

It's the system, not me

Psychological studies suggest that most of us excuse petty, illogical and even cruel behaviour if it is mandated by the organisation we work for. Take a pause for thought, says Dr Leandro Herrero

Not many people knew what was going on in the psychology department. Nothing unusual about that. An advert in the local newspaper offered volunteers a few dollars for participating in an experiment, and many people from the city of New Haven applied.

The study was run by Stanley Milgram, a small, curious assistant professor specialising in social experiments. This one examined the effects of punishment – administered here as an electric shock – on learning. The psychologist conducting the experiment read sequences of words to be repeated: house, money, flower, pretty, whether, cat. Each time a subject got them wrong, the volunteer, who was sitting the other side of a one-way-glass screen, administered a small electric shock. The potency of the shock increased progressively with each mistake – with the lever moving from 25v to 30v, 40v and so on.

As the experiment continued, the subject's reaction changed from a grimace to the expression of more and more discomfort. Invariably, the level became very unpleasant, even unbearable. The subject would be almost screaming. The administrator objected. "Never mind," the psychologist said,

"this is a well-controlled experiment, you need to keep pushing the button." Screams. "I want to stop. He wants to get out."

"No," said the psychologist, "keep trying. It's the protocol, we can't break this experiment yet." And so it continued until the pain was intolerable and the administrators were shaking. But they kept pushing the button. Well, some of them – 65% to be precise. The other 35% gave up and refused to continue the torture.

The experiments were repeated and repeated, always the same: mistakes, shocks, up, up, up. And the citizens from New Haven kept pushing the button even though they were torturing the guy the other side of the screen. Again and again, 65% complied with the instructions, and

35% told the psychologist to keep the money. More screams, more shocks and more knowledge about learning. And what we learned was that 65% of normal citizens from the normal town of New Haven were prepared to administer increasingly potent shocks to their increasingly terrified fellow human beings, for a few bucks, for science and following instructions. But here's the trick. Nobody really got shocked. The subjects were actors pretending to get near convulsion each time the button was pushed.

A shocking discovery

For a long time, these experiments were known only to academics and they remain controversial to this day. They were subject to normal academic scrutiny and, although they were officially labelled obedience experiments, some psychologists argued they did not measure obedience but trust. Other discussions, then and now, centred on their true social meaning. Could we apply the laboratory findings to real life? There are tons of pages on this subject, half in favour, half against. For many, the experiments amounted to post-holocaust soul-searching as to why normal humans obey orders. Other groups of social psychologists have focused on what might distinguish the 65% from the other 35%. Is there a particular personality that correlates with one group or the other? Can we predict who will keep pushing the button? To this day, no-one has come up with a good answer to any of these questions and we are left with the hard facts: 65% of us ("Not me," I hear you say) will keep obeying the instructions.

For people alien to the behavioural sciences these may be pretty unexpected, surprising and possibly disturbing results. Many years as a practising psychiatrist have made me slightly cynical about human nature and I am not half as disturbed as the average reader might be. I have been a spectator to many kinds of human misery, usually not in the public knowledge. But the Milgram experiments are distinctive. They did not deal with psychologically-disturbed or unfit people. These were normal citizens pushing the button. No matter how many academic papers refine the data, criticise the methodology, pontificate about the 'social transfer principle' (to decide whether laboratory findings can be applied in a less controlled setting) or argue as to whether the experiment examined obedience, trust, authority or hidden sadism, one cannot ignore the fact that real people inflicted what they thought was real pain on fellow human beings, simply because they were following orders.

The citizens from New Haven kept pushing the button even though they were torturing the guy

Illustration by Rob Wilcockson



supervisors, directors and vice-presidents, you and me – 65% of us, if Milgram is right – will say “I am sorry John, it’s not me, it’s the system. I have to inflict this pain on you. I don’t want to, but I have no choice”. In organisations, such behaviour comes in many forms and shapes. A 30-volt shock, for example, is forcing people to do something that is a hassle, unnecessary and serves no purpose other than to boost the ego of the person giving the instructions. A 50-volt shock might involve denying someone that little, perhaps one-off, opportunity for flexi-time that would make all the difference to the employee’s family and no difference whatsoever to the business. A higher voltage could entail submitting somebody to unnecessary humiliation and considerable psychological pain by requesting an action that serves no purpose other than as a public show of power. I have seen the latter done to someone going through a terrible family crisis. Nevertheless, she was told: “I am sorry, we have to do this, it’s the system. There is nothing I can do”. It was a fantastic lie; there was a lot the manager could have done. An even higher voltage: a manager resigns to go to a competitor. Suddenly, panic explodes in the legal department and managing director’s office. The resigning manager is escorted from the building with no time to explain his departure to his staff. He is treated like a terrorist-cum-industrial spy, and humiliated personally and socially for hours. I have seen the practice so many times and it is stupid. It assumes, among other things, that it is maintaining company security by preventing the manager from... doing what, exactly? Stealing his filing cabinet? Copying his hard drive? It insults the intelligence of the resigning manager (who has had plenty of time to copy the contents of the entire company computer had he wanted to). It serves no real business purpose and is humiliating and painful. The only conclusion that can be drawn from this is either that the legal department and managing director’s office are populated by stupid people, or, more scarily, they are normal and follow stupid orders from ‘the system’.

How we manage different levels of psychological voltage is personal to us. A low voltage for me might be a high voltage for you. But all of us, I bet, have experienced cases of “It’s not me, it’s the system. A little shock, a big shock. I know you are going to scream, but there is little I can do.” The most worrying thing is that, with few exceptions, we are the normal citizens of New Haven, not personality disorders waiting to strike. SM

•Dr Leandro Herrero writes on a management topic each month in Scrip Magazine. He is CEO and founder of The Chalfont Project, an international consulting firm focusing on organisational innovation and behavioural change management.

Conditions of supply

Scrip Magazine is supplied on the following conditions: – 1. All rights reserved; no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without either the written permission of the publisher or under the terms of a licence issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency (90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE, UK) or rights organisations in other countries that have reciprocal agreements with the copyright Licensing Agency. – 2. All abstracting of the data for republication and sale must have prior permission from the publisher. – 3. That it will not be circulated without prior agreement with the publisher outside the staff who work at the address to which it is sent. – 4. An order for additional copies at reduced rates constitutes an undertaking by the subscriber that such copies will not be exported or distributed so as to avoid taking full price subscriptions elsewhere without prior agreement with PJB Publications. – 5. While information is compiled with all due care, PJB Publications Ltd will not be liable for the consequences of anyone acting or refraining from acting in reliance on any information. Full terms and conditions available on request.

The good news is that in management we don’t have electric shocks. The bad news is that there is a worse kind of pain than that inflicted by voltage: psychological pain. The dynamics of power in our organisations are very rich. We exercise power, obey orders and follow instructions. We also challenge them, resist or decide not to comply. In the process, organisational life sometimes serves as a coverall excuse for many things that would not be accepted in normal life. How many times have we said, or heard, “It’s not me, it’s the system. If it were up to me, I would let you do it.”

They forced me to do it

I have always been fascinated by the pervasive use of ‘they’ in organisations. ‘They’ want this. ‘They’ forced me to do that. What fascinates me even more is how often I have heard it used by senior people, even those at the very top. Who is ‘they’, in those cases? In my experience, it’s a virtual, almost Olympic ‘they’ – the system, the best, most convenient and unaccountable management black hole.

We don’t need the man in Milgram’s lab to tell us, “Keep pushing, it’s an experiment, for goodness sake. Do you think you can break the protocol just like that?” Our managers,