

**MILGRAM AND ZIMBARDO REVISITED:  
THE CAPACITY FOR CRUELTY IN NORMAL POPULATIONS**

Martin R. Smith, M.Ed.\*

**REVISED**

Ninth International Conference on  
Multiple Personality/Dissociative States

November 13, 1992

Copyright (c) 1992 by Martin R. Smith

\*Biofeedback Institute of Los Angeles  
3710 South Robertson Boulevard, Suite 216  
Culver City, California 90232

# Milgram and Zimbardo Revisited: The Capacity for Cruelty in Normal Populations ©

Martin R. Smith, M.Ed.

With the increasing recognition of widespread child abuse and with resultant PTSD and dissociation, it seems expedient to review important research findings concerning the capacity for cruelty in a wide range of "normal" subjects. This paper reviews some well-known experiments regarding human cruelty and proposes an explanation for their disturbing findings.

In the well known experiments of Milgram, Zimbardo and Elliott, a wide range of normal people (with no other motivation than situational structure and experimenter urging) subjected other people to enormous amounts of pain, degradation and dehumanization.

In Milgram's experiment on obedience to authority, 65% of their naive S's from widely diverse backgrounds delivered up to 450 volts of electricity (labeled extreme danger) to unseen experimental confederates who deliberately gave wrong answers to the S's questions. The S's continued in the experiment simply at the urging of the experimenter. Milgram's explanation for the continuation of shock delivery was that obedience to authority has been evolutionarily bred into the individual members of society so that they will inhibit their own disruptive impulses. This insures that social order will not be threatened and that the advantages of an organized and obedient society will be maintained.

Zimbardo, *et al* (1973), in a mock prisoner-guard experiment involving normal college students, found unexpected aggressiveness and dehumanization of the prisoner subjects by the guard subjects. The experiment had to be terminated because of the escalating brutality of the guards and the increasing decompensation of the prisoners.

Elliott's (1970) well known elementary school experiment on discrimination using eye color, replicated Zimbardo's findings in that the "superior" group displayed unusual aggressiveness and brutality toward the "subordinate" group.

In all three experiments, outcome expectancies of the level of brutalization widely differed from the experimental results. Elliott summarized the differences between expected and actual outcomes by her comment, "By noon I was sick."

Experiments that have direct explanatory bearing on the findings of Milgram, Zimbardo and Elliott are those by Witkins, Asch and Rotter. Witkins' experiment on phenomenological field dependency found that a large number of people would line up a rod perpendicular with a tilted frame while some people were found to be field independent and lined up the rod perpendicular with gravity. Witkins attributed field dependency to a lack of differentiation. Asch's (1955) findings on group conformity also found that some S's would not conform and would trust their own perceptions gauging the relative length of lines. Rotter's (1966) widely known concept of locus of control originated from experiments in which some S's saw no causal connection between their behavior and reinforcement outcome which he labeled an external locus of control.

This paper proposes that relatively unforced cruelty, obedience to irrational authority, lack of differentiation, group conformity, external location of control and field dependency are in many cases related to trauma or the threat of trauma in the socialization of children. The implication of these research findings are difficult to incorporate into conscious awareness. The fact that millions of people in our society may exist in dissociated and semi-conscious states (Smith, 1987, ISSMPD) begs the question: "When does concern about damage to individuals in our culture outweigh the concern about maintaining the benefits of an organized and obedient society?" A population consisting of conscious, differentiated, field independent, internally located people does not necessarily equal anarchy, but may lead to a social organization that meets the needs of its members without the necessity of threat or violence.

**Milgram and Zimbardo Revisited:  
The Capacity for Cruelty in Normal Populations**

Martin R. Smith, M.Ed.

The purpose of this paper is to review important research findings concerning the capacity for cruelty in a wide range of "normal" subjects, and to investigate if the cruelty is an unavoidable aspect of human nature or an unnecessary, shaped response resting on irrational, superstitious beliefs (Smith, 1987, 1989a, 1989b).

The findings of three well-known experiments involving cruelty, carried out by Milgram, Zimbardo, and Elliott, are reviewed and an explanation offered to counter the idea that the results reflect an innate drive in humans to exhibit cruel and violent behavior. Additionally, three experimentally derived concepts that have direct explanatory bearing on the results of Milgram, Zimbardo, and Elliott are reviewed and are seen as indicative of chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These concepts are Witkin's field dependency, Asch's group conformity, and Rotter's external locus of control.

MILGRAM

Stanley Milgram (1974), in a series of experiments on obedience to authority, found that 65% of experimental subjects from widely diverse backgrounds delivered what they thought were up to 450 volts of electricity (labeled extremely dangerous) to unseen experimental confederates. The subjects were told to deliver increasing amounts of shock when the apparent "victims" gave wrong answers to questions asked by the subjects. The confederates deliberately answered incorrectly which, according to directions given to the subjects, warranted a shock. The subjects continued in the experiment simply at the instructions of the experimenter, who maintained a consistent air of authority. Some subjects were extremely distressed by the feigned moans and cries of the confederates, but no one stopped before 300 volts (labeled dangerous). The request of authority outweighed their desire to stop inflicting pain and possible death on virtual strangers.

ZIMBARDO

Zimbardo (1972) and his associates arranged an experiment involving a mock prison using 24 male college students who were pretested for physical and mental stability, maturity, and noninvolvement in antisocial behavior. The subjects were randomly divided into two groups of twelve, one group to be prisoners and one to be guards. They were to role play these designations as realistically as possible. The experiment was to last two weeks but was terminated after six days because of the enormous amount of

pathology and derealization among the prisoners, guards, and experimenters. The prisoners were rapidly decompensating into complete lethargy, and the guards were escalating their sadistic treatment of the prisoners. Experimenters, parents, and outsiders visiting the experimental site also experienced a loss of reality.

#### ELLIOTT

Peters, in A Class Divided (1971), summarizes the work of Jane Elliott, an elementary school teacher in Riceville, Iowa. Elliott, immediately following the assassination of Martin Luther King, wanted to teach her class about the effects of racial discrimination. She wanted desperately to do more than tell her class that racial discrimination was wrong and irrational. She wanted them to find out personally and deeply what the results of discrimination were actually like.

Her approach was based on a remark she had made years before to her college roommate following an argument with her father concerning race. She remembered as she talked to her roommate how her father's hazel eyes had blazed at her accusation of prejudice. She said, "If hazel eyes ever go out of style, my father's going to be in trouble." (p. 17) Using this idea, she proposed to her class that it be divided into two groups based on eye color, a blue-eyed group and a green and brown-eyed group. First, the blue-eyed group was designated inferior and the brown-eyed group superior. Following the weekend, the positions would be reversed. Elliott explained that for the purpose of the exercise, brown-eyed people were on top and blue-eyed ones on the bottom. This meant that brown-eyed children were better, cleaner, more civilized, and smarter than the blue-eyed children. Those on top the first day could use paper cups to drink rather than the water fountain, would have five extra minutes at recess, would go to lunch first and go back for seconds, and sit in the front of the class while the inferior blue-eyed group could do none of these things. Elliott also acted in a supportive way with the superior group and in a disdainful way with the inferior group. By afternoon, the effects were obvious. The children in the superior group were happy, alert, and doing far better work than they had done before. The inferior group was miserable. The blue-eyed children's posture, expressions, and entire attitudes were those of defeat. More disturbing still was that the superior children had turned on their friends of the previous day and had accepted almost immediately that what had been described as an exercise was actually true; they were superior.

Three days later, when the tables were turned, the now inferior brown-eyed children had within minutes become nervous, depressed, and resentful. At the end of the day, Elliott told the children that it had all been a lie. When she asked the children if eye color had anything to do with the way a person was, "They literally shouted their answer at her, 'No.'" (p. 31) Tension gave

way to crying, laughing, and hugging, and a sense of relief grew in the children when they realized that friendships they thought were irretrievably lost were now restored.

#### THE REALITY AND EXTENT OF VIOLENCE IN SOCIETY

Before proceeding further, I will examine some ideas and research that demonstrate the extent of cruelty and abuse directed toward children in our society in order to establish the seriousness of the problem.

Jacoby (1975) writes that our psychology in this era of late capitalism "is the ideology of conformism and synchronization." (p. 57) "The reality of violence and destruction, of psychically and physically damaged people, is not merely glossed over, but buried beneath the lingo of self, meaning, authenticity, personality. The more these cease to exist, the more they are invoked." (pp. 57-58) However, this buried evidence of violence is beginning to be uncovered. In the United States during 1990, there were 23,438 murders, 102,555 forcible rapes, 639,271 robberies, and 1,054,863 aggravated assaults (FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 1990, 1991). In 1991, there was an estimated total of 2,694,000 reports of child abuse according to the 1991 50 State Survey of Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities (National Commission for Prevention of Child Abuse, 1992).

Finally, the reality of constant warfare that rages across our planet, and inflicts tremendous damage on children, is instantaneously brought to our attention by the international nervous system comprised of satellites, television, radio, computers, and telephones. Ignorance is not bliss and it may soon be impossible to maintain without very powerful systems of denial.

#### INNATE VIOLENCE VERSUS THE SHAPING OF VIOLENT BEHAVIOR THROUGH EARLY TRAUMA

This section proposes the possibility that what appears to be an expression of innate violence in human beings may actually be the result of undetected and/or unacknowledged shaping of violence through early trauma. Milgram's (1974) explanation for the continuation of shock delivery was that obedience to authority has been evolutionarily bred into the individual members of society so that they will inhibit their own disruptive impulses. This ensures that social order will not be threatened and that the advantages of an organized and obedient society will be maintained. He notes, however, that this instinct for hierarchical organization in humans is the starting point for investigating obedience to authority, not the endpoint. Milgram proposes that humans function in two modes, autonomously for self interest and systemically when they take their place in a social order. When people move from an autonomous mode to a systemic one, a "critical shift in functioning is reflected in an alteration of attitude. Specifically, the person

entering an authority system no longer views himself as acting out of his own purposes but rather comes to see himself as an agent for executing the wishes of another person." (p. 133)

In considering if continued obedience to irrational requests by authority stems from displaced anger or aggression in people, Milgram declares that the contrary is true, "The key to the behavior of subjects lies not in pent-up anger or aggression but in the nature of their relationship to authority. They have given themselves to the authority; they see themselves as instruments for the execution of his wishes; once so defined, they are unable to break free." (p. 168) Goodman (1960), in his work on delinquency, argues strongly for recognizing the influence of an "absurd" society in creating so-called deviant behavior, including aggression and violence. Fromm too addresses how we may easily acquiesce to irrational, social influence, "The following chapter attempts. . . to show how, in our effort to escape from aloneness and powerlessness, we are ready to get rid of our individual self either by submission to new forms of authority or by a compulsive conforming to accepted patterns." (p. 156)

Fromm (1973) addresses what he calls malignant aggression and uses Heinrich Himmler as an example of a sadistic personality drawn to this type of aggression. In attempting to explain Himmler's behavior, Fromm writes the following, "perhaps more than of any other factor we must think of the pathogenic influence of the dry, banal, pedantic, dishonest, unalive atmosphere in which the Himmler family lived. There were no values except the insincere profession of patriotism and honesty, there was no hope except that of managing to hold onto their precarious position on the social ladder." (p. 324)

Bettelheim (1950) addresses the other side of violence, the violence of neglect and deprivation. He described a nine year old girl who came to his Orthogenic School who was withdrawn autistically most of the time. There was no time when she was not totally disoriented in terms of time and space and her own identity. Although he knew almost nothing of the first three years of her life, from the little information available Bettelheim assumed the girl had never received adequate care.

Finally, the Seville Statement on violence, drafted by 20 scientists from around the world, rejects the various myths that war is part of human nature. The statement specifically rejects five myths: (1) that humans have inherited a tendency to make war from our animal ancestors; (2) that war is genetically programmed into our human nature; (3) that in human evolution, there has been a special selection for aggressive behavior; (4) that humans have a "violent brain"; and (5) that war is caused by instinct or any single motivation.

In several previous papers (1987, 1989a, 1989b), I proposed a way to explain society's reliance on the use of threat and violence in the socialization of children. I proposed that a primitive form of trauma bound learning that is subcortical in nature and is reinforced by the fact of survival, not pleasure and pain, is passed from generation to generation due to a superstitious belief about the necessity for living with sacrifice and pain. Because in a violent society sacrifice and pain accompany survival, children quickly come to believe that it is required for continued existence and social order. The problem with this situation is that this belief is rarely reinspected to see if survival and genuine need satisfaction could be accomplished in a far less damaging way. Thus, the cycle continues and the whole of society is affected. Ostensible victims and perpetrators are both victimized by their allegiance to a destructive belief maintained by irrational authority.

#### EXPERIMENTAL CONCEPTS RELATED TO DISSOCIATION

As Jacoby noted, social ideas are most loudly proclaimed when the incongruity between the ideal and the actual is greatest. In short, as the evidence of violence increases so does the collective claims that there is no violence. When the incongruity becomes too great, individuals must distance or dissociate from reality and the powerlessness they feel (Smith, 1987, 1989a, 1989b).

Three researchers, Witkin, Asch, and Rotter, have derived concepts from their experimentation that help to characterize people suffering from trauma-induced dissociation.

#### Witkin

Witkin (1965), in reviewing his idea of field dependent - independent, noted that field dependent people use external cues from a fused phenomenal field to direct their behavior. Field independent people seem to have a stronger sense of differentiation from the outer world and can separate discreet aspects of the external environment which greatly aids rational, analytical decisionmaking.

One test to distinguish field dependent from field independent people is the tilted room test. "The apparatus for this test consists of a small room, which can be tilted left or right, within which is a chair, which can also be tilted left or right. The subject's task is to make his body straight while the room around him is crooked." (p. 318) Some people will align themselves with the room when it is tilted as much as 35 degrees. A fusion seems to exist between body and field in this situation. These persons are called field dependent. Persons who bring themselves close to upright no matter how much the room is tilted are called field independent. They seem to have an immediate sense of the separateness of their bodies from the world.

Witkin elaborates that this concept of psychological differentiation appears to have important diagnostic value. For instance, the fusion of body and field in the field dependent person suggests a lack of clear body boundaries. Field dependent children draw very crude human figures considerably lacking in detail while field independent children of the same age draw far more sophisticated figures. Field independent people have a greater sense of separate identity than field dependent people. They are aware of needs, feelings, and attributes which they can recognize as their own and know as distinct from others. Most importantly, studies have shown that field independent people tend to use specialized defenses, such as isolation, when there is a threat to the self system. Field dependent persons tend to use defenses such as massive repression and primitive denial. These defenses involve a total blotting out of memory, of past experiences, and of perception of stimuli. This is very much in line with a description of dissociation.

### Asch

Asch's (1958) work on group conformity demonstrates how conformism is used in the service of dissociation. In his basic experiment, a naive subject was seated at a table with seven to nine others who were confederates of the experimenter. The group's task was to judge the relative length of lines in which the length of the lines were obvious. On predetermined trials, the confederates unanimously gave the wrong answer. Asch then observed the amount of conformity this procedure would elicit from his naive subject. Even though the correct answer was always obvious, the average subject conformed to the group consensus on 32% of the predetermined trials. Only a few would stick by their own perceptions all of the time and, thus, were relatively impervious to group pressure. Traumatized people who are, in Witkin's term, field dependent would be more likely to conform to the group consensus for fear of the retaliation that would come from disobeying the authority of the group, especially for bringing attention to the implicit force used by the confederates to produce conformity.

### Rotter

Rotter (1982) noted that a "series of studies provides strong support for the hypothesis that the individual who has a strong belief that he can control his own destiny is likely to (a) be more alert to those aspects of the environment which provide useful information for his future behavior; (b) take steps to improve his environmental condition; (c) place greater value on skill or achievement reinforcements and be generally more concerned with his ability, particularly his failures; and (d) be resistive to subtle attempts to influence him." (p. 210) Rotter called this type of individual internally located. People who feel relatively powerless and seek guidance in the outside world are said to have



an external locus of control. Rotter's idea of an external locus of control continues the concept developed in this paper that people who are field dependent and are susceptible to group pressure are more likely to avoid facing internal issues resulting from trauma that would take a strong sense of self to resolve.

#### CONCLUSION

The fear that is aroused in the general population by people who are self-determined, field independent, internally located, and nonconforming points out the tenuous security that is maintained by denial concerning the use of violence in society. Both Milgram (1974) and Asch (1958) indicate that an ally or several allies are needed to break the hold of irrational authority that subscribes to the use of violence. For our society to successfully rid itself of the superstitious belief concerning sacrifice and pain, more and more people will need to become conscious of the psychosocial use of force and be willing to ask others to join them in disavowing the use of violence.

## References

- Adams, D. (1989). The Seville Statement on violence and why it is important. Journal of Humanistic psychology, 29(3), Summer, 328-337.
- Atkinson, R. L., Atkinson, R. C., Smith, E. E., & Hilgard, E. R. (1985). Introduction to psychology. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Bailey, R. H., & Editors of Time-Life Books (Eds.). (1976). Violence and aggression. New York: Time-Life Books.
- Banuazizi, A., & Movahedi, S. (1975, Feb.). Interpersonal dynamics in a simulated prison: A methodological analysis. American Psychologist, 152-159.
- Bettelheim, B. (1950). Love is not enough. New York: Avon.
- Breakwell, . M. (1979). Illegitimate group membership and inter-group differentiation. British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 18, 141-149.
- Breznitz, S. (1983). Anticipatory stress and denial. In S. Breznitz (Ed.), The denial of stress (pp. 225-255). New York: International Universities Press.
- Brown, M. S. (1984). Do confusing information and egocentric instructions influence perception? Perceptual and Motor Skills, 59, 15-20.
- Freedman, J. L., & Doob, A. N. (1969). Deviancy. Academic Press.
- Fromm, E. (1969). Escape from freedom. New York: Avon Books.
- Fromm, E. (1973). The anatomy of human destructiveness. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Goldberger, L. (1983). The concept and mechanisms of denial. In S. Breznitz (Ed.), The denial of stress (pp. 83-95). New York: International Universities Press.
- Goodman, P. (1960). Growing up absurd. New York: Random House.
- Hunt, S. M. (1979). Hypnosis as obedience behaviour. Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 18, 21-27.
- Jacoby, R. (1975). Social Amnesia. Boston: Beacon Press.

- Levine, P. (1986). Stress. In M. G. H. Coles, E. Donchin, S. W. Porges (Eds.), Psychophysiology: Systems, processes, and applications (pp. 331-353). New York: Guilford Press.
- Lobstein, T., Webb, B., & Edholm, O. (1979). Orienting responses and locus of control. British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 18, 13-19.
- May, R. (1983). The discovery of being. New York: Norton.
- Milgram, S. (1974). Obedience to authority. New York: Harper & Row.
- National Commission for Prevention of Child Abuse. (1992). 1991 50 state survey of child abuse reporting and fatalities. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Nova # 1304. (1986). Life's first feelings. WGBH Transcripts, 125 Western Ave., Boston, MA 02134; (617) 492-2777. (Program originally broadcast on PBS on February 11, 1986)
- Peters, W. (1971). A class divided. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- I. Rock (Ed.). (1990). The legacy of Solomon Asch: Essays in cognition and social psychology. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Rotter, J. B. (1982). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. In C. D. Spielberger (Gen. Ed.), The development and applications of social learning theory. New York: Praeger.
- Rotter, J. B., & Hochreich, D. J. (1975). Personality. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Selye, H. (1976). The stress of life (rev. ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Smith, M. R. (1987). Post-traumatic stress and the loss of ontological security: Overcoming trauma-induced neophobia in adult children of Alcoholics. Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Multiple Personality/Dissociative States, Chicago.
- Smith, M. R. (1989a). Social collusion in the creation of violence. Proceedings of the 42nd Annual Conference of the California State Psychological Association, San Francisco.
- Witkin, H. A. (1965). Psychological differentiation and forms of pathology. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 70(5), 317-336.