Milgram’s obedience experiment

A controversial experiment on conformity and obedience conducted in the early 1960s.

Stanley Milgram (1933-1984), an American experimental psychologist at Yale University, conducted a series of experiments on conformity and obedience to authority. In these experiments, Milgram recruited subjects—ordinary citizens—through newspaper advertisements offering four dollars for one hour’s participation in a “study of memory.” When the subject arrived at the experimental laboratory, he or she was assigned the role of “teacher,” and asked to read a series of word pairs to another subject, or learner. The teacher-subject then would test the learner’s ability to recall the pairs by reading back the first word in each pair. Whenever the learner made a mistake, the teacher-subject was instructed to administer punishment in the form of electric shock. This instruction, by an authority figure or employer to administer pain to a human being, is at the heart of the controversy.

The teacher-subject watched as the learner was strapped into a chair and an electrode was attached to the learner’s wrist. The teacher was encouraged by the experimenters to continue to administer the shocks. Milgram found that the 65 percent of the teacher-subjects would continue to do what they were told, even though the learners could be heard pleading and screaming, and concluded that most people will follow the instructions of an authority figure as long as they consider the authority as legitimate. Many psychologists and others questioned the ethics of conducting such experiments, where participants were encouraged, in the name of scientific experimentation, to inflict pain on others. Another aspect of the controversy surrounding Milgram’s work focused on the implications of his findings for the future of societies and their authority figures.

Further Reading


Stanley Milgram

1933-1984

American experimental social psychologist known for his innovative experimental techniques.

Stanley Milgram carried out influential and controversial experiments that demonstrated that blind obedience to authority could override moral conscience. His early studies on conformity were the first experiments to compare behavioral differences between people from different parts of the world. Milgram also examined the effects of television violence, studied whether New York City subway riders would give up their seats if asked to do so, and made award-winning documentary films.

Milgram, born in 1933 in the Bronx, New York, was the son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, Samuel Milgram, a baker, and Adele Israel. Growing up in the Bronx, with an older sister and a younger brother, Milgram attended James Monroe High School and graduated from Queens College in 1954. He had a majored in political science and planned to enter the School of International Affairs at Columbia University to prepare for the Foreign Service. Instead, he enrolled in Harvard University’s new interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations. There, Gordon Allport became his mentor and a series of fellowships enabled him to earn his Ph.D. in social psychology in 1960.

At Harvard, Milgram became Solomon E. Asch’s teaching assistant. Asch was applying Gestalt psychology to social relations and designing experiments to examine conformity. For his doctoral research, Milgram spent a year in Norway and a year in France, exploring the cultural differences in conformity. He found that pressure for conformity was greater for Norwegians than for the French. After returning from France, Milgram worked with Asch at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey.

Moving to Yale University in 1960, as an assistant professor of psychology, Milgram began his experiments on obedience, with funding from the National Science Foundation. Much to his surprise, he found that 65% of his subjects would inflict what they believed to be painful electric shocks on others, simply because they were told to do so.

Milgram married Alexandra “Sasha” Menkin, a psychiatric social worker, in 1961 and the couple eventually had a daughter and a son. Returning to the Department of
Social Relations at Harvard in 1963 as an assistant professor of social psychology, Milgram used his “lost-letter technique” to study people’s inclinations to help others when it wasn’t required. These experiments examined whether subjects would re-mail lost letters. Milgram also addressed the “small-world problem,” determining that any two individuals in the United States could reach each other via an average of five acquaintances.

In 1967, Milgram moved to the Graduate Center of the City University of New York as professor and chairman of the social psychology program. In 1970 he published “The Experience of Living in Cities,” which had a major influence on the new field of urban psychology. He also examined how residents of New York and Paris perceived the geographies of their cities. One of Milgram’s most unique social experiments, designed to study the effects of television violence, involved an episode of the CBS program “Medical Center,” with subjects viewing one of three endings. He found that viewers watching a violent ending were no more likely than others to commit an antisocial act when given the opportunity. He also performed experiments with “cyranoids,” intermediaries who communicated with someone using words from a third person. He found, for example, that listeners never suspected that an 11-year-old cyranoid’s words were actually those of a 50-year-old professor. In 1980, in the midst of these experiments, Milgram suffered the first of a series of massive heart attacks. He died of his fifth heart attack in New York City in 1984, at the age of 51.

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Further Reading

The psychology of military organization

Military psychologists are intimately involved in testing recruits for intelligence and aptitude for military specializations, and helping to find more effective ways of training them. A critical subset of such testing focuses on identifying and optimally training officers and other leaders—a task that many practitioners admit is as much art as science.

A whole field of study revolves around what military psychologists call group cohesion—the difficult-to-quantify spirit of camaraderie, mutual trust, and confidence soldiers have in their unit. Studies have linked high group cohesion to soldiers performing better both as a team and individually; soldiers in units with good group cohesion are less likely to suffer psychological disability after combat.

Another military psychology subspecialty identifies people who might prove emotionally unstable in military life; in the nuclear era, this type of testing is especially crucial. In addition, military personnel who are privy to classified information are screened for psychological conditions that might make them a security risk.

One of the most controversial areas in military psychology concerns the integration of nontraditional groups into the often-conservative military society. Through World War II and Korea, military psychologists helped confirm that African Americans could be integrated into white units successfully. Today, military psychologists are trying to find ways to ease the introduction of women into front-line units; some psychologists consider acceptance of gay troops as a future goal.

The psychology of military life

Military life places unique stresses on individuals and their families. Aside from the possibility of being wounded or killed in combat, military service often involves long hours of work, extended absences from home, and frequent transfer across the globe.

Some military psychologists research the sources of marital discord among military families; interestingly enough, some studies suggest that military life doesn’t destabilize families, but it can bring already unstable families to the breaking point. In some respects, clinical military psychology is not very different from civilian family practice, since military psychologists may treat both soldiers and their civilian spouses and children.

The military has traditionally taken a harsh stance with soldiers who risk their own and their comrades’ lives by abusing alcohol; but the macho culture has often worked at cross-purpose to that stance. In Vietnam, abuse of other drugs also became far more prevalent...