

Evaluation of Milgram's Obedience ExperimentEssay

This essay is to outline and evaluate Professor Milgram's experiment to discover "just how far someone would go"; personally however I would not class it as a true experiment as there is no control.

40 males aged between 20 and 50 years of age, were recruited from the New Haven area. They were obtained by responding to a newspaper and direct mail advertisement which asked for volunteers to participate in a study of learning at Yale University. They were paid \$4.50 for their participation in the experiment.

Two people would be introduced and would draw lots to see who went where, they were told one person would sit in front of a device that could shock the other person, and the other would sit in a separate room being shocked. The only form of contact was a microphone system, there was no visual contact.

The "Subject" who was sat in front of a box that would supposedly give the other person an electric shock and had the capability of different voltage outputs: slight shock (75 volts), moderate shock (120 volts), strong shock (150 volts), very strong shock (180 volts), intense shock (270 volts), extreme intensity shock (315), danger: severe shock (330) Then another switch marked 'XXX' (450 volts).

Table of voltage and reply from shocked –

75 Volts	*Grunt*
120 Volts	"These shocks are painful"
150 Volts	"Let me out"
180 Volts	"I can't stand the pain"
270 Volts	*Agonised scream*
315 Volts	*Violent scream*
330 Volts	No response
450 Volts	No response

If the participant asked to stop experiment, whether it be; 'should I continue administering shocks', or some other indication that he did not wish to go on, he would be told to continue with a sequence of 'prods':

- Prod 1: 'Please continue' or 'Please go on';
- Prod 2: 'The experiment requires that you continue';
- Prod 3: 'It is absolutely essential that you continue';
- Prod 4: 'You have no choice, you must go on'.

The prods were always made in sequence. Only if Prod 1 was unsuccessful could Prod 2 be used, and so on. If the participant continued to disobey after Prod 4, the experiment was stopped.

When the experiment had been finished the "subject" was reunited with the other person

All 40 of the participants obeyed up to 300 volts at which point 5 refused to continue. Four more gave one more shock before refusing; two stopped at the 330 volts level and one each at 345, 360 and 375 volts. Therefore, a total of 14 participants defied the experimenter, and

26 obeyed. Overall, 65% of the participants gave shocks up to 450 volts (obeyed) and 35% stopped sometime before 450 volts;

After the maximum shock had been administered, the participant was asked to continue at this level until the experimenter eventually called a halt to the proceedings, at which point many of the obedient participants heaved sighs of relief or shook their heads in apparent regret.

During the study many participants showed signs of nervousness and tension. Participants sweated, trembled, stuttered, bit their lips, groaned, dug fingernails into their flesh, and these were typical not exceptional responses. Quite a common sign of tension was nervous laughing fits (14 out of 40 participants), which seemed entirely out of place, even bizarre.

There are eight main reasons to which I believe the people may have done what they did;

The fact that the experiment took place at Yale University lent the study and procedure credibility and respect.

The participant believed that the experiment was for a worthy purpose.

The participant believed the victim had volunteered to be in the study and therefore has an obligation to take part in the procedures.

The participant felt himself to be similarly obligated to take part in the procedures as planned.

Being paid increased the sense of obligation.

As far as the participant was concerned, the roles of learner and teacher had been allocated fairly, by drawing lots. Thus the learner could not feel aggrieved that he had been unfairly assigned his role.

The participants had been assured that the shocks were 'painful but not dangerous'.

The victim responded to all of the questions until the 300 volt level was reached. This would indicate their willingness to take part.

The most important criticism of Milgram's work is concerned with its ethics:

Participants were deceived as to the exact nature of the study for which they had volunteered, and by making them believe they were really electrically shocking a real participant.

It is possible that being involved in the experiment may have had a long-term effect on the participants. Before the experiment they might have considered themselves incapable of inflicting harm on another person unless the circumstances were extreme. Afterwards, this view of themselves was shattered. Milgram argued that such self-knowledge was valuable.

In terms of the right to withdraw, it was good that Milgram stated at the start that the money paid to the participants was theirs regardless of whether they continued with the experiment. However, during the experiment the prods used suggested that withdrawal was not possible. This is ethically incorrect. Even so, we should consider whether the experiment would have been valid if the experimenter kept reminding the participant about his right to withdraw.

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In conclusion the results of this experiment are incredibly shocking, before hand Milgram estimated only a handful of people would go all the way, he was horrifically wrong, even though people were verbally rebelling they weren't behaviourally.