

Teaching Obedience & Authority

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Nathan in Power & Control

"Situations defined as real are real in their consequences" - The W.I. Thomas Theorem

Conformity, obedience, and authority are all big topics in my sociology 101 courses. So it's no surprise that I have students read about **Stanley Milgram's electrocution experiments**. Students are stunned to learn that people were willing to electrocute another person to death simply because a man in a white lab coat told them to. Many of my students find the article very interesting, but laugh it off as something "other people" would do. To make students more empathetic of the people in Milgram's experiment I have them take a pop quiz.

On the day the Milgram reading is due I show up to class exactly on time, leaving no time for before class chit-chat. I have a stern look on my face and in a authoritative voice I say, "Alright everyone, pop quiz. Clear your desks and take out a piece of paper. For the next 20 minutes I want NO TALKING!." Students are stunned both by the pop quiz and my sudden change in demeanor. I wait with an impatient look on my face as they pull out pen and paper. If any students asks for clarification or attempts to protest I cut them off with a stern, "I said no talking." When the students are ready I say, "Alright this is a pop quiz about math. I want you to write everything you know about Math. The more you write the more points you get. GO." After a beat, students begin writing furiously.

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I wait maybe 30 seconds to a minute and tell them to stop. "Why are you writing about math in a sociology class?" I ask. After some laughter someone always says, "Because you told us to." I spend the next 5-10 minutes decompressing and deconstructing the activity with the students. I tell them how hard it was for me to act so differently then I typically do. If you adopt this activity I can't stress enough that you need to set boundaries for yourself (to avoid abuse or hurting your students feelings) and that you have to help students process through the emotions this activity filled them with. During the activity I refuse to demean or insult students in anyway. I simply speak with a clear and direct tone. This has always been enough to command obedience. *I have never once had a student disobey or walk out.*

With my students now cognitively open to the ideas of authority and obedience we move on to discuss the Milgram article. Often in the discussion students will draw the logical conclusion and ask in one form or another, "how much of our lives are really based on our own decisions and how much is guided by our obedience to authority figures?" I typically spend an entire class

letting my students debate amongst themselves this very question.



I also provide students with recent examples of how our tendency for obedience has been abused. This year a French documentarian looked at how reality TV affects contestants' behavior. **He recreated Milgram's experiment as a game show and found some of the contestants were willing to electrocute a man to death even though there was no prize or reward for doing so.**

In April of 2004 a man called a McDonald's restaurant in Kentucky pretending to be a police officer. In a three and a half hour phone call he convinced the managers to strip search an 18 year old employee and force her to perform sexual acts on another man. The man who received the sex acts later pleaded guilty of sexual assault and was **sentenced to 1 years imprisonment.**

A big part of any sociology course is the idea that the world we live in is socially constructed. The Milgram experiment, my math pop quiz, and these news events clearly demonstrate the Thomas Theorem to students. Even if things are not based in the "real reality" they can have severe consequences if they are defined as real in our social construction of reality.

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