

Obedience to Authority: Milgram Contributions

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Abstract: The primary researcher was Stanley Milgram who was a Social Psychologist and professor at Yale University. Stanley was born on August 15, 1933 in New York City where he was raised. He graduated from James Monroe High School in 1950 and earned a bachelor's degree from Queens College in 1954. He went on to study under Gordon Allport at Harvard University where he earned a Ph.D in 1960. Stanley served as a professor at the following universities and colleges: Yale City University and City College. He died at the age of 51 in New York City (Miller, 1997).

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*“It’s easy to ignore responsibility when
one is only an intermediate link in a chain action”
-Stanley Milgram-*

What is Obedience?

Obedience is a form of social influence where an individual acts in response to a direct order from another individual, who is usually an authority figure. It is assumed that without such an order the person would not have acted in this way.

Introduction

Following World War II, Milgram became very interested in what led people to commit such atrocious acts as those witnessed in Nazi Germany. He aptly

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hypothesized that the presence of authority (or perceived authority) played a key role. It is my understanding that this hypothesis may have been strongly influenced by the results of the Nuremberg trials. During these trials, many men claimed that they were good people who were driven to do terrible things by the orders of Nazi authority figures.

1. The Dilemma of Obedience

Obedience, because of its very ubiquitousness, is easily overlooked as a subject of inquiry in social psychology. But without an appreciation of its role in shaping human action, a wide range of significant behavior cannot be understood. For an act carried out under command is, psychologically, of a profoundly different character than action that is spontaneous.

The person who, with inner conviction, loathes stealing, killing, and assault may find himself performing these acts with relative ease when commanded by authority. Behavior that is unthinkable in an individual who is acting on his own may be executed without hesitation when carried out under orders.

The dilemma inherent in obedience to authority is ancient, as old as the story of Abraham. What the present study does is to give the dilemma contemporary form by treating it as subject matter for experimental inquiry, and with the aim of understanding rather than judging it from a moral standpoint.

The important task, from the standpoint of a psychological study of obedience, is to be able to take conceptions of authority and translate them into personal experience. It is one thing to talk in abstract terms about the respective rights of the individual and of authority; it is quite another to examine a moral choice in a real situation. We all know about the philosophic problems of freedom and authority. But in every case where the problem is not merely academic there is a real person who must obey or disobey authority, a concrete instance when the act of defiance occurs. All musing prior to this moment is mere speculation, and all acts of disobedience are characterized by such a moment of decisive action. The experiments are built around this notion.

2. Preparation of the Stanley Milgram Experiment

The psychologist Stanley Milgram created an electric ‘shock generator’ with 30 switches. The switch was marked clearly in 15 volt increments, ranging from 15 to 450 volts. He also placed labels indicating the shock level, such as ‘Moderate’ (75-120 Volts) and ‘Strong’ (135-180 Volts). The switches 375-420 Volts were marked ‘Danger: Severe Shock’ and the two highest levels 435-450, was marked ‘XXX’.

The ‘shock generator’ was in fact phony and would only produce sound when the switches were pressed. 40 subjects (males) were recruited via mail and a newspaper ad. They thought they were going to participate in an experiment about ‘memory and learning’.

In the test, each subject was informed clearly that their payment was for showing up, and they could keep the payment “no matter what happens after they arrive”.

The two subjects (the real subject and the con-subject) drew slips of paper to indicate who was going to be a ‘teacher’ and who was going to be a ‘learner’. The lottery was in fact a set-up, and the real subject would always get the role of ‘the teacher’.

The teacher saw that the learner was strapped to a chair and electrodes were attached. The subject was then seated in another room in front of the shock generator, unable to see the learner.

2.1. The Experiment and Procedure

The subject was instructed to teach word-pairs to the learner. When the learner made a mistake, the subject was instructed to punish the learner by giving him a shock, 15 volts higher for each mistake.

The learner never received the shocks, but pre-taped audio was triggered when a shock-switch was pressed.

If the experimenter, seated in the same room, was contacted, the experimenter would answer with predefined ‘prods’ (“Please continue”, “Please go on”, “The experiment requires that you go on”, “It is absolutely essential that you continue”, “You have no other choice, you must go on”), starting with the mild prods, and making it more authoritarian for each time the subject contacted the experimenter.

If the subject asked who was responsible if anything would happen to the learner, the experimenter answered "I am responsible". This gave the subject a relief and many continued.

2.2. Public Announcement

Milgrams Experiments were in response to his investigation into how Nazi soldiers in WWII could blindly accept obviously morally wrong orders. Such as the atrocities committed during the holocaust. Milgram selected participants for his experiment by newspaper articles advertising for male participants to take part in a study on "memory and learning" which was being held at Yale University.

2.3. Learning Task

The lesson conducted by the subject was a paired-associate learning task. The subject read a series of word pairs to the learner, and then read the first word of the pair along with four terms. For example, the subject read such pairs as: blue box nice day wild duck etc. Then, in the testing sequence he would read: blue: sky ink box lamp.

The learner was to indicate which of the four terms had originally been paired with the first word. He communicated his answer by pressing one of four switches in front of him, which lit up one of four numbered quadrants in an answer box located on top of the shock generator.

3. Results

The results were shocking. Sixty-five percent of the teachers progressed to the maximum voltage level (450 volts) and all participants progressed to 300 volts despite their reservations or feelings. The researcher concluded that there are two reasons individuals obey orders even when acting against their own personal judgement or desires. The two reasons include 'out of fear' or the 'desire to appear cooperative'.

3.1. Experimenter Feedback

At various points in the experiment the subject would turn to the experimenter for advice on whether he should continue to administer shocks. Or he would indicate that he did not wish to go on.

The experimenter responded with a sequence of "prods," using as many as necessary to bring the subject into line.

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

The prods were made in sequence: Only if Prod 1 had been unsuccessful could Prod 2 be used. If the subject refused to obey the experimenter after Prod 4, the experiment was terminated. The experimenter's tone of voice was at all times firm, but not impolite. The sequence was begun anew on each occasion that the subject balked or showed reluctance to follow orders.

This force took the form of protests from the victim. Initially, mild protests were used, but these proved inadequate. Subsequently, more vehement protests were inserted into the experimental procedure. To our consternation, even the strongest protests from the victim did not prevent many subjects from administering the harshest punishment ordered by the experimenter. But the protests did lower the mean of the maximum shocks somewhat and created some spread in the subject's performance; therefore, the victim's cries were recorded on tape and incorporated into the regular experimental procedure.

The situation did more than highlight the technical difficulties of finding a workable experimental procedure: it indicated that subjects would obey authority to a greater extent than we had supposed. It also pointed to the importance of feedback from the victim in controlling the subject's behavior.

Each vocal response of the victim was coordinated to a particular voltage level on the shock generator. It is difficult to convey on the printed page the full tenor of the victim's responses, for we have no adequate notation for vocal intensity, timing, and general qualities of delivery. In general, however, the victim indicated no discomfort until the 75-volt shock was administered, at which time there was a little grunt. Similar reactions followed the 90- and 105-volt shocks, and at 120 volts the victim shouted to the experimenter that the shocks were becoming painful. Painful groans were heard on administration of the 135 volt shock, and at 150 volts the victim cried

out, "Experimenter, get me out of here! I won't be in the experiment any more! I refuse to go on!" Cries of this type continue with generally rising intensity, so that at 180 volts the victim cried out, "I can't stand the pain," and by 270 volts his response to the shock was definitely an agonized scream. Throughout, from 150 volts on, he insisted that he be let out of the experiment. At 300 volts the victim shouted in desperation that he would no longer provide answers to the memory test.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xxq4QtK3j0Y>.

3.2. Conclusion - Obedience to Authority

Before the Stanley Milgram Experiment, experts thought that about 1-3 % of the subjects would not stop giving shocks. They thought that you'd have to be pathological or a psychopath to do so.

Still, 65 % never stopped giving shocks. None stopped when the learner said he had heart-trouble. How could that be? We now believe that it has to do with our almost innate behavior that we should do as told, especially from authority persons.

4. The Process of Obedience

Obedience, in human behavior, is a form of "social influence in which a person yields to explicit instructions or orders from an authority. Obedience is generally distinguished from compliance, which is behavior influenced by peers, and from conformity, which is behavior intended to match that of the majority. Depending on context, obedience can be seen as immoral, amoral or moral.

Humans have been shown to be obedient in the presence of perceived legitimate authority figures, as shown by the Milgram experiment in the 1960s, which was carried out by Stanley Milgram to find out how the Nazis managed to get ordinary people to take part in the mass murders of the Holocaust. The experiment showed that obedience to authority was the norm, not the exception. Regarding obedience, Milgram said that "Obedience is as basic an element in the structure of social life as one can point to; Some system of authority is a requirement of all communal living, and it is only the man dwelling in isolation who is not forced to respond, through defiance or submission, to the commands of others.

5. Another Interesting Experiment is “The Hofling Hospital Experiment”

In 1966, the psychiatrist Charles K. Hofling conducted a field experiment on obedience in the nurse-physician relationship. In the natural hospital setting, nurses were ordered by unknown doctors to administer what could have been a dangerous dose of a (fictional) drug to their patients. In spite of official guidelines forbidding administration in such circumstances, Hofling found that 21 out of the 22 nurses would have given the patient an overdose of medicine.

Procedure

A person would telephone a nurse, saying that he was a doctor and giving a fictitious name, asking the nurse to administer 20 mg of a fictitious drug named “Astroten” to a patient, and that he/she would provide the required signature for the medication later. A bottle labelled “Astroten” had been placed in the drug cabinet, but there was no drug of that name on the approved list. The label clearly stated that 10 mg was the maximum daily dose.

The experimental protocol was explained to a group of twelve nurses and twenty-one nursing students, who were asked to predict how many nurses would give the drug to the patient; ten nurses and all the nursing students said they would not do it.

Hofling then selected 22 nurses at a hospital in the United States for the actual experiment. They were each telephoned by an experimenter who identified himself as Dr. Smith, who asked them to administer the drug and said that he would write up the paperwork as soon as he got to the hospital. Nurses who followed the instruction were stopped at the door to the patient room before they could administer the “drug”.

The nurses should have refused “Dr Smith's” instructions for any one of several reasons:

- The dosage they were instructed to administer was twice the recommended safe daily dosage;
- Hospital protocol stated that nurses should only take instructions from doctors known to them; they should not have followed instructions given by an unknown doctor over the phone;
- The drug was not on their list of drugs to be administered that day, and the paperwork required before drug administration had not been done.

Findings

Hofling found that 21 out of the 22 nurses would have given the patient an overdose of medicine. None of the investigators, and only one experienced nurse who examined the protocol in advance, correctly guessed the experimental results. He also found that 21 of 22 nurses to whom he had given the questionnaire had said they would not obey the orders of the doctor, and that 10 out of the 22 nurses had done this before, with a different drug.

Conclusions

The nurses were thought to have allowed themselves to be deceived because of their high opinions of the standards of the medical profession. The study revealed the danger to patients that existed because the nurses' view of professional standards induced them to suppress their good judgement.

Final Conclusions

Although this is one of those studies that doesn't exactly make us feel rosy about what we are capable of, it is a fascinating experiment nonetheless. Perhaps that is because there is still a part of us that refuses to believe that *we* could ever be persuaded to act as nearly all of Milgram's participants did. Don't kid yourself: these people weren't „crazy” and they don't belong in prison (which is a comment I frequently hear from people who aren't very familiar with Psychology). You very well could have been right there with them. Obedience to authority is a powerful force, and so is group pressure (which will most certainly be addressed later on this site). It's how we're wired. However, our social wiring is something that can be used for great good just as easily as great destruction, and *that* is what is important to remember.

What is the limit of such obedience? At many points we attempted to establish a boundary. Cries from the victim were inserted; they were not good enough. The victim claimed heart trouble; subjects still shocked him on command. The victim pleaded to be let free, and his answers no longer registered on the signal box; subjects continued to shock him. At the outset we had not conceived that such drastic procedures would be needed to generate disobedience, and each step was added only as the ineffectiveness of the earlier techniques became clear. The final effort to

establish a limit was the TouchProximity condition. But the very first subject in this condition subdued the victim on command, and proceeded to the highest shock level. A quarter of the subjects in this condition performed similarly.

In an article entitled “The Dangers of Obedience,” Harold J. Laski wrote:

“....civilization means, above all, an unwillingness to inflict unnecessary pain. Within the ambit of that definition, those of us who heedlessly accept the commands of authority cannot yet claim to be civilized men.”

Our business, if we desire to live a life not utterly devoid of meaning and significance, is to accept nothing which contradicts our basic experience merely because it comes to us from tradition or convention or authority. It may well be that we shall be wrong; but our self-expression is thwarted at the root unless the certainties we are asked to accept coincide with the certainties we experience. That is why the condition of freedom in any state is always a widespread and consistent skepticism of the canons upon which power insists.

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