

A LINE ON LIFE

6/8/86

Obedient Killers

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Would you hurt someone merely because someone else told you to do so? Most of us would answer with an emphatic, "No!" Dr. Stanley Milgram, a social psychologist who was concerned about the slaughter of over 9,000,000 people in Nazi Germany, ran a series of experiments to see how this could happen.

Suppose you and another person were subjects in an experiment to see the *effects of punishment on learning*. You draw lots to see who will be assigned to be a "teacher" who will be assigned the role of a "learner." You get the teacher's role. You see the learner strapped into a chair with electrodes on his wrists.

You are taken into the next room, out of sight of the learner. You are seated in front of a "shock generator" with 30 switches labeled from 15-450 volts. There is a 15-volt increase between each switch (15, 30, 45...420, 435, 450). The switches are also labeled from "Slight Shock" to "Danger, Severe Shock." Every time the learner makes a mistake, you are to give him a shock, with each shock increased by 15 volts. To show you what it is like, you are given a sample shock of 45 volts. (It hurts!)

The task is started. Eventually the learner makes a mistake. You give the 15-volt shock. More mistakes lead to more and higher intensity shocks. The learner's groans in response to the shocks increase in volume. Near 100 volts, the learner complains about a heart condition. You still continue, because the experimenter says, "*You must continue.*" At 150 volts, the learner demands to be released. With higher shocks, the screams grow louder.

At 300 volts, the learner screams his refusal to give any more answers. For the next question, there is no answer from the learner. The experimenter quietly commands, "*Treat no answer as a wrong answer.*" Hesitantly, you push 315 volts. An agonizing scream follows. With no answer for the following question, you push the switch for 330 volts. There is no sound from the learner. All the way to 450 volts, the learner is silent.

Would you shock the learner to 450 volts? Like most of us, psychiatrists predicted less than 1% would shock the learner to 450 volts. The astounding fact is that almost two-thirds (65%) shocked the learner to 450 volts! Virtually no one stopped at 300 volts ("Severe Shock").

In reality, no shocks were ever given. The learner, an actor, was the experimenter's confederate playing taped responses to the "shocks." The real experiment was to see how much shock the teacher would give in **obedience to the authority figure**.

The experiment was first done with college students at Yale. Some said that the shocking levels were so great because of the prestige of the university. So Milgram repeated the experiment out of a shabby office in Bridgeport, Connecticut, using average citizens rather than college students. Although there was some drop in obedience to authority, almost half (48%) still shocked the learner to 450 volts!

Many atrocities are committed in the name of obedience.

I don't know about you, but this experiment scares me. When questioned at the Nuremberg trials about the extermination of millions, Nazi war criminals typically replied, "*We were only following orders.*"

Some of you think this only relates to Nazis (maybe Communists too). Do you remember how Vietnamese men women and children were slaughtered at My Lai? These were "*good guys*" doing these things! What do you think they used as an excuse? You're right — "*We were only following orders.*"

We do need some obedience for any society to function. However, it is the unquestioning, complete obedience that can lead to the terrible deeds we mentioned.

In case you don't think it directly applies to you, another study was done with people who said they would *never* do such things. Some time later — in another situation — most of them shocked a learner to 450 volts. Does this scare you? I hope so. Then possibly you might not become an obedient killer.
