

# Milgram experiment analysis

[Psychology](#), [Psychotherapy](#)



## Milgram's Study of Obedience

The name Stanley Milgram is eponymous with the study of obedience. In his controversial 1970s study of the human behaviour, Milgram (1974) discovered that when under direction from a member of authority, study participants could be instructed to inflict a 450 volt electric shock on another individual..

In one study, Milgram (1974) assigned participants to the role of 'teacher' or 'learner'. Unbeknown to the participants, they would only ever be assigned to the role of teacher. As the teacher, participants were told that they were to investigate the effects of punishment on learning. The teacher administered a learning task to the learner who was based in a different room, and the learner indicated their response through buttons that lit up answer lights on the teacher's side of the wall. When the learners provided incorrect answers, the participants were instructed by the experimenter to administer the learner an electric shock. Again, unbeknown to the participant teachers, the shocks were not actually administered and the learners were acting confederates. The teacher was also instructed to increase the voltage of the electric shock with each wrong answer provided. As the voltage reached 150 volts, the learner would scream cries of protest, which could be heard by the teacher participant through the wall. At 300 volts, the learner refused to answer the question, and at 330 volts they made no response at all to the shock, suggestive of lack of consciousness. Whenever the participant faltered or showed signs of resistance to administering the shock, they would be prompted to continue by the experimenter. The experiment only ended when the teacher refused to administer the shock in response to <https://assignbuster.com/milgram-experiment-analysis/>

instruction after four prompts, or after the maximum shock had been given. In 65% of cases, the participants administered the maximum shock of 450 volts, a shock that was marked on the severity as “XXX”, following the description “Danger: Severe Shock” at 375 volts.

Milgram's (1974) demonstration of the unsettling capabilities of human behaviour presents many questions as to why so many people had not stopped administering the shocks when they knew that the learner was in significant distress. Was it that these individuals would have acted this way whatever the circumstance? Were they examples of the malevolent side of human nature? Or were there many contributing factors about the circumstance that led these individuals to behave in such a way contrary to all expectations of human beneficence? This essay will aim to address these questions through the work of Milgram and his contemporaries.

### Situational Influence

The findings of an earlier study by Milgram (1963) provided evidence that the individuals administering the shocks were not acting out of their own desire for cruelty, but instead were acting in conflict with their wanted or expected behaviour. Milgram (1963) found that administering shocks caused the participants to experience “extreme nervous tension”, demonstrated by sweating, trembling, stuttering, and even nervous laughter.

Burger (2009) proposes that despite the many attempts to interpret the results of Milgram's (1974) experiment, the main point of consensus is the importance of situational forces in influencing an individual's behaviour.

Additionally suggesting that this is something underestimated by most individuals. This was highlighted by the opinions of Yale students and psychiatrists who were unanimous in their belief that virtually no one would continue the experiment to the point of maximal shock (Milgram, 1974).

Burger (2009) suggests a compelling reason as to Milgram's participants were so ready to administer potentially lethal shocks under the instruction of the experimenter; that of the power of authority. The experiment provides a seminal example of the phenomenon of obedience, where individuals conform (often against their will) to an authority figure (Martin & Hewstone, 2009). This obedience to authority in the abandonment of alliance to morality (Elms, 1995) is something that has not only been demonstrated in research studies, observed from the abhorrent crimes committed by those under the rule of Hitler in Nazi Germany (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), to the behaviours of suicidal religious cults. Whilst Milgram's (1974) experimenter had both legitimacy and expertise (Morelli, 1983) with affiliation to the university, the experiment, and to science (Burger, 2009), other obedience has been shown to occur in the absence of this (Blass, 1999), therefore suggesting other situational influences at play.

The importance of the experimenter's expertise may have been of crucial significance in Milgram's (1974) research, in that the scenario was not one that any of the participants had experienced before. Burger (2009) proposes that in the absence of any other sources of information, the participants turn to the reassurance of the experimenter who does not seem perturbed by the cries from the learner and insists on the continuation of the experiment. In

this case, it may be suggested that the participants defer to the expertise of the experimenter, believing that they will instruct the most appropriate action. As purported by Milgram (1974), this has powerful implications for the determining effect of the situation on the action of individuals.

Kolowsky et al. (2001) suggest two types of authority; that derived from soft influences which results from factors within the influencing agent (eg. Credibility and expertise) and that derived from external social structures (such as hierarchy) known as harsh sources. It may be concluded that Milgram's experimenter portrayed both of these, perhaps explaining why the situation induced such high levels of obedience.

Burger (2009) also suggests that the levels of obedience of the participants in Milgram's (1974) experiment may be attributed to the gradual increase in demands of the experimenter. He suggests that the 15-volt increments created a task that gradually increased in demand being put on the participants. Initially participants would provide shocks to the learner causing only a slight discomfort, however, by the end of the experiment, the participants were agreeing to give shocks that were labelled ' Severe'.

Freedman and Fraser (1966) demonstrated the power of the so called ' foot-in-the-door' effect, showing that individuals that first complied with a small, minimally invasive request were more likely to comply with a larger related request. The authors proposed that the situation inflicted a change upon the participants' self-perception, where upon agreeing to the first request they ascribe the traits reflecting their previous actions (ie. I am someone that complies with such requests) which then influences their subsequent actions.

Burger (2009) suggests that the desire for personal consistency may be a factor with such incremental voltage increase, where refusing the 195 volt shock would be difficult having just pressed the 180 volt switch.

The Milgram (1974) experiment also raises the question of the role of responsibility in obedience. Under authority, it may have been that the individuals were able to go ahead with the behaviour due to a diminished sense of responsibility for their actions. Bandura (1999) suggests that this occurs as when not perceiving themselves as the agents of their actions, individuals are therefore spared their self-condemning reactions.

It appears, therefore, that given a different situation, many of the participants in Milgram's (1974) experiment may have acted differently. Questions are raised as to whether they would have committed the same act without a diminished responsibility, or if the experimenter had initially asked them to give the learner the highest voltage shock.

Zimbardo (1972) illustrates the importance of the situation on the influence of human behaviour in his 'Stanford Prison Experiment'. Randomly assigned to be prisoners or guards, participants in Zimbardo's (1972) experiment took on their roles with extremity and haste. With relevance to the behaviour elicited by Milgram in his experiments, the behaviour of the guards is of particular interest. Once given the power-laden role (Zimbardo, 1972), and faced with prisoner rebellion, the guards used physical and psychological tactics to confuse, intimidate, and harass the prisoners. Whilst not obeying any particular authority except for the demands of the experiment, these 'guards' had become blinded by the situation, illustrating how situational

confines can dramatically alter behavioural norms. By day 5 of the experiment, prisoners were withdrawn and behaving in pathological ways. None of the people involved in the experiment called a halt to the experiment, which had, by day 6, become of very questionable morality. In Zimbardo's (1972) experiment, the guards, selected for being representative of the average middle class American, with above average intelligence and emotional stability (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973), displayed anti-social and pathological behaviour, a phenomenon later described by Zimbardo as 'The Lucifer Effect' (Zimbardo, 2007). This was something that Haney et al. (1973) suggested occurred as a result of the pathology of the situation rather than the nature of those that entered it.

With the nature of the situation suggested as such a powerful influence over human obedience, the work of Burger (2009) helps to investigate the factors underlying the phenomenon of such morally deviant behaviour. Burger (2009) replicated the work of Milgram (1974), with the aim of further investigating the situational factors underlying the high levels of obedience to the experimenter in such a scenario. Due to ethical constraints, Burger's (2009) participants were only allowed to continue to the 150 volt shock, at which point the learner confederate would protest greatly and make reference to a heart condition. The experiment ended either if the participant refused to continue, or when they read the next question out to the learner. The study included an added condition in which participants saw a previous participant (who was a confederate) refuse to administer any shocks over 90 volts. The results of Burger's (2009) study showed that in the same situation some 40 years later, individuals still succumb to the situational factors and

obey the experimenter's instructions. Interestingly, Burger (2009) also found that despite seeing another teacher decline to administer any further shocks, and receive no negative consequences, participants took over the shock administration and continued the experiment. He took this as evidence of the power of the situation, where even a small normative influence was not enough use as an inference of how to behave in the situation.

Burger's (2009) research, does however, rely on the assumption that those administering 150 volt shocks would have continued to administer shocks up to the maximum voltage. There may have been individuals that would have stopped after this point that would not have been considered as doing so in the results of the study, which may lead to a false interpretation of individuals' obedience. Despite this, review articles have suggested it to be a convincing alternative end point (Packer, 2008; Miller, 2009). Another issue raised by Miller (2009) regarding Burger's (2009) replication of Milgram's (1974) study, is the screening out of those participants that might experience high degrees of emotion or distress. The effects of this on the results are two-fold. Initially, the experiment therefore is less likely to show any of the adverse emotional effects of conflict which was a particularly powerful finding from Milgram (1974) (Miller, 2009). Additionally, it may be that those participants that would have experienced more emotion and distress were those that would have stopped administering the shocks before 150 volts. It has been suggested that in his quest to provide an ethical replication of Milgram (1974), Burger (2009) may have failed to replicate the experiment at all (Miller, 2009).



Much of the research from Milgram and his contemporaries points to the powerful influences of the situation on behaviour, and this is supported by further evidence from Burger's (2009) replication of the Milgram (1974) experiment. Whilst those with high empathetic concern (as assessed by a personality questionnaire) expressed a greater reluctance to continue administering shocks compared to those with low scores for this trait, they did not refuse to continue at any earlier point. This shows that even individuals that one would consider less likely to commit such actions were influenced by the situational power. It was found, however, that those with a high desire for control were more likely to disobey the experimenter and act on their own feelings, terminating the shocks at an earlier stage than those with less of a desire for control. This was not found in the situation where the other confederate teacher declined to administer any shocks however. This shows that there is some modulation of behaviour as a result of personality, but suggests that the specific influences of personality interact greatly with the situation and context.

## Conclusion

Evidence suggests that the behaviour of obedience is strongly determined by a variety of situational factors, and that the power of these can be so great that individuals will obey an authority figure even regardless of the consequences. Factors of diminished responsibility, credibility and expertise of the experimenter, social hierarchy, and gradual increases in demands have all been shown to increase the likelihood of obedience. These have even been shown to supersede the power of someone disobeying the authority (as in the case of Burger 2009).

The power of situational influence on obedience in society has huge implications. Obedience to an authority can be hugely detrimental as demonstrated by Milgram (1973). These situations appear to most often occur when the authority figure is attributed misplaced expertise and status. For example, obedience to an aeroplane pilot who is in error can have catastrophic consequences (Tarnow, 1999), and dictatorships have resulted in obedience that has led to the suffering of millions throughout history. Obedience does have its role in the functioning of society however, and as an alternative to disobedience, is portrayed as a positive trait from an early age. Most organisations require the obedience to authority as a norm, with an inefficient operation if this was not the case (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). However, again, obedience relies on the authority figure having the morals and interest of society in consideration, as even in the scenario of business, personnel managers have been shown to discriminate against employees on the basis of race when instructed by an authority figure (Brief et al., 1995).

The belief that it is not so much the man, but the situation which determines how he will act (Milgram, 1974) carries a strong onus for creating an authority and situation which promotes what is perceived as 'good' behaviour. It suggests that whilst people may have their own beliefs and morals, these can be easily acted against in certain circumstances. This may explain civilised society's pursuit for rules, regulations and the attributing of individual responsibility. It has disastrous implications however, for a society ruled under the wrong hands.

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