

Name: _____

Class: _____

Milgram experiment on obedience

By Khan Academy
2015

In 1963, Stanley Milgram conducted a series of experiments that explored humans' obedience to authority figures. The findings shocked the world and continue to be discussed today. As you read, make note of the details that demonstrate how participants and scientists react to the experiment and findings.

- [1] The Milgram studies were conducted in order to study the willingness of participants, average everyday Americans, to obey authority figures who instructed them to perform behaviors that conflicted with their personal beliefs and morals. As you can probably imagine, it might be hard to recruit participants when that's what you're trying to study. In order to keep the participants from finding out what he was actually trying to look at, Milgram used deception. He started by posting ads looking for people to participate in a study about "learning and memory." The researchers really tried to make it a point to recruit average, everyday people.



"Ontario Science Centre: Milgram's Electric Box" by Isabelle is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

When recruits arrived at the lab, they were told that they were going to be participating in a study that was trying to look at the effects of punishment on learning - do people learn best after they've been punished for making a mistake? There were two participants involved in the study, and they randomly decided by picking out of a hat, who was going to play the role of teacher and who was going to play the role of the learner. In reality, one of the participants was actually a confederate, meaning that they were working with the experimenter and were secretly in on the point of the study. Choosing the roles out of a hat wasn't actually random in this case because it was rigged in such a way that the actual participant always got the teacher role and the confederates always got the learner role.

While the teacher was watching, the experimenter hooked the learner up to a number of electrodes,¹ and they were both told that the teacher was going to teach the learner a number of word pairs, and that the learner would be shocked whenever they gave the wrong answer. In some versions of the study, the person playing the learner noted that they were worried about the experiment because they had a heart condition, so they were worried about the shocks, at which point the experimenter would explain to them not to worry, that the shocks would be painful but not dangerous. The teacher was then taken to a different room where they couldn't see the learner. They had no visual contact with them. And they were sat in front of a box of switches that they were told was a shock box. The first switch was labeled 15 volts, and the switches increased at 15 volt

1. a solid electric conductor that carries an electric current

increments until it reached 450 volts. Along with an indication of voltage, there were also labels that went along with the switches: they went from "slight shock" to "moderate shock" to "strong shock" and then things like "very strong shock" and "intense shock" and "extremely intense shock," and then kind of troublingly, a label that noted that the switches would give a "severe shock" and the warning "DANGER XXX."

The teacher was instructed to read a long list of word pairs to the learner, and then when they were finished, to go back and read the first word of each pair, and then offer four possible pair words. Of those possible four pair words, the learner would indicate what they thought the answer was by pressing a button, and this was displayed on a screen to the teacher. Whenever the learner made an error, the teacher was instructed to give them a shock at increasing increments. The first wrong answer got a shock of 15 volts, the second one 30 volts, etcetera.² And just so you're aware, even though the teacher thought that they were giving the learner shocks, no actual shocks were given. But, of course, it was really important that the teacher really thought that the punishment was being administered.

- [5] After giving a number of correct answers, the participants seemingly started giving incorrect ones. And of course, the pattern of correct and incorrect answers that the learner was given was determined by the experimenter well before hand. The first couple of shocks really didn't elicit that much of a reaction. The learner would kind of gasp when they happened, but nothing more than that. However, after several increasing shocks, the learner would start to pound on the wall and cry out in pain. Eventually, they would start to complain about their heart condition, saying things like "let me out, my heart is bothering me, let me out." And as the shocks increased, they would continue to yell and scream that they wanted to quit. And after this, after a certain point, all responses from the learner would cease and there would only be silence from the other room. If at any point during the study, the participant playing the role of the teacher wanted to check on the other participant, or stop the experiment, or even just looked back at the experimenter for guidance to see what they should do, they were told things like "please continue" and "the experiment requires that you continue," And even "you have no other choice, you must go on." The experiment came to an end after either four verbal protests from the teacher, from the participant, or after they had given the final shock of 450 volts to the silent learner three times.

Before he started his experiment, Milgram had asked a number of professors and psychology students and clinical psychologists whether or not people would obey the commands of the experimenter. They overwhelmingly said that people would not, that most of them would stop when the learner protested, and that very, very few people would shock all the way, and that those that did were probably psychopaths.³ When the results of the study came out, they were actually really disturbing because 65% of participants shocked all the way. 65%. And to be clear, those participants didn't do so without feeling. They had protested and they were sweating, and they were trembling, but they still obeyed the commands of the experimenter and shocked to 450 volts. In the versions of the experiment where the learner claimed to have a heart condition, and specifically claimed that the shocks were hurting their heart, full compliance⁴ did drop, but not by much. It dropped to 63%.

Again, these were everyday, average Americans who heard the cries of people they were tormenting and continued with the task. I want to end with a quote from Milgram. It's kind of a long quote, but I think that it's

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2. and so on
 3. a person who suffers from a mental disorder associated with abnormal or violent social behavior
 4. **Compliance** (*noun*) the action or fact of following a wish or command

really important and really sums up the results of the study. He wrote:

I set up a simple experiment at Yale to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist. Stark⁵ authority was pitted against the subjects' strongest moral imperatives⁶ against hurting others, and with the subjects' ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any length on the command of an authority constitutes⁷ the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation. Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their parts, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work became patently⁸ clear, and they were asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.

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5. **Stark** (*adjective*) complete; severe
 6. **Imperative** (*noun*) an essential or urgent thing
 7. **Constitute** (*verb*) to form part of a whole
 8. **Patent** (*adjective*) easily recognizable; obvious

Text-Dependent Questions

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

1. What is the central idea of the text?
 - A. Participants' willingness to shock another person in Milgram's experiment shows how people will abandon their morals to follow the orders of authority figures.
 - B. The people who shocked the learner with the highest voltage were abnormal participants and are not reflective of the average citizen.
 - C. The distress that the teacher and learner both exhibited in Milgram's experiment shows how unethical his practices were.
 - D. Participants felt less impacted by the suffering of the learners because they were unable to hear or see them.

2. How does the author develop their analysis of the Milgram experiment?
 - A. They describe what most experts expected to learn from the experiment, then the actual findings and why they were so surprising.
 - B. They describe the result of Milgram's experiment and how we see examples of citizens blindly following orders in the real world.
 - C. They describe the real-world events that inspired Milgram's experiment and how he was affected by his findings.
 - D. They provide basic information about the experiment and discuss surprising findings.

3. How does paragraph 6 contribute to the author's explanation of Milgram's experiment?
 - A. It shows how people are too optimistic when they think about the compassion people feel for each other.
 - B. It proves how much the experts know about how people will respond when presented with a direct order.
 - C. It emphasizes how the results of the study strongly contradicted the predictions of experts about how participants would behave.
 - D. It emphasizes how participants in the study were significantly more compassionate when they realized the learner was ill in some way.

4. How does paragraph 8 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
 - A. It demonstrates that conducting experiments with human participants is dangerous.
 - B. It emphasizes how human morality can be overridden by the commands of authority figures.
 - C. It discredits the idea that even good people are capable of evil under certain circumstances or influence.
 - D. It proves that the relationship between authority figures and subordinates will not affect the outcome of the experiment.

5. How does the author develop their central idea over the course of the text?
