New directions in research on well-being: psychological process in everyday contexts

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The Milgram Experiment
The Milgram Experiment - Content of the experiment

• 1961: conducted by Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram

• Measurement of willingness to obey an authority

• Conflict with participant’s personal conscience

• Follow orders despite violating moral beliefs

(Holocaust)
Procedure of the experiment (1)

• 3 participants:
  • Teacher
  • Learner
  • Experimenter (Professor)

• Teacher & learner in separated rooms → were able to communicate, but could not see each other

• Teacher read word pairs, learner had to remember the correct pairs

• If answer incorrect → teacher had to administer electric shock to learner

• Teacher received real electric shock as proof
Procedure of the experiment (2)

- Teacher believed that learner received shocks

- BUT in reality:
  - No shocks
  - Not the learner who responded
    → a tape recorder integrated in the electro-shock generator

- Various reactions of the teachers:
  - From “Desire to stop” to laughing

- Experiment only stopped if:
  - Teacher wished to stop
  - After giving 450 V three times
Results

• 65% of participants administered final 450 V shock

• Ordinary people can become agents in a terrible destructive process

• Even if teachers wanted to stop, only a few had resources to resist authority (experimenter)

• None of the teachers who wanted to stop:
  • Insisted that experiment should be terminated
  • Checked learner’s health
Explaining Results in short

• Theory of Conformism
  • Relationship between group of reference and individual person
  • In crisis: leaves decision to the group

• Agentic state theory:
  • Individual person acts only as agent for someone else
  • Sees himself no longer responsible for his actions
Immediate Impact & Implications

Participants’ Reactions (1)

• Some individuals were traumatized while participating
  • Profuse sweating and trembling
  • 10% left extremely upset
  • Some others broke into unexplained hysterical laughter

• Mentally stable, healthy individuals were emotionally distraught after only 20 minutes
  • believed they were causing another human to suffer

• Observed reactions:
  • Twitching
  • Stuttering
  • Twisting hands
  • Pulling on earlobes
  • Nervous laughter
Subjects "debriefed" and told what had really happened immediately after.

If they were obedient, they were reassured that this was normal behaviour (true, of course).

A few weeks later they were sent:
- a write-up of the results of the research
- an explanation of the rationale

Questionnaire asked overall feelings about study:
- 43% of former participants surveyed were “very glad” to have participated
- 40% were “glad”
- Only 1.3% were “sorry” or “very sorry” they participated

Little difference between those who obeyed and those who didn't.
• People seemed remarkably relaxed about what they had done, in retrospect
  • Milgram: "The same mechanisms that allow the subject to perform the act...continue to justify his behaviour for him."

• Subjects interviewed by psychiatrist 1 year after the experiment:
  • “No long-term distress was found.”

• Ethical considerations are abundant:
  • Subjects generally receptive; to what extent should we consider their frame of reference?
  • No long-term distress BUT trauma during experiment
  • Do the ends justify the means?
• Set off numerous follow-up studies
  • Tested if the findings were still true in different cultures;
  • in slightly varying situations;
  • with different genders (only men were in the original study); etc.

• Manipulated many experimental variables

• Some variation in results BUT by and large, people still remarkably obedient
Immediate Impact & Implications

• Received high praise
  • 1964 American Association for the Advancement of Science's (AAAS) prize for research
  • Congratulatory letters from social scientists around the country
  • Media evidenced immediate interest
    • Milgram attempted to discourage this
    • Did not wish to have the experiment generally publicized as “the experiment only works if the subject does not know what it is about.”
    • Deception in research is one area where balancing the needs for statistical accuracy and validity against ethics is always a very difficult process

• Milgram also highly criticized for being unethical
  • Ethics and method were attacked in American Psychologist
    • Polarization of opinion / controversy leads to engaging and potentially instructive discussion, which many instructors have come to appreciate
    • While the experiment and method may not have been entirely moral or ethical, do benefits outweigh costs?
• Diana Baumrind’s (1964) criticism based on 3 ethical considerations:
  1. He was wrong in deceiving his subjects as to the true purpose of the experiment
  2. As a part of this deception, he was wrong in letting them believe they really were inflicting pain on another human being
  3. Worst of all, he was wrong to put them in a conflict situation that some of them found stressful

• Baumrind further argued:
  • Milgram’s experiment did not provide adequate measures to protect participants from the stress and realization that they were capable of brutal actions
  • The entire experiment should have been terminated at the first indication of discomfort in the participants
  • Because of the intensity of the experience, participants might be alienated from future participation in psychological research

• H. C. Kelman argued that use of deception in this experiment was not necessary because other, non-deceptive methods could have obtained similar results
• Milgram defended his work:
  • He argued that adequate measures were indeed taken to protect participants
  • Participants could withdraw from the study at any time
  • The deception was explained at the conclusion of the experiment
  • His subjects volunteered to take part in the experiment
  • Apart from what appeared to be their inborn urge to obey an ‘authority’ figure, nothing stopped them refusing to comply with the instruction
  • After the experiment all subjects were fully debriefed and assured that they had not in fact hurt anybody and had nothing to be ashamed of – that their behaviour was normal and understandable
• Milgram defended his work:

  • Deception was necessary as evidenced by the mistaken predictions of the results
    • Neither Milgram nor any of the psychologists whom he consulted before the investigation believed that these volunteers would behave in the way they did

  • No indications that stress undertaken by participants had any lasting or injurious effects

  • Follow-up questionnaires and interviews, several months and a year after the experiment, showed participants were not alienated from future research
    • The experience was worthwhile, even positively life-altering for them
    • Far from criticising Milgram, his subjects maintained that, though stressed, they were glad to have taken part and discovered important aspects of their own psychology
• Permanently changed our understanding of the Holocaust
  • In early explanations, Nazi leaders were demonized as pathological sadists and monsters
  • Milgram observed ordinary people submit to authority in his experiments
  • Concluded "the most fundamental lesson" of findings was that "ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process."

• Profound impact within academic social psychology, altering the central message of the discipline
  • Social psychology at the time was caught up in "the trait/situation controversy"
    • questioned whether behavior is more strongly determined by personality or by situation
  • Showed how powerful subtle, even invisible features of the situation could be
    • That we tend to underestimate the "power of the situation" has become the field's guiding thesis
  • Milgram wrote "The social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson: often, it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act"
The Power of the Situation:

- Yale’s reputation as a university added to the authenticity of the experiment experienced by the subjects

- This caused the subjects to continue administering electric shocks to high voltages, even though they did not want to
Immediate Impact & Implications

How Laws and Standards Changed

Why the Milgram Obedience Studies could not be conducted today:

• Subjects need to be informed of the potential consequences and risks of their participation

• Safety measures were put in place after the Milgram experiment, to protect the rights of research participants
  • Ex: Participants cannot be lied to or only told part of the truth

• Proposals for new research studies must be reviewed before the study takes place by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)

• Consent forms must be signed by subjects before the research begins

• Subjects have the right to ask that their input be destroyed after they have completed the study
Advancing science and protecting the individuals with whom psychologists work are two of psychology's core values.

Since every interaction with another human being raises at least the possibility of harm, avoiding harm entirely would end all research.

BUT allowing research to move forward with no restrictions whatsoever would risk harms that psychologists agree could not be justified by the knowledge gained.

For this reason, we must find a point on a continuum that strikes the correct balance.

**Immediate Impact & Implications**

**Striking a Balance Between Ethics & Methodology**
Less Immediate Implications

Obedience vs. Conformity

Obedience in Human Behaviour
  • Hierarchical Nature of Society
  • Obedience in Family Units
  • Experts as Authoritative Figures

“It is easy to ignore responsibility when one is only an intermediate link in a chain of action.”

STANLEY MILGRAM

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Obedience and Conformity

• Obedience and Conformity in organizations:

• Possible Reasons
  • Job Security
  • Lack of Knowledge and Confidence
  • Avoiding Responsibility

• Possible Solution
  • Positive Methods:
    • Education
    • Training
    • Proper Position Allocation
  • Preventive Methods:
    • Change of legal Identity
    • Penalization
    • Indirect control