SOLVING THE MURDER IN THE MILGRAM OBEDIENCE EXPERIMENTS:
A CALL FOR ACTION

By Eugen Tarnow

In 1963 Stanley Milgram showed that the vast majority of us humans exhibit excessively obedient behavior in the presence of an authority and that we can easily be made to encourage or tolerate real torture and murder even though it contrasts with our own stated ethical values.

The Milgram finding was buried by the criticism of the ethics of the experiment itself and, interestingly, the main critic, a very junior scientist at the time, was not delighted by the attention.

While the murder of the confederate Learner is an unethical decision, the fundamental finding of the experiment is not about which ethical decision to make, but rather that we are not able to carry out the ethical decisions we would like to make, in other words it is about self actualization. To prevent the fake murder in the Milgram experiment and, by extension, the real murders elsewhere, we need to accomplish two things. First, we have to teach ourselves that there is a large discrepancy between what we think we will do and what we will actually do in situations of authority. Second, we have to minimize the difference between what we do and what we would like to do.

I will discuss barriers and dynamics in our society that keep us from breaking and even enforce our habit to obey excessively. A sketch of a solution to the problem of excessive obedience is made involving experiential training, mappings of authority fields, rules and strong situations, and policy changes.

The impetus for action can be found in high risk niches in society.

Human errors made in the cockpit are found similar to those made in the authority experiments. Up to 20% of all airplane accidents may be preventable by optimizing the monitoring and challenging of captain errors by the first officer.

I also discuss how the power of a leader over a group is amplified when he or she starts to order the group, making the choice to disobey much more difficult. Returning to the airplane situation, this explains why a small well-informed minority can easily govern a previously ordered majority- hijackers taking over an airplane.  It also suggests what the passengers should do to take back the airplane.

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