
"The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson: a Book About Human's Obedience And Conformity

Obedying authority figures can cause various problems throughout a society without the society even being aware of the problems that are present. Blind obedience, as noted by Stanley Milgram, has been a factor in helping lead to brutal events such as the Holocaust and suicide terrorism (Slater et al.). It becomes easy for a person to conform to the social norms of a society, especially when there is a person of higher power telling them to do something (Hays and Goldstein 22). Typically when everyone is conforming to what an authority figure wants, each individual becomes a bystander without realizing that they are (Thomas et al. 621). Through the traits exemplified by the townspeople in the short story "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson, it is apparent that blind obedience and conformity lead to the formation of a bystander, which restricts individuals from getting the help that they need.

Stanley Milgram was a social psychologist from America, who performed obedience experiments at Yale University in the 1960s (Brannigan 623). The idea behind his experiments was to discover why people are able to perform brutal actions upon other human beings (Slater et al.). The focus was on whether authority figures can influence people to obey their commands to inflict pain upon another human being (Slater et al.). Powerful authority figures have the ability to cause conformity as shown by more recent experiments (Hays and Goldstein 22). With this knowledge, it is noticeable that people may listen to any command given to them by a person whom has more power and authority.

In the experiments performed by Milgram, there was a person who was considered the Teacher, who would be instructed by an authority figure, Mr. Williams, to give painful shocks to the other person in the experiment called the Learner (Slater et al.). Every time that the Learner would repeat back a word-memory incorrectly, the Teacher would shock them, gradually increasing the shock intensity every time in which they were incorrect (Slater et al.). The results of his experiments proved that 65% of average people would end up giving the maximum level of shock, which was 450 volts, to the Learner regardless of their cries for help because they would not want to disobey Mr. Williams (Brannigan 624). Most people would think that the cries of the Learner would convince the Teacher to stop shocking them, yet this was not the case. This is a fact that may be difficult for many people to fathom due to the fact that if they were stuck in that situation they do not believe that their reactions would be the same.

In many ways, the results from Milgram's experiments exemplify actions performed by the townspeople in the short story "The Lottery." Mrs. Dunbar was just an average townspeople in the story, yet she never seemed to be quite disturbed by the idea of the town having a tradition in which they would stone a person to death every year. She did not hesitate to go and grab a stone to throw upon Tessie after she had lost the lottery; in fact she grabbed a stone so large that she needed to use both hands in order to have the ability to pick it up (Jackson). Mrs. Dunbar seemed eager to go stone Tessie. She was telling her husband to hurry up and ended on going ahead without him and just allowing him to catch up later (Jackson). The actions displayed by Mrs. Dunbar are explained by the ideas presented in Milgram's experiment since she is obeying the orders of an authority figures, Mr. Summers, to go stone Tessie. Two other people, Mrs. Delacroix and Mrs. Graves were discussing the fact that it feels as if the time

between the lotteries seems rather short, and how “time sure does go fast” (Jackson). These two characters also seem as if they were not concerned or disturbed by what the lottery really is. Typically when a person talks about how time is flying by, it describes an exciting or happy event, but they used it to reference the lottery. This just proves that the people in “The Lottery” are just used to the idea of it since it has been a tradition for so many years. If it had not been for an authority figure pushing for the tradition to continue, then eventually the lottery would come to an end, but everyone in the town is blindly obedient to Mr. Summers.

A confirmation of Milgram’s theories occurred in 2004 at a McDonald’s in Mt. Washington, Kentucky (HeroicImaginationTV). An anonymous caller claimed to be a police officer and stated that one of the female employees had contraband, such as some type of drug, on her and he ordered the female manager to perform a strip-search (HeroicImaginationTV). The girl in which the caller was blaming, was a morally good person who was going to graduate in the top 10 of her high school class (HeroicImaginationTV). Regardless of the fact that she was a trustworthy girl, the caller was able to convince the manager to let her fiancé take over, so that she could get back to work and he ordered the fiancé to make the girl take off her apron that was covering her nude body, and demand her to do jumping jacks (HeroicImaginationTV). After that, he was ordered to force the girl to perform a sexual act and the fiancé obeyed the order (HeroicImaginationTV). When put in a situation dealing with what was thought to be an authority figure, the manager, the employee, and the fiancé were all willing to obey the commands no matter what they were. This displays how easy it can be for an authority figure to influence both the actions and the mindset of the person in which they are commanding. These individuals would most likely not have obeyed the orders if they were aware of the fact that it was not actually a police officer on the phone.

Just as in Milgram’s experiments, some of the Teachers were more hesitant to perform the higher shocks and would not get to the maximum shock of 450 volts, some of the townspeople were more hesitant also (Slater et al.). Mr. Dunbar is a wonderful example of this in that he only had pebbles as opposed to a large stone to throw (Jackson). Just because some people were more hesitant, does not mean that they did not participate though. They were forced to participate by an authority figure. The authority figure in “The Lottery” was Mr. Summers. He was the man who was in charge of the black box as well as making sure that everyone drew a piece of paper from it (Jackson). People of lower power are more likely to conform to the norms of their society (Hays and Goldstein 23). The other townspeople did not have as much authority and power as Mr. Summers because he had been alive the longest time out of them all, and therefore he had lived to experience the largest number of lotteries in his lifetime (Jackson). Due to the fact that Mr. Summers told everyone to draw a piece of paper from the black box every year, they eventually begin to believe that this event is normal. Authority figures are able to have a large influence on the people of a community.

Blind obedience is a main idea seen in Milgram’s findings. It is the idea that individuals will not question following an authority figures rules no matter what the personal consequence is (Miller 560). They solely do what they are told to do because of the fact that they were told to do it by someone who has power. In his experiments he realized that there were lines of authority which could easily persuade ordinary people to do cruel things (Slater et al.). It is likely that many of the people whom participate in the yearly lottery do not realize that in a way they are partaking in blind obedience, yet they were. Blind obedience can be dangerous in that people may begin to follow orders given to them by dictators or other cruel authority figures (Miller 560). If that is the situation, then many bad events, such as the Holocaust and suicide terrorist attacks may

occur.

The Milgram Experiment is used to help explain the thought and reasoning for people to perform the inhumane events that take place these days, such as suicide terrorism (Slater et al.). Under certain circumstances, it becomes simpler for people to want to obey authority figures in order to achieve success (Atran 1536). This is relevant to the idea of suicide terrorism in that if the terrorists believe that the directions given for them to follow by their authority figure will help their country, then they will do it (Atran 1536). Since the tradition of the lottery had been happening for centuries, the people of the town must have believed that the lottery was a beneficial tradition for their town to have and they would continue the tradition for that reason and many others. It has been determined that extreme behaviors may be caused by different events that occur throughout history (Atran 1536). The only history of the town that the townspeople know of, is a history that consists of having the yearly lottery. Since this is the only thing that the people of the town have ever been exposed to, it does not come as a shock that they would never be opposed to participating.

Home life can factor into how the minds of terrorists work as well. In general, suicide terrorists have no signs of problematic characteristics such as being fatherless, friendless, or jobless (Atran 1537). The individuals in the lottery typically did not have any of these characteristics either. The only reason in which they participate is because of the fact that it is a social norm and that they would not fit in if they did not participate (Jackson). Even if a person was not present for the drawing, another family member would be required to draw for that individual, therefore skipping the drawing would not work to your advantage in any way. Mrs. Dunbar had to draw for her husband since he was not present and everyone in the town snitched that he was not there (Jackson).

The Holocaust is a real life example of an event in which a group of people obeyed an authority and performed harsh actions upon other humans. Nazi Germany believed that they were "racially superior" which is what led them to the conclusion that burning all of the Jewish people who they successfully placed into their concentration camps was acceptable ("Introduction to the Holocaust"). Adolf Hitler promised to bring a better life to the citizens of Germany which allowed for him to be nominated as chancellor, which was a very important authority figure ("Introduction to the Holocaust"). Being given such an immense amount of power, Hitler was able to convert innocent citizens into Nazis. During this time, the eradication of Jewish people went unquestioned by the people of Germany who joined the Nazis (Brannigan 623). In relation to this, the townspeople from "The Lottery" never thought to question why they were obeying an authority figure whom was making them to stone innocent humans to death. Regardless of the amount of time in which the lottery was occurring, not a single person had the courage to try and get it to end. It was a tradition for their town, as well as others, that had been around for many generations. The original box from the lottery had been changed out, and the wood chips were replaced for pieces of paper (Jackson). This did not affect the townspeople though. Even though the tradition had changed, everyone would still participate and not question why this event kept reoccurring.

During the time of the Holocaust, there were a large number of people who became Nazis. It was also not incredibly difficult to recruit citizens from the city of New Haven and change them into ruthless Nazis (Brannigan 623). It seemed to be this was with the townspeople of "The Lottery" as well. From a very young age, the people of the town were forced to participate in the lottery every year (Jackson). Starting at such a young age makes it easier to consider the

concept acceptable since they had basically been doing it their whole lives without any problem. Tessie Hutchinson was the woman who had “won” the lottery in the year of the story, and even her son, Davy Hutchinson, was given a few pebbles to toss onto his own mother in order to kill her (Jackson). Since the children are so young when they are experiencing the lottery for the first time, they believe that it must be all right since the rest of the town was doing the same thing. “The gradual escalation of behavior can alter how individuals perceive the problematic behavior of others, reducing the severity of moral judgements and leading individuals to hold less accountable for their actions” (Miller 561). This quote helps prove that even though it is inhumane to host the lottery, when the children grow up they will never think to question it due to the fact that they saw it over a long span of time. It is more likely for groupthink to be present if all of the members in a group are from comparable backgrounds, as well as having no exposure to outside views (“What is Groupthink?”). The townspeople would never question whether or not the lottery should take place since they had never been exposed to a town that did not participate in the tradition of having a lottery. They truly believe that keeping their tradition alive is the right thing to do.

Irving Janis was a social psychologist who created the term groupthink in 1972 (“What is Groupthink?”). Group think is the idea that groups make immoral decisions because the pressure of their peers leads to the decline of their personal judgement (“What is Groupthink?”). This is a concept that was clearly expressed in “The Lottery.” The townspeople were aware that their peers were also going to partake in the lottery and try to prevent it from happening so they just let the tradition go on. When the stoning was taking place, everyone else was throwing stones, so their personal judgement and reasoning was that it was perfectly acceptable for them to partake in the stoning as well. Irrational thinking is a result from the desire for unanimity (“What is Groupthink?”). Due to the fact that the lottery has always been agreed upon by all people in the town, their thought process is not quite as rational as a person that lived in a town which did not have the lottery. Many people would look at the basis of this story and immediately realize how inhumane the lottery actually is, but it seemed so casual to the townspeople.

The bystander effect played a role in shaping the characters in “The Lottery.” It is the idea that when people are in a large group, they will not offer help to victims of violence (Thomas et al. 621). As the number of people in a group increases, it becomes less likely for anyone to help and individual who is in need of help (Thomas et al. 621). No help is ever offered to the people who get stoned in “The Lottery.” Tessie claimed “I think that we ought to start over, I tell you it wasn’t fair. You didn’t give him time enough to choose. Everybody saw that” after her husband selected the piece of paper with the black dot on it (Jackson). The other townspeople did not stand up for her and say that the lottery was unfair most likely because it was not their family who was going to be affected by the drawing. No one in the town seems to care about the lottery until it is their family who is harmed. That is just human nature for the people of that town though. Another example of this is that Tessie kept saying that it wasn’t fair that her family was going to have to do the second drawing, and that they should redo the first drawing (Jackson). Prior to her family being selected, Tessie was grinning and laughing with other townspeople, but had a sudden mood change when she realized that it was going to affect her personally. She would have been flattered if they redrew and she would not have been upset for the family who chose the black dot then. No one wants to win the lottery, but as long as they are not the family chosen, they will conform to the ways of their town and continue to let it happen.

It has been seen by researchers that most people want somebody to step in and help, but they

just do not want to be the ones to do it (Thomas et al. 621). For example, Davy Hutchinson was forced to throw pebbles at his own mother, and instead of refusing to do so, he was most likely hoping that someone else would step up and stop the stoning. It has also been discovered that the amount of knowledge that each individual has about each other bystander can also influence their actions (Thomas et al. 623). Each person in the town knows that no one else is going to question the authority of Mr. Summers, therefore it becomes less likely for any individual in particular to want to try and stop the lottery regardless of whether they realize how wrong it is or not.

Common knowledge is another aspect of the bystander effect. This means that everyone is aware of the help that is needed by a particular individual (Thomas et al. 621). Public spaces in which everyone is watching the same event occur are prime examples of common knowledge. The entire town is present for the stoning of the lottery winner, therefore they all have common knowledge of it. Simply because everyone knows what is happening to the person who wins, does not make them any more likely to step in to help. The townspeople will continue to conform to the norms of the town in order to keep peace and order. They try to ignore the fact of the matter and stay happy throughout the entire tradition, but if they were the person being harmed, they would most likely wish for someone to help them.

The bystander effect is not only relevant to "The Lottery," but it is also relevant to real life situations that could happen every day. For instance, in a 1964 violent attack against a woman named Kitty Genovese, the police were not informed about the attack (Lurigio 783). Kitty was an innocent woman who lived in a relatively safe neighborhood (783). Winston Mosely was an upcoming rapist and killer whom violently stabbed and also sexually assaulted Kitty in the open streets (783). Kitty's neighbors were able to hear her cries for help, yet decided not to call the police or take any sort of action to help provide safety to Kitty (784). This is similar to the stoning in "The Lottery" in that all of the townspeople were aware of the pain in which Tessie was going to experience, and they also knew that the stoning would lead to her death. No one in the town seemed to be too disturbed by this fact considering they did not take any acts to help her or get the stoning to be stopped. News articles preached the fact that Kitty's neighbors were heartless for being able to shut their windows and ignore the conflict that was happening just feet away from them (785). In a way, the townspeople in "The Lottery" also turned their backs on a woman in need. In fact, what they did was worse considering they didn't only ignore Tessie's cries, but they also participated in the brutal stoning of her. The townspeople, they did not see themselves or each other as heartless. The lottery was just a tradition that was acceptable to them, and they never thought twice about the consequences of their actions. In the safe part of the city, Kitty laid there to die in the open streets where all could see, and not a soul dared to help (Lurigio 786). As for Tessie in "The Lottery," she laid in the middle of her hometown to die with nothing else to do about it (Jackson). As opposed to getting help from anyone, both Kitty and Tessie had similar situations in which people acted as bystanders and just watched as they lay there suffering.

There have been many events that have taken place in both real life and in "The Lottery" where a person is denied the help that they need. Bystanders are created by the ideas of blind obedience and conformity; even if they should help the person, the bystanders believe that it should be someone else's job to get involved in the situation. In today's society nobody wants to stand up for others. "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson is a prime example of what human nature can look like if blind obedience and conformity are present.