THE MILGRAM-HOLOCAUST LINKAGE: CHALLENGING THE PRESENT CONSENSUS

Nestar Russell and Robert Gregory

Abstract: Stanley Milgram’s assertion that his “Obedience to Authority” (OTA) experiments replicated, in a laboratory setting, quintessential features of perpetrator behaviour during the Holocaust has been widely challenged. Most contemporary scholarship on this issue, known as the “Milgram-Holocaust (M-H) linkage”, argues that Milgram’s experiments failed to capture important factors such as ideology, policy, bureaucracy and technology, which more fully explain perpetrator behaviour. However, it is argued here that when the obedience research programme is viewed from a different angle – that of being an emerging policy-driven bureaucratic process in pursuit of “scientific” goals with an impersonal means of inflicting harm – the interplay of factors such as ideology, policy, bureaucracy and technology did in fact play a central role in generating Milgram’s high baseline completion rate. Hence, there is a much stronger theoretical connection between the OTA experiments and the Nazi state’s perpetration of the Holocaust than the current scholarly consensus allows.

Keywords: Milgram; authority; power; responsibility ambiguity; bureaucracy; shock generator; Holocaust; obedience

The Milgram-Holocaust (M-H) Linkage

After observing the 1961 trial in Jerusalem of the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann, Hannah Arendt concluded that she saw not only a man who was “neither perverted nor sadistic” but one who was also “terribly and terrifyingly normal” (1977: 276). Eichmann, she argued, was best understood primarily as a passive recipient of malevolent orders, which, as an ambitious bureaucrat, he sought to carry out as competently as possible. To capture the behaviour of the many ordinary desk-bound murderers like Eichmann, whose rubber stamps and “thoughtless” paper shuffling greased the cogs of the Nazi extermination machine, Arendt coined the term the “banality of evil” (1977: 252).

At about the same time, Arendt’s conclusions were being independently reinforced – or so it appeared – by an experimental programme on Obedience to Authority (OTA) conducted by American social psychologist Stanley Milgram
(1963, 1974). Milgram’s “New Baseline” (NB) experiment demonstrated that nearly two-thirds (65%) of “ordinary” Americans were “without any particular hostility on their part”, willing to follow orders to inflict what they were led to believe were potentially lethal electric shocks on an innocent person (1974: 6). During Milgram’s post-experimental interviews, many obedient participants attempted, as Eichmann had during his trial, to displace personal responsibility for their actions on to others. Milgram later endorsed Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil”, arguing that it came “closer to the truth than one might dare imagine” (1974: 6).

The purported behavioural similarities between many of Milgram’s participants, on the one hand, and numbers of ordinary Germans during the Holocaust, on the other, was termed by Miller (2004: 194) the “Milgram-Holocaust (M-H) linkage”. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, more scholars than not believed in the validity of the linkage (see Askenasy 1978: 131–132; Charny 1982: 13–16; Dicks 1972: 269; Elms 1972: 156 cited in Miller 1986: 132; Miller 1986: 257–258; Rosenbaum 1983: 36; Sabini and Silver 1982: 55–87; Steiner 1980: 431). According to Miller (1986: 257–258), many scholars took the OTA research “so seriously” because Milgram had “no doubt” revealed “one of the crucial secrets of the Holocaust”. This revelation “endowed the experiments with a special charisma” (257).

However, not everyone was persuaded by the M-H linkage (see Baumrind 1964: 423; Fromm 1973: 51; Patten 1977: 438; Tedeschi, Lindskold and Rosenfeld 1985: 211–212). By the early to mid-1990s, even proponents of the OTA research had come to question the linkage (see Blass 1993: 35–37; Lutsky 1995: 62–63). In particular, Daniel Goldhagen’s (1996) book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, was most influential in reversing the general tide of support for the M-H linkage. As well as presenting numerous examples of “ordinary” Germans volunteering to perpetrate cruel and sadistic acts on Jews, Goldhagen showed that some perpetrators willingly disobeyed SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler’s direct orders to cease killing (1996: 356–357). Goldhagen demonstrated that there was probably much more behind the Holocaust than, as Milgram (1974: 6) asserted, “ordinary people” just “doing their jobs”.

The discipline of social psychology had long accepted Milgram as one of its great scholars, but Goldhagen’s book emboldened a number of psychologists to challenge the M-H linkage (see Berkowitz 1999; Fenigstein 1998a, 1998b; Gonen 2000: 192; Mandel 1998; Mastroianni 2002). The resulting criticisms proved so forceful that Miller (2004: 228) conceded he may have previously been too “zealous and unreflective”. He concluded that when it came to explaining the Holocaust, obedience and a sense of duty “should be placed in the context of the crucial importance of many other factors” (220).
Lutsky (1995: 63) best captured the scholarly stumbling block for those affirmatively pursuing the M-H linkage. He argued, “What an emphasis on obedience slights, however, are voluntary individual and group contributions to Nazi ideology, policy, bureaucracy, technology, and ultimately, inhumanity” (emphasis added). That is, the purported M-H connections are overshadowed by the Holocaust’s more complex and often contradictory historical facts. It is fair to conclude that the present consensus, even among Milgram’s strongest advocates, is that the OTA experiments have only minor explanatory power when applied to the Holocaust (Fenigstein 1998b: 71; Lutsky 1995: 62–63).

Here, we challenge this consensus, arguing that Milgram’s experiments hold significant power in helping to better understand perpetrator behaviour during the Holocaust. In Section I, we question the conventional view that the Milgram experiments were actually mainly about “obedience”. Section II presents a different theoretical perspective on the experiments, showing that the NB’s high completion rate was heavily dependent on individual and group contributions to an ideologically and policy-driven bureaucratic process. And Section III illustrates the central importance of technology in the generation of Milgram’s NB results.

Section I: “Obedience to Authority” — or Not?

The word “obedience” can be found in the title of nearly every article Milgram wrote on his (in)famous experiments (1963, 1964a, 1964b, 1965b, 1972, 1973). He made a film called “Obedience (a filmed experiment)” (1965a) and wrote a book titled “Obedience to Authority” (1974). In the book, he presented his theoretical explanation of “the agentic state”, positing a psychological condition in which “the individual no longer views himself as responsible for his own actions but defines himself as an instrument for carrying out the wishes of others” (1974: 134). Milgram added, “In asserting this defense, the individual is not introducing an alibi concocted for the moment but is reporting honestly on the psychological attitude [the agentic state] induced by submission to authority” (1974: 146). However, Milgram’s theory immediately attracted a lot of criticism, with Miller (2004: 210), for example, concluding that there is “very little empirical support” for the idea. Blass (2004: 216) considered Milgram’s theory chapter – titled “The Process of Obedience: Applying the Analysis to the Experiment” – to be the “weakest” section of the book. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as late as 1 March 1980 – a few years before his death – Milgram was still toying with theories on different “types of obedience” (Stanley Milgram Papers, hereafter SMP,3 Box 71, Folder 293, Titled: “Unidentified Fragments, n.d.”). Nobody has since managed to develop a “conclusive theory to account for destructive obedience – or defiance, either” (Miller 2004: 233; see also Elms 1995: 27). So why did Milgram hold a
seemingly unshakable belief that his experiments were an investigation into “obedience to authority?” The answer can be found in the way he originally devised his experiments.

Milgram was driven by a desire to find an explanation for the Holocaust (Russell 2011). He derived his research idea from a common post–World War II stereotype: “I came across many statements which implied that Germans tended to obey orders more conscientiously[ly] than Americans” (Fermaglich 2006: 88). Thus, building on Solomon Asch’s conformity experiment, Milgram developed a procedure and carried out a pilot study where, just as in the Holocaust, “ordinary” (American) people were given “orders” to act “aggressively towards another person” (Tavris 1974a: 80). The apparent power of “obedience to authority” during the initial pilot session “astonished” him (Blass 2004: 68) because most “obeyed”. Part of the stereotype had been confirmed: there indeed appeared to be a proclivity in ordinary people to obey authority figures. Thereafter, Milgram was convinced that his experiments were, in some important way, about obedience, and with this belief locked firmly in mind, he was unable to imagine that they might actually have been about something else.

Others, however, have questioned Milgram’s thinking. Noting how the experimenter had to urge one participant at least four times to “please continue” between the 285- and 315-volt switches, Helm and Morelli observed that “The ‘obedient’ behaviour that Milgram has analysed seems heavily dependent on cajoling, pleading, and repetition, set in the context of deception and personal surveillance” (1985: 618). At best, the end result of the interaction between participant and experimenter – the fulfilment of a request – only loosely fits the dictionary definition of obedience – “compliance with an order, request, or law or submission to another’s authority” (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.). However, the cajoling, pleading and repetition suggest that something far more nuanced was going on. As Morelli (1983: 185) put it,

…it may very well be the case that there are other possibilities to be ruled out before it can be said with assurance that the subject’s behavior is properly characterized as obedience rather than such things as complying with a request, being persuaded by an argument, or capitulating to pressure and intimidation.

This possibility seems to have never crossed Milgram’s mind, because the findings from his first pilot studies had so forcefully confirmed what the Nazis had said in court: they too had just obeyed orders. But as one prosecutor of German war crimes suggested to journalist Gitta Sereny, “obeying orders” was probably a convenient and attractive excuse (Sereny 2002: 79–81). Such an excuse, as in many other cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity cases, would have
been intended to evade personal responsibility for actions motivated by factors such as careerism, greed, ambition, hatred and racism. Blinded by the confirmation bias, Milgram failed to consider that his “obedient” participants may have employed the same evasive strategy to avoid a sense of personal responsibility for their own actions.

Other researchers have questioned Milgram’s use of the term “obedience”. For example, Lutsky (1995: 58) argued that Milgram’s frequent conflation of description with explanation was tautological, whereby obedience was being explained by obedience (see also Mandel 1998: 82). More recently, several researchers have noted how “obedience” offers a weak description of most participants’ behaviour (see Brannigan 2013; Gibson 2014; Haslam and Reicher 2011; Perry 2012: 289; Russell 2009; Russell and Gregory 2011). If “obedience” was, as Morelli (1983) suggested many years ago, a weak description of many participants’ actions, it was therefore a flimsy foundation on which Milgram or anyone else could have built a robust theoretical explanation of these experimental results (Russell and Gregory 2011: 497). But perhaps the most telling criticism against Milgram’s misleading terminology came out of Burger’s partial replication of the obedience studies in 2009. Burger, Girgis and Manning (2011) noted during this replication that the fourth standard prod – “You have no other choice, you must go on” – infuriated participants so much that every single one of them exposed to it refused to continue (464). Of all the prods, this one most resembles a demand to obey authority, but in fact it stimulated disobedience 100 per cent of the time. So ironically, the experiments might not be about “obedience to authority” at all.

Authoritatively, Milgram asserted that his experiments were about obedience, and until quite recently none of the leading academic commentators on his experiments ever challenged this assumption, but instead they seem to have taken it for granted. The exception was Helm and Morelli (1979), who more than three decades ago sensed the flimsiness of Milgram’s terminology. In their words,

The attempt to clarify the legal and philosophic aspects of obedience involves the establishment of criteria that must “be met before an event or act can be said to fall within the ambit of a given concept”. In the absence of a clarification of such criteria, we have no good grounds for contending that this instance of a belief or behavior is illustrative of obedience to authority. (Helm and Morelli 1979: 325)

They compared this failure to question an assumption with the behaviour of King Charles II’s philosophers, who had been asked by the king why a fish gained weight after dying. A welter of theories were eagerly offered until Charles pointed out that a fish does not in fact gain weight after death. In the present case, however, we suggest that none of the philosophers in the metaphorical court of “King
Stanley” seriously challenged an assumption that was, because of his pilot studies, so firmly held by the king himself. Convinced from the outset that his experiments were somehow about “obedience”, Milgram eventually had to develop a theory that, metaphorically speaking, explained why a fish gains weight when it expires. Perhaps this is why he took well over a decade of deep and often depressing contemplation to develop a theory that so quickly ended up dead in the water (see Russell 2009: 87–91).

So if his findings say much less than Milgram believed about OTA, then how else can they be interpreted? We address this question in the next section.

**Section II: Ideology, Policy and Bureaucracy**

During the pilot stage of his experiments, Milgram established two main research goals. The first was to create a highly realistic baseline experiment where most participants were likely to implement “orders” to act “aggressively towards another person”, thus creating what he termed “the strongest obedience situation” (Russell 2011: 146, 149). After running his baseline experiment that would “maximize obedience”, Milgram’s second research goal was to undertake numerous ad hoc variations, in an attempt to discover why “obedient” participants had inflicted every shock (Russell 2011: 158, 149–156).

The achievement of these two goals was a massive logistical undertaking. Milgram had to draw on the help, expertise and resources of many other people. He required financial and institutional support, access to professional laboratory facilities, specialist technical equipment, numerous research assistants, technicians and actors. Milgram then had to motivate this diverse group of collaborators over many months, so that they would fulfil their essential roles in a carefully coordinated and sequential manner. However, because during the pilot studies many participants experienced the “extreme tension” (Russell 2014: 412) of thinking they were inflicting excruciating shocks on an innocent person, Milgram’s research goals were threatened by the possibility that some of his collaborators might become concerned that his experiments were unethical or immoral. This was a real possibility because it transpires that some participants found the experiments so stressful they thought they might have a heart attack (Blass 2004: 115–117; see also Perry 2012: 78). To ensure that every helper proceeded to carry out their specialist roles and achieve his research goals, Milgram had to neutralize any such concerns (see Russell, 2009, 2014).

He did so by applying two main psychological instruments. The first was comprised of a variety of Strain Reducing Mechanisms (SRMs) – techniques that help neutralize the tension normally associated with inflicting harm on another person (Milgram 1974: 153–164). One SRM was a persuasive rationale which justified
the infliction of intense stress on innocent people: that the research programme was likely to generate new scientific insights into man’s tendency to obey the inhumane orders of a malevolent authority.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) was Milgram’s funding agency, and Yale University provided his institutional affiliation and support. Both these organizations, together with his first research assistant (Alan Elms), and the many technicians and actors (particularly the “learner”, James McDonough, and “experimenter”, John Williams) were led to believe that their contributions to a potentially harmful experiment would shed new light on “[t]he problem of obedience to authority”. More specifically, Milgram “encouraged the people contributing to or participating with him in the experiment to view it as an analogue of Nazi evil” (Fermaglich 2006: 89) – a “crucial issue of our time” (SMP, Box 45, Folder 160, Titled: “Grants 1961–1967”).

As Milgram’s collaborators said, the research set out to explore an “important and fundamental social phenomenon” (NSF cited in Blass 2004: 72), which from the start produced “truly unusual” results (Elms 2009: 32). All believed that these experiments would be of “tremendous value” and therefore “must be done” (John Williams cited in Russell 2014: 416). This was a clear case of the ends being seen to justify the means (see Blass 2004: 117). The conversion of “something evil” (the imposition of intense nervous strain on innocent people) into something “good” (the advancement of scientific knowledge) is a type of SRM that Adams and Balfour (1998: xx) term “moral inversion”. This offered the rationalization that the experiments had a higher, “scientific”, goal, thereby investing the experimental programme with a strong ideological purpose and a sense of organizational mission. Although he said it in reference to his participants’ actions towards the learner, Milgram (1974: 187) argued that the infliction of harm is “…almost always justified in terms of a set of constructive purposes, and come to be seen as noble in the light of some high ideological goal” where, in the process of hurting another person, “science is served”.

To further reduce the risk of the collaborators rejecting his rationale for inflicting strong emotional stress on the “teachers”, Milgram typically supplied them with a range of other SRMs. For example, when weighing up whether to financially support the experiments, the NSF expressed a concern that participants might experience “negative effects” (Blass 2004: 71). The issue appears to have been resolved by Milgram’s assurances in his research proposal that he would “insure the subject’s well being [sic]” (SMP, Box 45, Folder 160, Titled: “Grants”). Another example of a SRM was Milgram seeking to reassure his research assistant, graduate student Alan Elms, in regard to Elms’ “E[chman][n]-like” role of delivering a constant flow of people to the laboratory. Milgram pointed out that participants would be given “…a chance to resist the commands of a malevolent
authority and assert their alliance with morality” (Blass 2004: 99). In other words, Elms need not concern himself with the intense stress experienced by the participants he delivered to the laboratory, because those who chose to side with evil over good really had only themselves to blame. This is an example of a SRM more commonly referred to as “blaming the victim”.

The second psychological instrument that Milgram used to keep his collaborators onboard was what he called “binding factors” (BF). These are powerful external bonds that can tempt, entrap or coerce a person into doing something they might otherwise prefer not to do (Milgram 1974: 148). An important BF was Milgram’s deliberate bolstering of the morally inverted rationale for participating, by satisfying his collaborators’ different personal/organizational needs, wants and desires – that is, appealing to their self-interest. For example, he efficaciously appealed to the NSF’s central organizational objective to fund highly innovative and ground-breaking research, when he claimed in his research proposal (25 January 1961) that his intended project was “a relatively unexplored domain of social behavior” in which the first “Pilot studies…yielded unexpected results of considerable interest” that observers apparently found “startling” (Russell 2014: 415). Such statements also appealed to Yale University’s central organizational mission – the acquisition of new knowledge – thus helping Milgram to gain the university’s crucial institutional support, including access to its laboratory facilities. Elms (2009: 32) has mentioned a variety of BFs that helped secure his own continuing involvement in the research programme. These included the Department of Psychology’s course requirement that he secure a “faculty sponsor”, his pecuniary reward and the draw of his (Elms’) own intellectual curiosity. Another powerful BF was certainly Milgram’s offer to collaborate with Elms on future obedience-related publications (see Elms 2009: 33). Ultimately, however, Milgram was aware that a rationale based on a form of moral inversion was, on its own, unlikely to secure the long-term commitment of his actors. So he bolstered this SRM with the offer of pecuniary reward. As Milgram said on 14 February 1962, in a request to the NSF for additional funding, “It would not be possible to hold this able group of workers together unless the work and salary payments were continuous” (Russell 2014: 416).

Milgram’s strongly manipulative strategy of gaining and sustaining the commitment of his collaborators was not necessarily duplicitous but was typical of the sort of “quid pro quo” arrangements that are made by project managers in virtually any organizational venture, to ensure that all involved work in a coordinated fashion towards the achievement of a preconceived and overarching goal (Breton and Wintrobe 1986: 909).

One would suspect that in the eyes of most of the collaborators, even a low risk of participants being injured would have negated the prospect of any “scientific”,

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personal or organizational gains. However, as Milgram drew in all the collaborators to help complete his experimental programme, the issue of individual responsibility underwent a subtle yet powerful transformation. In agreeing to contribute, his collaborators had unwittingly become links in an intrinsically strain-resolving, increasingly coercive and purpose-driven organizational process of Milgram’s making.

An inherent characteristic of a bureaucracy is its division of labour, where a goal-directed task is divided up into a series of sub-tasks, carried out by an array of specialist functionaries (Barnard 1968; Weber 1976). This compartmentalization causes a disjuncture between cause (i.e. the making of partial contributions to the pursuit of a goal) and any negative effects associated with the final outcome (in this case, the infliction of intense stress). This disjuncture between cause and effect stimulates among functionaries a high degree of what we call “responsibility ambiguity”. This can be understood as a metaphorical haziness, or “fog”, which renders debatable the issue of who is responsible for what, and makes the attribution of blame more difficult for outside observers. This “fog” can render some functionaries genuinely unaware of their personal responsibility in the perpetration of negative outcomes, while it can also enable others to opportunistically evade responsibility in the belief that their harmful contributions will be rewarded in the short term and never punished in the longer term. Thus, Milgram and his many willing helpers were in a sense protected by the fog of responsibility ambiguity, as they neither felt personally responsible for what was happening nor believed that they would not appear to be responsible for any harm that flowed from their involvement in malevolent organizational pursuits.

The responsibility ambiguity generated by the division of labour is typically expressed in two main ways: the diffusion and displacement of responsibility. Diffusion of responsibility occurs because all functionaries make partial contributions to the final negative outcome and, as a result, may only feel partially responsible for it. Because no one feels totally responsible for the negative outcome, ultimate responsibility is “diluted”. It is not focused on any single person or even a small number of people but is diffused across all those involved – thus greatly reducing the emotional and psychological strain felt by any one person. Displacement of responsibility occurs when functionaries choose to “pass the buck” of responsibility for their own actions elsewhere, in this case to Milgram himself, the experimenter or even the pursuit of “scientific knowledge”. In a bureaucracy, there is always someone or something else that can be held responsible for negative outcomes. This typically bureaucratic situation was described by Arendt (1977: 289) as “the rule of Nobody”.

In the case of displacement, responsibility ambiguity meant that each one of the collaborators in Milgram’s experiments felt, or at least sensed, that they did not appear to others to be responsible for contributing to a harmful process. And the
combined effects of the diffusion and displacement of responsibility meant that no single person was ultimately fully responsible for it.

Milgram conducted an experimental variation in which one participant asked the “learner” the questions while another one (in fact, an actor) inflicted the “shocks” for incorrect answers. This version produced a 92.5 per cent completion rate, leading him to write the following:

... it is psychologically easy to ignore responsibility when one is only an intermediate link in a chain of evil action but is far from the final consequences of the action ... Thus there is a fragmentation of the total human act; no one man decides to carry out the evil act and is confronted with its consequences. (Milgram 1974: 11)

With their responsibility both diffused and displaced, Milgram and his helpers felt much less strain, knowing that none of them were likely to be held accountable for the infliction of harm on others. Instead, they needed only to concern themselves with reaping the personal or organizational benefits of their involvement. This explains why all of Milgram’s collaborators risked partaking in a harmful and potentially dangerous experiment. As the principal investigator, Milgram set up the OTA experiments and managed them through to completion, and in so doing, he did not feel strongly responsible for their harmful effects, because he himself never directly hurt anybody and was only performing the sort of innovative research function expected by the prestigious Yale University of non-tenured faculty. Both Yale and the NSF signed off in support of the project, so Milgram could always tell himself that both these important institutions allowed, desired and legitimized it (Russell 2014: 414–415).

Bolstering the perceptions of Milgram and his collaborators that they could all probably act with impunity was their awareness that legal protections were built into the standard experimental procedure. For example, in order to receive the $4.50 payment for their time all participants had signed “a general release”, which stated, “In participating in this experimental research of my own free will, I release Yale University and its employees from any legal claims arising from my participation.” According to Milgram’s research notes, “The release, of course, was not used for experimental purposes, but to protect us against legal claims” (Russell 2014: 418). But if participants signed this release, would they not then be wary of any legal consequences that could flow from their willingness to inflict “harmful” electric shocks on another person? Not necessarily, because as Williams’ “EXPERIMENTER’S INSTRUCTIONS” manual illustrates, when the experimenter invited participants to sign the waiver, he explicitly downplayed its legal significance, even subtly distracting them by focusing more on the fact that their signature was required in exchange for the $4.50 payment. After the learner had
been strapped into the shock chair, the experimenter and participant “LEAVE SHOCK ROOM”. Williams was then to say to the participant,

> If you’ll sit down there [at the shock machine], we’ll begin... Oh, the first thing I should do is to pay you. It slipped my mind. (GET CHECK AND RECEIPT) I guess that, rather than unstrap the learner from his chair, I’ll wait and pay him later. Now, I’ll have to get your name and signature on this receipt for our records. Please read and sign the standard clearance we must have from all participants in our research, although this project itself is not dangerous. (SMP, Box 45, Folder 161, Titled: “Instructions and procedures”)

Despite the clear assurances given in Milgram’s research proposal that the experiments were harmless, according to Blass (2004: 71) the NSF held a committee meeting which raised “the question with their general counsel of who would be responsible – the National Science Foundation or Yale – for any negative effects on the subjects. The lawyer thought that Yale would be legally responsible.” It appears, therefore, that in the event of any legal challenges, the NSF intended to blame Yale University. (It is not known whether Yale in turn would have tried to blame the victims themselves, although the General Release implies that this was their intention.) In the event, Milgram encountered few difficulties in ensuring that all his collaborators willingly contributed to a research project that by Milgram’s own admission converted many naïve participants into “stuttering wrecks…rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse” (Milgram, 1963: 377).

The only possible exception in this regard was the experimenter John Williams. Because of his direct and undeniable involvement in inflicting emotional stress on participants, he was the most likely collaborator to have felt a strong sense of personal responsibility and to have challenged Milgram’s own authority. This posed a significant problem for Milgram, because the methodological strength of the entire programme rested upon Williams’ willingness to fulfil his role until all the data had been collected.5 Because the role of the experimenter had to remain constant, if Williams suddenly walked out, Milgram would have to start the research programme all over again. To ensure Williams stayed, Milgram gave him three pay increases, “Salary additions” of “$20…/mo[nth]” for the final “March-June” 1962 phase, and offered him either a 2 per cent share of the royalties from Milgram’s eventual book or a $100 bonus paid out at the end of the experimental series (Russell 2014: 416). Although Milgram relied heavily on financial and material inducement to secure Williams’ long-term commitment, this was not the only BF at work in Williams’ and other cases. What can be called bureaucratic momentum was also effective.

The division of labour inherent in Milgram’s quasi-bureaucratic structure also acted as a powerful BF, as is commonly the case in organizations with highly
interdependent production components. Employees working on an assembly line feel strong pressure to fulfil their own narrowly instrumental roles, so that the moving system continues to run smoothly. The threat of counterproductive bottlenecks posed by a single uncooperative “cog” is a powerful one. However, because any such resistance also threatens whatever rewards every other functionary will receive for the achievement of the organization’s goals, collective coercive pressure reduces the chances of obstruction by any single functionary. In such an environment, an organization member must go along to get along.

The binding force of bureaucratic momentum was strongly influential during the OTA experiments. For example, to meet the NSF’s organizational desire to sponsor the most innovative research, Milgram felt pressure to successfully complete the experimental programme, and this required the long-term retention of the experimenter’s services. In return, the experimenter felt contractually obliged to continue hounding participants. If “others” could be blamed for generating this pressure, then responsibility ambiguity would be extended, as individual functionaries were less likely to feel responsible for their contributions to a harmful process, and also knew they would not appear to others to be so. All could continue to contribute to, and benefit from, the organization, safe in the knowledge that they were unlikely to be held accountable for harming an innocent person. So despite any collaborators’ private moral reservations about harming an innocent person, bureaucratic momentum was another binding force that increased the probability that all those involved continued to work in unison towards the achievement of Milgram’s research goals.

What becomes clear is that a morally inverted and ideologically driven “scientific” rationale for inflicting harm (SRM), personal/organizational benefits (BF), bureaucratic momentum (BF), and the responsibility ambiguity inherent within a disjointed bureaucratic process (SRM) all, and each to some degree, worked collectively in keeping Milgram’s collaborators contributing to a harmful process.

In light of the above, it can be asked, why did most participants in the NB condition collaborate with Milgram in his endeavour to obtain a high completion rate? Technically speaking, the participants were just another – albeit the last – link in the same bureaucratic chain. We argue that forces similar to those affecting the other functionaries were at play in relation to their roles as ostensible inflictors of “harm” on the learner. From the beginning, the NB procedure set off on what Erdos (2013) aptly terms a “persuasion phase”: the process of convincing participants to inflict “harm”. Here, the experimenter supplied the participants with the rationalization that shocking an innocent person was of significant scientific importance because doing so would help determine the effects of punishment on learning (Milgram 1974: 18). This was a slightly different ideological rationale from that supplied to the other links in the bureaucratic chain. Nonetheless, the structure of this different ideological rationale was the same: something evil
(shocking an innocent person) was morally inverted into something good. That is, by exploring the effects of punishment on learning “...science is served” (Milgram 1974: 187). Participants were informed of the importance of their performance, and most became eager to be considered worthwhile participants (Milgram 1974: 59). The payment of $4.50 appears to have heightened this eagerness to please by contractually binding the participants to the experimenter (Milgram 1974: 148–152). Consequently, all participants in the NB condition inflicted the first few light shocks on the learner. At the first signs of participants hesitating, the experimenter imposed the binding force of bureaucratic momentum by giving the first two verbal prods: “Please continue” and “The experiment requires that you continue.” If the first two prods failed to bring the participant in line, the experimenter issued the third and fourth prods: “It is absolutely essential that you continue” and “You have no other choice, you must go on” (Milgram 1974: 21, italics in original). As conveyed by the participants’ frequent protests, many sensed that what was being asked of them was at least unfair, perhaps even unethical.8

The binding prods also doubled as SRMs because they subtly provided participants with the option to abnegate responsibility for inflicting the intensifying shocks. Participants could reassure themselves that they would never have inflicted the shocks of their own accord, that it was instead an expert from an elite university who “required” that they “continue”, and who told them that it was “essential” and that they had “no choice”.9 The binding yet simultaneously strain-resolving prods injected even more responsibility ambiguity into the situation. In the early stages, participants genuinely seemed to feel little or no personal responsibility for the learner’s uncomfortable experience. However, particularly from the 150-volt switch, when the learner’s pained reactions intensified, the close relationship between cause (flicking switches) and effect (the screaming learner) started to stimulate nervous facial expressions, suggesting that most participants started to feel responsible for their actions. They typically wanted to stop inflicting shocks but were reluctant to do so. After all, they had agreed to participate, and an “expert” from Yale University was vigorously encouraging them to continue. So, feeling like indispensable cogs in a powerful bureaucratic machine that had been designed to serve a noble cause, what choice did they really have?

Their inhibitions stemmed from the fear that in order to stop the experiment they would have to engage in a direct – probably impolite and socially awkward – confrontation with the experimenter (Milgram 1974: 150; Russell and Gregory 2011: 499–500). Consequently, many participants instead invented their own non-confrontational, inoffensive and polite means of prematurely ending the experiment. However, they did not know that during the pilot experiments Milgram had already encountered the most common non-confrontational exit strategies invented by participants, and therefore knew what most participants were likely to say
during the fully fledged experimental series (Russell and Gregory 2011: 507). Accordingly, he had armed his experimenter with an array of verbal prods designed to counter the most common non-confrontational attempts at extrication. For example, as the learner’s screams intensified many participants politely enquired about the effect of the shocks, sensing it would be reasonable to stop if, as the situation clearly indicated, the learner was being harmed. Participants were typically surprised when the experimenter curtly dismissed these enquiries with the prod: “Although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent tissue damage, so please go on” (Milgram 1974: 21). The participant then had to choose between confronting the experimenter and continuing to inflict further shocks. In the hope that a little more time might provide them with the opportunity to devise a more successful non-confrontational exit strategy, most participants continued a little further along the shock board. Since the participants were the only persons “harming” the learner, some of them deemed it wise to have the experimenter explicitly establish the direct lines of responsibility. In the unlikely case that the experimenter would be unwilling to accept full responsibility for the participant having shocked the learner, participants would then have been armed with an inoffensive opportunity to extricate themselves from the experiment. Expecting participants to assume all responsibility for someone else’s experiment is patently unfair and therefore participants would have expressed little hesitation in prematurely stopping the experiment (Meeus and Raaijmakers 1995: 164–165). However, the experimenter went so far as to contradict the legal release, thereby injecting even greater responsibility ambiguity into the situation by stating, “I’m responsible for anything that happens to him. Continue, please” (Milgram 1974: 74).

Typically, the participants’ search for a non-confrontational exit strategy not only failed but also backfired by drawing them into inflicting even more shocks. Even had they the courage to confront the experimenter and stop the experiment, they would have been faced with the additional burden of explaining why they had failed to stop earlier, once they had realized that the “learner” was being hurt and that it was wrong to continue inflicting shocks (Milgram 1974: 149). As Milgram (1965b: 73) explained, “The…problem then is how to become disengaged from a situation which is moving in an altogether ugly direction.”

While the participants contemplated this problem, a tempting opportunity emerged: if the participant unquestionably did as the experimenter asked, then only the latter could be blamed for the former’s actions (Eckman 1977: 97). The responsibility ambiguity inherent in the prods lured many participants to suspect that, despite feeling they were doing wrong, they may not have appeared to others present as being most responsible for the “learner’s” anguish. The confrontation-fearing participant was repeatedly encouraged to suspect that they could displace responsibility for their actions on to the experimenter because the latter said, and
the former wanted to believe, that it was “essential” to continue, that they had “no choice” but to do so, that the shocks were “harmless” and that only the experimenter was “responsible”. The experimenter’s last supplied strain-resolving/binding prod – “I’m responsible. …Continue, please” – proved particularly tempting for participants. Appearing to believe that they were not responsible enabled them to avoid a confrontation, absolved them from moral and legal culpability for continuing, and reassured them to a greater degree than at any earlier point that (like every other metaphorical cog in a bureaucratic machine), they could probably contribute to the infliction of harm with total impunity. Effectively, the prods planted a dark seed in the participants’ mind: they gave them increasingly credible and tempting excuses to continue.

Thus, participants could either stand up to the experimenter and accept personal responsibility for having inflicted as many shocks as they had, or they could capitalize on the mounting responsibility ambiguity by accepting the experimenter’s assurances that they could continue to flick the switches with total impunity. When the participants nervously contemplated the possibility of pursuing the latter option, the psychological noose hidden within the experimental procedure tightened. As Milgram tellingly noted, “…the experimental set up relies…on seduction, the systematic ensarement [sic] of the subject into a web of obligation and uncritically [sic] from which he is unable to escape” (Russell and Gregory 2011: 508).

At this crossroad, some participants chose to stop the experiment, but most chose what for them was the easier – self-interestedly “beneficial” because it was much less stressful – option of inflicting further shocks, in the firm belief that they were “just following orders”. By continuing to inflict “shocks”, participants could avoid a socially awkward confrontation with the experimenter while avoiding to appear personally responsible for their “harmful” actions. At this point, they transitioned out of the persuasion phase and entered the post-capitulation phase, where a commitment to shock infliction took hold (Erdos 2013).

After progressing along the shock board beyond the 330-volt switch (at which point the “learner” was, ostensibly, at least unconscious), the plausibility of the experimenter’s prods waned. That is, the learner was clearly being harmed, it was not “essential” that an innocent person be tortured, and the participants were ultimately responsible for their apparently harm-inflicting actions. Having already committed themselves to pursuing what they covertly knew to be the wrong course of action, many started to display unmistakable signs of nervousness – sweating, stuttering and shaking.

Having breeched the post-capitulation phase, and to strengthen their increasingly unconvincing excuses for continuing, some participants themselves started inventing what they thought were more plausible strain-resolving rationalizations for continuing. For example, participants commonly argued that “He [the learner]
was so stupid and stubborn he deserved to get shocked” (Milgram 1974: 10). In labelling the learner stupid, these participants were attempting to displace responsibility for their harmful actions on to the learner, and much as Milgram did in his letter to Elms, they were “blaming the victim” for their own misfortune. During and immediately after the experiment, participants who went through to the 450-volt switch more often blamed the experimenter, sometimes the learner, sometimes science or even “military service” (SMP, Box 153, Audiotape #2433) – in short, anyone or anything but themselves.

Although Russell and Gregory (2011) argue that participants were aware of being responsible for their own actions, only a small proportion were later willing to admit it (Milgram 1974: 203). As one participant later conceded, “I thought the ‘shocks’ might harm the other ‘subject’ however, I mentally ‘passed the buck’ feeling the one running the experiment would take all responsibility” (Russell and Gregory 2011: 508). That the experimenter and therefore Yale University had encouraged the participants to complete was clearly of personal significance in their post-capitulation decision to inflict more shocks; and Milgram’s own evidence suggests that here participants were probably telling the truth (see Footnote 9). As was the case for every other link in the OTA organizational chain, a critical factor in most participants’ decision to remain in the experiment was that “others” were involved, a factor that reinforced their sense of ambiguous responsibility.

The key argument here is that the decisions to fully cooperate that were made both by Milgram’s functional collaborators and by so many of his participants were typically shaped by the same SRMs and BFs (discussed above). Most of these inhered in Milgram’s quasi-bureaucratic system. That said, however, there was one key difference between the collaborators and the participants. Whereas the latter were the only ones required to directly inflict intense “electrical shocks” on an innocent person, only the experimenter among Milgram’s collaborators was himself required to directly inflict harm on the participants, by way of his increasingly coercive verbal prods. All of the other collaborators were only indirectly involved in the infliction of harm on innocent people. To significantly enhance the likelihood of participants carrying out their far more stressful role, Milgram had to supply them with another SRM, without which their willingness to comply would undoubtedly have been hugely reduced. This SRM was the shock generator itself.

Section III: Technology – The Shock Generator

Milgram initially argued that “The precise mode of acting against the victim is not of central importance” and that the delivery of electric shock was chosen for “technical reasons” – because participants could easily understand that shocks can be graded in intensity; it would be consistent with “the general scientific aura of the laboratory”
and because “it would be relatively easy to simulate the administration of shock in the laboratory” (Milgram 1974: 14). Yet he later acknowledged the role of the shock generator as an important SRM that played a significant role in producing his results (157). However, we go further than Milgram in arguing that this carefully crafted and seemingly authentic artefact was probably the single most powerful factor in producing his high completion rates (Russell and Gregory 2005; Russell 2009).

The shock generator had two characteristics that distinguished it from all the previously mentioned SRMs. First, the shock generator, not the “teacher”, delivered the punishment that was apparently strong enough to render the “learner” unconscious (at least). Second, the use of the shock generator meant that in the NB experiment the “teacher” could deliver punishment to the “learner” at a distance, with each being in separate rooms. This second characteristic ensured that “the act” of flicking switches was separated from its harmful “effect” on the learner (Milgram 1974: 39), thus ensuring that “the victim’s suffering possesses an abstract, remote quality for the subject” (36). Because the subjects helped to strap the learner into the chair and also received a sample 45-volt test shock, they were “...aware, but only in a conceptual sense, that his actions cause pain to another person” (36). This physical separation of cause from effect initially meant that subjects did not perceive themselves to be personally responsible for their “harmful” actions, and nor did they feel, at an emotional level, that they were so. And later in the experiment (when the “learner” was loudly protesting), the separation helped them to believe that they were not perceived by others to be responsible.10

By manipulating these two distinctive characteristics of the shock generator, Milgram was able to produce the widest disparities among his completion rates.

The experimental condition that maximized the effect of the shock generator’s two key characteristics was the Truly Remote Pilot (TRP) study, in which the electrical device was set up in such a way that the participant never heard, could not see and did not need to touch the person on whom they “inflicted” three consecutive 450-volt shocks. Although Milgram (1965b: 61) never provided the exact completion rate, in this variation “virtually all subjects went blithely to the end of the board”. However, across the first four official experiments, termed the Proximity Series, Milgram rearranged the positioning of the shock generator so that participants were increasingly exposed to the auditory, visual and eventually tactile consequences of their harmful actions. As the participants’ sensory awareness of harm doing was cumulatively reinforced, the harder it became for them to convince themselves and others present that they were not most responsible for their own actions:

- Remote – heard some banging on wall: 35 per cent pulled out;
- Voice-Feedback – heard all verbal reactions: 37.5 per cent pulled out;
- Proximity – saw and heard all reactions: 60 per cent pulled out.
As it became harder to deny the responsibility for their harmful actions, an increasing percentage of participants in the Proximity Series felt a compelling obligation to stop the experiment.

Of all Milgram’s variations, it was the last of this series – the Touch-Proximity (T-P) condition – that minimized the shock generator’s effect of shielding participants from the consequences of inflicting shocks. In this variation, the experimenter asked participants, from the 150-volt switch onwards, to force the recalcitrant learner’s hand on to a shock plate (“insulated” for the participant). Suddenly, participants were not only conceptually aware that they were producing pain but they were also perceptually aware by seeing and hearing a man screaming in pain under the force of their own hands. There was no disconnection in this experimental variation, cause and effect were manifestly and unequivocally direct, and most participants could not help but feel responsible for the consequences of their own actions, and were clearly seen by others to be responsible. Hence, under this condition, 70 per cent of the participants withdrew from the experiment.

Before running the T-P variation, Milgram “seriously doubt[ed] that many subjects will go along [sic] with the command for very long” (SMP, Box 46, Folder 175, Titled: “Notes: Proximity”). So he was later surprised to discover that almost one-third of participants in this variation inflicted every shock. This result, however, is less surprising when one takes into account that although the T-P condition had removed the shock generator’s second characteristic (the potential to inflict pain remotely), it retained in full the first characteristic (the shock generator, not the participant per se, inflicted the forceful blows).

The question arises, therefore, what results would Milgram have achieved in a variation where the means used by the participant to inflict harm was direct and personal, rather than mediated by a machine which separated the “teacher” and “learner”? Hypothetically, it would not have been difficult to design a control experiment for the TRP: run exactly the same experiment, but without a shock generator, while retaining the experimenter’s demands that intensifying levels of punishment be inflicted for incorrect answers. In this “No Shock Generator” condition, the participant would have to enter the “learner’s” chamber and personally inflict some form of physical punishment on a man who was strapped down and unable to protect himself. Perhaps participants could have punished the “learner” by striking him with an array of intensifying blows until the “learner” had been rendered unconscious at least.11 In such a scenario, the relationship between the “teacher” and the “learner” would be unmediated by any intervening variable like the shock generator and the participants could not avoid seeing, hearing, and feeling the consequences of their blows. There could be no doubt in the participants’ minds as to what was happening. In this hypothetical situation, sole responsibility for the participants’ harmful actions would no longer feel or – in the presence of...
others – appear ambiguous. Furthermore, in such a variation, any personal benefits associated with continued participation were unlikely to be at the forefront of the participants’ minds. Should any participants have agreed to complete such an experiment, it would have been indisputably clear, to a far greater degree than in the T-P condition, who was most responsible for the participants’ actions.

Interestingly, when Milgram asked a group of psychiatrists to predict the outcome of his NB procedure, they thought that only one in a thousand – those from the “pathological fringe” – would inflict every shock (Milgram 1974: 31). Perhaps the psychiatrists’ prediction would have been more accurate if it had been directed at a speculative “No Shock Generator” condition, in which only sociopaths might have participated? If so, the “No Shock Generator” version and the TRP would have produced completion rates with the broadest disparity of all – from virtually none to “virtually all”, respectively.

The shock generator was so important in generating the NB condition’s high completion rate that its absence would have severely weakened the power of every other BF and SRM involved in the basic procedure. Assaulting the learner with considerable force and then invoking self-exculpatory justifications – such as, they were “just following orders”, that science required them to do it, that the experimenter convinced them that they had “no other choice” or that the punishment would not cause permanent damage – would have sounded to themselves and appear to others present patently ridiculous. Who would be gullible enough to believe them? For nearly every participant, engaging in a confrontation would have been the less stressful option over continuing to hurt the learner. The shock generator was indisputably the most powerful single variable in the OTA experiments. None of the other SRMs and BFs could have ensured, in the way the shock generator did in the TRP, that the participants’ contributions to the overall process approximated the level of perceptual banality experienced by all the other links in the experimental programme’s bureaucratic division of labour. It was only during the TRP that every component of Milgram’s quasi-bureaucratic invention gave practical meaning to the “banality of evil” and saw “virtually all” functionaries doing their bit in unwittingly assisting Milgram to achieve his goal of producing a startlingly high completion rate. And it is here that the most direct connection between the OTA experiments and the Holocaust is found: such mass murder was carried out by modern industrialized, heavily bureaucratic, means, which as the Holocaust progressed increasingly separated perpetrators from the human consequences of their actions (Russell and Gregory 2005).

Conclusion: Revisiting the M-H Linkage

Milgram (1974: 42) was aware that many of his “teachers” experienced stress in trying to resolve the tension between what he called “incompatible response tendencies”: on
the one hand, the tendency to comply with authority, and on the other, sympathetic concern for the victim. However, his OTA experiments did not demonstrate human-kind’s “tendency to obey”, if such exists, as he claimed they did. Instead, we argue that in resolving what for them was a moral dilemma most participants were strongly influenced by the SRMs and BFs – notably, an ideologically driven rationale for inflicting harm, organizational and personal benefits, the diffusion/displacement of responsibility made possible by the division of labour, the coercive force of bureaucratic momentum and especially the emotionally distancing effect of the shock generator. For all involved – Milgram, his collaborators and “obedient” participants – a high degree of responsibility ambiguity took hold, which greatly aided the quest to maximize the NB completion rate. Responsibility ambiguity fosters what Stanley Cohen (2013) calls “maximum deniability”, often heavily relied upon by government officials.

In challenging the current consensus against the M-H linkage, we therefore argue that when the OTA experiments are viewed from this perspective, then – just like the Holocaust – the OTA studies can be said to have involved factors such as individual and group contributions to ideology, voluntarism, policy, bureaucracy, technology and ultimately inhumanity. All these factors collectively exerted their most powerful influence on his TRP, greatly reducing any perceptual stimulation the participants may have felt – and certainly did feel in other experiments, notably the T-P version – thus enabling them to inflict ostensible harm on the “learner” without feeling any undue emotional stress. Their willingness to stick largely unquestioningly with the standard operating procedures laid down by Milgram and his experimenter did indeed create and sustain an image of functional banality. He marshalled what he described as “powerful forces” that discouraged most participants from “making the right choice” (Blass 2004: 118, quoting Milgram). We argue that the pressures that he brought to bear on participants and which prevented so many of them from making “the right choice” were similar to some of those that are inherent in large modern organizations, which employ what are in effect SRMs and BFs in order to widen what Chester Barnard (1968: 168–169) called their members’ “zone of indifference”.13 In this “zone of indifference”, people may display in their behaviour a similar kind of “sheer thoughtlessness” that Arendt saw in Eichmann (Arendt 1977: 287).

Most participants in the NB experiment acted as if they were essentially cogs in an organizational machine, trapped within a sort of Weberian “iron cage” of instrumental rationality – to use Weber’s (1976) metaphor very loosely – and in which their sense of basic humanity and their own personal agency were subsumed within the overarching goal of an integrated impersonal system. In such a situation, “behavior is divorced from meaning and absolutely mandated by policy” (Alvarez 2010: 99). The “policy” in this case comprised a set of functional procedures carefully crafted to manipulate people (these days usually referred to as
“human resources”) in the pursuit of scientific knowledge – whether the ostensible knowledge of how people learn by punishment, or the “real” knowledge of how people can be induced to obey malignant authority (see Bauman, 1989). The actions of the people manipulated in this way are best understood as choices made by individuals who were placed in a particular situation, and the anxiety displayed by so many of them indicates that had they somehow been required to act alone, instead of in tandem with others, then they would not have responded as they did.

For his part, Rummel (1994) has documented how states in the twentieth century engaged in what he calls “democide”, the killing of vast numbers of their own citizens. And Grossman (1995) has provided an extensive analysis of how killing in wartime has been rendered increasingly effective by the development of military technology, which (we would add) is administered by compartmentalized and impersonal military bureaucracies. By these means, huge numbers of people can be killed, especially since the development of “unmanned aerial vehicles” (UAVs) or “drones”, operated by trained military personnel sitting thousands of kilometres away from their targets in high-tech control rooms, all the while answerable to their enthusiastic commanders for their destructive performance. This contemporary reality is a dark reflection of how Nazi “desk murderers” like Eichmann, all willing bureaucratic agents of the Nazi state in faraway Berlin, progressively overcame the “problem” of anguish to Holocaust perpetrators on the ground by developing killing methods that helped to emotionally distance them from their victims in the gas chambers (Green and Ward 2004: 174; Russell 2009, chapters 10–11).

This is, of course, not to say that the effects, in human terms, of Milgram’s experimental programme can be compared to those of the Holocaust. Nothing could be further from the truth. Yet when the results of Milgram’s OTA experiments are understood not as a confirmation of people’s propensity to obey authority per se, but as the product of a carefully crafted system of rational action that enables people to do the undoable, then their relevance to a fuller understanding of the Holocaust becomes more evident.

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**Notes**

1. We argue that while Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil”, which she authored after watching Eichmann in the dock at his trial in Jerusalem, is in its own right a valid descriptor of much bureaucratic behaviour, we also agree with Stagneth (2014), Wolin (2014) and others that
Eichmann was hardly a good example of it, as he was most certainly a thoughtful and committed official, personally dedicated to his exterminationist task. However, whether or not Eichmann was a good example of the “banality of evil” is largely irrelevant to our arguments about the M-H linkage.

2. The profile of the New Baseline condition is as follows. A confederate of Milgram’s, posing as a potential participant, enters a laboratory where they are greeted by another confederate dressed in a lab coat, hereafter called the experimenter. The ostensible participant is then introduced to a waiting naïve, and actual, participant. The experimenter tells both persons that the project they have volunteered to take part in is designed to investigate the effects of punishment on learning. They are then told that one person is required to be the teacher and the other the learner. The selection is rigged to ensure that the confederate is always made the learner and the participant the teacher. The three men enter a small chamber where the participant is asked to help strap the learner to a chair and the experimenter attaches an electrode to his arm. The learner mentions having a slight heart condition. The experimenter explained that the shocks may be painful but that they would cause no permanent tissue damage. The participant is then taken into an adjacent room and placed before the shock generator. The shock generator has 30 switches, aligned in 15-volt increments from 15 to 450 volts. The participant is given a sample 45-volt shock and is then instructed by the experimenter, standing nearby, to give the learner a shock each time an incorrect answer is proffered. Each incorrect answer warrants for the learner a shock one level higher than its predecessor. Once the experiment has started, the learner frequently provides incorrect answers and the experimenter insists that despite the intensifying shocks, the participant continues up the shock board. In fact, no shocks at all are being administered, though the participant does not know this. Through standardized tape recordings, the learner made explicit references to his heart condition at the 150-, 195- and 330-volt switches. From the 345-volt switch onwards, the learner’s increasingly excruciating reactions to the apparent shocks suddenly stop giving the impression that he had, at least, been rendered unconscious. The experimenter commands the participant to treat any unanswered questions as incorrect and accordingly to inflict the next level of shock. Once the participant has administered three successive shocks of 450 volts, they are considered “obedient” and the experiment is stopped.


4. Conversely, when outcomes are positive everyone will seek to take credit for them. As President John F. Kennedy is said to have ruefully observed after the 1961 Bay of Pigs disaster, “Victory has a hundred fathers but defeat is an orphan”.

5. The only exception to this rule was the Change of Personnel condition, in which Milgram tried to determine the influence of his usual experimenter/learner team.

6. In terms of the coercive force of bureaucratic momentum, consider the experience of Wes Kilham, who in the early 1970s performed the experimenter role in an Australian obedience studies replication:

“It was traumatic, difficult. I started disliking it very early on in the piece.” He confessed that he probably would have quit if he had been a staff member. But he was three-quarters of the way through his honours year. “There were demands on me to complete
the damn thing, and it was too late to turn around and choose another topic. I was trapped into thinking I had to see it through.” (Perry 2012: 344–345)

7. As Milgram (1974: 142) said,

When subjects enter the laboratory and are told to perform, they do not in a bewildered fashion cry out, “I never heard of science. What do you mean by this?” Within this situation, the idea of science and its acceptance as a legitimate social enterprise provide the overarching ideological justification for the experiment. [...] Ideological justification is vital in obtaining willing obedience, for it permits the person to see his behavior as serving a desirable end.

8. Milgram (1974: 187) noted when discussing historical examples of so-called obedience to authority, “Indeed, the repeated requests for authorization are always an early sign that the subordinate senses, at some level, that the transgression of a moral rule is involved”.

9. Milgram’s own evidence suggests that it is very unlikely participants would have inflicted intensifying shocks on their own accord: In the Subject Chooses Shock Level condition, the participants determined the intensity of punishment, and 97.5 per cent repeatedly inflicted low-level shocks (1974: 70–72).

10. This separation was important because of any legal or social consequences to the “teacher” that might have flowed from the “learner” being hurt. As Arendt (1977: 135) said of Eichmann, in obeying orders he was “...always so careful to be ‘covered’...” The pseudonymous participant Fred Prozi also sensed he was covered when he inquired after the 375-volt switch, “You accept all responsibility?” The experimenter responded, “The responsibility is mine. Correct. Please go on” (Milgram 1974: 76).

11. It could be argued that in the Touch-Proximity (T-P) variation, the “teacher” was harming the “learner” directly, in having to force the latter’s hand on to the shock plate. We suggest, however, that in our hypothetical situation the compliance rate would have been much less than the 30 per cent rate in the T-P condition, because the act of punching a person is much more physically violent.

12. Because Milgram’s subject first had to be motivated to deploy the shock generator, this device was not in itself a sufficient condition in the production of Milgram’s high completion rates.

13. The “zone of indifference” refers to orders which are unquestioningly accepted by organization members, as distinct from orders which will definitely be regarded as unacceptable. Other commands may be relatively neutral.

References


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