



THE MILGRAM'S EXPERIMENT

In 1962, Stanley Milgram shocked the world with his study on obedience. To test his theories, he invented an electronic box that would become a window into human cruelty.

In ascending order, a row of buttons marked the amount of voltage one person would inflict upon another.

Milgram's original motive for the experiment was to understand the unthinkable: how could the German people permit the extermination of the Jews?

“MILGRAM”: When I learn of incidents such as the massacre of millions of men, women and children perpetrated by the Nazis in World War II, how is it possible, I ask myself, that ordinary people, both courteous and decent in everyday life, can act callously, inhumanely, without any limitations of conscience?

Now there are some studies in my discipline, social psychology, that seem to provide a clue to this question.

M YELLING: [UI].

CROWD: [UI].

“MILGRAM”: The problem I wanted to study was a little different; it went a little bit further. It was the issue of authority. Under what conditions would a person obey authority who commanded actions that went against conscience? These are exactly the questions that I wanted to investigate at Yale University.

ANOTHER NARRATOR: It is May 1962. An experiment is being conducted in the elegant interaction laboratory at Yale University. The subjects are 40 males between the ages of 20 and 50, residing in the greater New Haven area.

M: Psychologists have developed several theories to explain how people learn. One theory is that people learn things correctly whenever they get punished for making a mistake.

NARRATOR: Forty years later, Milgram's infamous experiment, Obedience, is still taught in classrooms around the world.

RESEARCHER: Would you open those, and tell me which of you is which, please?

M: Teacher.

M: Learner.

RESEARCHER: All right now, the next thing we'll have to do is set the learner up, so that he can get some sort of punishment.

M: What inspired [uh] Milgram, I would say there were a number of factors. One of them is he was very ambitious. He wanted to make a mark in social psychology. And he wanted, ah, as he wrote to one friend, he wanted to come up with the most, with the boldest experiment that he could think of.

RESEARCHER: Would you roll up your right sleeve, please?

This electrode is connected to the shock generator in the next room. And this electrode paste is to provide a good contact, to avoid any blister or burn.

Do you have any questions now, before we go into the next room?

“VICTIM”: About two years ago, I was in the Veterans Hospital in West Haven.

RESEARCHER: Um hm.

“VICTIM”: And while there, they detected a heart condition. Nothing serious. But as long as I’m having these shocks, um, how strong are they? How dangerous are they?

RESEARCHER: Well, no. Although they may be painful, they’re not dangerous. Anything else?

“VICTIM”: No, that’s all.

RESEARCHER: All right. Teacher, would you take the test, and be seated in front of the shock generator, please, in the next room?

NARRATOR: But the experiment was rigged.

ANOTHER NARRATOR: The victim was an accomplice of the experimenter. The victim, according to plan, provided many wrong answers. His verbal responses were standardized on tape, and each protest was coordinated to a particular voltage level on the shock generator.

M: Now as teacher, you were seated in front of this impressive-looking instrument, the shock generator. Its essential feature is a line of switches that goes from 15 volts to 450 volts, and a set of verbal designations that goes from slight shock to moderate shock; strong shock, very strong shock; intense shock; extreme intensity shock; and finally, XXX — danger, severe shock.

Your job, the experimenter explains to you, is to teach the learner a simple word-pair test. If he gets each answer correctly, fine, you move on to the next pair. But if he makes a mistake, you are instructed to give an electric shock, starting with 15 volts {BUZZ}. And you increase the shock one step on each error. {BUZZ}

SUBJECT: Incorrect. You’ll now get a shock of 105 volts. {BUZZ}

“VICTIM”: Unh!

M: Hard head. Just how far can you go on this thing?

RESEARCHER: As far as is necessary.

SUBJECT: What do you mean, as far as is necessary?

RESEARCHER: To complete the test.

DR. THOMAS BLASS: Milgram was very much aware that obedience is a necessary ingredient for society to function. But he focused on the darker side of obedience.

{BUZZ}

SUBJECT: Incorrect. Hundred and fifty volts.

{SHOCK}

“VICTIM”: Unh!

SUBJECT: Sad face.

“VICTIM”: [UI]. That’s all! Get me out of here! I told you I had heart trouble! My heart’s starting to bother me now!

RESEARCHER: It’s absolutely essential that you continue. You have no other choice, Teacher.

SUBJECT: Oh, I have a lot of choices. My number-one choice is that I wouldn’t go on if I thought he was being harmed.

M: Now this man makes disobedience seem a very rational and simple deed. Our other subjects respond quite differently to the experimenter’s authority.

{BUZZ}

SUBJECT: Wrong. It’s hair. Seventy five volts, [Jim].

{BUZZ}

“VICTIM”: Unh!

SUBJECT: [UI].

RESEARCHER: Please continue.

M: Some psychologists were troubled by the ethics of it. Many, if not most subjects found it a highly stressful, conflicted experience. The people are stammering, stuttering, laughing hysterically, inappropriately.

SUBJECT: A hundred and fifty volts. {BUZZ}

“VICTIM”: Uhhh! Experimenter! That’s all! Get me out of here! I told you I had heart trouble. My heart’s starting to bother me now! Get me out of here, please! Let me out of here! You have no right to keep me here! Let me out! Let me out of here! Let me out!

RESEARCHER: Continue, please.

“VICTIM”: Let me out of here! My heart’s bothering me! Let me out!

RESEARCHER: Go on.

SUBJECT: [If you’re] responsible for it.

DR. THOMAS BLASS: Clearly, you know, when we see people went to the top of the shock board, it wasn’t like they were goin’ blithely, sadistically. People went stop and go, stop and go. They were in a state of conflict, which was, created a tremendous amount of stress. So that was the main critique.

SUBJECT: This will be at 330. {BUZZ}

“VICTIM”: Owwww!

SUBJECT INTERVIEW: As his voice began to show increasing frustration, uh, so did I. And I was really in a state of, uh, real conflict and agitation. One of Stanley Milgram’s basic contributions was that you don’t ask people what they would do, given this hypothetical situation; you put them in the situation.

{BUZZ}

SUBJECT: Wrong!

HERBERT [WEINER]: Wrong! I’m up to a hundred and eighty volts.

RESEARCHER: Please continue, teacher.

SUBJECT: A hundred and eighty volts? {Zap}

“VICTIM”: Ow!! I can’t stand the pain! Let me out of here!

SUBJECT: He, he can’t stand it. Uh, I’m not gonna kill that man there.

DR. THOMAS BLASS: Ac-, according to Milgram, one of the things that’s a prerequisite for carrying out acts that are evil is to shed responsibility from your shoulders, and, and hand it over to a person in charge.

SUBJECT: I mean, who’s gonna take the responsibility if anything happens to that gentleman?

RESEARCHER: I’m responsible for anything that happens here. Continue, please.

SUBJECT: All right, [UI] slow.

DR. THOMAS BLASS: He didn’t hold any gun to anybody’s head. Just the fact that he conveyed a sense of r-, authority. Roughly 60, 65 percent of the people went all the way to the top of the shock board.

SUBJECT: Four hundred fifty volts. {BUZZ} That’s it.

RESEARCHER: Now continue, using the last switch on the board, please, the 450 switch, for each wrong answer. Continue, please.

SUBJECT: Ah, I’m not gettin’ no answer. Don’t the man’s health mean anything?

RESEARCHER: Whether the learner likes it or not, we must..

SUBJECT: Well he might be dead in there.

M: Milgram made the point, I think very effectively, that the Nazis weren’t all a bunch of psychopaths at Belsen, and Dachau; that you could staff a death camp from the middle class in New Haven.

M: Well, who was actually pushing the switch?

SUBJECT: I was. But he kept insistin’. I told him no, but he said, it’s gotta keep goin’.

M: What kind of obedience would Milgram get today, if he were to do the experiment today?

F: Probably about the same.

M: Probably about the same. Why?

F: I don’t know. I think people are just inherently obedient. It just really shows, like how far human beings will go to appease what they perceive to be a authority figure.

M: Milgram has identified one of the constants, one of the universals, of social behavior: the readiness to obey authority cuts across time. It’s a constant.

The other outstanding and distinctive thing about the obedience experiment is how much it has and keeps on permeating contemporary culture, uh, and thought. It’s still with us, in very, very important ways.