

MILGRAM'S SHOCKING EXPERIMENT

During the 1960s, Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted an infamous experiment on obedience. Professor Milgram's question was whether American test subjects would cause harm to people if asked to obey authority. He was Jewish and wondered how easily Germans had allowed Jewish people to be put in concentration camps and murdered. His original hypothesis was that Americans who were naturally more individualistic would not engage in behavior that might harm others even when commanded by authorities.

Milgram ran newspaper ads for male participants to take part in a controlled experiment on learning at Yale University. He ended up with 40 males, aged between 20 and 50, all from New Haven, Connecticut, where Yale University was located. They were paid \$4.50 for just turning up.

On August 7, 1961, Milgram gathered the participants and told them that his experiment was to find out how punishment in the form of electric shocks affected learning. He paired them with a partner. Through a drawing, one of the pair was assigned the role of teacher and one the learner. The pair was then moved to separate rooms, connected by a microphone. The teacher read two words, like "banana" and "chair." The learner had to memorize the two words and then select them from a four-word sequence like parrot, chair, banana, and ice. Every time the learner made a mistake, the teacher was told to give a shock, increasing by 15 volts all the way to 450 volts. Although the teacher could not see the learner, through the microphone they could hear their reactions to the shocks throughout the experiment.

Like many psychological studies, Milgram's experiment involved deceit. For example, the "learners" were really actors who were in on the experiment. The drawing to decide roles was rigged. The real participant, or "test subject" always ended up as the teacher. The so-called "learners" were actually following a script. No shocks were taking place. However, test subjects playing the role of "teacher" believed there were. At 75 volts learners began to scream. From 150 to 330 volts, they protested more and more loudly and complained of chest pain. After that, the learners stayed silent. At 450 volts, the researcher told the teachers to continue for the sake of the experiment. Psychological effects on the test subjects would be considered unethical today, including extreme anxiety, sweating, and heart palpitations. In addition, pressure from the researcher to continue even after test subjects asked to stop, violated their right to withdraw from the study.

Instead of finding that American test subjects were less likely to conform to authority and resist causing harm, Milgram found that 65% inflicted shocks all the way to 450 volts, despite learners' screams, protests, and even disturbing silences. In his 1974 article "The Perils of Obedience," Milgram concluded that the chief finding of the study was that "adults...go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority."

Sources:

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