

# What do Milgram and Zimbardo Experiments Teach us about the Power of Organizations to Control People's Behaviors?

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**Abstract.** Although the idea that everyone is equal is established for a long time, we can still see hierarchies in different places, such as schools and firms. Power relation co-exists with hierarchy since the higher an individual is in the hierarchy, the more power he can obtain to control others. In this article, we explore the factors that can affect one's actions by analyzing the two famous experiments, Milgram's experiment and Zimbardo's experiment, to see the how would power of organizations control individual's behaviors. At the end, we found not only the power of the organization and authority figures can influence individuals' actions, other factors including one's belief, the role which the individual plays and the setting of reward and punishment may also affect people's behaviors.

## 1. Introduction

Organizations are everywhere in today's world and it is socialized for organizations to have a hierarchy. As long as there is hierarchy structure, there will be power relation through it. In this essay, we are going to discuss what we can learn about the power of the organization to control an individual's behaviors from the two famous psychology experiments, which have been taken place a few decades ago. As a beginning, we are going to look at what are the two experiments mainly from their background, and procedure separately including some connections between them. Afterwards, an analysis regarding what we can learn from these two practices will be drawn. At the end, a brief conclusion about this topic will be given.

## 2. Brief Review of Milgram's Obedience Experiment

After World War 2, Adolf Eichmann, the person who was one of the main members that responsible for organizing the systematic killing of millions, was on the trial. He said he was just following the orders. This leads to the rethinking of evil.

Inspired by that, Milgram, a psychologist from Yale University, started an experiment in 1961. Milgram and his team firstly posting an advertisement for recruiting people aged 20-50 with different education backgrounds excluding under-graduated as the beginning of their work [1]. In the advertisement, it announced that the duration of the experiment would be 1 hour long and the person who was hired would be paid by \$4.5 for their participation. To be more specific, the subjects were told that the \$4.5 would be given to them for coming to the

experiment, no matter what happened after they arrived. The place had been chosen in a basement with 2 rooms separated by a wall. There were 3 participants in the experiment which were 1 experimenter, 1 teacher and 1 learner. To understand this experiment better, we can divide it into two parts: the fake test and the actual test. The subjects that Milgram was studying on would always be assigned to the role of teacher while the learner was actually a confederate of the experiment.

The subjects were told the experiment was testing the effects of administering electric shocks on a learner's ability to memorize a list of word-pair list, for example couch-potato [1]. What they need to do was going through the list once and read out either one of the words in a pair. The subject could move on to the next pair if the learner answered the word correctly, otherwise, the learner would be administered an electric shock. Shocks increased by 15V each time until it reached 450V. Labels indicating the voltage strength were given at the same time, from Slight shock to Danger: Severe Shock and the two switches after were simply labeled as XXX [1].

However, the real test was to discover how far the subjects were willing to continue until stopping administering electric shocks. The subject would hear the learner pounding on the wall, which was a prepared recording playing when the shock level reached 300V and 315V. This placed the subject into a struggling situation whether to obey their own moral or obey the authority figure. One of the four goads prepared before will be given to make the subjects continue in the case that they started being irresolute. The goads are ranked in strength from simple requests to order. The results showed that 65% of participants administered the maximum level of electric shock (450V) and all participants showed their obedience until 300V.

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DISTRIBUTION OF BREAKOFF POINTS	
Verbal designation and voltage indication	Number of subjects for whom this was maximum shock
<b>Slight Shock</b>	
15	0
30	0
45	0
60	0
<b>Moderate Shock</b>	
75	0
90	0
105	0
120	0
<b>Strong Shock</b>	
135	0
150	0
165	0
180	0
<b>Very Strong Shock</b>	
195	0
210	0
225	0
240	0
<b>Intense Shock</b>	
255	0
270	0
285	0
300	5
<b>Extreme Intensity Shock</b>	
315	4
330	2
345	1
360	1
<b>Danger: Severe Shock</b>	
375	1
390	0
405	0
420	0
<b>XXX</b>	
435	0
450	26

**Figure 1:** Result Table of Milgram's Obedience Experiment  
 (Source: [1])

### 3. Brief Review of Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment

In 1971, Philip Zimbardo, the professor of psychology at Stanford University, started the famous Stanford Prison Study with his graduated students especially Craig Haney [2]. One of the reasons to start this study was that Zimbardo wanted to "generate another test of the power of social situations over individual dispositions without

relying on the kind of face-to-face imposition of authority surveillance" which was in Milgram's study [3].

Different from Milgram's study which regards authority figure to control individual's behaviors, Zimbardo's study is on the power of organizations to influence individuals' behaviors. However, similarly, Zimbardo started his study with an advertisement as well. On the advertisement, they announced that they need male college students for a prison study and each person can get \$15 per day for the participation. And then 24 of 75 respondents were chosen after personality test and interview with experimenters to ensure they were the most moral and the healthiest ones among all of the volunteers. In other words, there were no differences between them. After that, they were randomly assigned to be prisoners and guards, 12 of each role including 1 stand-by prisoner and 1 stand-by guard [4]. The prisoners were told to stay at home and the study would begin on Sunday. What these prisoners did not know was that the city polices were going to come and make realistic arrests.

After being arrested, the prisoners were taken to the basement of the police station and locked in the small cells. Actually, this was a basement in the university where a simulation of the prison had been built by Zimbardo and his team. In the 'prison', prisoners were dehumanized and their names became numbers. The prisoners were put into a "loosely fitting smocks with identification number on front and back" while the untrained guards were wearing the uniform with the symbols of power and anonymity [4]. The only instruction given to those guards was "maintain the reasonable degree of order within the prison necessary for its effective functioning" [4].

In the end, this experiment was terminated after 6 days as 5 of the boys are emotionally broke down, although it should be 2 weeks according to the role instruction [4]. Another mean reason was that a female professor who was visiting the stimulated prison saw many humiliating actions that the guards did to the prisoner. For instance, she saw that prisoners shackled together with leg irons on them and with bags over their heads and unable to see anything, and these prisoners were yelled at by guards to run around the toilets. From what she saw, the female professor noticed that things went wrong. She pointed this out and Zimbardo ended the study on the second day. At that moment, Zimbardo himself was completely in the role of superintendent unconsciously [4]. In the report, Haney et al (1972) stated the actions the subjects did were "the result of an Intrinsically pathological situation which could distort and rechannel the behavior of essentially normal individuals." This also complies with the proposition that evil actions may be caused by the powerful social force [4].

#### **4. Factors That Led to The Results of The Two Experiments and the Similarity Between the Two Experiments**

Today, we are living in an organizational society. When we are organized by others, we automatically give up certain control of external sources, such as ideas, ability and people, otherwise, nobody can be organized since they are in an equal position. This leads to the appearance of hierarchy, although equality is considered to be an act of humanity in management. Once there is a hierarchy structure constructed within an organization, power relation will exist according. Generally, individuals who are at a higher level in the hierarchy will be more powerful than those who are at the lower position since power is relational.

Starting with Milgram's study, what made the subjects obey and stay? Initially, the subjects entered in a new hierarchy at the moment they were settled in the experiment and they knew they were not in charge, or at the higher level of the hierarchy, as they were the participants. Additionally, the subjects assumed the experimenter to be a "legitimate authority", which means that they thought that all the requests made by the experimenter during the procedure were regarding to the experiment. Combined with the belief the subjects had, which was that this experiment would lead to the progress in science, subjects' mindset had been shifted to a role of the agent of the experimenter. What would make them feel more reassured about shifting to the role of agent was that the experimenter said: "Although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent tissue damage, so please go on" [1]. This entails that the subjects would value the words from the experimenter more. The particular reason for this circumstance was that the subjects saw the experimenter as their superior, who was at the higher hierarchical level than them in the organization. Similarly, the reason for why the subjects tried to or tended to ignore the words of the learner was that the subjects treated the learner as if he/she was on the same level or a level below. These show the obedience to the authority figure.

Someone may say that the obedience illustrated above was just mindless obedience, however, others may argue that they chose to obey was due to their belief that the experiment includes worthy ideology. Haslam and Reicher [5] stated that "our desire to be good subjects is stronger than our desire to be subjects who do good." As already mentioned in the brief review of Milgram's obedience experiment, when the subjects showed their intention to stop increasing the voltage, 4 prepared prods would be given. According to Milgram [1], the prods were:

- Prod 1: Please continue. / Please go on.
- Prod 2: The experiment requires that you continue.
- Prod 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.
- Prod 4: You have no other choices; you must go on.

The response of the subjects showed that Prod 4, which is a strong order, would make the subject quit, and, meanwhile, the second prod which appeals to science was the most effective one (Freedom in Thought, 2018).

What else made the subjects to continue was an obligation, because they committed to participate in the experiment.

Different from Milgram's obedience experiment, the effect on individuals' behaviour of situational factors within the circumstance was shown in Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment. Every subject was playing the role so deeply no matter they were assigned to be a guard or a prisoner. In the report, several examples were given by Haney et al (1972), including one of the guards "vigorously pounding his nightstick into his hand" while kept watching over his captives and prisoners talking with others in their identification numbers instead of their real names. This phenomenon can be explained easily by that the realistic arrests that the subjects had experienced accompanied with the circumstance of the stimulation of prison, including the wearable, the cell and the role the subjects were playing, made the subjects believed in and adapted to the role they were playing. In the words of most of the 'guards', "they were 'just playing the role' of a tough guard" [4].

Another reason for why the guards were playing the roles so seriously would be that Zimbardo gave them a sense of how he expected them to behave [5]. To understand this, we need to look at the relationship between Zimbardo, the experimenter who played the role of superintendent during the study, and the 'guards' first. As an experimenter, Zimbardo was followed by the 'guards' due to the identification with him. Simply, 'guards', as followers, behaved in the way they thought Zimbardo was expected them to behave although Zimbardo had no announcement regarding any specific behaviors he expected. "Identification with the authority in question and an associated belief that the authority is right" [4] are the two most significant differences between obedience and following from nature.

When the roles were played under this circumstance, another factor influenced prisoners' behaviors had shown up. As time passed, time for prisoners to do activities such as reading, going to the toilet and even sleeping became a reward to those prisoners who obeyed to the guards. From the perspectives of Haney et al (1972), prisoners learned to obtain power for their own advantages by admiring power, "ingratiation, informing, sexual control of other prisoners or development of powerful cliques" [4]. Similar circumstance can also be found easily in reality, for example, when we do not know why we are working mindlessly but we know we will be fired and punished if we stopped.

The common issue arises in both studies was that when the 'teacher' and the 'guards' were playing their roles, they felt that they were not responsible for their own actions. Instead, the 'teachers' felt that they were responsible for the experimenter as an agent and 'guards' felt that they were responsible for their duty-looking after the prisoners and maintaining order. In other words, in each experiment, the subjects assumed that the experimenter would be responsible for their actions. In real life, we may face the same situation as we usually automatically assume that our superiors are going to take responsibility for our actions.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up everything that has been illustrated above, authority figures and the circumstance within an organization will have a significant impact on individual's behaviors. Under particular conditions, these factors could convert a good man into an evil. Nevertheless, authority figures and the internal circumstance are not the only factors influencing people's behavior. Since an organization started with the gathering of a group of people who have the same objectives and are willing to work together to achieve that objectives, the belief that an organization has is also a very significant factor. This can be investigated from the two experiments as the reason behind either the subjects in Milgram's obedience experiment choosing to obey the experimenter or the subjects in Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment playing their roles deeply was their belief. The role and the position of an individual in an institution is another factor having impact on human's behaviour as different role has different duties and responsibilities, and these can force the person who plays the role to take certain actions under certain conditions. A good example would be the 'guards' in Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment. Finally, the rules of reward and punishment of the organization are crucial as well because individuals rarely taking actions that will bring them the punishment which is a disadvantage for themselves.

In general, all of the factors above, which can change and restrict individuals' behaviour, can be found in any organizations. And there would be more factors waiting for us to discover. From my point of view, the power of the organization to control people's behaviors is unmeasurable and incredible.

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