

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

August 15, 2011

I have a saying that I trot out from time to time whenever I'm being cynical and negative - which fortunately, isn't very often: the only reason we haven't had a holocaust in Wisconsin prisons is because nobody has given the order yet. Now I don't really believe that there will ever be a mass extermination of prisoners in Wisconsin. I say it more to make a point about how people are willing to follow whatever orders are given them regardless of the moral implications of their actions.

There have been several famous experiments done over the years. Stanley Milgram ran a series of experiments in 1961-62 where he had test subjects act as a "teacher" who was required to give ever-increasing electric shocks to a "learner" when the wrong answer was given. The teachers thought they were administering shocks of up to 450 volts and causing extreme pain to the learner. Sixty-five percent of the teachers went to the full 450 volts believing they were inflicting severe pain (actually, the learner faked the pain as there was no electricity involved). Conclusion: most people will hurt someone just because they are told to do so.

Albert Bandura conducted a similar experiment to see what the effect of biasing "teachers" toward believing the learners were "nice" or "animals". His research showed that when teachers viewed the learners as subhuman they imposed more severe shocks on them.

Finally, Phillip Zimbardo did an experiment in 1975 where he created 2 groups: prisoners and guards. He told the guards they had free reign to maintain order in any way they thought necessary. On the first day the guards began stripping the prisoners and spraying them with fire extinguishers, even going so far as to force them to simulate sodomy. The experiment terminated after only 6 days because the abuse got so out of hand.

These studies are fairly well-known in some circles but I doubt if the general public is aware of them. I think perhaps if everyone was aware of the propensity of many people to blindly obey orders and willingly inflict suffering on others with minimal encouragement, we would have more citizens speaking out about the practice of deferring to correctional officials when they claim draconian conditions of confinement are necessary to restrain dangerous criminals.

Think about it, do some research, form your own conclusions.