

# Online Exclusive: The Obedience Experiments at 50

October 11, 2011

This year is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of Stanley Milgram's groundbreaking experiments on obedience to destructive orders — the most famous, controversial and, arguably, most important psychological research of our times. To commemorate this milestone, in this article I present the key elements comprising the legacy of those experiments.

Milgram was a 28-year-old junior faculty member at Yale University when he began his program of research on obedience, supported by grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF), which lasted from August 7, 1961 through May 27, 1962.

As we know, in his obedience experiments Milgram made the startling discovery that a majority of his subjects — average and, presumably, normal community residents — were willing to give a series of what they believed were increasingly painful and, perhaps, harmful electric shocks to a vehemently protesting victim simply because they were commanded to do so by an authority (although no shock was actually given). They did this despite the fact that the experimenter had no coercive powers to enforce his commands and the person they were shocking was an innocent victim who did nothing to merit such punishment. Although Milgram conducted over 20 variations of his basic procedure, his central finding obtained in several standard, or baseline, conditions was that about two-thirds of the subjects fully obeyed the experimenter, progressing step-by-step up to the maximum shock of 450 volts.

First and foremost, the obedience experiments taught us that we have a powerful propensity to obey authority. Did we need Milgram to tell us this? Of course, not. What he *did* teach us is just how strong this tendency is — so strong, in fact, that it can make us act in ways contrary to our moral principles.

Milgram's findings provided a powerful affirmation of one of the main guiding principles of contemporary social psychology: That often it is not the kind of person we are that determines how we act, but rather the kind of situation we find ourselves in. To perceive behavior as flowing from within — from our character or personality — is to paint an incomplete picture of the determinants of our behavior. Milgram showed that external pressures coming from a legitimate authority can make us behave in ways we would not even consider when acting on our own.

Foreshadowing the widespread attention the obedience experiments were to receive was an early article appearing in the *New York Times*, titled “Sixty-five Percent in Test Blindly Obey to Inflict Pain,” right after the publication of Milgram's first journal report. Although Milgram had just begun his academic career and he would go on to do other innovative research studies — such as “The small-world problem” and “The lost letter technique” — they would always be overshadowed by the obedience work. Of the 140 or so talks he gave during his lifetime, more than a third dealt with obedience. His book *Obedience to authority: An experimental view* has been translated into 11 languages.

I believe that one of the most important aspects of Milgram's legacy is that, in demonstrating our extreme readiness to obey authorities, he has identified one of the universals, or constants, of human behavior, straddling time and place. I have done two analyses to support this contention. In one, I correlated the results of Milgram's standard obedience experiments and the replications conducted by others with their date of publication. The results: There was absolutely no relationship between when a study was conducted and the amount of obedience it yielded. In a second analysis, I compared the outcomes of obedience experiments conducted in the United States with those conducted in other countries. Remarkably, the average obedience rates were very similar: In the U.S. studies, some 61 percent of the subjects were fully obedient, while elsewhere the obedience rate was 66 percent.

A more recent, modified replication of one of Milgram's conditions (Exp.#5, "A new base-line condition") conducted by Jerry Burger, a social psychologist at the Santa Clara University supports the universality argument. Burger's replication added safeguards not contained in Milgram's original experiment. Although carried out 45 years after Milgram conducted the original Exp. #5, Burger's findings did not differ significantly from Milgram's.

From the beginning, the obedience studies have been embroiled in controversy about its ethics. They were vilified by some and praised by others. A well-known ethicist commented rhetorically: "Is this perhaps going too far in what one asks a subject to do and how one deceives him?" A Welsh playwright expressed his disdain by arguing that many people "may feel that in order to demonstrate that subjects may behave like so many Eichmanns, the experimenter had to act the part, to some extent, of a Himmler." On the other hand, Milgram received supportive letters from fellow social psychologists such as Elliot Aronson and Philip Zimbardo. And in 1964, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) awarded him its annual social psychology award for his most complete report on the experiments up to that time, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority."

The furor stirred up by the obedience experiments, together with a few other ethically problematic studies, has resulted in a greater sensitivity to the well-being of the human research participant today. More concretely, the obedience experiments are generally considered one of the handful of controversial studies that led Congress to enact the National Research Act in 1974, which mandated the creation of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). Harold Takooshian, one of Milgram's outstanding students at CUNY, recalls him saying that "IRBs are an impressive solution to a non-problem."

A distinctive aspect of the legacy of the obedience experiments is that they can be applied to real life in a number of ways. They provide a reference point for certain phenomena that, on the face of it, strain our understanding — thereby, making them more plausible. For example, Milgram's findings can help us fathom how it was possible for managers of fast-food restaurants throughout the United States to fall for a bizarre hoax over a nine-year period between 1995 and 2004. In a typical case, the manager of an eatery received a phone call from a man claiming to be a police officer, who ordered him to strip-search a female employee who supposedly stole a pocketbook. In over 70 instances, the manager obeyed the unknown caller.

The implications of Milgram's research have been greatest for understanding the Holocaust. In his book "Ordinary Men," Christopher Browning, a historian, describing the behavior of a Nazi mobile unit roaming the Polish countryside that killed 38,000 Jews in cold blood at the bidding of their commander, concluded that "many of Milgram's insights find graphic confirmation in the behavior and testimony of

the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101.”

Legal scholarship and practice has made wide use of the obedience studies. Several Supreme Court briefs, as well as over 350 law reviews have referenced them. The U.S. Army also has taken the lessons of Milgram’s research to heart. In response to a letter-writer’s question in December 1985, the head of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at West Point wrote: “All cadets...are required to take two psychology courses.... Both of these courses discuss Milgram’s work and the implications of his findings.”

There is typically a gray cloud of gloom hovering over any discussions of Milgram’s research. This is not surprising since Milgram himself repeatedly and almost exclusively drew troubling implications. So let me end on a more positive note.

Milgram recognized that obedience is a necessary element of civilized society. As he once wrote: “We cannot have society without some structure of authority, and every society must inculcate a habit of obedience in its citizens.” So, once he felt that he had probed the destructive side of obedience in sufficient detail, he was ready to turn his attention to its positive aspects.

Milgram submitted a continuation grant proposal to NSF in early 1962, after he had completed almost all of the experimental conditions dealing with destructive obedience. One of the proposed experiments he listed in that grant proposal was titled “Constructive Obedience.” The grant proposal was only approved in modified form with reduced funding, so Milgram never did carry out such an experiment. But, nonetheless, the fact that he planned such an experiment is informative, because it implied that Milgram apparently thought that the unexpected strength of the obedient tendencies he had discovered so far was just one part of a more general, full-spectrum predisposition.

*About the author: **Thomas Blass**, a professor of psychology at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, is the author of Milgram’s biography, The man who shocked the world: The life and legacy of Stanley Milgram (Basic Books, 2004, 2009). He also edited the third, expanded edition of Milgram’s anthology, The individual in a social world: Essays and Experiments (Pinter and Martin, 2010), the most complete collection of Milgram’s writings. In addition, Blass maintains a website about Milgram, [www.stanleymilgram.com](http://www.stanleymilgram.com). He can be reached at [bllass@umbc.edu](mailto:bllass@umbc.edu) .*