

Milgram's (1963) study of obedience

AIM

To investigate how far people will go in obeying an authority figure .

PROCEDURE

Subjects were led to believe that the experiment was investigating the effects of punishment on learning. The subjects were tested one at a time and were always given the role of teacher (through a fixed lottery). The subject saw his apparent co-subject (in reality an actor) strapped into a chair with electrodes attached to him, since he was to be the 'learner'. The subject ('teacher') was told the shocks would cause no permanent tissue damage and was given a trial shock of 45 volts.

The subject then started the experiment in the shock generator room next door by testing the learner over an intercom, and was told by the experimenter (the authority figure) to administer increasing levels of electric shock for each wrong answer (which the actor gave often). In the basic set-up of the experiment the subject received feedback reactions from the learner he was 'electrocuting' only by a thump on the wall at 300 volts followed by no further reply. The experiment finished when either the subject refused to continue (disobeyed the experimenter's request), or had reached the maximum shock on the scale (450 volts). The subject was then fully debriefed as to the real nature of the experiment, re-introduced to the learner in a friendly way and reassured that no damage had been done since the learner had not really received any shocks at all!

SUBJECTS

They were 40 males between the ages of 20 and 50 from a range of occupations and were drawn from the New Haven area. They were obtained by newspaper ad's for participation in a study of learning at Yale University and were paid \$4.50 just for turning up.

THE LEARNER

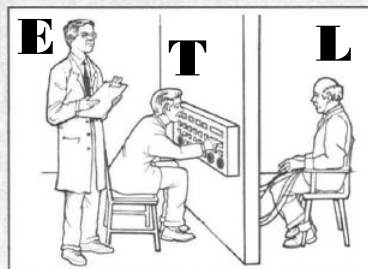
An actor was required to play the role of the learner – an Irish-American, 47-year-old accountant who appeared mild-mannered and likeable.

APPARATUS

Two rooms in the Yale Interaction Laboratory were used – one for the learner containing an 'electric chair' and an answering device, the other for the teacher and experimenter with an electric shock generator. The generator did not actually give shocks to the learner, and was used to measure the dependent variable of obedience. It was a convincing machine with a row of 30 switches ranging from 15 to 450 volts in increments of 15 volts, and was marked with descriptive terms of the shock effects – ranging from 'slight shock' through to 'Danger: severe shock' and 'XXX'.

THE EXPERIMENTER

He was 31 years old, dressed in a grey laboratory coat, and appeared somewhat stern and impassive through the experiment. If at any point the subject showed reluctance to administer the shock, he would command them to continue with standardised prompts ranging from "please continue" to "You have no other choice, you *must* go on".



REPLICATIONS OF MILGRAM'S STUDY

- Varying the subjects** **Gender** – women were found to show similar levels of obedience by Milgram, but other studies have found both lower levels (when asked to electrocute another woman) and higher levels (when asked to electrocute a puppy). **Nationality** – cross-cultural studies have found varying obedience levels - higher in Holland, Austria and Germany, but lower in Britain and Australia. The different procedures used in these studies make proper comparison difficult.
- Varying the victim** **Gender** – a female victim has occasionally reduced obedience
- Varying the setting** **Species** – Sheridan and King (1972) found 75% obedience when real electric shocks were used on puppies. See field experiments...

RESULTS

Levels of obedience expected

Psychology students and professional colleagues were asked what percentage of subjects would administer the highest degree of shock (450 volts) – the answers ranged from 1 to 3, with a mean of 1.2.

Levels of obedience obtained

65% of subjects continued to the maximum shock level of 450 volts. No subject stopped before 300 volts.

EVALUATION OF THE ETHICS OF OBEDIENCE STUDIES

MILGRAM

Against the study

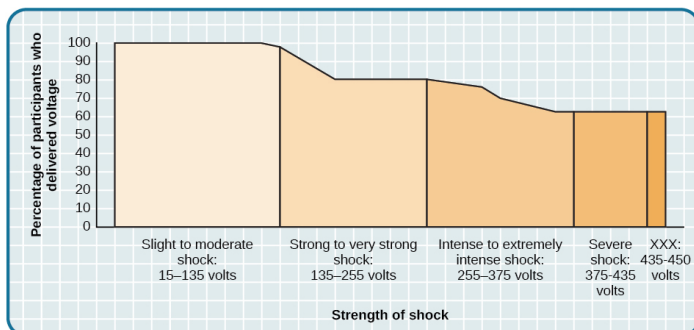
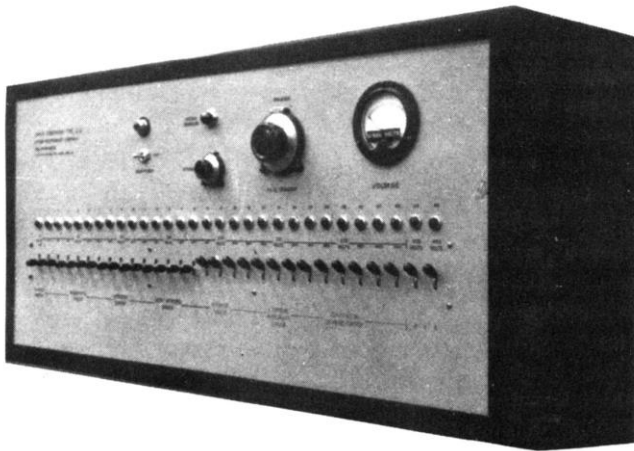
Baumrind (1964) criticised the study as being unethical since:

- It caused distress to the subjects. One had a violent seizure and all of the subjects could have suffered psychological damage, e.g. guilt or loss of self-esteem.
- Milgram deceived the subjects as to the true nature of the experiment, and therefore did not receive their informed consent.
- Milgram's study abused the right of subjects to withdraw from a psychology study – those wishing to leave were told to continue.

For the study

Milgram defended himself on ethical grounds by pointing out:

- The methodology was not unethical since the results obtained were completely unexpected, and although the subjects appeared uncomfortable with their obedience, Milgram concluded "momentary excitement is not the same as harm".
- Subjects could have left, they were not physically restrained. Indeed Milgram designed many variations to increase refusal/disobedience.
- All subjects were fully debriefed and reassured. They were shown that the learner was completely unharmed and had not received any shocks. A follow up opinion survey conducted a year later found that 84% were "glad to have been in the experiment", 15% were neutral, and only 1.3% were "sorry or very sorry to have been in the experiment". Around 80% of the respondents said there should be more experiments like Milgram's conducted, and about 75% said they had learnt something of personal value from their experience. The subjects were also examined by a psychiatrist one year after the study who found no signs of harm.



Public Announcement

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*We will pay five hundred New Haven men to help us complete a scientific study of memory and learning. The study is being done at Yale University.

*Each person who participates will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50c carfare) for approximately 1 hour's time. We need you for only one hour: there are no further obligations. You may choose the time you would like to come (evenings, weekdays, or weekends).

*No special training, education, or experience is needed. We want:

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City employees	Clerks	Salespeople
Laborers	Professional people	White-collar workers
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All persons must be between the ages of 20 and 50. High school and college students cannot be used.

*If you meet these qualifications, fill out the coupon below and mail it now to Professor Stanley Milgram, Department of Psychology, Yale University, New Haven. You will be notified later of the specific time and place of the study. We reserve the right to decline any application.

*You will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50c carfare) as soon as you arrive at the laboratory.