

Theories of authority: milgram and zimbardo's experiments



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Question: What do Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo's experiments on obedience and compliance teach us about nature of authority?

The Milgram Obedience experiment, which is also known as the Obedience to Authority Study, is a very well known scientific experiment in social psychology. The concept of the experiment was first discussed in 1963 in the Behavioral Study of Obedience in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* by Yale university psychologist Stanley Milgram and later in his 1974 publication *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. The purpose of this experiment is to test the power of human nature to resist the authority of an authority who gives an order against their conscience. This experiment was regarded as a typical one about the obedience experiment, and it had strong repercussions in the social psychology circle.

The following is some basic processes of the experiment: Milgram first advertised in the newspaper for participants and paid them \$4. 50 for each trial. Forty people, ranging in age from 25 to 50, were recruited to take part in the experiment. They were told they would take part in an experiment to study the effects of punishment on students' learning. In the experiment, two people were paired, one as a student and one as a teacher. Who shall be the student and who shall be the teacher shall be determined by lot. The teacher's task is to read the paired related words. The students must remember the words. Then the student need to choose the correct answer from four opinions after teacher presents a word. If the choice is wrong, the teacher pushes the button and gives the students an electric shock as punishment.

Due to prior arrangement, each group actually had only one participant, and the other was an assistant of the experiment. As a result, the participants were always teachers and the assistants were always students. At the beginning of the experiment, an assistant and a participant were placed in two rooms separated by a wall. Electrodes were attached to the students' arms so that they could be given an electric shock if they made a bad choice. Moreover, the experimenter strapped the " student" to a chair, explaining to the " teacher" that it was to prevent him from escaping. " Teacher" and " student" cannot see each other directly, they use the telecommunication transmission way to keep in touch. There were buttons on a total of 30, imposing electric penalties are marked on the each button it controlled by the voltage, starting from 15 volts, increased to 450 volts in turn. In fact, no shock was actually implemented, in the next room, the experimenter turned on a tape recorder, which played a pre recorded scream paired with the action of a generator. However, to make the participants convinced, they first received a 45-volt electric shock as an experience. Although the experimenter said the shock was mild, it was too much for the participants to bear.

During the experiment, the " student" made many mistakes intentionally. After the " teacher" pointed out his mistakes, he gave electric shock immediately. The " student" groaned repeatedly. As the voltage rises, the " student" shouts and scolds, then begs, kicks and hits the wall, and finally stops yelling, seemingly fainting. At this point, many of the participants expressed a desire to pause the experiment to check on the students. Many participants paused at 135 volts and questioned the purpose of the

experiment. Some went on to take the test after receiving assurances that they were not liable. Some laughed nervously as they heard the students scream. When a participant indicated that he wanted to stop the experiment, the experimenter responded in the following order:

1. Please continue.
2. This experiment needs you to continue. Please continue.
3. It is necessary that you go on.
4. You have no choice, you must go on.

If, after four times of prompting, the participants still wanted to stop, the experiment stopped. Otherwise, the experiment will continue until the punishment voltage applied by the participants increases to the maximum 450 volts and continues for three times.

In this case, 26 participants (65% of the total) obeyed the experimenter's order and persisted until the end of the experiment, but showed varying degrees of nervousness and anxiety. Fourteen others (35% of the total) rebelled and refused to carry out the order, saying it was cruel and immoral. After the experiment, Milgram told the truth to all the participants in order to eliminate their anxiety.

Surprisingly, before the experiment, Milgram had asked his fellow psychologists to predict the outcome of the experiment, and they all agreed that only a few people — 1 in 10 or even 1 percent — would be willing to continue punishing until the maximum volt. As a result, in Milgram's first experiment, 65 percent of the participants (more than 27 out of 40) reached the maximum 450 volts of punishment — even though they all showed

discomfort. Everyone paused and questioned the experiment when the volts reached a certain level, and some even said they wanted to give their money back. None of the participants persisted in stopping before reaching 300 volts. Milgram himself and a number of psychologists around the world have since done similar or different experiments, but with similar results. Dr Thomas Blass of the university of Maryland, Baltimore county, repeated the experiment many times and came up with the result: Regardless of the time and place of the experiment, a certain percentage of participants — 61 percent to 66 percent — were willing to apply a lethal voltage to each experiment.

As Philip Zimbardo recalled, due to little awareness about the experiment, participants who didn't reach the highest volts didn't insist that the experiment itself should end, didn't visit the " student" in the next room, and didn't ask the experimenter for permission to leave.

Milgram stated in his article *The Perils of Obedience* (1974) that the legal and philosophical views of obedience are very significant, but they say little about the actions people take when confronted with practical situations. He designed this experiment at Yale university to test an ordinary citizen's willingness to inflict much or little pain on another human being just because of the orders given by a scientist assisting the experiment. When the authority that led the experiment ordered the participant to harm another person, even more so than the screams of pain the participant had heard, the authority continued to order the participant most of the time, even though the participant was so morally disturbed. Experiments have shown

how willing adults are to submit to almost any measure of power, and we must study and explain this phenomenon as soon as possible.

The experiment itself has raised ethical questions about the science of the experiment, which puts extreme emotional pressure on participants.

Although the experiment led to valuable discoveries in human psychology, many scientists today would consider such experiments unethical. A later survey found that 84% of the participants at the time said they felt “ happy” or “ very happy” to have taken part in the experiment, that 15% of the participants chose to be neutral (92% of the participants did the post-survey), and many of them later thanked Milgram. And Milgram kept getting calls from former participants who wanted to help him with his experiments again, or even to join his research team. However, the experience of the experiment did not change every participant for life. Many participants were not told the details based on modern experimental standards, and exit interviews showed that many participants still did not seem to understand what was going on. The main criticism of experiments is not the ethical controversy of their methods, but the significance they represent. A participant from Yale university in 1961 wrote in the magazine of the Jewish Currents: when he wanted to stop in the middle of as a “ teacher”, is a suspect to “ the whole experiment may be just designed, in order to test an ordinary americans will follow orders against conscience - like Germany during the Nazi period” and this is one of the purpose of the experiment. Milgram, in his book *The Perils of Obedienc e* (1974), said, “ the question we face is how the conditions we create in the laboratory to bring people to power are related to the Nazi era that we deplored.”

An ordinary person, just to get his work done, without any personal malice or enmity, can actually be a tool for a horrific process of destruction. Moreover, when their work makes the destruction process obvious, when the tasks they are asked to perform do not conform to their own moral values, most people are unable to resist the orders of leaders.

On the basis of the first experiment, Milgram further discusses what factors are involved in the generation of obedience behavior. He explored the manipulation of experimental conditions from the subjective and objective dimensions of obedience. The objective conditions of Milgram's operation include many.

Firstly, it is the distance between "teacher" and "student": The distance between teachers and students is divided into four grades, with 40 participants participating in each grade. After analysing the data, the result shows that the closer the "student" is to "teacher", the more the participant refuses to obey, and the farther the distance is, the easier the participant is to obey. Secondly, it is the relationship between the experimenter and the participant. The relationship was divided into three situations: the experimenter and the participant were face to face together; the experimenter left after explaining the task and kept in touch with the participant by telephone; the experimenter was not present, and all instructions were played by a tape recorder. The results showed that in the first case, the participants obeyed three times more than in the other cases. Thirdly, it is the status of the experimenter. The results showed that the higher the status of the experimenters, the higher the number of the "students" who were tested with the strongest electric shock.

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In addition, there are many factors affecting obedience, which can be summarised into three aspects:

(1) the sender of the order. His authority, whether he supervises the execution of orders, affects obedience.

(2) the executor of a command. His moral level, personality characteristics and cultural background will also affect his obedience to orders.

(3) situational factors. For example, whether someone supports his refusal behavior, what is the example behavior of those around him, how is the reward structure set, how is the feedback of his refusal or execution of orders, etc., will also affect the individual's obedience behavior.

In conclusion, just like some social psychologists believe that there are two main reasons why individuals obey behaviors. The first is legal power. We usually think that in certain situations, society has given certain social roles more power, and it is our duty to obey them. For example, students should obey teachers, patients should obey doctors, etc. In the laboratory, participants should obey the experimenter, especially the unfamiliar situation strengthens the participants' readiness to obey the orders of the experimenter. The second is the transfer of responsibility. In general, we have our own sense of responsibility for our own behavior, but if we think that the responsibility for a certain behavior is not our own, especially when a commander takes the initiative to take responsibility, we will think that the leader of the behavior is not our own, but the commander. Therefore, we don't have to be responsible for this behavior, so there's a transfer of

responsibility, and people don't think about the consequences of their behavior.

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