



American Expression E1814 The milgram experiment

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The Milgram experiment is a landmark psychological study conducted by Stanley Milgram in the early 1960s. It aimed to investigate the extent to which ordinary individuals would obey authority figures, even when their actions conflicted with their moral beliefs and values. This study gained notoriety for its ethical controversies and its profound insights into human behavior.

The experiment took place at Yale University and involved three key roles: the experimenter, the teacher (a volunteer participant), and the learner (an actor). The experimenter instructed the teacher to administer increasingly severe electric shocks to the learner whenever they answered a question incorrectly. Unbeknownst to the teacher, the learner did not actually receive any electric shocks, but they convincingly acted as if they were in pain, even screaming and begging for the shocks to stop.

Crucially, the teacher could hear the learner's responses and pleas for mercy, which intensified the moral dilemma they faced. The experiment was designed to test how far participants would go in inflicting pain upon another person under the guidance of an authority figure.

The results of the Milgram experiment were shocking. A significant majority of participants, approximately 65%, continued to administer electric shocks, despite the learner's apparent distress and pleas. This finding raised important questions about the nature of obedience and the human capacity to follow orders, even when it involves causing harm to others.

Milgram's experiment revealed several factors that contributed to participants' obedience. One crucial element was the presence of a legitimate authority figure—the experimenter, who wore a lab coat and provided clear instructions. Participants often deferred to this authority figure, believing they were responsible for their actions.

Another contributing factor was the gradual escalation of shocks. Participants started with mild shocks and were systematically led to administer more severe ones, which made it easier for them to continue as they became desensitized to the harm they were causing. The learner's pleas and screams, while distressing, did not deter most participants because they were told to continue.

The Milgram experiment raised significant ethical concerns due to the emotional distress it caused participants. Many left the study feeling anxious, guilty, and traumatized. This led to a greater awareness of the need for ethical guidelines and informed consent in psychological research.

The implications of the Milgram experiment extended beyond the laboratory setting. It shed light on the disturbing potential for ordinary individuals to commit harmful actions when under the influence of authority, as seen in historical events like the Holocaust and other instances of mass obedience to authority figures. This research urged society to reflect on the importance of moral autonomy and the responsibility of individuals to critically evaluate and resist unethical orders.

In conclusion, the Milgram experiment is a seminal study that investigated the power of authority and obedience. It revealed the disconcerting willingness of many individuals to harm others when instructed by authority figures, even in the face of their own moral discomfort. While ethically contentious, this experiment provided valuable insights into human behavior and the need to critically examine the dynamics of authority and obedience in society.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think were the most significant ethical concerns raised by the Milgram experiment, and how do you believe these concerns could have been addressed differently in the study?
2. In your opinion, what factors contributed most to the high level of obedience observed in the Milgram experiment, and why do you think participants continued to administer shocks despite the learner's apparent distress?
3. Can you draw any connections between the findings of the Milgram experiment and real-world historical events or situations where obedience to authority figures led to harmful outcomes?
4. How might the Milgram experiment's results influence our understanding of group behavior and conformity, particularly in organizational or societal contexts?
5. Considering the ethical dilemmas posed by the Milgram experiment, what lessons can researchers and society learn about the responsible conduct of psychological studies involving human subjects, especially when exploring potentially harmful behavior?