

# The Milgram Experiment

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Saul McLeod, published 2007

One of the most famous studies of obedience in psychology was carried out by Stanley Milgram, a psychologist at Yale University. He conducted an experiment focusing on the conflict between obedience to authority and personal conscience.

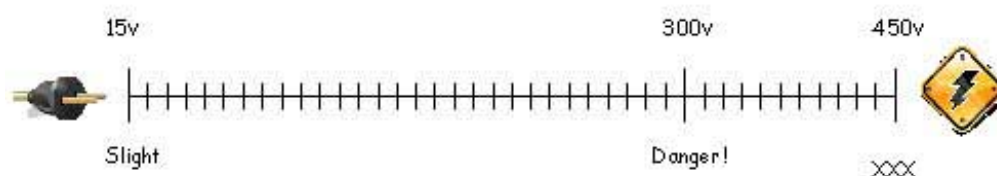
Milgram (1963) examined justifications for acts of genocide offered by those accused at the World War II, Nuremberg War Criminal trials. Their defense often was based on "obedience" - that they were just following orders from their superiors.

The experiments began in July 1961, a year after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Milgram devised the experiment to answer the question:

Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?" (Milgram, 1974).

Milgram (1963) wanted to investigate whether Germans were particularly obedient to authority figures as this was a common explanation for the Nazi killings in World War II. Milgram selected participants for his experiment by newspaper advertising for male participants to take part in a study of learning at Yale University.

The procedure was that the participant was paired with another person and they drew lots to find out who would be the 'learner' and who would be the 'teacher.' The draw was fixed so that the participant was always the teacher, and the learner was one of Milgram's confederates (pretending to be a real participant).



The learner (a confederate called Mr. Wallace) was taken into a room and had electrodes attached to his arms, and the teacher and researcher went into a room next door that contained an electric shock generator and a row of switches marked from 15 volts (Slight Shock) to 375 volts (Danger: Severe Shock) to 450 volts (XXX).

## Milgram's Experiment

## Aim:

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Milgram (1963) was interested in researching how far people would go in obeying an instruction if it involved harming another person.

Stanley Milgram was interested in how easily ordinary people could be influenced into committing atrocities, for example, Germans in WWII.

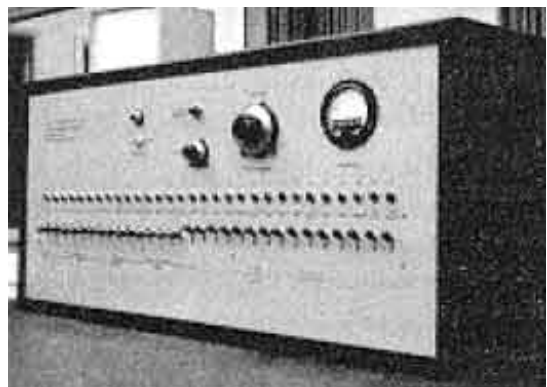
## Procedure:

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Volunteers were recruited for a lab experiment investigating “learning” (re: ethics: deception). Participants were 40 males, aged between 20 and 50, whose jobs ranged from unskilled to professional, from the New Haven area. They were paid \$4.50 for just turning up.

At the beginning of the experiment, they were introduced to another participant, who was a confederate of the experimenter (Milgram).

They drew straws to determine their roles – learner or teacher – although this was fixed and the confederate was always the learner. There was also an “experimenter” dressed in a gray lab coat, played by an actor (not Milgram).



Two rooms in the Yale Interaction Laboratory were used - one for the learner (with an electric chair) and another for the teacher and experimenter with an electric shock generator.

The “learner” (Mr. Wallace) was strapped to a chair with electrodes. After he has learned a list of word pairs given him to learn, the “teacher” tests him by naming a word and asking the learner to recall its partner/pair from a list of four possible choices.



The teacher is told to administer an electric shock every time the learner makes a mistake, increasing the level of shock each time. There were 30 switches on the shock generator marked from 15 volts (slight shock) to 450 (danger – severe shock).

The learner gave mainly wrong answers (on purpose), and for each of these, the teacher gave him an electric shock. When the teacher refused to administer a shock, the experimenter was to give a series of orders/prods to ensure they continued.

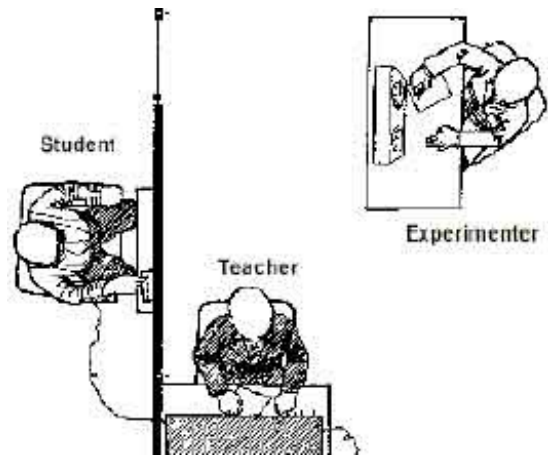
There were four prods and if one was not obeyed, then the experimenter (Mr. Williams) read out the next prod, and so on.

**Prod 1:** Please continue.

**Prod 2:** The experiment requires you to continue.

**Prod 3:** It is absolutely essential that you continue.

**Prod 4:** You have no other choice but to continue.



## Results:

65% (two-thirds) of participants (i.e., teachers) continued to the highest level of 450 volts. All the participants continued to 300 volts.

Milgram did more than one experiment – he carried out 18 variations of his study. All he did was alter the situation (IV) to see how this affected obedience (DV).

## Conclusion:

Ordinary people are likely to follow orders given by an authority figure, even to the extent of killing an innocent human being. Obedience to authority is ingrained in us all from the way we are brought up.

People tend to obey orders from other people if they recognize their authority as morally right and/or legally based. This response to legitimate authority is learned in a variety of situations, for example in the family, school, and workplace.

Milgram summed up in the article “The Perils of Obedience” (Milgram 1974), writing:

'The legal and philosophic aspects of obedience are of enormous import, but they say very little about how most people behave in concrete situations.

I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist.

Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' [participants'] strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' [participants'] ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not.

The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation.'

## Milgrams' Agency Theory

Milgram (1974) explained the behavior of his participants by suggesting that people have two states of behavior when they are in a social situation:

- The **autonomous state** – people direct their own actions, and they take responsibility for the results of those actions.
- The **agentic state** – people allow others to direct their actions and then pass off the responsibility for the consequences to the person giving the orders. In other words, they act as agents for another person's will.

Milgram suggested that two things must be in place for a person to enter the agentic state:

1. The person giving the orders is perceived as being qualified to direct other people's behavior. That is, they are seen as legitimate.
2. The person being ordered about is able to believe that the authority will accept responsibility for what happens.

Agency theory says that people will obey an authority when they believe that the authority will take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This is supported by some aspects of Milgram's evidence.

For example, when participants were reminded that they had responsibility for their own actions, almost none of them were prepared to obey. In contrast, many participants who were refusing to go on did so if the experimenter said that he would take responsibility.

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## Milgram Experiment Variations

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The Milgram experiment was carried out many times whereby Milgram (1965) varied the basic procedure (changed the IV). By doing this Milgram could identify which factors affected obedience (the DV).

Obedience was measured by how many participants shocked to the maximum 450 volts (65% in the original study). In total 636 participants have been tested in 18 different variation studies.

### Uniform

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In the original baseline study – the experimenter wore a gray lab coat as a symbol of his authority (a kind of uniform). Milgram carried out a variation in which the experimenter was called away because of a phone call right at the start of the procedure.

The role of the experimenter was then taken over by an 'ordinary member of the public' ( a confederate) in everyday clothes rather than a lab coat. The obedience level dropped to 20%.

### Change of Location

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The experiment was moved to a set of run down offices rather than the impressive Yale University. Obedience dropped to 47.5%. This suggests that status of location effects obedience.

## Two Teacher Condition

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When participants could instruct an assistant (confederate) to press the switches, 92.5% shocked to the maximum 450 volts. When there is less personal responsibility obedience increases. This relates to Milgram's Agency Theory.

## Touch Proximity Condition

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The teacher had to force the learner's hand down onto a shock plate when they refuse to participate after 150 volts. Obedience fell to 30%.

The participant is no longer buffered / protected from seeing the consequences of their actions.

## Social Support Condition

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Two other participants (confederates) were also teachers but refused to obey. Confederate 1 stopped at 150 volts, and confederate 2 stopped at 210 volts.

The presence of others who are seen to disobey the authority figure reduces the level of obedience to 10%.

## Absent Experimenter Condition

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It is easier to resist the orders from an authority figure if they are not close by. When the experimenter instructed and prompted the teacher by telephone from another room, obedience fell to 20.5%.

Many participants cheated and missed out shocks or gave less voltage than ordered to by the experimenter. The proximity of authority figure affects obedience.

## Critical Evaluation

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The Milgram studies were conducted in laboratory type conditions, and we must ask if this tells us much about real-life situations. We obey in a variety of real-life situations that are far more subtle than instructions to give people electric shocks, and it would be interesting to see what factors operate in everyday obedience. The sort of situation Milgram investigated would be more suited to a military context.

Orne & Holland (1968) accused Milgram's study of lacking 'experimental realism,' i.e., 'participants might not have believed the experimental set-up they found themselves in and knew the learner wasn't receiving electric shocks.'

**Milgram's sample was biased:**

- The participants in Milgram's study were all male. Do the findings transfer to females?
- Milgram's study cannot be seen as representative of the American population as his sample was self-selected. This is because they became participants only by electing to respond to a newspaper advertisement (selecting themselves). They may also have a typical "volunteer personality" – not all the newspaper readers responded so perhaps it takes this personality type to do so.

Yet a total of 636 participants were tested in 18 separate experiments across the New Haven area, which was seen as being reasonably representative of a typical American town.

Milgram's findings have been replicated in a variety of cultures and most lead to the same conclusions as Milgram's original study and in some cases see higher obedience rates.

However, Smith & Bond (1998) point out that with the exception of Jordan (Shanab & Yahya, 1978), the majority of these studies have been conducted in industrialized Western cultures and we should be cautious before we conclude that a universal trait of social behavior has been identified.

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## Ethical Issues

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- **Deception** – the participants actually believed they were shocking a real person and were unaware the learner was a confederate of Milgram's.

However, Milgram argued that "illusion is used when necessary in order to set the stage for the revelation of certain difficult-to-get-at-truths."

Milgram also interviewed participants afterward to find out the effect of the deception. Apparently, 83.7% said that they were "glad to be in the experiment," and 1.3% said that they wished they had not been involved.

- **Protection of participants** - Participants were exposed to extremely stressful situations that may have the potential to cause psychological harm. Many of the participants were visibly distressed.

Signs of tension included trembling, sweating, stuttering, laughing nervously, biting lips and digging fingernails into palms of hands. Three participants had uncontrollable seizures, and many pleaded to be allowed to stop the experiment.

In his defense, Milgram argued that these effects were only short-term. Once the participants were debriefed (and could see the confederate was OK) their stress levels decreased. Milgram also interviewed the participants one year after the event and concluded that most were happy that they had taken part.

- However, Milgram did **debrief** the participants fully after the experiment and also followed up after a period of time to ensure that they came to no harm.

Milgram debriefed all his participants straight after the experiment and disclosed the

true nature of the experiment. Participants were assured that their behavior was common and Milgram also followed the sample up a year later and found that there were no signs of any long-term psychological harm. In fact, the majority of the participants (83.7%) said that they were pleased that they had participated.

- **Right to Withdrawal** - The BPS states that researchers should make it plain to participants that they are free to withdraw at any time (regardless of payment). Did Milgram give participants an opportunity to withdraw? The experimenter gave four verbal prods which mostly discouraged withdrawal from the experiment:

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

Milgram argued that they are justified as the study was about obedience so orders were necessary. Milgram pointed out that although the right to withdraw was made partially difficult, it was possible as 35% of participants had chosen to withdraw.

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