

# 50th Anniversary of Stanley Milgram's Obedience Experiments

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Stories of torture, corporate greed, fraud, and misconduct are regular features of daily news coverage. For years, psychological scientists have tried to understand why ordinary and decent people are driven to commit such atrocious acts. Much of what we know on this topic can be traced to the work of one man: Stanley Milgram. Fifty years ago, Milgram, an assistant professor of psychology at Yale University, began a famous and controversial series of experiments to test the boundaries of people's obedience to authority and determine how far normal people would go in inflicting pain on others just because they were told to.

The experiment involved forty males who each took on the role of a "teacher" who delivered electric shocks to a "learner" when they answered a question incorrectly. Though the "teacher" believed that he was delivering real shocks, the "learner" was actually part of Milgram's research team and only pretended to be in pain. The "learner" would implore the "teacher" to stop the shocks and the "teacher" would be encouraged to continue despite the learner's pleas.

These experiments laid the foundation for understanding why seemingly decent people could be encouraged to do bad things. Thomas Blass, Milgram biographer and a professor of psychology at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, says that Milgram's obedience experiments provided a powerful affirmation of one of the main guiding principles of contemporary social psychology: "It is not the kind of person we are that determines how we act, but rather the kind of situation we find ourselves in."

"What Milgram's obedience studies revealed above all was the sheer power of social pressure. Suddenly it was conceivable that the sorts of psychological forces producing conformity that social scientists had been interested in for some time could not only explain fashions and stock market gyrations, but also some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most egregious collective behaviors: genocide, the Holocaust, totalitarianism," says Dominic Packer, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Lehigh University.

Milgram's obedience work sparked an examination of the ethics of psychological research on human subjects and has had a profound and lasting effect on how research in most areas within the social and behavioral sciences is conducted, says Jeffery Simpson, Professor of Psychology at the University of Minnesota. He argues that the rise of research studying people in their natural lives and environments is one of the most important legacies of Milgram's work.

Blass states that Milgram's obedience experiments are important because they provide a frame of reference for contemporary real-life instances of extreme, destructive obedience. The fact that recent studies have replicated Milgram's findings demonstrates that Milgram had "identified one of the universals or constants of social behavior, spanning time and place."

Now, fifty years later, Milgram's experiments serve as a turning point in the field of social psychology reminding us, as Packer observes, that "normal psychological processes – working away in all of us – can give rise to terrible behaviors if we are not careful."

([Read Carol Tavris's interview with Stanley Milgram here](#))

Also, check out these videos that explain the experiments:

For more information on Stanley Milgram's Obedience Experiments, read [this article](#) from *[Perspectives on Psychological Science](#)*.