



7-1975

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Recommended Citation

Armstrong, J. S. (1975). Review of Stanley Milgram's Obedience to Authority. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/marketing_papers/233

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Review of Stanley Milgram's Obedience to Authority

Abstract

A Review of the book *Obedience to Authority* by Stanley Milgram, reprinted with permission from the *Journal of Marketing*.

Disciplines

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Review of
Stanley Milgram, *Obedience To Authority*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974.
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The subject of social irresponsibility in marketing is of great current interest. However, the marketing literature is vague about just what "social irresponsibility" is, why there is a problem, and what solutions are possible.

The general impression gained from marketing literature is that, on the whole, marketing managers do a lot of good (we even speak about social responsibility to show we are positive thinkers); that unfavorable aspects are due to a small percentage of bad or unethical people; and that if companies only try a bit harder, give money to educational institutions, tell the story better, and perhaps get some new and younger marketing managers, then there really won't be any problem with social responsibility.

Milgram's book throws quite a different light on the problem of social irresponsibility. It implies that marketing managers are no worse than anyone else. They are just people and there's no reason to think of them as being cruel or sadistic. However, it also implies that the type of role in which marketing managers find themselves (to increase profit or some subgoal related to profits) is designed in such a way as to encourage managers to do things that they feel are socially irresponsible.

Milgram's book summarizes his now-famous laboratory studies of the early 1960s. The situation involves a naive subject who is placed in the position of teacher and is commanded to administer severe electric shocks to a "learner." In effect, the teacher is commanded to carry out an experiment even though great harm is done to the learner. The "teachers" proved to be obedient far beyond the expectations of experts. Indeed, a large proportion of teachers applied such severe shocks that they thought that the learner had died as a result.

The subjects did not shock the learner because they were sadistic or inhumane. Almost all of the subjects were upset at what they were doing – yet they did it. They did it because they believed they were required to do so in their role as a teacher. They

assumed that the person in authority had a worthy goal in mind and they wanted to help the authority figure. In a sense, they did harm by trying to do good. They were obedient.

The findings from the learning study and from related studies can be generalized to the marketing manager. He is commanded by those in authority to "maximize profits." He works at this even when it brings apparent harm to others. The generalization, seems especially convincing when one examines attitude studies of managers. Most managers say they commit socially irresponsible acts, that most of these acts relate to marketing, and that they do this because they are commanded to do so by superiors.

Milgram's book suggests that social irresponsibility in marketing does not involve a few bad people. In a sense; it involves good people. Rather than looking at the people, however, one should study the role in which society places people. How might the role of the marketing manager be modified so as to reduce the likelihood of socially irresponsible behavior? The book provides many possible leads. For example, it provides more information about how people are being harmed. Also, it helps make people feel responsible for the well-being of the subject.

Milgram thinks that he has written a great book. The reviewer agrees. In addition to providing a comprehensive summary and interpretation of his earlier studies, he reports on studies that he has not published previously. An excellent survey is provided of relevant studies on obedience done by others, and the work is related very nicely to various real life situations, for example, the My Lai Massacre. The various ethical issues that arose after publication of Milgram's first papers are also discussed. Finally, Milgram knows how to write.

The reviewer urges you to burn Chapter 1 from your favorite marketing text and begin anew in the study of social irresponsibility in marketing.

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