

Abstract

There are few facts about the role of obedience when committing acts against one's personal conscience (1961). Most theories suggest that only very disturbed people are capable of administering pain to an ordinary citizen if they are ordered to do so. Our experiment tested people's obedience to authority. The results showed that most obey all orders given by the authority-figure, despite their unwillingness. The conclusion is that, contrary to common belief, personal ethics mean little when pitted against authority.

Introduction

Current theories focus on personal characteristics to explain wrong-doing and how someone can intentionally harm others. In a survey, professionals such as doctors, psychologist and laymen predicted that a small proportion of a population (1-3%) would harm others if ordered to do so. In the recent war trial with Adolph Eichmann, he claims to only have been "following orders". The author wanted to test this claim. Can people harm others because they are merely obeying orders? Can people be ordered to act against their moral convictions?

The experiment will test whether a person can keep administering painful electric shocks to another person just because they are ordered to do so. The expectation is that very few will keep giving shocks, and that most participants will disobey the order.

Methods

Participants

There were 30 male participants. They were recruited by advertisement in a newspaper and were paid \$4.50.

Instruments

A "shock generator" was used to trick the participants into thinking that they were giving an electric shock to another person in another room. The shock generator had switches labeled with different voltages, starting at 30 volts and increasing in 15-volt increments all the way up to 450 volts. The switches were also labeled with terms which reminded the participant of how dangerous the shocks were.

Procedures

The participant met another "participant" in the waiting room before the experiment. The other "participant" was an actor. Each participant got the role as a "teacher" who would then deliver a shock to the actor ("learner") every time an incorrect answer to a question was produced. The participant believed that he was delivering real shocks to the learner.

The learner would pretend to be shocked. As the experiment progressed, the teacher would hear the learner plead to be released and complain about a heart condition. Once the 300-volt level

had been reached, the learner banged on the wall and demanded to be released. Beyond this point, the learner became completely silent and refused to answer any more questions. The experimenter then instructed the participant to treat this silence as an incorrect response and deliver a further shock.

When asking the experimenter if they should stop, they were instructed to continue.

Results

Of the 40 participants in the study, 26 delivered the maximum shocks. 14 persons did not obey the experimenter and stopped before reaching the highest levels. All 40 participants continued to give shocks up to 300 volts.

Discussion/Conclusion

Most of the participants became very agitated, stressed and angry at the experimenter. Many continued to follow orders throughout even though they were clearly uncomfortable. The study shows that people are able to harm others intentionally if ordered to do so. It provides evidence that this dynamic is far more important than previously believed, and that personal ethics are less predictive of such behavior.

References

1. Miller, G. (1993). Evolution of the Human Brain through Runaway Sexual Selection. PhD thesis, Stanford University Psychology Department.