

Obedience to Authority and the Art of Torture: A Social Psychological Phenomenon

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Abstract

This paper will review published literature on how certain authority figures brainwash, condition, convince, or persuade average, everyday, normal, healthy human beings in the art of torture. The paper will also discuss how great thinkers such as Karl Marx, Talcott Parsons, Max Weber, and Erich Fromm defined the relationship between obedience and authority. Another important topic for review in this investigation is understanding how individuals obey those authorities that assign them the task of torture. The examination will ask the question of whether torturers are sadists who enjoy inflicting pain and suffering on other human beings, or if they are just doing their job. Must one be a monster or tyrannical maniac to perform such abhorrent acts? Not so, according to certain research performed by psychologist Stanley Milgram, who suggested that there were three specific reasons why people obey or disobey authority. In addition, we will briefly examine case studies like the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War, the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment, and the incident of torture at Abu Ghraib prison during the war in Iraq. There is also evidence that attempts to explain this social psychological phenomenon in research performed by Janice T. Gibson, Ed.D., an educational and developmental psychologist, and Mika Haritos-Fatouros, a clinical psychologist, who examined the use of torture by Greek military police when the country was ruled by a military junta that lasted from 1967 through 1974. The results of their analysis were that there seems to be “a cruel method, in the education of a torturer”. This paper will conduct a literature review of the relationship between torture, obedience, and authority.

Keywords

Torture, Obedience, Authority

1. Introduction

The first concept that we attempt to explain here is the obligation to obey, or, as Milgram described, what binds individuals to obey. Secondly, how do we define torture? In this regard, we examine how obedience is defined from different perspectives, drawing on the work of Karl Marx, Talcott Parsons, Max Weber, and Erich Fromm. This paper will also discuss examples of obedience to authority and the later consequences of punishment, torture, and violence, through the study of historical events that occurred in the My Lai Massacre during the Vietnam War, the Stanford Prison Experiment, the Abu Ghraib prison incident during the Iraq War, the Milgram Experiment, and the Education of Torturers after the military coup d'état took place in Greece in 1967.

2. Objectives

From a social psychological viewpoint, obedience to authority and torture by state-sponsored regimes remains a topic of interest and the emphasis of research among psychologists, political scientists, and sociologists. The theme of this study is to review historical theories about the relationship between obedience and authority and why individuals follow the orders of their superiors, along with a review of historical events where individuals obeyed the dictates of their superiors, who in some cases engaged in torture related to their situational variables. The study will attempt to identify causes and reasons why individuals obeyed the authority of their superiors, even to the degree that they committed acts of torture against other individuals. Based on these goals, this study offers potential benefits for greater understanding of the social psychological phenomenon of obedience to authority and how any particular individual may be conditioned, educated, persuaded, or trained to learn how to and commit torturous acts, in order to encourage the ethical decision-making of anyone who maintains a position of power and authority and to discourage them or subordinates from obeying the directions of superiors who order them to commit torturous acts, which may decrease suffering in the world and is in line with the “[United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984](#)” (CAT).

3. Historical Theories of Obedience to Authority

3.1. Karl Marx

For instance, Karl Marx, the great philosopher, proposed that men obeyed due to the nature of the political capitalist system in which proletariats, “workers”, must obey their capitalist masters, “bourgeoisie”. Men obeyed due to the nature of the political capitalist system in which proletariats, “workers”, must obey their capitalist masters who own the means of production, “businesses that they work for”. So, the workers obey their owners because their everyday survival depends on their relationship with their boss. So, to live, they must obey; that is how Marx saw it. Men obeyed due to the nature of the political capitalist system in which prole-

tariats, “workers”, must obey their capitalist masters who own the means of production, “businesses that they work for”. So, the workers obey their owners because their everyday survival depends on their relationship with their boss. Therefore, the workers obey their owners because their everyday survival depends on their relationship with their boss. In order to live, they must obey; that is how Marx saw it.

One of the main issues for behavioral and social science concerns the nature and foundations of men’s obedience in society. Solutions to the problem vary, of course, depending on the theorist; generally, they portray how a theorist deals with power and authority. Marx’s solutions furnish one of the principal concepts in modern behavioral and social sciences.

Why do members of the working class in a capitalist society obey the capitalists? Marx’s assumption is that the division between the capitalists and the proletarians is antagonistic—each class is in conflict with the other. Furthermore, the capitalist class seeks to advance its own goals, notably the continued accumulation of capital. In order to accomplish this, it obviously must convince the proletariat to continue to work in its factories and industries; it must, in short, convince the proletariat to obey its commands to work.

The obedience of the working class to the capitalists, insofar as industrial work is concerned, is not the product of blatant coercion; divorced as they are from the ownership of any of the technical means of production, the proletarians have no choice but to work for the capitalists.^{0.25} Their daily livelihood depends on the use of these instruments, and thus, they obey the commands of the capitalists out of sheer necessity. From the perspective of the capitalist class, the first of the principal devices that account for the obedience of the proletariat is the capitalists’ ownership of the means of production.

Not content simply to demonstrate the power of the capitalists in economic institutions, Marx proceeds to make one of his renowned theoretical leaps, albeit one consistent with his general view of the world: Dominance in the economic institutions of society produces, ipso facto, dominance in every other main sphere of society. In other words, by virtue of their control of the working classes in the economic institutions of society, the capitalists also control the working classes in all other enterprises and institutions. Why should power in economic institutions be generalized to power in all other institutions?

There are a number of answers. One of the most plausible is that capitalists are, by definition, men of wealth, and wealth permits them to “purchase” people in positions of state power. Furthermore, control over those who occupy positions of state power means control over the means of physical force. Hence, the capitalists are able to secure the obedience of the working classes outside of economic institutions through their indirect control over the means of physical force.

To this argument, Marx would respond that, though it is partly correct, it obscures the real basis for the non-economic power of the capitalists. Concealed in the claim that economic wealth guarantees the capitalists’ political or other forms

of power is the real basis for the power of the capitalists outside of the economic realm, namely, the hegemony of their system of values. Their control in this respect is akin to that of any other dominant class in other ages:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class that has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

“One man, one vote” and “equal rights for all”, for instance, represent elements of the belief system of the capitalists that effectively act to secure the obedience of the proletariat in the political order of society; with adages such as “time is money”, they persuade the working-class members that they are fulfilling their own best interests by remaining obedient to the institutions of capitalism. Thus, the second principal device that the capitalists use to generate obedience from the working classes is their control of the means of communication.

Marx’s insightful analysis of these matters, however, glosses over several important issues. For one thing, it fails to specify how the capitalists’ hegemony over beliefs is achieved. Are there particular agencies, for example, the family or school, that spread the beliefs? Perhaps the most fundamental question of his analysis is raised by Joseph Schumpeter (1934): How is it that some people come to own the means of production in the first place? Marx addresses this problem by introducing the concept of primitive accumulation. “The so-called primitive accumulation . . . is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production”. Piracy, usury, and the dispossession of journeymen and apprentices by guild masters are among the several ways in which owners of industry initiate and foster the growth of their own capital resources. Yet the notion of primitive accumulation, and the particular routes whereby it is achieved, begs the question of how certain people become capitalists. “Force-robbery-subjugation of the masses facilitating their spoliation and the results of the pillage in turn facilitating subjugation”, as Schumpeter observes, “this was all right, of course, and admirably tallied with ideas common among intellectuals of all types.... But....it does not solve the problem, which is to explain how some people acquired the power to subjugate and rob”. Marx really solved this issue by fiat; other scholars consider it substantially more problematic.

In sum, the obedience of the proletariat derives from the control of the capitalists over the means of production and communication.

3.2. Talcott Parsons

Talcott Parsons, on the other hand, the great American sociologist, suggested that obedience was defined in relation to people’s roles in an advanced society, where all individuals have certain privileges and rights. In this, he has three reasons for why men obey: the first is that “individuals who obey the commands of other in-

dividuals do so because they have freely selected to occupy such roles, based upon the privileges those roles provide”; the second is that “those individuals who obey the commands of other individuals do so because of the obligations of their roles; the third is that those individuals who obey the commands of other individuals do so because to do otherwise would elicit the application of force; the last is that those individuals who obey the commands of other individuals do so because those commands are supported by the very highest values of society”. That individuals bind to obedience through the roles that they occupy.

A theorist’s response to the issue of men’s obedience in society often helps us better understand the theorist’s images of power and authority. Marx and Weber provided seminal and illuminating answers. Parsons might claim that the powerless comply with the commands of the powerful because the powerful exercise the capacity to make binding decisions on behalf of the entire society. However, why do some men make decisions that are binding over the actions of other men? In what sense are the decisions taken on behalf of the entire society? The answers to these questions disclose Parsons’s vision of the fundamental nature of obedience and of power.

To uncover Parsons’s image of the nature of obedience, let us assume that the roles of powerful and powerless exist in any collectivity. As a generic case, such an example is perfectly compatible with Parsons’s view because he believes power to be distributed in such a way that the decisions taken by some roles in a collectivity take precedence over decisions taken by other positions, or, in more conventional terms, that some positions hold more power than others. This illustration obviously oversimplifies matters; in Parsons’s full vision of the social world, no one can truly divide positions, or individuals, into the powerful and the powerless. For one thing, Parsons conceives of power as widely distributed among individuals, particularly in an advanced society. For another, he makes no claims about the existence of two sorts of roles—the powerful and the powerless; at best, there may exist roles that approximate the conditions of holding power or holding no power, such as those of an elected official and its counterpart, a voter.

Those individuals who occupy the roles of the powerless are compliant with the commands of those who occupy the roles of the powerful for several reasons. First and foremost, they are compliant by virtue of the roles they occupy, not because of qualities that they possess as individuals. Certain roles simply assert that their occupants must obey the instructions of other roles. For example, a citizen’s role in a society is to act in accordance with public officials’ instructions. In view of such demands, why does an individual choose to occupy such a role? Parsons’s imagery suggests that all such roles, at least in an advanced society, also entail significant privileges or rights. The role of a citizen, for example, entitles its holder to expect protection from elected officials, among other benefits. Thus, the first source of obedience is that individuals who obey the commands of others do so because they have freely chosen to assume such roles, based on the privileges those roles provide.

The obedience of some individuals to others by virtue of the roles they hold cannot, by itself, be sufficient to motivate individuals to remain compliant over a long period of time. The roles must also entail specific mechanisms to ensure the occupants' obedience. There are two such devices, though in fact they are but mirror images of one another—it is the obligation of the role of the powerless to obey the commands of those who occupy the role of the powerful, and it is the right of the powerful to expect the compliance of those who hold the role of the powerless. For instance, it is the citizen's obligation to comply with the official's commands, and it is the official's right to expect the citizen's compliance. Thus, the second source of compliance is that individuals who obey the commands of others do so because of the obligations of their roles.

Even the obligations of a role, however, are insufficient to command automatic and indefinite compliance. Individuals do not find the roles they occupy continuously satisfying; they are occasionally highly restrictive. When individuals find the duties associated with their roles unbearable and are inclined to disengage from the role and its obligations, other mechanisms must step in. These are the sanctions—the negative sanctions in particular, such as the application or threatened application of force—that those who occupy the roles of the powerful can use to secure the compliance of those who hold the roles of the powerless. They are the devices that seem to make the actions of the powerful truly binding on the powerless. The government, for instance, may apply or threaten to apply various forms and degrees of force—including imprisonment—if the citizen fails to comply with its commands. Hence, the third basis for compliance is that individuals who obey the commands of others do so because to do otherwise would elicit the application of force.

Is it true that force is an important, indeed perhaps the ultimate, means that may be used to secure the compliance of the powerless to the powerful, of the citizen to the government? Is Parsons, in fact, in league with Thomas [Hobbes \(2008\)](#) maintaining that individuals are compliant because the sovereign authority under which they live would apply the instruments of coercion if they act otherwise? Nothing could be further from the truth. To understand the role of force in society, Parsons asks: What gives individuals occupying specific roles the right to use force? What gives the government in a society, for instance, the legitimate monopoly over the application of the means of physical force in cases of noncompliance with its commands? To know the foundations of the right to use such means is to learn of the final, perhaps the ultimate, source of obedience in Parsons's imagery.

The final source is the values and the norms, the definitions of the rights and obligations in any society. These normative elements are such that, through a complex and long process, they become translated into the very expectations of the roles of the powerful and of the powerless in a society. It is a process that begins at birth, in the form of socialization by parents, and continues throughout life as one encounters increasingly more specialized collectivities and roles. The

normative elements for Parsons, like ideology for Marx, are pervasive throughout the various structures of a society. Thus, for example, the Constitution of the United States assigns to the president as well as to the Congress the capacity to make decisions on behalf of the entire nation; at the same time, it defines the norms and articulates the values, which in this particular and important instance assert that the occupants of some roles, citizens, must comply with the actions of the occupants of other roles, the president and the Congress.

3.3. Max Weber

Max Weber, a great 19th-century philosopher, explained that in the daily operation of any organized form of domination, whether in the form of a modern bureaucracy or a feudal fiefdom, the first procedure for establishing obedience is essential. This, he also remarked, could be a weak link as well as a strong one, in the sense that there is a latent conflict between the ruler and his follower, which then can make it necessary to have further procedures to secure the bond of obedience. Weber then states that an administrative apparatus should be created to enforce the people's obedience to the ruler by imposing punishment for disobedience, i.e., levying and collecting taxes, carrying on war, and attending to other related matters. Weber then explains that rulers establish legitimacy for others to obey them through three types of legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, or rational-legal. They differ from the tradition of his ancestors. The charismatic leader rules because he is believed to possess magical power or perform miracles, so men obey him because he is larger than life. In the legitimate form, the ruler is obeyed due to the relation to a written law, where they obey because they acknowledge the right of the law to rule over them.

The question of why one group of men obeys another, in modern nations as well as in ancient societies, was of fundamental concern to Weber. The dominance relationship, in its most abstract and essential form, involves a ruler who issues commands and followers who obey them. The question is then, why do the followers obey? First of all, in the daily operations of any organized form of domination—whether it be a bureaucracy or a feudal manor—habit or custom is the first principle securing obedience. It is also the weakest, as there is usually a latent conflict between the ruler and his followers. Thus, there have to be additional principles to secure the bond.

The next principle concerns an administrative apparatus. This helps enforce the ruler's authority by providing punishment for noncompliance with commands, levying and collecting taxes, conducting war, and attending to related matters. "Organized domination", Weber remarked, "requires the control of those material goods which in a given case are necessary for the use of physical violence... [as well as] control of the executive staff and the material implements of administration". Administration entails its own problems because major struggles for dominance always occur between the ruler and his staff. To lessen the threat of usurpation of the ruler's power, there must also be a shared interest between the

ruler and the staff; the burden of establishing such solidarity falls on the ruler. As in similar instances, such solidarity is ensured through the provision of material and ideal rewards by the ruler: “The fear of losing [material reward and social honor] is the *final* and *decisive* basis for solidarity between the executive staff and the power-holder”.

Still, even an administrative and military force, together with the associated material implements, is sufficient to sustain the ruler’s continued dominance over his subjects, particularly during times of crisis and threats to the ruler’s right to hold power. There has to be a third and final principle that acts to furnish the ultimate guarantee of obedience by the followers—namely, the follower’s belief in the legitimacy of the ruler. When it comes to the crunch, when custom melts, and administration weakens, the principle of legitimacy always upholds the ruler; the followers believe that a particular figure (or figures) has a right to command them, and they, on their part, have a duty to obey him.

Using the principle of legitimacy as an abstraction, an ideal type, Weber proceeded to distinguish among three separate forms: legitimacy based on traditional grounds, legitimacy based on charismatic appeal, and legitimacy based on rational-legal standards. In the first case, individuals obey a leader, often regarded as the patriarch, out of time-honored devotion. The leader is thought to possess power because he and his ancestors have always held the position of dominance. The patriarchal household and the patrimonial estate represent the specific settings in which such domination is evident. Charismatic domination, the most unstable and transitory of the three, is characterized by feelings of awe and complete devotion among followers. The leader is presumed to possess some uncommon talents—sometimes magical ones—and to be capable of carrying out miracles. Such leadership arises especially during times of societal stress and serves as the glue that binds men together in dominance relations when other principles of legitimacy, traditional or rational-legal, have been eroded. The last form of legitimate domination, rational-legal, involves a relationship between a superior and his subordinates. The underlying principles that justify the dominance of the superior in this case are those of written laws. They serve to establish the precise limits to the leader’s authority and the subordinates’ obedience. Moreover, the followers under these conditions obey the leader because he holds a particular office, not because of his own qualities as a person; the essence of the form, then, is impersonal.

In the modern state, as throughout history, concrete cases of domination actually involve mixtures of the three principles. The leadership of a monarch, for example, might rest on a combination of charismatic and traditional legitimacy. The leadership of the president of the United States often seems to combine all three forms. Such combinations notwithstanding, Weber thought that empirical analysis would be furthered if a concrete form of domination were to be characterized as one of the pure types.

This concept of domination has had far-reaching consequences and has been

applied to a wide range of circumstances. The notion of traditional domination, for instance, has been used to examine leadership in developing nations, while that of charismatic domination has frequently been used to explore the nature of leadership in political movements.

As lucid as this analysis of domination is, it does have some flaws. The major one concerns legitimacy. The problem with legitimacy as a concept is that it appears to exist only in the minds of the followers—in their beliefs and opinions. For instance, Weber asserted, charismatic leaders do not possess charisma, but rather it is bestowed on them by their followers: “It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma”. Though such a notion is in keeping with Weber’s injunction that sociology should concern itself mainly with the subjective interest of individuals—their intentions—its use means that observers of society actually possess no independent and objective basis for determining the presence of legitimacy, other than their own imaginative interpretations. Consequently, those who examine the nature of domination are left to conclude that leaders are continuously obeyed because followers believe they, the leaders, are legitimate holders of power, and the holders of power must be legitimate, for they are continuously obeyed. There are ways to escape this circularity; some are suggested by those scholars who have elaborated on Weber’s notion.

3.4. Erick Fromm

It was Erich Fromm (1957) who wrote an essay, “The Authoritarian Personality”, not long after the defeat of the authoritarian and fascist regimes of Japan, Italy, and the Nazi empire. The question Fromm was asking is: what is the definition of someone who has an authoritarian personality and/or authoritarian character trait? For example, he reflects on two types of character traits and how we distinguish between someone who would like to govern, command, or impede others and the person who yields to, obeys, or is willing to be shamed. In other words, we differentiate between those who wish to lead and those who wish to follow. He also describes how these types of authoritarian personality traits are strongly linked. In fact, what they share and how the authoritarian personality is understood is the incapacity to depend on themselves, to be self-sufficient, and maintain the burden of freedom.

In particular, Fromm discusses two types of authoritarian personality types, the passive-authoritarian and the active-authoritarian. Later, he also describes how people may follow either rational or irrational authority figures or movements, depending on their personality traits.

Passive-Authoritarians

For instance, he explains that those who identify as passive-authoritarians possess masochistic and submissive personality traits (Fromm, 1957). This helps them join a larger establishment, organization, or objective. While the individual, establishment, or goal could be important, influential, or excessive to the person

accepting them, the single follower believes that their organization, chief, or objective is omnipotent and superior. Therefore, they are more powerful and significant and belong to something more powerful and significant. The contradiction in this passive form of authoritarian traits is that the actor deprecates themselves in order to belong to something more powerful, in order to become more powerful themselves. The member would like to follow orders because they are not the leader who makes choices for them. The masochistic persona desires to establish dependence due to the fact that they are afraid and have feelings of solitude, insecurity, and incompetence. This is why they are trying to find a figurehead and a superpower, to feel secure and guarded through belonging and to master their own insecurities. While unconsciously, they experience their own helplessness and depend on their leader to reduce or eliminate it. Thereby, the masochistic and submissive person is afraid of exercising their own freedom and retreats to idol worship, where the authoritarian designs are based on Nazism and Stalinism (Fromm, 1957).

Active-Authoritarians

In terms of those who possess active-authoritarian and sadistic character traits, those they lead perceive them as strong and confident, but at the same time, they are afraid and solitary, just like those with masochistic traits. Whereas the masochist experiences strength because they belong to something bigger than themselves, the sadists experience strength since they have included other members and have the ability to control their identities. In that case, the sadistic-authoritarian leader is as dependent on the masochistic-authoritarian followers as they are on those who lead them. There is a condition for the sadistic-authoritarian to maintain their power. The perception is that they have power and control; their followers will then believe they are formidable. It is only when they lose power that they can no longer dominate and control others.

Fromm (1957) also discusses how he defines sadism in relation to the character traits of the individuals we have discussed in this paper. In fact, he states that sadism is the operative side of the authoritarian personality character. He also makes it clear that sadism is usually described as the propensity to torture and inflict pain. In this case, it is not what he is defining here. Fromm (1957) describes how the various types of sadism attempt to take control and dominate an individual, make them a powerless object of their will, become their overlord, and make all of their decisions and choices for them, in the absence of constraints. Shame and subjugation are used to cause them pain without their ability to resist the power and control to make them suffer.

Symbiotic Tendency

In addition, Fromm (1957) notes that both types of authoritarian personality traits include what he defines as a “symbiotic tendency”. This is where you can find the sadistic and masochistic elements in most of the character traits of the authoritarian personality type. He uses Adolf Hitler as an example to illustrate this symbiotic tendency. The ultimate goal of Hitler was to dominate, control, and

wield power throughout Nazi Germany. Later, he wanted to conquer and control as much of the world as he could rule over, in order to make them helpless objects of his desire. In the same regard, Hitler was dependent on the mass ovations from his followers, the acknowledgment of who gave him counsel, and what he referred to as the supremacy of nature, history, and destiny. Hitler held these mysterious beliefs, which led him to believe that heaven is superior to the country and that you can deceive mankind but not deceive heaven. Therefore, he was mostly impressed by the power of the natural world. He remarked that you can control mankind, but not the forces of nature. In this case, [Fromm \(1957\)](#) points out that Hitler possessed a combination of both authoritarian traits of the sadistic and masochistic personality. We have to succumb to the forces of nature, which he also had power over, along with those individual beings who should be controlled by him and his party.

Rational and Irrational Authority

Another important contribution that Eric [Fromm \(1957\)](#) made to the understanding of obedience to authority was the distinction between rational and irrational authority. One of the most important questions he asked, when acknowledging that authority can be masochistic and involve sadism, is whether we should conclude that all authority involves some form of pathology. He attempted to recognize this dilemma by investigating the differences between rational and irrational authority.

According to [Fromm \(1957\)](#), rational authority is the acknowledgment of authority founded on critical analysis of an individual's competency. He further describes how rational authority includes the subject of authority figures' individual intellectual abilities or critical analysis. It actually presumes it as a requirement for consideration by the authority figure. This does not demean the individual in favor of making the authority figure better. It provides a role for the authority figure based on their rational sense of superiority stemming from their greater competency. It is here that the end goal is founded on competence and care, where they assist the follower in the process of growth.

In terms of irrational authority, [Fromm \(1957\)](#) proposes that it differs from rational authority, where an individual emotionally submits to the person, institution, or idea of authority. Their connection to irrational authority is through the masochistic act of submitting to authority that is higher than them. For an individual to be great, they have to help the authority member become great. The authoritarian's motive is to dominate and demand submission from the follower, who pursues involvement in complex power structures and seeks to attain power through the authoritarian.

In regard to obedience and authority, we can see a relationship with those who possess passive-authoritarian or active-authoritarian character types, as pointed out by [Fromm \(1957\)](#). We can differentiate between a leader whose desire is to command, dominate, or impede others, while the follower tends to obey, submit, or be shamed ([Fromm, 1957](#)). It is the symbiotic relationship between the sadistic

leader and the masochistic follower who possess both qualities and become dependent on each other. In turn, the ruler becomes great because he depends on the followers' appreciation, fear, helplessness, submission, and loyalty. The follower perceives him as great and subjugates himself to his power, thereby making the follower great by being part of his organization, movement, or ideas. (1957) describes how most modern tyrannical regimes were based on this irrational authority. Most healthy and productive societies are based on the presence of rational authority, in which individuals can achieve emotional and intellectual competence to function and experience growth.

3.5. Synthesis of Theories about Obedience to Authority

So, in conclusion, regarding the definition of obedience, Marx believes it stems from the daily workers' dependence on the business owner, which compels them to obey. Since the ruling government of the colonels after the coup was greatly aligned with capitalism, the soldiers who served under their officers and followed their orders were economically dependent on the capitalist rulers for their economic survival. While Parsons contends that, through an elaborate series of relations with different roles and given occupations, men obey nature in reference to what their occupation or role obligates them to do. Parsons' interpretation of why the soldiers obey the orders of their officers is to uphold the highest values of society after the successful coup by the Colonels during the Greek coup d'état and the allegiance to the values of the new regime. Weber confides that men obey because they reside in a state of "Organized Domination", where the rules are given authority in a traditional, charismatic, or rational-legal sense; they assume the right to rule, which is why others obey them. It is apparent that the soldiers obeyed the orders of their officers due to the fact they perceive the new government of the Colonels after the Greek coup d'état as legitimate. Therefore, they follow their orders because they have legitimate authority. Fromm believed that obedience was the result of a symbiotic relationship between a ruler and a follower. Both were dependent on each other to maintain the sadomasochistic relationship. The follower obeys the ruler's orders and demands to live up to the leader's expectations, which makes the ruler the ruler.

4. Case Studies of Obedience to Authority

4.1. My Lai Massacre

One of the best historical examples of how individuals obey authority and are instructed to commit violent acts occurred during the Vietnam War in a small village called My Lai. The incident, which came to be known as the My Lai massacre, was captured in images that later appeared in Life magazine.

Piles of bodies jumbled together in a ditch along a trail—the dead all apparently unarmed. All were Oriental, and all appeared to be children, women, or old men. Clearly, there had been a mass execution, one whose image would not quickly fade (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, p. 2).

The soldiers who participated in the My Lai incident were not crazy or insane. In fact, an army unit that investigated this incident described the men as “average” for the time, place, and war (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). In his report on the massacre, Seymour S. Hersh (1970) wrote that most of the men had volunteered for the draft and were between the ages of 18 and 22. Almost half of the soldiers were African Americans, and a few were Mexican Americans. Few had attended college, and their favorite reading material was comic books (Hersh, 1972). Like soldiers who have committed similar kinds of crimes in wars since the beginning of time, these men were just like us—ordinary people.

One of the most troubling aspects of this incident was that many of these murders were organized. The investigation identified Lieutenant William Calley as the authority primarily responsible for this organized crime. He was tried for 102 murders and convicted of 22 in 1971. Although other soldiers also stood trial, he was the only one convicted in the My Lai massacre. The My Lai massacre was a prime case of a “crime of obedience”, demonstrating how individuals can commit unjust actions directed by an authority figure. It demonstrates how extreme military drills, situational demands, and sanctioned dehumanization of victims can create a binding to obedience and submission to illegal orders (Crawford & Novak, 2014).

4.2. Stanford Prison Experiment

The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) was a 1971 experimental study designed by psychologist Philip Zimbardo from Stanford University. This showed how quickly people adopt assigned social roles, with student “guards” becoming authoritarian and “prisoners” becoming submissive/distressed during the experiment. The study was conducted in a mock prison, forcing the experiment to end in 6 days instead of 14, due to escalating abuse and psychological breakdowns, revealing situational power dynamics over the individual personalities of the subjects who were assigned to the role of guard or prisoner.

The conclusion that attempted to explain the behavior of the guards and prisoners of the SPE was based on the social roles they occupied. In addition, it was the Stanford Prison Experiment, suggesting that a negative environment, hierarchical power structures, and the dehumanization of prisoners can lead otherwise good people to commit immoral acts. Through the social psychological concepts of diffusion of responsibility and dehumanization (Haslam, 2024). It is important to define the two social psychological concepts that help explain what happened to the subjects assigned the social roles of either prisoner or guard. As discussed in the paper, it took only six days for the subjects assigned as prisoners to become dependent, helpless, and passive. Those subjects assigned as guards came to express feelings of power and intense in-group cohesion. In addition, the guards deferred all responsibility for their behavior to the experimenters and the group as a whole. This was influenced by the social psychological principle known as the diffusion of responsibility. In terms of dehumanization, the method was expressed

in this experiment. This is when the subjects assigned the social role of guards removed their individual identities and adopted anonymity by dressing in prison or police uniforms and wearing mirrored sunglasses. This, in turn, enabled them to treat the prisoners cruelly (Haslam, 2024). While the prisoners' identities were removed by ordering them to wear frock-like garments without undergarments, they were assigned numbers in place of their real names. Not unlike a real prison. The guards also used techniques of psychological maltreatment. Where they would order them to scour the latrine with their hands, deprive them of sleep, and strip them of their clothes until they were nude. The guards would then increase the in-group cohesion and power of their social roles, which would rationalize their cruel behavior towards the prisoners. Who were their colleagues at the university? While the diffusion of responsibility was practiced through the diffusion of the guards' social roles, where they behaved more as a group than as individuals. This would reduce their personal culpability for their badgering and shaming of the prisoners. They would, more often than not, defer their responsibility to the head guard and the hierarchy of the simulated prison authority. In addition, the researchers and other participants did not intervene when the guards began escalating the abusive behavior. This only gave the false impression that they had rationalized their actions, thereby diffusing personal accountability. In fact, the diffusion was the primary method of increasing the practice of violence towards prisoners by guards. This demonstrates how it may be possible for an otherwise average, ordinary person to engage in abusive behavior based on the situational environment that they are put in (Haslam & Reicher, 2012).

4.3. Abu Ghraib

In 2003, the United States military, along with the support of the "Coalition of the Willing", invaded the nation of Iraq in order to remove their President, Saddam Hussein, who ruled Iraq with an iron fist for over 24 years. Their justification was that the nation of Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, which endangered their neighbors and all nations of the world. Even though the United States and its allies never found any evidence of weapons of mass destruction, they overthrew Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party. This resulted in the detention and imprisonment of over 100,000 suspected Iraqis, who were suspected to be insurgents, terrorists, or who were simply a threat to the American occupation. Thereafter, they were sent to prisons all over Iraq, in places like the Abu Ghraib facility near Baghdad, Camp Bucca, and Camp Cropper. It was at the Abu Ghraib prison, which was constructed in the 1980s and was notorious as a place where criminals, enemies, or rivals of Saddam Hussein were tortured and executed. After the invasion and occupation, the United States used it to imprison Iraqis. This then became a topic of controversy, involving members of the U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). They were accused of committing human rights violations against the prisoners.

The Abu Ghraib prison incident involved U.S. military and CIA personnel

committing severe human rights abuses, including torture, sexual humiliation, and physical abuse, against Iraqi detainees in 2003-2004, revealed by shocking photos in 2004 that sparked global outrage and condemnation of U.S. actions during the Iraq War. It appears that the presence of an atmosphere contributed to hostility, where the inmates were dehumanized and perceived as revolting to the guards. The guards encouraged conformity among their peers and obedience to authority. This may explain the extensive degree of mistreatment towards the prisoners (Fiske et al., 2004).

4.4. The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil

It is a 2007 book by psychologist Philip Zimbardo that details his infamous 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment and explores how situational forces and social roles can lead ordinary people to commit evil acts. The book serves as a firsthand account of the experiment, analyzing the psychological mechanisms that cause good people to behave immorally. Philip Zimbardo explained the prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib in his book *The Lucifer Effect*, arguing that the abuses stemmed from the situational factors and the social context within the prison, rather than the inherent evil of the individuals involved (Zimbardo, 2007). Haslam & Reicher (2012) also explained how the “Lucifer Effect” can help explain the “Banality of Evil” (Arendt, 1963). This was a term used to describe how individual Nazis like Adolf Eichmann followed the orders of their superiors because they believed that what they were doing was right and that the orders of their superiors were right as well (Haslam & Reicher, 2012). Subsequently, people obey orders and conform heedlessly and are powerless to resist following the commands of their leaders (Haslam & Reicher, 2012).

4.5. Milgram Studies

It was psychologist Stanley Milgram (1963) who conducted some of the first laboratory experiments on obedience and authority. In the investigation, Milgram (1963) had experimenters dressed in white lab jackets direct average American men to administer electric shocks to subjects in treatment. The shocks that they inflicted were not real, but only feigned by the confederate subjects, who were unaware that they were feigning the pain of the electric shocks. They were briefed that the experiment’s topic was the correlation between punishment and learning. In the experiment, 65% of Milgram’s (1963) subjects who administered the electric shocks obeyed the experimenters’ commands to deliver shocks at dangerously high levels. Another result was that the subjects were less likely to apply electric shocks to those who received the fake shocks when they were physically adjacent to them. About one-third of the subjects continued to apply the electric shocks when they were so close that they could touch them. The subjects who responded to the authority commands of the experimenters in the laboratory coats who ordered them to administer the electric shocks were referred to as average, normal American adult males. In some situations, the subjects were allowed to decide

whether to apply the electric shocks.

Based on the results of this experiment, [Milgram \(1963\)](#) suggested that there were three reasons why people may obey or disobey authority. The first is the personal history of an individual: family traditions or educational history that support obedience or resistance to authority. The second reason, and one that is very important, is a concept Milgram described as “binding”, which includes continuous encounters that result in individuals being at ease when they obey the commands of authority. The third reason is the concept of “strain”, which involves emotional discomfort from negative experiences related to obedience to authority. Thereafter, [Milgram \(1963\)](#) concluded that “when the binding factors are more powerful than the strain of cooperating, people will do as they are told”. When the strain is greater, they are more likely to disobey.

4.6. Greek Coup d’État of 1967

In 1967, a military coup d’état took place in Greece. This led to the establishment of a military dictatorship for the next seven years (1967-1974). The coup was initiated by officers who identified themselves as the “Regime of Colonels”. The takeover of the government was due to a history of political division, communist conspiracies, and economic and social turmoil. They then put pressure on King Constantine II to approve their movement, and they initiated martial law and suspended the civil rights guaranteed by the constitution. Under the guise of their leader, Colonel George Papadopoulos, the military government orchestrated a regime that enacted unyielding repression, censored the press, and dissolved trade unions. They also severely suppressed dissent through mass arrests and systematic torture, primarily targeting political rivals, students, and communists ([Klapisis et al., 2020](#)). Some of the methods they used for torture were sleep deprivation, physical beatings, and psychological abuse to intimidate and extract information. This led to a network of state terror that persisted across all social strata and affected people of all ages, thus creating the impression of an arbitrary terror system that could affect practically everyone ([Klapisis et al., 2020](#)). This led to widespread human rights violations and international condemnation, including Greece’s withdrawal from the Council of Europe. This period remains a critical chapter in Greece’s 20th-century history, reflecting the complexities of political power, national identity, and civil rights in the face of authoritarianism ([Klapisis et al., 2020](#)).

5. What Is Torture

5.1. Torture

It is important to define torture in the modern sense. [Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros \(1986\)](#) cited an example of an international convention that convened on December 20, 1984, at the United Nations in New York City. It was open to all 159 member nations at that time. The headline of the text adopted by the General Assembly and entered into force on June 26th, 1987, was “[United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punish-](#)

ment, 1984” (CAT). It was declared and defined by the International convention that, “Torture means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising from, inherent in, or incidental to lawful sanctions” (United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984).

Since the adoption and passage of the CAT by the United Nations, over 174 nations have signed onto the convention as of April 2024. (Committee against Torture Commemorates Fortieth Anniversary of the Convention against Torture, 2024) It has been an effective tool routinely used in courts around the world in order to administer prohibitions against torture and maintain basic human rights. This makes it an important asset to both international and national legal systems, even though the application may vary by different nation-states, where courts attempt to illuminate and administer the CAT’s prohibition on torture and maltreatment of people held in legal custody. Therefore, it is used as an important litigating argument in cases involving human rights violations.

5.2. The Education of a Torturer

According to these psychologists, Janice T. Gibson and Mika Haritos-Fatouros, Milgram’s experiment only explained the short-term effects of obedience in a laboratory setting, which they believe cannot explain the reasons for protracted patterns of torture during a conflict or under the guise of a brutal political dictator. Neither do Milgram’s (1963) ideas explain undirected, cruel, and violent acts that occur when no authority orders them. In reaction to this, Gibson and Haritos-Fatouros have developed what they believed was a new, complete learning model for torture that they discovered, which could be taught, which they describe as “Teaching to Torment”. Later, Mika Haritos-Fatouros (2005) studied state-sponsored torture at Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq war and described it as a methodical procedure for choosing a prospective individual who would be taught to torment and conditioned through behavioral training. Haritos-Fatouros’s (2005) examination determines that the potential candidates are not innately sado-masochistic, but they are judiciously prepared to obey authority and follow the commands of their superiors.

In constructing this learning model for torture, these two psychologists examined the processes that were utilized to educate Greek military police and the application of torture throughout that nation’s military government from 1967 through 1974. They gathered their information from 21 former soldiers from the Military Police Corps (ESA) who, in some cases, were convicted and served time

in jail. Haritos-Fatouros (2005) also interviewed 16 in person. She learned from the meetings with the soldiers that each seemed to be living an ordinary life, and even one had graduated from a university. Five others were graduates of technical schools of higher learning, and nine finished the second year of high school, while one of them had only graduated from primary school (Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros, 1986, pp. 50-58).

It was reported by the two psychologists that during the beginning of the screening sessions for those who would be considered to be torturers, they were evaluated based on physical stamina and agreement with the beliefs of the political regime. Especially, all members of their households did not hold any communist viewpoints. This demonstrated that they held antagonistic perceptions against possible recipients of torture from the very beginning.

After they began serving as police, they were examined for other qualities. For example, a previous torturer discussed that one of the key character traits was knowing how to remain silent about what you do or have done as a torturer. Next, you express a consistent level of hostility in your daily encounters with others. Further, you show intelligence and strength. Lastly, you maintain the trust of the officers you serve with and blindly follow orders. You would also be expected to report on one of your comrades who disobeyed orders or broke the rules (Booth-Kewley et al., 2010, pp. 91-98).

In order to ensure that the individuals they train obey the authority of the ESA during initial training, which includes binding during physically violent rites of initiation. The concept of “binding” was defined by Stanley Milgram as consisting of regular encounters that cause people to experience comfort throughout the duration of obedience to authority in basic training. Those in training had to endure being cursed at, kicked, punched, and whipped. In addition, they were required to run until they could not run anymore, and they were not allowed to urinate or defecate for a prolonged period. Thereafter, they were ordered to pledge loyalty to an emblem of authority used by the regime (Figure 1: a poster of a soldier superimposed on a large phoenix rising from its own ashes). Along with kneeling on both knees and swearing to maintain obedience to their commander and to the military revolution.

Whereas the soldiers were routinely beaten and threatened by their officers, they were then reminded of how fortunate they were to be part of the ESA, which was the most powerful and supreme part of the military regime. The servicemen developed their own in-group language of nicknames that helped them develop elitist attitudes. Subsequently, they began to use nicknames for victims and for different techniques of torture. The former policemen revealed an event referred to as a “Tea Party”, where a section of military police hit a victim with their fists, and a “tea party with toast” was another version where they gave more extreme thrashings by using clubs. Later, the training recruits began referring to anyone outside their group, including those related to them, as part of the “outside world”.



Figure 1. The motto accompanying the symbol was “Ἐκ τῆς τέφρας μου ἀναγεννώμαι” (Ek tis tefras mou anagennomai), meaning “From my ashes I am reborn”.

The strain of obedience on the recruits was reduced in several ways. Strain, as described by Milgram, was “experiencing negative emotions related to painful interactions associated with obedience”. For instance, the recruits would attend daily lectures on “national ethical education”, where they were educated against communist beliefs and any other adversary of the regime. In more sophisticated indoctrination, the trainees were instructed that they would be prisoners who were “worms”, and that it was their duty to “crush” them. In one case, a former recruit revealed that, as he was a tortured prisoner later, he recalled having called the prisoner a “bloody communist”, which he had heard at a lecture. These are clear examples of the psychological phenomenon of dehumanization.

In order to further reduce any uneasiness a recruit had about torture, the military police used a carrot and stick method. The servicemen received many rewards for their service, beginning with relaxed military regulations after they completed their training. For example, they could wear civilian clothes, leave camp without permission, keep their hair long, and use military vehicles for personal use. They were also allowed a leave of absence if they succeeded in extracting a confession from a prisoner. Along with providing them with economic incentives such as a complimentary bus pass, free restaurant meals, and employment opportunities after they completed their military enlistment. These were the carrots that the torturers earned for their service to the military regime (Alcala, 2026).

The sticks they would receive, if they failed, would be continual harassment and discipline for any form of disobedience. They would also be routinely intimidated and threatened, first by their instructors, then by higher-ranking soldiers. The soldiers were also expected to spy on one another and were constantly in a state of fear (DiRosa & Goodwin, 2014).

One very important step in the training and education of a torturer is having the recruits go through the process of becoming desensitized to torture. The first

step is for the trainee to experience torture and learn to perceive it as a natural state. They would be progressively exposed to beatings and torment that would become worse throughout the process. The next step is for the recruit, who was selected to train in the coveted “Persecution Section”, which was the section that tortured prisoners who were incarcerated for political crimes. At the beginning of their training, they were assigned to maintain contact with the prisoners by serving meals to them in their cells as they watched the veteran soldiers torture them. The next part of their instruction was to be involved with beating the prisoner. Thereafter, they were taught how to apply different techniques of torture to the inmates. Later on, the officer in charge would not allow time for the recruits to reflect and process their newfound training on how to torture a prisoner. Then the commander would abruptly assign them to a position as a jail guard or to be in charge of torturing prisoners.

What the authors meant to demonstrate in this investigation was to provide examples of how people can be educated and trained to be torturers. The kind of people who are trained to be torturers are not sadistic or monsters, but by most standards, they are actually quite average human beings who are systematically trained through an educational process that increases binding and decreases strain. 1) The result of this analysis was a model for torture that Gibson and Haritos-Fatouros labeled as “Teaching to Torment”. The first step is: a) Assessing the pool of soldiers to select the best possible candidates: average, even-tempered individuals with the psychological, emotional, and, in some instances, the correct political attitude for the duty. b) Strategies to elevate binding among those chosen: Inducing rites of passage to segregate them into a novel social hierarchy with exclusive norms and virtues. An exclusive belief system and “in-group” forms of communication that differentiate them from the rest of society. Strategies that decrease the strain of not obeying an order or command: Victim blaming and dehumanizing the targets of torture so it is less distressing to hurt them. Persecution is the persistent somatic and intellectual menacing that inhibits rational reasoning and encourages innate actions necessary for inhumane brutality. Compensation for obedience and punishment for disobedience. Behavioral modeling by observing colleagues perpetuates acts of violence, and then they receive compensation. Gradual exposure to repulsive behaviors through systematic exposure makes them appear normal, despite previous moral traditions being questioned.

6. Conclusion

It seems that the most likely individuals who can be educated, convinced, or brain-washed into committing brutal acts of violence and torture inflicted on another human being may be the ever ordinary individual. It was Karl Marx who explained that men obeyed due to the nature of the political capitalist system. For the proletariat to live, they must obey their bourgeois capitalist masters. The soldiers that served under their officers during the Greek coup d'état followed their orders and were economically dependent on the capitalist rulers for their economic survival.

While Talcott Parsons proposed that obedience is defined in relation to people's roles in an advanced society, in which all individuals are bound to obedience through the roles they occupy. Parsons's interpretation of why the soldiers obey the orders of their officers is to uphold the highest values of the society after the successful coup by the Colonels during the Greek coup d'état and their allegiance to the values of the new regime. It was Max Weber who argued for the creation of an administrative apparatus to enforce the people's obedience to the ruler by imposing punishment for disobedience, i.e., levying and collecting taxes, carrying on war, and attending to other related matters. Weber then explains that rulers establish legitimacy for others to obey them through different types of legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, or rational-legal. It is apparent that the soldiers obeyed the orders of their officers due to the fact they perceived the new government of the Colonels after the Greek d'état as legitimate. The new leadership was created during a time of societal stress resulting from the coup d'état and acted as the glue binding men together in dominance relations when other principles of legitimacy, traditional or rational-legal, had been eroded or changed. Erich Fromm believed that obedience stemmed from a symbiotic relationship between a ruler and a follower. Both were dependent on each other to maintain the sadistic-masochistic relationship, where the follower obeys the orders and demands of the ruler in order to live up to the expectations of the leader. This makes the ruler the ruler. Thereafter, the soldiers obeyed the orders of their officers because they were expected to obey orders through their training and socialization about the military hierarchy. Thereby, they obeyed the orders of their officers because they were their rulers.

This paper discussed how the My Lai massacre was a "crime of obedience", showing how individual persons can conduct unjust actions directed by an authority figure. It revealed how extreme military drills, situational demands, and sanctioned dehumanization of victims can create a binding to obedience and submission to illegal orders (Crawford & Novak, 2014). It was the result of the Stanford Prison Experiment, which suggested that a negative environment, hierarchical power structures, and the dehumanization of prisoners may cause otherwise good people to commit immoral acts. This can be explained by the social psychological concepts of diffusion of responsibility and dehumanization. The Abu Ghraib prison incident during the Iraq War, where U.S. military and CIA personnel committed severe human rights abuses against Iraqi detainees, was explained by the presence of an atmosphere contributing to hostility and where the inmates were dehumanized and perceived as revolting to the guards. The guards encouraged conformity among their peers and obedience to authority. This may explain the extensive degree of mistreatment towards the prisoners (Fiske et al., 2004). Philip Zimbardo also explained that the prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib in his book *The Lucifer Effect* were the result of situational factors and the social context within the prison, rather than the inherent evil of the individuals involved (Zimbardo, 2007). While Haritos-Fatouros (2005) studied state-inflicted torture

at Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq war and explained it as an orderly system for choosing a potential individual who would be taught to torment and conditioned through behavioral training. Haritos-Fatouros (2005) suggests that the prospective contenders are not instinctively sadists, but they are distinctively trained to obey the authority and abide by the orders of their commanders.

The evidence of the possibility of the social psychological phenomenon to occur has been documented in Milgram's experiment with subjects' responses when an authority figure instructed them to administer physical punishment to other subjects in the experiment. Other examples were found during the rule of the Greek Junta between 1967 and 1974, when Greek military police were instructed to utilize torture as a prime method of extracting information from prisoners. Therefore, the recruits training to become part of the Greek military police learned how to torture and become torturers. The primary conclusion that was drawn from this data was that it may be possible that torturers have normal personalities. The idea is that obedience to an authority of violence pressures normal people to commit cruel and sadistic acts. The question here is, what kind of personality does it take to become a torturer, or to commit such abhorrent behavior? Must one be a monster or tyrannical murderer? Not so, in accordance with the variety of data and literature that was reviewed in regard to this subject in question.

It appears that Milgram's (1963) study proposed a reason for how it may be possible that a person can be recruited to obey an authority figure in the use of torture or administer pain to another human being. It is his binding and strain theory, which attempts to explain the short-term effect in this regard. While the theory of Gibson and Haritos-Fatouros, which they developed, is what they believed was a new, complete learning model for torture.

It turns out that, based on the analysis of theories from leading theorists and researchers such as Karl Marx, Talcott Parsons, Max Weber, and Eric Fromm, including the review of historical cases of obedience to authority and how some individuals inflicted torture and pain on other human beings by order from their superiors, along with laboratory studies conducted by Stanley Milgram and Phillip Zimbardo about obedience to authority, we can better understand the social psychological phenomenon of explanations of why people may be more likely to obey authority, even to the extreme where they follow orders to inflict pain and torture upon other human beings.

7. Limitations

It is clear that there is not one definitive pathway to where any individual could be brainwashed, coerced, educated, socialized, or trained to obey authority. Especially to the point where they are ordered or expected to inflict pain or psychological or physical torture upon another human being. In addition, it would be both unethical and illegal to conduct a laboratory experiment where the subjects are assigned to harm another human being.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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