

## THE OBEDIENCE STUDY

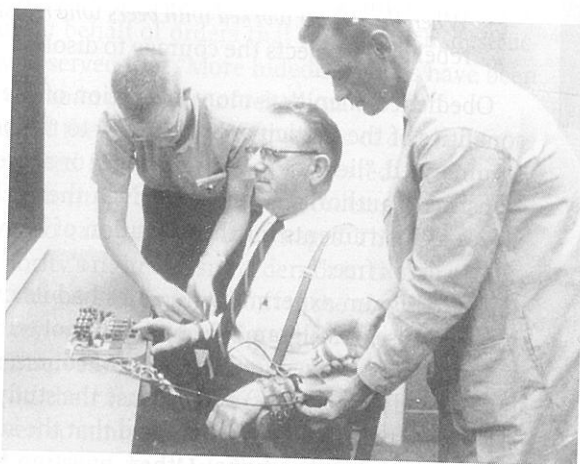
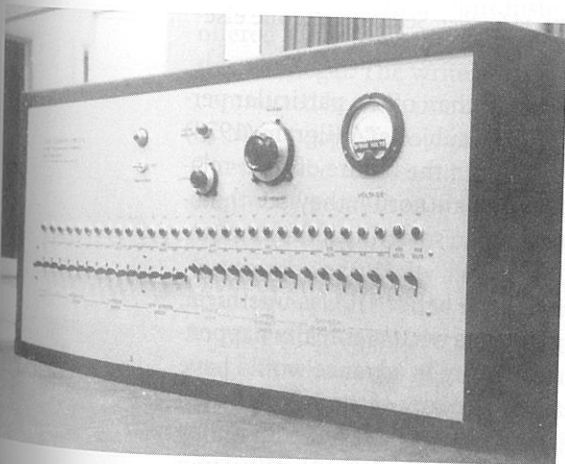
In the early 1960s, Stanley Milgram (1963, 1974) designed a study that was to become one of the most famous in all of psychology. Milgram wanted to know how many people would obey an authority figure when ordered to violate their own ethical standards. Participants in the study, however, thought they were part of an experiment on the effects of punishment on learning. Each was assigned, apparently at random, to the role of “teacher.” Another person, introduced as a fellow volunteer, was the “learner.” Whenever the learner, seated in an adjoining room, made an error in reciting a list of word pairs he was supposed to have memorized, the teacher had to give him an electric shock by depressing a lever on a machine (see Figure 17.1). With each error, the voltage (marked from 0 to 450) was to be increased by another 15 volts. The shock levels on the machine were labeled from SLIGHT SHOCK to DANGER—SEVERE SHOCK and, finally, ominously, XXX. In reality, the learners were confederates of Milgram and did *not* receive any shocks, but none of the teachers ever realized this during the experiment. The actor-victims played their parts convincingly: As the study continued, they shouted in pain and pleaded to be released, all according to a pre-arranged script.

When Milgram first designed this experiment, he asked a number of psychiatrists, students, and middle-class adults how many people they thought would “go all the way” to XXX on orders from the experimenter. The psychiatrists predicted that most people would refuse to go beyond 150 volts, the point at which the learner first demanded to be freed, and that only one person in a thousand—someone who was emotionally disturbed and sadistic—would administer the highest voltage. The non-professionals agreed with this prediction, and all of them said that they personally would disobey early in the experiment.



### ASK QUESTIONS

jot down your best guess in answering these three questions: (1) What percentage of people are sadistic? (2) If told by an authority to harm an innocent person, what percentage of people would do it? (3) If *you* were instructed to harm an innocent person, would you do it, or would you refuse?



**Figure 17.1**

### The Milgram Obedience Experiment

On the left is Milgram's original shock machine; in 1963, it looked pretty ominous. On the right, the “learner” is being strapped into his chair by the experimenter and the “teacher.”

In fact, however, every subject administered some shock to the learner, and about two-thirds, of all ages and from all walks of life, obeyed the experimenter to the fullest extent. They obeyed no matter how much the victim shouted for them to stop and no matter how painful the shocks seemed to be. They obeyed even when they themselves were anguished about the pain they believed they were causing. They obeyed even as they wept, implored the experimenter to release them from further participation, and argued with themselves. Milgram (1974) noted that many would “sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan, and dig their fingernails into their flesh”; many protested to the experimenter, but they backed down when he merely asserted, “The experiment requires that you continue.”

More than 1,000 participants at several universities eventually went through the Milgram experiment. Most of them, men and women equally, inflicted what they thought were dangerous amounts of shock to another person. (Seven of eight subsequent American replications of the study also found the obedience rates of men and women to be identical [Blass, 1993].) Researchers in at least eight other countries have likewise found high percentages of obedience, ranging to more than 90 percent in Spain and the Netherlands (Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1995; Smith & Bond, 1994).

Milgram and his team subsequently set up several variations of the basic experiment to determine the conditions under which people might disobey the experimenter. They found that virtually *nothing the victim did or said changed the likelihood of the person's compliance*—even when the victim said he had a heart condition, screamed in agony, or stopped responding entirely, as if he had collapsed. However, people were more likely to disobey under the following conditions:

- *When the experimenter left the room.* Many people then subverted authority by giving low levels of shock but reporting that they had followed orders.
- *When the victim was right there in the room,* and the teacher had to administer the shock directly to the victim's body.
- *When two experimenters issued conflicting demands* to continue the experiment or to stop at once. In this case, no one kept inflicting shock.
- *When the person ordering them to continue was an ordinary man,* apparently another volunteer, instead of the authoritative experimenter.
- *When the subject worked with peers who refused to go further.* Seeing someone else rebel gave subjects the courage to disobey.

Obedience, then, was more a function of the situation than of the particular personalities of the participants. “The key to the behavior of subjects,” Milgram (1974) summarized, “lies not in pent-up anger or aggression but in the nature of their relationship to authority. They have given themselves to the authority; they see themselves as instruments for the execution of his wishes; once so defined, they are unable to break free.”

The Milgram experiment, too, has had its critics. Some believe it was unethical, both because of Milgram's deception in not telling subjects what was really happening until after the session was over (of course, such honesty in advance would have invalidated the findings) and because the study caused so many of the subjects such emotional pain (Milgram countered that the subjects wouldn't have felt pain if they had disobeyed instructions). Others question Milgram's assertion that the situation often overrules personality; certain personality traits, such as hostility and authoritarianism, do predict obedience to authority in real life (Blass, 1993). Some psychologists strenuously disagree with those who have equated the behavior of Milgram's participants with that of Nazi doctors, concentration-camp executioners, and soldiers who perpetrate massacres. As John Darley (1995) put it, Milgram's subjects



In the “touch-proximity” variation of Milgram's experiment, the “teacher” had to administer shock directly to the learner. Here, a subject continues to obey, but most in this condition did not.

obeyed only when the experimenter was hovering right there, and many of them felt enormous discomfort and pain; in contrast, he notes, the defining characteristics of those who commit atrocities is that they do so without supervision by authorities, without external pressure, and without feelings of anguish.

Nevertheless, this experiment had a tremendous influence on public awareness of the dangers of uncritical obedience. As Darley himself observed, "Milgram shows us the beginning of a path by means of which ordinary people, in the grip of social forces, become the origins of atrocities in the real world."

## THE POWER OF ROLES

In spite of their limitations, the three imaginative studies we have described vividly demonstrate the power of social roles and obligations to influence the behavior of individuals. The behavior of the prisoners and guards varied; some prisoners were more rebellious than others, some guards were more abusive than others. But, ultimately, what the students did depended on the roles they were assigned. Regardless of their personal feelings, staff members at the mental hospitals, from psychiatrists at the top to ward attendants at the bottom, had to adapt to the structure of the institution. And whatever their personal traits, when people in the Milgram experiment believed they had to follow the legitimate orders of authority, most of them put their private values aside.

Obedience, of course, is not always harmful or bad. A certain amount of routine compliance with rules is necessary for any group to function, and obedience to authority can have constructive results as well as destructive ones (Darley, 1995). That is why all societies set penalties, from a mild fine to life in prison, on those who fail to obey the law—indeed, some societies impose the death penalty. All groups impose consequences, from mild censure to outright banishment, on those who fail to obey the group's everyday norms and rules. A nation could not operate if all its citizens ignored traffic signals, cheated on their taxes, dumped garbage wherever they chose, or assaulted each other. An organization could not function if its members "did their own thing," working only when they felt like it. But obedience also has a darker aspect. Throughout history, the plea "I was only following orders" has been offered to excuse actions carried out on behalf of orders that were foolish, destructive, or illegal. The writer C. P. Snow observed that "More hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than in the name of rebellion."

Most people follow orders because of the obvious consequences of disobedience: They can be suspended from school, fired from their jobs, or arrested. In addition, they obey because they respect the authority who is giving the orders; because they want to be liked; or because they hope to gain personal advantages. They obey without thinking critically about the authority's right to issue orders or in the confidence that the authority knows more than they do. But what about those obedient people in Milgram's experiment who felt they were doing wrong, who wished they were free, but who could not untangle themselves from the cobweb of social constraints? Why do people obey when it is not in their interests, or when obedience requires them to ignore their own values or even commit a crime?

Social psychologists Herbert Kelman and Lee Hamilton (1989) have studied "crimes of obedience," ranging from military massacres of civilians to bureaucratic crimes such as Watergate and the Iran-Contra scandal (in which Ronald Reagan's administration, against the express wishes of Congress, illegally sold arms to Iran in order to fund the Contra forces in Nicaragua). They and other researchers draw our attention to several factors that cause people to obey when they would rather not: