

THE MILGRAM EXPERIMENT

The aftermath of the Holocaust and the events leading up to World War II, the world was stunned with the happenings in Nazi Germany and their acquired surrounding territories that came out during the Eichmann Trials. Eichmann, a high ranking official of the Nazi Party, was on trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The question is, "Could it be that Eichmann, and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?"

Stanley Milgram answered the call to this problem by performing a series of studies on the Obedience to Authority. Milgram's work began at Harvard where he was working towards his Ph.D. The experiments on which his initial research was based were done at Yale from 1961-1962.

In response to a newspaper ad offering \$4.50 for one hour's work, an individual turns up to take part in a Psychology experiment investigating memory and learning. He is introduced to a stern looking experimenter in a white coat and a rather pleasant and friendly co-subject. The experimenter explains that the experiment will look into the role of punishment in learning, and that one will be the "teacher" and one will be the "learner." Lots are drawn to determine roles, and it is decided that the individual who answered the ad will become the "teacher."

Your co-subject is taken to a room where he is strapped in a chair to prevent movement and an electrode is placed on his arm. Next, the "teacher" is taken to an adjoining room which contains a generator. The "teacher" is instructed to read a list of two word pairs and ask the "learner" to read them back. If the "learner" gets the answer correct, then they move on to the next word. If the answer is incorrect, the "teacher" is supposed to shock the "learner" starting at 15 volts.

The generator has 30 switches in 15 volt increments, each is labeled with a voltage ranging from 15 up to 450 volts. Each switch also has a rating, ranging from "slight shock" to "danger: severe shock." The final two switches are labeled "XXX." The "teacher" automatically is supposed to increase the shock each time the "learner" misses a word in the list. Although the "teacher" thought that he/she was administering shocks to the "learner," the "learner" is actually a student or an actor who is never actually harmed. (The drawing of lots was rigged, so that the actor would always end up as the "learner.")

At time, the worried "teachers" questioned the experimenter, asking who was responsible for any harmful effects resulting from shocking the learner at such a high level. Upon receiving the answer that the experimenter assumed full responsibility, teachers seemed to accept the response and continue shocking, even though some were obviously extremely uncomfortable in doing so.

Today the field of psychology would deem this study highly unethical but, it revealed some extremely important findings. The theory that only the most severe monsters on the sadistic fringe of society would submit to such cruelty is disclaimed. Findings show that, “two-thirds of this studies’ participants fall into the category of ‘obedient’ subjects, and that they represent ordinary people drawn from the working, managerial, and professional classes (Obedience to Authority).” Ultimately 65% of all of the “teachers” punished the “learners” to the maximum 450 volts. No subject stopped before reaching 300 volts.

Milgram also conducted several follow-up experiments to determine what might change the likelihood of maximum shock delivery. In one condition, the touch-proximity condition, the teacher was required to hold the hand of the learner on a “shock plate” in order to give him shocks above 150 volts.

The most amazing thing to note from this follow-up experiment is that 32% of the subjects in the proximity-touch condition held the hand of the learner on the shock plate while administering shocks in excess of 400 volts! Further experiments showed that teachers were less obedient when the experimenter communicated with them via the telephone versus in person, and males were just as likely to be obedient as females, although females tended to be more nervous.

Milgram’s obedience experiment was replicated by other researchers. The experiments spanned a 25-year period from 1961 to 1985 and have been repeated in Australia, South Africa and in several European countries. In one study conducted in Germany, over 85% of the subjects administered a lethal electric shock to the learner!

1. According to Milgram’s experiments, who had responsibility for any pain resulting from the experiment? Why is this important?
2. What can we learn from the statistical evidence in the experiment regarding the belief by many that Nazi killers were sadistic murderers?
3. What was so shocking about the results from the follow-up “touch-proximity” experiment?
4. Can you explain the “85% shock rate” in Germany by means of what you learned about child rearing practices in Germany?

Around this time (early 1960’s) research was being conducted into the authoritarian trait of Germans in an attempt to explain how the atrocities of World War II could have taken place. Milgram’s study demonstrated that these traits were not confined to Germans and were not confined to certain types of situations (eg war). This was a profound and extremely thought provoking discovery.

Obedience to authority is a basic tenant of any human social organization. Virtually every society has developed some sort of hierarchy in which some individuals exercise a degree of authority over others. For example, teachers have authority over their students; police officers have authority over members of the public.

Basically, it's hard to conceive of a society that could function without this type of arrangement. However, there are times when private belief and compliance with those in authority may come into conflict. The resolution of this type of conflict represents one of the oldest problems in philosophy and religion. Abraham, when commanded by God to kill his son, was torn between his love of his son and his obedience to God. Obedience to authority is a form of compliance and as such it has been studied in the laboratory's of social psychologists for 30 years.

Milgram's experiment didn't begin in a laboratory, but rather a lecture theatre where a group of psychiatrists, university students and middle-class adults of various occupations and ages had gathered to listen to a lecture on obedience to authority. During the lecture, Milgram described the experiment in great detail.

Following the detailed description of the experiment, each audience member is asked to privately record how he or she would have acted. All of the audience groups responded similarly. They all saw themselves as disobeying the experimenter somewhere early on in the experiment. On average, the psychologists said they would have stopped when the voltage level reached 120. For the university students it was 135. Remember, this is about the level when the learner would have first protested about the pain. Nobody in any group said they would have continued beyond 300 volts.

When asked to explain their disobedience, the audience members responded that they "didn't want to hurt anyone." In other words, the audience saw their disobedience as stemming from their empathy for the subject and compassion for those in pain and a sense of fairness. The psychologists predicted that only 4% of the teachers would progress beyond 300 volts. The students said that 0.1% would reach the highest level on the generator. These latter cases (who would use the highest voltage setting) were described by the psychologists as "pathological sadists."

1. How was it possible for psychologists--experts in human behavior—to have misjudged so drastically how the average person reacted in the experiment?
2. Were those who realized the highest level of inflicting pain “pathological sadists?”