



Shock and Awe

Replicating Milgram's shock experiments leads to a different interpretation

In 2010 I worked on a *Dateline NBC* television special replicating classic psychology experiments, one of which was Stanley Milgram's famous shock experiments from the 1960s. We followed Milgram's protocols precisely: subjects read a list of paired words to a "learner" (an actor named Tyler), then presented the first word of each pair again. Each time Tyler gave an incorrect matched word, our subjects were instructed by an authority figure (an actor named Jeremy) to deliver an electric shock from a box with toggle switches that ranged in 15-volt increments up to 450 volts (no shocks were actually delivered). In Milgram's original experiments, 65 percent of subjects went all the way to the end. We had only two days to film this segment of the show (you can see all our experiments at <http://tinyurl.com/3yg2v29>), so there was time for just six subjects, who thought they were auditioning for a new reality show called *What a Pain!*

Contrary to Milgram's conclusion that people blindly obey authorities to the point of committing evil deeds because we are so susceptible to environmental conditions, I saw in our subjects a great behavioral reluctance and moral disquietude every step of the way. Our first subject, Emily, quit the moment she was told the protocol. "This isn't really my thing," she said with a nervous laugh. When our second subject, Julie, got to 75 volts and heard Tyler groan, she protested: "I don't think I want to keep doing this." Jeremy insisted: "You really have no other choice. I need you to continue until the end of the test." Despite our actor's stone-cold authoritative commands, Julie held her moral ground: "No. I'm sorry. I can just see where this is going, and I just—I don't—I think I'm good. I think I'm good to go." When the show's host Chris Hansen asked what was going through her mind, Julie offered this moral insight on the resistance to authority: "I didn't want to hurt Tyler. And then I just wanted to get out. And I'm mad that I let it even go five [wrong answers]. I'm sorry, Tyler."

Our third subject, Lateefah, became visibly upset at 120 volts and squirmed uncomfortably to 180 volts. When Tyler screamed, "Ah! Ah! Get me out of here! I refuse to go on! Let me out!" Lateefah made this moral plea to Jeremy: "I know I'm not the one feeling the pain, but I hear him screaming and asking to get out, and it's almost like my instinct and gut is like, 'Stop,' because you're hurting somebody and you don't even know why you're hurting them outside of the fact that it's for a TV show." Jeremy icily commanded her to "please continue." As she moved



into the 300-volt range, Lateefah was noticeably shaken, so Hansen stepped in to stop the experiment, asking "What was it about Jeremy that convinced you that you should keep going here?" Lateefah gave us this glance into the psychology of obedience: "I didn't know what was going to happen to me if I stopped. He just—he had no emotion. I was afraid of him."

Our fourth subject, a man named Aranit, unflinchingly cruised through the first set of toggle switches, pausing at 180 volts to apologize to Tyler—"I'm going to hurt you, and I'm really sorry"—then later cajoling him, "Come on. You can do this.... We are almost through." After completing the experiment, Hansen asked him: "Did it bother you to shock him?" Aranit admitted, "Oh, yeah, it did. Actually it did. And especially when he wasn't answering anymore." When asked what was going through his mind, Aranit turned to our authority, explicating the psychological principle of diffusion of responsibility: "I had Jeremy here telling me to keep going. I was like, 'Well, should be everything's all right....' So let's say that I left all the responsibilities up to him and not to me."

Human moral nature includes a propensity to be empathetic, kind and good to our fellow kin and group members, plus an inclination to be xenophobic, cruel and evil to tribal others. The shock experiments reveal not blind obedience but conflicting moral tendencies that lie deep within. ■

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