

The Milgram Experiment

A lesson in depravity, the power of authority, and peer pressure

The world was stunned with the happenings in Nazi Germany and their acquired surrounding territories that came out during the Eichmann Trials which were held in Jerusalem in 1961. Eichmann, a high ranking official of the Nazi Party, was on trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Stanley Milgram (a Ph.D. student) devised a series of experiments to answer this question: "Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?"

Milgram's work began at Harvard where he was working towards his Ph.D. The experiments on which his initial research was based were done at Yale from 1961-1962.

A Description of the Experiment

In response to a newspaper ad offering \$4.50 for one hour's work, an individual was asked to take part in a Psychology experiment investigating memory and learning. He was introduced to a stern looking experimenter in a white coat and a rather pleasant and friendly co-subject. The experimenter explained that the experiment will look into the role of punishment in learning, and that one will be the "teacher" and one will be the "learner" (or "student"). Lots were drawn to determine roles, and it was decided that the individual who answered the ad will become the "teacher."

The "learner" (student) was then taken to a room where he was strapped in a chair to prevent movement and an electrode was placed on his arm. Next, the "teacher" was taken to an adjoining room which contains a generator. The "teacher" was instructed to read a list of two word pairs and ask the "learner" to read them back. If the "learner" got the answer correct, then they moved on to the next word. If the answer was incorrect, the "teacher" was supposed to shock the "learner" starting at 15 volts.

The generator has 30 switches in 15 volt increments, each was labeled with a voltage ranging from 15 up to 450 volts. Each switch also has a rating, ranging from "slight shock" to "danger: severe shock". The final two switches were labeled "XXX". The "teacher" was supposed to increase the shock each time the "learner" missed a word in the list. Although the "teacher" thought that he/she was administering shocks to the "learner", the "learner" was actually an actor who never experienced the shocks. (The drawing of lots was rigged, so that the actor would always end up as the "learner.")

After a number of voltage level increases, the actor started to bang on the wall that separated him from the subject. After several times banging on the wall and complaining about a heart condition, all responses by the "learner" ceased. At times, the worried

"teacher" questioned the "experimenter," asking who was responsible for any harmful effects resulting from shocking the learner at such a high level. Upon receiving the answer that the "experimenter" assumed full responsibility, the "teacher" seemed to accept the response and continue shocking, even though some were obviously extremely uncomfortable in doing so.

Results

Today the field of psychology would deem this study highly unethical but, it revealed some extremely important findings. The theory that only the most severe monsters on the sadistic fringe of society would inflict cruelty is disproven. Findings showed that, "two-thirds of this study's participants fall into the category of "obedient" subjects, and that they represent ordinary people drawn from the working, managerial, and professional classes (*Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*)." Ultimately 65% of all of the "teachers" punished the "learners" to the maximum 450 volts. No subject stopped before reaching 300 volts!

Milgram wrote about his findings in his 1974 book, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*:

The legal and philosophic aspects of obedience are of enormous importance, but they say very little about how most people behave in concrete situations. I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist. Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' [participants'] strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' [participants'] ears ringing with the screams of the victims. Authority won more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation. Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.

Variations and Follow-up

Milgram also conducted several follow-up experiments to determine what might change the likelihood of maximum shock delivery. In one condition, the touch-proximity condition, the teacher was required to hold the hand of the learner on a "shock plate" in order to give him shocks above 150 volts.

The most amazing thing to note from this follow-up experiment is that 32% of the subjects in the proximity-touch condition held the hand of the learner on the shock plate

while administering shocks in excess of 400 volts! Further experiments showed that teachers were less obedient when the experimenter communicated with them via the telephone versus in person (compliance decreased to 21 percent), and females were just as likely to be obedient as males, although females tended to be more nervous.

Milgram's obedience experiment was replicated by other researchers. The experiments spanned a 25-year period from 1961 to 1985 and have been repeated in Australia, South Africa and in several European countries. The percentage of participants who are prepared to inflict fatal voltages remains remarkably constant, 61–66 percent, regardless of time or place.

The Milgram Experiment and Peer Pressure

Milgram's experiment was about obedience to authority. Do his experiments teach us anything about the power of peer pressure? Yes, for three reasons.

First, a "peer" is defined as "one belonging to the same societal group especially based on age, grade, or status" (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 29 May 2008). While a peer group contains people of the same societal group, peer groups usually contain hierarchies as well -- that is, someone in the group who is viewed as an authority of the group. This person may be the "jock" in the gym class or the "popular cheerleader" or "my best friend" or a "fellow coworker who is a friend of the boss," but peer groups usually contain authority figures. So Milgram's research does give us some insight into the dynamics of peer pressure when an authority of the group is involved.

Secondly, Milgram conducted 19 different variations of his experiment. In two of these variations Milgram combined the power of authority with that of peer conformity. In those experiments, the "teacher" (the participant) was joined by one or two additional "teachers" (actors, like the "learner"). The behavior of the participants' peers strongly affected the results. In Variation 17, when two additional teachers refused to comply with the experimenter, only 10% of the participants continued to shock to the maximum 450 volts. In other words, peer pressure (two other "teachers" refusing to go along) helped participants resist authority. (The addition of only one "teacher" who refused to comply had less affect on the participant.)

In Variation 18, the participant performed a secondary task (reading the questions via microphone or recording the learner's answers). Another "teacher" (an actor) fully complied with the experimenter's orders. In that variation, 86% of the participants continued to go all the way through the experiment (reading the questions or recording the answers) while their fellow-teacher shocked the learner. In other words, peer pressure made the participants more willing to be destructive.

Thirdly, Professor Milgram himself saw implications for peer pressure in the results. In his book *Obedience to Authority*, he elaborated two theories to explain his results:

The first is the *theory of conformism*, based on Solomon Asch's work, describing the fundamental relationship between the group of reference and the individual person: "A subject who has neither ability nor expertise to make decisions, especially in a crisis, will leave decision making to the group and its hierarchy. The group is the person's behavioral model."

The second is the *agentic state theory*, where, according to Milgram, "the essence of obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes, and he therefore no longer sees himself as responsible for his actions. Once this critical shift of viewpoint has occurred in the person, all of the essential features of obedience follow."

Both of the theories that Milgram proposed have implications for training our children (or ourselves) to resist destructive peer pressure.

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