

The Milgram Experiment

Background *The Milgram experiment is a landmark experiment in social psychology, the field devoted to the study of human behavior within groups. It was in part an attempt by its author, Stanley Milgram, to understand why otherwise normal people helped commit wartime atrocities.*



Experiment assistants and participant

Study Methodology

The experiment began with a hypothesis—that the urge to obey authority is strong enough to cause people to violate their own moral and ethical beliefs. However, designing an experiment to test that proposition posed a dilemma—how could it be done without actually harming someone in the process?

Stanley Milgram devised a clever, if still controversial, experiment. Its centerpiece was a fake, yet very convincing, machine supposedly capable of administering electric shocks at 30 increasingly stronger levels. During the experiment, the machine was controlled by the subject, who did not know that it was a fake. In the study, two other persons secretly acted out roles. One played an authority figure who directed the experiment. The other played a subject who was supposedly receiving electric shocks.

Milgram recruited 40 male subjects of different ages and occupations. They were told that they were participating in a study on the impact of punishment on learning and that their role was to question another subject (who, as mentioned, was collaborating with the experimenter) and administer increasingly higher-level shocks for each wrong answer. The sham subject then gave wrong answers on purpose. If the unknowing subject hesitated to administer the shock, he was ordered to do so by the person playing the authority figure. The more the subject hesitated, the stronger the commands became.

Results and Interpretation

With regular prompting from the fake authority figure, all the study's participants shocked the fake subject beyond the point where he appeared to be yelling in pain and became despondent and refused to answer. At this point, when the fake authority figure demanded they continue, 65 percent did so all the way to the highest shock level. The study showed that humans are highly susceptible to pressure from authority figures.

There was another major finding as well. Many of the study's unknowing subjects showed signs of extreme stress even as they obeyed their orders. This second finding continues to be a source of ethical debate among psychologists. In short, can deceiving study subjects and placing them under extreme stress ever be justified?

Milgram's study has obvious real-world implications. Given the apparent ease with which humans can ignore their own moral and ethical beliefs in the face of authority, one might argue that it is important to place strict guidelines on the use of authority.

Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioral study of obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67, 371-378.

Thinking Critically

- 1. Identify** In what two ways was the experiment problematic in terms of ethics?
- 2. Analyze** How might the study have been an attempt to understand the sources of wartime atrocities?