

Psychology of the nazi obedience



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The Holocaust is known as one of the most devastating, or perhaps even the most devastating incident in human history. The mass executions, the terrible conditions, the ruthlessness, and the passivity of the majority of witnesses to the traumatic events all seem like a giant, twisted story blown out of proportion to scare children. In a time of desperation, when a country was on its knees to the rest of the world, one man not only united Germans against a scapegoat, but also manipulated them into committing almost unspeakable crimes against their 'enemies'. From Kristallnacht, when German citizens destroyed millions of dollars worth of Jews' possessions, synagogues, and stores; to the ghettos where residents were thrust together into too-small living spaces; to the concentration camps themselves where medical experiments, starvation, forced labor, gassings, beatings, and mass shootings occurred, seemingly ordinary people were capable of terrible deeds. Whether they acted under recklessness, fear, hate, ignorance, or were simply 'following orders' is what one must ask about every participant of the Holocaust, and through experiments like Milgram's, we can understand the psychology of their obedience well enough to ensure that such atrocities never happen again.

Definition: Obedience refers to those cases of conformity and compliance in which the person making the request is perceived as an authority figure or leader and the request is perceived as an order or command. Obedience can be a good thing. (Beneficial obedience). Obedience to parents and teachers is part of nearly everyone's socialization. However, obedience has its dark side. Most tragic are the cases in which people obey a leader who is evil, unreasonable, or sadly mistaken. This type of obedience is called Destructive

obedience. The ultimate demonstration of destructive obedience is that of Hitler of Germany and Mussolini of Italy.

“ One similarity between conformity and obedience is that both involve an ABDICATION OF PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY.”

Conformity is defined as yielding to group pressures. Individuals show conformity when they behave in ways that are expected by other members of a group. Conforming to the norms of group is majority influence but there are also cases when a minority can influence the behaviour of a group.

Zimbardo (1973) psychology lecturer at Stanford University USA conducted the prison test; students were recruited to play the roles of prisoners and guards in a mock prison. This was to study Conformity to Role Models. The study had to be aborted by Zimbardo after subjects playing the guards became very aggressive and started abusing the subjects playing the prisoners.

Moscovici (1969) researched on how minority could influence the majority to change its responses even the responses are clearly wrong. Moscovici et al. (1969), in his Green Colour Slide Experiment (GCSE), concluded that the minority can influence the majority as long as the minority are consistent in their responses.

The aftermath of the Holocaust and the events leading up to World War II left the world stunned with the happenings in Nazi Germany and their acquired territories. Much of the destruction and lack of compassion for human life came to the forefront of concern for society at large during the Nuremberg Trials. Adolf Eichmann argued that he had only been obeying orders. He was

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not the “ monster” that the newspapers described but simply an ordinary person caught up in an extraordinary situation. Eichmann was described as having no violent anti- Jewish feelings (Arden, 1963). He was an autonomous individual who became agentic when he joined the SS and subscribed to the military code of obedience to those in authority.

MY LAI MASSACRE AS A RESULT OF OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY The Vietnam controversy made many people feels at distress. It was never considered a “ war,” although that is exactly what it was There is an unquestionable connection between Milgram’s “ Obedience to Authority” and the My Lai Massacre. According to Kelman ” Hamilton, “ Unquestioning obedience has been the cause of such disasters as the My Lai massacre and the Holocaust.

- Milgram proposed the agentic theory: When we act as the agent of someone in authority we find it easy to deny personal responsibility for our actions – just following orders or just doing our job. Obedience to authority is deeply ingrained from early childhood when we are taught to obey our parents, teachers and elders. It is possible that the demand characteristics raised obedience rates. In the My Lai Massacre the men felt it was their duty to open fire on the village. They were given orders to do just that. There was no questioning of orders from Cally, their superior. The soldiers must have done as they were told, or incur severe consequences.

In Milgram’s experiments people felt they were ‘ helping’ in a scientific experiment. It also helped that the authority appeared to be academic experts at a top university, people would have trusted them.

Stanley Milgram's now famous experiments were designed to test obedience to authority (Milgram, 1963). What Milgram wanted to know was how far humans will go when an authority figure orders them to hurt another human being. But Milgram didn't investigate the extreme situation of war; he wanted to see how people would react under relatively 'ordinary' conditions in the lab. How would people behave when told to give an electrical shock to another person? To what extent would people obey the dictates of the situation and ignore their own misgivings about what they were doing?

The experimental situation into which people were put was initially straightforward. Participants were told they were involved in a learning experiment, that they were to administer electrical shocks and that they should continue to the end of the experiment. Told they would be the 'teacher' (lab coat) and another person the 'learner', they sat in front of a machine with a number of dials labeled with steadily increasing voltages. This was the 'shock machine'. The third switch from the top was labeled: "Danger: Severe Shock", the last two simply: "XXX".

Today the field of psychology would deem this study highly unethical because of the great deal of stress laid upon the subjects; however it is quite evident that this research yielded some extremely important findings. The theory that only the most severe monsters on the sadistic fringe of society would submit to such cruelty is disclaimed. Findings indicated that, "two-thirds of this studies participants fell into the category of 'obedient' subjects. These participants represented ordinary people drawn from the working, managerial, and professional classes" (Obedience to Authority).

Ultimately 65% of all of the “ teachers” punished the “ learners” to the maximum 450 volts.

According to Milgram, every human has the dual capacity to function as an individual exercising his or her own moral judgement and the aptness to make their own moral decisions based on their personal character. The question is therefore raised: What becomes of the average person who is obedient to authority when it overrides their own moral judgment?

Hofling (1966) conducted research on obedience in a natural setting at a hospital. He aimed to find out about rates of obedience in nurses. He tested this by conducting a field experiment to discover whether nurses would be prepared to disobey two orders at taking orders from an unknown Doctor (Doctor Smith from Psychiatry) and exceed the stated maximum dose of a drug (Astrofen).

21/22 nurses were prepared to take orders from an unknown doctor, and exceed the maximum doze without written authorizations.

The implications of this study are that Milgram’s results can be generalized to other settings which are higher in ecological validity.

Although this experiment is ethically very disturbing since the nurses were tricked into illegal actions, it does have high experimental validity and high ecological validity.

It is experimentally valid because it was a field study that took place in an actual real-life setting. It is also ecologically valid as it has genuine real world significance.

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Orne and Holland (1968), in a paper entitled ' On the ecological validity of laboratory deception', claimed that milgram's experiment lacked experimental realism because the participants couldn't have believed in the set-up. They also considered the question of demand characteristics in relation to experimental validity. Demand characteristics are those cues in an experiment that invite participants to behave in certain predictable way. Therefore, obedience is a demand characteristic- it is the response to the cues given by the experimenter. Milgram experiment also lacks validity as a consequence of the fact that participants behaved as they did because they had entered into a social contract by the payment of (\$4. 50) to obey the instructions. Therefore their behavior did not demonstrate obedience in the real world.

Ecological validity concerns the extent to which we can generalize the findings of a study to other situations. All of Milgram's research on obedience to authority was carried out in laboratory situations, which suggests that we might not be able to generalize the findings to the real world.

Milgram's work raises some important ethical issues- issues that also apply to many studies of obedience and conformity. In fact Milgram's study has become almost more famous for the ethical issues it raised than for its findings related to obedience.

Baumrind (1964) criticized Milgram for the severe distress he caused many if not all of his participants. Milgram's defence was that this effect was not anticipated nor was it deliberate. Prior to conducting the study he had

surveyed opinion about how people would behave and had reason to expect very little obedience and therefore very little distress. However, this does not justify all the subsequent variations he conducted, which must have been equally stressful. Both Zimbardo (1973) and Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina (1982) stopped their studies because of the concern they felt for the participants. Milgram also pointed out that the participants appeared to recover well afterwards, as evidenced in post-experiment interviews.

Baumrind argued that the participants were deceived by the experimenter as they were not told the true nature of the experiment; they were told that it was a memory experiment. Milgram (1992) has argued that the deception was a necessary part of the experiment because, without it, the experiment would lack experimental realism. In Milgram experiment the participants were not told that the study might cause conflict and distress, so they were not in a position to give their informed consent. A further ethical consideration is the freedom of the participant to withdraw at any time. Coolican (1990) claims that in Milgram's experiment the participants can withdraw at any time but in reality they were more or less ordered to continue. So they were not really free to leave if they wanted to, as the experimenter had the script to follow and stressed on continuing the experiment.

Erikson (1968) summed up Milgram's findings; it is "to man himself, not to 'the devil' belongs the responsibility for, and the control of, his inhuman actions."

Aronson (1988) argued that there might have been no ethical objections if the findings had been less distasteful, and Milgram (1974) also suggested

that the ethical concerns would have been reduced if the participants had disobeyed.

Erikson's conclusion was that people obey because obedience is a feature of human nature. There are different dispositional and situational explanations for obedience. Situational explanations include; being in a socially obedient environment, making graduated commitments, and being in an agentic state (a state caused by external events).

E. g. Eichmann was an autonomous individual who became agentic when he joined the SS and subscribed to the military code of obedience to those in authority.

Adorno et al.(1950) proposed that some people had an authoritarian personality. Adorno used the idea of the authoritarian personality to explain obedience to authority in fascist societies. He argued that fascism encouraged the development of this type of personality. This led to hostility towards minority groups, particularly Jews, and to the obeying of orders to oppress and murder Jewish people. Individuals with authoritarian personalities have repressed their hostility towards controlling parents and remain submissive to authority.

Goldhagen(1996) identifies ' eliminationist anti-semitism' rather than obedience as the primary motivation for the Holocaust. For many of the killers, even if considering only their first encounter with a victim, the act of killing came about quickly. They often involved in humiliation, degradation, or brutalization of the victim (Dawidowicz 1975; Goldhagen 1996).

The fundamental lesson of Milgram's research is an understanding of human weakness, and the frailty of conscience, in the face of malevolent demand by the authority to engage in evil that is universally recognised as wrong or immoral; in stark contrast the fundamental lesson of holocaust is the understanding of human willingness to engage in evil when that evil has been transformed, by social conditioning and state sanction, into something that is right and just, a source of great personal, national, and national pride and a matter that has almost nothing to do with conscience, morality, or obedience pressures.