

# Milgrams Experiment on Obedience to Authority

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Why is it so many people obey when they feel coerced? Social psychologist Stanley Milgram researched the effect of authority on obedience. He concluded people obey either out of fear or out of a desire to appear cooperative--even when acting against their own better judgment and desires. Milgram's classic yet controversial experiment illustrates people's reluctance to confront those who abuse power. It is my opinion that Milgram's book should be required reading (see References below) for anyone in supervisory or management positions.

Milgram recruited subjects for his experiments from various walks in life. Respondents were told the experiment would study the effects of punishment on learning ability. They were offered a token cash award for participating. Although respondents thought they had an equal chance of playing the role of a student or of a teacher, the process was rigged so all respondents ended up playing the teacher. The learner was an actor working as a cohort of the experimenter.

"Teachers" were asked to administer increasingly severe electric shocks to the "learner" when questions were answered incorrectly. In reality, the only electric shocks delivered in the experiment were single 45-volt shock samples given to each teacher. This was done to give teachers a feeling for the jolts they thought they would be discharging. Shock levels were labeled from 15 to 450 volts. Besides the numerical scale, verbal anchors added to the frightful appearance of the instrument. Beginning from the lower end, jolt levels were labeled: "slight shock," "moderate shock," "strong shock," "very strong shock," "intense shock," and "extreme intensity shock." The next two anchors were "Danger: Severe Shock," and, past that, a simple but ghastly "XXX."

In response to the supposed jolts, the "learner" (actor) would begin to grunt at 75 volts; complain at 120 volts; ask to be released at 150 volts; plead with increasing vigor, next; and let out agonized screams at 285 volts. Eventually, in desperation, the learner was to yell loudly and complain of heart pain.

At some point the actor would refuse to answer any more questions. Finally, at 330 volts the actor would be totally silent--that is, if any of the teacher participants got so far without rebelling first.

Teachers were instructed to treat silence as an incorrect answer and apply the next shock level to the student.

If at any point the innocent teacher hesitated to inflict the shocks, the experimenter would pressure him to proceed. Such demands would take the form of increasingly

severe statements, such as "The experiment *requires* that you continue."

What do you think was the average voltage given by teachers before they refused to administer further shocks? What percentage of teachers, if any, do you think went up to the maximum voltage of 450?

*Results from the experiment.* Some teachers refused to continue with the shocks early on, despite urging from the experimenter. This is the type of response Milgram expected as the norm. But Milgram was shocked to find those who questioned authority were in the minority. Sixty-five percent (65%) of the teachers were willing to progress to the maximum voltage level.

Participants demonstrated a range of negative emotions about continuing. Some pleaded with the learner, asking the actor to answer questions carefully. Others started to laugh nervously and act strangely in diverse ways. Some subjects appeared cold, hopeless, somber, or arrogant. Some thought they had killed the learner. Nevertheless, participants continued to obey, discharging the full shock to learners. One man who wanted to abandon the experiment was told the experiment must continue. Instead of challenging the decision of the experimenter, he proceeded, repeating to himself, "Its got to go on, its got to go on."

Milgram's experiment included a number of variations. In one, the learner was not only visible but teachers were asked to force the learner's hand to the shock plate so they could deliver the punishment. Less obedience was extracted from subjects in this case. In another variation, teachers were instructed to apply whatever voltage they desired to incorrect answers. Teachers averaged 83 volts, and only 2.5 percent of participants used the full 450 volts available. This shows most participants were good, average people, not evil individuals. They obeyed only under coercion.

In general, more submission was elicited from "teachers" when (1) the authority figure was in close proximity; (2) teachers felt they could pass on responsibility to others; and (3) experiments took place under the auspices of a respected organization.

Participants were debriefed after the experiment and showed much relief at finding they had not harmed the student. One cried from emotion when he saw the student alive, and explained that he thought he had killed him. But what was different about those who obeyed and those who rebelled? Milgram divided participants into three categories:

*Obeyed but justified themselves.* Some obedient participants gave up responsibility for their actions, blaming the experimenter. If anything had happened to the learner, they reasoned, it would have been the experimenter's fault. Others had transferred the blame to the learner: "He was so stupid and stubborn he deserved to be shocked."

*Obeyed but blamed themselves.* Others felt badly about what they had done and were quite harsh on themselves. Members of this group would, perhaps, be more likely to challenge authority if confronted with a similar situation in the future.

*Rebelled.* Finally, rebellious subjects questioned the authority of the experimenter and argued there was a greater ethical imperative calling for the protection of the learner over the needs of the experimenter. Some of these individuals felt they were accountable to a higher authority.

Why were those who challenged authority in the minority? So entrenched is obedience

it may void personal codes of conduct.

## References

Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York: Harper and Row. An excellent presentation of Milgrams work is also found in Brown, R. (1986). Social Forces in Obedience and Rebellion. *Social Psychology: The Second Edition*. New York: The Free Press.

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