

Title: Milgram's Obedience Studies

Author: James M. DuBois

Description: In the early 1960's, Stanley Milgram used deception to recruit subjects for a psychology experiment. Subjects were told that the research concerned the effect of punishment on learning, when in fact it studied obedience to authority.

Headings: Classic Historical Cases

Case Type: Decision making

Milgram's Obedience Studies

In the early 1960's, in response to a newspaper ad or a letter, forty men, aged 20 – 50 and representing various occupations came to the psychological laboratory of Yale University to take part in what they believed would be a study of memory and learning. They were paid \$4.50 for their participation.

When they arrived, each was met by two other men – one pretending to be the experimenter and another pretending to be a subject. The subject was played by a 47-year-old accountant, "whom most observers found mild mannered and likable." Stanley Milgram, the actual principal investigator, was positioned behind a one-way mirror observing events.

As a pretext for administering shock, the actual subjects were told that the research concerned the effect of punishment on learning. A rigged drawing of slips of paper from a hat always resulted in the naïve subject being the teacher and the accomplice (the pretend subject) being the learner or victim. The learner was then lead to an adjacent room where the experimenter strapped the learner into an apparatus that looked like an electric chair. The wires attached to the learner were said to be attached to a shock generator in the next room, and the experimenter said "although the shocks can be painful, they cause no permanent tissue damage."

The false experiment involved learning a list of pairs of words. False answers by the learner were to be punished by administering a shock. The shock generator was a realistic-looking panel with 30 switches labeled with voltages ranging from 15 – 450, with sets of switches labeled as "slight shock, moderate shock, ... extreme shock, ... danger–severe shock, and XXX." The "teachers" were told to punish incorrect responses starting with mild shock, but increasing the voltage with each wrong response. The 45-volt switch was used to give a mild shock to the "teacher" to convince him that the machine really did work. As the experiment proceeded, the learner gave about 3 wrong answers for every correct one. No sound was heard from the learner in the other room until the 300-volt level. Then the learner pounded on the wall, but his answer did not appear on the response panel. The experimenter told the teacher to treat "no response" as an incorrect response and to increase the voltage.

At this point many teacher-subjects were unwilling to continue, but the experimenter urged them to do so using a series of prods or encouraging phrases: (1) "please continue" for the first refusal to

administer a shock; then (2) “the experiment requires that you continue,” for the next refusal, then (3) “it is absolutely essential that you continue” and finally, (4) “you have no other choice, you must go on.” If the teacher refused to continue after all four prods, the experiment was ended. The measure of obedience to authority was the level of the last shock given by the teacher.

The major finding of the study was that, “of the 40 subjects, 26 obeyed the orders of the experimenter to the end, proceeding to punish the victim until they reached the most potent shock available on the shock generator.” Only 5 subjects stopped when the learner began pounding the wall at the 300-volt mark.

If this study were proposed today, would you grant it a “waiver of informed consent” in order to allow the use of deception, which is essential to its design?