Milgram's Study of Obedience

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In an attempt to study destructive obedience in the laboratory, especially in regards to the atrocities committed during WWII, Stanley Milgram’s 1963 research study produced some disturbing findings and one of the most famous experiments in psychological history. Not only did this experiment influence the literature on obedience, but it has raised important issues in research methodology and ethics.

Methodology

Milgram (1974) stated that “obedience is the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose” (p. 1). His theoretical proposition for the study is that obedience is so ingrained, that people tend to obey other people who are in positions of authority over them, even if they violate their own morals and ethics (Milgram, 1974,). In his original study, Milgram (1963) recruited 40 males between the ages of 20 and 50 from New Haven through newspaper ads and mail solicitations. The experiment was held at Yale University, to increase the perceived legitimacy, and the participants were told they were involved in a study regarding the relationship between punishment and learning (Milgram, 1974). Milgram (1963) then setup a “teacher” (true participant), a “learner” (confederate), and an experimenter, who was played by a high school biology teacher. The subjects drew slips of paper from a hat
to determine who would be the teacher or learner, but the drawing was rigged so the true participant was always the teacher. The teacher and learner were then taken to another room, where the teacher observed the learner being strapped down to an “electric chair” connected to the large shock generator in the adjacent room (Milgram, 1974). The learner was taken to an adjacent room with the very intimidating shock generator. The generator had 30 switches labeled with voltage levels, ranging from 15 to 450 volts. The switches were also labeled in groups with verbal designations such as slight shock, moderate shock, danger, and XXX (Milgram, 1963).

The Learning Task

The learning task involved the learner memorizing various word pairs, where the teacher would read the list of pairs and then test the learner on his memory of them. As instructed by the experimenter, the teacher administered a shock for each incorrect response, and more importantly, increased one level on the shock generator each time, along with announcing the level of shock before turning the switch (Milgram, 1963). Each teacher was also given a sample shock of 45 volts, prior to beginning the test, which convinces the subject of the authenticity of the generator, even though the confederate is not really ever being shocked (Milgram, 1974). During times of hesitation by the teacher, the experimenter had standardized responses, called prods.

Prod 1: Please continue. or Please go on.

Prod 2: The experiment requires that you continue.

Prod 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.

Prod 4: You have no other choice, you must go on.

There were four prods, in which the second could not be used before the first and so on. However, if the subject refused to obey the experimenter after the four prods, the experiment ended. The learner’s responses were also planned to be correct or incorrect in the same sequence for all subjects and the shouting of discomfort and protest, in the form of pounding on the walls for the original experiment, was prearranged at 300 volts (Milgram, 1963). Milgram (1963) also had fellow psychiatrists, graduate students, faculty, and middle-class adults predict how far one hundred Americans of various ages and occupations would obey an experimenter (measured by the level of shocks administered). They predicted that virtually all subjects would refuse to go past 150 volts.
Milgram defines Obedience & Defiance

Milgram’s (1963) operational definitions of defiance was any subject who stopped the experiment at any point before the 30th shock level, and obedience, as one who complied with all commands and administers all shocks. Following the experiment, Milgram (1974) interviewed each subject and debriefed them on the true purpose of the study, to alleviate any anxiety upon the end of the experiment.

Results

The results of the study were surprising to everyone. No subject stopped before 300 volts, but of the 40 participants, 5 stopped at 300-volts, 4 stopped at 315-volts, 2 stopped at 330-volts, and 1 each at 345, 360, and 375-volts. A total of 14 subjects defied the experimenter, and 26 of the 40 participants obeyed till the end, administering 450-volts to the learner (Milgram, 1974). The results varied as Milgram adjusted certain variables and environmental conditions. Examples of the various environmental conditions are the Voice-feedback variable, in which the teacher could hear the learner’s protests, the Proximity variable, in which the teacher and learner are next to each other, Touch-proximity variable, in which the teacher was required to place the learner’s hand on a shock plate, and another voice-feedback in which the learner protests and mentions his heart condition (Milgram, 1974). Of course the varying aspects of audible and physical closeness affected the levels of obedience, shown in table one (Milgram, 1974, p. 35).

Characteristics of the "Teacher"

It is important to note that the participants did not cruelly inflict “pain” on the learners, though they thought the conditions of the experiment were true. As Milgram (1963) observed, most subjects showed signs of extreme tension and nervousness through perspiration, trembling, stuttering, lip-biting, groaning, self-inflicted scratching, and nervous laughing fits. In his article on obedience, Milgram (1963) noted that these signs of tension were characteristic and not exceptional responses to the experiment. In conditions where the teacher could see the learner through a looking glass, many averted their eyes or objectified the learner in order to continue escalating the shocks. One subject stated, “I didn’t want to see the consequences of
what I had done” (Milgram, 1974, p. 34). Milgram (1974) also observed that many subjects devalued the victim.

“Once having acted against the victim, these subjects found it necessary to view him as an unworthy individual, whose punishment was made inevitable by his own deficiencies of intellect and character” (p. 10).

The reason this study surprised so many was the fact that these average people who participated continued to obey a person in a position of authority, though the experimenter had no power to enforce his commands and the subjects had nothing to lose by defying them (Milgram, 1963). The tension felt by the subjects should have motivated some kind of escape behavior, but many were unable to bring relief, therefore there must have been a competing drive or inhibition that prevented defiance (Milgram, 1974). The power of this inhibiting factor must have been greater than the experienced stress, and it is here that Milgram (1963) points to the force that the situation carries in itself. Milgram (1974) further stipulated that every situation has a kind of ideology, which is the interpretation of the meaning of a situation. “There is a propensity for people to accept definitions of action provided by legitimate authority” (p. 145). Although the subject performs the action, he allows the perceived authority to define the meaning, and this is the basis of obedience. It cannot be viewed as an authority figure who forces an unwilling subordinate, instead the subject accepts the definition of the situation and acts willingly (Milgram, 1974).

**Milgram's Summary for High Obedience**

Milgram (1963) also summed up some features of his original experiment that may explain the unexpectedly high amount of obedience observed: (1) it may be presumed that everyone is competent and reputable since the study is sponsored by and takes place at Yale; (2) the goals of the experiment appear to be important, therefore the subject’s participations would be significant; (3) the learner also voluntarily participated and has an obligation to the study also; (4) it is by chance that the subject is the teacher, since it could have been the other way around; (5) the subject does not know about the rights of a researcher and his subjects, therefore the subject will trust in the experience of the researcher; and (6) the subject is constantly assured that the shocks are “painful but not dangerous,” so the pain inflicted is momentary (p. 377).
Variations in the Original Study

After approximately 45 years, Milgram’s findings have continued to hold up to challenges of their validity. Milgram repeated his experiment in various other conditions. In his book, Obedience to Authority, Milgram described the change in his experiment by varying the following conditions: change of personnel; closeness of the authority; female subjects; studying outside of the Yale setting; letting the subject choose the shock levels; the leaner demands to be shocked; ordinary men give orders; use of subject as a bystander; contradictory authorities and rebelling peers. In each of these conditions, Milgram found somewhat similar results, though the physical and therefore emotional, distance of the learner from the teacher affected the amount of obedience. When the teacher and learner were in separate rooms and cannot be seen or heard, the highest level of obedience was observed, whereas the lowest level of obedience occurred when the subject was required to force the learner’s hand onto a shock plate (Milgram, 1974). On a more optimistic note, when subjects were allowed to punish the learner by choosing the shock level, most never pressed higher than switch two (45-volts) (Milgram, 1974).

Milgram’s Study and effect on Research Ethics

Along with being the most influential study in understanding obedience, Milgram’s research is also one that is often used when discussing the ethical treatment of human subjects. Even though no participants received any real shocks, Milgram received great criticism in regard to his treatment of subjects, specifically, Diana Baumrind (1964), claimed Milgram created unacceptable levels of stress in his participants. Baumrind (1964) also stated that the lab is an unfamiliar setting, therefore the rules of behavior is ambiguous for the subject, who would be more prone to obedient behavior compared to other environmental conditions. Also, after revealing the deception, subjects may feel used, embarrassed, or distrustful of psychologists and future authority figures in their lives (Baumrind, 1964). Milgram (1964) responded to these criticisms by surveying his participants after debriefing them and found that 83.7% were glad to have participated and only 1.3% regretted it.

Conclusion

Milgram’s obedience studies continue to influence current research, in which many tried to refine his original experiment, especially in the atmosphere of strict procedures regarding deception and human participants. Also, Thomas Blass (1999),
the leading authority and famous author of Milgram’s biography, reviewed all the research and social implications stemming from Milgram’s study. In general, Blass found that the results have been consistent and relatively unchanged over the past 45 years, which may be surprising when many are aware of Milgram’s studies and the extreme results that blind obedience could lead to. Blass continues to detail the history and influence of Milgram’s work, which may be found on Blass’s website at: [1]. In a concluding summary, Blass comments in his biography that:

“We didn’t need Milgram to tell us we have a tendency to obey orders. What we didn’t know before Milgram’s experiments is just how powerful this tendency is. And having been enlightened about our extreme readiness to obey authorities, we can try to take steps to guard ourselves against unwelcome or reprehensible commands” (Blass, 2002, p. 73).