Milgram (1963): Obedience

Lesson 1.4.1 | Concepts and methods

1. Psychology and aim

The social approach explains behaviour, thoughts and emotions through social contexts and the actual, implied or imagined presence of others. **Obedience** is following instructions from a perceived authority. **Social pressure** can create conflict between instructions and personal conscience.

The study investigated how far people would obey commands to administer apparently harmful shocks. It challenged predictions that destructive obedience would be confined to very few people.

2. Sample and laboratory situation

Forty men aged 20-50 from New Haven and nearby communities volunteered through newspaper adverts/direct mail. Occupations and education varied. They received $4.50 simply for attending and could retain it regardless of what happened.

At Yale, a stern experimenter in a grey technician's coat presented a memory-and-learning cover story. A friendly learner was an accomplice. A rigged draw ensured the real participant became the teacher; the learner was strapped into a chair with electrodes.

3. Task and apparatus

The teacher read word pairs and tested matching words. Preset learner errors required increasing shock levels: 30 switches, 15-450 V in 15 V increments, with escalating danger labels. The participant received a real 45 V sample shock; the learner received no actual shocks.

This exact condition had no learner voice feedback. The learner pounded on the wall at 300 V and again at 315 V, then was silent. Missing answers were counted as errors and the teacher was instructed to continue.

4. Method

Controlled laboratory procedure with observation and interviews. The main study had **no manipulated IV or comparison condition**. Maximum shock delivered was the measure of obedience; visible tension and interview responses added evidence.

> Do not import spoken pain protests from other Milgram variations into this core study. The specified main condition used wall pounding and silence.

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Lesson 1.4.1 | Evidence and interpretation

1. Prods and stopping

Standard prods progressed from a request to continue, to the experiment's requirement, absolute necessity and finally a statement denying choice. Special responses addressed concerns about permanent tissue damage. Persistent refusal ended the procedure.

2. Quantitative results

Outcome	Result
Reached at least 300 V	40 / 40
Reached 450 V: fully obedient	26 / 40 = 65%
Refused before 450 V	14 / 40 = 35%

Maximum settings among the 14 refusers: 300 V (5 men), 315 V (4), 330 V (2), 345 V (1), 360 V (1), 375 V (1).

Fourteen psychology students had predicted, on average, that only 1.2% would reach the top level. Participants rated the final shocks as very painful: mean 13.42 on a 14-point scale; mode 14.

3. Emotional observations

Sweating, trembling, stuttering, groaning and lip-biting showed strain. Fourteen displayed nervous laughter/smiling; three severe uncontrollable episodes were described. Some participants remained relatively calm. Continuing did not necessarily mean approving of, or enjoying, harm.

4. Interpretation

Yale's legitimacy, the scientific role, commitment and reassurance may help explain obedience. These influences were not separately manipulated in the original condition. Fourteen refusals and varied distress also show individual variation.

Conclusion: authority pressure could produce unexpectedly high destructive obedience and substantial conflict. The findings do not imply that all people always obey authority.

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Lesson 1.4.1 | Evaluation and connections

1. Strengths

Control: preset learner responses and ordered prods supported a consistent procedure.
Operationalisation: maximum shock level defined obedience clearly and quantitatively.
Multiple data: behaviour, tension observations and interviews helped interpret the psychological conflict.

2. Limitations

Sample: 40 male volunteers from one US area do not represent every sex, culture or setting.
Artificial task: laboratory switches and a research cover story differ from many real authority situations; expectations could affect behaviour.
No isolated causes: the original study did not separately test Yale, payment, the coat or personality. Do not present these explanations as experimentally demonstrated causes here.

3. Ethics

Deception/consent: the real purpose, rigged allocation, learner and shocks were concealed or misrepresented.
Harm: believing one was harming another person caused marked distress even though the learner was safe.
Withdrawal: repeated prods, especially denial of choice, could undermine freedom to stop.

The report describes interviews, reassurance and reconciliation with the learner. These efforts matter, but debriefing does not automatically undo distress or fully restore prior informed choice.

4. Debates and application

Situational: a legitimate-seeming authority context accompanied high obedience. **Individual:** some refused and emotional responses differed; the causes of these differences were not isolated.
Application: findings can inform discussion of questioning harmful orders and routes to raise concerns. Training effectiveness was not tested.
Nature/nurture: the study did not separate inheritance from lifelong experience.

> Common mistake: calling this main condition a two-group experiment with an IV. The official core study specifies no IV in the main condition.

Hint: A situational explanation needs a specific social feature and a link to behaviour, while acknowledging whether that feature was actually manipulated.