Four Decades After Milgram, We're Still Willing to Inflict Pain

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In 1963, Stanley Milgram, an assistant professor of psychology at Yale, published his infamous experiment on obedience to authority. Its conclusion was that most ordinary people were willing to administer what they believed to be painful, even dangerous, electric shocks to innocent people if a man in a white lab coat told them to.

For the first time in four decades, a researcher has repeated the Milgram experiment to find out whether, after all we have learned in the last 45 years, Americans are still as willing to inflict pain out of blind obedience.

The Milgram experiment was carried out in the shadow of the Holocaust. The trial of Adolf Eichmann had the world wondering how the Nazis were able to persuade so many ordinary Germans to participate in the murder of innocents. Professor Milgram devised a clever way of testing, in a laboratory setting, man's (and woman's) willingness to do evil.

The participants -- ordinary residents of New Haven -- were told they were participating in a study of the effect of punishment on learning. A ''learner'' was strapped in a chair in an adjacent room, and electrodes were attached to the learner's arm. The participant was told to read test questions, and to administer a shock when the learner gave the wrong answer.

The shocks were not real. But the participants were told they were -- and instructed to increase the voltage with every wrong answer. At 150 volts, the participant could hear the learner cry in protest, complain of heart pain, and ask to be released from the study. After 330 volts, the learner made no noise at all, suggesting he was no longer capable of responding. Through it all, the scientist in the room kept telling the participant to ignore the protests -- or the unsettling silence -- and administer an increasingly large shock for each wrong answer or non-answer.

The Milgram experiment's startling result -- as anyone who has taken a college psychology course knows -- was that ordinary people were willing to administer a lot of pain to innocent strangers if an authority figure instructed them to do so. More than 80 percent of participants continued after administering the 150-volt shock, and 65 percent went all the way up to 450 volts.

Jerry Burger of Santa Clara University replicated the experiment and has now published his findings in American Psychologist. He made one slight change in the protocol, in deference to ethical standards developed since 1963. He stopped when a participant believed he had administered a 150-volt shock. (He also screened out people familiar with the original experiment.)

Professor Burger's results were nearly identical to Professor Milgram's. Seventy percent of his participants administered the 150-volt shock and had to be stopped. That is less than in the original experiment, but not enough to be significant.

Much has changed since 1963. The civil rights and antiwar movements taught Americans to question authority. Institutions that were once accorded great deference -- including the government and the military -- are now eyed warily. Yet it appears that ordinary Americans are about as willing to blindly follow orders to inflict pain on an innocent stranger as they were four decades ago.

Professor Burger was not surprised. He believes that the mindset of the individual participant -- including cultural influences -- is less important than the "situational features" that Professor Milgram shrewdly built into his experiment. These include having the authority figure take responsibility for the decision to administer the shock, and having the participant increase the voltage gradually. It is hard to say no to administering a 195-volt shock when you have just given a 180-volt shock.

The results of both experiments pose a challenge. If this is how most people behave, how do we prevent more Holocausts, Abu Ghraibs and other examples of wanton cruelty? Part of the answer, Professor Burger argues, is teaching people about the experiment so they will know to be on guard against these tendencies, in themselves and others.

An instructor at West Point contacted Professor Burger to say that she was teaching her students about his findings. She had the right idea -- and the right audience. The findings of these two experiments should be part of the basic training for soldiers, police officers, jailers and anyone else whose position gives them the power to inflict abuse on others.

By ADAM COHEN

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