

Milgram's experiments



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As evidenced by Milgram's many experiments, it is virtually impossible that the reason for the German's compliance with Hitler's orders for mass extermination of Jews is that the Germans were "unusually cruel, sadistic people with abnormal and twisted personalities."

After World War II, in the Nuremberg War Crimes trials, a common defense of those accused of these crimes against humanity was "obedience.". The prevalence of this justification is what prompted Stanley Milgram to perform his experiments. Milgram's experiments focused on the conflict between obedience to authority and a person's conscience.

Milgram recruited participants through newspaper advertisements calling for anyone interested in getting paid for participating in an experiment supposedly intending to determine the effect of punishment on learning. The participant (the subject) is introduced to a stern-looking experimenter in a white coat and to a second 'participant' that the subject understands was recruited in the same way that he was. This second participant, who is pleasant and friendly to the subject, is actually an accomplice of the experimenter.

Under the directions of the experimenter the subject, given the role of "teacher", is made to inflict electric shocks of increasing power for every mistake that the other "participant" (the "learner") makes in answering some questions. The experimenter and the teacher are in the same room while the learner is in an adjoining room. 65% of the teachers obeyed all orders and went to the maximum of 450 volts administered to the learner, even though most of the subjects were extremely uncomfortable in delivering the punishment. None of the subjects stopped "punishing" before reaching 300 volts.

Milgram also made variations in his many experiments and was thus able to establish a pattern: compliance increased with the increase in the immediacy of the the experimenter (the authority) to the subject, and decreased with the immediacy of the learner (the "victim"). Milgram also brought in the element of peer pressure (the power of conformity). Actors posing as teachers joined the subject, and had a very strong effect on the subjects behavior. When these actors refused to obey the experimenter, the majority of subjects also refused, and when the actors complied fully, the majority of subjects did the same.

Milgram performed these experiments to gain an understanding of the cruelty of the Nazis, and he succeeded in demonstrating that even "normal" people have the capacity for extreme cruelty, as long as they are able to find an "excuse"-a scapegoat-for their actions. These "excuses" are found in authority and the power of conformity. The concept of responsibility of the subject is important here-when, in the subjects mind, responsibility/blame can be transferred to another, then inhibitions that normally exist break. The "teachers" who complied fully were able to justify their actions by the belief that all responsibility was the experimenter's.

According to Milgram, "For a person to feel responsible for his actions, he must sense that the behavior has flowed from 'the self'" (Milgram, 1974). This explains the extreme cruelty of the Nazis. The directive for the mass torture and murder originated from Hitler, and they are able to transfer all blame to Hitler, or at least to their direct superiors. (Conversely, we can easily imagine that, in Hitler's mind, he must have taken all the "credit" for the racial "cleansing" that happened, although he had not conducted the killings and torture himself.)

Milgram has succeeded in showing us that our decisions and actions can be profoundly affected by how we are able to allocate responsibility in our minds, to the point that these decisions and actions become extremely divergent to values and morals that we hold dear.

References

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