WHY MY LAI?

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Abstract

In the following project, we have presented four psychological theories in order to understand what influences a soldier to commit a war crime. The theories discussed are: obedience to authority, group conformity, dehumanization and the power of the situation. A point of departure has been taken in the Vietnam War and the My Lai massacre is presented and used as a case study. An account of the historical aspects of My Lai has been given and the four theories have been introduced and applied to the soldiers who participated in the massacre. By doing so, the key influences have been identified and suggestions for the prevention of future war crimes are given.

I det følgende projekt har vi præsenteret fire psykologiske teorier for at kunne forstå hvilke indflydelser en soldat bliver påvirket af, for at kunne begå krigsforbrydelser. De omtalte teorier er lydhed til autoritet, gruppe tildannelse, umenneskeliggørelse og situationens magt. Der tages udgangspunkt i Vietnamkrigen og My Lai massakren præsenteres og bruges som konkret eksempel. Der gives en redegørelse for de historiske aspekter i My Lai og de fire teorier introduceres og bliver relateret til soldaterne der deltog i massakren. Ved at gøre dette bliver de vigtigste inflydelser identificeret og der gives foreslag til forebyggelsen af fremtidige krigsforbrydelser.

Šiame projekte mes pristatėme keturias psichologines teorijas, norint nustatyti kas gali pastumėti karį įvykdyti karo nusikaltimus. Teorijos, kurias mes aptarėme, yra šios: besąlygiškas nuolankumas aukštesnio rango pareigūnams (autoritetui), grupinis paklusnumas, žmogiškumo atemimas (dehumanizacija) ir situacijos poveikis. Analizę mes pradėjom
Problem Definition

Motivation
War has always been an essential ingredient in the development of the human race. As a result of the battles fought in ancient times, up until modern warfare, millions of innocent lives have ended as a result of war crimes committed. Despite this fact, it was not until recent history that a definition of a war crime has been discussed and put in place. This was done in order to prevent the loss of innocent lives.

After World War I and II, the Western media began to focus on such atrocities. By doing so it was brought to the attention of Western society that war crimes were being committed in the name of democracy. In recent wars the fact that these incidents occur has been subject of debate at the highest instances of democratic societies around the world.

In the following project, our main focus will be on American soldiers committing war crimes, and what influences them in order to trigger this action. In order to investigate this thoroughly we will take a point of departure in the My Lai massacre which was a war crime committed during the Vietnam War in 1968. Through this incident, we will attempt to explain what influenced these soldiers by applying different psychological theories that have been developed on human behavior. Were the soldiers brought to this point through the situation they found themselves in? How big a part did the role of their line of commanders play, were the soldiers simply obeying orders or were they acting on their own impulses? To which extent did their perception of the enemy influence their behaviour? Did the unit which they were a part of influence their actions?
By applying these theories and asking these questions, we will try to offer an explanation as to why these atrocities are being committed, and ultimately give suggestions on how war crimes can be prevented from happening in the future.

**Research question**

What influences a soldier to commit war crimes such as the atrocities committed during the My Lai massacre?

**Sub-questions**

- What happened in the My Lai massacre?
- What is the definition of a war crime according to the Geneva Convention, which American soldiers abide by?
- How big an influence does authority have on the action of a soldier?
- Which relevance does being in a group have upon the actions of a soldier?
- How big a part does dehumanizing of the enemy and the soldiers play when committing war crimes?
- Is the act of a soldier due to the power of the situation he is in? If yes, how?
- What has been done to prevent war crimes from happening?
- Based on the research in the following project, what proposals can be made for the prevention of war crimes?

**Delimitation**

We will not be discussing the individual soldier, but instead look at the group as a whole. We are only focusing on one historical atrocity because
we think it is more important to focus on what influences the behaviour of the soldiers, rather than the comparison of historical events.

We are not going to do empirical work, mainly because of time pressure, but also because it is difficult to find relevant accounts from people in Denmark, since we are focusing on American soldiers. We will not be focusing in detail on the training of the soldiers although we understand the significance. As the process of analyzing the training of a soldier would be a whole project on its own, and therefore not our main focus.

**Dimensions**

In our project we intend to cover the dimensions of *Subjectivity and Learning* and *History and Culture*.

*Subjectivity and Learning*

Through studying psychological theories by for example Milgram, Asch and Zimbardo we shall cover the dimension of *subjectivity and learning*. When studying these theories we give a summary of the experiments and their results. We also apply these theories to the events of our case study. We focus mainly on behavioral studies such as obedience to authority, group psychology, the power of the situation and the effects of dehumanization.

*History and Culture*

We also intend to cover the dimension of *history and culture*, by giving a historical account of the events in the My Lai massacre as well as discussing The Geneva Convention, and by criticizing the sources which our accounts are based on.
Our case study, the My Lai massacre, is described in detail and we give a shorter account of the Vietnam War. To cover the dimension of *History & Culture* we are criticizing the sources we are basing our historical account on. We are discussing the reliability of eyewitness accounts and the objectivity of historians and historical works.

**Semester theme – the Humanities and Humanism**

The project focuses on determining what influences the behavior of soldiers, and as atrocities such as the My Lai massacre is a crime against humanity, it is relevant to our semester theme.

**Theoretical and methodological framework**

- Obedience to authority
- Group conformity
- Dehumanization
- Power of the Situation

In order to determine what influences the soldier to commit a war crime, we will apply four different psychological theories to our case study, The My Lai massacre. We have chosen to focus on the most recognized experiments and theories, as they are most prominent in their fields of research. The theories and experiments that we will introduce and apply to the My Lai massacre are the following:

Obedience to Authority by Stanley Milgram, a study on group conformity by Solomon Asch and The Autokinetic Experiments on Norm Formation by Muzafar Sherif. A definition of the concept of dehumanization has been put in place by psychologists Nick Haslam and Herbert C. Kelman, and ultimately ideas on the power of the situation by Philip Zimbardo.
Case study
The My Lai massacre

Linguistic policy
We are writing the project in English, we will try to find all our materials, sources and readings in English, partly because we have people in our group who do not speak Danish, and also because we are focusing on a subject which took place overseas, so most of the materials are already in English. Finally, it is important to us to use the English language and materials because our main focus is on the minds of American soldiers. However, if necessary we are also capable of using materials written in other languages.

Organization of time
See Group Process Description on page 106.

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Geneva Convention

Short introduction to the Geneva Convention

In order to discuss the prevention of war crimes, we must first understand how they are defined.

The first time International humanitarian law was considered was after the battlefield of Solferino during the Italian campaign of the Franco-Austrian war in 1859, where forty thousand wounded men were left to die without food, water, shelter or any kind of medical attention. (Bennett, 2005)

Henry Dunant, a young businessman, was shocked by this senseless suffering and wrote a book about it. Gustave Moynier, a lawyer from Geneva, helped him write a basic code for the treatment of wounded soldiers in battle and arrange the first international conference in order to obtain international support and maintenance.

On the 22nd of August, 1864, due to Henry Dunant and Gustave Moynier, the first Geneva Convention was signed in Geneva by representatives of 12 countries, 24 delegates and later on laid the foundation for the Red Cross.

Today it consists of four conventions, drafted on the 12th of August, 1949 and the additional protocols of the 8th of June, 1977.

The International Committee of the Red Cross summarizes the Geneva Convention as:

“…In time of war, certain humanitarian rules must be observed, even with regard to enemy … The Geneva Conventions are founded on the
idea of respect for the individual and his dignity. Persons not directly
taking part in hostilities and those put out of action through sickness,
injury, captivity, or any other cause must be respected and protected
against the effects of war; those who suffer must be aided and cared for
without discrimination...” (Bennett, 2005, p. xii)

Geneva Convention and War crimes.
The theme of the fourth Geneva Convention was “Protection of Civilians
in times of war” and it was signed on the 12th of August, 1949 by sixty-
one delegates.

It contains rules meant to ensure the safety of civilians in occupied or
enemy territory at the time of conflict. It states that there should always
be safe zones for the elderly, pregnant women, and sick or wounded
civilians. Also, there should always be supply of food and medication.
Any kind of violence or the taking of hostages is forbidden. Committing
outrages against personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading
treatment, rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy,
pillaging an area (even when taken by assault), is against the Geneva
Convention.

However, the greatest offences against the rules in this code are wilful
killing and causing great suffering or serious injuries to body or health.

The definition of a war crime under article 6 (b) of The Constitution of
The International Military Tribunal is:

“Violations of the laws or customs of war. Such violations shall include,
but not be limited to, murder, ill-treatment or deportation to slave labor
or for any other purpose of civilian population of or in occupied territory,
murder or ill-treatment of prisoners of war or persons on the seas, killing
of hostages, plunder of public or private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns or villages, or devastation not justified by military necessity” (http://www.dannen.com/decision/int-law.html#D).

However, during the Vietnam War, the Geneva Convention was not widely used. Instead, there was a US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV), which was responsible for the command, control and support of US personnel in Vietnam. It states that the wilful killing, torture, or inhuman treatment of, or wilful causing of great suffering or serious injury to the body or health of persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of the armed forces who had laid down their arms or who were not combatants because of sickness, wounds, or any other cause, is a war crime (Bourke, 1999).

It was difficult to resolve what constituted a major war crime, as well as who was responsible for it.

General Assembly states that crimes and crimes against humanity shall be investigated, and the persons, for whom there is evidence indicating that they have committed criminal acts, shall be traced, arrested, trialled and, if found guilty, punished. The states should cooperate with each other in the collection of information and evidence and on a bilateral and multilateral basis with a view towards halting and preventing war crimes and crimes against humanity (Boutros- Ghali, Boutros 1995).

The Vietnam War was especially lawless, but perhaps inadequate or no measures were taken in order to prevent war crimes. Drill Sergeant Kenneth Hodges (one of the men who trained Charlie Company for combat) was very satisfied with their "performance” on March 1968 and even boasted:
"They turned out to be very good soldiers. The fact that they were able to go into My Lai and carry out the orders they had been given, I think this is a direct result of the good training they had" (Bourke, 1999 p. 187).
The Vietnam War and My Lai massacre

The American involvement in the Vietnam War has been subject to a lot of debate and controversy. Since the war officially ended in 1975 several artists have attempted to portray some of the difficult situations the American soldiers found themselves in during the war. Movies such as “Apocolypse now” and “Platoon” have tried to display the horrors of the war, and a lot of literature has been written on the psychological consequences that Vietnam veterans have suffered. This war has a big place in American history, and therefore has been heavily debated. In the following chapter we will give a brief description of the Vietnam war, and a detailed description of the My Lai massacre. In doing so, we will be creating a platform for the rest of the project. The following chapters, will take their point of departure in these descriptions, and therefore this case study will be of great importance in relation to answering our research question.

The Vietnam War, 1954-1975

For countless years Vietnam had been an unstable country. Vietnam was a colony of France until May, 1954 when Vietnam was successful in overpowering the French. (Smith, 1983) When France left Vietnam a civil war broke out between the North and the South. North Vietnam became a communist power, while South Vietnam was attempting to stabilize a Democratic society.

Not long after the fear of the Nazi regime had subsided, Communism became the forefront of fear in the American’s minds. Communism in Vietnam was perceived as being a threat to American ideals. America feared a domino effect to take place if Vietnam were to become a full
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communist nation. They believed if the communists where left to overtake Vietnam it would soon spread to their own boarders and it would force them to fight communism on their own soil. Both President Eisenhower and President Truman before him believed Vietnam was an American interest, and likewise President J.F. Kennedy believed that the defeat of Communism in Vietnam was vital, and the spread of communism was to stop in Vietnam. (Kissinger, 2003) In 1961 President J.F. Kennedy sent in troops to bring aid to South Vietnam. Kennedy understood the war in Vietnam was not that of a conventional war, but was a war consisting of guerrilla warfare. This war was to be like no other, never before had American troops been sent so far from home to fight an unknown enemy. The Vietnam War turned out to be the longest war in American history to this day. (Kissinger, 2003)

In the following years, increased numbers of reinforcements were sent into Vietnam. In early 1962 operation Ranchhand began. The goal was to clear the vegetation of the forests, and make the Viet Cong visible to American forces. By spraying an herbicide, nicknamed “Agent Orange” whole forests were destroyed, and in a matter of minuets leaves would wilt and begin to fall. (Gawthorne, 2006) After the death of President Kennedy, President Johnson was now put into a difficult situation, and action needed to be taken in Vietnam. President Johnson in 1965 fully committed America to the war in Vietnam by deploying as many as 35,450 troops. (Smith, 1991)

The fighting in Vietnam was brutal. American troops were confronted with guerrilla warfare. This included many booby traps and mines, which were mostly homemade. The guerrilla warfare tactics of the enemy also included them disguising themselves as civilians and hiding among
civilians. The Viet Cong would also often use the civilians: men, women, and children to set up booby traps and mines, and for intelligence purposes. It was not uncommon for young Vietnamese children to lead American troops into traps, and in effect made it difficult for any American soldier to trust even the youngest of civilians. (Peers, 1979) A large majority of the fighting took place in the jungle. The Viet Cong used the example of the Chinese guerrillas. There were miles and miles of tunnels dug underneath the ground, allowing surprise attacks, and major casualties for the Americans. Jungle warfare was exhausting and there was frequently heavy and debilitating rain.

When Richard Nixon ended the war in 1973, more bombs were dropped during the Vietnam War then the whole of World War II. (Cawthorne, 2006) America was left with 58,193 soldiers dead, 1,948 missing in action and 153,303 wounded. (National Archives and Record Administration, CACCF (Combat Area Casualties Current File), 1956-1998. The Vietnamese had also suffered heavy casualties. 185,000 South Vietnamese soldiers were killed, 900,000 North Vietnamese soldiers were killed, and over one million civilians died. (Gawthorne, 2006)
The My Lai massacre

The My Lai massacre, which took place on the 16th of March 1968, is by many perceived as being the darkest day in American military history. Between 347 and 519 civilians were slaughtered in the course of just four hours by American troops.

The story was gradually brought to the attention of the government and the public. The soldiers of Charlie Company didn’t keep quite about the atrocities they had committed and were on several occasions known to have talked openly about the incidents. At the same time the Viet Cong were handing out flyers accusing the Americans of atrocities. This lead to the American Army taking action and starting a somewhat “half-hearted” investigation of the incident. Though this first investigation lead to the conclusion, that no further actions were necessary. It was not until Ron Ridenhour, a Private who had served in Vietnam, gathered information from men in Charlie Company and sent thirty copies of a summary of his evidence to prominent politicians in America (Cawthorne, 2003). After the story broke public, Lieutenant General Peers was then put in charge of an official investigation.

During this inquiry more than 100 people were interviewed and it proved beyond doubt that atrocities had taken place.

On the following pages we will try to give an account of the incidents that happened that morning in My Lai, by looking at testimonies given by superiors as well as privates that took part in the mission. All the factual information on the following pages are taken from Lieutenant General Peers’ “The My Lai inquiry” 1970, these are the only official numbers, dates and timelines that are available as they were logged in the American
military system. Furthermore we would like to stress the fact that the actual incidents which took place once the soldiers entered the village is unclear, as they are based on different testimonies given by soldiers who took part in the mission. These testimonies were given in front of the Peers Panel and later in a court of law. Therefore we realize that these accounts may not be completely truthful, as different factors may have influenced the motivation (for example trying to avoid getting convicted of the crimes investigated) and thereby putting into question the authenticity of the accounts given by the participants of the massacre. Some incidents vary in the different testimonies and therefore, as a result still is not to this day an absolutely clear account of what happened on that fateful morning.

**The briefing on the mission:**
The task force’s mission was to engage what was believed to be the Viet Cong’s Local 48th battalion. The Viet Cong were, according to intelligence, operating in the Son May village, which consisted of 6 hamlets, named My Lai 1, My Lai 2, My Lai 3, My Lai 4, My Lai 5 and My Lai 6. Three companies were to be involved in this mission. Alpha Company lead by Captain Riggs, were instructed to situate themselves north of the Son May village create a buffer and stop any fleeing Viet Cong from escaping. Bravo Company under the command of Captain Michels, were to land in landing zone 2 south-east of the hamlet of My Lai 1 and sweep trough it moving west to join forces with Charlie Company. Charlie Company under the command of Captain Medina were to land at landing zone 1 west of My Lai 4 and sweep trough it in a eastern direction, to finally meet up with Bravo Company between My Lai 1 and 4.
On the afternoon of March 15th 1968, Colonel Henderson summoned his commanders for a briefing on the forthcoming mission. According to various testimonies, Henderson told the commanders “to be aggressive and close rapidly with the enemy” (Peers, 1979). He also told them that this was their chance to eliminate the 48th Battalion. Henderson then proceeded to leave the briefing, and left his Task Force commander Lieutenant Colonel Barker to instruct the officers on the tactical aspects of the mission. Again, according to various testimonies, Colonel Lieutenant Barker gave the impression that the participants of the mission were going to meet heavy resistance once they were on the ground. The following orders given by Barker are believed to have been “To destroy anything they came across in the My Lai village” (Peers, 1979). These orders have been a great subject of discussion, as some have stated in their testimonies that they remember this order very clearly, and others have testified that Colonel Lieutenant Barker never said anything to that affect.

Following this briefing, all the Captains went back to their respective Companies and briefed their men on the mission.

Different accounts have been given as to what was said during these briefings. According to various testimonies given by privates that were present at the briefings by their captains, the general feeling was summed up by a testimony given by Private Larry G. Holmes of B Company, who said,

“We had three hamlets that we had to search and destroy. They told us they...... had dropped leaflets and stuff and everybody was supposed to be gone. Nobody was supposed to be there. If anybody is there, shoot them”
(Hersh, 1972, p. 11). This quote was backed up by Private Homer C. Hall who said “We were to leave nothing standing because we were pretty sure that this was a confirmed VC village” (Hersh, 1972, p. 11).

Later that night Captain Medina from Charlie Company summoned his platoon leaders Lieutenant La Cross, Lieutenant Calley and Lieutenant Brooks. Once again he briefed them on the tactical aspects of the mission and in his own words “tried to prepare them mentally to engage the 48th battalion” (Peers, 1979, p. 79). He instructed his platoon leaders that there would be no civilians in the village as they would have gone to the market approximately 30 minutes prior to the attack. Medina is also believed to have reminded his men that they had “lost several men to enemy mines and booby traps and that this operation was their chance to get even” (Peers, 1979, p. 170).

This briefing was given immediately after a very emotional funeral for a sergeant, who was killed the day before by a booby trap. Numerous accounts of Privates and of his platoon leaders indicate that Medina ordered his men to “Burn the houses, kill the livestock, and destroy the crops and foodstuffs” (Peers, 1979, p. 170). According to various testimonies, Medina didn’t mention how to handle the civilians, but by not doing so, left the men with the impression that they were to destroy anything they encountered in the My Lai 4 village. However Captain Medina went on to testify that he had said or done nothing that would lead his men to believe that they were to “go slaughter women and children” (Peers, 1979, p. 79).

Finally, all the men were instructed that the Son May village was a “free fire zone”. This meant that their South Vietnamese allies had given the American forces permission to fire freely on the village, as it had been
pointed out as being a Viet Cong stronghold and therefore anyone residing there, were thought to be Viet Cong sympathizers (Elliot, 2003).

The My Lai massacre, March 16th 1968

Charlie Company:

Charlie Company landed at what was named “Landing Zone 1” just west of My Lai 4 at 7:30 am on the 16th of March 1968. In the minutes leading up to this, approximately 100 artillery shells had been fired at the landing zone, sending civilians who had been working in fields nearby running for cover. The first platoons to touch ground were Lieutenant Calley’s and Lieutenant Brook’s platoons. They split up after landing and set up defensive perimeters around the landing zone, killing several civilians in the process. Also, at this point several civilians that were fleeing the My Lai 4 hamlet were killed by Shark attack helicopters flying over the village. According to standing procedure any enemies killed by the helicopters were subsequently marked with a smoke grenade. Captain Medina had received information that the landing zone was “hot” (Which meant they were being fired upon) and consequently informed his platoon leaders of this. Therefore they fired on anything moving as they were thought to be enemy combatants. At approximately 7:50 am, Charlie Company was in place in landing zone 1. Lieutenant Calley and his 1st platoon approached My Lai 4 from the west, Lieutenant Brooks and his 2nd platoon manoeuvred around the western side of My Lai 4 and approached the hamlet from the north and Lieutenant La Cross and his 3rd platoon situated themselves in landing zone 1. Captain Medina ordered Lieutenant La Cross to send a squad to the south of My Lai 4 to recover the weapons that had been marked with smoke-grenades by the Shark attack helicopters.
Lieutenant Calley and 1st platoon were the first to enter My Lai 4. In the process of doing so, they shot several fleeing civilians and bayoneted others. Grenades were thrown into huts, and civilians were called out, and whilst emerging, were shot on the spot. Several civilians were rounded up into groups of approximately ten and executed. At one point an estimated 30-50 civilians were rounded up and put under guard by some of the members of 1st platoon. One of these guards was Private Meadlo. The following account of this incident is taken from his testimony:

Private Meadlo testified that he had been ordered to guard the group of civilians, and while doing so Lieutenant Calley told him “you know what to do”. Meadlo went on to testify that when Calley returned approximately 15 minutes later he was angry and asked “How come they’re not dead?” Meadlo answered “I didn’t know we were supposed to kill them”, Calley said “I want them dead,” Meadlo then testified that “Calley backed off 10 to 15 yards and started firing into the group of people – the Viet Cong – shooting automatic. He was beside me. He burned four or five magazines. I burned off a few, about three. I helped shoot them”. Meadlo went on to testify that he was crying whilst firing into the group of people (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, p. 6). Other testimonies given by other privates backed this up.

1st platoon now proceeded to round up as many as 150 people in a drainage ditch nearby. Some had fled into it themselves to seek cover from soldiers in the village, others were herded into it by members of 1st platoon. They proceeded to fire into the ditch, Private Dennis Conti recollects in his testimony “A lot of them, the people, were trying to get up and mostly they was just screaming and pretty bad shot up…. I seen a
women tried to get up. I seen Lieutenant Calley fire. He hit the side of her head and blew it off” (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, p. 7).

As this was happening Lieutenant Brooks and his 2nd platoon had entered the hamlet from the north. They also committed atrocities similar to the ones being committed by Calley and his men. Livestock were shot and buildings and crops were burnt as 2nd platoon swept through My Lai 4. Several civilians were rounded up and shot, grenades were thrown into huts with the inhabitants still in them, and on more than one occasion, rapes occurred. In one specific incident it was reported that a Private had raped a woman, and then proceeded to firing his weapon into her vagina. About 30 minutes after entering the hamlet, 2nd platoon were ordered to move out to the North of the hamlet by Captain Medina in order to recover some weapons that had been marked with smoke grenades by the attack helicopters. After doing this, 2nd platoon moved further north and entered a village called Binh Tay rounding up 10-20 civilians, putting them in a circle, and firing several grenades into the middle. Those who did not die instantly were finished off by rifle fire. Again, rapes occurred. At approximately 9:15 am Captain Medina ordered Lieutenant Brooks and 2nd platoon to leave Binh Tay and to “stop the killing” (Peers, 1979). 2nd platoon proceeded to round up the remaining civilians in Binh Tay (approximately 50) and moving them in a south Western direction out of the village. Lieutenant Brooks and some of his men now proceeded to re-enter My Lai 4 from the North east.

After recovering the weapons south of My Lai 4, and in the process killing approximately 17 people, La Cross and his 3rd platoon regrouped at landing zone 1. They then proceeded to enter My Lai 4 from the west,
conducting what was to be a “mopping-up” mission. In the process of doing so, they killed several wounded civilians. They burnt all the remaining crops, foodstuffs and huts and then rounded up as many as 12 women and children and executed them on the spot. They now proceeded to join up with Lieutenant Calley’s 1st Platoon.

At this time Hugh Thomson, a helicopter pilot, was flying over My Lai 4 on a reconnaissance mission. Thomson and his crew started noticing a lot of dead bodies on the ground. In an account given by Thomson later he recollects “We saw a lady that was wounded. We got on the radio and called for some help and marked her with smoke. A few minutes later up walks a Captain, steps up to her, nudges her with his foot, steps back and blows her away” (Transcript of accounts given by Thompson at a conference on My Lai held at Tulane University, Dec. 1994). By this point Thomson and his crew knew that something had gone badly wrong. They proceeded to fly over the My Lai 4 hamlet and noticed a lot of dead and wounded people in a ditch. He landed the helicopter and asked the Sergeant he met on the ground “if he could help them out”; the response was that “he would help them out of their misery”. Thomson went back into the helicopter, and while taking off, heard his gunner say “My god, they’re firing into the ditch” (Transcript of accounts given by Thompson at a conference on My Lai held at Tulane University, Dec. 1994). A while after, when flying over the north eastern part of My Lai 4, Thomson saw several civilians being chased towards a bunker by American soldiers. Thomson this time landed his helicopter between the civilians (women, children and old men) and the soldiers. Thomson now ordered his men to turn their guns on the American soldiers and fire upon them if they shot
any civilians. The following discussion is between Thomson, and who he later identified as being Lieutenant Calley:

Thomson approached the lieutenant on the ground and shouted “Hey, there are some civilians over here in this bunker. Can you get them out?” The reply was “Well, we’re gonna get them out with a hand grenade” (Transcript of accounts given by Thompson at a conference on My Lai held at Tulane University, Dec. 1994). Thomson now proceeded to walk to the bunker and motioned for the civilians to come out. He took them to the helicopter, and called in assistance. Another attack helicopter landed, and helped transport the civilians out of the area.

Thompson radioed in a complaint following this incident, and as a consequence of this, Major Calhoun, who was the operation officer, radioed to Captain Medina and Captain Michels and said “Make sure we are not shooting anyone that is not necessary. Let’s not be killing civilians out there” (Hersh, 1972, p. 114).

Captain Medina himself now proceeded to enter My Lai 4 with his command group. They entered My Lai 4 from the North and walked through it in a southern direction. At one point he met up with Lieutenant La Cross and had a discussion as to how big the body count was. While doing so, it is believed that some of the members of the command group walked off for themselves and killed several wounded civilians. Medina situated himself in the southern part of the Hamlet and shortly after doing so, received a report that Private Carter from 1st platoon was shot in the foot. Some testimonies said that it was an accident but several others testified that he had shot himself in the foot intentionally because he wanted to get away from the atrocities. At 11:00 a.m. Medina ordered Charlie Company to sit down and have lunch.
After doing so the whole company left the hamlet, with victims everywhere. Some of the victims where still alive under the bodies of the people who had been shot in the ditch, and on numerous of the victims, members of C Company had carved “C Company” with their knifes on the bodies. Later in the day the company proceeded to walk to the coast and jump into the water “as if nothing had happened”.

Later on in a documentary on the My Lai massacre some of the participants of the My Lai massacre spoke about what they had done openly. Private Vernando Simpson recollects:

“That day at My Lai I was personally responsible for killing between 20 to 25 people. From shooting them, to cutting their throat, to scalping them, to cutting of their hands, and cutting out their tongs. I did it. I just went, and lot of people did it and I just followed suit. I just lost all sense of direction, of purpose. I just started killing any kind of way I could kill. I didn't know I had it in me. And once you start it is very easy to keep on” (4 timer I My Lai, DR Documentary, 15th of Nov. 1989).
Bravo Company:

B company, lead by Captain Michles, landed in landing zone 2 east of My Lai 1 at about 8:27. B Company’s mission was to intercept any Viet Cong who would be fleeing from My Lai 4 in an eastern direction and to search and destroy the enemy stronghold at My Lai 1. As the platoons moved in from the landing zone they heard the shooting of rifles and believed they were hearing enemy fire. It is believed now, that the gunshots Bravo Company heard were Charlie Company less then a mile to the west at My Lai 4. 2nd platoon began to move into My Lai 1. With First Lieutenant Roy B. Cochran in the lead the platoon encountered a land mine not far from My Lai 1. The mine killed Cochran and injured four more. After the dead and injured were evacuated 2nd platoon continued their advance towards My Lai 1. At approximately 9:30 a second land mine went off this time injuring 3 men. Although there had been no enemy fire 2nd platoon had suffered heavy casualties and was ordered to fall back from the area by Captain Michles.

Both 3rd platoon and 1st platoon knew what had happened to their men in 2nd platoon, at this point their missions changed. Their mission now was to only intercept any escaping Viet Cong from My Lai 4. The 3rd Platoon moved north to My Lai 6, screening the area and detaining it’s inhabitants. They now proceeded to situate themselves in a nearby bivouac are. This left 1st platoon on the field.

The 1st Platoon began to head south towards My Khe 4. When 1st Platoon entered the area of 20 huts at approximately 9:35, the 1st squad began to fire upon them with their rifles. The firing into the huts lasted about four-five minutes and anyone, mostly women and children, who fled the area, were shot down. The 1st squad then moved into My Khe 4, were they threw demolition charges of about one-two pounds of TNT into
bunkers and shelters without making an effort to see if any civilians were inside. As the women and children ran out of their shelters they were shot and killed. The shelters were subsequently burned.

1st Platoon then proceeded to the north, past My Lai 1 to My Lai 2 where they met up with the rest of Bravo Company.

Alpha Company which was situated to the north has not been included here due to the fact that they never took part in any atrocities.

**The aftermath**

According to General Peers official rapport the body count was calculated to be 347, although Vietnamese sources claim that in fact 519 killed would be more accurate.

Also, General Peers found no proof of enemy fire that day and in total only four weapons were recovered. Charlie Company suffered only one casualty, the Private who either accidentally or purposely shot himself in the foot. Bravo Company on the other hand lost Lieutenant Roy B. Cochran to a landmine and seven men were injured.

The following day it was reported in the American press that the American army had achieved a great victory, eliminating the 48th battalion and killing 128 enemy combatants in the process. These numbers were provided by the military (these were the numbers that had been reported back to the command center during the mission).

After the massacre was brought to the public’s attention and subsequently investigated by Lieutenant General Peers Panel, the case was now turned over to the army’s Criminal Investigation Division. Following their
investigation 26 participants of the My Lai massacre were prosecuted in a court of law. Many of the men who had been interviewed in the investigation had in the meantime left the armed forces and could therefore no longer be prosecuted in a court martial. Only Lieutenant Calley was convicted of the charges and was sentenced to life in prison. However two days later, due to immense pressure from the public, who had become sympathetic to Calley during his trial, President Nixon made a controversial decision and released Calley from prison, and reduced the sentence to three years house arrest.

The following quotes of Lieutenant Calley are taken from his own book “Body count” which was published in 1971:

When Calley was flown back from Vietnam to face the court:

“I couldn't understand it. I kept thinking, though. I thought, could it be I did something wrong? I knew that war's wrong. Killing's wrong: I realized that. I had gone to a war, though. I had killed, but I knew - so did a million others. I sat here, and I couldn't find the key. I pictured the people of My Lai: the bodies, and they didn't bother me. I had found, I had closed with, I had destroyed the VC: the mission that day. I thought, it couldn't be wrong or I'd have remorse about it.” (Bourke, 1999, p. 171).

W. Calley had no doubt that even babies could be "the enemy":

"The old men, the women, the children - the babies - were all VC or would be VC in about three years", he continued, "And inside of VC women, I guess there were a thousand little VC now.” (Bourke, 1999, p. 175).
Having considered the actual event of the My Lai massacre one must question the information given to us as whether or not our sources are reliable. Just as in any other historic account it is important to be critical towards the given information. We will in the following chapter consider the situations our sources have derived from. This means the actual historical data and individual quotes which we used to understand the circumstances in and around the My Lai massacre will be investigated. (Ricoeur, 1965).

**Source criticism and the reliability of eyewitness’s accounts.**

There are many different ways of understanding what a source is. It can be anything, as long as it is put in perspective to its origin and context; it is valuable and relevant in accordance to the process of reconstructing history. So something as abstract as a story or a song in comparison to a physical item such as a painting or a document can have an equal amount of relevance towards the given study.

There are no limitations to what can be considered a useful source when investigating history. It is only a matter of putting data in relation to other data when attempting to draw a certain conclusion to, for example, what happened in a certain event. (Olden-Jørgensen, 1994)

Most of what we know today about what went on at the My Lai massacre is told by soldiers serving either Bravo or Charlie Company, personal testimony. However there are still primary sources in the form of pictures taken by assigned army photographers who were present at the time with Charlie Company.
The testimonies given by the soldiers were mostly given under oath in a court of law or before the Peers Panel, but just because a statement is stated under oath does not necessarily make it more true than one said off the stand. The servicemen who were called to witness could for many reasons leave out parts or completely change what they actually perceived as the truth. This is quite common when investigating first hand oral sources and can be perceived as a tendency. (Langholm, 1967). The truth or reliability of oral sources can be distorted for reasons of such as engagement, moral standards or egoistical reasons.

Once the soldiers have testified, one should consider what can roughly be translated as “the cause of the person(s)” and “the cause of the situation”. (Ankersborg, 2007) The memory of a situation is created by the “cause of the person”, and therefore a historical testimony may be coloured by “the cause of the person” or in this case the soldier. On the other hand “the cause of the situation” will always be the actual and objective truth about the situation under which the given source is produced (Ankersborg, 2007).

When relying on oral and first hand sources one is able to divide them into groups to define their individual position in the situation where a source is created. They can for instance be an “active participant” or an “observer” in the given situation. (Pasternak and Skyum-Nielsen, 1973, p. 37). To maintain reliability the different testimonies should be as consistent as possible, but they will still inevitably differ a bit depending on what position they were in at the given situation. The more consistent the testimonies, the more reliable the sources are.

**Objectivity and Subjectivity in historical criticism**
We all expect a certain kind of objectivity when studying history. We want and expect the facts. History should be objective insofar that it should not be influenced by personal feeling, interpretation, or prejudice. We want an unbiased account. However this can be a difficult, and some say, an impossible task. As Paul Ricoeur writes in his book “History and Truth”, historians are making their own “self-discovery” and “recovery” of history (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 32). By looking at this statement it can be concluded that it is not possible for a historian to produce a historical account without the facts first going through a series of filters.

Professor E. H. Carr, a historian, points out the three most important filters which historical facts are going through before it reaches the reader.

The first filter is that the facts are refracted through the mind of the recorder. The historian must have objectivity as their point of departure rather then subjectivity (Ricoeur, 1965). The historian will first make observations in order to reconstruct an event, a series of events, a situation, or an institution on the basis of sources. We must then go from the objectivity of history to the subjectivity of the historian (Ricoeur, 1965).

The historian begins to interrogate the objective documents in order to form a hypothesis. The historian will make a selection, a historical choice in order to connect to only the important events in his readings. This is where the problem lies in regards to objectivity. As soon as we are born, we are already situated in a society (cultural group, language etc.) and an environment that leads us all through our lives and has a huge influence.
on our actions, point of views and individual interpretations. Historians, by making their selection, may be influenced by their personal and class prejudice, their morals, political or religious attitudes. “The past can not change, but history books often do.” (Atkinson, 1978, p. 73).

The historian must leave the sources behind and write his interpretation of that which he has read. A good historian should know the difference between good subjectivity and bad subjectivity (Ricoeur, 1965). The historian should try to explain that which he is studying by composing and reconstruct it so it can be historically understood, rather than attempting to restore what happened in the past. Going in one direction could easily become history without meaning or significance to what happened, whereas going in an opposite direction the historian might resolve to propaganda or historical fiction.

The second filter is whom the historian is writing about. “History cannot be written unless the historian can achieve some kind of contact with the mind of those about whom he is writing” (Carr, 1975, p. 24). This increases the chances of getting emotionally involved in the situation the historian is studying, as well as him becoming subjective in his work. The historian must be interested in the values of those he is studying. This does not mean that he should have the same beliefs as those he is studying but instead be able to enter them hypothetically. The historian studies people of the past while keeping his own notion of human knowledge in mind, since people of the past and the historian share the same humanity (Ricoeur, 1965). The historian must be able to understand, not judge.
The third filter is time. The difficulty of objectivity is that as a historian you are never able to be in the presence of that which you are studying, you are only able to study its traces. There is a “historical distance”.

In *What is History?* E.H. Carr states: “*We can view the past, and achieve our understanding of the past, only through the eyes of the present*” (Carr, 1975, p. 24).

It should be mentioned, that a historian has to be most conscious of his own situation in order to be more capable of appreciating the essential nature of differences between his own society and the others from different time periods or countries. Historians should always be aware of the change in perspectives through time, because the same facts may sound different throughout the years. Also there are no doubts that a historian of the seventeenth century would write history in a different perspective than a historian from the twentieth.

In the following paragraphs we will look upon the specific sources we have used in order for us to give an account for what actually happened at the My Lai massacre and its aftermath. We have used several statements and quotes by eyewitnesses who went through court hearings as a result of what happened at the My Lai massacre.

In the Peers Panel over a hundred people were interviewed and in regards to certain incidents some testimonies were more consistent than others. The fact that several people have different accounts of what had been said on March 15th at the briefings can be seen as influenced by the “cause of the person”. What had actually been said is one thing to consider in itself, but it all comes down to how the individual interpreted the given orders. Captain Medina briefed his men to “burn the houses, kill the livestock,
and destroy the crops and foodstuffs” (Peers, 1979, p. 170), and several of the soldiers present were under the impression that they were to go and destroy anything they encountered, but Captain Medina himself testified that he had said nothing to that effect (Peers, 1979). After hearing this we encounter contradictory testimonies and therefore the reliability of the sources has to be questioned. Later on Captain Medina admitted to have not been sincerely truthful before the Peers Panel. (Peers, 1979)

The testimony from Private Meadlo (see history chapter page 22) can be taken as more reliable, mostly because several others took the stand and backed up his story, and also because it does not seem as though he had deliberately changed his story as, for example, Captain Medina apparently had. Meadlo had, under oath, admitted to killing civilians and had absolutely nothing to achieve from telling this and therefore it does not seem as if there was any hidden agenda behind his testimony.

The fact that there are different accounts of what happened to Private Carter (see history chapter page 25), the private who was injured, can be ascribed to the situation they were in. Some soldiers were affected by the atrocities and this may very well have influenced the memories of the soldiers near the situation. Private Carter was not called to testify.

Hugh Thompson could be categorized as an “observer” until he interfered with the atrocities and thus making him an “active participant”. The same can be said about Lieutenant Calley who was a very “active participant” according to several testimonies, including Private Meadlo and Hugh Thompson. Lieutenant Calley stated under oath that he was following orders from his immediate superior, Captain Medina. As mentioned before, Captain Medina denied to have ordered his men to kill civilians.
Seymour Hersh broke the story to the public just over a year after the incident; he did this with the help of the materials gathered during Vietnam by Private Ridenhour. This would provide some reliability to the material presented by Hersh, since they were gathered immediately after the events and were still in the environment of the war. It is also significant to mention that General Peers began his inquiry shortly after the events of My Lai had been made public. Two years had gone by until the first person was questioned before the Peers Panel, and due of the lack of time which had passed by, the experience of the atrocities were to the interrogated soldiers still fresh in their minds.

An important factor which should be taken into consideration, when assessing written sources for a history chapter, is the author behind the written sources. The author of our main source for the history chapter, “The My Lai Inquiry” is Lieutenant General Peers. Since our resources are limited in that we have little reliable Vietnamese sources, it is to our benefit that it is believed that Lieutenant General Peers was a good choice for investigating the My Lai massacre because of his reputation of being as objective as possible.

While using the book “The My Lai Inquiry” as our reference for describing the My Lai massacre, it is relevant to take a closer look at what kind of person Lieutenant General Peers actually was, in order to find out what filters the historical facts he wrote went through.

Lieutenant General Peers was born in the small town of Stuart, Iowa in 1914. He attended the University of California, Los Angeles where he
was a member of Sigma Pi Fraternity. In year 1938, after graduation, Lieutenant General Peers joined the military.

In November 1969, Lieutenant General Peers was given a task of investigating the My Lai incident and by this time he was already a three-star general.

Professor Douglas O. Linder from the UMKC (University of Missouri-Kansas City) states in his “Famous Trials” that there are four main reasons why particularly Lieutenant General Peers was to investigate The My Lai massacre:

“First, he was stationed at the time in the Pentagon as chief of the Army's reserve forces and National Guard, and therefore had no direct command. Second, he was not a West Point graduate and thus could not be accused of being influenced by the Academy's fraternity of officers. Third, he had served in Viet Nam as a commanding general. Fourth, he generally had a reputation for fairness and objectivity.”

Once having considered E.H. Carr’s theory of what filters a historian encounters while investigating historical events, we can apply them to Lieutenant General Peers’ inquiry.

As an investigator Lieutenant General Peers was researching into the accounts of the My Lai massacre in the same way as a historian would. The same filters which can be applied to a historian can also be applied to Lieutenant General Peers in this situation. The first and most important filter is the subjectivity of the historian. Lieutenant General Peers as an American and as a well educated military official has certain ideas and morals which would effect how he interpreted information. It is however difficult to be sure of what possible motivations and convictions Peers
had which influenced his investigation since we will never be able to get into the mind of Lieutenant General Peers. This would be required in order to confirm his objectivity. The second filter is the relationship between the historian and of those being investigated. Lieutenant General Peers had the advantage of being from the same background as the soldiers he was investigating. This would give him a better understanding of the values at which the soldiers held. By understanding the soldiers' values it makes it easier for him to understand them without judging, making him as objective as possible. The third filter is about the element of time. Lieutenant General Peers began his inquiry of My Lai less then two years after the incident occurred. This worked to his advantage because he was able to get real live testimonies of those involved which left little room for any “historical distance”.

After applying E.H. Carr’s theories to Lieutenant General Peers we find that they have been effective in proving Peer’s My Lai Inquiry to be a reliable and objective source.
Obedience to Authority

Many people have, throughout their life, been taught to obey a range of authority figures. We learn how to function and behave among others in institutional systems where we are submitted to authority. Our whole life we have been taught to obey and respect authorities and it is expected of us to do so. However, what role does our obedience to authority play in extreme situations of conflict? To what extent does our obedience go when asked to commit acts that deviate from basic human morals? Is it possible that obedience to authority is so ingrained in human behavior that average people are not only capable but willing to commit atrocious acts of violence as long as they are ordered to do so by an authority figure?

Stanley Milgram’s Experiment

In 1974 social psychologist Stanley Milgram designed a set of experiments to test just how far the average person is willing to go when ordered to harm another person by an authority figure. The accounts of Milgram’s experiments in this chapter are taken from “Obedience to Authority” by Milgram published in 1974.

The experiment consisted of three people – a teacher/participant, a learner/victim and an experimenter/authority figure. They are told by the experimenter that they are participating in a study on the affects of punishment on learning. The learner is led into a room and strapped to a chair with an electrode attached to his wrist. The teacher is sat in front of a shock generator with a voltage range of 45 to 450 volts. The teacher is then instructed to read a list of word pairs aloud to the learner whose ability to remember the second word of each pair is tested when he hears
the first words again. When the learner makes an error the teacher is instructed by the experimenter to administer a shock to the learner, increasing the voltage with each wrong answer. Besides the buttons indicating the level of volts, words were written to let the teacher know how damaging the shocks were, ranging from slight shock, moderate shock, strong shock, very strong shock, intense shock, extreme intensity shock, danger: severe shock and finally XXX. Despite these indications, the experimenter continues to order the teacher to administer a shock.

What the teacher does not know is that the learner is in fact an actor who receives no shock at all. The true subject of the experiment is the teacher. The purpose of the experiment is to test just how far the participant is willing to go when ordered by the experimenter to inflict increasingly painful shocks to a victim.

What Milgram found was unexpected – 60% of the participants were obedient to the experimenter, administering the strongest shock possible despite painful cries from the learners. This was in contrast to what Milgram had expected to find. His initial prediction was that most people would be unwilling to minister a painful shock to another human being.

Milgram conducted 18 variations on his experiment, from which we have chosen six variations that we find relevant to the actions of the men at the My Lai massacre: Voice-Feedback, Proximity, Touch-Proximity, Closeness to Authority, Institutional Context and Subject Free to Choose Shock Level.

The first three experiments mentioned above are relevant because they discuss the relation between the participant and the victim. These kinds of relations were also seen between the soldiers and their victims in the My Lai massacre. Using the chosen variations of Milgram’s experiment, we
can use these theories to attempt to analyze the minds and the actions of the soldiers involved in the massacre.

When choosing the Closeness to Authority experiment we look at the importance of the actual presence of the authority figure during the massacre. This is relevant in order to understand the effect authority had when being either present or absent during certain events which occurred in the massacre.

The Institutional Context experiment is relevant in finding out if the environment has any effect on a person’s or in this case a soldier’s actions and ability to harm others.

Finally, in the Subject Free to Choose Shock Level experiment, we can investigate whether or not the actions taken place in the massacre are manifestations of natural aggression once the choice of causing harm is completely left up to the participants or the soldiers.
Voice-Feedback, Proximity and Touch-Proximity

Voice-Feedback is a variation of Milgram’s experiment where the victim is shocked in an adjacent room, and therefore only his voice can be heard by the participant; the victim cannot be seen. This experiment showed that only 37.5% of the participants of the experiment defied the authority figure when hearing the suffering utterances from the victims.

Another variation of the experiment, Proximity, was performed similarly to the Voice-Feedback, but here the victim was placed in the same room as the participant and the participant was therefore exposed to both visual and audible reactions from the victim. This caused an increased number of defiances; in fact 60% of these participants did not carry out the experiment to the fullest, as required by the experimenter.

The final variation is Touch-Proximity, again similar to the previous two, however in this experiment; the victim’s hand had to rest on a shock plate in order for him/her to recieve the shock. The victim was instructed to deny further increasement of the shocks at 150-volt, and the experiment was to see how far the participant would go to force the victim to recieve shock. The results from this last experiment increased again with 70% of the participants denying going through with shocking their victims.

It is of great relevance to compare the incidents in the My Lai massacre to these experiments and their results. It is important for the understanding of this project to look at what effect the visual presence of the victim has on the participant, or soldier. The experiment with the greatest effect (meaning the one with the largest amount of participants applying the highest level of shock) was the Voice-Feedback. Stanley Milgram
explains these results by giving an account for the empathic cues that the participant experiences during an incident in which he or she exposes others to pain or suffering. Milgram explains that these cues can cause the participant, or the soldier, to more vividly experience the suffering he or she is causing, and therefore may feel empathic responses and not carry on. Another explanation Milgram gives is that when obeying authority, a person can be so focused on pleasing the authority figure that he or she go into denial about exposing others to pain. A participant from the experiment said that he was too focused on doing everything right that he completely forgot about the pain he was causing to another human being.

In the Voice-Feedback experiment where the victim is in another room, Milgram set out to analyze the effect of the participant being close to the authority figure as opposed to the victim. Milgram points out that when the participant is closer to the authority figure and further away from the victim, a group-formation process happens and the participant forms a relation to the authority figure. In this relation, the victim is excluded, and this not only makes the victim weaker, but it also makes him or her seem weaker to the subject. This may be more or less obvious, but imagine the power of these relations between a private and his commanders when they are created during a war. When a soldier is already psychologically weakened by the atmosphere around him, this relation might very well feel like an escape route or a bond to make him feel safe, or even stronger.

The development shown in these three experiments, with the victim coming closer and closer to the participant gives an account for the theory that it is harder to disobey orders from a superior when the participants
and the superior are alone, than it is when the victim is present. This might contradict what really happened during the My Lai massacre, seeing as the atrocities were committed by soldiers in one-on-one situations with Vietnamese civilians. Still, the orders were given and the soldiers followed them to a great extent, even without questioning the killing of civilians. Although, a great amount of other reasons played a part in a soldier’s mind during a time like the My Lai Massacre, Milgram’s experiments show how easy it is to make an ordinary man expose others to pain.

Along with the theories developed by Stanley Milgram and the many other influences that a soldier is exposed to during a war, it is easier to understand how he is able to shut down to please and obey, and forgets what is really occuring. What can be extracted from these conclusions is that it is difficult to disobey, especially under pressure from an authority figure.
Closeness to Authority

Concerning the Closeness to Authority experiment, Milgram is interested in looking at the proximity between the participant and the experimenter as opposed to the participant’s proximity to the victim. The experiment is identical to what we saw in the previous experiments as far as the set of rules the experimenter had provided for the participant. However, now the experimenter was instead physically absent during the experiment and gave further instructions over a telephone from another room. Milgram wishes to study if there are any differences in the behavior of the participant towards the victim in the experimenters’ absence.

This experiment revealed a change in the participant’s behavior as several participants showed manifestations of sympathy to the victim. Although seemingly loyal to the experiment during telephone conversations with the experimenter they applied lower levels of shock to the victim then actually required, thereby displaying disobedience to the experimenter. The results of this experiment therefore show a decrease in the level of obedience when the experimenter was physically removed from the room.

In a specific incident during the My Lai massacre, Lieutenant Calley tells a group of soldiers guarding a group of huddled Vietnamese: “you know what to do?” (Kelman and Hamilton, 1989, pg. 6). One soldier, Private Meadlo, replies “yes” taking for granted that they were to watch over the gathered prisoners. Several minutes later Lieutenant Calley returns and says “How come they aren’t dead?” (Kelman and Hamilton, 1989, p. 6). The soldiers then turn to kill them although some seemed apparently uncomfortable and unwilling to do so. The situation in which the soldiers are left alone with prisoners display a similar behavior as witnessed with
the subject in the above mentioned experiment. After leaving the soldiers alone with the orders to “take care of them” they show subtle sympathy towards the gathered prisoners in “sparing” their lives rather than shooting them right away. This of course can be interpreted in the individual soldiers’ sense of moral ethics towards his fellow man, but under the circumstances of this specific, somewhat chaotic and brutal event one could just as much assume they are meant to kill the prisoners instead of simply guarding them.

Comparing this situation with the experiment we encounter a slight problem when taking the concept of consequence into consideration. For the participant in the experiment there was no immediate consequence in not being obedient to the experimenter and raising the shock level when required. However, for the soldiers in the mentioned situation, they faced an authority figure which during the massacre was known to be life threatening towards the soldiers if they did not do what was ordered. The results of the experiment and the mentioned example differ as we look closer at a situational perspective; nonetheless we see similarities of the two when looking at the result of the given order in the absence of authority.

Institutional Context
The previous experiments that were conducted by Milgram all took place at Yale University, a world-renowned Ivy League school. Many of the participants commented that the reputation of the school gave them confidence in the legitimacy of the experiments, and the competency of the personnel conducting them. Several participants indicated that had it
not been for the impressive location of the experiments, they would not have been willing to shock the learner.

Milgram realized that whether or not a person was willing to obey commands may depend on the credibility of the institution that stood behind those commands. “One must always question the relationship of obedience to a person’s sense of the context in which he is operating.” (Milgram, 1974, pg. 68). In order to test the effect the kind of institution had on subject’s willingness to comply with orders, Milgram designed a new experiment, this time under the disguise of a small private business doing research for industry. Milgram moved his experiment to a non-descript office building in nearby Bridgeport, a small industrial city in Connecticut. The participants received $4.50 for participating and the study used the same age and occupational distribution as was used for the Yale study. The personnel in both studies were the same.

The participant’s responses to the experiment conducted in Bridgeport were slightly different from the experiments conducted at Yale. Some participants showed some skepticism concerning the integrity of the Bridgeport experimenter, and commented on their lack of knowledge about the firm’s credibility. However, the level of obedience was only somewhat less in the Bridgeport experiments than it was in the Yale study. Participants appeared equally as tense as they had at Yale, and their estimation of how much pain the victim was in was only slightly higher at Bridgeport. Despite their lack of confidence in the institution, a large number of Bridgeport participants were still obedient - 48% administered the maximum shock as compared to 65% at Yale.
Though there was a difference in how many people were willing to fully obey the experimenter’s orders, almost half the participants still administered the maximum shock. This shows that although the kind of institution does play a role in a person’s willingness to obey, it is the category of institution, rather than its quality, that plays the biggest role in obedient behavior. Some people may find it easier to disobey in an institutional context of lesser credibility, however the results of the Bridgeport experiment show that for most, all that is needed is some sort of institutional structure.

The soldiers involved in My Lai were all part of an institution larger and more powerful than any of those used in the Milgram experiments, that is, the military. Soldiers in Vietnam faced life and death situations on almost a daily basis and had been conditioned through training, to follow the group and to obey orders in order to stay alive. The consequences of disobedience in the mind of a soldier in combat were far greater than that of a participant in one of Milgrams experiments. Not only does the military have the authority to actually punish disobedient soldiers, furthermore, soldiers in combat are left with little choice but to obey their superior officers and trust that they have the appropriate experience and judgement to keep the soldier alive. Even so, almost half of the participants in the Bridgeport experiment were still willing to obey an institution that they had never even heard of. The fact that 48% of Milgram’s participants were willing to obey an unknown firm, provides a better understanding of why so many soldiers were willing and ready to obey an extremely powerful institution - the same institution they had come to identify with and rely on to keep them alive.
Subject Free to Choose Shock Level

This experiment differs from the rest of Milgram’s experiments because the participants were free to choose the shock level applied to the victim, without having any authority commanding the participant to raise or lower the level. The victim is placed in another room, so that the subject is not able to see but only hear the victim. What Milgram would like to discover through this experiment is whether the actions of the participants changes when authority is not present; are the commandments superfulous or would the participants still raise the level on his own?

The results show that the “majority of subjects delivered the very lowest shocks to the victim when the choice was left up to them” (Milgram, 1974, p. 72). This concludes the fact that the participants show less of a tendency towards natural aggression. According to Milgram this rules out the fact that people are aggressive by nature and want to harm other people when given the opportunity. If people have a destructive urge to harm others when in a situation where it is acceptable, then why such low levels of shock? Comparing the results of this particular experiment to Milgrams Remote-Victim and Voice-Feedback experiments, it clearly shows how big an influence authority play on the actions of the participant. People are willing to obey the present authority even though they are aware of the fact that they are harming other people to such an extent that they can cause injury.

Finally, we will compare Milgram’s experiment, Subject Free to Choose Shock Level, to the American soldiers in the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. Were people free of choice to kill the Vietnamese or were they obeying orders from authorities? There is an incident mentioned earlier in
the chapter where American soldiers are guarding a group of Vietnamese prisoners. When their Lieutenant Calley returns he asks “How come they aren’t dead?” (Kelman and Hamilton, 1989, pg. 6) and starts shooting the prisoners, ordering the soldiers to follow. In this case the soldiers didn’t think about harming the prisoners even though the situation they are in might have allowed them to do so. This incident supports Milgram’s theory that people do not have a destructive urge to harm others. When authority is present ordering what to do, it becomes almost impossible not to obey his commands. We can compare the shocking of the victims to the soldiers in war. Perhaps, they do not necessarily harm people because they have an inward destructive urge but because they have been “integrated in a social structure” (Milgram, 1974, pg. 166) and they are not able to get out.

**Criticism and later development**

Having discussed Milgram’s studies and compared them to the My Lai massacre we find several similarities which can be considered as answers as to whether or not his experiments can be applied to real life. Nevertheless, we must then consider the reliability of these comparisons. Different psychological experiments have been conducted trough time, and along with this, other theorists and psychologists have raised the question: Can experiments conducted artificially actually be applied to real life situations? Some critics have claimed that the experiments were not ecologically valid and could not be applied to the general population because of the artificial setting in which it was conducted.

Psychologist Keith E. Stanovich emphasized that many experiments are designed to develop and test theory, and not to be applied to specific environmental situations. (Stanovich, 2003) Although Stanovich does not
discuss Milgram’s experiment specifically, what he wrote about experiments in general is still relevant and can be applied to all psychological experiments either conducted in a laboratory or carried out in an artificial setting. Milgram’s experiment has helped to develop theories about man’s tendency to obey an authority in a laboratory.

Further criticisms of Milgram’s study are the moral and ethical issues concerning the way in which he deceived participants. By tricking them into believing that they were the ones performing the experiment, when in fact, they were being experimented on; the contrast of deception and truth then comes into question. However, the deception of participants was not only crucial to Milgram’s studies; it is also common practice in psychological experiments.

One notable criticism of Milgram’s study is that participants took for granted the morality of the experiment (Nissani 1990). Given that the experiments were conducted by psychiatrists at Yale University, some have questioned whether participants truly believed that the learner was being harmed. The legitimacy of the experiments may have led some participants to realize that no one was getting hurt. One participants even remarked in a post-experiment interview that: “I knew you wouldn’t let anything happen (to the learner)” (Milgram, 1974, p. 83). If participants knew deep down that the experimenters would not allow any harm to come to the learner the results become questionable.

Further developments of the Milgram experiment have been hard to conduct, because the participants of the new study might have previous knowledge of the experiment. Therefore, the crucial factor of the participants not knowing that the experiment was in fact about obedience
to authority would be ruined. Therefore, any experiment like Milgram’s which has been conducted later than his own, is easily criticized.

Milgram’s experiment is still very relevant today, though. It is still discussed throughout many parts of the world because of the revolutionary and provocative discoveries he made. The factor of obedience has not only been used in his experiment, and in further developments of the experiment, but it has also been used to analyze and criticize the notion of how we rely on different sources today. Not in particular authority figures as real people, but for example also factual literature.

Nissani & Hoefler conducted a different experiment where they wanted to do a research on the way in which people rely on orders given by manuals. The experiment consisted of a group of participants who were to first read about a volume formula for spheres which was purposely false and afterwards asked to determine the volume, by both using the false formula and by filling the actual sphere with water and measuring the result.

The results of the experiment were that none of the participants actually rejected the false formula or use of it when filling up the actual sphere (Nissani & Hoefler, 1990). From this it can be concluded that the theory Milgram developed is not only relevant in the settings under which he conducted them but also in other situations.

**Discussion**

Western society is constructed by a hierarchical structure which makes it natural for us to obey a person in a higher position of authority than ourselves. As we have seen in Milgram’s experiments this tendency is prevalent in most people, even when it involves the harm of others.
Before Milgram conducted his study, it was generally considered that anyone capable of committing atrocities such as the My Lai massacre must be naturally sadistic; merely a small percentage of society who are simply ‘evil’. What Milgram showed us was that even the average person may be capable of such acts when put under pressure by someone in a position of power. Participants in the experiments were more inclined to follow orders they knew to be depraved from an authority figure, rather than disobey. The psychological stress of disobedience seems to be harder for a person to face than the stress of harming another living being. The natural tendency towards obedience is strengthened by the fact that an experimenter conducting a study does not have the power to punish participants who disobey their orders. Conversely in a military context, disobeying direct orders can lead to serious consequences for a soldier. The soldiers at My Lai were in an environment conducive to obeying orders. They have been trained to follow the orders of their commanders; respect for authority is weighed heavily upon. Not to mention the fact that they are fighting a war, constantly facing life or death situations where their only support system is the military and their commanding officers. It is hard for them to disobey because they have been integrated into the social structure of the military and when in the middle of a war they would have nowhere to turn if they chose to disobey the orders of their commanders.

The presence of authority is an important factor when discussing the willingness of the soldiers to obey orders at My Lai. As we have seen in the example used earlier in the chapter when the authority was not physically present soldiers were less inclined to murder the innocent civilians. However, once the Lieutenant was once again present, the soldiers obeyed the orders to cause bodily harm. Furthermore, the
commanding officers at My Lai were themselves participating in the massacre. The authority figures were not merely ordering the killing of civilians but were actively participating, strengthening the motivation of the soldier to obey by setting an example.

**Conclusion**

Human inclination to obedience to authority can override even the most basic morals. Under relatively safe circumstances, participants in Milgram’s experiments were ready to hurt another individual when ordered to do so. Thus, authority plays a big role in explaining why soldiers were willing to perform such atrocities as those committed during the My Lai massacre.
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Group Conformity

“The importance of group solidarity for effective military performance has been a staple of military doctrine for 2500 years.” (Gal and Mangelsdorff, 1991, p. 465). The soldiers who participated in the My Lai Massacre were trained to work within a unit. The majority of soldiers participating in the Son My mission committed atrocities which went against their social norms. Even though many of the soldiers knew that the atrocities they were committing were wrong, they still chose to participate. Why is it, that soldiers are able to commit such crimes when it goes against their social norms? One possibility is that an individual may be influenced by his group to act in a way which goes against his social norms in order to imitate the social norms of his group, this would be conformity. In this chapter we will give an account of two different conformity experiments; one by the social psychologists Solomon Asch, and the other, by Muzafer Sherif. We will then apply the results of these experiments to the soldiers who participated in the My Lai Massacre.

Asch’s Experiment
Solomon E. Asch (1907-1996), in the 1950’s, performed experiments on social influence in groups. Today his experiments are viewed as “classics and are the most widely replicated studies of all time.” (Lavine, 1999, p. 35). The term conformity is used when describing Asch’s experiments. “Conformity consists of stating an attitude or belief or engaging in a behaviour that is consistent with that of other members of a group or with other people in one’s social environment” (Kazdin, 2000, p. 263). The following review of Asch’s Experiment is based on his own book, “Social Psychology” (1952).
The Experimental Procedure

A group of seven to nine college students were gathered into a classroom. They were shown lines differing in length and their task was to match the two lines of equal length. The table as demonstrated below was displayed on cards, containing four vertical black lines as in “A Sample Comparison”. On the right side of the card there are three lines differing in length, one of which is equal to the single line on the left side of the card, called the “Standard line”.

![Diagram of a Sample Comparison]

A Sample Comparison

The participants were instructed to look on the card with the numbered lines on the right side and the standard line at the left. They were to select from among those lines the one equal in length to the standard line. They had to state their judgment in terms of the corresponding number. When all the participants stated their answers, the card was removed and replaced by a new card with new comparison and standard lines. There were 12 cards in all.

There is only one participant who is in fact participating in the experiment. The other participants are, without his knowledge, cooperating with the experimenter by at times giving incorrect answers. Their instructions were to act in a natural, confident way, and to give the
impression that they were new to the experiment as well. They were supposed to be friendly, but firm. During the first two trials all participants gave the correct answer. In the following trials those who were cooperating with the experimenter now responded by giving the *same* incorrect answer. The one participant who was not cooperating with the experimenter now had to choose between conforming or following his own perception. There were 31 male participants total in the experiment. On average, two-thirds of the participants gave at one point correct responses and where independent of the majority trend; the remaining third participants (32%) gave at all times incorrect answers identical to those of the majority. Out of the two-thirds only one-fifth of the participants remained completely independent, meaning they did not once conform to the majority at any time.

The experiment did not end with the completion of the comparisons. Now the subject would be asked to take a part in a small unofficial discussion to answer questions such as: “*Do you suppose that the entire group was wrong and that you alone were right?*” Or “*How confident of your judgments are you?*”

These experiments lead to the conclusion that there were two kinds of subjects. Naive ones, who believed, that all members in the group were right and it was themselves who made a mistake. The second kind was the subjects, who knew that they were right, but went along to avoid the discomfort of a disagreement with the rest of the group.

After witnessing the results of the Asch experiment one would wonder; why is it that people conform to a group? According to psychologists Deutsch and Gerard (1955) as explained Lavine there are two explanations; normative influence and informational influence. The Asch experiment is a great example of normative influence, the normative
influence is described below. The informational influence will be addressed later in the chapter.

Normative influence occurs when you conform to a group because you have a desire to gain positive outcomes from others and you want to avoid rejection or embarrassment (Kazdin, 2000). We can understand how the normative influence is portrayed in Asch’s experiment since the lengths of the lines were unquestionable. The participants did not need to rely on other members of the group to confirm what their eyes were plainly telling them (Kazdin, 2000). The simplicity of this experiment means that it was very easy to distinguish which line matched which. Hardly anyone made a mistake when questioned alone, however in order to conform to the group it meant that the participant had to agree with the others in the group even when they were apparently wrong (Lavine, 1999).

There were different variations of the Asch experiment. In order to find out if the individual would act differently under other circumstances, variations such as increasing the contradiction between the individual and the majority, as well as reducing the size of the majority or introducing a partner, took place.

There are three ways in which a participant can adhere to conformity. Firstly, yielding due to distortion of perception secondly, distortion of judgment and finally distortion of action. Distortion of perception is when you are not consciously aware that you are being influenced by the group. Distortion of judgment is when you have a low confidence and you assume that the group is correct, and distortion of action is based on your desire to be accepted by the group (Lavine, 1999).
Criticism

Although Asch’s experiments are considered of great importance in social psychology research, there are still some downsides to Asch’s way of conducting his experiments. According to John M. Lavine, “In spite of Asch’s theoretical contributions concerning groups, his empirical work focused rather narrowly on the issue of social influence, and his experimental paradigm was not designed to investigate social interaction among group members. Thus, notwithstanding his evident interest in groups, Asch’s experimental work was devoid of any explicit attention to group processes.” (Lavine, 1999, p. 362).

Asch’s experiment demonstrates normative influence; informational influence is understood by looking at Muzafer Sherif’s experiments on conformity.

The formation of a norm in a group situation

Muzafer Sherif, a social psychologist from Columbia University conducted several experiments on group norms and conformity. We will take a point of departure in Sherif’s autokinetic experiments, which were conducted at the psychology department of Columbia University in 1935-36 (Sherif, 1948). He set out to study “empirical observations concerning norm formation and its effects on perception and judgement of individuals in a laboratory setting” (Sherif, 1948, pg. 202). Sherif conducted these experiments to investigate how social norms were established. He was interested in how many people were willing to change their norms and conform to norms set by the group.

The following review is based on Muzafer Sherif’s own books “Social Psychology” from 1948 and “The psychology of social norms” 1936.
The autokinetic experiments on norm formation

The experiments took place in dark rooms at the psychological laboratories of Columbia University. All participants were graduates and undergraduates from either Columbia or New York University. None of them were majoring in psychology or had any knowledge of the autokinetic effect. In a completely dark room the autokinetic effect is when a small bright light is shown and the human eye is deceived to believe that the light is moving even though the small light is stationary. The same effect can be seen when you look at a distant star in the night sky. The deceiving effect is due to eye movements and to the fact that humans can not exactly pin point the location of the light due to the lack of physical references. Sherif carried out two variations of the experiment, an individual situation and a group situation. Nineteen participants participated in the individual version and another forty participants were brought in to conduct the group experiment. The participants were placed in a dark room five meters from the small light. The light was projected through a tiny hole in a metal box and the light was controlled by the experimenter. Sherif’s first variation was the individual experiment. Participants were told that as soon as they saw the light begin to move, they were to press the “signal button”. The light would then, after a few seconds, completely disappear and the participants were to estimate the distance it moved as accurately as they were able to. Each participant was to make 100 judgements on the distance the light had moved. The results indicate that when the participant repeatedly perceives the movement, they will try to make their own scale for comparing the distance. This is done for the simple reason that they have no optical way of calculating distance. A
second and third series of the experiment were conducted to see if the participants would stick to their first scale or would perceive the movements differently. The averages of the estimates were very similar to the judgements from the first series, but with a reduced variety.

For the second variation, Sherif split 40 participants into two groups. The first group would start out by going through a session individually and then afterwards go through the same again, this time with one or two others present. The last 20 would do it the other way around. The settings of the experiments were in general the same as the one conducted on individuals. However, small changes had been made. In order for the experimenter to be able to tell the participants apart, small signal lights were installed in different colors. The results showed a difference in the norms that the groups formed. The groups who were first presented to the experiment alone would form their individual norms and then be willing to adjust to a new set of common norms when they repeated the experiment in interaction with others. The others who were first introduced to the experiment in a group quickly formed a norm on how to judge the distance. This norm would then stay with the individual when he later on was going through the session again on his own. He perceived the situation with the norms which were brought from the earlier situation of his interaction with others. The norms formed in interaction with others will stay and become the participants own set of norms. The following chart shows the convergence of three participants, who all went through the experiment alone and then afterwards were conducted in interaction with each other. They get closer to the same estimates and in the third trial they all have the same estimations of how far the light had moved (Sherif, 1948).
The Y-axis is the participant’s estimates in inches.

(Sherif, 1948, p. 209, first graph)

The participants were asked to answer at random. The person who was first to answer could be seen as a leader, and might become more influencing then other members of the group. In the empirical work of these experiments the “leaders” were observed also to be influenced by the others, maybe not in that moment, but later on in subsequent trails.

Sherif’s studies were based on *informational influence* and *internalization*. The informational influence refers to general situations where people rely on others to define the reality. Internalization refers to the incidents where the personal norms are changing to conform to others (Baron and Kerr, 1992).

People tend to rely on the validity of others actions and attitudes. In Sherif’s experiments people used each other as reliable sources, due to the lack of accuracy in the perceptions of the lights. When the task people are facing is difficult or ambiguous they tend to conform in order to
obtain information from other group members. They turn to the others to get their estimate of the present situation (Kazdin, 2000).

**Criticism**

Sherif himself criticizes the reliability of his experiment due to the fact that it is under artificial conditions; it is conducted in a laboratory and does not present social situations.

**Group conformity and the My Lai massacre**

The soldiers involved in My Lai give accounts of what happened that day. There are specific quotes which are relevant to group conformity. Private Vernando Simpson recalls his memories of that day in the documentary “4 timer I My Lai” (4 hours in My Lai) “That day at My Lai I was personally responsible of killing between 20 to 25 people. From shooting them, to cutting their throats, to scalping them, to cutting of their hands, tongues. I did it. I just went and lot of people did it and I just followed suit. I just lost all sense of direction, of purpose. I just started killing any kind of way I could kill. I didn't know I had it in me. And once you start it is very easy to keep on.” (4 timer I My Lai, DR Documentary, 15\(^{th}\) of Nov. 1989). In this example both normative and informational influence present it self; he conformed to his group by “following suit”. He states “I didn’t know I had it in me” which implies that he had conformed to the group norms. This resembles one of the experiments conducted by Sherif; the experiment where a subject starts out by conducting a session on his own, setting his own standards. Afterwards, in interaction with other group members they go through the trials, and set a new standard. Private Simpson joined the military with his own norms, but in the course of his military training and the time he spent as a
member of Charlie Company these changed and he conformed to the group norms of his unit.

When comparing this to Asch’s experiment Private Simpson could have conformed as a result of one or more different types of distortion: perception, judgement and action. He might not have been aware that he was under the influence of others (perception), but on the other hand he could have been under the impression that his unit was doing the right thing (judgement) or that they would accept him if he took part in the atrocities (action).

Another example of conformity of a soldier in My Lai is in the quote by Jimmy Roberson, who participated in the My Lai massacre, he recalls the shock of participating in the massacre:

“Like, you know, as far as myself, you know, I happened to look into somebody’s eyes, a woman’s eyes, and she – I don’t know, I looked I mean, just before we started firing, I mean. You know, I didn’t want to. I wanted to turn around and walk away. It was something telling me not to do it. Something told me not to, you know, just turn around and not be part of it, but when everybody else started firing, I started firing” (Bourke, 1999, p. 191). When Roberson says, “...when everyone else started firing, I started firing” you are given a perfect example of conformity. It is possible that Roberson was conforming because of distortion of action, he wanted to be accepted in his group and not seen as an outsider therefore he took part in the My Lai massacre. This same example may also be an example of distortion of judgement. Roberson may not have been confident that his gut feeling was correct, “...it was something telling me not to do it.” and therefore assumed that the others in his group were acting correctly and followed in the action.
However there was a small minority who did not conform to the group. Likewise, Asch found that one fifth of all participants in his experiment did not conform and were completely independent. Harry Stanley from the first platoon, under the command of Lieutenant Calley, was an example of the minority disobeying the orders to kill the civilians in My Lai:

“We had orders,” Stanley recalled, “but the orders we had was that we were going into an enemy village and that they were all armed. I didn’t find that when I got there. And ordering me to shoot down innocent people, that’s not an order – that’s craziness to me, you know. And so I don’t feel like I have to obey that.” In the light of the My Lai massacre some soldiers stood up and did not conform to the group or authority which confirms the findings of Asch’s experiments.

A soldier must have cohesion with his group in order for the group to be able to help him survive. The importance of cohesiveness in a military unit is undeniable. The reality is that in war you will be dealing with groups of soldiers who are forced to work together. In many cases soldiers will conform to their group. “Soldiers are well aware of their dependence on others for survival in combat. Attachment to the combat group is dependent not only on the ability of the group to help him survive, but on their willingness to do so.” (Gal and Mangelsdorff, 1991, p. 464)

Private Stanley would still depend on his unit to keep him alive, yet according to his values he chose not to conform to his group during the My Lai massacre. Unit cohesion is what keeps the soldier going; it gives them motivation for combat, and the past experiences in which the soldier has had with his group gives him a sense of belonging and forms the norms for the group. (Gal and Magelsorff, 1991)
Conclusion

It is difficult to know exactly what is going on through someone’s mind when conforming to a group. Both Asch’s and Sherif’s experiments helped shine light onto the motivations for conforming. The experiments were based on the subject’s perceptions; the Asch experiment was a simple experiment which identifies a normative influence among the subjects. The subjects were seen to conform because of their need for acceptance from the rest of the group which is distortion of action. The Sherif experiment is an example of informational influence, the subjects conformed to the group because of their distortion of perception and their distortion of judgement. The subjects were not aware that they were being influence by the group, or had a low confidence of their own perceptions and relied on their group to make the correct decisions.

Understanding why soldiers are able to commit atrocities although it goes against their social norms can be explained in the experiments of Solomon Asch and Muzafer Sherif. The results of their experiments showed that people conform for two reasons. Firstly, because they have a desire to gain positive outcomes from others and they want to avoid rejection or embarrassment (normative influence). Secondly, because people rely on others to define the reality and internalization refers to the incidents where the personal norms are changing to conform to others (informational influence). When the perceptions of a soldier are influenced this will directly influence a change in his behaviour. In the My Lai massacre soldiers were faced with a choice to either conform to the group and the group norms or suffer the consequences of going against the members of the group. Therefore conformity was an
inevitable consequence of the situation in My Lai for the soldiers involved.
**Dehumanization**

“The process of dehumanization is an essential ingredient in the perpetration of inhumanities” (Bandura, 1999, pg. 200) Dehumanization is a means for the soldier to morally justify the killing of his enemy. The result of dehumanizing the enemy is that they are seen as possessing lesser human value. It is important to point out that, in this context, dehumanization works two ways. The soldier in question is dehumanized in the sense that he is “re-defined” as being a killing machine whose job is to eliminate the enemy. In order to be able to do this, the soldier must then dehumanize the enemy by stripping him of those things that make him human and give value to his life (Kelman, 1973).

During the process of dehumanization, different methods are put in place by a higher authority. The authorities in this context are the leading figures within the American army and government. Throughout the following chapter we will discuss the different methods that are used in order to influence the soldiers’ perception of the enemy and themselves. Ultimately we will apply this concept to the My Lai massacre and discuss to which extent dehumanization was a catalyst for the atrocities committed.

**Nick Haslam – Dehumanization: An Integrative view**

In order to explain dehumanization we will take a point of departure in some of the most recent studies on the subject. This was conducted by psychologist Nick Haslam, who is a Professor of psychology at the University of Melbourne in Australia. In his paper “Dehumanization: An integrative view” he describes two different notions of dehumanization. He argues, however, that in order to do so, one must first define the two
different ways of perceiving human characteristics. They are defined as follows:

Uniquely human characteristics are those that separate humans from animals. These are the traits that fall under the categories of sophistication, culture, refinement, socialization and internalized moral sensibility. They are acquired characteristics that generally develop later in life. Uniquely human characteristics reflect our socialization and culture, and can therefore vary across different cultures. When these characteristics are denied to someone it is known as animalistic dehumanization (Haslam, 2006).

Human nature characteristics are those inherent traits that all humans are born with, such as emotions, depth and individual agency. They link humans to the natural and biological world and are those traits we all share despite differences in culture and society. When these traits are denied to a person it is known as mechanistic dehumanization, where the person is perceived as a machine without depth or soul (Haslam, 2006).

**Herbert C. Kelman – Violence without Moral Restraint**

Herbert C. Kelman talks about the concept of dehumanization in his paper “Violence without Moral restraint: Reflections on the dehumanization of victims and victimizers”, 1973. Kelman argues that in order to commit violence without moral restraint there are three concepts that are essential ingredients in a soldier's education. The first two concepts are *authorization* and *routinization*. For the purpose of this chapter we will not give an account of these concepts, however similar theories are presented in the chapters on Obedience to Authority and The
Power of the Situation The ultimate, and third concept, is *dehumanization*. If authorization and routinization are the means to carry out the physical acts of violence, dehumanization is the mechanism that allows the soldier to psychologically cope with the acts he is required to carry out.

Through the use of patronizing and negative labeling, the soldier is able to strip the victim of his individuality and community, and thereby remove any sense of empathy the soldier may have. The soldier is now able to perceive his enemy as an object, rather than a human being. This object now takes the physical form of the ideals that have been targeted by the higher authority which the individual soldier abides by.

“Once dehumanized they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes and concerns, but as sub-human objects” (Keen, 1986, Kelman, 1973 as quoted by Bandura, 1999).

It is important to point out that these theories are generalizations and are not necessarily applicable to every individual.

We will now look at, and discuss, some of the different methods used during the process of dehumanization. In the context of the Vietnam War, these methods were applied to the soldiers as well as the American public through different mediums. In the following, our focus will be on the use of training and propaganda, specifically during the Vietnam War.

**Dehumanizing Soldiers through Training**

The dehumanization of a soldier begins when he enters the military institution. The soldiers now become a part of a process of anonymity
where they are stripped of their identity. In order to do so, the soldiers are removed from society and incorporated in a military environment where other values, such as obedience, respect and discipline dominate. They are encouraged to forget their pre-existing civilian values and take on an institutional military identity (Frey-Wouters/Laufers, 1986).

“Individuals had to be broken down, to be rebuilt into efficient fighting men. The basic tenets included depersonalization, uniforms, lack of privacy, forced social relationships, tight schedules, lack of sleep, disorientation followed by rites of reorganization according to military codes, arbitrary rules and strict punishment” (Bourke, 1999, p. 79).

The soldiers are given identical uniforms to make them stand out as a unit and not as individuals. The purpose of this is to remove all personal traits and to alter their view of themselves as independant, unique human beings.

Another vital part of the dehumanizing process of a soldier is the training for combat. During this training, the soldier is taught to handle a weapon and to kill his enemy, by any means necessary. Lieutenant Calley (a key figure in the My Lai massacre) described his training at the Officer/Cadet School in Fort Benning, Georgia:

“One thing we were taught at OCS for twenty years we had thought was bad. To kill, and a sergeant in gym shorts and a T-shirt taught it. We sat around, and he kicked another man in the kidney: a few inches lower, really, or this could be a lethal kick. It was just gruesome: a POP, and I thought, Oh god. No one can live through that. He really kicked or he flipped a man with karate and WHAM: he would show us the follow-up. And stomp on him right between the eyes: pretend to, and push his nose right into his brain. Or stomp on his solar plexus: his ribcage, to push
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splinters into his lungs. And then stomp on his heart to smash it” (Calley, 1971, pg. 27).

In this quote he describes the brutal means of preparing a soldier for combat. Chanting and singing was also commonplace during physical exercises for the soldiers. This played a part in the redefining process of the soldiers, for instance when asked by their sergeant: “What is the spirit of a bayonet?!” They would repeatedly yell: “To kill!” (Bourke, 1999 p. 81) This kind of chanting helped desensitize the soldier to the idea of killing.

Ultimately throughout the training process, the soldier is hardened and introduced to various methods of how to carry out his job, which is to kill. 18 year-old Private Marks sums up the intended effect of the military training in a letter to his mother in 1965:

“A human being becomes so unimportant and the idea of killing a VC is just commonplace now – just like a job” (Bourke, 1999, p. 70-71).

Training effectively strips the soldier of his human nature traits. It does so by removing the emontional response to killing as well as replacing his individual identity with that of the unit. This is what Haslam would refer to as mechanistic dehumanization. An infantry man reports his experience of military training in Frey-Wouters/Laufer’s Legacy of War:

“They wanted you to be more or less like robots. You reacted on command only. You did not use any of your logic or reasoning. You had to do what they told you. It was very hard because a lot of these things went against our grain.” (Frey-Wouters/Laufer, 1986, p. 266).

This army recruit uses the term “robot”, which is essential in regards to mechanistic dehumanization. Haslam argues that when people are denied
their inherent human characteristics, they are represented as superficial
non-human objects, or in other words, machines (Haslam, 2006).

**Dehumanizing the Enemy through Propaganda**

When, in 1965, the American government decided to commit itself to the
war in Vietnam, the cause had already met resistance from journalists and
university professors across the country. In order to justify American
involvement in Vietnam the government began a widespread propaganda
campaign in order to gain support. On February 17th 1965 President
Johnson and the State Department issued “Aggression from the North, the
record of North Vietnams campaign to conquer South Vietnam.” The
document emphasized the defensive nature of American involvement,
claiming that they were protecting democracy and freedom for the South
Vietnamese. The paper pointed out that this conflict was a result of Soviet
and Chinese attempts to promote communist ideals, and if they were
successful the potential danger of communism spreading throughout the
world. This allowed the American government to present the involvement
in Vietnam as being essential in preventing communism from spreading
to the United States (Cole, 1998).

In the process of recruiting draftees the Defense Department produced a
number of propaganda films in order to convince soldiers that the war
was in the best interest of the nation. The film “Why Vietnam” (1965)
stressed the fact that this was a conspiracy on a global scale, and that
North Vietnams aggression towards the south was backed by Soviet and
Chinese communists. Therefore, it was of great importance to defend the
democratic values of the South Vietnamese. The film portrayed the
United States as fighting for freedom and democracy, while North
Vietnamese president Ho Chi Minh was compared to Adolph Hitler and other fascist leaders from World War II. Other films, “The Unique War” (1966) and “Vietnam Village Reborn” (1967) included sequences with Vietnamese civilians praising the efforts of the American troops. The Vietnamese culture and people were described as being childlike and lacking sophistication which supported the notion that they were in need of American intervention in order to survive (Cole, 1998).

The propaganda may have been important step in the process of dehumanizing the Vietnamese. By portraying them as evil communists, they were categorized not as individuals but rather as a physical representation of the ideals the soldiers would be fighting. By describing the Vietnamese people as being unsophisticated and childlike they are in effect degraded to being sub-human. This affectively strips the Vietnamese of the uniquely human characteristics that the Americans perceive themselves as representing as a result of being part of a democracy. Sergeant Scott Cammel describes the dehumanizing effect the propaganda had on soldiers:

“It wasn’t like they were humans, we were conditioned to believe that this was for the good of the nation, the good of our own country and anything we did was okay. And when you shot someone you didn’t think that you were shooting at a human. They were a gook or a commie and it was okay.” (Bourke, 1999, p. 205)

Ultimately the American soldiers are lead to believe that they represent the good, while the Vietnamese represent the evil element that needs to be changed or defeated.

**Dehumanization and the My Lai massacre**
The soldiers who participated in the My Lai massacre were, as a result of being in the American army, exposed to the aforementioned methods of dehumanization. Having been in active duty in Vietnam, the soldiers had already established their view of the enemy, before ever entering My Lai. The training and propaganda they were exposed to before coming to Vietnam laid the foundation for their perception of the Viet Cong. The American soldiers would amongst themselves refer to the enemy not as Vietnamese or Vietcong, but instead would use racist terms such as “dinks” and “gooks” which strips them of a human identity (Jensen and Frederiksen, 2001).

During the My Lai massacre several isolated incidents indicate that the Vietnamese had been dehumanized in such a severe way that it was possible for the American soldiers to commit extreme acts of violence. There are several accounts of soldiers admitting to having committed severe acts of cruelty such as rape, scalping, and mutilation. Some soldiers carved “C Company” on the chests of dead villagers. One specific incident involved a soldier raping a woman and subsequently firing his weapon into her vagina. Soldiers did not see the villagers as equal human beings, but as objects which they had no moral quarrels with subjecting to murder and torture. The soldiers did not differentiate between men, women and children. Lieutenant Calley described his veiw of the Vietnamese:

“The old men, the women, the children – the babies were all VC or would be VC in about three years. And inside of VC women I guess there were a thousand little VC now” (Calley, 1971 p. 84).

Another indicator of the dehumanization of the Vietnamese by American soldiers during the My Lai massacre was the way in which the operation
was conducted. The civilians were rounded up into large groups and thrown into ditches before being executed. The morality of the situation was never openly questioned by the soldiers; they treated the mission as strictly routine. At one point they were told to take a lunch break and following the massacre they went out to the ocean for a swim (Peers, 1979). The following day there was no sense of remorse amongst the company (Bourke, 1999).

Michael Bernard, a soldier at My Lai sums up the dehumanizing mentality of the participants of the My Lai massacre:

“A lot of those people wouldn’t think of killing a man. I mean, a white human- a human so to speak” (Bourke, 1999, p. 205).

**Conclusion**

Through the notions put in place in Haslam’s and Kelman’s studies we have been able to see how dehumanization took form during the Vietnam War, and specifically in the My Lai massacre. In order for the soldiers who participated in My Lai to commit these atrocities, the process of dehumanizing the Vietnamese was of essential importance. By redefining themselves through training they changed their identity to that of a lethal weapon whose job was to kill. Propaganda provided a moral justification for the soldiers to kill the enemy by degrading communist Vietnam and putting the soldier on a pedestal. Dehumanization is not a choice taken by the soldier; rather it is a psychological tactic that influences the subconscious of the individual.

In conclusion, dehumanization is a subconscious mechanism which plays a vital role in the soldiers’ ability to cope psychologically with the task of killing another human being.
The power of the Situation

When a person is placed in a new situation, how does this affect the behavior of the individual? Psychologist Walter Mischel gives the following example of how an individual’s behavior can be foreseen based on the situation they find themselves in. “He asks us to consider two situations: a party to celebrate someone winning a large sum of money and a funeral. People will be much more talkative, cheerful and outgoing at the party than at the funeral” (Carlson, Martin, Buskist, 2004, p. 595).

Various psychologists have developed theories in order to assess a person’s behavior in a given situation. Experiments such as Obedience to Authority (Milgram, 1974), the Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, 1973), and Asch’s experiment on conformity (Asch, 1953) have all staged different situations and subjected participants’ behavior to analysis.

In the following chapter, the Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, 1973) will be introduced and it will be discussed in relation to the My Lai massacre. We will consider the concept that behavior is determined by the situation, and describe the environment which the American soldiers found themselves in during the Vietnam War. The significance of the situation in regards to the My Lai massacre, specifically what role it played in motivating the soldiers to participate in the atrocities, will be examined.

The Stanford Prison Experiment

The Stanford Prison Experiment is the most prominent experiment in this field. Conducted in 1971, it has since been reinvented as a television series, book, and feature film. It gained popularity due to its controversial
nature and as a result has been heavily debated by various psychologists and critics. Despite this heavy debate, it is impossible to escape the Stanford Prison Experiment when researching the power of the situation, due to its fame both within the field of psychology and in popular culture. The following account of the Stanford Prison Experiment is based on the documentary “Quiet Rage – The Stanford Prison Study” (Zimbardo, 1992).

Psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted The Stanford Prison Experiment in 1971 at Stanford University in California. An ad for a prison experiment was placed in the newspaper and twenty four participants were chosen out of the seventy five applicants. Zimbardo assessed their psychological condition and made sure they were all physically and mentally healthy before selecting participants. A mock prison was set up in the basement of the psychology department at Stanford University and participants were paid 15 dollars a day for participating. The duration of the experiment was to be two weeks.

Participants were randomly given the role of either guard or prisoner at the beginning of the experiment. The purpose of the experiment was to assess what effect the situation would have on the behavior of the participants and to what extent they would adapt to their roles as either prisoner or guard. Zimbardo himself acted as superintendent of the prison, and had a group of advisors, one of which was ex-convict Carlo Prescott, in order to create as authentic a setting as possible. Participants who were chosen to be prisoners were picked up by actual police officers at their homes and taken to the Police Station where they were finger printed, stripped and deloused before given uniforms and numbers and
taken to Zimbardo’s prison. Participants chosen to be guards were also given uniforms and were briefed by Zimbardo and his staff concerning their role in guarding the prisoners. They were instructed to control the prisoners; however, they were not permitted to use physical force.

During the first day of the experiment, the participants had difficulty taking their roles seriously. However, by the second day the prisoners had begun to rebel against the guards’ authority by barricading the cell door with their beds. This created a gap between the guards and the prisoners, which in turn created a hostile environment. At first the prisoners displayed solidarity, however, they soon surrendered to the guards’ control. The prisoner who led the rebellion was so distraught by the experience that he became hysterical and eventually feigned illness in an attempt to be released from the prison. Rather than release the prisoner, Zimbardo offered him special privileges, and asked him to provide the experimenters with information about the other participants. The prisoner felt as though there was no escape from the prison, and relayed this impression to the other prisoners upon his return to the group. This established in the prisoners the idea that this was a genuine situation.

In order to gain control, the guards used various psychological tactics such as isolation, taking away basic privileges, physical exertion, and verbal abuse. They also turned prisoners against one another by forcing them to humiliate each other and single out disobedient prisoners. For instance, when one prisoner refused to eat his dinner he was put in isolation. The other prisoners were given a choice; if they gave up their blankets the prisoner would be released, or they could chose to keep their
blankets and the prisoner would remain in isolation overnight. The prisoners decided to keep their blankets.

During the experiment four participants left prematurely. These were all participants who had been in the role of prisoner. They could not cope with the situation and one by one broke into tears and lost control. Zimbardo saw no other way than to let them go.

After six days even Zimbardo was so affected by his role that he did not realize the situation had spun out of control. It took one of his graduate students reviewing surveillance footage alongside him, to point out that what he was doing to these boys was horrible. This made him to realize that the situation was no longer under control and that the experiment had to be stopped.

**Philip Zimbardo’s Message**

What Zimbardo’s experiment did was put people in an unfamiliar situation to observe how it would influence their behavior. In the course of six days ordinary people were transformed into their roles of submissive prisoners and ruthless guards. Zimbardo took normal people and gave one group power over the other, the result of which was that each group took on the roles they were given. In post experimental discussions participants described being affected so severely that they lost touch with reality and began to treat the experiment and their roles as if they were real. Four of the prisoners even left the experiment prematurely because of the distress the situation caused them. Throughout the experiment, isolated incidents created a hostile environment in the prison and this influenced the behavior of both guards and prisoners. What Zimbardo wanted to show us was how being given a role in a certain
situation can affect a person’s behavior. The take home message of Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment is that in the right situation it is possible for otherwise normal people to exhibit extreme behavior.

Criticism
The Stanford prison experiment has been the subject of much controversy and debate. Several critical points have been raised. The fact that the experiment is a simulation rather than an authentic environment means one can question its ecological validity. Also there is much criticism surrounding the ethics of the experiment. Furthermore, in the film Zimbardo’s experiment demonstrates the idea that in the right situation normal people are capable of acting in either submissive or sadistic ways according to their roles. However, what Zimbardo does not do is provide any concrete explanation as to why. This leaves us with only his arguments and observations but not a specific outlined conclusion based on actual results.

The most notable critique of the experiment came from Carlo Prescott who was one of Zimbardo’s advisors. In his article “The Lie of the Stanford Prison Experiment” (Prescott, 2005) he claims that certain treatment of prisoners by the guards came from his advice rather than from the guards themselves. This casts doubt on the conclusion that the situation was the primary catalyst for the actions of the participants.

Despite this criticism, we feel that the Stanford Prison Experiment still has relevance in the context of our case study. Assuming what Carlo Prescott claims is true; there is an added dimension of authority which is not discussed in the actual experiment. Zimbardo set out to create a
specific situation to see what effect it had on the behavior of participants. If the guards were instructed on how to act in their role, this creates a different situation in which the acts of the participants were influenced not only by the situation itself but also by an authority. Comparing this new situation to the way the military is structured the experiment is still relevant. The military is a hierarchal system in which an authority is always an influencing factor in any given situation. Also, we would like to emphasize that regardless of whether or not the guards were instructed on how to behave; they still carried out acts which were considered sadistic, many of which Prescott does not take credit for in his criticism.

Having given an account of Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment, we will now discuss the situation soldiers in Vietnam were facing in order to investigate the ways in which it affected the soldiers involved in the My Lai massacre.

**The Situation in Vietnam**

When the American soldiers arrived in Vietnam they were, just as the participants in the Stanford Prison Experiment, placed in a completely different situation than they were used to. Not only were they met by hostile resistance from the Viet Cong but also faced the challenges of cultural differences, language barriers, and most importantly adjusting to these unfamiliar circumstances. The fear of dying or getting wounded was ever present. In many situations soldiers were not able to distinguish between civilians and the Vietcong, which created a sense of uncertainty as to who was the enemy. Soldiers were not only subjected to physical barriers of adapting to a new environment, but also faced extreme psychological challenges. In the following we will give an account of
various aspects of the situation soldiers found themselves in during the Vietnam War and discuss their impact on the behavior of soldiers during the My Lai massacre.

"Draining the pond to catch the fish"
In January, 1968 the situation in Vietnam took a drastic turn. Brigadier General William R. Desobry, the chief military advisor, held a press conference in which he stated that the Viet Cong forces were “Poorly motivated, poorly trained” and that the South Vietnamese army had the “upper hand completely” (Elliot, 2003). This press conference was held in order to reassure the American public and give the impression that it was only a matter of months before the Viet Cong would be defeated. Three weeks later, on the 30th of January, the Viet Cong put in motion what was named the Tet-offensive. They mobilised a large number of troops and attacked several American and South Vietnamese strongholds, completely surprising them and overrunning several provinces. This was a devastating blow to the Americans. Not only because this meant that their strategy of reassuring the American public in the aforementioned press conference had backfired on them, but also because in several big cities, the civilian population had shown an ability to organize themselves and turn their guns on the Americans, supporting the Viet Cong.

Up until this point the American strategy in Vietnam had been what was referred to as “search and destroy” missions. This entailed that American patrols would patrol the jungles and villages in the countryside of Vietnam in order to locate and eliminate the Viet Cong. Also the Americans believed that this tactic would minimize civilian casualties. Following the Tet-offensive this strategy was changed. Up until this point
the American forces were required to obtain authorization from the South Vietnamese before bombing populated areas. Now, free-fire zones were introduced, which meant that large areas were marked within which the Americans could bomb without authorization. Instead of the aforementioned search and destroy missions, the concept of “clear and hold” or “draining the pond to catch the fish” was introduced. This meant that instead of taking over and securing areas in which the Viet Cong operated, they would relocate the civilian population to cities they were already in control of. By doing so, they would now be able to assume that anyone left in the villages were Viet Cong. The American soldiers would now be able to call in air strikes, burn the villages to the ground and kill anyone they encountered under what they perceived as being legitimate circumstances. During the six months following the Tet-offensive, this new policy was carried out under the name “Operation Speedy Express”. This had a devastating effect on the civilian population. During these 6 months the American army claimed to have eliminated more than 10,000 Viet Cong combatants. However, only 900 weapons were recovered, leading to speculation that the majority of the victims were actually civilians. (Elliot, 2003)

**Distinguishing between civilians and the enemy**

During the Vietnam War the American soldiers were met by fierce resistance from different groups. One of the most difficult situations they found themselves in was that they were forced to engage in guerrilla warfare. For instance, soldiers were subjected to sniper attacks and ambush while on patrol. “*The enemy seemed to be everywhere – and nowhere – and men hit out blindly with frustration and passion. Combatants felt impotent: they were viciously assaulted but were rarely*
able to attack in return” (An Intimate History of Killing, Bourke, pg. 203) Fighting under these circumstances made it difficult for soldiers to distinguish between combatant and civilian. It is described by many soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War that it was not uncommon for them to be fired upon by old men, women and children. A lieutenant colonel who testified at the Calley trial described the confusion this situation created for the soldier, “Over there, we never knew who was the enemy, really. A little old twelve-year-old would come up, take your chewing gum and the next minute drop a grenade.” (Body Count, Calley, p. 19) This situation resulted in many civilian casualties, as soldiers would attack civilians convinced they were Viet Cong or Viet Cong sympathizers. The line between the legitimate killing of enemies and committing atrocities became very fine.

The Stanford Prison Experiment and the My Lai massacre
Comparing the situation of the soldiers who participated in the My Lai massacre to the Stanford Prison Experiment, parallels can be drawn between Zimbardo’s study and the situation the soldiers of C Company found themselves in during the Vietnam War and the My Lai massacre. Zimbardo’s conclusion of the Stanford Prison Experiment was that the power of a situation can determine the behaviour of an individual, given the right circumstances. He demonstrated how normal people put in an extreme situation, within a matter of days adapted to their roles in this new environment, and became able to act in ways they never thought possible. By describing the different aspects that influenced the soldiers’ behaviour during the Vietnam War, we have created a platform in order to prove that in the circumstance of war, one can not avoid acting according to the situation they find themselves in.
C Company were also exposed to the situation described throughout this chapter, and we will now give an account of their situation leading up to and during the My Lai massacre and how they were influenced by this. Like the participants of Zimbardo’s experiment, the soldiers who participated in the My Lai massacre were also influenced by the situation.

An important fact which is not often mentioned in various accounts of the My Lai massacre, is that the presence of the Viet Cong’s 48th battalion in the village of Son My had already been confirmed. Numerous attacks on the Son My village had been conducted by American forces in the months leading up to the My Lai massacre and they had sustained heavy casualties in the process (Calley, 1971). This undeniably had a strong psychological effect on C Company, who was aware of this fact. They themselves had also suffered casualties and this increased the anxious anticipation they felt leading up to the mission in Son My.

“Charlie Company certainly had difficulties along these lines immediately prior to the My Lai massacre. In the previous three months they had lost one quarter of their men to sniper fire, mines and booby traps. There was a widespread feeling that their lack of aggressiveness accounted for this death toll.” As Sergeant Gregory T. Olsen put it, “the attitude of all the men, the majority, I would say was a revengeful attitude, they all felt bad because we lost a number of buddies prior to My Lai.” Everyone was “psyched up”” (Bourke, p. 204).

In Lieutenant Calley’s book Body Count he describes how his platoon adapted to the situation in Vietnam and how their attitudes toward the civilian population changed over the course of their time in the war. For instance, in the early stages of their tour the soldiers of C Company
would interact with the Vietnamese children who received treats and presents from the Americans. However, as time passed and the soldiers of C Company were met with hostility and were attacked by civilians as well as the Viet Cong, their attitude towards the children changed drastically. Calley goes on to describe how, with time, the soldiers would react aggressively when approached by the children and at times would push or kick them away (Calley, 1971).

During the My Lai massacre there was strong indication that the power of the situation played a vital part in enabling the soldiers to carry out atrocities. A combination of the effects of being in a warzone, along with the circumstances leading up to and during the massacre, all played a role in the soldiers’ readiness to participate in the massacre. Vernando Simpson, a soldier of the My Lai massacre, describes how the power of the situation overwhelmed him, and he “just lost all sense of direction”, he goes on to say how he “didn’t know [he] had it in [him]. Once you start [killing] it is very easy to keep on,” (4 timer I My Lai, DR Documentary, 15th of Nov. 1989).

Another good indication that the soldiers had lost themselves in the situation, presents itself in the following incident. Hugh Thompson, a helicopter pilot flying overhead witnessed the atrocities being committed on the ground. When he realized what was happening, he landed the helicopter and evacuated several wounded civilians. As he was not involved in the situation, he was able to see the massacre from an outsider’s perspective, unlike the soldiers involved who were caught up in the situation. Likewise, in the Stanford Prison Experiment, it took an
outsider to make Zimbardo realize that the experiment had spun out of control.

The soldiers in Vietnam were put into an alien environment just like the participants of the Stanford Prison Experiment. Through the different experiences and circumstances in the new situations, their behavior was influenced and they acted in ways which they never thought possible. The American soldiers were, as mentioned presented with the problem of not being able to distinguish between the enemy and civilians and this clouded their judgement. The fear of being ambushed and the frustration of loosing many of their fellow soldiers took its toll. Ultimately this influenced not only the soldiers’ perception of the civilian population and their roles, but also their own roles in the war. Different seperated incidents had gradually become a part of the soldiers’ daily lives and their behavior had changed accordingly. Similarly, the participants of the Stanford Prison Experiment were influenced by different seperated incidents that occured and their behavior changed accordingly.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, we have given an account of the Stanford Prison Experiment and of the situation in general during the Vietnam War and the My Lai massacre. Subsequently, we have discussed these notions in relation to the My Lai massacre in order to asses the affect the situation had on the behavior of the soldiers. In conclusion, a lot of different factors influence the situation, which will always have an effect on a soldier in combat.
Discussion

Throughout our project, we have studied and discussed various psychological theories and applied them to the incidents of the My Lai massacre. We have reached different conclusions when studying each theory, and they are as follows.

Obedience to Authority
When looking at Milgram’s study on obedience to authority, we found that the majority of the participants in the experiment, who were average people, obeyed the authority figure and were therefore able to inflict pain on other human beings. Since the participants in the experiment were able to defy their own values and go as far as inflicting a great level of shock to the victims when instructed to by an authority, we were able to relate this to the soldiers killing, not only their enemies, but also innocent civilians. The impact that the psychological stress of disobeying an authority had on the soldiers was overwhelming, which is why we can conclude that obedience to authority is a relevant theory when looking at what influenced the soldiers to commit atrocities.

Group Conformity
The experiments conducted by Solomon Asch and Muzafer Sherif showed that the participants of their experiments who conformed in groups, conformed for two reasons: Normative influence and informational influence. The studies on group conformity are relevant to this project because the soldiers work as a unit, and therefore, they must have cohesion with their fellow soldiers to avoid rejection from the group. According to the studies on group conformity, people are more
likely to follow the acts of others in the same group; in this case, soldiers follow the acts of their comrades in their unit. The soldiers conformed under the impression that the majority was right. Because the soldiers internally depend on each other for survival, exclusion from the unit is too great a consequence.

**Dehumanization**

Through the studies conducted by Nick Haslam and Herbert C. Kelman a definition of dehumanization has been put in place. By distinguishing between two different concepts of human characteristics, we are able to determine two corresponding types of dehumanization. It is described how dehumanization, through various methods, allows the soldier a moral justification for killing who he perceives as being the enemy. Dehumanization allowed the soldiers in the Vietnam War to perceive the Vietnamese as being sub-human, thereby seeing them as objects rather than human beings.

**The Power of the Situation**

Finally, we have discussed the power of the situation and how this aspect influences the mind and actions of a soldier. Philip Zimbardo conducted the Stanford Prison Experiment and reached the conclusion that the power of the situation determines the behavior of the individual. The situation of the Vietnam War, leading up to and during the My Lai massacre has been described. By giving an account of the different problems a soldier encountered during the Vietnam War, such as being able to distinguish between combatant and civilian and the psychologically difficult aspects of guerrilla warfare, we have shown how
the power of the situation is an inevitable and overwhelming consequence of being at war.

A major problem we encountered when using Philip Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment, is the fact that it does not present us with any definite conclusions. Therefore, it was very difficult for us to use the experiment as a direct theory. It is throughout the experiment not very clear what Zimbardo is trying to show us and therefore lacks scientific value.

**Limitations**

After reviewing and describing the knowledge we have obtained by applying these theories, we must also discuss the limits that they present us with. We have mainly focused on how atrocities are committed in a group and how the power of the situation can influence a soldier to such an extent that he is able to commit atrocities. However, we have not discussed individual differences. We must address the possibility that an individual may have been ready to commit atrocities before being influenced by any of the theories mentioned in this project. The individual’s background, before entering the military, could be taken into consideration. Events occurring throughout the individual’s childhood or upbringing could just as well have been a main catalyst for them committing atrocities. Also recent studies have introduced the notion that an individual can be inherently evil, suggesting that it is a genetic disorder. Another factor that could be relevant in discussing why soldiers during the Vietnam War were able to commit war crimes is the aspect of the abuse of illegal substances. It is a common known fact that the use of alcohol, marijuana and various hard drugs were commonly used by the American soldiers in Vietnam. The effect of drug abuse is therefore also a possible factor. The mental and physical symptoms of substance abuse
would have a debilitating effect on the efficiency of a soldier and ultimately cloud their judgement of right and wrong.

As described throughout the project, the different experiments which have been discussed have all been conducted in artificial settings. It is in general a common criticism of psychological experiments, because they do not represent the reality of social situations. For instance, the personal relationships between the participants and the experimenter do not resemble the ones that take place in real life situations, and in this context, the army. The relationship between the experimenter and the participants in Stanley Milgram’s study on obedience to authority did not have the same depth and qualities as the relationship between the privates and their commander in a military environment. Similarly, the same problem occurs in the experiments conducted by Solomon Asch and Muzafer Sherif. The groups that are represented in these experiments are average people with no previous relationships to each other, unlike an army unit that have a dependant relationship.

Throughout our project, we have only focused on one specific case study: the war crimes of the My Lai massacre. We could have focused on a more recent war crime which happened under different circumstances. The case study we have used to take a point of departure in throughout this project, represents one aspect of war crimes, which is mutilating and killing up close. An aspect of war crimes that we have not covered is killing from a distance. Conducting air strikes on civilian populations or bombing villages with artillery shells could also be considered as being a war crime.
By doing empirical work we could have interviewed Vietnam veterans and thereby reduced several filters which our sources have been exposed to. We could also have conducted our own experiments, and see if we would reach the same conclusions as the ones we have come across through looking at Stanley Milgram’s, Phillip Zimbardo’s, Muzaffer Sherif’s and Solomon Asch’s experiments.

**Prevention/Implications**

Throughout this project we have determined through the different theories presented, what influences a soldier to commit a war crime. By doing so, we have a greater understanding of the motivation behind the My Lai massacre, and can thereby discuss which theories we think are most relevant in preventing a soldier from committing a war crime.

In order to discuss which theories preventative action should be taken in, it is important to introduce the action that has already been taken by the military and government. After the My Lai massacre, the American government took new measures in order to prevent war crimes. This was done by making the soldiers aware of what constitutes a war crime. They were issued folders upon arrival in Vietnam, which described the Geneva Convention and encouraged soldiers to treat the civilian population humanely. Also, before arriving in Vietnam, soldiers were given a one hour lecture on war crimes and the Geneva Convention (Cole, 1998).

The American military has, since the Vietnam War, introduced mental health teams, which are assigned to combat forces in war zones and conflict situations. Their task is to provide immediate treatment and consultation to soldiers who have experienced traumatic events, as well
as assist commanding officers in identifying and reducing negative behavioral responses to stressful situations (Cole, 1998).

Also, the military has tried to create a home environment for soldiers deployed overseas by attempting to replicate familiar surroundings from the home, such as McDonald’s, cinemas, and shopping centres. This alleviates stress for the soldier, and allows him time to recuperate from the pressures of being in a combat situation. Being in an environment the soldiers can identify with helps them remain psychologically stable during times of conflict.

Group conformity occurs naturally when forming a unit in the military. When in the army a soldier is never required to act on his own, but instead must act as one with the unit. Through their training and education the importance of working in a group is constantly emphasized. The actions required of soldiers in combat are carried out by the unit as a whole and therefore the individual soldier learns to depend on his group for survival. Military tactics rely on the group performing together. By removing the element of group cohesion in a military unit, the strategies of combat become ineffective. Also, without the group the individual soldier is more exposed to the hazards of war and he loses a vital support network which comes from the social interaction within the unit. Even though we believe the group can influence the behaviour of the individual, group conformity is such a vital element on the battlefield and in the structure of the military that it can not be removed. Therefore, we do not think preventative action can be taken by restructuring the groups created within the military.
Vietnam was an offensive mission, and the American soldier’s view of the Vietnamese people was influenced before arriving in Vietnam. Through their training they had been redefined as killing machines and once in combat dehumanized the Vietnamese as a means of psychologically coping with the task of killing another human being. The offensive nature of American involvement in the Vietnam War entails that soldiers were deployed to take action against what was perceived as a problem. This meant that the situation was created by the nature of their mission. They were required to engage what had been described to them as being a threat to the civilized world. This threat did not always present itself in the way they had been taught. More than often, the American soldiers were not fighting a regular army but were frequently met with guerrilla warfare and in many situations were not able to distinguish between the enemy and civilians. This created a chaotic situation which the soldiers had no control over. Also, another relevant point was that the enemy they were fighting was not abiding by the restrictions set forth by the Geneva Convention. This undoubtedly made it difficult for the American soldiers to both follow the rules and effectively fight the Viet Cong.

Looking at the aforementioned situation we do not believe that preventative action can be taken in either the situation or dehumanization. Firstly, the situation, as stated earlier, is beyond human control, hence it is improbable to change the situation in such a way as to prevent war crimes. Secondly, we believe that since dehumanization is a subconscious mechanism and an essential tool for being able to morally justify killing another human being, it would not be plausible for an army conducting offensive missions to remove the aspect of dehumanization. Without
dehumanization, soldiers would have difficulty with the task of killing the enemy which contradicts what they are trained to do.

Taking into consideration that the military is built up as a hierarchical system we believe that preventative action should be directed towards the authority figures in the army. The commanding officer is responsible not only for the lives of his soldiers, but for their conduct as well. This means that officers have a direct influence on the behaviour of the soldier through the orders they give and the example they set. Soldiers look towards their commanding officer for security and leadership and expect him to have an overview of the situation. By providing the officers with additional tools for identifying tendencies towards overaggressive or sadistic behavior it would enable them to prevent soldiers from committing extreme acts of violence. In order to be capable of doing so, it is important that the officers themselves are required to go through strict evaluation and training to ensure that they are proficient in dealing with the psychological obstacles they may encounter. A leader in any context should set an example of how to conduct oneself while efficiently carrying out the required job. By making it clear what behavior is acceptable and by setting an example the authority figure should be able to positively influence the soldiers.

**Interconnected Theories Creating the Situation**

The different theories discussed in this project are interconnected. In the context of a military institution, it is not possible to describe one aspect without encountering another. When a soldier goes to war he becomes a part of a situation in which all these theories are present. The theories of obedience to authority and group conformity are ever present in the
military institution and the concepts of dehumanization and the power of the situation naturally occur in conflicts such as the Vietnam War. The specific case of the My Lai massacre, we believe, was a consequence of all these factors playing a part in the situation. The soldiers participating were strongly affected by their situation leading up to this event. The combination of dehumanization, the morale of the group, and the conduct of the authority figures present, intensified the circumstances and ultimately was the main catalyst in creating the overpowering situation the soldiers found themselves in. A soldier is affected by the environment he finds himself in and the newly created norms that follow from this situation will inevitably influence the actions of a soldier. History has shown that war crimes will occur in most conflicts. A war of this nature will always present soldiers with a life threatening situation in which decisions have to be made in a split second and distinguishing between right and wrong can be problematic. In conclusion, given the way in which the Vietnam War played out, we believe, that an atrocity such as the My Lai massacre was inevitable.
Conclusion

In order to answer our research and sub-questions we took a point of departure in the My Lai massacre, during the Vietnam War. We gave an account of the actual event and the circumstances surrounding it, as well as putting in place a definition of a war crime by giving an account of the Geneva Convention. We then chose four theories which we felt were relevant in explaining why people commit atrocities. By applying these we were able to determine how big a part each theory plays in influencing a soldier to commit a war crime, as well as discuss them in relation to each other. We ultimately reached the conclusion that the four theories discussed are strongly interconnected and all of them are important, each to a certain extent, in influencing a soldier to commit a war crime.
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Levine, John M. "Solomon Asch's Legacy for Group Research."


Group Process Description

A project proposition about human conflict and psychology sparked our common interest. The interest was in understanding psychologically why ordinary people are able to commit acts of evil. Later on the main focus turned to the attention of the military and military training. We wanted to know what process the soldier went through in training in order to kill in combat. The discussion began about the issue of war crimes, which seemed to be committed by soldiers who before the war were ordinary citizens. We needed to research into war crimes, and the soldiers which committed them, in order to understand why it occurs. A case study of a specific war crime was required for our research. We decided to keep our focus on one war crime in one war due to lack of time. The My Lai massacre, which occurred during the Vietnam War, became our case study because it is broadly discussed and a well documented war crime which helped us to apply psychological theories to the soldiers. We chose to focus on American soldiers, because it was easier to find good reliable sources and it drew the greatest amount of interest.

To understand the psychology of why a soldier commits a war crime we looked into four specific theories or ideas. In order to choose these theories we began by briefly looking into each theory presented and chose the most relevant. Our decision was to address obedience to authority, group conformity, dehumanization, and the power of the situation. The focus was on the soldiers as a group, rather than the soldiers as individuals.

In the beginning of our research we used the internet for inspiration. We went on to use the library at RUC, to find the majority of our sources. Sources have though been found at other libraries for example,
Copenhagen University. We found multiple books on each of the four subjects. In the area of dehumanization limited research was available. This particular subject was fairly new and not much research has been published.

Each chapter was completed by a group of four and handed in according to our own specific deadlines. The collective group meetings were used for critique, correction and for debating the conclusion of each chapter. Every week we had meetings with our supervisor Mikkel B. Hansen as well. Beforehand we sent drafts of our chapters and received feedback on them. Our supervisor pointed out the requirements for the project and the two dimensions we intended to cover. In order to fulfill the history dimension, he advised us to write a chapter about history criticism.

At the beginning of our research we watched movies which were relevant to our project, such as “Apocalypse now”, “Full Metal Jacket” and “Stanford Prison Experiment”.

The problem definition seminar helped us to realize that we had to narrow down our research question, while in the mid-semester evaluation; we received beneficial feedback from the other group as well as from our feedback supervisor Leif Emil.

We did not experience any social conflicts or crisis in our group through the project process. We were productive individually as well in groups. The contract, which contains the rules about meetings, deadlines, absences and etc. was signed and followed by all members of the group.