

Milgram Experiment - Obedience to Authority

The Stanley Milgram Experiment was created to explain some of the concentration camp-horrors of the World War 2, where Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, Slavs and other enemies of the state were slaughtered by Nazis.

Do as you're told

Many war-criminals claimed they were merely following orders and could not be held responsible for their actions, in the trials following the World War 2.

Were the Germans in fact evil and cold-hearted, or is this a group phenomenon which could happen to anyone, given the right conditions?

Preparation of the Stanley Milgram Experiment

The psychologist Stanley Milgram created an electric 'shock generator' with 30 switches. The switch was marked clearly in 15 volt increments, ranging from 15 to 450 volts.

He also placed labels indicating the shock level, such as 'Moderate' (75-120 Volts) and 'Strong' (135-180 Volts). The switches 375-420 Volts were marked 'Danger: Severe Shock' and the two highest levels 435-450, was marked 'XXX'.

The 'shock generator' was in fact phony and would only produce sound when the switches were pressed.

40 subjects (males) were recruited via mail and a newspaper ad. They thought they were going to participate in an experiment about 'memory and learning'.

In the test, each subject was informed clearly that their payment was for showing up, and they could keep the payment "no matter what happens after they arrive[d]".

Next, the subject met an 'experimenter', the person leading the experiment, and another person told to be another subject. The other subject was in fact a confederate acting as a subject. He was a 47 year old male accountant.

The two subjects (the real subject and the con-subject) drew slips of paper to indicate who was going to be a 'teacher' and who was going to be a 'learner'. The lottery was in fact a set-up, and the real subject would always get the role of 'the teacher'.

The teacher saw that the learner was strapped to a chair and electrodes were attached. The subject was then seated in another room in front of the shock generator, unable to see the learner.

Research Question

The [Stanley Milgram Experiment](#) aimed at getting an answer to the question:

“For how long will someone continue to give shocks to another person if they are told to do so, even if they thought they could be seriously hurt?” (the [dependent variable](#))

Remember that they had met the other person, a likable stranger, and that they thought that it could very well be them who were in the learner-position receiving shocks.

The Experiment

The subject was instructed to teach word-pairs to the learner. When the learner made a mistake, the subject was instructed to punish the learner by giving him a shock, 15 volts higher for each mistake.

The learner never received the shocks, but pre-taped audio was triggered when a shock-switch was pressed.

If the experimenter, seated in the same room, was contacted, the experimenter would answer with predefined 'prods' ("Please continue", "Please go on", "The experiment requires that you go on", "It is absolutely essential that you continue", "You have no other choice, you must go on"), starting with the mild prods, and making it more authoritarian for each time the subject contacted the experimenter.

If the subject asked who was responsible if anything would happen to the learner, the experimenter answered "I am responsible". This gave the subject a relief and many continued.

Results

During the Stanley Milgram Experiment, many subjects showed signs of tension. 3 subjects had "full-blown, uncontrollable seizures".

Although most subjects were uncomfortable doing it, all 40 subjects obeyed up to 300 volts.

25 of the 40 subjects continued to complete to give shocks until the maximum level of 450 volts was reached.

Conclusion - Obedience to Authority

Before the Stanley Milgram Experiment, experts thought that about 1-3 % of the subjects would not stop giving shocks. They thought that you'd have to be pathological or a psychopath to do so.

Still, 65 % never stopped giving shocks. None stopped when the learner said he had heart-trouble. How could that be? We now believe that it has to do with our almost innate behavior that we should do as told, especially from authority persons.