variations of his experiment to precisely investigate the extent to which he was able to influence the subjects' behaviour in the intentionally or unintentionally simulated organisations.[12] The first four variations focused on the "closeness of the victim" and investigated how the willingness to obey changed when the immediacy of the victim's distress increased (see Milgram 1974: 32 ff.). Whereas more than 62.5% of the participants were willing to deliver electric shocks as severe as 450 volts when they heard the victim's screams or protests (variation 2 – voice-feedback), the willingness to obey decreased to 40% when the victim was in the same room (variation 3 – proximity, same room). When the subjects had to physically hold the victim's hand onto a shock plate, compliance decreased to less than 30% (variation 4 – touch-proximity). [13]

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[10] Critical analyses of the Milgram experiment refer to this process as the "obedience alibi" (see Mandel 1998: 91).

[11] There are, of course, equivalents for the production of actions that a person would not normally consider doing (key phrase: symbolically generalised communication media). Not only money but also power (you either join the military or go to prison), truth or love (either you take out the garbage or I stop loving you) can produce behaviour that would otherwise not be considered.

[12] Time and again, experiments have shown the degree of indifference to concrete actions that subjects were asked to perform. Volunteers in experiments were, for example, made to masturbate or perform sexual acts, (Masters/Johnson 1966), to starve themselves for an extended period of time (Rowland 1968), or to perform stupid, boring and useless tasks (Orne 1962).

[13] In variation 1 (remote), the subject was unable to hear the victim's protests. At electric shocks of 300 volts, however, the subject could hear the victim pounding on the wall that separated the teacher and the learner. After 315 volts, the victim remained silent. When I mention the baseline experiment in the figures, I refer to variation 5 in which there was voice feedback and 65% of the participants were willing to obey.
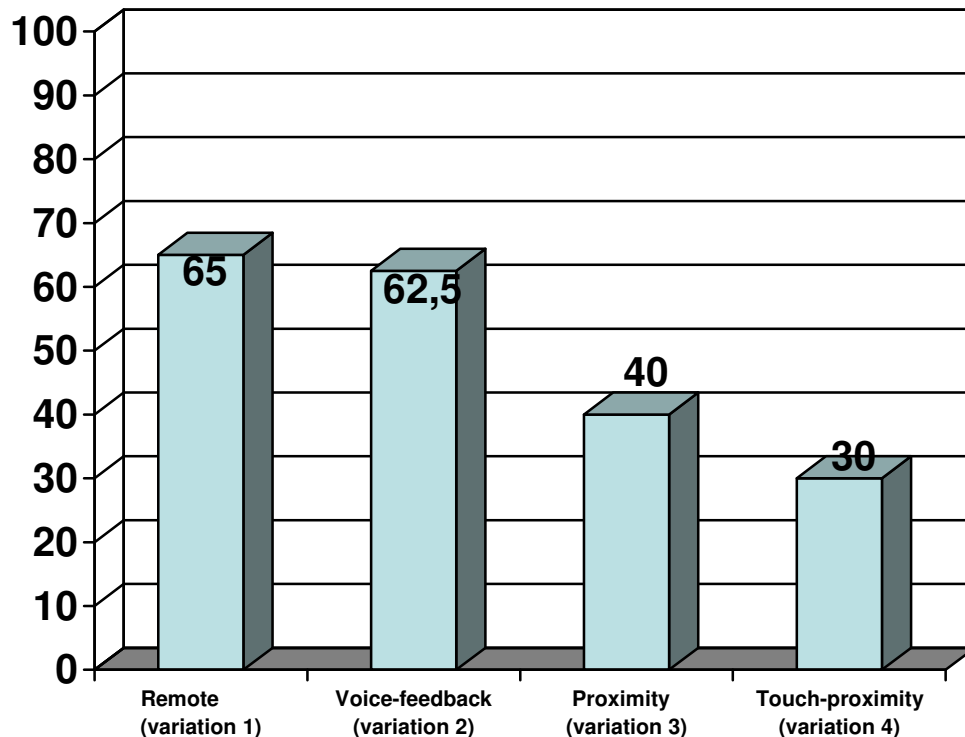
Figure 2. "Closeness of the victim" variations of the Milgram experiment, which were used to investigate a subject's zone of indifference. The figures represent the percentage of subjects who were willing to use all 30 switches and to administer the final 450-volt shock (obedient subjects).

Tests investigating the type of actions that belong to an individual's zone of indifference are known from organisations and can be simulated in real experiments in organisations. For example, the teaching load for professors with a strong interest in research might be gradually increased from 8 to 12 hours per week per semester and later to 16, 20, 24, and 28 hours. It would then be interesting to see at what stage they reach the end of their zone of indifference and quit their job.[14] In a military setting, the demands made on soldiers deployed abroad could be gradually increased in an attempt to assess whether deployment to Afghanistan, Iraq or Iran falls within a soldier's zone of indifference or not.

The "closeness of the victim" variations of Milgram's experiment are, however, far less interesting than two other variations that Milgram originally intended to use only for investigating whether the willingness to administer electric shocks reflects the release of long-suppressed aggression. For this purpose, Milgram developed a number of different experiments in which the subjects received instructions that required non-aggressive behaviour.

In the "learner demands to be shocked" experiment (variation 12), the experimenter called a halt to the experiment after the 150-volt shock and stated that no further shocks should be administered in view of the learner's heart condition. The (confederate) learner, however, demanded that the experiment be continued and electric shocks be administered for wrong

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[14] I am not implying that such an experiment is currently being conducted in North Rhine-Westphalia or other German states. The purpose of the systematic increase in the number of hours per week per semester is to achieve "more teaching" (and thus less research) at the same cost rather than to obtain scientific findings.

answers. Every subject stopped at this point and refused to administer any more shocks (see Milgram 1974: 90 ff.).

In another experiment (variation 14), which is without any doubt one of the most elegant variations of the baseline experiment, the (confederate) learner suggested that the experimenter should receive the electric shocks. The experimenter agreed and was shocked by the (naïve) subject. At 150 volts, the experimenter demanded that no more shocks be administered. Again, all participants obeyed the order of the hierarchist and broke off the experiment (Milgram 1974: 99 ff.).
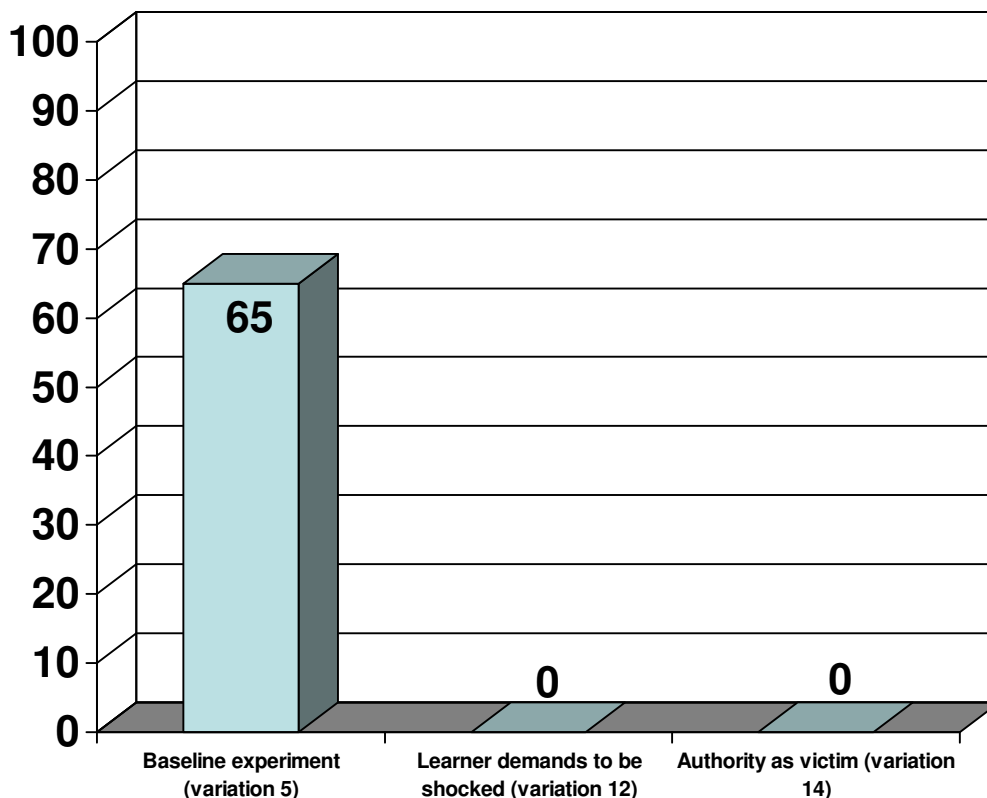

Figure 3: Variations of the Milgram experiment, which were used to investigate whether the subject's behaviour reflected a tendency towards aggression or a willingness to obey. These experiments provide insight into a subject's zone of indifference. The figures represent the percentage of subjects who were willing to use all 30 switches and to administer the final 450-volt shock (obedient subjects).

These two variations enabled Milgram to demonstrate convincingly that a tendency towards aggression played no role in his experiments. In addition, they provide information for an interpretation of the zone of indifference. In a nutshell, the subjects behave as they do not because they find it interesting to administer electric shocks but because this behaviour falls within the zone of indifference of the majority of subjects, who in other words did not consider it worth risking their membership by disobeying an order. They more or less agree with a particular attitude but it appears that they would comply with either the instruction to administer electric shocks or to discontinue or, in other words, to continue or terminate the experiment.

What then creates this zone of indifference? In my opinion, there are two interpretations. The first possible explanation for the behaviour that is expected of the participants falls within the zone of indifference to which the participants consented at the beginning of the experiment.

One of the most interesting aspects of Milgram's experiment is that the participants were told in detail *before* the beginning of the baseline experiment what they were expected to do, which is to willingly administer electric shocks up to 450 volts.[15] The second possible explanation is that the zone of indifference was slowly extended after the organisation was joined, for example according to the foot-in-the-door principle, which was described in the original article.

In my opinion, we are not in a position to judge the extent to which the behaviour of the participants fell within the initially defined zone of indifference and the extent to which the zone of indifference was slowly extended during the duration of membership. I am cautious about this because Milgram's and other experiments did not include variations investigating whether the actions fell within an initially defined zone of indifference or a gradually extended zone of indifference.

Such variations would have been possible. For example, the experimenter might have explained in detail to the subjects how the learner will react to increasing shock levels in order to enable the participants to withdraw before the beginning of the experiment. In another variation, the experimenter might have ordered the subject to administer 450-volt shocks for one of the first wrong answers. Thus it would have been possible to determine the proportion of participants whose willingness to obey was attributable to the foot-in-the-door principle. Other variations might have been used to test further methods of motivating unknown behaviour in subjects. For example, it would have been possible to simulate the foot-in-the-door principle: the experimenter might have first expected a far-reaching behaviour from the subjects (administration of a 450-volt shock) and, if the subject refused to comply, he might have ordered the subject to administer at least a 150-volt shock.[16]

For this reason, I would suggest not to explain the zone of indifference in Milgram's experiment simply by referring to an extension of the zone of indifference in the course of the experiment. It is clear that the foot-in-the-door phenomenon leads to an extension of the zone of indifference. We are, however, unable to determine in retrospect the extent to which the participants' behaviour is a result of this phenomenon.

3. Membership: The simulation of low exit costs in experiments

The thesis of ordinary organisations implies that both the entry and exit costs simulated in experiments are similar to those associated with ordinary organisations. It is argued that the participants in Milgram's experiment and in the Stanford prison experiment were willing to administer electric shocks, guard prisoners, or send people to radioactively contaminated regions because the experimental design made it impossible for them to withdraw from the experiment. Rather, it is believed that members bind themselves to an organisation by

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[15] In this respect, the simulated organisation was "not ordinary". Usually, the behaviour that is expected in organisations is not explicitly specified beforehand. The Milgram experiment – at least the baseline variation – is special insofar as the participants were able to make a well-informed decision *at the beginning* about whether the expected behaviour fell within their zone of indifference or not.

[16] The door-in-the-face principle implies that people who are confronted with a far-reaching request are more willing to comply with a more moderate request than those who are directly confronted with the more moderate request. (see Cialdini et al. 1975). Other experiments might be useful as well, e.g. a low-ball experiment, which implies that subjects agree to a deal at a certain price and then the original deal is changed for the worse (see Cialdini et al. 1978), or the that's-not-all principle, which implies that subjects are offered a product for a certain price and the price is lowered before they decide to buy or not to buy. I am grateful to Boris Holzer for pointing out that the knee-deep-in-the-big-muddy principle (Barry M. Staw 1966) rather than the foot-in-the-door principle (see Freedman/Fraser 1966) could be used to interpret a graduated increase.

voluntarily joining it. They are afraid that they might "lose face" if they exit the organisation and thus they continue in an attempt to avoid this "embarrassment" (see Kühl 2005 a: 100f).[17]

Proponents of the thesis that "non-ordinary organisations" were simulated in the Milgram experiment believe that the experiments were designed in such a way as to make it difficult for participants to withdraw. They postulate that the experimenter ignored verbal protests from the participants and did not understand these protests as a "termination" of membership. In the Stanford prison experiment, the participants were allowed to leave the prison only in the case of abnormal mental behaviour and with the permission of the superintendent (see Klatetzki 2007: Section 2.1). According to Klatetzki, this shows that the violation of membership rules by the participants in the experiments did not lead to the termination of membership.

But are the experiments really that different from ordinary organisations in this respect?

Self-selection or a member's declaration to exit an organisation suggests that an organisation usually does not automatically understand a first expression of displeasure as an exit. Anyone who has ever attempted to leave a company, a church or a political party knows that it is eventually possible to leave an organisation but only after long delays caused by the organisation. If you hand in your notice at work, your employer will ask you to sleep on your decision or finish one last "key project" or he will ask you under what conditions you (as a "member of the organisation" are willing to stay. If you wish to leave a church in Germany, you cannot simply declare your intention to do so. Rather, you must file a declaration of intention with the responsible government authority. Even after covering exit costs of 30 euros, you will often not be allowed to leave the church until the end of the following year. If you wish to withdraw from a political party, your notice of withdrawal will first be ignored and then you (actually a former member) will be asked to think over your decision. It may take several attempts before you can successfully withdraw from a political party.[18]

This process is even clearer when you exit an organisation as a result of *external selection*, in other words as a result of the organisation itself. Deviations from the rule are commonplace in all organisations and do not lead to dismissal from the organisation. Sociological research has provided a wealth of information about cheating in schools and universities (e.g. Williams 1970) and party donation affairs in the Christian democratic and social democratic parties in Germany (Ortmann 2003). We are familiar with the fact that labourers in a piecework system may stockpile their work to generate a reserve for quieter phases (see Schumann et al. 1982). We know that rules are bent in aircraft manufacturing (see Bensman/Gerver 1963) and that postmen have little tricks to make their work easier (see Harper/Emmert 1963).

These departures from the rule do not call membership into question. If they did, organisations would have to dismiss so many members (and thus hire new ones) that they would not have time to perform their true work. Membership is only called into question if a member of the organisation refuses to carry out explicitly prescribed instructions. The fact that Army maintenance units may circumvent official channels is not the problem. The

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[17] I expressly follow the reasoning of Milgram who made this argument plausible with regard to Goffman (see Milgram 1963: 377; cited in Kühl 2005 a: 101). On the basis of Goffman, the phenomenon of "embarrassment" is well established in social psychology (for further details see Silver et al. 1987: 47 ff.).

[18] It is important to distinguish between industrial organisations, which pay their members for the work they do, and special interest organisations, which receive money from their members for representing their interests. It is often easier to exit companies, authorities, hospitals, or universities than it is to exit a special interest organisation because an industrial organisation will be interested in terminating membership as soon as a member stops working.

problem is when this method of communication is used after it has been explicitly prohibited by a superior. Membership is not called into question when professors regularly and informally shirk teaching loads. This would only happen if a professor openly refused to offer nine hours of classes a week.

An explicit refusal such as this would immediately attract attention in an organisation. But not because the action that is refused is in any way relevant. Whether or not a certain professor only offers six and not nine hours of instruction will do nothing to worsen the situation of the university in question. The reason why explicit refusals do attract attention is because a single *explicit* refusal calls into question the acceptance of the formal structure of an organisation. This and only this is what Luhmann (1964: 63) meant when he wrote that the open refusal to obey "*an*" instruction given by a superior or "*a*" regulation calls membership into question because this refusal is directed "against the system and against all formal expectations". Explicit refusals must (unlike the daily bending of rules) be dealt with in the organisation. Otherwise the basic principle on which the organisation is based – the acceptance of the condition of membership – would be called into question.

Several steps are, however, involved in the enforcement of this condition of membership. If a member of an organisation visibly (!) refuses to carry out instructions (e.g. performing certain work in manufacturing process, carrying out the deportation of an asylum seeker, or holding a seminar at the university), this member is usually reminded in a friendly fashion that the instructions must be carried out. Sometimes the superior even makes an effort to justify the reason for the instructions. If the member continues to refuse, the superior usually issues his expectations in the form of an order ("You will do this right now. This is an order.").[19] Only if the member continues to refuse despite the fact that the instructions have now been worded as an order will he be informed about the consequences of his actions ("If you don't do this, you will be dismissed.") Only then will an organisation decide to dismiss a member.[20]

This process is interesting because it allows us to define more closely the relationship between interaction and organisation. Most researchers believe that interactions in organisations can develop a momentum of their own outside the structural guidelines of the organisation (for a detailed description of current discussions in system theory, see Kieserling 1999: 335 ff.). We are familiar with conflict situations at department meetings when open displays of aversion between colleagues lead to an increasingly heated atmosphere and even reminders of organisational rationalities are of little help. We know about the difficulties schools and universities have in regulating interaction during classes because this is when the organisation withdraws and, to use a phrase of Niklas Luhman's (2002: 160 f), it allows interaction to play a leading role.

But the experiments dealt with here are characterised by the fact that, in the interaction between experimenter and test subject, the formalised expectations of the organisation are

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[19] Studies have shown how seldom instructions from superiors are issued as orders (see Mintzberg 1973; see also Burns 1954: 95; Luhmann 1971 b: 99). What this shows is that this stage of escalation is rarely reached in most organisations.

[20] This approach has been formalised in many organisations. This means that superiors must comply with a graduated procedure consisting of verbal warning, written warning, and dismissal so that they themselves do not violate conditions of membership. This matter has received frequent treatment in legal literature (for German examples, see Pflaum 1992 or Beck 1997). An interesting case study is the disciplinary action taken against Bundeswehr major Florian Pfaff, who refused to provide logistic support to what he felt was an illegal war of aggression against Iraq (see Pfaff 2007). Up to the annulment of the disciplinary measures by the 2nd Military Service Chamber of the German Administrative Court, the Bundeswehr provided a classic example of how an order is enforced in the face of explicit refusal but without immediately giving notice (see also Rose 2007).

mobilised. As a result of the explicit reference to membership conditions, it is especially the organisation and not interaction that takes a leading role. This can be seen particularly in the Milgram experiment and in the deportation experiment.

In the Milgram experiment we can see how an almost model organisation makes increasingly clear references to the fulfilment of formalised membership conditions and how interaction is more and more explicitly directed towards the formal expectations to be fulfilled by the organisational member (see Kühl 2005 a: 97). In the experimental design of the Milgram experiment, experimenters were provided with a series of increasingly explicit orders to give if test subjects refused to administer electric shocks. The first order was "Please continue" or "Please go on". The fourth and last order was "You have no choice, you must go on". If the test subject refused to obey this order to continue, the experiment was considered to be finished.[21]

My thesis is that these very procedures are evidence of normality in all organisations and are not a characteristic of organisations with high exit barriers. It goes without saying that in modern society there are organisations that can have high exit barriers for their members. In Germany, a high-ranking police officer who decides to leave the force at an early age may have to pay back the costs of his university education. Soldiers have difficulty terminating their membership if they find themselves in a war or if a war is impending. This is the case regardless of whether they have volunteered or been drafted. Augustin Aguayo is a case in point of the high exit costs members must sometimes pay. Aguayo, a regular in the US Army, refused to serve a second term in Iraq with his unit. His application for conscientious objector status was denied by the Army and he was sentenced to prison.

The problem is that this type of organisation with high exit costs cannot be simulated in experiments, even if we wanted to. It would be necessary to deny test subjects the right to call off the experiment. No ethnic commission is likely to approve such an experiment. Unlike in (abnormal!) organisations such as the Italian mafia, the Chinese triads, or the Ugandan army under Idi Amin, we cannot simply shoot test subjects who wish to terminate their participation in experiments.[22]

4. Concluding remarks

In terms of organisational sociology, the most interesting question remaining is whether organisations that force the entry of members and impede their exit are able to make great demands on their members for example when it comes to producing brutality. Or whether – as I have hypothesized – it is organisations with voluntary membership and easy exit schemes that are able to produce behaviour in their members that leads to moral outrage outside the organisation or even with the passing of time (see Kühl 2005 a: 107).

The thesis of the "ordinary organisation" must not be interpreted in such a way that all types of brutality in modern society can be traced back to behaviour in "ordinary organisations" (see Kühl 2007). The murdering armies of children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are

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[21] In one of the best surveys of the social psychology of the Holocaust, Leonard S. Newman (2002: 47) underlines the freedom of the test subjects in the experiment: "Throughout the procedures, the experimenter was on hand to urge the participant to continue with the study. Neither force nor threats were involved; participants were pressured with simple verbal directives (e.g. "you must continue"; "the experiment requires that you go on"). In fact, participants were free to call a halt to the proceedings at any time."

[22] Most scholars agree that no academic ethics commission today would approve the Milgram experiment or the Stanford prison experiment. This is just one indication of how difficult it is to simulate high exit costs.

certainly not "ordinary organisations". As a rule their members are forced to join and exits are difficult. To this extent, the mafia is certainly a "special organisation" because it is difficult to join and especially to exit. If we are to believe mafia films, exits frequently end with cement shoes at the bottom of a harbour (see, for example, Anderson 1965; Gambetta 1993 for a more differentiated examination of the Sicilian mafia).

There are no indications that brutality in modern society can be limited to the phenomenon of organisations. The terror during the first French republic in 1793, the pogrom against Russian Jews in Odessa in 1821, or the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 are more likely to be described with processes in social movements than in organisations. For an explanation of the brutality of the Tupamaros in Uruguay, the Red Army Faction in Germany, or the Red Brigades in Italy, we must turn for answers to group dynamics rather than organisational sociology (see Reemtsma 2007 on the Red Army Faction).[23] And even everyday household violence is more likely to be explained by conflict-escalating dynamics in pair relationships than by organisational sociology.

But despite these limitations, I believe the theory of "ordinary organisations" has explanatory power, even far beyond the interpretations of the experiments. It points towards the possibility of the "normality" of organisations involved in mass murder.

One of the (alarming) findings of Holocaust research is that it is not necessary to ensure high exit costs in organisations or to promote especially charismatic people to leadership positions in order to motivate organisational members to take part in genocide. According to Henry Friedlander (1998: 248 f), more than thirty years of research have failed to uncover evidence that someone who had refused to take part in killing was executed, imprisoned or in any way punished. Studies on the command personnel of National Socialist extermination camps and the *Einsatzgruppen* on the eastern front have clearly shown that hierarchies do not necessarily have to consist of unusually charismatic people (see Jäger 1982: 22 ff.).

This is not to say, of course, that any hospital, advertising agency, university, or automobile manufacturing plant can be "easily" transformed into a killing organisation. This position would overestimate the possibility of reprogramming aims. In addition, the theory of "*ordinary* organisations" does not claim that nursing the sick, preparing an advertising campaign, or teaching students makes the same demands on personnel as does the organised torture and killing of people. But organisations that specialise in torture and killing do not necessarily require mechanisms (and personnel) different from those organisations that nurse, advertise, teach, or manufacture.[24] It is disturbing to realise not only that mass murderers in organisations are often ordinary people but also that the organisations that plan and conduct mass murders often have the same characteristics as ordinary organisations.

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[23] See also the answer provided by Baum (2007) which says that "the terrorists came from the centre of society". As I see it, a promising explanation of the Red Army Faction "phenomenon" would involve a theory that differentiates between group, movement and society.

[24] This does not of course rule out the fact that organisations can change from "ordinary organisations" to "extraordinary organisations" when they conduct mass murder. Considerations analogous to Robert J. Lifton's criticism of Arendt's theory of the banality of evil are conceivable. Lifton argued, "Nazi doctors were banal, but what they did was not. Repeatedly in this study, I describe banal men performing demonic acts. In doing so – or in order to do so – the men themselves changed; and in carrying out their actions, they themselves were no longer banal." (Lifton 1986: 12; see also Darley 1992: 209). Such changes during a long-planned mass murder can be empirically observed in certain army units (for example, the My Lai massacre in Vietnam). In experiments, such changes can only be simulated to a limited extent owing to the short time of experiments (with the possible exception of the Stanford prison experiment).

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