Genocide and the Brain: Teaching about Social Psychology, Neuroscience, and the Holocaust

Presented by Brittany Burns
USHMM Teacher Fellow
Algonquin Regional High School
NCTE 2014
bburns@nsboro.k12.ma.us
What is Neuroscience?
The scientific study of the nervous system, including the brain

What is Social Psychology?
The psychological study of the behaviors of individual people in society/groups

How do they connect to the Holocaust?
These fields help us understand how the Holocaust happened and why people, especially perpetrators, made the choices that they did. It also helps us consider ways to prevent genocide in the future.
Sacred Values [noun]: Any value that a community explicitly or implicitly treats as possessing infinite or transcendental significance that precludes comparisons, trade-offs, or mingling with bounded or secular values (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, and Lerner, 2000, p. 853)

What values can be “sacred”?

- Religious Beliefs
- Nationalism
- Political Beliefs
- Family/Children
- Group association
- Issue Identification (pro-life, pro-gun rights, etc.)

Sacred Values are beliefs or values that are core to our identity and that we will protect at great cost. When these are threatened, it triggers our amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for emotions.
So what does that mean?

- Research shows that the amygdala works faster than the neocortex and can overpower rational thought processing (LeDoux, 1992, pp. 69-79)
- This can lead to aggressive & violent behavior

When people are led to believe that their sacred values are at risk or are being threatened by another group, they are biologically inclined to react emotionally and aggressively.

How might this understanding impact our perception of...

- Propaganda?
- Nationalism?
- Scape-goating?
- Nazi ideology?
- Hate speech?
**Conformity & Obedience:** Willingness to change one’s beliefs or follow orders to fall in line with larger group

*Example: Stanford Prison Experiment*

**Aggression:** Willingness to cause physical harm to another, often for self-preservation or at direction of another

*Example: Bobo Doll Experiment*

**Bystander Effect:** Diffusion of responsibility because of a belief that one cannot help or someone else will

*Example: Kitty Genovese*
Questions to explore using primary sources:

→ What “sacred values” are identified by these perpetrators? How/why did they believe Jews were threatening those values?

→ How can neuroscience and social psychology help us better understand the mindset of these perpetrators?

→ How do these perpetrators attempt to justify their actions? How do they explain what they did? What can we learn from these explanations?

→ How do these findings help us better understand the Holocaust specifically and, more broadly, genocide?
Bibliography of Resources

Research & Secondary Materials:
“Neurobiology of Escalated Aggression and Violence” in Journal of Neuroscience (October 2007) found at http://www.jneurosci.org/content/27/44/11803.full#content-block

“The Price of your Soul: How your Brain Decides whether to ‘Sell Out’” in eScience Commons found at http://www.emory.edu/EMORY_REPORT/stories/2012/01/esc_brain_decides_sell_out.html


“Theories of Social Psychology” in Simply Psychology found at http://www.simplypsychology.org/social-psychology.html

*“The Neuroscience of Social Conflict” Tedx Boston Talks (October 2014) found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfljJGTvKE

*“The Stanford Prison Experiment” documentary video available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZwfNs1pqG0

Primary Source Materials:
*“A Commandant’s View” from Facing History & Ourselves
http://www.facinghistory.org/for-educators/educator-resources/readings/commandants-view (text copy)
hhttp://www.facinghistory.org/videos/commandants-view-audio (audio version)

*“The Perpetrators” from “PBS’ Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State” text found at http://www.pbs.org/auschwitz/40-45/victims/perps.html (video testimony available on Netflix or through purchase)


*Especially recommended for use with students