

READING

A Matter of Obedience?

Three decades before Christopher Browning completed his study of Police Battalion 101, a psychologist at Yale University named Stanley Milgram also tried to better understand why so many individuals participated in the brutality and mass murder of the Holocaust.

In the 1960s, Milgram conducted an experiment designed “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.”¹ Joseph Dimow was one of the people who unknowingly took part in that experiment. In 2004, he described the experience:

Like many others in the New Haven area, I answered an ad seeking subjects for the experiment and offering five dollars, paid in advance, for travel and time. At the Yale facility, I met a man . . . in a white coat and horn-rimmed glasses. He led me into a room filled with an impressive display of electrical equipment. A second man was introduced to me as another subject for the experiment, and together we were told that the experiment was to test the widely held belief that people learn by punishment. In this case, one of us would be a “learner” and the other a “teacher.” The teacher would read a list of paired words . . . and then repeat the first word of the pair. If the learner did not respond with the correct second word, the teacher would deliver a “mild” electric shock to the learner as punishment. . . .

The “professor” said we would draw straws to see which of us would be the learner. He offered the straws to the other man [and] then [the man] announced that he had drawn the short straw and would be the learner . . .

The learner, said the professor, would be in an adjoining room, out of my sight, and strapped to a chair so that his arms could not move—this so that the learner could not jump around and damage the equipment or do harm to himself. I was to be seated in front of a console marked with lettering colored yellow for “Slight Shock” (15 volts) up to purple for “Danger: Severe Shock” (450 volts). The shocks would increase by 15-volt increments with each incorrect answer.²

¹ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 3–4.

² Joseph Dimow, “Resisting Authority: A Personal Account of the Milgram Obedience Experiments,” *Jewish Currents* (January 2004), accessed June 18, 2016.

In fact, the “learner” was an actor hired by Milgram. Dimow, the “teacher,” was the person Milgram and his team were studying. Social scientists Nestar Russell and Robert Gregory explain how the experiment was set up:

Once the experiment has started, the participant [the “teacher”] is soon required to deliver shocks of increasing intensity. In fact, no shocks at all are being administered, though the participant does not know this. As the “shocks” increase in intensity, the ostensible pain being experienced by the learner also becomes increasingly apparent by way of shouts and protests (actually via a tape recording) emanating from behind a partition that visually separates the teacher from the learner. For example, at 120 volts the learner is heard to say “Ugh! Hey, this really hurts!” Typically, the participants express their concern over the learner’s well-being. Yet the experimenter continues to insist “The experiment requires that you continue,” “You have no other choice, you must go on.” Such commands were designed to generate feelings of tension—what Milgram called strain—within the participant. If the participant continued to obey these strain-producing commands to the 270-volt level, the learner, in obvious agony, was heard to scream, “Let me out of here. Let me out of here. Let me out of here. Let me out. Do you hear? Let me out of here!” At the 300-volt level, the learner refuses to answer and instead responds with agonized screams. The experimenter commands the participant to treat further unanswered questions as incorrect and accordingly to inflict the next level of shock. After a 330-volt shock has been administered, the learner suddenly falls silent. The participant is again ordered to treat any further unanswered questions as incorrect and to continue administering shocks of increasing voltage. Once the participant has administered three successive shocks of 450 volts, the experimenter stops the process.³

After a session of the experiment was complete, Milgram’s team revealed to the participant that he or she had been deceived, and they brought the “learner” into the room so that the participant could see that he had not been harmed. Regardless, this deception, in which the subject of an experiment is tricked into believing that he or she is harming another individual, is widely considered to be unethical today. At the time, when Milgram described this experiment to a group of 39 psychiatrists, the psychiatrists predicted that one participant in 1,000 would continue until he or she delivered the most severe shock, 450 volts. In reality, 62.5% of participants did.

By varying the setup of his experiment, Milgram observed a relationship between the distance separating the teacher and learner and the willingness of the teacher to generate more severe

³ Nestar Russell and Robert Gregory, “Making the Undoable Doable: Milgram, the Holocaust, and Modern Government,” *American Review of Public Administration* 35, no. 4 (December 4, 2005), 328–329.

shocks. When the teacher was required to touch the learner by forcing the learner's hand onto the plate from which the shock was delivered, 30% of the teachers proceeded to the most severe shock. When the teacher did not touch the learner but remained in the same room, obedience to go all the way increased to 40%. When the teachers were placed in a separate room from which they could hear the voice of the learner but not see him, obedience increased to 62.5%. When the learner did not speak but only banged on the wall to indicate distress, obedience increased to 65%. When the teacher could neither see nor hear the learner at all, obedience reached almost 100%.⁴ Milgram tested other variations in which the distance between the experimenter and the teacher changed. He found that the farther the distance between experimenter and teacher, the less likely the teacher was to obey. Milgram concluded that the experiment forced the teacher to decide between two stressful situations: inflicting pain on another person and disobeying authority. The closeness of the learner and the experimenter to the teacher affected the teacher's choice: "In obeying, the participants were mainly concerned about alleviating their own, rather than the learner's, stressful situation."⁵

In interpreting the implications of Milgram's research, many, including Milgram himself, focused on the effect of physical closeness between perpetrator and victim on the willingness of one person to harm another. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes:

It is difficult to harm a person we touch. It is somewhat easier to afflict pain upon a person we only see at a distance. It is still easier in the case of a person we only hear. It is quite easy to be cruel towards a person we neither see nor hear.⁶

But others who study Milgram's work argue that focusing primarily on physical distance leaves out other important factors suggested by the experiment. Russell and Gregory argue that "emotional distance" is an equally important factor. In their analysis of the Milgram experiments, they write:

Although the . . . learner was deliberately chosen as a likable, middle-aged man, and although many participants expressed strong concern about his apparent plight—and were relieved to be reconciled with him at the end of the experiment—he was a stranger

⁴ Nestar Russell and Robert Gregory, "Making the Undoable Doable: Milgram, the Holocaust, and Modern Government," *American Review of Public Administration* 35, no. 4 (December 4, 2005), 330.

⁵ Nestar Russell and Robert Gregory, "Making the Undoable Doable: Milgram, the Holocaust, and Modern Government," *American Review of Public Administration* 35, no. 4 (December 4, 2005), 331.

⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013), 155.

to them. Milgram speculated that obedience rates may have been even higher had the learner been presented as “a brutal criminal or a pervert”; but obedience rates may also have been much lower overall had the learner been a loved member of the participant’s family, a friend, or even an acquaintance. So Milgram confirmed what most people instinctively know—that it is far easier to maltreat others if they are personal strangers, even easier to do so if they are cultural strangers, and especially if we engage in rationalization processes of self-deception that serve to dehumanize them.⁷

Russell and Gregory also believe that the way the harm is inflicted would affect the willingness of individuals to do it. In their analysis of the Milgram experiments, they point out that the shock generator was a technological and indirect way for the teacher to inflict pain; in most variations, teachers flicked a switch rather than using “direct physical force.” Russell and Gregory ask: “How far would Milgram’s participants have gone if they had been required personally to beat, bludgeon, or whip the learner, ultimately to the point of unconsciousness or beyond?”⁸

Milgram’s experiments provide insights that help us understand the choices and motivations of many who participated in the Nazi programs of persecution and mass murder. But many historians and social scientists who have studied the Holocaust say that Milgram’s work does not fully explain the behavior of perpetrators in the Holocaust. While many acted in response to orders from authority figures, some perpetrators chose to go beyond the orders they were given. Others chose to act out of their own hatred or for their own material gain without being asked to do so. Even within the German government and military, leaders and bureaucrats took initiative and devised creative methods to achieve larger goals, not in response to orders but in an effort to “work toward the Führer”.

⁷ Nestar Russell and Robert Gregory, “Making the Undoable Doable: Milgram, the Holocaust, and Modern Government,” *American Review of Public Administration* 35, no. 4 (December 4, 2005), 332.

⁸ Nestar Russell and Robert Gregory, “Making the Undoable Doable: Milgram, the Holocaust, and Modern Government,” *American Review of Public Administration* 35, no. 4 (December 4, 2005), 333–34.

Connection Questions

1. What encourages obedience? What factors do the Milgram experiments suggest? What factors do these experiments leave out?
2. How do the Milgram experiments explain aspects of perpetrators' actions in the Holocaust? What do the experiments fail to explain?
3. What situation caused "feelings of tension" in participants in the Milgram experiments? What role did the distance between "teacher" and "learner" play in creating these feelings? What role did the distance between "teacher" and "experimenter" play?
4. What is the difference between physical distance and "emotional" distance? According to Russell and Gregory, what difference might the emotional distance between "teacher" and "learner" make in the willingness of the "teacher" to harm the "learner"? What might have created emotional distance between perpetrators and victims during the Holocaust?
5. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes: "The most frightening news brought about by the Holocaust and by what we learned of its perpetrators was not the likelihood that 'this' could be done to us, but the idea that we could do it."⁹ Do you agree that everyone has the potential to become a perpetrator? What do the Milgram experiments suggest about the aspects of human behavior that could make it possible for us to willingly inflict pain on others?
6. Some who played a role in mass murder during the Holocaust later tried to explain their actions by saying that they were simply obeying the orders of authority figures. Historian Daniel Goldhagen warns that this sort of "blind obedience" is not a sufficient explanation, because it leaves out the extreme form of antisemitism that he believes motivated the German killers. He writes that individuals will only obey orders that are consistent with the values and morals they already hold.¹⁰ What does he mean? What is he suggesting about the moral values and beliefs of perpetrators, such as the members of Police Battalion 101? Based on what you have learned so far, do you agree or disagree with Goldhagen?

⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013), 152.

¹⁰ Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Knopf, 1996), 383.