Obedience to Authority:
Arendt, Milgram, and Zimbardo

Lawrence M. Hinman, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy
University of San Diego

Larry at EthicsMatters dot net
June 19, 2014
Overview

Part One. The Problem
• WWII & the Holocaust
• Hannah Arendt: Eichmann and the Banality of Evil

Part Two. The Explanation
• Milgram and His Shocking Experiments
• Zimbardo and the Stanford Prison Experiments

PostScript: Abu Grahib
Part One

The Problem
The horror of WWII was unimaginable.

- Estimates of the total number of death: 50-70 M.

This came on the heels of the pointless horror of WWI

- 22M deaths

The world was sickened by this loss of life—and the continuing deamage to those who survived.
The Holocaust

- The world was even more deeply shocked as the details of the Nazi extermination program became public as Auschwitz and other death camps were liberated.
- The death toll was horrific:
  - 6M Jews
  - Millions more Roma, homosexuals, Ethnic Poles, and handicapped persons.
- April 7, the anniversary of the Warsaw uprising, is commemorated in Israel as the day of remembrance of the Holocaust.

How was such evil possible?
Hannah Arendt covered the trial of Adolph Eichmann for the New Yorker. Her dispatches were subsequently published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. She was struck by the ordinariness of Eichmann, by what she called “the banality of evil.”
Thus the problem...

We can understand—or at least we think we can understand—great evil perpetrated by monstrous figures.

What was most disturbing about Eichmann—responsible for the killing of millions of Jews at Auschwitz and other camps—was that he was ordinary, a petty bureaucrat.

“The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together.”

How could someone so ordinary do such horrible things?
Part Two

Milgram and Obedience to Authority
Stanley Milgram (1933-1984)

- Graduated from James Monroe High School in NYC in 1950 along with classmate Phil Zimbardo
- Studied the newly-emerging field of social psychology at Harvard, working under Gordon Allport. His doctoral work focused on cross-cultural conformity, comparing subjects in Norway and France.
- Upon receiving his Ph.D. in 1960, he accepted a position at Yale, after spending time with Solomon Asch at the Institute for Advanced Study, again working on issues of conformity and social pressure.
- He joined the faculty at Yale in 1962, then taught for a few years at Harvard, and finally went to CCNY where became a Distinguished Professor.
Stanley Milgram’s classic shocking studies were intended to test obedience to authority.

They are arguably the most important social psychology experiments of the 20th century because they forever shook our expectations about human nature.

When he asked his students at Yale what percentage of participants would shock someone to the maximum, their estimate was 3%.

In reality, about 2/3 of the participants (67%) shocked to the maximum degree.
Milgram’s General Finding

Milgram’s findings would dramatically change our understanding of human behavior and—more specifically—of the capacity of good people for doing evil deeds.

"With numbing regularity good people were seen to knuckle under 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. A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority." (1965)
As we discuss this, it is helpful to know the basic vocabulary of the experiment:

**E:** The **Experimenter.** The authority figure who gives the orders.

**T:** The **Teacher.** The research subject (volunteer) who asks questions and administers shocks from incorrect answers.

**L:** The **Learner.** The person that the teacher asks questions and to whom shocks are administered.
Some Variants

Milgram conducted many versions of this experiment, but there were four principal variants in terms of proximity (Blass 2009):

1. **Remote.** Learner only knocked on wall. (65%)
2. **Voice-feedback.** Learner gave (pre-recorded) verbal comments and complaints. (62.5%)
3. **Proximity.** The learner is placed in the same room, close to the teacher. (40%)
4. **Touch Proximity.** The teacher had to place the learner’s hand on a metal plate to administer the shock. (30%)

Introducing an alleged heart condition did not significantly change the response rate.
In a 2009 article in *American Psychologist*, Thomas Blass discusses some of what we learned from Milgram’s experiments.

- We have a far stronger tendency to obey what is perceived as legitimate authority than we thought.
- Certain “internal mediating mechanisms” facilitated obedience:
  - “accepting the authority’s definition of the situation, of reality.”
  - Attributing responsibility to the authority figure rather than to oneself, what Milgram called the “agenic state.”
- Proximity of the person experiencing the shock is a crucial variable: the closer the learner, the less likely we are to shock.
- But proximity varies in two groups—not an expected result.
Part Three

Zimbardo and the Stanford Prison Experiment
Phil Zimbardo, a New Yorker and high school classmate of Milgram’s, received his Ph.D. in psychology from Yale in 1959. After teaching at NYU and Columbia for several years, he joined the faculty at Stanford in 1968.

One of his first experiments after receiving tenure at Stanford was funded by a grant from the Office of Naval Research. His experiment involved taking a group of volunteers (many of them graduate students) and putting them in a mock prison situation, with one group as guards and the other as the prisoners.

The two-week experiment had to be stopped after six days because the behavior of both prisoners and guards had become so extreme.

The suggestion to stop the experiment came only when an outsider (Zimbardo’s girlfriend and later wife) saw what was happening and questioned it.
Zimbardo’s Prison Experiment

Official Stanford Prison Experiment website:
• http://www.prisonexp.org/

Google video:
• http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-22650799994423481&ei=p3orSeGwB4Xc-AG58KmzBQ&q=stanford+prison+experiments
• Retrospective by Phil Zimbardo:
• http://www.guba.com/watch/3000048452

Zimbardo on Abu Grhaib:
• http://www.oculture.com/weblog/2006/12/thinking_humani.html

http://www.lucifereffect.com/

Video: How ordinary people become monsters ... or heroes


Zimbardo at Google:

- http://video.google.com/videosearch?q=Phil+Zimbardo&sitesearch=

At the Salk Institute:

- http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-1503712409267149308&ei=ipQrSeXLHYGE_AGbwcw_BQ&q=Phil+Zimbardo
Milgram completed and submitted his experiments on June 2, 1962. The day before they were submitted, the Israeli government hanged Adolf Eichmann for the crimes he committed during the Holocaust.

Milgram’s experiments were subject to severe criticism on ethical grounds, and new APA rules in the 1970s governing the treatment of research subjects precluded repeating those experiments in the United States.

His experiments were repeated in numerous countries around the world with substantially the same results.

In a modified and ethically nuanced version of Milgram’s original experiments, Jerry Burger at Santa Clara University repeated the experiments in 2007 with substantially the same results.


Blass, Thomas, Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm (Psychology Press, 2000)


Elms, Alan C, ‘Obedience Lite’, American Psychologist, 64 (2009), 32


Twenge, Jean M, ‘Change Over Time in Obedience: the Jury's Still Out, but It Might Be Decreasing.’, American Psychologist, 64 (2009), 28–31