The normalization of torment: Producing and managing anguish in Milgram’s “Obedience” laboratory

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Abstract
Milgram framed his “Obedience” experiments as an inquiry into the Holocaust, posing state directed mass murder as a “conflict between conscience and authority.” However, recent research into atrocities suggests that “moral conflict” is often absent; murder is frequently undertaken willingly in a spirit of idealism and “normalcy.” The question is not why do people obey orders they find morally objectionable as Milgram suggested, but rather how does it become “normal” and “ok” to torture or kill defenseless people? I examine this question through a reinterpretation of the Obedience study. Instead of focusing on the confused and entrapped participants, people who were tricked into “immoral” action, I study the scientists themselves—individuals who applied enhanced stress techniques on innocent people repeatedly and enthusiastically, fully aware of what they were doing. Inverting Milgram’s Holocaust analogy, I suggest that recent scholarship on Nazi doctors can provide insights into the various ways that torment became “normalized” for Milgram and his assistants.

Keywords
enhanced interrogation techniques, ethics of research, Nazi doctors

Stanley Milgram’s Obedience experiments are an academic and cultural blockbuster. At once entertaining and supposedly informative, psychology and the public cannot get enough of them; the appetite for things “Milgram” seems insatiatable. In addition to the obedience work featuring prominently in undergraduate psychology textbooks, news broadcasts, and documentaries, Milgram is the subject of four recent special issues: The Psychologist (Reicher & Haslam, 2011), Theoretical and Applied Ethics (Herrera, 2013),

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the *Journal of Social Issues* (Reicher, Haslam, & Miller, 2014) and the current special issue of *Theory & Psychology* (Brannigan, Nicholson, & Cherry, 2015). What is notable about much of this voluminous commentary is not simply the extent of the scholarship, but also the nature of the interest. As I have discussed elsewhere (Nicholson, 2011b), most of the recent literature on the Obedience experiments has been largely flattering and uncritical in character (see Blass, 2009; Burger, 2009; Miller, Collins, & Brief, 1995). A recent special issue of *The Psychologist* is a case in point. Throughout this issue, Milgram is presented in saintly terms. He is described as having an “epic vision for social psychology” (Reicher & Haslam, 2011, p. 650); and as a “guide” who can help psychology “go back to that heroic era of great field studies” (Reicher & Haslam, 2011, p. 652). In contrast, many of the discussions of the obedience research in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s featured a number of searching ethical and epistemological critiques (see Baumrind, 1964; Helm & Morelli, 1979; Mixon, 1972; Patten, 1977a, 1977b; Schuller, 1982).

The efforts to render the Obedience study as a kind of psychological “classic” that is timeless and beyond significant criticism have been extensive and in a certain sense “successful.” Milgram has been effectively “rehabilitated” within psychology to the point that the paradigm has been declared by one of its enthusiasts to be “alive and well after all these years” (Burger, 2011, p. 654). However, for all the success of the disciplinary “makeover,” challenging questions of the sort raised by Diana Baumrind (1964) in her famous critique of the Obedience research remain. Among these questions include the propriety of using “enhanced” stress techniques on innocent, unsuspecting people and the validity of using staged “quasi-theatrical” laboratory performances for understanding complex historical events like the Holocaust. In the last 5 years, several scholars have built on Baumrind’s formative critique drawing extensively on resources that she never had access to: Milgram’s unpublished archival records (see Gibson, 2013; Nicholson, 2011a, 2011b; Perry, 2013). One of the most important revelations of this new, archive-based Obedience scholarship is the discovery that Milgram was not always forthcoming with the truth. We now know that Milgram misrepresented several important facets of his research, including (a) the extent and nature of his debriefing procedures, (b) the risk posed by the experiment, (c) the harm done to his participants, (d) the role of standardization in the study, and (e) his private views on the ethics and meaning of the research. Looking behind the “archival curtain” makes it clear that the received view of the Obedience study is not the “reality” of what happened but an idealized version constructed by Milgram for rhetorical purposes and those of professional self-advancement (Nicholson, 2011b; Perry, 2013).

In light of these archival investigations, it is apparent that distinguished critics such as Baumrind (1964) and Kohlberg (1974) had more reason than they supposed to question the ethics and validity of the Obedience research. Indeed, one is tempted to consign the Obedience research to the past where other curiosities of 1960s era psychological excess lie buried (see Nicholson, 2007; Raz, 2013). However this temptation is not one that I will indulge in the present study. My intention here is not to “bury” the Obedience study but to examine it from a different perspective. Instead of taking the behavior of Milgram’s participants as the “puzzle” to be explained, I will scrutinize the conduct and ideological mindset of Milgram and that of his research team—the individuals who knowingly and repeatedly “went all the way” with their participants.
This alteration in focus is inspired by the disjuncture that emerges when considering the behavior of the majority of Milgram’s participants to that of individuals involved in “real-life” scenarios of unlawful killing and torment. Milgram admitted that his participants were operating in a context of confusion and uncertainty. They were led to believe they were participating in something that was benign, expressly told that what they were doing would involve “no permanent tissue damage” only to then find themselves in a confusing world of collapsing expectations in which experimental cues increasingly collided with their intellectual understanding of and emotional reaction to the situation. As is now well known, this scenario produced extraordinary tension and feelings of anxiety and self-doubt for many participants. In contrast, what stands out in both the conduct and statements of American military police at Abu Ghraib or that of prominent Nazis such as Auschwitz Commandant Rudolph Höss or SS Lieutenant Colonel Adolph Eichmann is their serenity in the face of a clear and unambiguous understanding of the brutality they had inflicted. For example, Höss (1992) was quite matter of fact about his role as the “greatest destroyer of human beings” (p. 189) and, while he admitted to being misled by Nazi propaganda, given the circumstances and commitments of wartime military service he did not think he had done anything wrong, concluding his autobiography with the statement that he “had a heart and was not evil” (p. 186). Eichmann was equally unabashed when considering his role as one of the principal “production managers” of the Holocaust: “I was no ordinary recipient of orders. If I had been I would have been a fool. Instead, I was part of the thought process. I was an idealist” (quoted in Brannigan, 2013). American military police showed a similar equanimity while torturing prisoners and later when charged for abusing detainees (Alkadry & Witt, 2009). The now infamous photos of American military police abusing prisoners shows the soldiers unperturbed and in some cases smiling. Private Lynndie England, one of the military police court martialed for prisoner abuse, was, like several of her colleagues, completely mystified by the charges, telling ABC News that “we don’t feel like we were doing things that we weren’t supposed to do” (cited in Alkadry & Witt, 2009, p. 139).

Unlike the participants in Milgram’s study, Lynndie England, Adolph Eichmann, and Rudolph Höss were not tricked into torture or mass murder. There was no deception concerning the benign nature of the undertaking nor was their brutal conduct dependent on lies that the victims were “suffering no permanent tissue damage” (Milgram, 1963, p. 374). These “real life” perpetrators knew exactly what they were doing and many were willing participants (Brannigan, 2013; Goldhagen, 1996). The key question that such cases pose is not the one Milgram put forward of “why do people obey orders they find morally objectionable,” but rather, how does it become “normal” and routine to abuse, torment, or, in some cases, kill defenseless people?

The confused, entrapped, and frequently reluctant Obedience study participants are of limited use in answering this important question. However, as someone who knowingly and repeatedly applied “enhanced” stress techniques to innocent people, the conduct of Milgram himself and that of his research team is relevant to the issue of how torture becomes “normalized.” We now know that Milgram created a functioning theatre of pain that reduced many able, self-possessed participants to trembling wrecks, several of whom conveyed their anguish to Milgram shortly after their participation (Nicholson, 2011b; Perry, 2013). These disturbing historical revelations are unsettling for our sense
of Milgram as an ethical researcher, but they also raise a wider-ranging and possibly more important question of how the Obedience study was sustained in the face of such visceral pain and distress?

The question of how to sustain torment was alluded to by Milgram (1963) himself in an analysis of why many participants went along with the directives of the experimenter. Milgram noted that his participants were expressly told that they were participating in something benign and causing no physical harm. The situation was highly ambiguous involving a perceptual collision between a calm experimenter and a highly agitated “victim.” Finally, the participants were given no time for reflection. They had to think through this confusing situation and decide on a course of action “on the spot.”

What is significant about these observations is that they refer to the maintenance of torment “in the experimental moment,” but they do not address the more important “real life” scenarios that Milgram claimed to be interested in—the Nazi who murders not once in a state of confusion but repeatedly in the full knowledge of what he was doing (Goldhagen, 1996). Ironically, it is this scenario that Milgram’s role as experimenter typified—namely that of a person who torments others repeatedly, fully aware of the pain they are inflicting. After the first few trials Milgram and his colleagues were in no doubt concerning the intensity of the stress in the experiment and the potential for physical breakdown. Moreover, unlike the participants who experienced the trauma of the study once with “little time for reflection” (Milgram, 1963, p. 378), Milgram and his team visited the anguish over and over again, luring hundreds of innocent people into the lab in the full knowledge that many of these individuals would experience convulsions, trembling, and other extreme stress-related conditions. This deliberate and systematic application of enhanced stress techniques to vulnerable people raises the very question that so frequently comes to mind when considering grim contexts of torment like that of Abu Ghraib: How did it become “normal” and “ok” for a small group of scientists to subject innocent American citizens as a matter of routine to such extraordinary levels of abuse, experiences which by Milgram’s (1963) own admission “reached extremes that are rarely seen in sociopsychological laboratory studies” (p. 375).

Although there is an extensive literature on the ethics of the obedience research, the issue of the “normalization of torment” among the experimenters (i.e., Milgram and his team) has received relatively little consideration. For example, well-known Milgram scholars such as Blass (2004), Elms (1995, 2009, 2014), and Miller (1986, 2009) have undertaken extensive commentary on various aspects of the obedience research, but always within the logic of the social psychology experiment: “these are the parameters of the experiment, here are the participants, what are they doing and why?” What is lacking in these accounts is any sort of critical regard for the experimenters themselves (a capacity for disciplinary self-examination which, rather ironically, Milgram himself possessed). Why did Milgram and his associates continue with the experiment day after day knowing the anguish that they were inducing? What sort of mentality enables scientists to inflict such extreme levels of psychological trauma on their fellow citizens as a matter of course?

This paper will examine how torment was “normalized” and sustained among the Obedience experimenters themselves. I will explain this by inverting the analogy that Milgram famously and repeatedly applied to his innocent and unsuspecting participant-victims, that of the Holocaust. From the initial publication of the obedience research in
1963 through to his 1974 book, Milgram insisted that he had deciphered the Holocaust by way of the psychology laboratory. While he conceded that there were important differences between the two situations, he argued that he had successfully reproduced the essence of authority such that he could compare and ultimately conclude that ordinary American citizens who had volunteered in good faith for what they thought was a benign psychology experiment were in fact no better morally than the SS who staffed Nazi death camps. “I used to wonder whether there were sufficient moral imbeciles in the United States to man a system of death camps,” Milgram remarked in a 1974 interview. “After doing my experiments, I am convinced I could recruit the necessary personnel in any medium-sized town” (as cited in Nobile, 1974).

Equating American citizens in a psychology experiment with members of the Nazi killing machine was and remains a contentious point, and in my own thinking on the topic I find myself in agreement with Fenigstein (1998) who noted that “the terms that are routinely used to describe the horrors of the Holocaust – e.g. atrocity, inhumanity, hatefulness, wickedness – are simply preposterous in the context of Milgram’s studies” (p. 71). However, for the purpose of this article, I will indulge Milgram, suspend my sense of historical specificity and grant that the situations are at least somewhat comparable. If that is so, it follows that the comparison works in both directions and that the Holocaust can provide insights into the Obedience experiment itself, a context where supposedly responsible, cultured scientists visited anguish as a matter of routine on hundreds of innocent people. In so doing, it is very important to emphasize that this is an analogy of Milgram’s own making. He was the person who framed his study as an inquiry into the Nazi killing machine and, to his credit, Milgram was keenly aware of the moral parallel between his own behavior and that of Nazi officials, even going so far as to compare the conduct of his research team with that of SS Lieutenant Colonel Adolph Eichmann—a point to which I will return later.

In this paper, I will draw from the now sizable historiography on those individuals most analogous to Milgram’s role in the obedience research—not that of a guard or soldier, but of doctors and scientists involved in the systematic brutalization of innocent people. My intention here is not to equate the two situations, but to follow Milgram’s (1974) logic that the “differences in scale, numbers, and political context may turn out to be unimportant as long as certain essential features are retained” (p. xii). Crucial to this comparison is the idea that both parties in this analysis—Nazi doctors and Milgram and his research team—are acting in ways that they consider to be ethical and responsible. In other words, neither of these historical events is best understood as “evil deviance” or manifestations of “unethical science.” In the case of Nazi physicians, there was an extensive and lively debate on medical ethics throughout the Nazi era (see Harrington, 1996). A “culture of complaint” existed within the Nazi medical profession and physicians were not shy about expressing their concerns when they felt that policies and procedures were wrong or being carried out in too indiscriminate a manner (Proctor, 2000, p. 343). In short, ethics were not absent in Nazi medicine but through an elaborate array of rituals, metaphor, myth, and peer pressure, they were transformed into a framework that reflected the broader values of the regime. A core element in Nazi medical ethics was the idea of “national race hygiene” to which physicians as guardians of the body felt ethically committed to protect.
Although contemporary commentators frequently emphasize the relative absence of ethical standards for Cold War era researchers (e.g., Reicher et al., 2014), Milgram was subject to a 1959 APA code of ethics that required him to “respect the integrity and protect the welfare of the persons … with whom he is working” (American Psychological Association, 1959, p. 280). Well aware of his ethical responsibilities, Milgram developed his own mechanisms of normalization, many of which drew on a kind of “tough guy” ethic shared by several of his colleagues in American psychology. This ethic held that participants in psychology experiments were “resilient selves” capable of handling a significant amount of “enhanced” stress without any appreciable harm or long term effect (Stark, 2010). This ethical framework transformed a context of visceral suffering and anguish that was obvious to many of the participants into one that was somehow “therapeutic” for both the individual participant and society as a whole. As we shall see, the mechanisms of normalization employed by Milgram bore a resemblance—at least in some instances—to the complex frameworks of justification used by Nazi physicians.

**Recreating the Holocaust in the laboratory**

The level of anguish and torment in the obedience study is now something that is easily missed, or at least underappreciated. Through a combination of repetition and the strategic exclusion of damaging detail, Milgram’s use of enhanced stress techniques on unsuspecting people has become “normalized” for psychologists and the public alike, something that is legitimate and permissible—even admirable. Milgram played an important role in rendering the study into something that was both “surprising” but also legitimate and consistent with the social expectations of psychological research practices. In his book-length treatment of the study, Milgram (1974) sanitized the experiment, omitting graphic details that might unsettle the reader. He did not include disturbing accounts from witnesses as to what had transpired, nor did he include feedback from the many participants who were traumatized and in some cases physically endangered by the experiment. Most contemporary social psychology textbooks have followed Milgram’s lead and have either minimized or, in some cases, completely ignored the torment that participants were subjected to (Nicholson, 2011b; Stam, Lubek, & Radtke, 1998). Similarly, most of the recent scholarly commentary on Milgram omits specific details of the anguish participants experienced in favor of a brief mention of “ethics” while reassuring current psychologists that the experience was “overwhelmingly positive and that there is little evidence of any harm” (Reicher & Haslam, 2011, p. 652).

To gain an appreciation of the pitiless character of the study, one must go back to the original published account of the experiment. In the initial presentation of the study, Milgram actually boasted of the torturous character of the experiment, noting that he had produced stress reactions among his participants that “reached extremes rarely seen in sociopsychological laboratory studies” (Milgram, 1963, p. 375). In another early paper, Milgram (1965) reported that he had induced “full-blown, uncontrollable seizures” in 15 people and that he had tormented another person to a point where he had “a seizure so violently convulsive that it was necessary to call a halt to the experiment” (p. 68). Russell (2014) has noted that Milgram even went so far as to apply his enhanced stress techniques on people who had ties of friendship and family. In a previously
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unpublished series of trials known as the “relationship condition” he asked participants to bring a friend to the study to see how amenable people who had close personal ties would be to his ruse (Russell, 2014, p. 195). Some of the participants brought family members including one person who brought his son. Milgram’s papers contain the transcript of an obviously anguished father being repeatedly bullied by the experimenter into “shocking” his own son. Lest anyone doubt the gut-wrenching intensity of the proceedings, Milgram (1963) quoted one observer at length who commented on the “striking reactions of tension and emotional strain”:

I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled an earlobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered “Oh God, let’s stop it.” And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end. (cited in Milgram, 1963, p. 377)

This description is consistent with the recollections of several participants that Milgram himself gathered after the study was completed. One participant remarked that “I wouldn’t want to do another experiment like that again for any amount of money. I’m still sorry I went to do it. It took me a couple of weeks before I was able to forget about it. I don’t think it is right to put someone through such a nervous tension.” Another commented that “I couldn’t remember ever being quite as upset as I was during the experiment” (Reaction of subjects, 1962) while a third stated that “I felt real remorse and when I came out—when the experiment was all over, I got home and told my family I had just gone through the most trying thing that I had ever subjected myself to” (Subjects’ conversation, 1963).

It is important to emphasize the industrial scale of all this suffering. The study had more than 780 participants and in his report Milgram (1963) indicated that extreme stress reactions were “characteristic rather than exceptional … to the experiment” (p. 375). Consistently producing this level of anguish requires a very elaborate and sophisticated physical infrastructure and a number of historians have documented Milgram’s extraordinary skill as a laboratory impresario (Gibson, 2013; Nicholson, 2011a; Perry, 2013; Russell, 2010). However, the production of torment on such a large scale also requires an equally elaborate “moral” infrastructure, an ideological framework that justifies the anguish and placates any feelings of guilt that arise among the tormentors. As we shall see, Milgram devoted considerable attention to developing just such a structure.

“Why do we feel justified?”: The value of “therapeutic torment”

The book length version of the Obedience study received extensive media coverage and it provoked a wide range of responses from the public, many of whom wrote to Milgram. While some writers accepted Milgram’s framing of the study, often quite enthusiastically, others challenged the ethics of the project, seeing little moral difference between participants who “shocked” people in the name of science and Milgram himself who psychologically shocked people in the name of science:
The fact was that not only two thirds of the subjects went on to the end ... but you did too. You and the men engaged in running the experiments. Did any of your associates rebel and refuse to go on? If they did not, then the public has an enormously better track record than laboratory workers because a profound psychological shock is if anything in an advanced culture more serious an affair than a physical one. (Paashaus, 1974)

This reader's curiosity about the mentality of the researchers themselves was understandable for, in his published work, Milgram donned the guise of “scientific objectivity,” carefully shielding the ways in which his own motivations and ideals maintained the study and its subsequent presentation to the public. Nazism served as a useful screen in this regard. Aware of the media value of the Holocaust analogy, Milgram publicly and repeatedly emphasized the parallel in his published work, highlighting Gordon Allport's characterization of the study as the “Eichmann experiment.” It is “an apt term” Milgram continued, “for the subject’s situation [is] something akin to the position occupied by the infamous Nazi bureaucrat” (Milgram, 1974, p. 178). In private however, before he became famous, Milgram was much more candid and keenly aware of the degree to which the Eichmann analogy applied to himself. In his notebook retrieved from the archives, he formulated many of the very criticisms that would dog him in later years and he drew a parallel between his own conduct in the experiment and that of his obedient participants:

I—and many others—know that the naïve subject is deeply distressed, and that the tension caused him is almost nerve shattering in some instances. Yet we do not stop the experiment because of this. And no observer has ever thought to interrupt the experiment, although we know a man was suffering deeply … The question to ask then is this: why do we feel justified in carrying through the experiment, and why is this any different from the justifications that the obedient subjects feel? (Milgram, 1962a).

It is quite understandable that Milgram should have felt so uneasy. The type of systematic torment that he was undertaking was unpleasant work and it did tug at his conscience. In an undated note he remarked that “at times I have concluded that, although the experiment can be justified, there are still elements in it that are ethically questionable, that it is not nice to lure people into the laboratory and ensnare them into a situation that is stressful and unpleasant to them” (Milgram, n.d.a). More revealing still, on another occasion, Milgram expressed a sense of ethical disquiet by applying the Eichmann analogy to his own conduct, drawing the parallel between the logistical challenges of facilitating torment in the laboratory and the logistical difficulties that confronted the SS in carrying out the “Final Solution.” Writing to his research assistant, Alan Elms, Milgram stated that one of Elms’ tasks would be to “think of ways to deliver more people to the laboratory”: “This is a very important practical aspect of the research. I will admit it bears some resemblance to Mr. Eichmann’s position” (Milgram, 1961a).

Equating himself and that of his research team with Adolph Eichmann speaks to Milgram’s sense of the ethical dubiousness of what he was doing. His framing of the study had created awkward equivalency—if his confused and entrapped “obedient” participants were Nazis, was he not also a Nazi for inflicting anguish on his unsuspecting participants and for continuing to lure innocent people into the lab in the full knowledge...
that many of them would suffer one of the most stressful and potentially life-threatening experiences of their entire lives? Indeed, as the very creator of this dark, Kafkaesque space, did he not bear a greater weight of moral responsibility? How was one to justify luring well-meaning people into a laboratory, lying to them, subjecting them to an ordeal of extraordinary anguish and then, as a kind of psychological coup de grâce, state that those who did not see through his elaborately staged ruse were “moral imbeciles”? (Milgram, 1961b).

At this juncture, it is useful to consider in more detail the Nazi analogy that Milgram applied to himself by examining the historiography on S.S. concentration camp physicians. Lifton (1986) described the ideological framework that enabled Nazi doctors to participate in industrialized killing while simultaneously maintaining a “doctorly” image of themselves as responsible, “ethical” healers and scientists. A central feature of this framework was the Nazi embrace of a seemingly life-affirming “modern” vision centered around “scientific” ideals of hygiene and purity. The Nazis were convinced that a wide range of corrosive agents were weakening the German Volkskorper. It was this concern that prompted Nazi policy makers to envision the régime as “applied biology” and to invest heavily in what were then world-leading public education campaigns and laws directed against tobacco, cancer, and asbestos (Proctor, 2000, p. 341). Human genetics was part of this wider vision to medically cleanse Germany of toxins. The remarks of one Nazi doctor illustrate how these seemingly scientific commitments could license killing as something “therapeutic” and in keeping with a physician’s Hippocratic oath: “Of course I am a doctor and I want to preserve life. And out of respect for human life, I would remove a gangrenous appendix from a diseased body. The Jew is the gangrenous appendix in the body of mankind” (cited in Lifton, 1986, p. 16). The plausibility of this imagery was reinforced by a seemingly concrete anti-Semitic race science, which supposedly proved that the deterioration of the Aryan race could be halted by the killing of all Jews.

There is of course a vast difference between psychological torture and physical killing and there are differences in the professional commitments of experimental psychologists and physicians. Nevertheless, there was a parallel to be drawn that Milgram himself recognized. Both scenarios involve professions supposedly committed to human welfare enmeshed in a program of systematic brutalization. Milgram developed his own moral infrastructure to assuage the feelings of discomfort that arose from what he described as a “nerve shattering” environment (cited in Perry, 2013, p. 327). A central plank in this framework was the notion of what I will term “therapeutic torment”—the idea of laboratory brutalization as a “positive character-building” experience for those being tormented. So construed, participants were not innocent victims of dishonest, irresponsible science but winners of a rare opportunity to be mistreated for their own good. Milgram laid out the logic of therapeutic torment in the aforementioned letter to Elms. There should be “no misconceptions of what we do with our daily quota” he remarked, invoking the Eichmann idiom. “We give them a chance to resist the commands of a malevolent authority and assert their alliance with morality” (Milgram, 1961a).

Casting the experiment as “moral therapy” was a clever rationalization, allowing Milgram to at least partially displace feelings of guilt as a perpetrator of torment with a sense of himself as a benevolent father-like figure who was traumatizing people for their own good. As the Obedience study grew in fame and notoriety following its public debut...
in 1963, Milgram developed the "therapeutic torment" theme in considerable detail. In *Obedience to Authority* (1974) he wrote at length about the "positive side to participation" reporting that "subjects indicated that they had learned a good deal, and many felt gratified to have taken part" (p. 196). It is important to note that Milgram had some basis for this assertion. In the survey that he conducted following the completion of the study, 83% of participants indicated that they were either glad or very glad to have taken part. The figures brought great comfort to Milgram, and he came to view them as the "chief moral warrant for the continuation of the experiment" (as cited in Abse, 1973, p. 40).

However, retrospective consent is a very flimsy foundation on which to base the application of enhanced stress on unsuspecting people (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009). This approach shows disrespect for individual autonomy by drawing people into the study who, after the fact, indicated that they would have preferred not to have been involved. Moreover, as Benjamin and Simpson (2009) have noted, the judgment of lay participants after the fact is often influenced by issues of cognitive dissonance—their desire to try to recover a measure of dignity and self-respect out of a gruesome ordeal. Milgram clearly sensed the need to provide a compelling narrative to confer meaning onto his participants' suffering and to allay lingering feelings of resentment. In the written "debrief" that Milgram sent to all the participants, he instructed them to think of the abuse and devaluing that they had endured as a patriotic undertaking, providing insight into what might happen in the event of a nuclear war: "Consider for example the possible day when a man in another country is told by a superior to drop a hydrogen bomb on the United States. Will he participate in this act of destruction?" (Milgram, n.d.b). In the context of the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, such framing made it difficult for all but the most skeptical and self-possessed to question Milgram even though many spoke at length about what an awful experience it had been (see Nicholson, 2011a).

Although Milgram eventually convinced himself that the majority of his participants found the torment beneficial, he also knew that some of his participants were badly traumatized by the mistreatment and did not buy his "therapeutic" rationalization. In such cases, "therapeutic torment" was given a wider, society-based interpretation. Conceding the toxic character of the experience for the individual, Milgram argued that torment was nevertheless justified because society as a whole would benefit from the torture of a few hundred innocent people. The unrelenting display of suffering revealed "the capacity for man to abandon his humanity, indeed, the inevitability that he does so, as he merges his unique personality into larger institutional structures" (Milgram, 1974, p. 188). Such knowledge could embolden some to defy abusive administrative authority and pursue a more ethical course of action. "We need to be aware of the problem of indiscriminate submission to authority," Milgram (1992) wrote. "I have tried to foster that awareness with my work" (p. xxxiii). As ethical criticisms of the Obedience studied mounted, Milgram drew heavily on this wider sense of therapeutic torment, even crediting the refusal of one young American to fight in the Vietnam War to his role as a participant in the study (Milgram, 1974, p. 200).

*Ritual, scientific idealism, and the authorization of anguish*

Tormenting people in the name of world peace was one of Milgram's better justifications, but its significance is undermined by the fact that he did not actually believe it...
while the suffering was ongoing. What sustained him in the face of so much routinized anguish was not so much the therapeutic value that he would emphasize so strongly later, but a more straightforward sense of intellectual curiosity, a kind of scientific zealotry that evidently trumped basic considerations of decency and respect for others. In his notebook, Milgram (1962c) spoke to this issue directly:

It would be pleasant to remark that the experiments were undertaken with a view toward their possible benefit to humanity; that knowledge of social man, in this instance, was sought for its possible application to the betterment of social life. “Surely” some may hold “the social good that stems from an understanding of human behavior compensates for, and thus helps justify, the abuses which were necessary for the conduct of the experiment.” A fine argument: but the author does not buy it.

In a moment of remarkable candor, Milgram admitted that he was driven primarily by a sense of wonder at the drama he had produced. Disturbing though it may seem, it was thrilling to lure a cross section of small-town Connecticut into this disorienting, bizarre environment and watch as many of them collapsed under the strain of the ordeal. To his credit, Milgram saw the sadistic element in all this quite clearly and he wrote derisively of those, including himself, “who sit by ‘enjoying the show,’” and did nothing while the naïve experimental participant “was suffering deeply” (Milgram, 1962d; see also Nicholson, 2011b). Unsettled by the pleasure of such power, he couldn’t bring himself to stop; there was too much at stake for him professionally and it was all so very interesting:

Moreover, considered as a personal motive of the author—the possible benefits that might rebound to humanity—withered to insignificance alongside the strident demands of intellectual curiosity. (Milgram, 1962c)

It is impossible to know if Milgram felt this way throughout the experiment, but it is clear from this quote that there was a period during the study when he didn’t believe in the humanitarian value of what he was doing. While the sense of dramatic curiosity—would this next person be able to withstand the psychological torture?—was a compelling motivation, by itself it is difficult to imagine how any sensitive person could repeatedly visit so much anguish on so many innocent people. Here again, Milgram’s Nazi analogy is instructive. The bulk of the industrialized violence of the Holocaust was not random or disordered but embedded in a highly controlled context of ritual—a set of “enactments, materializations, [and] realizations” that, as Geertz has noted, help with the “overcoming of ambivalence as well as of ambiguity” (cited in Lifton, 1986, p. 432). Nazi death rituals were central to maintaining the psychological state of the SS involved. At the heart of this process were the selections, a medicalized ritual where physicians would decide who would live and who would die, thereby conferring a perverse scientific imprimatur on the ghastly proceedings. Lifton (1986) has noted that selections were not simply a duty of these physicians, but a ritual connecting an ostensibly “medical” task to mythic ideals of racial purity and national survival. Selections were a “cultural performance [that] tended to absorb anxieties and doubts and fuse individual actions with prevailing Nazi concepts” (p. 432). The ritual also served as a
test of Nazi masculinity and hardness which, when passed, solidified the physician’s relationship to the group (see also Kuhne, 2008).

We have already seen that Milgram was troubled by doubts and anxieties concerning the intellectual significance and ethical dubiousness of the obedience study. Ritual served as a powerful propellant in this situation just as it does in other contexts of torment. The obedience study was a scientific ritual writ large. Set in the sacred space of the laboratory, it was heavily scripted and the product of hours of preparation and rehearsals. Milgram employed numerous variations on the study and carefully recorded his data. Nothing was left to chance and as assistant Alan Elms (1995) noted, Milgram was “the most well organized researcher I have ever encountered” (p. 24). The precise, exacting protocols of the study helped keep the attention of the researchers on technical procedures and away from human suffering. Ironically, the tendency for technique and protocol to obscure anguish was something that Milgram (1965) noted himself in the behavior of his participants. He wrote very perceptively of a “denial and narrowing of the cognitive field so that the victim is put out of mind” (p. 63). However, Milgram struggled to see how this very phenomenon insulated him from the anguish he had orchestrated on his own victims—the participants—something later noted by his colleague and eyewitness of the experiment Lawrence Kohlberg:

I witnessed [the participants’] pain as a scientific observer through the mentality of the one-way vision mirror. That Milgram’s conclusions apply to myself I would be the last to deny. I could more dispassionately observe the suffering of the subjects through a one-way vision mirror, just as the subjects could continue to shock their assumed victims when separated by a screen from them. In this sense, Milgram’s belief in social-science “objectivity” operated as a false screen from the moral and personal understanding of the realities of the situation he created and allowed him to engage in a morally dubious experiment. (1974, p. 43)

As Kohlberg noted, the procedures and design of the study facilitated the routinization of torment. However, what elevated these actions to the level of ritual was their connection to a mythic ideal. Milgram and his team were not grim-faced brutes deceiving and tormenting purely for pleasure, but scientists seeking something transcendent and redeeming. On this point, the ideological context of Nazi medicine is a useful point of reference. Historian Anne Harrington (1996) has outlined the important role played by “visions of salvation and reform” in the working lives of Nazi physicians (p. 199). She referred to the case of SS Colonel Joachim Mrugowsky, chief of the Institute of Hygiene in the Waffen SS. Among his many crimes documented at Nuremberg in 1946 were the execution of Russian prisoners by poisoned bullets and a “research” program that involved injecting lethal tubercular cultures into healthy people. As barbaric as these actions may seem, Mrugowsky did not see himself as a “sadistic” person nor did he view his conduct as an over-zealous application of scientific objectivity—“science run amok.” For Mrugowsky, these actions were an expression of an enlightened holistic biomedical perspective which sought to harness medical science with the highest forms of German culture.

As noted previously, there was torment aplenty in the Obedience study, but beyond this experimentally induced “banality of anguish” lay something pure and noble—at least in the minds of those inflicting the extreme stress. Where SS men like Mrugowsky
were inspired by visions of a pure and “authentic” German Volk (Harrington, 1996), Milgram was beguiled by the promise of a pathway to the “real”—an understanding of the social world as it truly was. He was part of post-war tradition in American social psychology that envisioned the psychology laboratory as being akin to a chemistry laboratory, a space where one could “condense the elements present when obedience occurs in the larger world such that the essential ingredients are brought into a relatively narrow arena where they are open to scientific scrutiny” (Milgram, 1962b). As Danziger (2000) has noted, the artificial conditions of the social psychological experiment were not seen as a weakness but as a way of attaining “empirical purity” (p. 343). Artifice allowed one to “demonstrate the unadulterated effect of singular manipulable variables” (p. 343). Convinced that the laboratory was an epistemologically privileged place, Milgram envisioned social psychology in the grandest of terms. Its “special mission” was to deliver humanity from darkness into light: “Social psychology at its best leads to a mature adjustment of our illusions, a revision of the fictions we harbor about human nature” (Milgram, n.d.c). What made this “mature adjustment” so exhilarating for Milgram was the prospect of acquiring “truth” about the social world, knowledge about human nature equal in sophistication and precision to our understanding of the physical world. On offer was an ordered, disciplined understanding of the social, a periodic table of psychological forces that would allow us, finally, to really know human nature. “Ultimately, social psychology would like to have a compelling theory of situations,” Milgram (1965) wrote, “which will, first, present a typology of situations; and then point to the manner in which definable properties of situations are transformed into psychological forces in the individual” (p. 74).

With this vision of something high and ennobling firmly in mind, the repeated application of “enhanced” stress techniques to hundreds of innocent people did not seem quite so squalid, at least not in broad outline. The purity of the vision rendered all the wretchedness and anguish into a more aesthetically pleasing and psychologically palatable form. The pain and suffering of the participant victims was valuable “data” that brought us that much closer to attaining ultimate social truth.

Conclusion

Historical analogies are always fraught—anything involving Nazism especially so. However, given the extraordinary deference afforded to the study and the still common invocation of the Obedience paradigm as an “explanation” of all or part of the Holocaust, Milgram’s own role in the experiment bears far closer scrutiny than it has received to date. It should go without saying that Milgram is no more a “Nazi” than his innocent and entrapped participants were. However, it should also be clear by now that the production of torment on the scale undertaken during the Obedience experiments was no “routine affair,” or a set of “simple manipulations” as Milgram (1974) would later disingenuously claim (p. 175). The production and management of anguish was a highly involved matter and it was as much an ideological undertaking for the experimenters themselves as it was a technical process to be applied to others. To be successful, Milgram needed to be able to render the anguish of innocents as something normal and routine, something that was in fact “good for them” and for society as a whole.
The archival record clearly shows that Milgram had strong reservations about what he was doing while the Obedience study was running, but once removed from the immediacy of the moment, the contrition, regret, and misgivings that were sprinkled throughout his private notebooks disappeared from his written work. Publicly, the Milgram of post-Obedience study fame insisted that he had done nothing wrong. He remarked that he was “totally astonished” by the ethical criticisms of his work and by the “absence of any assumption of good will and good faith” (as cited in Evans, 1980, p. 4). Quick to condemn his confused and entrapped “obedient” participants as nascent Nazis, he never publicly examined his own willingness to “go all the way,” nor did he consider how scientistic idealism and the rituals of the psychology lab could render the indiscriminate application of extreme, life-threatening stress as “normal,” “necessary,” and “respectable.”

Viewing the Obedience experimenters against the backdrop of Nazi medicine may strike some readers as jarring. An entire discipline and indeed an entire society has been largely shielded from the sordid details of the study and desensitized to the spectacle of an Ivy League psychologist tormenting unsuspecting American citizens. Until now, the received view has been that “ordinary” Americans who trusted the experimenter are the nascent Nazis or “morals imbeciles” as Milgram (1961b) described them. The scientists who engineered the entire process were “innocent observers” simply trying to understand how this “Nazi-like” behavior arises. To suggest otherwise—to consider the Obedience paradigm as an ethically ambiguous space that frequently implicated the scientists themselves in the kind of routinized, callous behavior that they would subsequently condemn in others—is considered by some to be an affront to psychology. Keen to protect the field’s reputation, Milgram’s defenders have brought forth a range of rhetorical devices all of which are designed to shut down lines of inquiry that run counter to the received view. Critics of the Obedience research have their credentials questioned and are accused of being “angry” and engaging in “Milgram bashing” (see Elms, 2014; Tavris, 2013) a charge which is especially ironic since the most substantial criticisms of the Obedience research come from Milgram’s own unpublished notes.

The unwillingness of many in psychology to look honestly and critically at all of the “players” in the Obedience experiment—participants and experimenters alike—is understandable. As Miller (2004) has noted, the Obedience paradigm confers considerable cachet on the field of social psychology while giving the discipline a role in discussions of the Holocaust, undoubtedly one of the most important events in human history. Any field would be reluctant to let go of such a well-known example of disciplinary prowess. It is just so much easier to indulge the old myths while loudly proclaiming the need for yet more Milgram-style laboratory artifice. Nevertheless, to the degree that psychology is a scholarly discipline and not a religion, it is important to confront new evidence—archival or otherwise—and where necessary to revise our understanding, even when it involves a figure of such renown.

The preceding critical examination of how the torment of innocents was “normalized” for Milgram and his research associates is not intended as a refutation of the study’s intellectual utility, but as a challenge to the way it is typically read. My argument has been that the study’s impact and contemporary significance is greatest when it is inverted in such a way that the people who designed the torment regime and knowingly and actively participated in it—that is, Milgram and his collaborators—become the object of...
interest. I think this focus is more relevant than the perspective that Milgram presented, which stressed the behavior of ordinary people who were lured into a supposedly benign environment, lied to, and then subjected to highly confusing and contradictory stimuli—a distressed “victim” and a calm experimenter telling them that everything was OK. This context is quite unlike any scenario where the Obedience study is so frequently deployed—Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, or Nazi death camps. The guards, physicians, and military psychologists in these facilities were not tricked into torture and killing; they were very much aware and generally approving of the torment they were inflicting (see Fenigstein, 2015; Mastroianni, 2015). To the degree that there is any parallel at all between these scenarios and a social psychology laboratory, the connection is with the thoughts and behavior of Milgram and his associates who knew of the anguish they were visiting on innocent people but continued regardless, enmeshed in contexts of scientific ritual, research protocols, and a conviction that the torment was justified by a “higher” moral purpose.

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