

## OBEY AT ANY COST

Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioral study of obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 67*, 371-378.

If someone in a position of authority ordered you to deliver an electrical shock of 350 volts to another person because the other person answered a question incorrectly, would you obey? Neither would I. If you met someone who was willing to do such a thing, you would probably think of him or her as cruel and sadistic. This study by Stanley Milgram of Yale University set out to examine the idea of obedience and produced some shocking and disturbing findings.

Milgram's research on obedience may be the most famous and widely recognized in all of psychology's history. It is included in every general psychology text and every social psychology text. If you talk to students of psychology, more of them are familiar with this study than with any other. Out of this study came a book by Milgram (1974) on the psychology of obedience and a film about the research itself that is widely shown in college and university classes. Not only is this experiment referred to in discussions of obedience, but it has also been highly influential in issues of research methodology and the ethics of using human subjects in psychological research.

Milgram's idea for this project grew out of his desire to investigate scientifically how people could be capable of carrying out great harm to others simply because they were ordered to do so. Milgram was referring specifically to the hideous atrocities committed on command during World War II, and also, more generally, to the inhumanity that has been perpetrated throughout history by people following the orders of others. It appeared to Milgram that in some situations, the tendency to obey is so deeply ingrained and powerful that it cancels out a person's ability to behave morally, ethically, or even sympathetically.

When behavioral scientists decide to study some complex aspect of human behavior, their first step is to gain control over the behavioral situation so that they can approach it scientifically. This can often be the greatest challenge to a researcher, since many events in the real world are difficult to re-create in a laboratory setting. So Milgram's problem was how to cause one person to order another person to physically injure a third person without anyone actually getting injured.

### THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

Milgram's primary theoretical basis for this study was that humans have a tendency to obey other people who are in a position of authority over them, even if, in obeying, they violate their own codes of moral and ethical behavior. He believed that, for example, many individuals who would never intentionally

cause someone physical harm would inflict pain on a victim if ordered to do so by a person perceived to be a powerful authority figure.

### METHOD

Probably the most ingenious portion of this study is the technique that was developed to test the power of obedience in the laboratory. Milgram designed a rather scary-looking shock generator: a large electronic device with 30 toggle switches labeled with voltage levels starting at 30 volts and increasing by 15-volt intervals up to 450 volts. These switches were labeled in groups such as "slight shock," "moderate shock," and "danger: severe shock." The idea was that a subject could be ordered to administer electric shocks at increasing levels to another person. Please note, before you conclude that Milgram was truly sadistic himself, that this was a very realistic-looking simulated shock generator, and no one ever actually received any painful shocks.

The subjects for this study were 40 males between the ages of 20 and 50. There were 15 skilled or unskilled workers, 16 white-collar sales-or businessmen, and nine professional men. They were recruited through newspaper ads and direct-mail solicitation asking for subjects to be paid participants in a study about memory and learning at Yale University. Each subject participated in the study individually. In order to obtain an adequate number of subjects, each was paid \$4.50 (remember, these are 1963 dollars). All subjects were clearly told that this payment was simply for coming to the laboratory, and it was theirs to keep no matter what happened after they arrived. This was to ensure that subjects did not behave in certain ways because they were fearful of not being paid.

In addition to the subjects, there were two other key participants: a confederate in the experiment (a 47-year-old accountant) posing as another subject, and an "actor" (dressed in a gray lab coat, looking very official) playing the part of the experimenter.

As a participant arrived at the social interaction laboratory at Yale, he was seated next to another "subject" (the confederate). Obviously, the true purpose of the experiment could not be revealed to subjects, since this would completely alter their behavior. Therefore, a "cover story" was given by the experimenter, who explained to the subjects that this was a study on the effect of punishment on learning. The subjects then drew pieces of paper out of a hat to determine who would be the teacher and who would be the learner. This drawing was rigged so that the true subject always became the teacher and the accomplice was always the learner. Keep in mind that the "learner" was a confederate in the experiment, as was the person playing the part of the "experimenter."

The learner was then taken into the next room and was, with the subject watching, strapped to a chair and wired up with electrodes (complete with electrode paste to "avoid any blisters or burns") connected to the shock generator in the adjoining room. The learner, although his arms were

strapped down, was able to reach four buttons marked a, b, c, and d, in order to answer questions posed by the teacher from the next room.

The learning task was thoroughly explained to the teacher and the learner. Briefly, it involved the learner memorizing connections between various pairs of words. It was a rather lengthy list and not an easy memory task. The teacher-subject would read the list of word pairs and then test the learner's memory of them. The teacher was instructed by the experimenter to administer an electric shock each time the learner responded incorrectly. Most important, for each incorrect response, the teacher was to move up one level of shock on the generator. All of this was simulated so realistically that no subject suspected that the shocks were not really being delivered.

The learner-confederate's responses were preprogrammed to be correct or incorrect in the same sequence for all the subjects. Furthermore, as the amount of voltage increased with incorrect responses, the learner began to shout his discomfort from the other room (in prearranged, prerecorded phrases, including the fact that his heart was bothering him), and at the 300-volt level, he pounded on the wall and demanded to be let out. After 300 volts he became completely silent and refused to answer any more questions. The teacher was instructed to treat this lack of a response as an incorrect response and to continue the procedure.

Most of the subjects would turn to the experimenter at some point for guidance on whether to continue the shocks. When this happened, the experimenter ordered the subject to continue, in a series of commands increasing in severity as more prodding was necessary:

Command 1: Please continue.

Command 2: The experiment requires that you continue.

Command 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.

Command 4: You have no other choice, you must go on.

A measure of obedience was obtained simply by recording the level of shock at which each subject refused to continue. Since there were 30 switches on the generator, each subject could receive a score of 0 to 30. Subjects who went all the way to the top of the scale were referred to as "obedient subjects" and those who broke off at any lower point were termed "defiant subjects."

## RESULTS

Would the subjects obey the commands of this experimenter? How high on the voltage scale did they go? What would you predict? Think of yourself, your friends, people in general. What percentage do you think would deliver shocks all the way through the 30 levels; all the way up to 450 volts—"danger: severe shock"? Well, before discussing the actual results of the study, Milgram asked a group of Yale University seniors, all psychology majors, as well

as various colleagues to make such a prediction. The estimates ranged from 0 percent to 3 percent, with an average estimate of 1.2 percent. That is, no more than three people out of a hundred were predicted to deliver the maximum shock.

Table 1 summarizes the shocking results. Upon command of the experimenter, every subject continued at least to the 300-volt level, which was

**TABLE 1** Level of Shock Delivered by Subjects

NUMBER OF VOLTS TO BE DELIVERED	NUMBER WHO REFUSED TO CONTINUE AT THIS LEVEL
Slight shock	
15	0
30	0
45	0
60	0
Moderate shock	
75	0
90	0
105	0
120	0
Strong shock	
135	0
150	0
165	0
180	0
Very strong shock	
195	0
210	0
225	0
240	0
Intense shock	
255	0
270	0
285	0
300	5
Extreme intensity shock	
315	4
330	2
345	1
360	1
Danger: severe shock	
375	1
390	0
405	0
420	0
XXX---	
435	0
450	26

(from Milgram, 1963, p. 376)

when the confederate banged on the wall to be let out and stopped answering. But most surprising is the number of subjects who obeyed orders to continue all the way to the top of the scale.

Although 14 subjects defied orders and broke off before reaching the maximum voltage, 26 of the 40 subjects, or 65 percent, followed the experimenter's orders and proceeded to the top of the shock scale. This is not to say that the subjects were calm or happy about what they were doing. Many exhibited signs of extreme stress and concern for the man receiving the shocks, and even became angry at the experimenter. Yet they obeyed.

There was concern that some of the subjects might suffer psychological distress from having gone through the ordeal of shocking another person, especially when the learner had ceased to respond for the last third of the experiment. To help alleviate this anxiety, after the subjects finished the experiment, they received a full explanation (called a debriefing) of the true purpose of the study and of all the procedures, including the deception that had been employed. In addition, the subjects were interviewed as to their feelings and thoughts during the procedure and the confederate "learner" was brought in for a friendly reconciliation with each subject.

## DISCUSSION

Milgram's discussion of his findings focused on two main points. The first was the surprising strength of the subjects' tendency to obey. These were average, normal people who agreed to participate in an experiment about learning, not sadistic, cruel individuals in any way. Milgram points out that from childhood these subjects had learned that it is immoral to hurt others against their will. So, why did they do so? The experimenter was a person in a position of authority, but if you think about it, how much authority did he really have? He had no power to enforce his orders, and subjects would lose nothing by refusing to follow orders. Clearly the situation carried a force of its own that somehow made obedience significantly greater than was expected.

The second key observation made during the course of this study was extreme tension and anxiety manifested by the subjects as they obeyed the experimenter's commands. Again, it might be expected that such discomfort could be relieved simply by refusing to go on, and yet this is not what happened. Milgram quotes one observer (who watched a subject through a one-way mirror):

I observe a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse . . . At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered, "Oh, God! Let's stop it." And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter and obeyed to the end. (p. 377)

Milgram listed several points at the end of the article to attempt to explain why this particular situation produced such a high degree of obedience. In summary, from the point of view of the subject, his main points were that (1) if it's being sponsored by Yale, it must be in good hands, and who am I to question such a great institution; (2) the goals of the experiment appear to be important, and therefore, since I volunteered, I'll do my part to assist in the realization of those goals; (3) the learner, after all, also voluntarily came here and he has an obligation to the project too; (4) hey, it was just by chance that I'm the teacher and he's the learner—we drew lots and it could have just as easily been the other way around; (5) they're paying me for this, I'd better do my job; (6) I don't know all that much about the rights of a psychologist and his subjects, so I will yield to his discretion on this; and (7) they told us both that the shocks are painful, but not dangerous.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDINGS

Milgram's findings have held up quite well in the nearly 30 years since this article was published. Milgram himself repeated the procedure on similar subjects outside of the Yale setting, on unpaid college student volunteers, and on women subjects, and he found similar results each time.

In addition, he expanded further on his findings in this study by conducting a series of related experiments designed to reveal the conditions that promote or limit obedience (see Milgram, 1974). He found that the physical, and therefore emotional, distance of the victim from the teacher altered the amount of obedience. The highest level of obedience (93 percent going to the top of the voltage scale) occurred when the learner was in another room and could not be seen or heard. When the learner was in the same room with the subject and the subject was required to force the learner's hand onto a shock plate the rate of obedience dropped to 30 percent.

Milgram also discovered that the physical distance of the authority figure to the subject also influenced obedience. The closer the experimenter, the greater the obedience. In one condition, the experimenter was out of the room and telephoned his commands to the subject. In this case obedience fell to only 21 percent.

Finally, on a more positive note, when subjects were allowed to punish the learner by using any level of shock they wished, no one ever pressed any switch higher than No. 2, or 45 volts.

## CRITICISMS

While Milgram's research has been extremely influential in our understanding of obedience, it has also had far-reaching effects in the area of the ethical treatment of human subjects. Even though no one ever received any shocks, how do you suppose you would feel, knowing you had been willing to shock someone (possibly to death) simply because a person in a lab coat told you to? Critics of Milgram's methods (e.g., Baumrind, 1964; Miller,

1986) claim that unacceptable levels of stress were created in the subjects during the experimental sessions. Furthermore, it has been argued that the potential for lasting effects existed. When the deception is revealed to subjects at the end of their ordeal, they may feel used, embarrassed, and possibly distrustful of psychologists or legitimate authority figures in their future lives.

Another line of criticism focused on the validity of Milgram's findings. The basis for this criticism was that since the subjects had a trusting and rather dependent relationship with the experimenter, and the laboratory was an unfamiliar setting, obedience found there did not represent obedience in real life. Therefore, critics claim, the results of Milgram's studies were not only invalid, but because of this poor validity the treatment his subjects were exposed to could not be justified.

Milgram responded to criticisms by surveying subjects after they had participated. He found that 84 percent of his participants were glad to have participated, and only about 1 percent regretted the experience. In addition, a psychiatrist interviewed 40 of the subjects who were judged to have been the most uncomfortable in the laboratory and concluded that none had suffered any long-term effects. As to the criticism that his laboratory findings did not reflect real life, Milgram said, "A person who comes to the laboratory is an active, choosing adult, capable of accepting or rejecting the prescriptions for action addressed to him" (Milgram, 1964, p. 852).

The Milgram studies reported here have been a focal point in the ongoing debate over experimental ethics involving human subjects. It is, in fact, arguable whether this research has been more influential in the area of social psychology and obedience or in policy formation on the ethical treatment of human subjects in psychological research.

### RECENT APPLICATIONS

The breadth of influence that Milgram's obedience project continues to exert on current research can best be appreciated through a brief annotated selection of recent studies that have been primarily motivated by Milgram's early methods and findings. As has been the case in every year since the early 1960s when Milgram carried out his studies, these studies are divided between attempts to refine and elaborate on people's tendency to obey authority figures, and the omnipresent debate about the ethics of using deception in research involving human subjects.

Two articles examined the use of deception in psychological experiments from an historical perspective. One of these articles focused on the level of concern with ethical issues social science researchers displayed in their published research reports (McGaha & Korn, 1995). These authors found in reviewing studies in psychology-related journals that, historically, interest in research ethics was fairly low until the mid-1970s when there began a significant increase in the number of articles related to ethical concerns. They contend that this change is rooted in the "emergence of

ethical interest in terms of the social climate of concern for human rights in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1973 revision of the American Psychological Association's ethical principles (see this book's preface for a discussion and a more recent update of these principles), and the development of federal regulation of research with human participants" (p. 147; parenthetical added). Another interesting view of this ethical discussion can be found in a recent article by Herrera (1997). Herrera writes that, historically, the use of deception in psychology experiments has often been framed as a necessary part of certain studies. However, he contends that in reality, such deception may have been due more to a conscious choice made by researchers based on the value they placed on people versus scientific inquiry. He goes on to offer the following provocative suggestion: "Commentators frequently cite Stanley Milgram's work in the 1960s as a harbinger of changed attitudes towards deception, and suggests that today's psychologists abide by more enlightened ethical practices. *It is difficult to find evidence to support this portrayal*" (p. 23; emphasis added).

So, what, if anything, should be done to protect subjects from irresponsible deceptive practices in psychological research while at the same time allowing for some deception when absolutely necessary for scientific advancement? A third study (Wendler, 1996) seeks to answer this question by proposing that subjects in studies involving deception be given an increased level of "informed consent" (see the discussion of this concept in the preface to this book). This would mean that before you agree to be a subject in an experiment using deception, you are informed of the study's intention to use deception. "This 'second order consent' approach to acceptable deception," claims Wendler, "Represents our best chance for reconciling respect for subjects with the occasional scientific need for deceptive research" (p. 87).

Recent attempts to refine and enhance Milgram's findings can be best seen in a special issue of the *Journal of Social Issues*, that was devoted to articles relating to Milgram's obedience studies. Examples of the range of articles published in this special issue include a study by John Darley (whose research is profiled in the previous reading) comparing "constructive" and "destructive" obedience (Milgram's study represented the latter); a cross-cultural examination of harmful obedience in the workplace (called "crimes of obedience") comparing subjects in Washington D.C., Moscow, and Tokyo; and a fascinating study showing how obedience can produce racial discrimination in hiring practices (Brief, Buttram, Elliot, Reizenstein, & McCline, 1995; Darley, 1995; Hamilton & Sanders, 1995).

Finally, one study actually returned us to Milgram's starting point: The Holocaust (Blass, 1993). Blass takes the perspective that Milgram's influential research may have left the impression that the situational pressures completely outweigh personality factors in determining obedience, and that this impression is not wholly accurate. Blass proposes that dispositional variables such as personality characteristics and enduring belief systems can also predict obedience. He suggests that a more accurate picture

of the obedience-to-authority process must consider the interaction of external *and* internal influences.

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