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# The Milgram Experiment

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2008

*In 1963, Stanley Milgram conducted a study on obedience. Using a series of social psychology experiments, Milgram measured participants' willingness to comply with an authority figure.*

- [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.

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.

The experiments began in July 1961, a year after the trial of Adolf Eichmann<sup>1</sup> 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.



*"German Third Reich Officers 1022" by thardy1 is in the public domain.*

## 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.

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

## Procedure

Milgram selected participants for his experiment by newspaper advertising for male participants to take part in a study at Yale University. Volunteers were told they would participate in a lab experiment 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<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

- [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.

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2. an accomplice

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

## 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.

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.