



*The Lucifer Effect* by Philip Zimbardo, 2008.

### **The Testimonies of the Ordinary**

The most extreme instance of this hostile imagination at work is of course when it leads to genocide, the plan of one people to eliminate from existence all those who are conceptualized as their enemy. We are aware of some of the ways in which Hitler's propaganda machine transformed Jewish neighbors, co-workers, even friends into despised enemies of the State who deserved the "final solution."

The testimonies of these ordinary men--mostly farmers, active churchgoers, and a former teacher--are chilling in their matter-of-fact, remorseless depiction of unimaginable cruelty. Their words force us to confront the unthinkable again and again: that human beings are capable of totally abandoning their humanity for a mindless ideology, to follow and then exceed the orders of charismatic authorities to destroy everyone they label as "The Enemy." Let's reflect on a few of these accounts,

"Since I was killing often, I began to feel it did not mean anything to me. I want to make clear that from the first gentleman I killed to the last, I was not sorry about a single one."

"We were doing a job to order. We were lining up behind everyone's enthusiasm. We gathered into teams on the soccer field and went out hurting as kindred spirits."

"Anyone who hesitated to kill because of feelings of sadness absolutely had to watch his mouth, to say nothing about the reason for his reticence, for fear of being accused of complicity."

"We no longer looked at them one by one, we no longer stopped to recognize them as they had been, not even as colleagues."

"We no longer saw a human being when we turned up a Tutsi in the swamps. I mean a person like us, sharing similar thoughts and feelings. The hunt was savage, the hunters were savage, the prey was savage-savagery took over the mind."

## **Dehumanization and Moral Disengagement in the Laboratory**

Let's see how the experiment worked. Imagine you are a college student who has volunteered for a study of group problem solving as part of a three-person team from your school. Your task is to help students from another college improve their group problem-solving performance by punishing their errors. That punishment takes the form of administering electric shocks that can be increased in severity over successive trials. After taking your names and those of the other team, the assistant leaves to tell the experimenter that the study can begin. There will be ten trials during each of which you can decide the shock level to administer to the other student group in the next room.

You don't realize that it is part of the experimental script, but you "accidentally" overhear the assistant complaining over the intercom to the experimenter that the other students "seem like animals." You don't know it, but in two other conditions to which other students like you have been randomly assigned, the assistant describes the other students as "nice guys" or does not label them at all.

Do these simple labels have any effect? It doesn't seem so initially. On the first trial all the groups respond in the same way by administering low levels of shock, around Level 2. But soon it begins to matter what each group has heard about these anonymous others. If you know nothing about them, you give a steady average of about a Level 5. If you have come to think of them as "nice guys," you treat them in a more humane fashion, giving them significantly less shock, about a Level 3. However, imagining them as "animals" switches off any sense of compassion you might have for them, and when they commit errors, you begin to shock them with ever-increasing levels of intensity, significantly more than in the other conditions, as you steadily move up toward the high Level 8.

Think carefully for a moment about the psychological processes that a simple label has tripped off in your mind. You overheard a person, whom you do not know personally, tell some authority, whom you have never seen, that other college students like you seem like "animals." That single descriptive term changes your mental construction of these others. It distances you from images of friendly college kids who must be more similar to you than different. That new mental set has a powerful impact on your behavior. The post hoc rationalizations the experimental students generated to explain why they needed to give so much shock to the "animal-house" students in the process of "teaching them a good lesson" were equally fascinating. This example of using controlled experimental research to investigate the underlying psychological processes that occur in significant real-world cases of violence.

## **Parallel Universes in Abu Ghraib and Stanford's Prison**

The college students role-playing guards and prisoners in a mock prison experiment conducted at Stanford University in the summer of 1971 were mirrored in the real guards and real prison in the Iraq of 2003. Not only had I seen such events. I had been responsible for creating the conditions that allowed such abuses to flourish. As the project's principal investigator. I designed the experiment that randomly assigned normal, healthy, intelligent college students to enact the roles of either guards or prisoners in a realistically simulated prison setting where they were to live and work for several weeks.

How do ordinary people adapt to such an institutional setting? How do the power differentials between guards and prisoners play out in their daily interactions? If you put good people in a bad place, do the people triumph or does the place corrupt them? Would the violence that is endemic to most real prisons be absent in a prison filled with good middle-class boys? These were some of the exploratory issues to be investigated in what started out as a simple study of prison life.

## **BLIND OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY: MILGRAM'S SHOCKING RESEARCH**

Imagine that you see the following advertisement in the Sunday newspaper and decide to apply .The original study involved only men, but women were used in it later study, so I invite all readers to participate in this imagined scenario.

**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 in memory and learning. The study is being conducted at Yale University.

Each person who participates, will be paid \$4.00 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.

A researcher whose serious demeanor and white laboratory coat convey scientific importance greets you and another applicant at your arrival at a Yale University laboratory. You are here to help scientific psychology find ways to improve people's learning and memory through the use of punishment. He tells you why this new research may have important practical consequences. You are shown a shock generator to operate with thirty switches, starting from a low level of 15 volts and increasing by 17 volts at each higher level. The experimenter tells you that every time the learner makes a mistake, you have to press the next higher voltage switch. The control panel indicates both the voltage level of each of the switches and a corresponding description of the level. The 10th Level (150 volts) is "Strong Shock"; the 13th Level (195 volts) is "Very Strong Shock"; the 17th Level (255 volts) is "Intense Shock"; the 21st Level (315 volts) is "Extremely Intense Shock"; the 25th Level (375 volts) is "Danger, Severe Shock"; and at the 29th and 30th Levels (435 and 450 volts) the control panel is simply marked with an ominous XXX (of ultimate pain and power).

In another room is in another room. The learner's arms are strapped down and an electrode is attached to his right wrist. The shock generator in the next room will deliver the shocks to the learner-if and when he makes any errors. The two of you communicate over the intercom, with the experimenter standing next to you. You get a sample shock of 45 volts, the 3rd Level, a slight tingly pain, so you now have a sense of what the shock levels mean. The experimenter then signals the start of your trial of the "memory improvement" study.

Initially, your pupil does well, but soon he begins making errors, and you start pressing the shock switches. He complains that the shocks are starting to hurt. You look at the experimenter, who nods to continue. As the shock levels increase in intensity, so do the learner's screams, saying he does not think he wants to continue. You hesitate and question whether you should go on, but the experimenter insists that you have no choice but to do so.

Now the learner begins complaining about his heart condition and you dissent, but the experimenter still insists that you continue. Errors galore: you plead with your pupil to concentrate to get the right associations, you don't want to hurt him with these very-high-level, intense shocks. But your concerns and motivational messages are to no avail. He gets the answers wrong again and again. As the shocks intensify, he shouts out, "I can't stand the pain, let me out of here!" Then he says to the experimenter, "You have no right to keep me here! Let me out!" Another level up, he screams. "I absolutely refuse to answer any more! Get me out of here! You can't hold me here! My heart's bothering me!"

Obviously you want nothing more to do with this experiment. You tell the experimenter that you refuse to continue. You are not the kind of person who

harms other people in this way. You want out. But the experimenter continues to insist that you go on. He reminds you of the contract, of your agreement to participate fully. Moreover, he claims responsibility for the consequences of your shocking actions. After you press the 300-volt switch, you read the next keyword, but the learner doesn't answer. "He's not responding," you tell the experimenter. You want him to go into the other room and check on the learner to see if he is all right. The experimenter is impassive: he is not going to check on the learner. Instead he tells you, "If the learner doesn't answer in a reasonable time, about five seconds, consider it wrong," since errors of omission must be punished in the same way as errors of commission—that is a rule.

As you continue up to even more dangerous shock levels, there is no sound coming from your pupil's shock chamber. He may be unconscious or worse! You are really distressed and want to quit, but nothing you say works to get your exit from this unexpectedly distressing situation. You are told to follow the rules and keep posing the test items and shocking the errors.

Now try to imagine fully what your participation as the teacher would be. I am sure you are saying, "No way would I ever go all the way!" Obviously, you would have dissented, then disobeyed and just walked out. You would never sell out your morality for four bucks! But had you actually gone all the way to the last of the thirtieth shock levels, the experimenter would have insisted that you repeat that XXX switch two more times, for good measure! Now, that is really rubbing it in your face. Forget it, no sir, no way: you are out of here, right? So how far up the scale do you predict that you would go before exiting: How far would the average person from this small city go in this situation?

### **The Shocking Truth**

A group of 40 psychiatrists estimated American citizens said only one percent would go to the 30<sup>th</sup> Level. In fact, in Milgram's experiment, two of every three (65 percent) of the volunteers went all the way up the maximum shock level of 450 volts. The vast majority of people, the "teachers," shocked their "learner-victim" over and over again despite his increasingly desperate pleas to stop.

And now I invite you to venture another guess: What was the dropout rate after the shock level reached 330 volts--with only silence coming from the shock chamber, where the learner could reasonably be presumed to be unconscious? Who would go on at that point? Wouldn't every sensible person quit, drop out, refuse the experimenter's demands to go on shocking him?

Here is what one "teacher" reported about his reaction: "I didn't know what the hell was going on. I think, you know, maybe I'm killing this guy. I told the experimenter that I was not taking responsibility for going further. That's it." But when the experimenter reassured him that he would take the responsibility, the worried teacher obeyed and continued to the very end.

And almost everyone who got that far did the same as this man. How is that possible? If they got that far, why did they continue on to the bitter end? One reason for this startling level of obedience may be related to the teacher's not knowing how to exit from the situation, rather than just blind obedience. Most participants dissented from time to time, saying they did not want to go on, but the experimenter did not let them out, continually coming up with reasons why they had to stay and prodding them to continue testing their suffering learner.

### **Ten Lessons from the Milgram Studies: Creating Evil Traps for Good People**

I want to draw parallels to compliance strategies used by "influence professionals" in real-world settings.

1. Prearranging some form of contractual obligation, verbal or written, to control the individual's behavior in pseudolegal fashion. (In Milgram's experiment, this was done by publicly agreeing to accept the tasks and the procedures.)

2. Giving participants meaningful roles to play ("teacher," "learner") that carry with them previously learned positive values and automatically activate response scripts.

3. Presenting basic rules to be followed that seem to make sense before their actual use but can then be used arbitrarily and impersonally to justify mindless compliance. Also, systems control people by making their rules vague and changing them as necessary but insisting that "rules are rules."

4. Altering the semantics of the act, the actor, and the action (from "hurting victims" to "helping the experimenter," punishing the former for the lofty goal of scientific discovery)—replacing unpleasant reality with desirable rhetoric, gilding the frame so that the real picture is disguised.

5. Creating opportunities for the diffusion of responsibility or abdication of responsibility for negative outcomes; others will be responsible, or the actor won't be held liable. (In Milgram's experiment, the authority figure said, when questioned by any "teacher," that he would take responsibility for anything that happened to the "learner.")

6. Starting the path toward the ultimate evil act with a small, seemingly insignificant first step, the easy "foot in the door" that swings open subsequent greater compliance pressures, and leads down a slippery slope. (In the obedience study, the initial shock was only a mild 15 volts.)

7. Having successively increasing steps that are gradual, so that they are hardly noticeably different from one's most recent prior action. "Just a little bit more," increasing each level of aggression in gradual steps of only 15-volt increments, over the thirty switches, no new level of harm seemed like a noticeable difference from the prior level to Milgram's participants.)

8. Gradually changing the nature of the authority figure (the researcher, in Millgram's study) from initially "just" and reasonable to "unjust" and demanding, even irrational. This tactic elicits initial compliance and later confusion, since we expect consistency from authorities and friends. Not acknowledging that this transformation has occurred leads to mindless obedience.

9. Making the "exit costs" high and making the process of exiting difficult by allowing verbal dissent (which makes people feel better about themselves) while insisting on behavioral compliance.

10. Offering an ideology, or a big lie, to justify the use of any means to achieve the seemingly desirable, essential goal.

Many other experiments conducted had the same results. In one with shocking puppy dogs, the students were clearly upset during the experiment. Some of the females cried, and the male students also expressed a lot of distress. Did they refuse to continue once they could see the suffering they were causing right before their eyes: For all too many, their personal distress did not lead to behavioral disobedience. About half of the males (54 percent) went all the way to 450 volts. The big surprise came from the women's high level of obedience. Despite their dissent and weeping, 100 percent of the female college students obeyed to the full extent possible in shocking the puppies.

### **Training and Accountability**

This is a conversation between a staff sergeant who had night shift at Abu Ghraib prison, convicted for torture crimes as a prison guard with the author Zimbardo.

Z: "Please tell me about your training to be a guard, a guard leader, in this prison."

Prison Guard: "None. No training for this job. When we mobilized at Fort Lee, we had a cultural awareness class, maybe it was about forty-five minutes long, and it was basically about not to discuss politics, not to discuss religion, and not to call 'em Aayrabs.'

Z: "How would you describe the supervision you received and the accountability you felt you had toward your superior officers"

Prison Guard: "None."