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engage Obedience to authority

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Obedience to authority



psychology / 2018

Obedience to authority

Why is it so many people obey when they feel coerced? Social psychologist Stanley Milgram researched the effect of obedience to authority.

This issue of engage explains the infamous Milgram Experiment and how the results still relate to all of us today.



Stanley Milgram

Stanley Milgram (1933 – 1984) was an American social psychologist. He is widely regarded as one of the most important figures in the history of social psychology.

The Stanley Milgram Experiment was created to explain some of the concentration camp horrors of World War Two, where Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, Slavs and other enemies of the state were slaughtered by Nazis.

The experiment investigated the question: “For how long will someone continue to give shocks to another person if they are told to do so, even if they thought the person could be seriously hurt?”

The experiments began in July 1961, in the basement of Linsly-Chittenden Hall at Yale University, three months after the start of the trial of German Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem.

The experiment

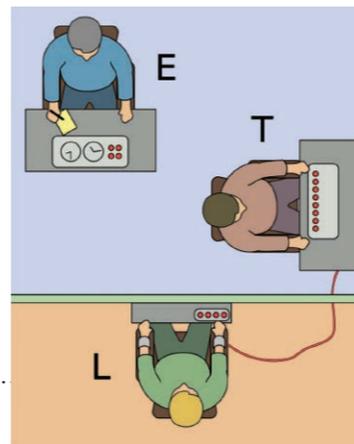
Milgram created an electric ‘shock generator’ with 30 switches. The switch was marked clearly in 15 volt increments, ranging from 15 to 450 volts.

They measured the willingness of study participants, men from a diverse range of occupations, with varying levels of education, to obey an authority figure who instructed them to perform acts they would never in good conscience have performed of their own volition.

Participants were led to believe that they were assisting in a scientific experiment, in which they had to administer electric shocks to a “learner”. These fake electric shocks gradually increased to levels that would have been fatal had they been real.

The experimenter (E) orders the teacher (T), the subject of the experiment, to give what the latter believes are painful electric shocks to a learner (L), who is actually an actor.

The subject is led to believe that for each wrong answer, the learner was receiving actual electric shocks, though in reality there were no such punishments. The electro-shock generator was pre-programmed to play pre-recorded sounds (screams of pain) whenever a shock was administered. As shock levels increased, so the screams of pain became louder and more desperate.



Psychopath or not?

Before the experiment, experts predicted that about 1-3 % of the subjects would not stop giving shocks.

They assumed that you’d have to be pathological or a psychopath to hear the screams and not to stop. Yet 65 % never stopped giving shocks. None stopped when the learner said he had heart trouble. How could that be? We now believe that it has to do with our behavioural programming to do as we are told, especially by figures of authority.

Researchers at the University of Queensland discovered that people are less likely to follow the commands of an leader when the these resemble an order. However, when the command stresses the importance of the experiment for science, people are more likely to obey.

Another explanation of Milgram’s results is the belief in what “people cannot be counted on is to realise that a seemingly benevolent authority is in fact malevolent, even when they are faced with overwhelming evidence which suggests that this authority is indeed malevolent.”

Obedience in nursing

In 1966, Charles K. Hofling investigated obedience among nurses to an order from a doctor.

They used real nurses in a real hospital, but the nurses did not know they were taking part in a research study. During their shift, a researcher telephoned the ward, introduced himself as a doctor, and instructed the nurse to administer to a patient 20mg of Astroten. This was a drug the nurses would have been unfamiliar with.

Standard hospital rules prohibited nurses from taking telephone orders from an unfamiliar doctor. Despite this, 21 out of 22 nurses followed the fake doctor’s orders and gave the drug.

Before the experiment, Hofling had asked nurses whether they thought their colleagues would obey the orders given in the experiment, and the majority believed there would be almost no obedience. The study supports Milgram’s findings. It highlighted the pressure nurses are often placed under to follow orders, even though doing so breaks their professional rules.



The ethics

A psychological study like Milgram’s would never be allowed in most countries today, because of ethical considerations.

However, Milgram’s findings have been replicated in a variety of cultures and most lead to the same conclusions as Milgram’s original study, and in some cases see even higher obedience rates.

Critics object that it lacked the realism of a real life situation, but in real life people obey orders in their everyday settings; nurses, for example, obey doctors, school students obey teachers, and everybody obeys policemen.

People tend to obey orders from other people if they recognise their authority as morally right and/or legally based. Obedience to authority is ingrained in us all because of the way we are brought up.

We live in a world of constantly changing authority, fake news and confusion about whom to believe. With this vacuum of trust, when strong leadership or authority appears, it can be attractive and lead us to follow it. Just look at Trumpism.

The question for all of us is: how far would we go when pushed by an authority figure and where do we draw our line?

It may be that we are puppets-puppets controlled by the strings of society. But at least we are puppets with perception, with awareness. And perhaps our awareness is the first step to our liberation.

–Stanley Milgram



Public Announcement

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