

OBEDIENCE, DESTRUCTIVE

Obedience is the act of compliance to the commands of a legitimate authority. In destructive obedience the acquiescence is to a command to harm another person. The phrase was first introduced into the social sciences in 1963 by Stanley Milgram in his article "Behavioral Study of Obedience" in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* describing the first of a series of experiments on obedience he conducted at Yale University from 1961 to 1962.

In those experiments the subject was told to teach a learner a series of word pairs, using increasingly painful electric shocks—up to 450 volts—as punishment for each error. Although the shocks were fake and the learner was an actor who feigned his suffering, the experiment was stressful for most of the subjects. Sixty-five percent of the subjects were fully obedient to the experimenter's commands, progressing to the maximum shock. The unexpectedly high rate of destructive obedience was the central and most dramatic finding in Milgram's experiments. While we did not need Milgram to tell us that people tend to obey authorities, the sheer power of that finding was revelatory: that ordinary people would act contrary to conscience and hurt an innocent person at the bidding of an authority without coercive means to enforce his or her commands.

Milgram conducted over twenty different variations in his series of experiments on destructive obedience. A second important insight is provided by a subset of those variations. In that series Milgram varied the distance between the teacher and the learner. As the distance was reduced, so was the percentage of obedient subjects. The morality of shocking an innocent victim did not change from condition to condition, but the tendency to obey the destructive orders did, demonstrating that the immediate situation can have powerful effects on behavior even at the expense of the subject's personal inclinations.

Milgram undertook his research to shed light on the Holocaust in an attempt to explain how normal people could become complicit in carrying out the murderous commands of Nazi leaders. Although early twenty-first century regulations in the United States and other countries make it virtually impossible to replicate Milgram's experiments, experiences in real life continue to affirm his findings.

For example, in 2004 two male students at a Georgia high school obeyed their teacher's orders to throw an unruly female classmate out the window. Real-life events also have broadened the scope of destructive obedience in several ways. For instance, it is known that destructive obedience can take place even when the self is the victim. A review of airplane accidents between 1978 and 1990 found that in about 25 percent of cases the first officer's reluctance to correct an error made by his or her captain was a contributing factor. Also the power of destructive obedience when the action is damaging in a nonphysical manner is as strong as or stronger than is the case when the obedient act is physically destructive, strong enough to override a person's moral or ethical principles. As a teaching exercise, a University of San Diego law professor, Steven Hartwell, had his students advise a client on how best to present her side of a rent dispute in court. Hartwell told them to advise the client to lie under oath and say that she had paid her rent. Twenty-three of twenty-four subjects complied and told the woman to perjure herself.

SEE ALSO *Authoritarianism; Authority; Conformity; Holocaust, The; Milgram, Stanley; Nazism*

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