
A Matter of Obedience?

This reading comes from the Facing History and Ourselves resource [Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior](https://www.facinghistory.org/for-educators/educator-resources/resources/facing-history-and-ourselves-holocaust-and-human-behavior) (<https://www.facinghistory.org/for-educators/educator-resources/resources/facing-history-and-ourselves-holocaust-and-human-behavior>).

Introduction

In her study of totalitarian regimes, Hannah Arendt wondered, “How do average, even admirable, people become dehumanized by the critical circumstances pressing in on them?” In the 1960s, Stanley Milgram, a professor at Yale University, decided to find out by recruiting college students to take part in what he called “a study of the effects of punishment on learning.” In Milgram’s words, “The point of the experiment is to see how far a person will proceed in a concrete and measurable 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?”¹

Working with pairs, Milgram designated one volunteer as “teacher” and the other as “learner.” As the “teacher” watched, the “learner” was strapped into a chair with an electrode attached to each wrist. The “learner” was then told to memorize word pairs for a test and warned that wrong answers would result in electric shocks. The “learner” was, in fact, a member of Milgram’s team. The real focus of the experiment was the “teacher.” Each was taken to a separate room and seated before a “shock generator” with switches ranging from 15 volts labeled “slight shock” to 450 volts labeled “danger – severe shock.” Each “teacher” was told to administer a “shock” for each wrong answer. The shock was to increase by fifteen volts every time the “learner” responded incorrectly. The volunteer received a practice shock before the test began to get an idea of the pain involved.

Before the experiment began, Milgram hypothesized that most volunteers would refuse to give electric shocks of more than 150 volts. A group of psychologists and psychiatrists predicted that less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the volunteers would administer all 450 volts. To everyone’s amazement, 65 percent gave the full 450 volts!

Later Milgram tried to isolate the factors that encouraged obedience by varying parts of the experiment. In one variation, he repeated the test in a less academic setting. Obedience dropped to nearly 48 percent, still a very high number. In another variation, the volunteers received instructions by telephone rather than in person. Without an authority figure in the room, only 21 percent continued to the end. Milgram

also noted that when no one in authority was present, some volunteers reacted to the “pain” of the “learner” by repeating a relatively low level shock rather than increasing voltage as instructed – an innovative compromise in Milgram’s view.

In a third version of the test, each volunteer was surrounded by authority figures who argued over whether to continue the experiment. In this variation, no “teacher” continued until the end. In yet another variation, it appeared as if three “teachers” were giving shocks at the same time. Two, however, worked for Milgram. When they “quit,” only 10 percent of the real volunteers continued. The distance between the volunteer and the “learner” also made a difference. Only 40 percent of the “teachers” obeyed when the “learner” was in the same room. Obedience dropped to 30 percent when volunteers had to place the “learner’s” hand on a metal plate to give the shock. On the other hand, when they had a lesser role in the experiment, 92 percent “went all the way.” Gender had little effect on the outcome of the experiment. Men and women responded in very similar ways. Women did, however, show more signs of conflict over whether to obey. Philip Zimbardo, a psychologist at Stanford University, said of the experiments:

The question to ask of Milgram’s research is not why the majority of normal, average subjects behave in evil (felonious) ways, but what did the disobeying minority do after they refused to continue to shock the poor soul, who was so obviously in pain? Did they intervene, go to his aid, did they denounce the researcher, protest to higher authorities, etc.? No, even their disobedience was within the framework of “acceptability,” they stayed in their seats, “in their assigned place,” politely, psychologically demurred, and they waited to be dismissed by the authority. Using other measures of obedience in addition to “going all the way” on the shock generator, obedience to authority in Milgram’s research was total.²

Zimbardo observed similar behavior in an experiment he supervised in 1971. He chose twenty-four young men – “mature, emotionally stable, normal, intelligent college students” – from seventy applicants. These men were arbitrarily designated as “guards” or “prisoners” in a simulated prison. The “guards” met to organize the prison and set up rules. Zimbardo reported what happened next.

At the end of only six days we had to close down our mock prison because what we saw was frightening. It was no longer apparent to most of the subjects (or to us) where reality ended and their roles began. The majority had indeed become prisoners or guards, no longer able to clearly differentiate between role playing and self. There were dramatic changes in virtually every aspect of their behavior, thinking and feeling. In less than a week the experience of imprisonment undid (temporarily) a lifetime of learning; human values were suspended, self-concepts were challenged and the ugliest, most base, pathological The question to ask of side of human nature surfaced. We were horrified because we saw some boys (guards) treat others as if they were despicable animals, taking pleasure in cruelty, while other boys (prisoners) became servile, dehumanized robots who

thought only of escape, of their own individual survival and of their mounting hatred for the guards.³

Connections

1. Milgram has defined obedience as “the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose.” How do you define the word? What is blind obedience? How does it differ from other forms of obedience? What is the difference between obedience and conformity?
2. What encourages obedience? Is it fear of punishment? A desire to please? A need to go along with the group? A belief in authority? Record your ideas in your journal so that you can refer to them later.
3. Obedience, a documentary describing the Milgram experiment, is available from the Facing History Resource Center. After watching the film, discuss the following questions.
4. As students watch the film, some laugh. How do you account for that laughter? Is it because something was funny or was there another reason? Those who study human behavior say that laughter can be a way of relieving tension, showing embarrassment, or expressing relief that someone else is “on the spot.” Which explanation is most appropriate in this case?
5. How did the volunteers act as they administered the shocks? What did they say? What pressures were placed on them as the experiment continued? How did they decide whether to stop?
6. Did you identify with any of the volunteers you observed in Obedience?
7. Zimbardo said that he “called off the [prison] experiment not because of the horror I saw out there in the prison yard, but because of the horror of realizing that I could have easily traded places with the most brutal guard or become the weakest prisoner full of hatred at being so powerless that I could not eat, sleep or go to the toilet without permission of the authorities.”⁴ How would you like to think you would react?
8. A student who took part in an experiment set up by Zimbardo on deafness-induced paranoia expressed a dilemma posed by experiments like those of Milgram and Zimbardo. “I agree with the people who say it’s not right to deceive human beings; it’s not right to treat people as if they were mice. But I agree with Professor Zimbardo that he couldn’t do his work on deafness and paranoia without deceiving his subjects, because if they knew what was going on, they wouldn’t react the same as if they didn’t. I can see both sides. That’s my dilemma, and I don’t think there’s any simple answer to it, only complicated ones.”⁵ What is your position on “research through deception?” Should scientists be allowed to carry out such experiments.
9. Sociologists Herbert Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton related Milgram’s experiments to events during the Vietnam War. They characterized incidents like the My Lai massacre in which an American armed forces unit destroyed a hamlet and killed hundreds of women and children as a “crime of obedience.” What does that phrase mean to you? Can obedience be a crime? If so, give an example you have

- seen or read about. If not, explain why obedience can never be a crime.
10. *The Wave*, an award-winning film, re-creates Ron Jones's classroom "experiment," the Third Wave. It raises important questions about conformity, peer pressure, and loyalty. Both the video and a transcript are available from the Facing History Resource Center. A teacher said of her students' responses, "They were spellbound. Most felt they would have joined the Third Wave; they used phrases like 'the power of belonging' and we discussed the vulnerability in us that makes us want to be part of a group, especially if it's elite." As you watch the film or read the transcript, think about the way you responded.
 11. What did it teach you about yourself? About why many people are attracted to a particular leader or want desperately to be part of a particular group?
 12. How might you have felt if you had been a student in Jones' class? Did he have a right to manipulate students to "teach them a lesson?" Would your answer be different if students had known in advance they were taking part in an "experiment"?
 13. Some teachers use simulations to engage students "emotionally" or simulate affective experiences and learning. Unless a simulation includes a cognitive component, however, it has little or no learning value. It may even leave some students with the impression that they now "know what it was like" to have been a victim of the Nazis. That is just not true. Keep in mind that simulations also tend to oversimplify events and leave students with an inaccurate picture of the past. In addition, a number of simulations reinforce stereotypes; build on students' fears or insecurities; encourage ridicule; or violate the trust between student and teacher.
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End Notes

1. Harrison E. Salisbury, Forward to *Mischling, Second Degree: My Childhood in Nazi Germany* by Ilse Koehn (Greenwillow, 1977), viii-ix.
2. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (Harper & Row, 1974), 3-4
3. Tannen, preface to *You Just Don't Understand*, 16.
4. *Ibid.*

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