

Can Milgram's Findings Provide a Framework for a Guilt-free Drone Warfare?

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ABSTRACT

We all know about war and more precisely, about the psychological after effects and traumas it leaves those participating with. Whole lives can be ruined by combat-related disorders that severely impair daily functioning. They all seem to revolve around a certain feeling: guilt, mostly deriving from emotionally vivid and lived-through experiences. However, that is not the case when it comes to armed drones. So, how is the mere nature of drone warfare related to a psychological experiment from more than 60 years ago?

Keywords: Drones; Artificial intelligence; Satellite communication; Electroshocks

INTRODUCTION

During the 1960's, Stanley Milgram, one of the most influential figures in social psychology for which you can find out more in the "About" section of the website, conducted an experiment at Yale University for the role of punishment on human learning behaviors. Before entering in groups of two, the participants were randomly assigned to the roles of the "teacher" and the "learner". Upon entering, the "learner" sat on one side of the table with electrodes attached to his arm, who were connected to a shock generator. He had to learn pairs of words and answer questions about them to the teacher. The "teacher" sat on the opposite side of the table and has control over the amount of shock he is going to administer to the "learner". He was given a set of guidelines, as to how much he is going to shock the "learner". The "teacher" was informed about the electrodes and that, despite being painful, no permanent tissue damage can be inflicted on the "learner". The "learner" has also previously mentioned that he suffers from mild heart disease. On the generator, there was an etiquette, describing the correlation between the number of volts administered and the levels of danger for the recipient's health.

EXPERIMENT

As the experiment was going on, while finding some pairs of words correctly, the "learner" also made some mistakes and, as a result, he was getting increasingly higher voltages delivered to his body. Upon reaching 75 volts, the "learner" was screaming in pain, on 150 volts he was asking to be dismissed from the experiment and on 300 volts he was non-responsive to the

questions. Milgram demanded that they be considered as wrong and deliver another shock. The "teacher" often demanded that they stop the experiment, mentioning that the "learner" seems to be in tremendous pain. Milgram replied to these requests by using a hierarchy of automated responses, like "please continue" and "it is essential that you continue the experiment".

On another variation of the experiment, in which the "learner" and the "teacher" could not see each other (a wall was put between them) nor could they hear each other, the "learner" was intensively hitting at the wall at 300 volts.

RESULTS

A team of specialists in human behavior, including 39 psychiatrists, was called beforehand to predict the point up until which a psychologically balanced human being would still administer electric shocks. These specialists predicted that merely 10% of participants would go over 180 volts and that no one would obey until the highest value (450 volts). The real results, however, paint a completely different picture. More than 95% of the participants reached and surpassed 180 volts and a staggering 65% of them went all the way until 450 volts, despite the label at that point demonstrating the ominous XXX sign. More worrying is that, recent replication of the experiment show that the level of obedience would remain the same today [1].

A thing to note is that the reason why I was putting the word "learner" under quotations is because he wasn't a randomly assigned person, he was a person cooperating with Milgram (a

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Received date: February 05, 2021; **Accepted date:** February 19, 2021; **Published date:** February 26, 2021

Citation: Katsaitis C (2021) Can Milgram's Findings Provide a Framework for a Guilt-Free Drone Warfare? J Psychol Psychother 2021; 11(S1): 003

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confederate as they are called in Social Psychology) and the test was set in a way that he was always assigned as a “learner”. He did not suffer from a single shock either, he was just given a list of reactions to different voltage levels. In reality, the real participants were under the illusion of shocking another person. Afterwards, the “learner” greeted the teacher and he felt a sigh of relief.

What factors shaped these results?

One factor that made ordinary people, like the ones on Milgram’s experiment (they were everyday people, 20-50 years old, from different work fields and without any psychiatric disorder) act so brutally is that, once people are committed to a course of action (administering electroshocks), it’s very hard for them to modify or stop it. Another factor was the physical closeness between the experimenter and the participant. When the “learner” was not visible, more people tended to proceed with higher shocks than when they could see/hear the “learner”. Closeness and obedience levels were negatively correlated, as the first one increased more and more the other was steadily and respectively decreasing. When the experimenter was in the same room, obedience (percentage of people who reached the maximum shock capacity) was reduced to 40%, and when the experimenter literally touched the arms of the “teachers”, the number further fell down to 30%, which is still terrifyingly high. Perhaps it is that seeing the person suffering triggers a perception of the other person as a human like the rest of us, with weaknesses and limits. Consistent with previous findings, when the experimenter was giving the orders through a phone connection, the final percentage was around 20% and when he wasn’t giving any orders (+being absent), the number further fell to 25%. Group pressure [2] is an element of the utmost importance. Having two other people following orders without question to authority dramatically increased obedience to 92% while having two other individuals arguing against continuing reduced obedience to just 10%. It’s worth noting here that Solomon Asch had conducted an experience on social conformity, where one participant would go into a room with four or five other confederates. They were certain tests with easily solved visual tests. The confederates were specifically asked beforehand to say the same wrong answer with absolute certainty. The participant, who was not aware of that, might have said the correct response the first time, but nearly all of them conformed to the group after a few rounds. There were some who persisted on saying the correct answer, but they felt extremely out of place and uncomfortable, feelings no human wants to feel. The last main factor was the legality and the legitimacy [3] of the authority present. This is extremely important, given that a well-established authority figure allows the participants to diffuse their responsibility for what may or may not happen to their superiors, they don’t carry the burden of their actions. Even the emblems of power can have an effect on people’s obedience. When seeing people with clothing that suits the respective position, individuals tend to give in easier. The most characteristic example of that is the perception a lot of people have, that nurses are the same as doctors, because their attire is similar (this isn’t true, they have completely different training and authorization). The place

also plays a major role. When meeting with a private firm, for instance, in an old and badly conserved building, people were less eager to accept what as being said. Of course, we have to take into account that individuals’ differences in personality [4] may account for not having on steady result all the time. In general, it has been found that people who tend to show behaviors of conformism and obedience are characterized by low self-esteem and intelligence, high need for social approval, self-control, higher feelings of inferiority and insecurity and an authoritarian personality. However important personality factors may be, the role of the situation shouldn’t be undermined in any case. They are more of predispositions who push the person to acting in a certain way if the situational factors are in the same direction. We wouldn’t want to be culturally indifferent. In different, collectivistic cultures, people tend to be more conformists because that’s what’s valued in their culture, even if compliance, under this context, has a negative meaning and it supersedes other values. According [5] to research on Milgram’s replications, Italians reached up to 73% of the electric shock, Jordanians are at the same level as the Americans, Spaniards, Austrians, Germans and the Dutch are at higher levels. Only Australians [6] and Britons [7] are lower. The conclusion was that It might depend on the costume of the experimenter (people in Australia were less formally dressed). Women in Australia were more reluctant to give electroshocks (the “victims” in Australia were been women, that might have to do with it). The level of obedience increased when the victim could instruct another to deliver the shock but only if the other did not complain and object to the orders, if he objected, then the rate of obedience decreased. When the researcher informed the people about the consequences of their actions, this choice essentially zeroed in on the number of people who chose the most extreme choice. However, all the countries in the experiment are industrial. People who are in the process of learning take into account the social context and not just the commands of a figure of power. There is no blind obedience to power as Milgram originally implied.

Implications for drone warfare

Now to the question of how are drones related to Milgram’s findings, we first need to look at how they work, from takeoff to a strike [8]. After takeoff, the control of a drone is transferred to a pilot who, however, could be thousand of miles away, usually in the respective country’s air base. Their satellite communication systems allow for remote control by a pilot. For a strike to be successful, the military drone needs to be a few kilometers near the target. Usually he/she is targeted by his/her cellphone. Drone strikes are mostly used for dealing with suspected terrorists and terrorist activities. It has become pretty clear how armed drone strikes can be easier to complete than normal bombings from fighter jets. If we were to correlate Milgram’s experiment with what we described above, we can understand why. Firstly, the launch of the drone, the piloting and the deeply submerging and complicated environment, for which one might have been trained for many hours, all account for putting the person in a very strict course of action. Closeness between the pilot and the target is

nonexistent. Not only is the pilot hundreds of miles away, but most likely he or she piloting the drone will never see the actual person that's being bombarded. Best case scenario is that the pilot will see the vehicle or the faculty in which the suspected terrorist is hiding in, but not the person per se. Another reason supporting the initial statement is that in the control center of the drone, a person higher in hierarchy than the pilot might be present. As stated earlier, despite the risk that not following rules from their superiors might result in termination from their job, the presence of a legitimate authority figure in the room makes it easier for the pilot to dispense any responsibility he or she has to those giving the commands. If they are going to take the blame, why would the pilots be worried? They were just following orders, an excuse we have seen being projected in the darkest times of human history. Not to mention that, if the pilot never gets to know the person being targeted, information coming from his/her superiors will steer his perception about the target, removing any guilt or dissonance. Group pressure again comes into play. The pilot, of course, is not alone on the control room. If other individuals are eager to proceed with the mission (perhaps for the reasons mentioned above), then it is predicted that those authorizing the actual strike will proceed normally, even if he/she had some doubts in the beginning.

DISCUSSION

What the future holds for drones

Right now, the drones used for military purposes are small Unmanned Surveillance Vehicles (USVs) and bigger attack USVs. This situation is likely to remain consistent within the next decade at least, given that imports for these kinds of drones keep on rising, with the country having ordered most of them until 2014 being the UK. A big problem arises however. As technology improves, new drone strike techniques have been developed and have already being used. The most prominent technique is called drone swarming [9] and it has a simple in theory but complicated in action premise. Using advanced Artificial Intelligence [10], drones are able to form squadrons and think completely independently while forming groups. They can find their target probably with GPS coordinates given to them. They can be extremely effective in the sense of dividing up a task in the most efficient way possible and execute orders. They can perhaps also form sub-groups and shoot down multiple targets all at once before the human brain can even conceptualize what happened. Autonomous drones [11] make less mistakes than humans, better at identifying the location of the targets. Most of the progress is classified, so our information is limited, but from what we can see for now on the topic of this technology advancing [12], tests ran by Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) just last year showed that drones, in their own words, "efficiently shared information, cooperatively planned and allocated mission objectives, made coordinated tactical decisions, and collaboratively reacted to a dynamic, high-threat environment with minimal communication". It is possible that these drone swarms will be used within the next decade or so. Has

drone swarming being used? That's hard to tell. Multiple drones using modern GPS navigation systems have been used to attack oil facilities in Saudi Arabia [13] and an air-base backed by Russia [14] in Syria, but just the sheer number of them doesn't necessarily reflect that this exact drone swarming technology was present. As time progresses we can see that increased emphasis is being placed on drones: our first and most prominent example is their use in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijan used Israeli and Turkish [15] drones in big numbers to destroy Armenia's weapon systems, allowing a quick advance of Azerbaijani soldiers and a complete loss of the region, especially when combined with Armenia's lack of drone jammers. Not to mention that this has prompted the United Kingdom to show an interest in buying the drones used. Is the technology developing? Yes. China [16] has developed swarm drone launcher, the United States and Israel [17] both have started developing drone swarming technologies. The UK'S RAF [18] started live trials back in July. Russia used drone swarms in their annual military exercise. Perhaps this is the first sign of this technology developing; it might not be what we described earlier on but its sure getting there. The best illustration of what this technology is capable of doing is shown in this video by the Guardian or as Venable said "As shown during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, fleets of simultaneously launched next generation small drones will be a key feature of future military operations; potentially, if armed with shotguns and weapons of mass destruction they would also be capable to perform air-to-air and air-to-ground strikes, which would destroy anything on their way". Let's just say that this is big enough of an issue to attract the attention of the European Parliament [19] which called for the need of an "EU strategy prohibiting lethal autonomous weapon system" from being deployed and used. Why is this important? Besides the obvious dystopian scenario described above, that involves autonomous drones travelling in swarms, locating and executing certain targets and even if we overcome the obvious ethical barriers, there are still some underlying implications from Milgram's experiment: this technology is revolutionary in the sense that it gets rid of the aspect of human control.

CONCLUSION

Humans no longer execute strikes, they simply give orders and machines do it for them, absurdly eliminating closeness as a determinant factor of the relevance of Milgram's findings. If this technology is officially implemented and we can see all of its' details, perhaps then Milgram's experiment will need to be renewed.

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