

The Dilemma of Obedience

Obedience is as basic an element in the structure of social life as one can point to. Some system of authority is a requirement of all communal living, and it is only the man dwelling in isolation who is not forced to respond, through defiance or submission, to the commands of others. Obedience, as a determinant of behavior, is of particular relevance to our time. It has been reliably established that from 1933 to 1945 millions of innocent people were systematically slaughtered on command. Gas chambers were built, death camps were guarded, daily quotas of corpses were produced with the same efficiency as the manufacture of appliances. These inhumane policies may have originated in the mind of a single person, but they could only have been carried out on a massive scale if a very large number of people obeyed orders.

Obedience is the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose. It is the dispositional cement that binds men to systems of authority. Facts of recent history and observation in daily life suggest that for many people obedience may be a deeply ingrained behavior tendency, indeed, a prepotent impulse overriding training in ethics, sympathy, and moral conduct. C. P. Snow (1961) points to its importance when he writes:

When you think of the long and gloomy history of man, you will find more hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion. If you doubt that, read William Shirer's 'Rise and Fall of the Third Reich.' The German Officer Corps were brought up in the most rigorous code of obedience . . . in the name of obedience they were party to, and assisted in, the most wicked large scale actions in the history of the world. (p. 24)

The Nazi extermination of European Jews is the most extreme instance of abhorrent immoral acts carried out by thousands of people in the name of obedience. Yet in lesser degree this type of thing is constantly recurring: ordinary citizens are ordered to destroy other people, and they do so because they consider it their duty to obey orders. Thus, obedience to authority, long praised as a virtue, takes on a new aspect when it serves a malevolent cause; far from appearing as a virtue, it is transformed into a heinous sin. Or is it?

The moral question of whether one should obey when commands conflict with conscience was argued by Plato, dramatized in *Antigone*, and treated to philosophic analysis in every historical epoch. Conservative philosophers argue that the very fabric of society is threatened by disobedience, and even when the act prescribed by an authority is an evil one, it is better to carry out the act than to wrench at the structure of authority. Hobbes stated further that an act so executed is in no sense the responsibility of the person who carries it out but only of the authority that orders it. But humanists argue for the primacy of individual conscience in such matters, insisting that the moral judgments of the individual must override authority when the two are in conflict.

The legal and philosophic aspects of obedience are of enormous import, but an empirically grounded scientist eventually comes to the point where he wishes to move from abstract discourse to the careful observation of concrete instances. In order to take a close look at the act of obeying, I set up a simple

experiment at Yale University. Eventually, the experiment was to involve more than a thousand participants and would be repeated at several universities, but at the beginning, the conception was simple. A person comes to a psychological laboratory and is told to carry out a series of acts that come increasingly into conflict with conscience. The main question is how far the participant will comply with the experimenter's instructions before refusing to carry out the actions required of him.

But the reader needs to know a little more detail about the experiment. Two people come to a psychology laboratory to take part in a study of memory and learning. One of them is designated as a "teacher" and the other a "learner." The experimenter explains that the study is concerned with the effects of punishment on learning. The learner is conducted into a room, seated in a chair, his arms strapped to prevent excessive movement, and an electrode attached to his wrist. He is told that he is to learn a list of word pairs; whenever he makes an error, he will receive electric shocks of increasing intensity.

The real focus of the experiment is the teacher. After watching the learner being strapped into place, he is taken into the main experimental room and seated before an impressive shock generator. Its main feature is a horizontal line of thirty switches, ranging from 15 volts to 450 volts, in 15-volt increments. There are also verbal designations which range from SLIGHT SHOCK to DANGER—SEVERE SHOCK. The teacher is told that he is to administer the learning test to the man in the other room. When the learner responds correctly, the teacher moves on to the next item; when the other man gives an incorrect answer, the teacher is to give him an electric shock. He is to start at the lowest shock level (15 volts) and to increase the level each time the man makes an error, going through 30 volts, 45 volts, and so on.

The "teacher" is a genuinely naïve subject who has come to the laboratory to participate in an experiment. The learner, or victim, is an actor who actually receives no shock at all. The point of the experiment is to see how far a person will proceed in a

concrete and measurable situation in which he is ordered to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim. At what point will the subject refuse to obey the experimenter?

Conflict arises when the man receiving the shock begins to indicate that he is experiencing discomfort. At 75 volts, the "learner" grunts. At 120 volts he complains verbally; at 150 he demands to be released from the experiment. His protests continue as the shocks escalate, growing increasingly vehement and emotional. At 285 volts his response can only be described as an agonized scream.

Observers of the experiment agree that its gripping quality is somewhat obscured in print. For the subject, the situation is not a game; conflict is intense and obvious. On one hand, the manifest suffering of the learner presses him to quit. On the other, the experimenter, a legitimate authority to whom the subject feels some commitment, enjoins him to continue. Each time the subject hesitates to administer shock, the experimenter orders him to continue. To extricate himself from the situation, the subject must make a clear break with authority. The aim of this investigation was to find when and how people would defy authority in the face of a clear moral imperative.

There are, of course, enormous differences between carrying out the orders of a commanding officer during times of war and carrying out the orders of an experimenter. Yet the essence of certain relationships remain, for one may ask in a general way: How does a man behave when he is told by a legitimate authority to act against a third individual? If anything, we may expect the experimenter's power to be considerably less than that of the general, since he has no power to enforce his imperatives, and participation in a psychological experiment scarcely evokes the sense of urgency and dedication engendered by participation in war. Despite these limitations, I thought it worthwhile to start careful observation of obedience even in this modest situation, in the hope that it would stimulate insights and yield general propositions applicable to a variety of circumstances.

A reader's initial reaction to the experiment may be to wonder

why anyone in his right mind would administer even the first shocks. Would he not simply refuse and walk out of the laboratory? But the fact is that no one ever does. Since the subject has come to the laboratory to aid the experimenter, he is quite willing to start off with the procedure. There is nothing very extraordinary in this, particularly since the person who is to receive the shocks seems initially cooperative, if somewhat apprehensive. What is surprising is how far ordinary individuals will go in complying with the experimenter's instructions. Indeed, the results of the experiment are both surprising and dismaying. Despite the fact that many subjects experience stress, despite the fact that many protest to the experimenter, a substantial proportion continue to the last shock on the generator.

Many subjects will obey the experimenter no matter how vehement the pleading of the person being shocked, no matter how painful the shocks seem to be, and no matter how much the victim pleads to be let out. This was seen time and again in our studies and has been observed in several universities where the experiment was repeated. It is the extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority that constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation.

A commonly offered explanation is that those who shocked the victim at the most severe level were monsters, the sadistic fringe of society. But if one considers that almost two-thirds of the participants fall into the category of "obedient" subjects, and that they represented ordinary people drawn from working, managerial, and professional classes, the argument becomes very shaky. Indeed, it is highly reminiscent of the issue that arose in connection with Hannah Arendt's 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt contended that the prosecution's effort to depict Eichmann as a sadistic monster was fundamentally wrong, that he came closer to being an uninspired bureaucrat who simply sat at his desk and did his job. For asserting these views, Arendt became the object of considerable scorn, even calumny. Somehow, it was felt that the monstrous deeds carried out by Eich-

mann required a brutal, twisted, and sadistic personality, evil incarnate. 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 dare 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. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority. A variety of inhibitions against disobeying authority come into play and successfully keep the person in his place.

Sitting back in one's armchair, it is easy to condemn the actions of the obedient subjects. But those who condemn the subjects measure them against the standard of their own ability to formulate high-minded moral prescriptions. That is hardly a fair standard. Many of the subjects, at the level of stated opinion, feel quite as strongly as any of us about the moral requirement of refraining from action against a helpless victim. They, too, in general terms know what ought to be done and can state their values when the occasion arises. This has little, if anything, to do with their actual behavior under the pressure of circumstances.

If people are asked to render a moral judgment on what constitutes appropriate behavior in this situation, they unfailingly see disobedience as proper. But values are not the only forces at work in an actual, ongoing situation. They are but one narrow band of causes in the total spectrum of forces impinging on a person. Many people were unable to realize their values in action and found themselves continuing in the experiment even though they disagreed with what they were doing.

The force exerted by the moral sense of the individual is less

effective than social myth would have us believe. Though such prescriptions as "Thou shalt not kill" occupy a pre-eminent place in the moral order, they do not occupy a correspondingly intractable position in human psychic structure. A few changes in newspaper headlines, a call from the draft board, orders from a man with epaulets, and men are led to kill with little difficulty. Even the forces mustered in a psychology experiment will go a long way toward removing the individual from moral controls. Moral factors can be shunted aside with relative ease by a calculated restructuring of the informational and social field.

What, then, keeps the person obeying the experimenter? First, there is a set of "binding factors" that lock the subject into the situation. They include such factors as politeness on his part, his desire to uphold his initial promise of aid to the experimenter, and the awkwardness of withdrawal. Second, a number of adjustments in the subject's thinking occur that undermine his resolve to break with the authority. The adjustments help the subject maintain his relationship with the experimenter, while at the same time reducing the strain brought about by the experimental conflict. They are typical of thinking that comes about in obedient persons when they are instructed by authority to act against helpless individuals.

One such mechanism is the tendency of the individual to become so absorbed in the narrow technical aspects of the task that he loses sight of its broader consequences. The film *Dr. Strangelove* brilliantly satirized the absorption of a bomber crew in the exacting technical procedure of dropping nuclear weapons on a country. Similarly, in this experiment, subjects become immersed in the procedures, reading the word pairs with exquisite articulation and pressing the switches with great care. They want to put on a competent performance, but they show an accompanying narrowing of moral concern. The subject entrusts the broader tasks of setting goals and assessing morality to the experimental authority he is serving.

The most common adjustment of thought in the obedient subject is for him to see himself as not responsible for his own

actions. He divests himself of responsibility by attributing all initiative to the experimenter, a legitimate authority. He sees himself not as a person acting in a morally accountable way but as the agent of external authority. In the postexperimental interview, when subjects were asked why they had gone on, a typical reply was: "I wouldn't have done it by myself. I was just doing what I was told." Unable to defy the authority of the experimenter, they attribute all responsibility to him. It is the old story of "just doing one's duty" that was heard time and time again in the defense statements of those accused at Nuremberg. But it would be wrong to think of it as a thin alibi concocted for the occasion. Rather, it is a fundamental mode of thinking for a great many people once they are locked into a subordinate position in a structure of authority. The disappearance of a sense of responsibility is the most far-reaching consequence of submission to authority.

Although a person acting under authority performs actions that seem to violate standards of conscience, it would not be true to say that he loses his moral sense. Instead, it acquires a radically different focus. He does not respond with a moral sentiment to the actions he performs. Rather, his moral concern now shifts to a consideration of how well he is living up to the expectations that the authority has of him. In wartime, a soldier does not ask whether it is good or bad to bomb a hamlet; he does not experience shame or guilt in the destruction of a village; rather he feels pride or shame depending on how well he has performed the mission assigned to him.

Another psychological force at work in this situation may be termed "counteranthropomorphism." For decades psychologists have discussed the primitive tendency among men to attribute to inanimate objects and forces the qualities of the human species. A countervailing tendency, however, is that of attributing an impersonal quality to forces that are essentially human in origin and maintenance. Some people treat systems of human origin as if they existed above and beyond any human agent, beyond the control of whim or human feeling. The human element behind

agencies and institutions is denied. Thus, when the experimenter says, "The experiment *requires* that you continue," the subject feels this to be an imperative that goes beyond any merely human command. He does not ask the seemingly obvious question, "Whose experiment? Why should the designer be served while the victim suffers?" The wishes of a man—the designer of the experiment—have become part of a schema which exerts on the subject's mind a force that transcends the personal. "It's *got* to go on. It's *got* to go on," repeated one subject. He failed to realize that a man like himself wanted it to go on. For him the human agent had faded from the picture, and "The Experiment" had acquired an impersonal momentum of its own.

No action of itself has an unchangeable psychological quality. Its meaning can be altered by placing it in particular contexts. An American newspaper recently quoted a pilot who conceded that Americans were bombing Vietnamese men, women, and children but felt that the bombing was for a "noble cause" and thus was justified. Similarly, most subjects in the experiment see their behavior in a larger context that is benevolent and useful to society—the pursuit of scientific truth. The psychological laboratory has a strong claim to legitimacy and evokes trust and confidence in those who come to perform there. An action such as shocking a victim, which in isolation appears evil, acquires a totally different meaning when placed in this setting. But allowing an act to be dominated by its context, while neglecting its human consequences, can be dangerous in the extreme.

At least one essential feature of the situation in Germany was not studied here—namely, the intense devaluation of the victim prior to action against him. For a decade and more, vehement anti-Jewish propaganda systematically prepared the German population to accept the destruction of the Jews. Step by step the Jews were excluded from the category of citizen and national, and finally were denied the status of human beings. Systematic devaluation of the victim provides a measure of psychological justification for brutal treatment of the victim and has been the constant accompaniment of massacres, pogroms, and wars. In all

likelihood, our subjects would have experienced greater ease in shocking the victim had he been convincingly portrayed as a brutal criminal or a pervert.

Of considerable interest, however, is the fact that many subjects harshly devalue the victim *as a consequence* of acting against him. Such comments as, "He was so stupid and stubborn he deserved to get shocked," were common. Once having acted against the victim, these subjects found it necessary to view him as an unworthy individual, whose punishment was made inevitable by his own deficiencies of intellect and character.

Many of the people studied in the experiment were in some sense against what they did to the learner, and many protested even while they obeyed. But between thoughts, words, and the critical step of disobeying a malevolent authority lies another ingredient, the capacity for transforming beliefs and values into action. Some subjects were totally convinced of the wrongness of what they were doing but could not bring themselves to make an open break with authority. Some derived satisfaction from their thoughts and felt that—within themselves, at least—they had been on the side of the angels. What they failed to realize is that subjective feelings are largely irrelevant to the moral issue at hand so long as they are not transformed into action. Political control is effected through action. The attitudes of the guards at a concentration camp are of no consequence when in fact they are allowing the slaughter of innocent men to take place before them. Similarly, so-called "intellectual resistance" in occupied Europe—in which persons by a twist of thought felt that they had defied the invader—was merely indulgence in a consoling psychological mechanism. Tyrannies are perpetuated by diffident men who do not possess the courage to act out their beliefs. Time and again in the experiment people disvalued what they were doing but could not muster the inner resources to translate their values into action.

A variation of the basic experiment depicts a dilemma more common than the one outlined above: the subject was not ordered to push the trigger that shocked the victim, but merely to

perform a subsidiary act (administering the word-pair test) before another subject actually delivered the shock. In this situation, 37 of 40 adults from the New Haven area continued to the highest shock level on the generator. Predictably, subjects excused their behavior by saying that the responsibility belonged to the man who actually pulled the switch. This may illustrate a dangerously typical situation in complex society: it is psychologically easy to ignore responsibility when one is only an intermediate link in a chain of evil action but is far from the final consequences of the action. Even Eichmann was sickened when he toured the concentration camps, but to participate in mass murder he had only to sit at a desk and shuffle papers. At the same time the man in the camp who actually dropped Cyclon-B into the gas chambers was able to justify *his* behavior on the grounds that he was only following orders from above. Thus there is a fragmentation of the total human act; no one man decides to carry out the evil act and is confronted with its consequences. The person who assumes full responsibility for the act has evaporated. Perhaps this is the most common characteristic of socially organized evil in modern society.

The problem of obedience, therefore, is not wholly psychological. The form and shape of society and the way it is developing have much to do with it. There was a time, perhaps, when men were able to give a fully human response to any situation because they were fully absorbed in it as human beings. But as soon as there was a division of labor among men, things changed. Beyond a certain point, the breaking up of society into people carrying out narrow and very special jobs takes away from the human quality of work and life. A person does not get to see the whole situation but only a small part of it, and is thus unable to act without some kind of over-all direction. He yields to authority but in doing so is alienated from his own actions.

George Orwell caught the essence of the situation when he wrote:

As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me. They do not feel any enmity against me as an individual, nor

I against them. They are only "doing their duty," as the saying goes. Most of them, I have no doubt, are kind-hearted law abiding men who would never dream of committing murder in private life. On the other hand, if one of them succeeds in blowing me to pieces with a well-placed bomb, he will never sleep any the worse for it.

CHAPTER

2

Method of Inquiry

Simplicity is the key to effective scientific inquiry. This is especially true in the case of subject matter with a psychological content. Psychological matter, by its nature, is difficult to get at and likely to have many more sides to it than appear at first glance. Complicated procedures only get in the way of clear scrutiny of the phenomenon itself. To study obedience most simply, we must create a situation in which one person orders another person to perform an observable action and we must note when obedience to the imperative occurs and when it fails to occur.

If we are to measure the strength of obedience and the conditions by which it varies, we must force it against some powerful factor that works in the direction of disobedience, and whose human import is readily understood.

Of all moral principles, the one that comes closest to being universally accepted is this: one should not inflict suffering on a helpless person who is neither harmful nor threatening to oneself. This principle is the counterforce we shall set in opposition to obedience.

A person coming to our laboratory will be ordered to act against another individual in increasingly severe fashion. Accordingly, the pressures for disobedience will build up. At a point not known beforehand, the subject may refuse to carry out this

command, withdrawing from the experiment. Behavior prior to this rupture is termed *obedience*. The point of rupture is the act of *disobedience* and may occur sooner or later in the sequence of commands, providing the needed measure.

The precise mode of acting against the victim is not of central importance. For technical reasons, the delivery of electric shock was chosen for the study. It seemed suitable, first, because it would be easy for the subject to understand the notion that shocks can be graded in intensity; second, its use would be consistent with the general scientific aura of the laboratory; and finally, it would be relatively easy to simulate the administration of shock in the laboratory.

Let us now move to an account of the details of the investigation.

Obtaining Participants for the Study

Yale undergraduates, being close at hand and readily available, would have been the easiest subjects to study. Moreover, in psychology it is traditional for experiments to be carried out on undergraduates. But for this experiment the use of undergraduates from an elite institution did not seem wholly suitable. The possibility that subjects from Yale would have heard of it from fellow students who had already participated in it seemed too great a risk. It appeared better to draw subjects from a much larger source, the entire New Haven community of 300,000 people. There was a second reason for relying on New Haven rather than the university: the students were too homogeneous a group. They were virtually all in their late teens or early twenties, were highly intelligent, and had some familiarity with psychological experimentation. I wanted a wide range of individuals drawn from a broad spectrum of class backgrounds.

To recruit subjects, an advertisement was placed in the local newspaper. It called for people of all occupations to take part in a study of memory and learning, and it offered \$4 payment and 50 cents carfare for one hour of participation (see illustration). A

Public Announcement

WE WILL PAY YOU \$4.00 FOR ONE HOUR OF YOUR TIME

Persons Needed for a Study of Memory

*We will pay five hundred New Haven men to help us complete a scientific study of memory and learning. The study is being done at Yale University.
*Each person who participates will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50c carfare) for approximately 1 hour's time. We need you for only one hour: there are no further obligations. You may choose the time you would like to come (evenings, weekdays, or weekends).

*No special training, education, or experience is needed. We want:

Factory workers	Businessmen	Construction workers
City employees	Clerks	Salespeople
Laborers	Professional people	White-collar workers
Barbers	Telephone workers	Others

All persons must be between the ages of 20 and 50. High school and college students cannot be used.

*If you meet these qualifications, fill out the coupon below and mail it now to Professor Stanley Milgram, Department of Psychology, Yale University, New Haven. You will be notified later of the specific time and place of the study. We reserve the right to decline any application.

*You will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50c carfare) as soon as you arrive at the laboratory.

TO:

PROF. STANLEY MILGRAM, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY,
YALE UNIVERSITY, NEW HAVEN, CONN. I want to take part in
this study of memory and learning. I am between the ages of 20 and
50. I will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50c carfare) if I participate.

NAME (Please Print)

ADDRESS

TELEPHONE NO. Best time to call you

AGE..... OCCUPATION..... SEX.....

CAN YOU COME:

WEEKDAYS EVENINGS WEEKENDS.....

Fig. 1. Announcement placed in local newspaper to recruit subjects.

total of 296 responded. As these were not sufficient for the experiment, this mode of recruitment was supplemented by direct mail solicitation. Names were sampled from the New Haven telephone directory, and a letter of invitation was sent to several thousand residents. The return rate for this invitation was approximately 12 percent. The respondents, for whom we had information on sex, age, and occupation, constituted a pool of subjects, and specific appointments were made with participants a few days before they were to appear in the study.

Typical subjects were postal clerks, high school teachers, salesmen, engineers, and laborers. Subjects ranged in educational level from one who had not finished high school to those who had doctoral and other professional degrees. Several experimental conditions (variations of the basic experiment) were contemplated, and from the outset, I thought it important to balance each condition for age and occupational types. The occupational composition for each experiment was: workers, skilled and unskilled: 40 percent; white-collar, sales, business: 40 percent; professionals: 20 percent. The occupations were intersected with three age categories (subjects in twenties, thirties, and forties assigned to each experimental condition in the proportions of 20, 40, and 40 percent respectively).

Locale and Personnel

The experiment was conducted in the elegant Interaction Laboratory of Yale University. This detail is relevant to the perceived legitimacy of the experiment. In some subsequent variations, the experiment was dissociated from the university (see Chapter 6). The role of experimenter was played by a thirty-one-year-old high school teacher of biology. Throughout the experiment, his manner was impassive and his appearance somewhat stern. He was dressed in a gray technician's coat. The victim was played by a forty-seven-year-old accountant, trained for the role; he was of Irish-American descent and most observers found him mild-mannered and likable.

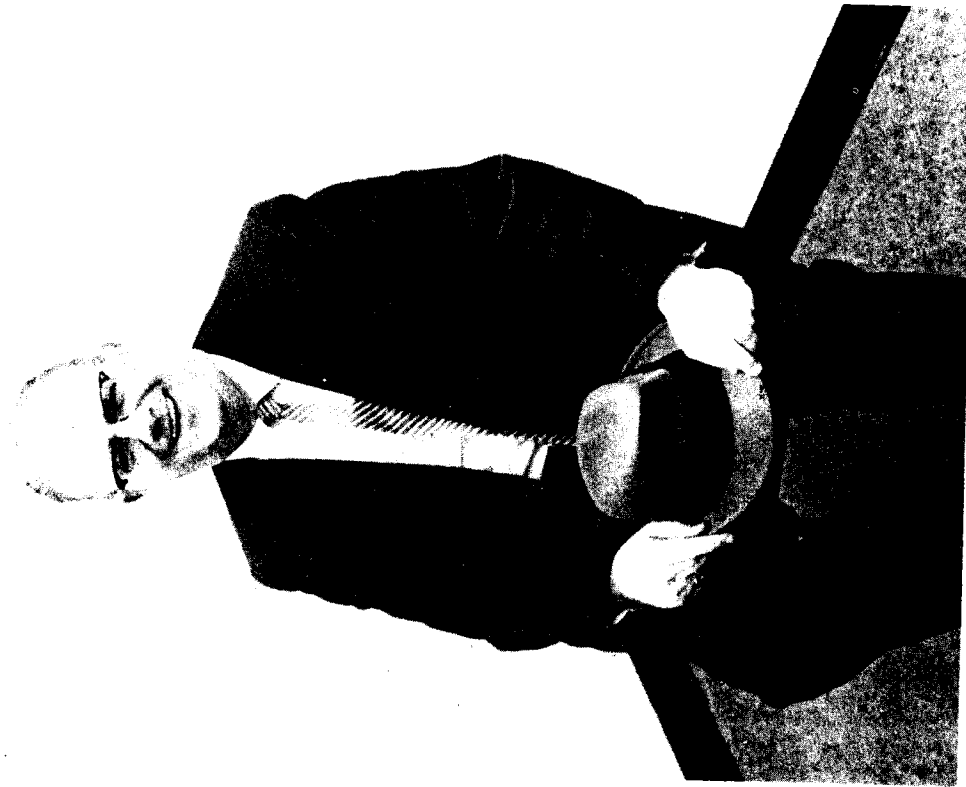


Fig. 2. The "victim."

Procedure

One naive subject and one victim performed in each experiment. A pretext had to be devised that would justify the adminis-

tration of electric shock by the naive subject. (This is true because in every instance of legitimate authority the subordinate must perceive some connection, however tenuous, between the specific type of authority and the commands he issues.) The experimenter oriented the subjects toward the situation in which he wished to assess obedience with the following instructions:

Psychologists have developed several theories to explain how people learn various types of material.

Some of the better-known theories are treated in this book. (The subject was shown a book on the teaching-learning process.)

One theory is that people learn things correctly whenever they get punished for making a mistake.

A common application of this theory would be when parents spank a child if he does something wrong.

The expectation is that spanking, a form of punishment, will teach the child to remember better, will teach him to learn more effectively.

But actually, we know very little about the effect of punishment on learning, because almost no truly scientific studies have been made of it in human beings.

For instance, we don't know how much punishment is best for learning—and we don't know how much difference it makes as to who is giving the punishment, whether an adult learns best from a younger or an older person than himself—or many things of that sort.

So in this study we are bringing together a number of adults of different occupations and ages. And we're asking some of them to be teachers and some of them to be learners.

We want to find out just what effect different people have on each other as teachers and learners, and also what effect *punishment* will have on learning in this situation.

Therefore, I'm going to ask one of you to be the teacher here tonight and the other one to be the learner.

Does either of you have a preference?

[Subject and accomplice are allowed to express preference.]

Well, I guess the fairest way of doing this is for me to write the word *Teacher* on one slip of paper and *Learner* on the other and let you both draw.

[The subject draws first, then the accomplice.]

Well, which of you is which?

All right. Now the first thing we'll have to do is to set the Learner up so that he can get some type of punishment.

If you'll both come with me into this next room.

The drawing described above had been rigged so that the subject was always the teacher and the accomplice always the learner. (Both slips contained the word "Teacher.") Immediately after the drawing, the teacher and learner were taken to an adjacent room and the learner was strapped into an "electric chair" apparatus.

The experimenter explained that the straps were to prevent excessive movement while the learner was being shocked. The effect was to make it appear impossible for him to escape from the situation. An electrode was attached to the learner's wrist, and electrode paste was applied "to avoid blisters and burns." Subjects were told that the electrode was attached to the shock generator in the adjoining room.

To improve credibility the experimenter declared, in response to a question by the learner, "Although the shocks can be extremely painful, they cause no permanent tissue damage."

Learning Task

The lesson conducted by the subject was a paired-associate learning task. The subject read a series of word pairs to the learner, and then read the first word of the pair along with four terms. For example, the subject read such pairs as:

blue box
nice day
wild duck
etc.

Then, in the testing sequence he would read:

blue: sky ink box lamp

The learner was to indicate which of the four terms had originally been paired with the first word. He communicated his answer by pressing one of four switches in front of him, which lit up one of

four numbered quadrants in an answer box located on top of the shock generator.

Shock Generator

The instrument panel consisted of 30 lever switches set in a horizontal line. Each switch was clearly labeled with a voltage designation that ranged from 15 to 450 volts. The labels showed a 15-volt increment from one switch to the next, going from left to right. In addition, the following verbal designations were clearly indicated for groups of four switches, going from left to right: Slight Shock, Moderate Shock, Strong Shock, Very Strong Shock, Intense Shock, Extreme Intensity Shock, Danger: Severe Shock. Two switches after this last designation were simply marked XXX.

When a switch was depressed, a pilot light corresponding to each switch was illuminated in bright red; an electric buzzing was heard; an electric blue light, labeled "voltage energizer," flashed; the dial on the voltage meter swung to the right; and various relay clicks were sounded.

The upper left-hand corner of the generator was labeled SHOCK GENERATOR, TYPE ZLB, DYSON INSTRUMENT COMPANY, WALTHAM, MASS. OUTPUT 15 VOLTS-450 VOLTS.

Sample Shock

Each subject was given a sample shock from the shock generator, prior to beginning his run as teacher. This shock was always 45 volts and was applied by pressing the third switch of the generator. The shock was applied to the wrist of the subject, and the jolt strengthened the subject's belief in the authenticity of the generator.

Shock Instructions

The subject was told to administer a shock to the learner each time he gave a wrong response. Moreover—and this is the key command—the subject was instructed to "move one level higher

on the shock generator each time the learner gives a wrong answer." He was also instructed to announce the voltage level before administering a shock. This served to continually remind the subjects of the increasing intensity of shocks administered to the learner.¹ If the subject reached the 30th shock level (450 volts), he was instructed to continue the procedure using this maximum voltage. After two further trials, the experimenter called a halt to the experiment.²

Experimenter Feedback

At various points in the experiment the subject would turn to the experimenter for advice on whether he should continue to administer shocks. Or he would indicate that he did not wish to go on.

The experimenter responded with a sequence of "prods," using as many as necessary to bring the subject into line.

Prod 1: Please continue, or, Please go on.

Prod 2: The experiment requires that you continue.

Prod 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.

Prod 4: You have no other choice, you *must* go on.

The prods were made in sequence: Only if Prod 1 had been unsuccessful could Prod 2 be used. If the subject refused to obey the experimenter after Prod 4, the experiment was terminated. The experimenter's tone of voice was at all times firm, but not impolite. The sequence was begun anew on each occasion that the subject balked or showed reluctance to follow orders.

Special Prods

If the subject asked if the learner was liable to suffer permanent physical injury, the experimenter said:

Although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent tissue damage, so please go on. (Followed by Prods 2, 3, and 4, if necessary.)

If the subject said that the learner did not want to go on, the experimenter replied:

Whether the learner likes it or not, you must go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly. So please go on. (Followed by Prods 2, 3, and 4, if necessary.)

Feedback from the Victim

In all conditions the learner gave a predetermined set of responses to the word-pair test, based on a schedule of approximately three wrong answers to one correct answer.

The victim's responses were a key element in the situation and needed to be worked out carefully. In pilot studies, at first no vocal feedback from the victim was used. It was thought that the verbal and voltage designations on the control panel would create sufficient pressure to curtail the subject's obedience. However, this proved not to be the case. In the absence of protests from the learner, virtually every subject in the pilot study, once commanded, went blithely to the end of the board, seemingly indifferent to the verbal designations. This deprived us of an adequate basis for measuring obedient tendencies. A force had to be introduced that would strengthen the subject's resistance to the experimenter's commands, and reveal individual differences in terms of a distribution of breakoff points.

This force took the form of protests from the victim. Initially, mild protests were used, but these proved inadequate. Subsequently, more vehement protests were inserted into the experimental procedure. To our consternation, even the strongest protests from the victim did not prevent many subjects from administering the harshest punishment ordered by the experimenter. But the protests did lower the mean of the maximum shocks somewhat and created some spread in the subject's performance; therefore, the victim's cries were recorded on tape and incorporated into the regular experimental procedure.

The situation did more than highlight the technical difficulties of finding a workable experimental procedure: it indicated that subjects would obey authority to a greater extent than we had supposed. It also pointed to the importance of feedback from the victim in controlling the subject's behavior.

Each vocal response of the victim was coordinated to a particular voltage level on the shock generator. It is difficult to convey on the printed page the full tenor of the victim's responses, for we have no adequate notation for vocal intensity, timing, and general qualities of delivery. In general, however, the victim indicated no discomfort until the 75-volt shock was administered, at which time there was a little grunt. Similar reactions followed the 90- and 105-volt shocks, and at 120 volts the victim shouted to the experimenter that the shocks were becoming painful. Painful groans were heard on administration of the 135-volt shock, and at 150 volts the victim cried out, "Experimenter, get me out of here! I won't be in the experiment any more! I refuse to go on!" Cries of this type continue with generally rising intensity, so that at 180 volts the victim cried out, "I can't stand the pain," and by 270 volts his response to the shock was definitely an agonized scream. Throughout, from 150 volts on, he insisted that he be let out of the experiment. At 300 volts the victim shouted in desperation that he would no longer provide answers to the memory test.

At this juncture, it was found, subjects would usually turn to the experimenter for guidance. The experimenter would instruct the subject to treat the absence of a response as a wrong answer, and to shock the subject according to the usual schedule. He advised the subjects to allow 5 to 10 seconds before considering no response as a wrong answer, and to increase the shock level one step each time the learner failed to respond correctly. At 315 volts, after a violent scream, the victim reaffirmed vehemently that he was no longer a participant. He provided no answers, but shrieked in agony whenever a shock was administered. After 330 volts he was not heard from, nor did his answers reappear on the four-way signal box.

Measures

The main measure for any subject is the maximum shock he administers before he refuses to go any further. In principle this may vary from 0 (for a subject who refuses to administer even the

first shock) to 30 (for a subject who administers the highest shock on the generator).

Interview and Debriefing

An important aspect of the procedure occurred at the end of the experimental session. A careful postexperimental treatment was administered to all subjects. The exact content of the session varied from condition to condition and with increasing experience on our part. At the very least every subject was told that the victim had not received dangerous electric shocks. Each subject had a friendly reconciliation with the unharmed victim and an extended discussion with the experimenter. The experimenter was explained to defiant subjects in a way that supported their decision to disobey the experimenter. Obedient subjects were assured that their behavior was entirely normal and that their feelings of conflict or tension were shared by other participants. Subjects were told that they would receive a comprehensive report at the conclusion of the experimental series. In some instances, additional detailed and lengthy discussions of the experiment were also carried out with individual subjects.

When the experimental series was complete, subjects received a written report which presented details of the experimental procedure and results. Again, their own part in the experiments was treated in a dignified way and their behavior in the experiment respected. All subjects received a follow-up questionnaire regarding their participation in the research, which again allowed expression of thoughts and feelings about their behavior.

Recapitulation

In this situation the subject must resolve a conflict between two mutually incompatible demands from the social field. He may continue to follow the orders of the experimenter and shock the learner with increasing severity, or he may refuse to follow the orders of the experimenter and heed the learner's pleas. The

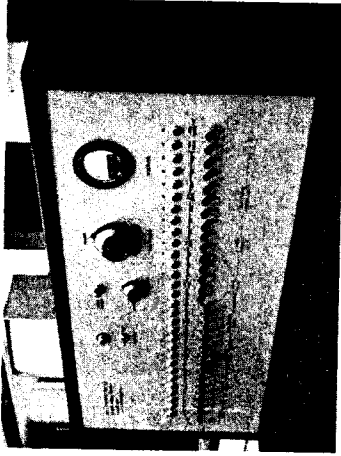


Fig. 3

Shock generator.



Victim is strapped into chair.



Subject receives sample shock.



Subject breaks off experiment.

Of the 40 subjects, 26 obeyed the orders of the experimenter to the end, proceeding to punish the victim until they reached the most potent shock available on the generator. After the 450-volt shock was administered three times, the experimenter called a halt to the session.

Subjects were frequently in an agitated state. Sometimes, verbal protest was at a minimum, and the subject simply got up from his chair in front of the shock generator, indicating that he wished to leave the laboratory. Some obedient subjects expressed reluctance to administer shocks beyond the 300-volt level and displayed tensions similar to those who defied the experimenter.

After the maximum shocks had been delivered, and the experimenter called a halt to the proceedings, many obedient subjects heaved sighs of relief, mopped their brows, rubbed their fingers over their eyes, or nervously fumbled cigarettes. Some shook their heads, apparently in regret. Some subjects had remained calm throughout the experiment and displayed only minimal signs of tension from beginning to end.

Bringing the Victim Closer

An experiment differs from a demonstration in that in an experiment, once an effect has been observed, it becomes possible to alter systematically the conditions under which it is produced, and in this way to learn the relevant causes.

What we have seen thus far applies only to a situation in which the victim is out of sight and unable to communicate with his own voice. The recipient of the punishment is thus remote, nor does he indicate his wishes very clearly. There is pounding on the wall, but this has an inherently ambiguous meaning; possibly, some subjects did not interpret this pounding as evidence of the victim's distress. The resulting obedience may be attributable to this. Perhaps there will be no obedience when the victim's suffering is more clearly communicated; when the victim is given a sense of presence, and he is seen, heard, and felt.

Behavior noted in our pilot studies lent credence to this notion.

4

Closeness of the Victim

Now let us look at the actual performance of subjects in the experiment. To begin, we shall consider the results of the Remote-Feedback variation (Experiment 1). It differs slightly from the usual situation in that no vocal complaint is heard from the victim. He is placed in another room where he cannot be seen by the subject, nor can his voice be heard; his answers flash silently on the signal box. However, at 300 volts the laboratory walls resound as he pounds in protest. After 315 volts, no further answers appear, and the pounding ceases.

It is instructive to reprint the subjects' remarks at the point of defiance, as transcribed from the tape recordings:

"I think he's trying to communicate, he's knocking. . . . Well it's not fair to shock the guy . . . these are terrific volts. I don't think this is very humane. . . . Oh, I can't go on with this; no, this isn't right. It's a hell of an experiment. The guy is suffering in there. No, I don't want to go on. This is crazy." (Subject refuses to administer more shocks.)

"He's banging in there. I'm gonna chicken out. I'd like to continue, but I can't do that to a man. . . . I'm sorry I can't do that to a man. I'll hurt his heart. You take your check. . . . No really, I couldn't do it."

Expected Behavior

Too often, the value of a work in social science is played down by asserting the self-evident character of the findings. But rarely do we have clear information on exactly how people expect behavior to unfold in a given set of circumstances. If we acquire this information, we will be able to compare it with the actual outcome of the study. It will provide us with a benchmark from which to see how much or little we learn through the experiment. Further, should there be a disparity between what people expect and what actually occurs, we are left with the interesting problem of accounting for the gap. For the expectations then come to have the character of an illusion, and we must ask whether such an illusion is a chance expression of ignorance or performs some definite function in social life.

The procedure for getting at such expectations is straightforward. In each case the respondents consist of an audience that has come to hear a lecture on the topic of obedience to authority. The experiment is described in detail without, however, disclosing the results in any way. The audience is provided with a schematic diagram of the shock generator, showing verbal and voltage designations. Each respondent is asked to reflect on the experiment, then privately to record how he himself would perform in it. Predictions were made by three groups: psychiatrists,

...in a free field but against ... from the person being

... a framework in which to ... principal conflict of the ... between the experimenter's ... the electric shock and the ... increasingly insistent, that the ... The crux of the study is to vary systematically the degree of obedience to the ... and to learn under what condition submission to authority is most probable and under what conditions

... the experimental situation does is to condense the ... in the larger world such ... into a relatively narrow ... scientific scrutiny. The power of the ... from the fact that we are able to see, and the ... concurrent operation of antagonistic ... rarely impinge on him at the identical instant.

In those studies the victim could be dimly perceived by the subject through a silvered glass. Subjects frequently averted their eyes from the person they were shocking, often turning their heads in an awkward and conspicuous manner. One subject explained, "I didn't want to see the consequences of what I had done." Observers noted:

... subjects show a reluctance to look at the victim, whom they could see through the glass in front of them. When this fact was brought to their attention, they indicated that it caused them discomfort to see the victim in agony. We note, however, that although the subject refuses to look at the victim, he continues to administer shocks.

This suggested that the salience of the victim may have, in some degree, regulated the subject's performance. If in obeying the experimenter the subject found it necessary to avoid scrutiny of the victim, would the reverse be true? If the victim were rendered increasingly more salient to the subject, would obedience diminish? A set of four experiments was designed to answer this question. We have already described the Remote condition.

Experiment 2 (Voice-Feedback) was identical to the first except that vocal protests were introduced. As in the first condition, the victim was placed in an adjacent room, but his complaints could be heard clearly through the walls of the laboratory.

Experiment 3 (Proximity) was similar to the second, except that the victim was placed in the same room as the subject, a few feet from him. Thus he was visible as well as audible, and voice cues were provided.

Experiment 4 (Touch-Proximity) was identical to the third, with this exception: the victim received a shock only when his hand rested on a shock plate. At the 150-volt level the victim demanded to be let free and refused to place his hand on the shock plate. The experimenter ordered the subject to force the victim's hand onto the plate. Thus obedience in this condition required that the subject have physical contact with the victim in order to give him punishment at or beyond the 150-volt level.

Forty adult subjects were studied in each condition. The results, shown in Table 2, revealed that obedience was significantly

Table 2. Maximum Shocks Administered in Experiments 1, 2, 3, and 4

Shock level	Verbal designation and voltage level	Experiment			
		1 (n = 40)	2 (n = 40)	3 (n = 40)	4 (n = 40)
1	Slight Shock				
2	15				
3	30				
3'	45				
4	60				
5	Moderate Shock				
6	75				
7	90			1	
8	105				
9	120				
9	Strong Shock				
10	135	1			1
11	150	5		10	16
12	165	1			
12	180	1		2	3
13	Very Strong Shock				
14	195				
15	210				
15	225			1	1
16	240				
17	Intense Shock				
18	255				
18	270			1	1
19	285				
20	300	5*	1	5	1
21	Extreme Intensity Shock				
21	315	4	3	3	2
22	330	2			
23	345	1	1		1
24	360	1	1		
25	Danger: Severe Shock				
25	375	1			
26	390			1	
27	405				
28	420				
29	XXX				
29	435				
30	450	26	25	16	12
	Mean maximum shock level	27.0	24.53	20.80	17.88
	Percentage obedient subjects	65.0%	62.5%	40.0%	30.0%

* Indicates that in Experiment 1, five subjects administered a maximum shock of 300 volts.

reduced as the victim was rendered more immediate to the subject. The mean maximum shock for the conditions is shown in Figure 6.

Thirty-five percent of the subjects defied the experimenter in the Remote condition, 37.5 percent in Voice-Feedback, 60 percent in Proximity, and 70 percent in Touch-Proximity.

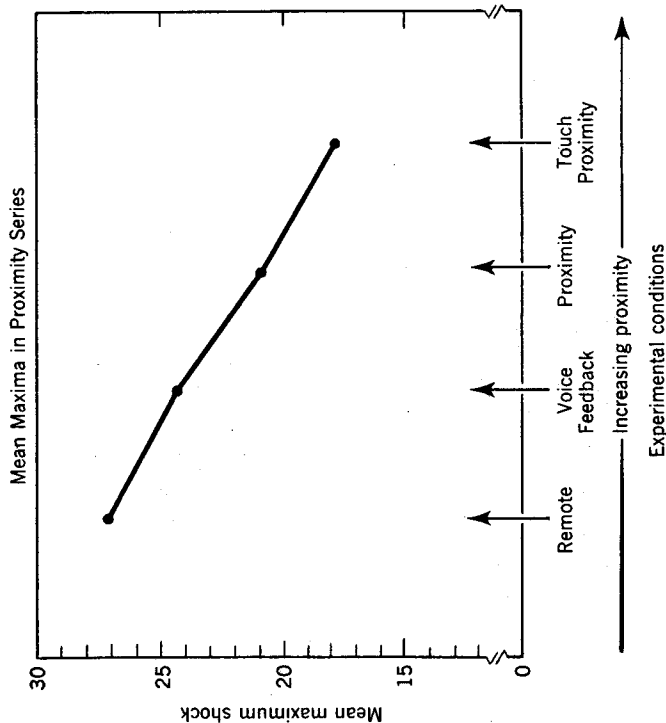


Fig. 6. Mean maximum shocks in Experiments 1, 2, 3, and 4.

How are we to account for the diminishing obedience as the victim is brought closer? Several factors may be at work.

1. *Empathic cues.* In the Remote and, to a lesser extent, the Voice-Feedback conditions, the victim's suffering possesses an abstract, remote quality for the subject. He is aware, but only in a conceptual sense, that his actions cause pain to another person; the fact is apprehended but not felt. The phenomenon is common



General arrangement for Touch-Proximity Condition.

Fig. 7



enough. The bombardier can reasonably suppose that his weapons will inflict suffering and death, yet this knowledge is divested of affect and does not arouse in him an emotional response to the suffering he causes.

It is possible that the visual cues associated with the victim's suffering trigger empathic responses in the subject and give him a more complete grasp of the victim's experience. It is also possible that the empathic responses are themselves unpleasant, possessing drive properties which cause the subject to terminate the arousal situation. Diminishing obedience, then, would be explained by the enrichment of empathic cues in the successive experimental conditions.

2. *Denial and narrowing of the cognitive field.* The Remote condition allows a narrowing of the cognitive field so that the victim is put out of mind. When the victim is close it is more difficult to exclude him from thought. He necessarily intrudes on the subject's awareness, since he is continuously visible. In the first two conditions his existence and reactions are made known only after the shock has been administered. The auditory feedback is sporadic and discontinuous. In the Proximity conditions his inclusion in the immediate visual field renders him a continuously salient element for the subject. The mechanism of denial can no longer be brought into play. One subject in the Remote condition said, "It's funny how you really begin to forget that there's a guy out there, even though you can hear him. For a long time I just concentrated on pressing the switches and reading the words."

3. *Reciprocal fields.* If in the Proximity conditions, the subject is in an improved position to observe the victim, the reverse is also true: the actions of the subject now come under scrutiny by the victim. Possibly, it is easier to harm a person when he is unable to observe our actions than when he can see what we are doing. His surveillance of the action directed against him may give rise to shame or guilt, which may then serve to curtail the

action. Many expressions of language refer to the discomfort or inhibitions that arise in face-to-face attack. It is often said that it is easier to criticize a man "behind his back" than to confront him directly. If we are lying to someone, it is reputedly difficult to "look him in the eye." We "turn away in shame" or in "embarrassment," and this action serves to reduce our discomfort. The manifest function of allowing the victim of a firing squad to be blindfolded is to make the occasion less stressful for him, but it may also serve a latent function of reducing the stress of the executioner. In short, in the Proximity conditions, the subject may sense that he has become more salient in the victim's field of awareness and consequently becomes more self-conscious, embarrassed, and inhibited in his punishment of the victim.

4. *Experienced unity of act.* In the Remote conditions it is more difficult for the subject to see a connection between his actions and their consequences for the victim. There is a physical separation of the act and its effects. The subject depresses a lever in one room, and protests and cries are heard from another. The two events are in correlation, yet they lack a compelling unity. The unity is more fully achieved in the Proximity conditions as the victim is brought closer to the action that causes him pain. It is rendered complete in Touch-Proximity.

5. *Incipient group-formation.* Placing the victim in another room not only takes him farther from the subject, it also draws the subject and the experimenter relatively closer. There is incipient group formation between the experimenter and the subject, from which the victim is excluded. The wall between the victim and the others deprives him of an intimacy which the experimenter and the subject could feel. In the Remote condition, the victim is truly an outsider, who stands alone, physically and psychologically.

When the victim is placed close to the subject, it becomes easier to form an alliance with him against the experimenter. The subject no longer has to face the experimenter alone. He has an

ally who is close at hand and eager to collaborate in a revolt against the experimenter. Thus, the changing set of spatial relations leads to a potentially shifting set of alliances over the several experimental conditions.

6. *Acquired behavior dispositions.* It is commonly observed that laboratory mice will rarely fight with their litter mates. Scott (1958) explains this in terms of passive inhibition. He writes: "By doing nothing under . . . circumstances [the animal] learns to do nothing, and this may be spoken of as passive inhibition. . . . This principle has great importance in teaching an individual to be peaceful, for it means that he can learn not to fight simply by not fighting." Similarly, we may learn not to harm others simply by not harming them in everyday life. Yet this learning occurs in a context of proximal relations with others and may not be generalized to situations in which the others are physically remote from us. Or perhaps, in the past, aggressive actions against others who were physically close resulted in retaliatory punishment that extinguished the original form of response. In contrast, aggression against others at a distance may rarely have led to retaliation.

We move about; our spatial relations shift from one situation to the next, and the fact that we are near or remote may have a powerful effect on the psychological processes that mediate our behavior toward others. In these experiments, as the victim was brought closer to the man ordered to give him shocks, increasing numbers of subjects broke off the experiment, refusing to obey. The concrete, visible, and proximal presence of the victim acted in an important way to counteract the experimenter's power and to generate disobedience. Any theoretical model of obedience will have to take this fact into account.

Unexpected Behavior

The over-all level of obedience, across all four experimental

variations, requires comment. Subjects have learned from childhood that it is a fundamental breach of moral conduct to hurt another person against his will. Yet, almost half the subjects abandon this tenet in following the instructions of an authority who has no special powers to enforce his commands. To disobey would bring no material loss or punishment. It is clear from the remarks and behavior of many participants that in punishing the victim they were often acting against their own values. Subjects often expressed disapproval of shocking a man in the face of his objections, and others denounced it as stupid and senseless. Yet many followed the experimental commands.

The results differed sharply from the predictions made in the questionnaire described earlier. (Here, however, it is possible that the remoteness of the respondents from the actual situation and the difficulty of conveying to them the concrete details of the experiment could account for the serious underestimation of obedience.) But the results were also unexpected to people who observed the experiment in progress through one-way mirrors. Observers often expressed disbelief upon seeing a subject administer more and more powerful shocks to the victim; even persons fully acquainted with the details of the situation consistently underestimated the amount of obedience subjects would display.

The second unanticipated effect was the tension generated by the procedures. One might suppose that a subject would simply break off or continue as his conscience dictated. This is very far from what happened. There were in some subjects striking reactions of emotional strain.

In the interview following the experiment subjects were asked to indicate on a 14-point scale just how nervous or tense they felt at the point of maximum tension (Figure 8). The scale ranged from "Not at all tense and nervous" to "Extremely tense and nervous." Self-reports of this sort are of limited precision and at best provide only a rough indication of the subject's emotional response. Still, taking the reports for what they are worth, it can be seen that the distribution of responses spans the entire range

of the scale, with the majority of subjects concentrated at the center and upper extreme. A further breakdown showed that obedient subjects reported themselves as having been slightly more tense and nervous than the defiant subjects at the point of maximum tension.

How is the occurrence of tension to be interpreted? First, it points to the presence of conflict. If a tendency to comply with authority were the only psychological force operating in the

are in authority. The subject is quickly drawn into a dilemma, and the presence of high tension points to the considerable strength of each of the antagonistic vectors.

Moreover, tension defines the strength of the aversive state from which the subject is unable to escape through disobedience. When a person is uncomfortable, tense, or stressed, he tries to take some action that will allow him to terminate this unpleasant state. Thus tension may serve as a drive that leads to escape behavior. But in the present situation even where tension is extreme, many subjects are unable to perform the response that will bring about relief. Therefore there must be a competing drive, tendency, or inhibition that precludes activation of the disobedient response. The strength of this inhibiting factor must be of greater magnitude than the stress experienced, or else the terminating act would occur. Every evidence of extreme tension is at the same time an indication of the strength of the forces that keep the subject in the situation.

Finally, tension may be taken as evidence of the reality of the situation for the subject. Normal subjects do not tremble and sweat unless they are implicated in a deep and genuinely felt predicament.

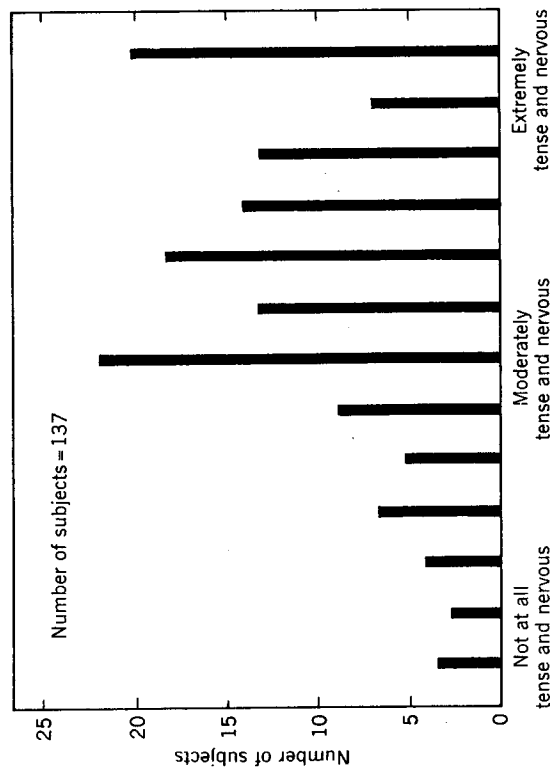


Fig. 8. Level of tension and nervousness reported by subjects.

situation, all subjects would have continued to the end, and there would have been no tension. Tension, it is assumed, results from the simultaneous presence of two or more incompatible response tendencies (Miller, 1944). If sympathetic concern for the victim were the exclusive force, all subjects would have calmly defied the experimenter. Instead, there were both obedient and defiant outcomes, frequently accompanied by extreme tension. A conflict develops between the deeply ingrained disposition not to harm others and the equally compelling tendency to obey others who