

## To Become A Torturer

Obedience to authority is considered to be a virtue for the most part in our country. Few people think twice about the subject, and even fewer consider that such authority could be dangerous. Authority figures often have a great deal of power due to people's obedience, and if that authority is malevolent, considerable harm can and has been done. Studies done predominantly by Stanley Milgram and also by others have shown that ordinary people can be taught to become torturers and do the "unthinkable."

In order to see how ordinary people can obey authority to the extent of torture and cruelty, we need to understand why people are so obedient. In "The Education of a Torturer," Janice Gibson and Mika Haritos-Fatouros explain that Stanley Milgram came up with three factors that cause a person to decide to obey or disobey. The first factor is a person's family or school background. If a person has been strongly encouraged his or her family and school background to obey, he or she will be more obedient to authority. If, however, the opposite is true, he or she will be more likely to disobey. The second factor is called binding. The binding process is a series of experiences that "makes people feel comfortable when they obey" (355). Such factors can include rewards and punishment for obedience or disobedience. A third factor is strain. Strain is the appearance of bad feelings that come up when a person disobeys.

The last two factors, binding and strain, contribute quite a bit to the decision to obey or disobey. In combination with each other, if binding is greater than the strain of obedience, people will be very likely to obey. However, if strain is greater than the binding forces, people will most likely disobey. Obviously, if authority offers enough to bind the person in spite of the strain, that authority figure will be able to accomplish nearly anything he or she wants through those that obey him or her.

Gibson and Haritos-Fatouros sum up this idea by saying, "Training that increases binding and reduces strain can cause decent people to commit acts, often over long periods of time that otherwise would be unthinkable" (357). This statement is backed up by a study done by Molly Harrower, a University of Florida psychologist. She asked 15 Rorschach experts to examine inkblot tests from Adolf Eichman, Rudolf Hess, Hermann Goering and five other Nazi war criminals along with tests from eight Americans (Some of the Americans were considered psychologically normal, and others were not). These experts were unable to distinguish the Nazis' tests from the Americans' tests. This study shows that the Nazis weren't psychologically different from the average American.

Unlike the brainwashing evident in Nazi Germany, sometimes the binding forces can seem trivial, like a simple desire to please the authority figure. Stanley Milgram's study on authority and obedience backs this up. In the "Perils of Obedience" we learn about this experiment. In the study, the subjects were led to believe the purpose for the experiment was to study learning and memory, and then each one were placed in a room in front of a shock generator. Each person was then told that he or she was the teacher. The "teacher" then watched as the "learner", an actor, was led to a chair that strongly resembled a small electric chair and strapped into it. The teacher was then required by the experimenter to read word pairs to the learner. If the learner could not respond with the correct answer in a set period of time, the teacher would be told to administer

increasing levels of shocks (from 15 to 450 volts and labeled from "slight shock" to "Severe Shock - Danger" with the two highest voltages rated 'XXX'). This experiment was designed so that the teacher would have to make a clear break away from the authority figure, the experimenter, in order to stop performing shocks.

In this case, the binding force was the desire to do a good job in the experiment and please the experimenter. The strain was the increasing intensity of protest from the learner. ("The Learner" went from a grunt to a scream to utter silence and, finally, complete apathy.) In the first experiment on 40 people, 25 fully obeyed the experimenter up to "shocking" the victim three times at 450 volts. In all of his experiments, Milgram found fully obedient subjects about 60% of the time or more.

For long term obedience, however, a simple desire to please the authority figure often isn't enough. Training that greatly increases binding, is very strong in the military, especially in the elite branches. In "Obedience to Vietnam," Stanley Milgram sums up some of the basic elements of military training that are specifically designed to do this. First, the recruit is moved from the outside world to the inner world of the group. In the military, there are rewards like liberty and civilian clothes for obedience and punishments like court-martials or the brig for disobedience. Training involves linking actions of a soldier to valued ideals. (For example "Killing commies is good because commies want to kill democracy and freedom.") This training also involves isolation from outside authorities that could lessen the authority within the military. The soldier is taught that disobedience within ranks can cause disintegration of the unit and even death of his or her buddies. Killing others is for a just cause, and often these targets are dehumanized through language (like "gooks" in Vietnam).

Often this conditioning causes the obedient person to shift responsibility for his actions onto the authority figure. Milgram calls this transference "the agentic stage" or the "the psychological condition of those who have surrendered autonomy and have become agents or extensions of the authority figure" ("Obedience in Vietnam" 256 ). This shift to the agentic stage was partially responsible for deaths of civilians and the use of Napalm in Vietnam, the removal of Native Americans from their land, the enslavement of Blacks and the concentration camps which once held the Japanese in America. When people do these things, they are taught it is right, just and patriotic to obey as well as dangerous and cowardly to disobey. Physical and psychological distance, as well as the language modifications that take place to dehumanize the victim(s), also help the obedient person to detach from the consequences of his or her actions. These things smooth the transition from normal behavior to the agentic stage by reducing strain.

But, this shift in behavior does not only take place in the military. In "The Education of a Torturer" we are introduced to an experiment conducted by Craig Haney, W. Curtis Banks and Phillip Zirton on students. Several students were selected from a group of volunteers and assigned the part of prison guards. The remaining students were asked to play the part of prisoners. The "guards," acting under the authority of the experimenter, carried out their duties so well that they resorted to bullying, insults and cruel treatment of "prisoners." The study had to be cancelled when the "prisoners" started showing signs of depression, illness and apathy as a result. These people were students; in other words, they were ordinary people.

Experiments have shown that obedience to the point of torture, cruelty and "unthinkable" deeds is something the majority of people can be taught to do. We will all supposedly obey given the right conditioning. Milgram sums this up by saying, "It is ironic that the virtues of loyalty, discipline and self-sacrifice that we value so highly in the individual are the very properties that create destructive organization engines of war and bind men to malevolent systems of authority" ("Obedience in Vietnam," 261-2). Perhaps it would be wise for us to think carefully about the implications of the experiments that have been done and to think twice if we find ourselves in a similar situation. Are we doing the "unthinkable" if we obey?

### **Works Cited**

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