

# Milgram's Study

One of the most famous studies of obedience in psychology was carried out by Stanley Milgram (1963).

Stanley Milgram, a psychologist at Yale University, conducted an experiment focusing on the conflict between obedience to authority and personal conscience.

He examined justifications for acts of genocide offered by those accused at the World War II, Nuremberg War Criminal trials. Their defense often was based on "obedience" - that they were just following orders of their superiors.

The experiments began in July 1961, a year after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Milgram devised the experiment to answer the question "Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?" (Milgram, 1974).

Milgram (1963) wanted to investigate whether Germans were particularly obedient to authority figures as this was a common explanation for the Nazi killings in World War II.

Milgram selected participants for his experiment by newspaper advertising for male participants to take part in a study of learning at Yale University. The procedure was that the participant was paired with another person and they drew lots to find out who would be the 'learner' and who would be the 'teacher'. The draw was fixed so that the participant was always the teacher, and the learner was one of Milgram's confederates (pretending to be a real participant).



The learner (a confederate called Mr. Wallace) was taken into a room and had electrodes attached to his arms, and the teacher and researcher went into a room next door that contained an electric shock generator and a row of switches marked from 15 volts (Slight Shock) to 375 volts (Danger: Severe Shock) to 450 volts (XXX).

## Milgram's Experiment

### Aim:

Milgram (1963) was interested in researching how far people would go in obeying an instruction if it involved harming another person. Stanley Milgram was interested in how easily ordinary people could be influenced into committing atrocities for example, Germans in WWII.

To see more specifics about the study, go here: <http://www.simplypsychology.org/milgram.html>

## Ethical Issues

- **Deception** – the participants actually believed they were shocking a real person, and were unaware the learner was a confederate of Milgram's.

However, Milgram argued that “illusion is used when necessary in order to set the stage for the revelation of certain difficult-to-get-at-truths”.

Milgram also interviewed participants afterwards to find out the effect of the deception. Apparently 83.7% said that they were “glad to be in the experiment”, and 1.3% said that they wished they had not been involved.

- **Protection of participants** - Participants were exposed to extremely stressful situations that may have the potential to cause psychological harm. Many of the participants were visibly distressed.

Signs of tension included trembling, sweating, stuttering, laughing nervously, biting lips and digging fingernails into palms of hands. Three participants had uncontrollable seizures, and many pleaded to be allowed to stop the experiment.

In his defence, Milgram argued that these effects were only short term. Once the participants were debriefed (and could see the confederate was OK) their stress levels decreased. Milgram also interviewed the participants one year after the event and concluded that most were happy that they had taken part.

- However, Milgram did **debrief** the participants fully after the experiment and also followed up after a period of time to ensure that they came to no harm.

Milgram debriefed all his participants straight after the experiment and disclosed the true nature of the experiment. Participants were assured that the behaviour was common and Milgram also followed the sample up a year later and found that there were no signs of any long term psychological harm. In fact the majority of the participants (83.7%) said that they were pleased that they had participated.

- **Right to Withdrawal** - The BPS states that researchers should make it plain to participants that they are free to withdraw at any time (regardless of payment).

Did Milgram give participants an opportunity to withdraw? The experimenter gave four verbal prods which essentially discouraged withdrawal from the experiment:

1. Please continue.
2. The experiment requires that you continue.
3. It is absolutely essential that you continue.
4. You have no other choice, you must go on.

Milgram argued that they are justified as the study was about obedience so orders were necessary. Milgram pointed out that although the right to withdraw was made partially difficult it was possible as 35% of participants had chosen to withdraw.

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**Culminating question:** In your view, did Milgram go to far? Use your sense of ethics and what you have learned in class to inform your answer.