

Obedience to authority is when we change our behaviour as a result of a direct order from a perceived authority figure. Obedience is necessary to maintain social order and doesn't always result in an aggressive outcome, as it can provide a productive purpose too.

Milgram was part of a group of researchers interested in the destructive obedience observed during the holocaust. He wanted to understand this in order to prevent similar situations in the future.

He believed that obedience is relevant to our time because, between 1933 and 1945, millions of innocents were killed. The building of gas chambers and concentration camps would not have been possible if a large number of people had disobeyed orders.

Many believed that the Germans had carried out these atrocities because 'the Germans are a highly obedient nation who will follow orders whether or not these orders are moral or immoral'

Milgram aimed to disprove the 'Germans are different' hypothesis, by testing the conditions under which people would obey instructions even if it went against their moral beliefs. Obedience is a deeply ingrained behaviour for many people, where the impulse to obey can override any moral or ethical beliefs.

Milgram believed that obedience comes easily to us all, and is the dispositional cement that binds us to systems of authority.

In an experimental situation, he aimed to investigate people's willingness to follow destructive orders and find out if ordinary American people would obey unjust orders to inflict pain on another.

He wanted to investigate the 'Germans are different' hypothesis, related to the idea that Nazis had a personality defect.

40 male volunteers were recruited via a newspaper advertisement. They had to be ages between 20 and 50 and were paid \$4.50 to take part. They had to come from occupational backgrounds in order to take part in the study of memory and learning at Yale University.

Upon arrival, they were introduced to Mr Wallace, who was presented as another participant, but was in fact an accomplice of the experimenter. The procedure was explained to both men, and they were told that one would be the teacher and the other would be the learner. The experiment was rigged, so that the real participant was always the teacher.

Participants were shown the electric chair apparatus, and the learner had an electrode attached to his wrist, with electrode paste to avoid blisters. Both were told that this was linked to the shock generator in the next room. The teacher of the experiment also received a sample shock of 45 volts in order to maintain authenticity.

They were then taken into the next room and shown the shock generator, which went up in 15 volt increments to a maximum of 450 volts.

A paired associate learning task was used, where the teacher would read aloud a word of pairs, and then read the first word from each pair again followed by 4 terms. The learners job was to identify which of the 4 terms was associated with the first word in the pair. The answer was communicated by pressing one of four switches, which was linked to one of four lights on the shock generator.

The teacher was told to administer a shock for every wrong answer, increasing by 15 volts each time up to a maximum of 450 volts.

The procedure was standardised, with predetermined responses to the task, and standardised prods were used, such as 'please continue'. Also, participants were fully debriefed afterwards.

Prior to the experiment, 14 Yale Seniors had predicted that a maximum of 3 would administer the full 450 volts.

The real results were:

100% administered at least 300 volts, with 4 addressing 315 volts. 5 participants administered between 330 and 375 volts. However, unlike the prediction earlier made, 65% of participants (26) went on to administer the full 450 volts.

Both qualitative and quantitative data was found. The qualitative data was the observed signs of stress, such as lip biting, trembling, nervous laughter and 3 even had a full blow seizure. The quantitative data was the percentage of participants administering each level of shock.

Milgram concluded that the findings drawn show that people will unwillingly go against their moral judgement and will instead obey the demands of a perceived authority figure. The high levels of obedience observed show that we all tend to obey authority figures in certain situations.

Rather than dispositional factors explaining obedience, it is clear that situation factors are possibly more important, and can override our usually good and moral behaviour.

Milgram also noted that the extreme obedience observed was the result of the particular conditions under which it occurred, such as being set in Yale University which would make the experiment seem 'worthy', being paid an attendance fee of \$4.50 and also the fact that participants were isolated with no one to turn to.

Participants had little time for reflection and it was clear that obeying orders caused conflict within them. Participants felt both a desire to avoid inflicting pain and a desire to follow orders from authority.

