

Wilful obedience

Business



In 1961, Stanley Milgram began experimenting with the tendency of people to obey authoritative figures, even when they are consciously performing unethical acts.

He became interested in this idea after the trial of WWII criminal Adolph Eichmann who said he only ordered the murder of millions of Jews because he was told to. The idea of the experiment is that each participant meets another “ participant” who is really an actor. The administrator would then ask the participants to pick a piece of paper that would assign them the role of “ Learner” or “ Teacher.” Both papers said “ Teacher” but, the confederate (actor) would lie and become the “ Learner.” The “ Teacher” was put in a room with an administrator.

The “ Learner” would be placed in a separate room, and asked a series of questions to which they would answer mostly incorrectly. Every incorrect answer would earn the “ Learner” a shock from the “ Teacher.” The shocks ranged from 15 volts to a lethal voltage marked with “ XXX.” The “ Learner” was never actually shocked. Prerecorded screams and noises would be played to correspond with higher volts of electricity.

After the 300 volt mark, the “ Learner” would bang on the wall and demand to be let go. After this point, the “ Learner” remains silent. Throughout the experiment, many “ Teachers” would ask to stop. After the fourth time they refuse to continue, they were let go and told the true nature of the test. The results of the experiment showed that 26 people would administer the fatal shock to the “ Learner” while 14 would not. The shock level was an indicator

of how far somebody would be willing to go to obey an authoritative figure, such as a psychologist in a lab coat.

While these results are shocking, they show the true dangers of being completely obedient. Some possible causes of these results could be the fact that the experiment was sponsored by Yale, which, being a prestigious school, lead people to believe it was safe and trustworthy, the physical presence of the administrator, the seemingly randomness of the experiment, and the fact that “ Teachers” were told the shocks were not dangerous, only painful. This experiment is important because it shows how willing we are to follow orders coming from a higher power despite the fact that we know what we are doing is wrong.