

Obedience and the real world

Stanley Milgram's study of obedience remains one of the most iconic experiments in social psychology, but just how far can we stretch the 'obedience alibi' when explaining events in the real world?

Obedience to authority was an important social issue in 1962, when Stanley Milgram began his studies at Yale University in the USA. Adolph Eichmann had recently been sentenced to death for his role in the Holocaust, despite his plea that he was 'only obeying orders'. Whether such crimes against humanity could be explained in terms of simple obedience was very much a judgement call, although it is clear that Milgram's work was the first effort to understand this phenomenon in an objective and scientific manner.

Milgram's study of obedience

In his initial base-line study, Milgram recruited 40 male participants by advertising for volunteers to take part in an experiment to examine the effects of punishment on learning. The participants were used in pairs, drawing slips of paper to determine who would become the 'teacher' and who would become the 'learner'. The draw was rigged so that the real participant was always the teacher and

the other participant, who was actually an accomplice of Milgram, took the role of learner. The teacher's task was to test the learner's ability to learn word pairs. Every time he made an error, the teacher was to administer an electric shock, increasing the shock level each time, with the final shock level set at 450 volts. The learner, seated in a separate room from the teacher, received his shocks in silence until 300 volts, at which point he pounded on the wall and then gave no response to subsequent questions. The teacher was instructed to treat no response as incorrect, and to continue giving the shocks. Despite the reality of the experimental set-up, no shocks were really given, and the learner's responses were actually pre-recorded.

In the base-line study, a substantial majority of participants (26 out of 40) continued to the full 450 volts. In subsequent variations, Milgram tested whether obedience levels would drop if the teacher could actually hear the learner screaming and demanding to be set free. They did not, with 25 of the 40 in this second condition

still continuing to 450 volts. Milgram then introduced another variation to the experiment, with the learner claiming a pre-existing heart condition. Again, this made no difference to obedience levels, with 26



Stanley Milgram

Eric Kroll/Stanley Milgram

out of 40 being completely obedient to the experimenter's instructions. Even when the learner was in the same room and the teacher was required to press the hand of the screaming victim down onto a shock plate to receive his shock, a staggering 30% of participants still continued to the full 450 volts.

Milgram's research stunned an American public still reeling from the horror of Nazi war crimes during the Holocaust. Approximately two-thirds of ordinary Americans had been willing to deliver potentially fatal shocks to an innocent victim, continuing to do so despite his having lapsed into apparent unconsciousness. The comparison was clear for many to see. If this level of obedience could be obtained at the command of an experimenter with no apparent means of enforcing his orders, what levels of obedience would have been possible within the Nazi war machine during the Second World War, when disobedience was not an option? Milgram had revealed in ordinary Americans the potential for behaviour comparable to that of the Nazis during the Holocaust.

Just following orders

Although Milgram was not attempting to explore Holocaust events in his laboratory, he was intent on studying what he considered a central dynamic of the Holocaust — obedience — in a carefully controlled experimental setting. 'The essence of obedience, as a psychological process, can be captured by studying the simple situation in which a man is told by a legitimate authority to act against a third individual' (Milgram 1974).

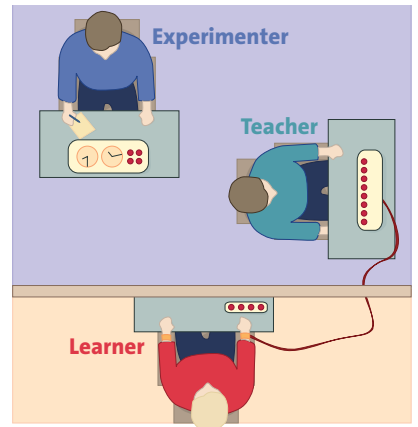
Milgram believed that events in the Holocaust and in the My Lai massacre in Vietnam in 1968, where hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians were killed by American soldiers, related closely to the dilemma faced by his experimental participants. People, he claimed, are obsessed with carrying out their jobs and are willing, when necessary, to assign responsibility for their actions to someone higher in command. For example, Adolph Eichmann's biography painted a picture, not of a raging psychopath, but of a relatively ordinary bureaucrat, intent on doing his job efficiently. What he felt most proud of was his strict adherence to duty in transporting Jews and his efficiency in the job. Elliot Aronson (1984) sums this up with his claim that 'people who do crazy things are not necessarily crazy', and that instead of classifying people such as Eichmann as

psychotic, we should 'try to understand the nature of the situation and the processes that were operating to produce the behaviour'.

At the Nuremberg war trials, the Nazi defendants claimed that they had been 'following orders', therefore they could not be guilty of war crimes. Were these just excuses for pathological behaviour? Although we cannot accept the plea of following orders as a *justification* for the killing of innocent people, perhaps it is more reasonable to consider it as an *explanation* for these events. It is this possibility that we consider next.

Explaining the unexplainable

Drawing upon insights derived from Milgram's study of obedience, a number of commentators, including Milgram himself, have attempted to explain one of the seemingly most inexplicable events in human history — the mass murder of European Jews during the Second World War. However, there are a number of differences between Milgram's study and the Holocaust



The teacher administered shocks to the learner, who was seated in a separate room.

that would make such an explanation untenable. As Milgram himself observed, 'The laboratory experiment takes an hour, the Nazi calamity unfolds over more than a decade' (Milgram 1974).

Blass (1992) also points out that there is a crucial distinction between Holocaust murders, where the perpetrators clearly



Adolf Eichmann standing in his bullet-proof box in the court room in Jerusalem, 11 December 1961. He was charged and found guilty of the wartime murder of millions of Jews