

The Milgram Obedience Experiment  
The Perils of Obedience

By Kendra Cherry, About.com Guide  
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"The social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson: often it is not so much the kind of  
person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will  
act." –Stanley Milgram, 1974

If a person in a position of authority ordered you to deliver a 400-volt electrical shock to another

person, would you follow orders? Most people would answer this question with an adamant no, but Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted a series of obedience experiments during the 1960s that demonstrated surprising results. These experiments offer a powerful and disturbing look into the power of authority and obedience.

### Introduction to the Milgram Experiment

Milgram started his experiments in 1961, shortly after the trial of the World War II criminal Adolph Eichmann had begun. Eichmann's defense that he was simply following instructions when he ordered the deaths of millions of Jews roused Milgram's interest. In his 1974 book *Obedience to Authority*, Milgram posed the question, "Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?"

### Method Used in the Milgram Experiment

The participants in the Milgram experiment were 40 men recruited using newspaper ads. In exchange for their participation, each person was paid \$4.50.

Milgram developed an intimidating shock generator, with shock levels starting at 30 volts and increasing in 15-volt increments all the way up to 450 volts. The many switches were labeled with terms including "slight shock," "moderate shock" and "danger: severe shock." The final two switches were labeled simply with an ominous "XXX."

Each participant took the role of a "teacher" who would then deliver a shock to the "student" every time an incorrect answer was produced. While the participant believed that he was delivering real shocks to the student, the student was actually a confederate in the experiment who was simply pretending to be shocked.

As the experiment progressed, the participant would hear the learner plead to be released or even complain about a heart condition. Once the 300-volt level had been reached, the learner banged on the wall and demanded to be released. Beyond this point, the learner became completely silent and refused to answer any more questions. The experimenter then instructed the participant to treat this silence as an incorrect response and deliver a further shock.

Most participants asked the experimenter whether they should continue. The experimenter issued a series of commands to prod the participant along:

"Please continue."

"The experiment requires that you continue."

"It is absolutely essential that you continue."

"You have no other choice, you must go on."

### Results of the Milgram Experiment

The level of shock that the participant was willing to deliver was used as the measure of obedience. How far do you think that most participants were willing to go? When Milgram posed this question to a group of Yale University students, it was predicted that no more than 3 out of

100 participants would deliver the maximum shock. In reality, 65% of the participants in Milgram's study delivered the maximum shocks.

Of the 40 participants in the study, 26 delivered the maximum shocks while 14 stopped before reaching the highest levels. It is important to note that many of the subjects became extremely agitated, distraught and angry at the experimenter. Yet they continued to follow orders all the way to the end.

Because of concerns about the amount of anxiety experienced by many of the participants, all subjects were debriefed at the end of the experiment to explain the procedures and the use of deception. However, many critics of the study have argued that many of the participants were still confused about the exact nature of the experiment. Milgram later surveyed the participants and found that 84% were glad to have participated, while only 1% regretted their involvement.

#### Discussion of the Milgram Experiment

While Milgram's research raised serious ethical questions about the use of human subjects in psychology experiments, his results have also been consistently replicated in further experiments. Thomas Blass (1999) reviewed further research on obedience and found that Milgram's findings hold true in other experiments.

Why did so many of the participants in this experiment perform a seemingly sadistic act on the instruction of an authority figure? According to Milgram, there are a number of situational factors that can explain such high levels of obedience:

- The physical presence of an authority figure dramatically increased compliance.

- The fact that the study was sponsored by Yale (a trusted and authoritative academic institution) led many participants to believe that the experiment must be safe.

- The selection of teacher and learner status seemed random.

- Participants assumed that the experimenter was a competent expert.

- The shocks were said to be painful, not dangerous.

Later experiments conducted by Milgram indicated that the presence of rebellious peers dramatically reduced obedience levels. When other people refused to go along with the experimenters orders, 36 out of 40 participants refused to deliver the maximum shocks.

"Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority" (Milgram, 1974).

Milgram's experiment has become a classic in psychology, demonstrating the dangers of obedience. While this experiment suggests that situational variables have a stronger sway than personality factors in determining obedience, other psychologists argue that obedience is heavily

influenced by both external and internal factors, such as personal beliefs and overall temperament.

Suggested Reading:

Milgram, S. (1973). The perils of obedience. Harper's Magazine, 62-77.

Milgram, S. (1974). Obedience to authority: An experimental view. Harpercollins Classic Studies in Psychology

Harlow's Wire Mother Experiment

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