

THE MILGRAM "SHOCK" EXPERIMENT

Stanley Milgram

The Holocaust forces us to ask how people could obey orders that ended in the murder of millions of people. The issue of mass obedience has produced heated debate. Stanley Milgram's controversial laboratory research described below was designed to compare German and American levels of obedience. Milgram found a human capacity to obey destructive orders that had little to do with any instinct for aggression. He used Hannah Arendt's phrase, "the banality of evil," to describe the results of the experiment. In the experiment, ordinary persons imparted electric shocks to the victims not from any aggressive tendencies but out of a sense of obligation. Thus, ordinary people, by simply doing their jobs, chose to participate in a destructive process.

The Nazi [murder] of European Jews is the most extreme instance of...immoral acts carried out by thousands of people in the name of obedience. Yet in lesser degree this type of thing is constantly recurring: ordinary citizens are ordered to destroy other people, and they do so because they consider it their duty to obey orders...In order to take a close look at the act of obeying, I set up a simple experiment at Yale University. Eventually, the experiment was to involve more than a thousand participants and would be repeated at several universities...Two people come to a psychology laboratory to take part in a study of memory and learning. One of them is designated as a "teacher" and the other a "learner." The experimenter explains that the study is concerned with the effects of punishment on learning. The learner is conducted into a room, seated in a chair, his arms strapped to prevent excessive movement, and an electrode attached to his wrist. He is told that he is to learn a list of word pairs; whenever he makes an error, he will receive electric shocks of increasing intensity.

The real focus of the experiment is the teacher. After watching the learner being strapped into place, he is taken into the main experimental room and seated before an impressive shock generator. Its main feature is a horizontal line of thirty switches, ranging from 15 volts to 450 volts, in 15 volts increments. There are also verbal designations which range from **SLIGHT SHOCK** to **DANGER-SEVERE SHOCK**. The teacher is told that he is to administer the learning test to the man in the other room. When the learner responds correctly, the teacher moves on to the next item; when the other man gives an incorrect answer, the teacher is to give him an electrical shock. He is to start at the lowest shock level (15 volts) and to increase the level each time the man makes an error, going through 30 volts, 45 volts, and so on.

The "teacher" is a genuinely naive subject who has come to the laboratory to participate in an experiment. The learner, or victim, is an actor who actually receives no shock at all. The point of the experiment is to see how far a person will proceed in a...situation in which he is ordered to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim. At what point will the subject refuse to obey the experimenter?

Conflict arises when the man receiving the shock begins to indicate that he is experiencing discomfort. At 75 volts, the "learner" grunts. At 120 volts he complains verbally; at 150 he demands to be released from the experiment. His protests continue as the shocks escalate, growing increasingly vehement and emotional. At 285 volts his response can only be described as an agonized scream...

For the subject, the situation is not a game; conflict is intense and obvious. On one hand, the...suffering of the learner presses him to quit. On the other, the experimenter, a legitimate authority to whom the subject feels some commitment, enjoins him to continue. Each time the subject hesitates to administer shock, the experimenter orders him to continue...

There are, of course, enormous differences between carrying out the orders of a commanding officer during times of war and carrying out the orders of an experimenter. Yet...one may ask in a general way: How does a man behave when he is told by a legitimate authority to act against a third individual?...

A reader's initial reaction to the experiment may be to wonder why anyone in his right mind would administer even the first shocks. Would he not simply refuse and walk out of the laboratory? But the fact is that no one ever does. Since the subject has come to the laboratory to aid the experimenter, he is quite willing to start off with the procedure...Despite the

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fact that many subjects experience stress, despite the fact that many protest to the experimenter, a substantial proportion continue to the last shock on the generator.

Many subjects will obey the experimenter no matter how vehement the pleading of the person being shocked, no matter how painful the shocks seem to be, and no matter how much the victim pleads to be let out....

A commonly offered explanation is that those who shocked the victim at the most severe level were monsters, the sadistic fringe of society. But if one considers that almost two-thirds of the participants fall into the category of "obedient" subjects, and that they represented ordinary people...the argument becomes very shaky. Indeed, it is highly reminiscent of the issue that arose in connection with Hannah Arendt's 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt contended that the prosecution's effort to depict Eichmann as a sadistic monster was fundamentally wrong, that he came closer to being an uninspired

bureaucrat who simply sat at his desk and did his job...it was felt that the monstrous deeds carried out by Eichmann required a brutal, twisted, and sadistic personality...After witnessing hundreds of ordinary people submit to the authority in our own experiments, I must conclude that Arendt's conception of the *banality of evil* comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine. The ordinary person who shocked the victim did so out of a sense of obligation—...—and not from any peculiarly aggressive tendencies.

This is, perhaps, the most fundamental lesson of our study: ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become...clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe the Milgram "shock" experiment.
2. Did the participants feel uneasy about what they were doing? Erich Fromm in his book, *Anatomy of Destructiveness*, has suggested that we should emphasize the difficulty people had in obeying Milgram's orders.
3. What do you think would have been your reaction if you had been the teacher? How does the issue of "responsibility" play a role in the subject's decision to shock the learner?
4. Is the capacity for obedience an innate part of human nature? Can humans be taught to disobey orders that lead to the infliction of pain on others? How could this be done?
5. Are there times when it is important or necessary to obey without question or hesitation? Give examples.
6. What is meant by the "banality of evil"?

DEFINITION

enjoins: commands

Source: Milgram, Stanley. "The Milgram 'Shock' Experiment." *The Holocaust and Genocide: A Search for Conscience—An Anthology for Students*. Harry Furman, ed. New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1983.

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