

# STANLEY MILGRAM ON OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

In 1945, World War II ended. At and around the time of its ending, the world became aware of two terrifying realities. First were the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Humankind had the power of the sun in its hands. Second, the concentration camps were opened, and documents were captured; these showed firsthand, and in cold print, the inhumanity of which human beings were capable. Combine immense power with a capacity for unspeakable cruelty, and the fear that swept over the world is not hard to understand.

Perhaps we could console ourselves with the thought that the Nazi leaders, and the concentration camp guards and wardens, were unusually bad people. Some of them no doubt were. As far as could be seen, however, many others were simply normal human beings, carrying out orders. Well, then, perhaps certain societies are particularly at risk for this sort of barbarity. Perhaps there is an “authoritarian personality” that is particularly inclined to follow orders blindly, even inhumane ones, and perhaps certain societies foster the authoritarian outlook. Both of these possibilities offer comfort. Perhaps barbarities are perpetrated only by a pathological minority—pathological individuals, and perhaps pathological societies.

When Stanley Milgram began his studies of obedience, his intention was to compare different societies. He sought a way in which one’s willingness to follow inhumane orders could be measured. Then, with that method in hand, he could compare people drawn from different societies—for example, Germany and the United States. Other studies have in fact compared people from different countries. But what Milgram found in the United States was revelation enough.

Stanley Milgram (1933–84) was born in New York City. He earned his bachelor’s degree from Queens College in 1954 and his Ph.D. at Harvard in 1960; during his time there he was research assistant to Solomon Asch, another student of response to social pressure (chapter 56). Milgram then joined the faculty at Yale, where his classic experiments on obedience began. Later he returned to Harvard and then, in 1967, to the City University of New York, where he remained. Milgram’s book on

obedience (1974) was translated into seven languages and nominated for a National Book Award for what it showed us about ourselves.

In Milgram's initial experiments (1963), the participants were recruited from newspaper ads and posters placed around the city. These invited people to "learn about themselves" in a psychological experiment. That, plus how to reply, was all the information that they were given in advance. This is important, for it means that none of the participants had volunteered to be prison guards or concentration camp guards or to give punishment to anyone else for any reason. They simply had volunteered to participate in a psychological experiment, nothing more.

Then each of the resulting volunteers was put through a staged scenario, as follows. Upon entering the laboratory, they were introduced to another person who they were led to believe was another participant. Actually, this other person was an actor who was in the pay of the experimenter. But the participants did not know that.

The participants were told that they had been assigned the role of "teacher" in a learning experiment, whereas the actor had been assigned the role of "learner." As teacher, the participant's task was to punish the "learner" when he made mistakes in a learning task. The "learner" then went into a cubicle where the participant could not see him, but the two could communicate by voice, and the "learning session" began.

Now the "punishment"—so participants believed—consisted of electric shocks. The "learner"—the actor—had electrodes strapped to his wrist, connected by wires to a box identified as a shock generator. There was a control device that could be set at various levels. The purported intensities ranged from 15 V to 450 V (115 V is standard wall-socket voltage in the United States). Alongside these various settings were verbal descriptions ranging from "Slight shock" to "Danger: severe shock."

In short, the participants were told that their task in the experiment was to deliver electric shocks to the "learner" when the learner made a mistake. And the participants believed that they were in fact doing this.

The experiment began with the "shock" set at very low intensity. As the task went on, the participant was told to deliver the shocks at greater and greater intensity, as indicated on the shock generator. Remember that the "learner" was an assistant to the experimenter; he was playing a role, and in fact was receiving no shocks at all. But *the real participants did not know that.*

The test was to memorize a list of paired items, so that, seeing one member of each pair, the participants were to call out the other. The actor deliberately made mistakes and received a "shock" after each one. The participant was told to increase the level of the shock with each error, so the shock level kept rising.

The interest in the experiment was the real participants, who thought they were delivering these painful shocks. As the supposed level of shock went up and up, at what point would the participants simply say, "No. I'm not going to administer any more shocks"? They could, after all, have said that at any point. The experimenter had no power to prevent them from simply quitting and walking out the door.

But most did not. At about 120 V, the actor shouted that the shocks were becoming too painful. At 150 V, he demanded that the experiment end. So it went, until the actor was screaming with pain, and then, at higher levels still, there came only an ominous silence from the cubicle in which the actor sat. But the experimenter calmly told the participant that failure to respond was to be counted as an error, and that he was to continue delivering shocks of greater and greater intensity. And the

fact is that a full 65 percent of Milgram's subjects—both men and women—continued to obey the experimenter to the very end. *Sixty-five percent.*

They did not do so blindly. Early on, they would look to the experimenter for guidance and say things like “Shouldn't we stop?” But the experimenter would reply calmly, “You have no choice. You must continue.” Not surprisingly, many of the participants became seriously upset:

I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his earlobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered “Oh God, let's stop it.” And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the very end. (Milgram, 1963, p. 376)

Milgram went on to repeat the experiment under different conditions, and thus learn more about what he had discovered (1974). For instance, he showed that what he saw was a matter of *obedience to authority*, not of *conformity to a group* (though his work is often erroneously discussed under the latter heading).

One experiment that shows this began in the way described earlier. But then, shortly after the “learning session” began, the experimenter left the room to answer a bogus telephone call, leaving an assistant in charge. Here, where the person giving orders lacked the authority of a scientist, many fewer participants continued to follow orders.

At the same time, elements of the situation could also modulate the tendency to obey. One of these was the “psychological distance” between the participant and the apparent victim. In the original experiment, the actor was isolated in a booth. But in a variation, the actor was in the same room directly adjacent to the participant, who was told to administer the shock by pressing the victim's hand upon a shock electrode. Under these conditions, obedience dropped. It dropped all the way to 30 percent—which still means that about a third of the participants continued to obey even under these conditions.

This variation reduced the “psychological distance” between participant and victim; what if it is increased instead? Again there was a separate experiment, and this time there were two actors: one pretended to receive the shocks, and the other pretended to administer them. The real participants gave no shocks, but simply read the stimuli over a microphone and recorded the “learner's” responses. They did not have to administer shocks, but it was made clear to them that their presence was required to conduct the experiment. In other words, by quitting and walking out the door, they could prevent any further shocks to the learner. But in fact, under these conditions over 90 percent of the participants obeyed orders all the way to the end.

Finally, there does seem to be a parallel with the research on conformity in that it only takes one or a few dissenters to break up the influence of the authority figure (compare chapter 56). In these experiments, the single participants were in the company of two other people whom they thought were participants too, but who were actually assistants to the experimenter. Early on in the experiment, first one, then the second, refused to obey the experimenter's orders and “quit” the experiment. When they did so, all but 10 percent of the true participants also quit. Of

course, all participants could have quit in all the other experiments as well, and surely at some level they “knew” that this was so. Apparently, though, this option had to be made a salient part of their life spaces (chapter 55). It rarely came to mind without the “prompting” of disobedience by another person.

Why were these perfectly ordinary people willing to go on complying with what they thought was a cruel and dangerous procedure? No doubt there were a number of reasons. One is dehumanization of the victim. The “teacher” may put on psychic blinders and concentrate on his task, learning to ignore the suffering victim. One of Milgram’s participants said, “You really begin to forget that there’s a guy out there, even though you can hear him. For a long time I just concentrated on pressing the switches and reading the words” (Milgram, 1974, p. 515).

Then there is what we might call *transfer of responsibility*, by analogy with *diffusion of responsibility* (chapter 59). If we are acting on someone else’s orders, we may come to feel that it is the other person who is really performing the action, and not ourselves; some writers have compared this to a hypnotic state (Wegner, 2002). As we can dehumanize a victim, so it seems that we can also dehumanize ourselves, becoming instruments rather than agents in our own minds. Another of Milgram’s participants, who had obeyed to the very end, said, “I stopped, but he [the experimenter] made me go on” (Aronson, 1999, p. 43).

Another factor promoting compliance may have been the *gradualness* of the sequence (the “slippery-slope” phenomenon). “Suppose the experimenter had explained, at the outset, that he would like people to deliver a possibly fatal shock to the other participant. How many people would have agreed? Very few, we suspect” (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1994, p. 304). But Milgram’s experiment set up a situation in which what was done changed gradually, from not at all dangerous to (apparently) very dangerous, with no prominent line of demarcation. At what point should the participants switch from one role (participants whose job is to follow the experimenter’s instructions) to another role (people who can make their own decisions and decide not to hurt someone)? The gradualness of the dilemma might even mean that a shift of role would be accompanied by a certain *cognitive dissonance* (compare chapter 40). The participants might say to themselves, “I have obeyed orders thus far, and it is only a small increase in shock intensity that I am being asked to administer now; why refuse now if not before? It would be inconsistent of me.”

Whatever the reasons, the willingness of Milgram’s participants to comply with these abhorrent orders often comes as a surprise—as it did to Milgram himself. When people are asked, “How many people do you think would deliver the maximum amount of shock in such a situation?” a typical estimate is around one percent. These were the results with psychology majors at Yale University, a sample of middle-class adults, and a panel of psychiatrists. But the data are clear. This commonsense answer is simply wrong. We should remember once again that the participants in Milgram’s experiments were ordinary people, presumably not much different from you and me. We may feel very strongly as individuals that we would refuse to comply with such abhorrent demands, and most of us will say so if asked. It is humbling to remember that when actually faced with the situation, roughly two-thirds of “people like us” do in fact comply. As noted in other chapters, we tend to minimize the important role of the *situation* in affecting our thoughts and actions.

Direct experience with situational constraints on behavior can be very revealing. Elliott Aronson tells this story:

One year, when, as usual, I asked my social-psychology students whether they might continue delivering shocks until the end of the scale, only one hand slowly rose; everyone else in the class was confident that he/she would defy the experimenter's instructions. But the student who raised his hand was a Vietnam veteran who was in a position to know; he had experienced the impact of similar pressures, and he painfully and tragically came to recognize his own vulnerability in certain situations. (1999, p. 46)

Before leaving these experiments, a word should be said about the ethical issues that they raise. Milgram's participants were put through very stressful experiences, as indicated earlier, and they had not consented to this. Apart from issues of informed consent, we have to wonder whether the procedures of these experiments might have done damage to the participants' conception of themselves.

Of course, all of them had the procedure and the reasons for it carefully explained to them after the experiment was over. They were told that no one had in fact received any shocks or undergone any pain at all. Even so, they were also fully aware that they had not known this while the experiment was going on. Therefore, they left the experiment knowing that they had been willing to inflict pain (whether they had actually done so or not) just because someone in authority had told them to do so. How damaging might that knowledge be?

On the other hand, we could ask, if we refuse to learn unpleasant truths of ourselves, it is that not also damaging in the long run? Perhaps it is; but it is not clear that that is for us scientists to say. We do not have the right to put people in stressful situations without their consent just to "teach them a lesson."

Milgram discussed the matter with his participants, and he reports that most thought that it was a valuable experience, that they had learned something important about themselves. Even so, we cannot be sure of all participants will react that way. What about those who do not?

We find ourselves, in short, in a conflict for which there is no easy resolution. It seems very likely that an experiment like Milgram's would not be permitted today. Supervisory boards would forbid it, for the reasons we have just given. And yet the fact remains that Milgram's experiments are cited in every introductory psychology text, and are presented as having taught us something valuable about human beings—including ourselves.

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