

# Stanley Milgram

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## Stanley Milgram

**Born:** 1933 | **Died:** 1984

**Nationality:** American

**Primary Field(s):** Social Psychology

### 1. Summary

**Stanley Milgram** was a highly influential

#### Social Psychologist

whose groundbreaking research significantly altered our understanding of human behavior in social contexts. Born in 1933 and passing away in 1984, Milgram's professional life was dedicated to exploring the complexities of human interaction, particularly under the influence of social pressures and authority. He is most widely recognized for his controversial yet seminal studies on

#### Obedience to Authority Figures

, known collectively as the

#### Milgram Experiment

.

The core finding of the

#### Milgram Experiment

was that a substantial majority of ordinary individuals were willing to obey instructions from an authority figure, even when these instructions compelled them to engage in actions they believed were morally wrong or caused severe distress to another person. This startling revelation challenged prevailing notions of individual autonomy and moral fortitude, suggesting that situational forces can exert a powerful influence on human conduct. Milgram's work provided critical insights into the dynamics of power, conformity, and personal responsibility, thereby shaping decades of subsequent research in social psychology and ethics.

### 2. Key Contributions

Milgram's research portfolio was diverse, yet his most significant contribution remains the

## **Milgram Experiment**

on obedience. This series of studies, conducted in the early 1960s, explored the extent to which individuals would comply with the commands of an authority figure, even if those commands involved inflicting apparent harm on another person. The findings from these experiments provided a stark demonstration of the power of situational factors over individual moral judgment, sparking intense debate and profoundly influencing the field of social psychology.

Building upon the empirical findings of his obedience studies, Milgram developed the

## **Agentic State Theory**

. This theoretical framework proposed that individuals, when acting under the direction of an authority, transition from an autonomous state--where they take personal responsibility for their actions--to an agentic state, where they see themselves as mere instruments carrying out the wishes of the authority figure. In this state, personal responsibility is diffused, making individuals more susceptible to unethical commands. This theory provided a psychological lens through which to understand historical atrocities, such as those committed during the Holocaust.

Beyond his work on obedience, Milgram also made pioneering contributions to understanding social networks with his innovative research on the

## **small-world phenomenon**

. This series of experiments, often summarized by the phrase "six degrees of separation," demonstrated the surprising interconnectedness of human society. His methodology for tracing chains of acquaintance laid foundational groundwork for modern network theory and provided empirical evidence for the idea that any two people in the world are connected by a relatively short chain of social ties.

## **3. The Milgram Experiment: Methodology and Findings**

The

### **Milgram Experiment**

was meticulously designed to simulate a learning task, though its true purpose was to observe obedience. Participants were recruited for a study on "memory and learning" and assigned the role of "teacher." A confederate of Milgram's played the "learner," and an experimenter, dressed in a grey lab coat, provided instructions. The setup involved a "shock generator" with 30 switches, ranging from 15 volts ("slight shock") to 450 volts ("XXX"), clearly labeled with ascending intensity levels. The teacher's task was to administer increasingly powerful electric shocks to the learner

each time the learner made a mistake on a word-pair association task.

The learner, located in an adjacent room and not visible to the teacher (though in some variations, they were in the same room), provided pre-recorded responses. As the voltage increased, the learner would exhibit signs of distress: first grunts, then protests, shouts of pain, demands to be released, and eventually, after 330 volts, ominous silence. If the teacher expressed reluctance to continue, the experimenter would deliver a series of prods, escalating in intensity: "Please continue," "The experiment requires that you continue," "It is absolutely essential that you continue," and finally, "You have no other choice, you must go on."

The main finding of the original experiment was profoundly unsettling: 65% of participants (26 out of 40) administered the maximum 450-volt shock, despite the learner's apparent agony and eventual silence. All participants administered at least up to 300 volts. These individuals, ordinary citizens from various walks of life, displayed clear signs of stress and moral conflict--sweating, trembling, stuttering, and nervous laughter--yet continued to obey the experimenter's commands. The results contradicted the expectations of psychiatrists and laypeople alike, who had predicted that only a pathological few would progress to the highest shock levels.

Milgram conducted numerous variations of the experiment to explore the factors influencing obedience. He found that obedience rates decreased when the learner was in the same room as the teacher, when the teacher had to physically force the learner's hand onto a shock plate, or when the experimenter's authority was perceived as less legitimate (e.g., conducted in a rundown office building rather than Yale University). Conversely, obedience increased when the experimenter was physically present and when the participant was less directly responsible for administering the shock, such as by only assisting another "teacher" who delivered the shocks. These variations underscored the powerful role of situational context and proximity to both authority and victim in mediating obedience.

## 4. The Agentic State Theory

To explain the high levels of obedience observed in his experiments, Milgram proposed the

### **Agentic State Theory**

. This theory posits that individuals operate in one of two distinct states when confronted with an authority figure: the autonomous state or the agentic state. In the autonomous state, individuals perceive themselves as acting on their own free will and take full responsibility for their actions. They are guided by their own conscience and moral principles, making independent choices about their behavior.

However, under certain conditions--particularly when faced with a legitimate authority figure--

individuals can undergo an "agentic shift" into the agentic state. In this state, they cease to see themselves as independent actors and instead view themselves as agents or instruments carrying out the will of the authority. The individual essentially surrenders their personal autonomy, transferring responsibility for their actions to the authority figure. This shift allows them to bypass their own moral compass, as they no longer feel personally accountable for the consequences of their behavior, believing they are "just following orders."

Milgram believed that this theory could provide a powerful explanation for the behavior of individuals involved in atrocities, such as the Holocaust. He argued that many ordinary people, when placed within a highly structured hierarchy and commanded by powerful authorities, could enter an agentic state. In this state, they might participate in inhumane acts, not out of inherent malice, but because they perceived themselves as mere cogs in a larger machine, absolved of personal moral culpability. The theory highlights how social structures and the perception of legitimate authority can profoundly override individual ethics and conscience.

## 5. The Small-World Experiment

Another significant, though less controversial, contribution by Stanley Milgram was his research into the

### **small-world phenomenon**

, conducted in the late 1960s. This work aimed to empirically investigate the degree of interconnectedness within social networks, seeking to determine how many interpersonal connections, on average, separate any two random individuals in a large population. His findings provided the empirical basis for the popular concept of "six degrees of separation."

The methodology for the

### **small-world experiment**

involved a clever chain-letter approach. Participants in Nebraska and Kansas were given a letter and asked to forward it to a specific target individual located in Boston. The crucial instruction was that they could only send the letter to someone they knew on a first-name basis, and whom they believed would be more likely to know the target or someone closer to the target. If they didn't know the target directly, they would pass it to an acquaintance they thought would get it closer, who would then repeat the process.

Milgram found that, on average, the letters that successfully reached their target did so by passing through a surprisingly small number of intermediaries, typically around five or six people. This demonstrated that despite the vastness of the population, individuals are intricately linked through relatively short chains of social connections. The research provided compelling evidence for the

concept of social proximity and challenged intuitive assumptions about the vast distances separating individuals in large societies.

The

### **small-world experiment**

had a lasting impact on various fields, including

### **network theory**

,

### **social network analysis**

, and even the study of disease transmission and information flow. It highlighted the non-random structure of social networks, where a few highly connected individuals (hubs) can significantly reduce the path length between any two nodes. This work underscored Milgram's intellectual breadth, showcasing his ability to devise ingenious experiments to explore fundamental questions about human social organization.

## **6. Intellectual Context and Impact**

**Stanley Milgram's** work emerged from a critical post-World War II intellectual climate, where scholars and the public grappled with the moral implications of the Holocaust and other atrocities. The question of how seemingly ordinary people could participate in such horrific acts became a central concern, influencing researchers like Milgram to explore the psychological mechanisms behind obedience to destructive authority. His research can be seen as a direct response to the infamous "just following orders" defense raised during the

### **Nuremberg trials**

, seeking to understand the situational rather than purely dispositional factors that drive such compliance.

The impact of the

### **Milgram Experiment**

on

### **social psychology**

was profound and immediate. It fundamentally reshaped the field's understanding of human

behavior, shifting focus from purely individual personality traits to the powerful influence of situational context and social roles. It demonstrated that even strong moral convictions could be overridden by the perceived legitimacy of authority, forcing psychologists to reconsider the boundaries of individual autonomy and the ethics of human interaction in hierarchical settings. The findings sparked a robust debate that continues to resonate in contemporary discussions about ethics, power, and human nature.

Perhaps Milgram's most significant indirect impact was on the establishment and strengthening of

### **ethical guidelines**

for psychological research. The controversy surrounding his methods--particularly the use of deception and the potential for psychological distress among participants--served as a catalyst for a paradigm shift in research ethics. It directly contributed to the widespread adoption of strict protocols, such as

### **informed consent**

, the right to withdraw without penalty, and institutional review boards (IRBs) or ethics committees, which now rigorously scrutinize all research involving human subjects to protect their welfare.

Beyond academia, **Milgram's** work has permeated popular culture, literature, and public discourse. The concept of "Milgram's obedience studies" is widely recognized and frequently invoked to explain instances of compliance with authority in various real-world scenarios, from military actions to corporate wrongdoing. His findings have provided a crucial framework for understanding why individuals might act against their personal values when under pressure from perceived legitimate authority, making his legacy one of enduring relevance and continuous re-evaluation.

## **7. Major Works**

**Stanley Milgram's** most pivotal and enduring work is his book,

### **Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View**

(1974). This seminal text synthesizes his various obedience experiments, detailing the methodologies, findings, and theoretical implications, particularly the

### **Agentic State Theory**

. The book provided a comprehensive overview of his research, making it accessible to both academic and general audiences, and became an instant classic in social psychology, shaping the intellectual landscape for decades.

Another significant publication is

### **The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments**

(1977). This collection compiles a broader range of Milgram's diverse research interests, including his groundbreaking work on the

#### **small-world phenomenon**

, his studies on urban psychology, and other experimental inquiries into social behavior. It showcases his intellectual versatility and his consistent methodological ingenuity in exploring fundamental questions about human interaction.

Prior to these book-length treatments, Milgram's findings were introduced to the academic community through influential journal articles. Key among these are "Behavioral Study of Obedience" (1963), published in the

#### **Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology**

, which first presented the startling results of his initial obedience experiment. This was followed by "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority" (1965) in

#### **Human Relations**

, which explored various experimental variations and refined his understanding of the factors influencing obedience and resistance. These articles laid the foundation for his later comprehensive works and cemented his reputation as a leading experimental social psychologist.

## **8. Criticisms and Debates**

Despite the profound impact of the

### **Milgram Experiment**

, it has also been subjected to extensive

#### **criticism and debate**

, primarily concerning its ethical implications. The most prominent ethical concern revolved around the severe psychological distress experienced by participants, who believed they were genuinely harming another person. Critics argued that the experiment exposed participants to undue stress and potential long-term psychological harm, creating a profound moral dilemma for them. Furthermore, the extensive use of

### **deception**

and the lack of full

### **informed consent**

were major points of contention, as participants were not fully aware of the experiment's true nature or the potential emotional toll it might take.

Methodological critiques have also been raised, questioning the experiment's ecological validity due to its artificial laboratory setting. Some scholars argued that participants might have suspected the shocks were not real, leading to

### **demand characteristics**

where they simply played along with what they perceived the experimenter wanted. This perspective suggests that the behavior observed might not accurately reflect real-world obedience but rather a compliance with experimental roles. While Milgram conducted post-experiment interviews and debriefings to address these concerns, the debate over the participants' belief in the reality of the shocks persists.

Further debates concern the interpretation of Milgram's results. While he emphasized the power of "obedience to authority," some researchers have proposed alternative explanations. For instance, critics like Gina Perry suggest that participants' behavior might not have been purely about obedience but rather an identification with the scientific endeavor or a desire to maintain rapport with the experimenter, or even a form of "engaged followership" rather than blind compliance. Others have questioned the generalizability of the findings across different cultures and historical contexts, suggesting that obedience rates might vary significantly based on societal norms and political climates.

The long-term impact on the participants themselves also remains a subject of debate. While Milgram claimed that most participants reported positive feelings about having participated, feeling they had learned something valuable about themselves, others have highlighted the potential for lasting psychological distress. The controversy surrounding the

### **Milgram Experiment**

fundamentally challenged the scientific community to re-evaluate its responsibilities to human subjects, directly contributing to the development of modern ethical guidelines for research.

## **9. Ethical Controversy and Legacy**

The ethical storm ignited by the

## **Milgram Experiment**

remains a cornerstone of discussions in research ethics. The intense scrutiny of his methods, particularly the high levels of

### **deception**

and the considerable distress inflicted upon participants, played a pivotal role in shaping the current landscape of human subjects research. The outrage and concern from both the public and the scientific community led directly to the establishment and widespread adoption of stringent

### **ethical guidelines**

, including the mandatory use of

### **informed consent**

and the creation of

### **Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)**

in the United States, or their equivalents internationally. These bodies are now standard in ensuring the protection and well-being of participants in all psychological and medical research.

Despite the ethical controversies, **Milgram's** legacy as a brilliant and incisive

### **Social Psychologist**

is undeniable. His work provided unparalleled insights into the powerful, often unsettling, dynamics of human behavior under authority. The

## **Milgram Experiment**

remains one of the most cited and discussed studies in psychology, continuing to inform our understanding of complex social phenomena ranging from conformity and compliance to the psychology of genocide and organizational misconduct. Its enduring relevance highlights the timeless nature of the questions Milgram posed about individual responsibility within social hierarchies.

In essence, **Stanley Milgram's** contribution to psychology is marked by a profound duality: on one hand, his ingenious experimental designs unveiled uncomfortable truths about human nature and the capacity for obedience that reside within ordinary individuals; on the other, his methods spurred an indispensable revolution in

## **research ethics**

, fundamentally altering how scientific inquiry is conducted. His work continues to serve as a cautionary tale and a catalyst for critical thinking about the interplay between individual morality and societal influence, securing his place as one of the most impactful figures in the history of psychology.

## **Further Reading**

[Social psychology - Wikipedia](#)

[Obedience - Wikipedia](#)

[Milgram experiment - Wikipedia](#)

[Agentic state - Wikipedia](#)

[Six degrees of separation - Wikipedia](#)

[Network theory - Wikipedia](#)

[Social network analysis - Wikipedia](#)

[Nuremberg trials - Wikipedia](#)

[Research ethics - Wikipedia](#)

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[Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View - Wikipedia](#)

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[Demand characteristics - Wikipedia](#)

[Institutional review board - Wikipedia](#)