

CORE STUDY #1: MILGRAM 1963 (OBEDIENCE)

Aim:

- To investigate how obedient individuals would be to orders received from a figure of authority, specifically when this obedience would result in harm to an innocent individual (destructive obedience) via an electric shock.
- Destructive obedience - obedience that has the potential to cause psychological or physical harm to another person.
- Obedience - following a direct order from a person or people in authority.

KEY TERMS:

- Agentic state - when we give up our free will to serve as an "agent to authority"
- Autonomous state - when we act of our own free will and choose whether to e.g. be obedient or not.
- Agentic shift - moving from an autonomous state to an agentic state

Background:

Milgram came from a European Jewish family, and so was profoundly affected by the atrocities committed by soldiers and ordinary people against Jews in Nazi Germany during the Second World War.

These Nazi soldiers, when put on trial, claimed that they were "just following orders". This sparked Milgram's curiosity as he was interested in whether extreme social situations could cause normal people to exhibit destructive obedience and cause harm to another innocent individual.

- Before his study, Milgram asked his psychology students and other professors at Yale University how many people would deliver a fatal shock to an innocent man on command. They all agreed that less than 3% would deliver a maximum voltage.

Method:

Participants

- 40 men between the ages of 20 and 50 years old from the area of New Haven
- Volunteer sample: recruited through a newspaper advertisement promising a small sum of \$4.50 for participation, regardless of the outcome of the experiment
- 40% were white-collar workers, the rest were from a range of background

Design

- A laboratory setting, conducted at Yale University
- Independent measures design
- Best described as a controlled observation; it is technically not a true experiment because strictly, the IV does not exist
- Obedience operationalized as the maximum voltage given
- DV: maximum voltage given – level of obedience
 - Body language and comments made by the participants were also recorded
- IV: does not exist BUT could be argued that the prods given by the experimenter were the IVs

Procedure

- Conducted in a modern laboratory at Yale University – this location was chosen to make the entire thing seem legitimate
- The participants arrived individually into the lab where they were introduced to a confederate who they thought was another participant.
- The confederate was a likable, 44-year-old Irish-American accountant called Mr. Wallace
- They were told the study aimed to investigate the effect of punishment on learning, which was not the real aim of the experiment (deception)
- The two were then asked to draw straws on who would be a 'teacher' and who would be the 'learner', but this draw was pre-decided and Mr. Wallace always received the role of the learner.
- The participants were given a sample 45V shock and were then shown Mr. Wallace being strapped into an electric chair.
 - The participants were told that the shocks were painful, but they were not fatal.
 - These shocks were not real, only the sample shock was. The confederate was to act as if the shock was real.
- The participants were then taken into an adjacent room where they were seated in front of an electric shock machine facing the wall, with the experimenter seated on a desk behind them.
 - This shock machine had voltages starting at 15V and then increasing in 15-volt increments to 450V. The machine also had labels that went from "slight shock" at 15V, to "Danger: Severe Shock" and "XXX" for the final two switches.
- The participants were told they had to read word pairs out to the learner. If he repeated them back correctly then they were to move on to the next pair, but if he was incorrect, then the participant was instructed to deliver an electric shock, going up by 15V each time for every wrong answer.
 - The participants were also told to count no response as an incorrect answer
- Until 300V was reached, the learner stayed silent when the participant administered the shocks
- At 300V, the learner began shouting for help and for the participant to stop administering the shock.
- After 300V, the learner stopped responding completely and did not answer any of the questions or react when a shock was administered.
 - The sudden lack of response was tailored so that it seemed as if the learner was incapacitated or dead

- If, and when, the participants hesitated to shock the learner or looked to the experimenter for guidance, a series of prods were used in a specific order each time the participant refused to continue:
 - "Please continue"
 - "The experiment requires that you continue"
 - "It is absolutely essential that you continue"
 - "You have no choice, you *must* go on"
- These prods were usually effective and caused the participant to turn back around and continue delivering shocks.
- The procedure was said to be complete when the participant delivered the maximum 'XXX' 450V shock, or when they refused to continue.
- At the end of the study, the participants were taken to a different room where they were interviewed. One of the questions was how painful they thought the 450V shock was on a scale of 1 (not at all painful) to 14 (extremely painful).
 - The mean average estimate of the painfulness of the shock was 13.42, showing that the participants still carried out the order even though they were fully aware of the pain they were causing.

Throughout the study, the participants were watched through a one-way mirror by different researchers (covert observation in a controlled lab setting). Verbal comments and body language were recorded. At the end of the experiment the participants were debriefed on the deception that had occurred: they were told the true aim of the study, and then were shown Mr. Wallace, alive and unharmed, to ensure the participants left in a slightly less distressed mental state.

Results:

- 65% of the participants delivered the maximum voltage 'XXX' shock of 450V. Compared to the 3% stated by professionals, this is an extremely high number.
- All of the participants gave the 300V shock and 35% stopped sometime after that and did not deliver the maximum shock.
- A mean of 368V was given by all of the participants

Body language and verbal comments

- 14 out of 40 men displayed nervous laughter and smiling
- Almost all of the participants displayed signs of stress such as sweating and stuttering
- One participant had a stress response so severe that he started seizing and the procedure had to be stopped.
- After the procedure was complete, most of the participants displayed visible signs of relief such as wiping their brows and sighing. A very small minority of participants appeared calm throughout the experiment (damn, psychos)
- Comments included: "I don't think I can go on with this...I don't think this is very humane"
- ★ In a different condition, the learner mentioned having a heart condition, and though obedience rates dropped, this decrease was barely significant, with 63% of the participants still delivering the maximum shock. This was despite the learner protesting, saying things like "Let me out! My heart is bothering me!" and "I want to quit! My heart!". Comments from the participants in this condition included "I'm gonna chicken out...I can't do that to a man, I'll hurt his heart".

Conclusions:

- Individuals are much more obedient to authority than we might reasonably expect. This seems to be true for the majority of people.
- Despite high levels of obedience, people find the experience of carrying out destructive acts under the orders of authority figures triggers feelings of stress. This is due to a conflict between two important social phenomena: the need to obey those in authority and the need to avoid harming others.

Evaluation:

A strength of this study is that it is highly replicable. This is because it was conducted in a controlled laboratory environment at Yale University with standardized procedures such as using the same voltage machine and stooge for each participant and using a sample shock of 45V for each participant. This means another researcher can simply get another group of participants and repeat the procedure exactly and compare and test the results for accuracy. This allows the findings of the study to be tested, therefore increasing the validity of the study.

Another strength of this study is that it is highly reliable. This is because the participants were not told the true aim of the study (they were told the aim was to "investigate the effects of punishment on learning"), and so could not change their behaviors to be more socially desirable. The participants were also given sample shocks of 45V, so they thought the experiment was real, and so produced real responses. This increases the validity of the study.

A weakness of this study is that it is not generalizable. This is because it used a small sample size of only 40 men from the area of New Haven, 40% of which were white-collar workers. This means that the results cannot be applied to other genders or people from different parts of America, who have different professions. The sample was also collected through volunteer sampling via a newspaper advertisement, so the sample is not representative of those who don't read or can't afford the newspaper. This reduces the validity of the study.

Another weakness of this study is that it breaches multiple ethical guidelines. This study breaches the guidelines of deception, the right to withdraw, and protection from physical and psychological harm. The participants were deceived as they were not told the true aim of the study and were told it was to "investigate the effect of punishment on learning". They were also given a real sample shock of 45V so they thought the experiment was real and that they were hurting another human being, leading to a breach of the ethical guideline of protection. The participants also had stressful reactions, with one participant having a full-blown seizure due to emotional stress. The participants were under the impression that they were hurting and killing

another person, which would have had severe psychological impacts. The prods used by the researcher breached the ethical guidelines of withdrawal, with one of the prods being "You have no choice, you must go on". Since the participants were getting paid for participating, they would have also felt financially obligated to complete the experiment. This reduces the validity and credibility of the study.

Issues and debates:

- **Application to daily life:** The findings of this study can be applied to daily life to explain behaviors of people like the Nazis in the 1930s, and the Rwandan Genocide in 1994 by applying the conclusion of the study that normal citizens will obey figures of authority and carry out destructive obedience when placed in morally straining situations.
- **Individual and situational explanations:** This study supports the situational explanation of obedience as it states that the situation a person is placed in can cause them to exhibit obedience. For example, the experiment was conducted at Yale University (authenticity) and the experimenter wore a grey lab coat (authenticity, uniform = authority figure) so the participants were more likely to obey.