

Milgram's obedience experiments

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Abstract

This essay comprises a discussion of a classical experiment from the history of psychology, namely Milgram's obedience experiment. This includes an evaluation of the relevance of Milgram's findings to the present day. Finally, the evidence presented within the essay is synthesised and conclusions made. In particular, it is concluded that despite the moral and ethical implications of these studies, there is a clear need to learn about obedience to authority. Not only can classical experiments such as those conducted by Milgram assist in understanding human behaviour, but they can also assist in a number of environmental contexts, including schools and the military.

The aim of this essay is to discuss a classical experiment from the history of psychology, namely Milgram's obedience experiment. This will be followed by an evaluation of the relevance of Milgram's findings in the present day. Finally, the evidence presented within the essay will be synthesised and conclusions made.

Introducing Milgram's Experiment

One of the most famous psychology experiments ever documented is that of Milgram's (1974) study of obedience to authority. The study involved deceiving participants into thinking they were giving electric shocks to another participant in an adjacent room. The study was disguised as being one on learning and memory, with the participant supposedly delivering the shock being the 'teacher' and the person supposedly receiving the shock being the 'learner.' Shocks were administered each time the learner answered incorrectly, with volts (v) progressively escalating from 15v ('

slight shock') to 450v (' danger: sever shock') in increments of 15v. No shocks were actually delivered and the learner was an actor.

The experimenter, wearing a white laboratory coat to exert authority, was in the same room as the participant (or teacher) and prompted them to continue delivering shocks despite any pleas from the learner. These pleas started at 150v. Of particular note is that the participant met the learner before the experiment and saw him being strapped into the chair where the shocks would be delivered to him. The teacher also heard the learner complain of a bad heart.

It was found that the teachers only refused to stop administering shocks once they reached 368 volts, and 65% of teachers administered the ' lethal' shock. Even in variations of this study, an overwhelming majority of teachers continued administering shocks after they thought the student may be injured or unconscious.

Milgram's study gained its notoriety due to the many ethical and moral dilemmas it raises, which subsequently resulted in new ethical guidelines that prevented a replication of the study. That was until 2009, when Burger claimed to have replicated Milgram's work. Indeed, Burger claims to have replicated the study in all ways except for study duration. Specifically, the study was stopped after the 150v decision to continue or not continue after hearing the learner's pleas. The rationale provided for this variation in the replication is that, in Milgram's study, 79% of participants who continued past 150v continued to the 450v. Thus, Burger proposed that stopping the experiment at 150v would still provide insight into how likely people were to

go on to 450v should this have been expected of them. This is supported by a meta-analysis of eight of Milgram's conditions, which shows that 150v was the point that elicited the most disobedience (Packer, 2008).

Another aspect of Burger's (2009) replication of Milgram's experiment was to establish if participants who had witnessed another 'teacher' or 'confederate' (who was actually an actor) refusing to continue, would be more likely to refuse to continue themselves. Therefore, on certain issues, Burger went to great lengths to produce an accurate replication of Milgram's experiments. In replicating the confederate condition, Burger predicted that this would have an effect on obedience levels, but this was not found to be the case. In fact, this variation in the experiment had no effect on obedience levels. This was a markedly different result to that recorded by Milgram, who found that 7.5% of the participants withdrew from the experiment when they witnessed the confederate doing so. When there were three teachers, comprising two actors who withdrew from the experiment, 30% of the participants also refused. This left just 10% of participants prepared to see the experiment through to the end. Not only were Burger's (2009) findings in contrast to those of Milgram, but the interpretation of results is also limited in that Burger only examined the use of one as opposed two confederates. This is a significant weakness considering the wealth of evidence demonstrating the role of conformity on attitudes and behaviours (Hogg and Vaughan, 2011).

The Relevance of Milgram's Work Today

Milgram's study has a great deal of relevance today, most notably in terms of demonstrating how soldiers might react to orders during war. Even though the Milgram obedience study is considered unethical and not a good representation of obedience (Banyard, 2010), many consider his study to be a true and uninhibited study of obedience. Indeed, his findings demonstrate that if an individual in a position of power guides another individual to commit an unethical act, the person being guided is capable of behaving in ways they would not otherwise contemplate. Furthermore, carrying out evil acts is not necessarily dependent on an individual's character, but the situations they find themselves in. In fact, Milgram's conclusion was that " a substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority" (Milgram 1974, p. 189). This has profound implications in the military, among many other contexts.

The key insight gained from social psychology and, in particular, from Milgram's experiments, is the importance of social influence on obedience. Indeed, Milgram's work has been supported by other researchers. Berkowitz and LePage (1967) demonstrated in a study comprising students who were given electric shocks as task feedback, that more shocks were associated with more anger. In turn, angered participants gave more shocks and the aggressive cue of a gun increased the number of shocks students were willing to give. This highlights the potentially dangerous outcomes inherent within obedience to authority, providing the rationale for understanding this phenomenon as much as research allows.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this critique has provided insight into a classical experiment from the history of psychology, as conducted by Milgram and later replicated by Burger. Despite the moral and ethical implications of these studies, there is a clear need to learn about obedience to authority due to its relevance within today's society. Not only can classical experiments such as those conducted by Milgram assist in understanding human behaviour, but they can also assist in a number of environmental contexts, including schools and the military.

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