

Name: _____

Class: _____

The Milgram Experiment

By Saul McLeod

From *Simply Psychology* ♦ 2007

In 1963, Stanley Milgram conducted a study on obedience. Using a series of social psychology experiments, Milgram measured the eagerness of participants to comply with an authority figure. As you read the text, take notes on the factors that impacted the behavior of the participants.

- [1] One of the most famous studies of obedience in psychology was carried out by Stanley Milgram in 1963.

Stanley Milgram, a psychologist at Yale University, conducted an experiment focusing on the conflict between obedience to authority and personal conscience.¹

He examined justifications for acts of genocide offered by those accused at the World War II Nuremberg War Criminal trials. Their defense was often based on “obedience” – that they were just following orders from their superiors.



“Milgram” by Beverly Yuen Thompson is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

The experiments began in July 1961, a year after the trial of Adolf Eichmann² 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?”

- [5] Milgram 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.

Aim

Milgram was interested in researching how far people would go in obeying an instruction if it involved harming another person. He wanted to know how easily ordinary people could be influenced into committing atrocities, for example, Germans in WWII.

Procedure

Milgram selected participants for his experiment by newspaper advertising for male participants to take part in a study at Yale University.³ Volunteers were told they would participate in a lab experiment

¹ **Conscience (noun):** one’s moral sense of right and wrong

² Adolf Eichmann (1906-1962) was a German Nazi lieutenant colonel and one of the major organizers of the Holocaust.



investigating “learning.” 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 showing up.

At the beginning of the experiment they were introduced to another participant, who was actually a confederate of Milgram. They drew straws to determine their roles – “learner” or “teacher” – although this was fixed, and the confederate was always the learner (pretending to be a real participant). There was another confederate dressed in a grey lab coat and playing the role of “experimenter” (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 was taken into the first room and had electrodes attached to his arms, and the teacher and researcher went into a room next door that contained the electric shock generator.⁴

- [10] After Mr. Wallace, the learner, had studied a list of word pairs given him to learn, the teacher would then test him by naming a word and asking the learner to recall its partner/pair from a list of four possible choices.

The teacher was then 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 375 volts (Danger: Severe Shock) to 450 volts (XXX).

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 (called “prods”) to ensure they continued. There were 4 prods and if one was not obeyed then the experimenter 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 of the participants continued to 300 volts.

Milgram did more than one experiment – he carried out 18 variations of his study, all with similar findings. All he did was alter the situation to see how this affected obedience.

Conclusion

- [15] The study suggested that 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.

³ A university in New Haven, Connecticut.

⁴ The electric shock generator did not actually work; it was only there to make the “teacher” believe that the experiment was real.

Milgram sums this 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.”

Milgram’s Agency Theory

Milgram explained the behavior of his participants by suggesting that people actually 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 in order 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.

[20] 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.

© 2008, Saul McLeod.
Reprinted with permission of the author.

Text-Dependent Questions:

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Summarize the study’s findings in your own words. [RI.2]

2. PART A: What does the word “confederate” mean as it is used in paragraph 8? [RI.4]
 - a. Accomplice
 - b. Authority figure
 - c. Volunteer
 - d. Stranger

3. PART B: Which phrase from the paragraph best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - a. “another participant”
 - b. “drew straws to determine their roles”
 - c. “pretending to be a real participant”
 - d. “dressed in a grey lab coat”

4. Which of the following best states the purpose of the section titled “Milgram’s Agency Theory”? [RI.5]
 - a. It provides an alternative theory to the reason behind the study’s findings based on personality types.
 - b. It summarizes the study’s methodology and findings in a clear and concise manner.
 - c. It connects the Milgram experiment to another study and theory in psychology related to human behavior and authority.
 - d. It presents a deeper analysis of the study’s findings and its possible application to other conditions in real life.

5. According to the study’s findings, what is the relationship between conscience and evil? [RI.3]
 - a. Most people are more likely to ignore their conscience and commit evil acts if they are ordered to by authority.
 - b. People with a greater conscience are less likely to obey authority figures and commit acts of evil.
 - c. Most people in positions of authority are more likely to promote acts of evil and less likely to obey a sense of conscience.
 - d. People who are less in touch with their conscience are usually also more prone to committing acts of evil.

Discussion Questions:

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. How far were most people willing to go to obey authority? Would you have gone this far?
2. According to the text, “ordinary” people are more likely than not to follow an authority figure. Does this seem believable? Why or why not?
3. Do you think that what the participants did was wrong? Does it mean that they are “evil”?
4. Milgram’s findings can be used to possibly explain why people have committed horrible acts throughout history, despite being considered “good people” under other circumstances. With the findings of these study, how might such things be prevented from happening again?
5. In the context of this article, why do people do bad things? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other art, literature, or history in your answer.

For Teachers

Suggested Text Pairings:

“The Stanford Prison Experiment” by Saul McLeod (Non-Fiction)

The Stanford Prison Experiment was conducted by Phillip Zimbardo in 1973. By organizing an exercise that simulated prison life, Zimbardo intended to discover how quickly people conformed to the roles of guard and prisoner. While many people thought that brutality reported among American prison guards had to do with personalities, some thought it had to do with the prison environment. Pair this text with “The Milgram Experiment” to allow students to further discuss what makes “good” people do bad things, and how corrupts. Find “The Stanford Prison Experiment” at CommonLit.org (**Morality → Why do people do bad things? → 9th-10th Grade**).

“First They Came...” by Martin Niemöller (Quotation)

Martin Niemöller was a Lutheran pastor whose famous quotation reveals his guilt for not initially speaking up during the Holocaust. Pair “The Milgram Experiment” with “First They Came...” and other Holocaust texts to help students understand the reasons why so many people in an advanced nation stood behind Hitler. Find “First They Came...” at CommonLit.org (**Social Pressure → What are the effects of following the crowd? → 7th-8th Grade**).

“The Third Wave Experiment” by CommonLit Staff

In 1967, a German social studies teacher named Ron Jones conducted a social experiment with students in his history class. His experiment aimed to recreate the conditions that led to rise of Nazism in Germany. On the first day, he announced that he was starting a movement to eliminate democracy, and his movement soon became popular on campus. Pair “The Milgram Experiment” with “The Third Wave Experiment” and ask students to compare the results of each experiment, and identify the factors that led to the Holocaust. Find “The Third Wave Experiment” at CommonLit.org (**Social Pressure → Why do people follow the crowd? → 9th-10th Grade**).

Answers to Text-Dependent Questions:

1. Answers will vary; in their own words, students should summarize the finding that “ordinary people are likely to follow orders given by an authority figure, even to the extent of killing an innocent human being.”
2. A
3. C
4. D
5. A