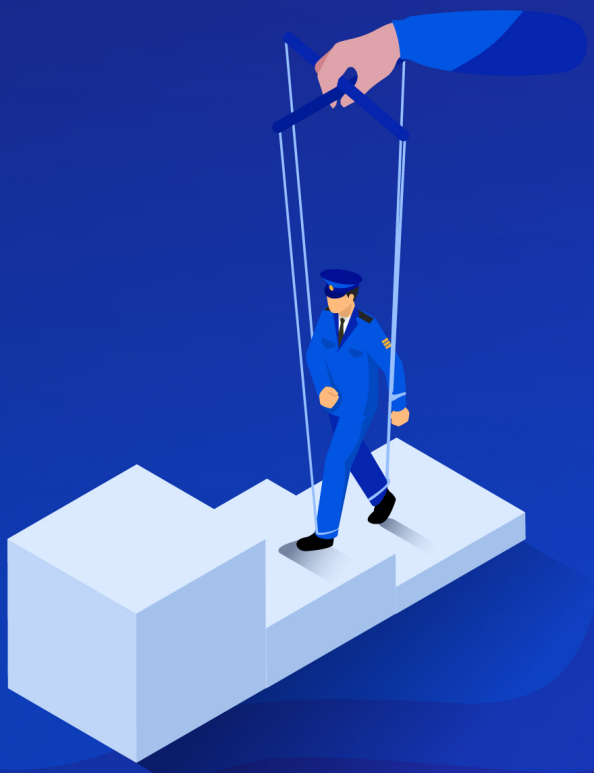
SUMMARY

OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

STANLEY MILGRAM



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Summary of “Obedience to Authority” by Stanley Milgram

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Learn about the controversial Milgram Experiment.

Introduction

Would you consider yourself to be obedient to authority? Are you a loyal rule follower or someone who likes to push the envelope? Most people fall somewhere in-between the two extremes on each end of the spectrum. As a general rule, most of us would consider ourselves to be decent, law abiding citizens. We would probably agree that we don't want to hurt anyone, that we want to be considered "good people," and that we follow the rules when it is possible and reasonable to do so. However, most of us don't see a problem with speeding (even though that's technically against the law), with occasionally cheating on a test, or with calling out sick from work even when we're not really sick. Technically, all of those things are against the rules of polite society, but most of us feel comfortable breaking them. At the very least, we feel as though doing these things doesn't make you a "bad person?"

But what about following the wrong rules? What if the policy at your office was that you had to kill someone when they made a mistake or turned up five minutes late? Certainly, these are extreme examples, but what if they were part of your reality? Would you follow the rules even when they violated your morals, your conscience, or your personal beliefs? Would you be able to feel comfortable hurting someone if you could tell yourself you were "just following orders?" These are the questions that fascinated Stanley Milgram and these are the questions he sought to explore in his controversial Milgram Experiment.

The Parameters of The Experiment

Pop quiz: what's the number one lesson every single person learned as a kid? We all probably learned the basics-- don't steal, don't lie, don't hurt other people-- but at the core, what we all learned was, "Obey authority." We were repeatedly told, "Listen to Mommy and Daddy," "listen to your teachers," "listen to your babysitters," and through these instructions, we internalized a key lesson about the world: authority figures are to be respected and obeyed. As a result, even if some of us had a rebellious streak, we still understood that obedience was important and that most situations in life required you to obey someone in order to succeed.

So, we obey our bosses. We obey the laws of our nation, state, city, or community. And for the most part, that pattern of obedience has never caused us to do anything problematic. But what about when it does? Stanley Milgram was especially concerned with this question because he was a practicing psychologist during the 1960s, when the Nuremberg War Criminal trials were in full swing. These trials were conducted to assess the guilt of Nazis who had been captured when the Allies defeated Hitler. Because these individuals had assisted with the Holocaust, working with Hitler to orchestrate a mass genocide and perpetrate multiple crimes against humanity, their guilt was considered almost unquestionable. In their defense, however, the criminals argued that they weren't bad people and that they wouldn't have attempted to kill millions on their own. Rather, they argued, they were simply following orders.

Milgram was shocked and angered by this argument and he wanted to examine its validity by conducting a psychological experiment. He wanted to know if there could possibly be a grain of truth to the Nazis' defense and if it was possible that they really were brainwashed by a sense of obedience to authority. So, in July of 1961-- a year after the trial and execution of Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann-- Milgram decided to construct an experiment that would somewhat simulate the conditions experienced by Nazi officers who were "just following orders" to torture their fellow human

beings. Here's how it worked. Milgram started by sending out a call for participants in local newspapers, inviting men to serve as test subjects in a psychological experiment being conducted at Yale University. The experiment was structured in the following fashion:

- One person would be a "learner"
- One person would be a teacher
- Milgram would serve as the experimenter and would be dressed in official clothing that marked him as an authority figure (i.e. a lab coat)

The learner, however, wasn't actually a real test subject, but one of Milgram's colleagues who was pretending to be a volunteer. To give the appearance of being fair, the two volunteers would draw lots to determine who would play the "learner" and who would play the "teacher." Unbeknownst to the real volunteer, however, the drawing was always rigged so that Milgram's colleague always wound up playing the learner. Even though Milgram cycled through thousands of participants-- all of whom were men ranging in age from 20-50-- the roles of experimenter and learner remained the same and were always filled by Milgram and his colleagues.

Here's how the experiment functioned: the teacher and the learner were separated. Although they could not see each other, each was informed of the other's presence and they could hear each other. The volunteer playing the "teacher" was told that the purpose of the experiment was to teach the "learner" pairs of words. If the learner got it wrong, the experimenter told the teacher to administer an electric shock. The voltage of the electric shock ranged from mild (15 volts) to lethal (at 450 volts). The level of pain each shock would cause was clearly indicated on the shock generator's panel. This meant that no matter what level of shock the teacher chose, they would be unable to avoid the fact that they were intentionally inflicting pain on another human being. However, the teacher was told that even though the shocks would cause significant pain, they would not be held responsible for the suffering they inflicted.

The Dark Side of Obedience

Having been presented with that information, what would you expect the outcome to be? Would you expect the teacher to stop when confronted with the learner's screams of pain? Would you expect them to refuse to continue with the experiment? To call it cruel and barbaric and denounce it as wanton sadism? What would you do in their place? If you cherish the worldview that, at heart, most people are basically good, you might be surprised to learn that the results were the opposite of what you might expect. In fact, when told to continue shocking the learner, almost every participant complied, even when they could hear the learner's agonized screams. Despite the fact that the learner consistently broke down sobbing and begging for release, the participants continued to shock them on command. And when the experimenter instructed them to continue raising the voltage, more than half of the participants complied-- even when they were instructed to use voltage that was indisputably lethal. Even the half that resisted-- refusing to apply deadly voltage-- still persisted in shocking the victim up to at least 350 volts.

This meant that, as far as the participants knew, 50% of them had willingly killed another human being in the context of the experiment. But why? Why would they obey someone's order to kill? Why didn't they resist? And what did this mean about the morality of these participants? To answer these questions, Milgram interviewed the volunteers after the experiment and asked them about their thought processes. In every single case, just like the Nazis, the participants affirmed that they were simply following orders. Because the experimenter presented as an authority figure, the participants stated that they felt like they were supposed to listen to him-- even at the expense of their own morality and their feelings of discomfort. This confirmed Milgram's theory that the mandate to obey authority is so deeply ingrained in us, we are unlikely to resist it even under extreme pressure.

The Question of Responsibility

The results of his interviews with the subjects generated new questions for Milgram. In every case, the subjects affirmed that they didn't really associate their actions with themselves or their sense of morality-- even in the cases where they thought they had killed someone! After conducting more interviews, Milgram concluded that this was the result of something he called "the agentic state." The agentic state is a state of mind which has to do with the participants' sense of agency or their personal culpability. This occurred during the course of the experiment as participants repeatedly asked Milgram for reassurance that they would not be held responsible for the torture they inflicted on the learners. And while they were shocking the learners, they also repeatedly asked Milgram to confirm that he, the authority figure, did indeed want them to inflict harm.

Armed with this reassurance, the participants then felt as though their actions could not really be attributed to them. This reveals an interesting insight into the human concept of morality: do we only conceptualize right and wrong in terms of whether or not we will be blamed? This is certainly what appeared to happen during the subjects' agentic state. Instead of feeling guilt or responsibility for their actions, the participants appeared to transfer those feelings onto the experimenter, blaming him for both the learner's suffering and their own actions! The author concluded that many Nazi war criminals were absolutely operating in an agentic state. Because they were able to compartmentalize the horror of what they were ordered to do, they could feel as though their horrific actions didn't really define them as people.

What Happens When the Experiment is Reversed?

Milgram concluded that the subjects' willingness to inflict torture was directly correlated to their sense of obedience to authority. So, in order to test this hypothesis, he decided to reproduce the experiment with a few tweaks. In the second version of the experiment, Milgram would explain the parameters of the experiment to the participant, instruct them to shock the learner, and then leave the room. In his instructions, however, Milgram was careful not to instruct the participant to escalate the voltage. Once he had exited, another of Milgram's colleagues would enter. But instead of being dressed as an authority figure, this actor was dressed in plainclothes like the subject himself. As such, he presented not as an authority figure, but as another average Joe just like the subject. This plainclothes actor would then demand that the teacher increase the voltage to produce an extremely painful shock.

Milgram was curious to know what would happen if the position of the authority figure was reversed. Would the participants still blindly follow instruction? Or would they rebel? In the second experiment, the results overwhelmingly fell into the latter category. So far from obeying, the participants were both shocked and outraged. Not only did they not comply, they castigated the actor, calling them a sadistic and terrible person and demanding to know why on earth they would even think of such a thing. Some subjects even shouted at the actor to get out and asserted that they would report him to the experimenter for his inhumanity.

This confirmed Milgram's theory that the context-- and presence of an authority figure-- changes everything. When the participants thought they were being instructed to follow orders, they repeatedly asked for reassurance and questioned the intentions of the experimenter, but ultimately, followed blindly. This process was what prompted them to enter the agentic state. But when a non-authority figure presented them with the option to inflict pain, they immediately rebelled and chastised the other person for even suggesting something so sadistic. Ultimately, Milgram

concluded, we follow an authority figure's orders because we believe they know what they're doing and we should trust them.

However, in order to be certain of his results, Milgram repeated the experiment a third time, once again under different conditions. In the third version of the experiment, Milgram tested what would happen if you altered the participants' proximity to direct violence. Put simply, how did the results change if the participants had to see the subject they were torturing? What if they had to physically harm the subject while looking them in the eye? In the third version, Milgram removed the barrier that prevented the teacher and learner from seeing each other. Now, the two participants could see each other and the teacher was instructed to physically place the learner's hand on a device that would deliver a painful electric shock.

As you might imagine, the difference in proximity produced drastically different results. While unable to see the learners, the teachers were more willing to shock them; it was easier to dehumanize them without seeing them and this made it easier to follow the experimenter's instructions. But when they had to physically hurt the learner themselves, 70% of the participants disobeyed Milgram's direct orders. Where more than 75% of the participants had been willing to inflict pain on subjects they could not see, their willingness plummeted when they were no longer able to compartmentalize or blame their actions on the experimenter. When they had no choice but to confront the fact that they were hurting another human being, most participants couldn't handle that knowledge and defied authority.

Final Summary

It's easy to assume that moral conundrums are either black or white and that people are either good or bad. But as Milgram's experiment illustrates, the truth isn't always quite so simple. Many people who might otherwise be kind, loving, and upstanding citizens are willing to hurt someone else when they believe they are following orders or otherwise not responsible for their actions. And because the importance of obedience to authority is drilled into us from early childhood, most people are so conditioned to obey that they find it almost impossible to rebel against an authority figure.

However, the other half of Milgram's experiment proves that this does not mean we are doomed to blindly follow terrible commands or that we are inherently morally deficient. When the conditions of the experiment were altered, the subjects' responses showed that most people are good at heart and would refuse to deliberately harm another human being when ordered to do so. But as you can see, this experiment raises a number of questions about human ethics and morality.