

# BEHAVIORAL STUDY OF OBEDIENCE

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

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## BEHAVIORAL STUDY OF OBEDIENCE

**Date(s):** 1961 (Initial studies)

**Location(s):** Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut

### 1. Summary

The **Behavioral Study of Obedience**, commonly known as the Milgram Experiment, was a landmark series of social psychology investigations conducted by Yale psychologist **Stanley Milgram** starting in 1961. The primary objective of the study was to empirically measure the willingness of participants to obey an authority figure who instructed them to perform actions that conflicted sharply with their personal conscience and ethical beliefs. Specifically, the study sought to determine how far an individual would proceed in administering what they believed were increasingly painful, and eventually dangerous, electric shocks to another person merely because they were ordered to do so by a legitimate scientific authority. The experiment provided a profoundly disturbing demonstration of the power of situational factors and obedience to authority over individual morality, revealing that a significant majority of participants were willing to inflict seemingly destructive and harmful actions when commanded.

The core mechanism of the study involved a structured deception where the participant, designated the "Teacher," was led to believe they were administering genuine electric shocks to a "Learner" (who was, in fact, an actor/confederate). The experimenter, dressed in a grey technician's coat, provided standardized verbal "prods" to encourage continuation whenever the participant expressed reluctance or distress. The resulting data, which showed that 65% of participants delivered the highest possible shock level of 450 volts, sent shockwaves through the academic community and the general public, challenging prevailing assumptions about human autonomy and responsibility. Although the study remains one of the most cited and influential in social science, it simultaneously spurred massive debates regarding research ethics, leading to significant changes in institutional guidelines for human subjects research.

### 2. Background: The Context of Authority and Atrocity

The impetus for the **Behavioral Study of Obedience** stemmed directly from the horrific events of World War II and the subsequent trials, particularly the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. Milgram sought to understand the psychological mechanisms underlying the Holocaust, where seemingly ordinary citizens participated in mass atrocities by claiming they were merely "following orders." Before the study began, Milgram and his colleagues hypothesized that Americans, given their democratic traditions and individualistic culture, would possess a stronger moral framework than those who participated in totalitarian regimes. Experts predicted that perhaps only a minuscule percentage (around 1-3%) of participants would proceed to the maximum shock level, predicting

that most would refuse when the Learner expressed pain.

This intellectual background positioned the study not merely as an investigation into psychological mechanisms but as a sociological examination of how ordinary people transition into agents of a destructive authority. Milgram aimed to demonstrate that obedience was a powerful, deeply ingrained behavioral script activated by the presence of perceived legitimacy and authority within a hierarchical structure. The historical context thus provided a compelling, urgent need for empirical investigation into the dynamics of destructive obedience, transforming the laboratory into a crucible for testing fundamental assumptions about human moral character under duress.

### 3. Methodology and Design

The experimental design relied heavily on theatrical staging and elaborate deception. Participants were recruited, often through newspaper advertisements, for a study purportedly investigating the effects of punishment on memory and learning. Upon arrival, the participant was introduced to the Experimenter and the Learner (the confederate). A rigged drawing established the role of "Teacher" for the true participant, while the Learner was always guaranteed to be the confederate. The Teacher was then shown a complex-looking "shock generator" machine, which featured 30 clearly labeled switches ranging from 15 volts ("Slight Shock") to 450 volts ("XXX - Danger: Severe Shock"). To solidify the reality of the shock, the Teacher received a brief, genuine 45-volt sample shock.

The Learner was strapped into a chair in an adjacent room, visible or audible to the Teacher. The Teacher's task was to read a pair of words, then test the Learner's recall. If the Learner made a mistake, the Teacher was instructed by the Experimenter to administer an electric shock, increasing the intensity by 15 volts with each subsequent error. As the voltage increased, the Learner followed a scripted set of protests: at 150 volts, the Learner would demand to be let out; at 300 volts, they would refuse to answer; and after 330 volts, they would fall completely silent. If the Teacher hesitated or questioned the procedure, the Experimenter administered a series of four standardized verbal **prods**, delivered in sequence, such as "Please continue," or "The experiment requires that you continue," ultimately culminating in the final prod: "You have no other choice, you must go on."

### 4. Key Findings: The Shock of Obedience

The quantitative results of the original Milgram Experiment were startling and contradicted all expert predictions. A staggering 65% of participants (26 out of 40 in the main variation) administered the maximum shock level of 450 volts. No participant stopped before the 300-volt level, which was marked by the Learner's desperate refusal to continue the test. The primary conclusion was that the powerful situational pressure exerted by the Experimenter was sufficient to

override the Teacher's deep-seated aversion to harming another person. The findings suggested that obedience is not merely a trait of malevolent or cruel individuals but is accessible to a wide range of normal people under specific authoritative conditions.

Beyond the raw statistics, the qualitative data collected was equally crucial. Milgram documented intense internal conflict experienced by the participants. Many displayed extreme signs of stress, including nervous laughter, sweating, trembling, stuttering, and visibly agonizing over the commands. Despite this profound internal distress and their moral knowledge that they were inflicting harm, the presence of the perceived authority figure--and the implicit assurance that the authority was responsible for the outcome--kept the majority of participants compliant. These observations led Milgram to articulate the concept of the **Agentic State**, wherein individuals see themselves not as autonomous moral agents but as instruments executing the wishes of an external authority.

## 5. Key Figures Involved

**Stanley Milgram:** The central figure and research psychologist at Yale University who conceived, designed, and executed the study. Milgram dedicated his work to understanding the social dynamics of conformity, obedience, and social networks. His methodology, though controversial, established a powerful precedent for studying deeply complex moral behavior in controlled laboratory settings.

**The Experimenter (E):** Typically portrayed by a high school biology teacher acting as a confederate, the Experimenter served as the critical link of authority. Their demeanor was cold, impassive, and firm, ensuring that the participants felt the legitimacy and unwavering nature of the institutional command, reinforcing the idea that the Experimenter held both the knowledge and the responsibility for the proceedings.

**The Learner (L):** Portrayed by a 47-year-old accountant trained to act as the victim, the Learner was the crucial element of the deception. The Learner's scripted cries and eventual silence were designed to test the limits of the Teacher's obedience and distress, maximizing the moral pressure on the participant.

## 6. Ethical Controversies and Criticisms

The **Behavioral Study of Obedience** has been deemed by scientists and ethicists as highly controversial and, in some respects, unethical, largely due to the extreme psychological pressure placed upon the participants. The use of elaborate deception meant that participants could not give fully informed consent, as they were unaware of the true nature of the study or the potential for emotional trauma. When participants administered the highest shock levels, they genuinely believed they had potentially harmed or even killed a fellow human being, resulting in significant short-term distress and, according to critics, potential long-term psychological damage.

The primary ethical criticism centers on the violation of the principle of **non-maleficence**--the obligation not to inflict harm. Although participants were extensively debriefed immediately after the experiment, shown that the Learner was unharmed, and given follow-up care, the trauma of the experience itself was undeniable. Critics, most notably psychologist [Diana Baumrind](#), argued that the lasting trust issues and the psychological insight gained by the participants--that they were capable of such cruelty--did not justify the severe distress imposed. These criticisms were instrumental in the subsequent development of strict research oversight committees, such as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), which now mandate rigorous ethical review and minimize the use of deception in psychological research.

## 7. Legacy and Impact

Despite the ethical debate, the **Behavioral Study of Obedience** remains one of the most significant experiments in the history of social psychology. Its immediate impact was to fundamentally shift the focus from personality traits (the idea that only "evil" people commit evil acts) toward situational factors (the power of context and authority in influencing behavior). The study provided a powerful, quantifiable explanation for how systemic cruelty and destructive behavior can emerge in seemingly normal social settings, contributing significantly to the fields of political psychology and organizational behavior.

The long-term legacy of Milgram's work is twofold: scientifically, it provides an enduring, if sobering, insight into the human capacity for obedience; institutionally, it served as a catalyst for reformulating research guidelines across all disciplines dealing with human subjects. The intense scrutiny the study received ensured that modern ethical codes prioritize participant welfare, autonomy, and informed consent above maximizing experimental impact, thereby fundamentally altering the relationship between researchers and their subjects. The study continues to be replicated and debated, demonstrating its enduring relevance in understanding social influence and moral decision-making.

## Further Reading

[Milgram experiment - Wikipedia](#)

[Stanley Milgram - Wikipedia](#)

[Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View \(Milgram's seminal 1974 book\)](#)