

The behavioural study of obedience – Behavioural study of obedience.

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Milgram, S. (1963)

Introduction / Background

Social psychology focuses on the study of behaviour within a social context, such as family, institutions, and political systems. Social behaviour may involve activity within a group, or between groups, and the Milgram study looks at the influence people have on each other.

Obedience is often linked with desirable behaviour, but Milgram starts his article with reference to the behaviour of German SS officers in the Second World War. He points out that the officers displayed inhumanity in issuing orders but that those who obeyed were equally guilty.

The Research Questions:

- Why do people obey authority?
- What are the conditions that foster obedient behaviour?
- What are the conditions that foster independent behaviour?

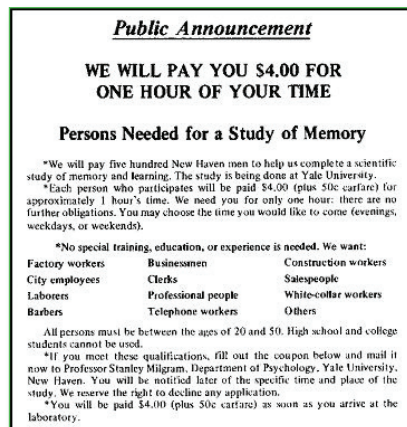
Hypothesis: That American men will not follow an order, if by doing so they cause harm to another person.

Milgram set out to test this hypothesis in a number of extraordinary studies including this one.

The Experiment

Method: A laboratory experiment having NO independent variable (IV).

Participants: Milgram advertised, using a newspaper and direct mailing, for 500 hundred New Haven men to take part in a scientific study of memory and learning at **Yale University**. Everyone was paid \$4 simply for coming to the laboratory. The payment did not depend on remaining in the study. The final group of participants consisted of 40 men aged between 20 and 50, who came from various occupational backgrounds. There were two further participants: the part of the experimenter was played by a biology teacher, and the part of the learner or victim was a 47-year-old accountant (Mr Wallace). Both of these men were accomplices of Milgram.

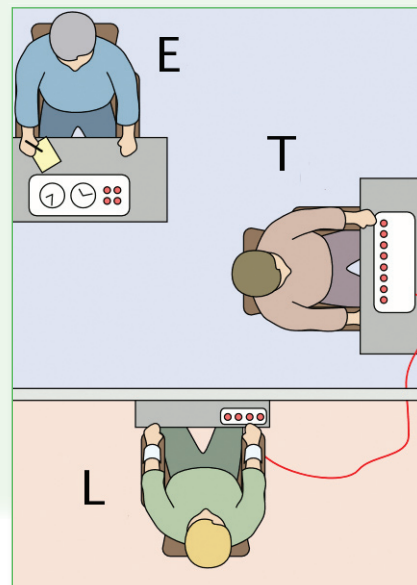


Procedure

The participants were deceived about the true purpose of the research. When each participant arrived, they were told that the purpose of the experiment was to see how punishment affected learning. The 'naïve' participant was introduced to the other participant and both were asked to draw lots to see who would play the part of the teacher and who would be the learner. The confederate always got the part of the learner. The learner was strapped into a chair in the next door room and an electrode attached to his wrist. The learner was given the following task: He would hear a list of word pairs and later be given one word and a choice of four possible partners. He must identify which of the four was correct. Every time the learner got a question wrong, he would receive an electric shock administered by the teacher and the shocks increased in intensity with each mistake. The teacher did this using a shock generator, a machine with switches labelled for each level of electric shock.

The 'teacher' was given a sample shock of 45 volts to demonstrate that the machine was working, though in fact that was the only time it did work. For the rest of the experiment the learner only pretended to be receiving shocks.

The experiment began. The learner gave mainly wrong answers and for each of these the teacher gave him an electric shock which was received in silence until they got to shock level 300. At this point the learner pounded on the wall and then gave no response to the next question. When the 'teacher' turned to the experimenter for guidance, he was given the standard instruction, 'an absence of response should be treated as a wrong answer'. After the



315 volt shock the learner pounded on the wall again but after that there was no further response from the learner – no answers and no pounding on the wall. If the teacher felt unsure about continuing, the experimenter used a sequence of 4 standard 'prods', which were repeated if necessary:

- Prod 1: Please continue.
- Prod 2: The experiment requires that you continue.
- Prod 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.
- Prod 4: You have no other choice, you must go on.

If the teacher asked whether the learner might suffer permanent physical injury, the experimenter said: "Although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent tissue damage, so please go on."

Results

Over half of the participants (26/40 or 65%) went all the way with the electric shocks.

Only nine of the participants (22.5%) stopped at 315 volts.

Other findings

The participants showed signs of extreme tension: most of them were seen to 'sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips' and quite a few laughed nervously and smiled in a bizarre fashion. Three even had 'full-blown seizures'. At the end of the experiment all participants were debriefed. They were reunited with the victim, assured there had been no shocks, and told that their behaviour was entirely normal and that their feelings of conflict were shared by the others. They were also sent a follow-up questionnaire, which showed that 84% felt glad to have participated, and 74% felt they had learned something of personal importance. Only one person reported that he felt sorry to have participated.

Prior to the experiment Milgram had conducted a survey asking a range of people to predict the participants' behaviour. The responses estimated that no more than 1% of the participants would continue to 450 volts. People who observed the experiment through one-way mirrors also expressed astonishment at the participants' behaviour.

Conclusion

Milgram proposed the concept of an **agentic state** to explain this high level of obedience, in which, in this situation, the participant acts as the 'tool' of the experimenter, passing the responsibility for the consequences of his actions to the experimenter... "I was only following orders".



Dr. Stanley Milgram