



Authority, Obedience and Teen/teacher "relationships"

Ok, so recently there's been a few stories of teachers sleeping with teenage pupils. Many people have been (rightly, in my opinion) outraged by the teachers' behaviour.

However @paintsnature wrote an [article in the Washington Post](#) about how she believes that automatically criminalising these relationships is a bad idea. In the piece she argues that this criminalisation may deter children reporting/discussing these "relationships". Because these children are complicit in the relationship. Her argument is that these children are consenting. Whether they can legally consent or not, the argument is that they WANT these relationships, so would not want to see the adult criminally prosecuted.

The argument about teenage girls (as is usually the case in these discussions) *wanting* relationships with older men is tired, weak and frankly infuriating. Yes all teenagers want to grow up. They are desperate to prove that they are no longer children. Teenage girls do this through sexualised behaviour, because society teaches them that being a woman = being sexually available for men. They are drawn to "older" guys, again in an effort to prove that they are grown up. When these guys are "older" by a couple of years (17 year old boys with cars are like a dream come true to 15 year old girls) then we can all turn a blind eye (well to some extent). ?e see this as a relationship between equals, because it basically is.

However, when the "relationship" involves a 14/15 year old student and her TEACHER, regardless of his age, this is NOT OK.

Let me digress a little, to explain why.

Stanley Milgram is a VERY famous Psychologist. Every undergraduate student knows his name, and is familiar with his work. It is taught in Social Psychology lectures about obedience and power; and in ethics lectures as a study that should NEVER be repeated.

Milgram was fascinated with the "I was just following orders" argument made by Nazi soldiers following WW2. (I am not about to conflate teachers and Nazis here, I promise, this is just what brought Milgram to his research). He wanted to know whether there was something about these soldiers that made them behave as they did. Were they all cruel sadists or would "normal" people behave in the same way? He designed an experiment that involved a participant "administering" electric shocks to another "participant". The shocks ranged from very mild to lethal. Before collecting any data he approached a selection of top Psychologists and asked them what proportion of people would administer the fatal shock. They all agreed less than 1 percent of "normal" people would do this.

Milgram then ran the experiment, and his results shook our understanding of obedience and authority.

The experimental set up was thus:

Participants were recruited through newspaper advertisements, all of them were male. They were brought to a building on the campus of Yale university and told that they were taking part



in an experiment on learning. They were introduced to another "participant" who was actually a confederate of the researchers. The participant was then "randomly" assigned to be the teacher. The researcher then took the teacher and the student (who was the confederate) and showed them the shock device. The student was strapped into a chair, with electrodes attached to one hand. The teacher was given a shock at the lowest level, so they knew what they were administering. The student was left strapped in the chair and the teacher was shown to another room. The teacher is accompanied in this room at all times by an experimenter in a white lab coat. This room contained the bank of switches used to deliver the shocks. These ranged from very mild, through to dangerous, and finished xxx. The teacher had to read out pairs of words, for the student to memorise. Then the teacher would read the first word from each pair, and the student had to provide the second. If the student gave an incorrect answer, the teacher was asked to give a shock. With the shocks increasing for each incorrect answer. Through the course of the experiment the student is heard yelling, complaining that they want to stop, complaining of a heart condition and then going silent. Throughout the course of the experiment, if the teacher questions delivering a shock, the experimenter provides encouragement. The experimenter had a number of stock phrases to use, the most severe of which was "the experiment requires you to continue".

So, here we have a man, a normal, everyday kinda guy. He's come in to take part in some research and he's being asked to give a stranger (who he believes to be just another normal guy) electric shocks. At first this seems fine, then the guy starts complaining, so the normal, nice guy checks with the experimenter, is told "the experiment requires you to continue". So, what does he do? How many of these nice, normal, everyday guys do you think administered that fatal shock? How many continued after the student complained of a heart condition? How many potentially killed someone, because "the experiment requires you to continue?"

65%

I'm gonna let that sink in. Because that is a really significant number. Two-thirds of people! Two-thirds!

What Milgram's research showed, is that everyday, normal people are so conditioned by authority and obedience to authority that we would kill someone, because a guy in a white coat tells us it's necessary.

So, what does this have to do with teenagers and teachers? Well, children are conditioned from a VERY young age that they should do what a teacher tells them. Teachers are only rivalled in their authority by parents. What a teacher says goes. They have immense amounts of authority.

This is why it is ALWAYS wrong for a teacher to have a "relationship" with a student. The power imbalance is too great. The student will almost never feel comfortable saying no. And when they do, it is all too easy for a teacher to make that "no" go away.

For a teacher to have a relationship with a student is a massive abuse of power. And an even bigger abuse of trust. And this doesn't just go for teenagers and teachers, relationships between university lecturers and their (adult and of consenting age) students are frowned upon; for the



very same reason.

It doesn't matter how much of a crush a teenager has. How much "seduction" and "complicity" and "consent" there is, because it is all an illusion. The child has no real power in the situation. They have no real choice. They've been trained to obey, and so obey they will.

It is the teacher's job, their adult responsibility to safeguard vulnerable young women and men from abuse. It is their job to make sure that these teenagers desires to be grown up, to be sexual and mature are not taken advantage of. There is no excuse for using a teenagers vulnerability for your own sexual gratification. NONE.

For more info on Milgram check out the [Wikipedia page](#).