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The Roots of Stanley Milgram's Obedience Experiments and Their Relevance to the Holocaust

Abstract: Drawing on archival materials, interviews, as well as published sources, this article traces the roots of one of the most important and controversial studies in the social sciences, the experiments on obedience to authority conducted by the social psychologist, Stanley Milgram. Milgram's research had two determinants: First, his attempt to account for the Holocaust and, second, his intention to apply Solomon Asch's technique for studying conformity to behavior of greater human consequence than judging lengths of lines—the task which was the original focus in Asch's studies. After a detailed presentation of these antecedents of Milgram's work, the article concludes with a brief discussion of the applicability of the obedience experiments to the behavior of the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

"I wish to announce my departure from the Lindsly-Chittenden basement laboratory. It served us well." So began a letter to Claude Buxton, Chairman of Yale's Psychology Department.¹ The letter continued: "Our last subject was run on Sunday, May 27. The experiments on 'obedience to authority' are, Praise the Lord, completed At this point the findings look very strong, but need to be written up in a clear and intelligent fashion" The letter was dated June 1, 1962, the day after the Israeli government carried out Adolf Eichmann's death sentence for his role in the Nazis' 'final solution of the Jewish problem', presaging a more substantive connection that was to be made between those experiments and the behavior of the Nazis.

The author of the letter was 28-year-old Stanley Milgram, with a Ph.D. in social psychology from Harvard, who had begun his academic career barely two years earlier as an assistant professor with a starting annual salary of \$6,500. And in October, 1963, both the psychological community, through an article in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* (Milgram 1963) and the general public, via journalistic accounts in newspapers such as *The New York Times* (Sullivan 1963), *Der Spiegel*, *The London Times*, and later

¹ Quotes and information given without citation are either from the Stanley Milgram Papers, Yale University Archives, or from interviews conducted by me with Milgram's widow, Alexandra (Sasha) Milgram.

in many other newspapers, would learn about those “very strong” findings—Milgram’s startling discovery that an average, presumably normal group of men would readily inflict very painful, and possibly harmful electric shocks (as much as 450 volts) on a harmless victim whose actions did not merit such harsh treatment. Specifically, as part of an experiment ostensibly dealing with the effects of punishment on learning, subjects were required by an experimenter to shock a “learner” (actually an actor) every time he made an error on a verbal-learning task, and to increase the intensity of the shock in 15-volt increments from 15 to 450 volts on each subsequent error.

The results: At the bidding of the experimenter, 65% of the subjects continued to obey him to the end, despite the fact that: a) The subject was informed at the beginning that he could leave any time and still get his payment of \$4.50. b) The experimenter, though urging the subject on with such directives as “The experiment requires that you go on”, had no coercive means to enforce his commands. c) Although as the experiment began the experimenter affirmed that the shocks may be painful, but not dangerous, other details conveyed a contradictory and sinister message, i.e., after 315 volts the learner stopped giving answers to the verbal-learning task. The verbal label under the highest voltage switches said, “Danger: Severe Shock”, and then simply and ominously “XXX”. In some conditions, vocal protests of increasing pitifulness and urgency (e.g., “I can’t stand the pain. Let me out of here!”) corresponding to increasing shock voltages were heard from the learner (Milgram 1963; 1965; 1974).

This ‘shock’ experiment was part of a research program focusing on the dynamics of obedience to authority consisting of twenty-four experimental variations, begun in the summer of 1961, with grant support from the National Science Foundation. The results of this controversial program of research were reported by Milgram in a series of journal articles (Milgram 1963; 1964a; 1965a;c), magazine articles (Milgram 1964b; 1967a; 1973; 1976), a documentary film (Milgram 1965b), and a book (Milgram 1974). The work became one of the best-known pieces of research in the social sciences and would make Milgram’s name almost a household word. Even today, more than thirty-five years later, any introductory or social psychology text that would fail to include the obedience studies would risk being considered incomplete in its coverage. Not surprisingly, they are included in a recent book titled *Forty Studies That Changed Psychology* (Hock 1998).

The importance of this work could arguably be equated with that of Freud, in that both of them created significant modifications in our thinking about human nature. But there the similarity ends. While Freud, of course, focused on childhood and intrapsychic determinants of human action, for Milgram—following in the footsteps of Kurt Lewin’s ahistorical approach—the primary causal explanation for a person’s behavior was to be sought in the immediate,

concrete, social situation. Furthermore, unlike with Freud, there is no need for controversy about Milgram's connectedness to his Jewishness. Although a secular Jew, Milgram had a strong sense of his Jewish identity throughout his lifetime.

One would be hard put to find many other works in psychology which would compare with the obedience research in the wide range of disciplines which have found relevance in it. Thus, we can find the work discussed in publications of disciplines as diverse as law, accounting, history, economics, psychiatry, philosophy, Holocaust studies, political science, and business ethics.

Even teachers of English literature showed an early interest in his work, because of the lucidity of his writing style. In fact, one of the very first anthologies to reprint his writings was *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Expository Prose* (Eastman et al. 1965). Later examples of similar works that contained his writings are: *Fields of Writing: Readings Across the Disciplines* (Comley et al. 1984) and *Theme and Form: An Introduction to Literature* (Beardsley et al. 1969). A segment of the news program *Sixty Minutes* (CBS 1979) was devoted to it, and it served as the basis for a play, *The Dogs of Pavlov* (Abse 1973), a TV drama, *The Tenth Level* (starring William Shatner as the Milgram-like scientist), and a French film, *I Comme Icare (I as in Icarus)*, starring Yves Montand. Milgram's (1974) book has been translated into 11 languages, including, ironically, Serbo-Croatian in Yugoslavia in 1989. Some of his journal reports have appeared in translations, e.g., in German (Milgram 1966) and Hebrew (Milgram 1967b), as well. (For further discussions of the importance of Milgram's obedience research and his numerous other research endeavors, see Blass 1991; 1992. For a biographical treatment, see Blass 1996).

The purpose of this article is to trace the roots of Milgram's obedience research, and then conclude with a brief discussion of the applicability of the work to the Holocaust.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can already identify in Milgram's childhood, inklings of the brilliant mind (some called Milgram a genius) that later conceived the inventive machine and laboratory procedure to study obedience. When he was still in kindergarten, one night he stood next to his mother as she helped his older sister with her homework which was about President Abraham Lincoln. The following day when the kindergarten teacher asked her class to tell what they knew about Lincoln, little Stanley recited what he learned about him the night before. This impressed the teacher so much that she took him around to all the classes to recite his speech about President Lincoln (A. Milgram 1993).

Stanley had an inquisitive mind and his boyhood interests were in the scientific realm. As he later told an interviewer (Tavris 1974): "I was always doing experiments; it was as natural as breathing, and I tried to understand how

everything worked." In high school he became editor of the school's science newspaper, was a member of Arista (an honor society), and enjoyed working on stagecraft for theatrical productions—an experience that, no doubt, helped him later infuse the obedience experiments with the dramatic elements that made them such a powerful experience for his subjects.

Moving to the more focused antecedents of the obedience experiments, we can find them in Milgram's own statements. One factor that led to the obedience studies was his concern about the Holocaust. As he (Milgram 1977) put it: His "laboratory paradigm ... gave scientific expression to a more general concern about authority, a concern forced upon members of my generation, in particular upon Jews such as myself, by the atrocities of World War II The impact of the Holocaust on my own psyche energized my interest in obedience and shaped the particular form in which it was examine." (92–3)

There is evidence that this concern about the suffering of his fellow Jews under the Nazis began during his childhood. Milgram was born in the Bronx, New York, on August 15, 1933, to Samuel and Adele Milgram, both immigrants from Eastern Europe. During World War II, Samuel still had family in Europe and Stanley was very much aware of his father's worries about them. He often recalled how his parents would listen to the radio to keep close watch on developments in Europe. And we find the following expression of solidarity with his people in a speech the 13-year-old Milgram wrote and gave at his Bar Mitzvah celebration which took place in the year following the end of the War: "As I come of age and find happiness in joining the rank[s] of Israel, the knowledge of the tragic suffering of my fellow Jews throughout war-torn Europe makes this also a solemn event and an occasion to reflect upon the heritage of my people—which now becomes mine."²

Given the rootedness of the obedience work in the Holocaust, it is no surprise that Milgram initially planned to conduct some obedience studies in Germany after he completed the American series. This intention was expressed in a letter, dated October 10, 1960, which Milgram wrote to his former Harvard mentor, Gordon Allport, one of the giants of American psychology: "Next year I ... plan to undertake a long series of experiments on *obedience*. While this series will stand by itself as an independent study, it is also preparation for the project on German character—in which comparative experimental measures of 'obedience to authority' will play an important part." He never did carry out the German phase of that plan, because, as he told an interviewer (Meyer 1970, 73), he found so much obedience among his American subjects that he "hardly saw the need for taking the experiment to Germany".

The second factor that led Milgram to conduct the obedience experiments was the work of Solomon E. Asch on conformity. Asch had brought the ap-

² I want to express my appreciation to Alexandra (Sasha) Milgram for providing me with a copy of this speech.

proach of Gestalt psychology—pioneered by Wertheimer, Kohler, and Koffka and applied by them primarily to the realm of perception—to the study of social behavior. One of Asch's major contributions to social psychology was his invention of a laboratory procedure for studying behavioral conformity. In his experiments, subjects participate in what they believe is a study of perception. On each trial, a group of subjects views two cards: one contains 3 vertical lines of different lengths and the second shows 1 vertical line which is the same length as one of the 3 lines on the first card. The subject's task is to indicate, on each trial, which one of the 3 lines matches the single line in length. The experiment was typically conducted with a small group of participants, each of whom was supposed to announce, in turn, his match. Only one of the participants was a naive subject—who always answered last—while the rest were confederates who were instructed to give, unanimously, incorrect answers on designated trials. Asch found that, on the average, the real subject conformed to the bogus majority about one third of the time, giving the same incorrect answer they did.

Milgram had become intimately familiar with Asch's conformity paradigm: He was Asch's research and teaching assistant when the latter came to Harvard as a visiting lecturer in 1955–56; Milgram's doctoral research was a massive cross-cultural experiment on conformity, comparing Norwegians and Frenchmen, using a modification of the Asch procedure (Milgram 1960; 1961); and, finally, Milgram worked for Asch at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 1959–60, helping the latter edit a book on conformity, which was never published.

Here is how Milgram (1977) described how the Asch experiment led to his obedience paradigm:

“I was trying to think of a way to make Asch's conformity experiment more humanly significant. I was dissatisfied that the test of conformity was judgments about *lines*. I wondered whether groups could pressure a person into performing an act whose human import was more readily apparent, perhaps behaving aggressively toward another person, say by administering increasingly severe shocks to him. But to study the group effect ... you'd have to know how the subject performed without any group pressure. At that moment, my thought shifted, zeroing in on this experimental control. Just how far *would* a person go under the experimenter's orders? It was an incandescent moment”

Implications for the Holocaust. From its very beginnings, the obedience experiments have played a central and enriching role in a number of controversies. One of the most important ones has to do with the ethics of immersing participants in a highly stressful situation without their prior consent and deceiving

them into believing that they had hurt, and possibly harmed, an innocent human being. The other one has to do with whether or not Milgram's research has helped to solve the central behavioral puzzle posed by the Holocaust: How the average, presumably normal, German citizen and his allies could be transformed into individuals who would readily perpetrate unimaginable acts of cruelty against the Jews of Europe, resulting in the death of six million of them. Clearly, Milgram's answer was in the affirmative:

"After witnessing hundreds of ordinary people submit to the authority in our own experiments, I must conclude that Arendt's conception of the *banality of evil* comes closer to the truth than one might imagine. The ordinary person who shocked the victim did so out of a sense of obligation—a conception of his duties as a subject—and not from any peculiarly aggressive tendencies. This is, perhaps, the most fundamental lesson of our study: ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process With numbing regularity good people were seen to knuckle under to the demands of authority and perform actions that were callous and severe. Men who are in everyday life responsible and decent were seduced by the trappings of authority, by the control of their perceptions, and by the uncritical acceptance of the experimenter's definition of the situation into performing harsh acts." (Milgram 1974, 6, 123)

Milgram's 'situationist' approach, as expressed in the previous quotes, is today considered one of the legitimate viewpoints—even if one might not agree with it—in debates about how to best account for the Holocaust, as the following quote from a *Washington Post* book review by Marc Fisher (April 25, 1996) of Goldhagen's (1996) book suggests: "[Daniel Goldhagen] now claims he deserves a place alongside Hanna Arendt, Stanley Milgram, Raul Hilberg, and Yehuda Bauer, the great fathomers of the Holocaust."

My own view is that Milgram's approach does not provide a fully adequate explanation of the Holocaust. While it may well account for the dutiful destructiveness of the dispassionate bureaucrat who may have shipped Jews to Auschwitz with the same degree of routinization as potatoes to Bremenhaven, it falls short when one tries to apply it to the more zealous, inventive, and hate-driven atrocities that also characterized the Holocaust. A fuller presentation of this viewpoint, including the laboratory and historical evidence it is based on, can be found in my review of the various psychological approaches to the perpetrators of the Holocaust (Blass 1993).

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