

# Classic Psychological Studies

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## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will examine two famous psychological studies, specifically in terms of the experimental method. As you explore them, think about the ethical implications of both. You will also reflect on how strong self and social awareness skill can help you listen to your conscience. Our discussion breaks down as follows:

## 1. Milgram Obedience Experiments

We'll begin with the Milgram Obedience Experiments. These experiments were originally created as a result of World War II, when people thought that the Germans who went along with the atrocities committed by the Nazis in Germany during World War II were also responsible, and were morally wrong in their behavior. It was also thought that this behavior was exceedingly abnormal, that people would not cooperate with these sorts of actions under normal conditions.

Therefore, the purpose of this experiment was to see how people respond to authority and whether they would comply with that authority's requests—in other words, testing their obedience—even if what they were told to do was not necessarily morally right.

Here's how it worked. A subject was placed in a room with an experimenter next to them, who was the authority figure. In front of the subject was a control panel with different buttons. Each button had a different voltage on it in increasing order, from 15 volts up to 450 volts. The subject was also given a list of word pairs.

Now, the subject was told that the panel containing all the different voltages was hooked up to another participant in a different room, that they could hear but couldn't see. That person in the other room would try to memorize the list of word pairs as it was read to them by the subject.

The subject would then ask the first word in a word pair and see if they could get the correct answer from the other participant. If the other participant got it wrong, then the subject would press the button and give them a shock. The shocks would continue in increasing order if the other participant did not produce the correct results, until they finally reached 450 volts.

Now, the important thing to know is that there actually was no other second subject. It was just a recording. The responses that the subject was getting were the same in each experiment regardless of what the person said or did—and they would generally get the answers wrong.

The experimenters wanted to see if the subjects would continue to shock a person, particularly given the authority figure next to them.

The results were that the subjects continued to give the electric shocks regardless of the increasingly angry or worried responses they were getting from the recording that they heard. When the subjects questioned what they were doing, the experimenter would give them a series of responses, such as, "You have to continue."

If they continued to question or refused to continue, then the experiment would stop. However, if they went all the way to 450 volts three times, that would also be the end of the experiment.

The experimenters wanted to test how many people would continue to go on even if, at the very end, they were worried for the person's safety on the other side? Well, the results were that 66% of people went all the way through, which shows what a powerful effect that authority can have, as well as the drive to obey, on people's choices.

As a result of the experiment, many of the subjects reported distress, distress that they had harmed another person (as they were led to believe by the experimenters.) This deception caused cognitive dissonance, two conflicting beliefs about themselves. They believed themselves to be good people but their actions were not those of a good person. In some cases, this resulted in serious mental pain. No resolution to this pain was offered to the subjects, before or after participating in the experiment. As a result, psychological ethics require that experimenters give as much information about the experiment as possible without compromising the results and that subjects be warned of possible effects on themselves and ways to mitigate those outcomes.

### Self and Social Awareness: Skill Reflect

How do you think you'd perform in an experiment like this? As you strengthen your self and social awareness skills you may be more willing to listen to your conscience, even in the face of authority. When you are aware of how you feel about something, you are more likely to act in alignment.



### TERMS TO KNOW

Obedience

Complying to the request of an authority figure.

#### Milgram Obedience Experiments

A series of experiments after World War II that attempted to measure how people respond to authority, or obey what they are told.

## 2. Stanford Prison Experiment

The second study, the Stanford Prison Experiment, was a psychological experiment conducted by Philip Zimbardo at Stanford in 1971. In this study, participants were selected from a pool and randomly grouped into categories of either prisoners or guards. They were then locked onto a floor of a building that was a simulated prison, for a period of two weeks.

The purpose was to see how people responded perceived roles in controlled conditions. For instance, would participants fall into a prisoner role or a guard role, depending on what they were labeled, regardless of who they were to begin with?

The subjects that were randomly selected to be prisoners were arrested, at their homes, by real local police and taken away with sirens blaring. They were not informed that this would happen, and it was not part of the contract that they had signed with the experimenter, Phillip Zimbardo. This gave a sense of recklessness and danger to the whole experiment.

Subsequently, "prisoners" were strip-searched, given numbers to replace their names, and ordered to wear uncomfortable smocks without underwear with a chain around their ankles.

On the first day, the subjects labeled prisoners, as well as those labeled as guards, started to fall into these roles. They started acting like it was an actual prison situation, even though, in reality, none of them were actually prisoners or guards. The prisoners began to act out against the guards. They started refusing to follow directions, began refusing to come out of their cells, and revolted against the guards.

The guards, on the other hand, started to impose measures and countermeasures to exert control. They created what was called a "privilege cell," for those prisoners who didn't act up. They forced prisoners to go to the bathroom in buckets in the cells. They forced them to do push-ups and took away their mattresses so they had to sleep on the floor.

One prisoner revolted against the conditions and refused to eat, going on a hunger strike. The guards placed him in solitary confinement. Even Zimbardo, the experimenter, began to assume his role as the superintendent of the prison and continued to allow the abuse.

The experiment was supposed to last two weeks. It only lasted for six days before the conditions became so extreme that Zimbardo's team began to worry for the health of the participants. They confronted Zimbardo, and it was shut down. Zimbardo was criticized for his lack of oversight and was questioned about the lack of any independent variable in this experiment. Participants had been told that they could leave at any time, but this right was denied them.

The experiment resulted in major psychological and borderline physical harm to the participants. The results weren't necessarily conclusive, because it didn't last for the full two weeks. However, it illustrated the powerful effect that a prison-type environment can have on individuals, as well as the impact of the different labels of guard or prisoner on people.

#### ★ BIG IDEA

Both of these experiments led to a more specific and stringent need for ethical guidelines to guide experimental practices. Competence, informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and avoidance of harm were all violated in the Stanford Prison Experiment, while informed consent and avoidance of harm were absent in the Milgram experiment. Researchers today must submit proposed studies to a review board to be certain that they are complying with ethical guidelines. These guidelines were put in place by the American Psychological Association (APA).

#### 📖 TERM TO KNOW

##### Stanford Prison Experiment

A psychological experiment in 1971 where participants were randomly grouped into categories of prisoners and guards and locked into a floor of a building for only six days before it was canceled.

#### 📋 SUMMARY

In this lesson, we learned about two famous psychological experiments, the Milgram Obedience Experiments and the Stanford Prison Experiment. The Milgram Obedience Experiments consisted of a series of experiments conducted after World War II that attempted to measure how people respond to authority, or obey what they are told—even when what they were told to do was morally questionable. You reflected on how strong self and social awareness skill could impact how a participant in a study like this behaves.

In the Stanford Prison Experiment, participants were randomly grouped into categories of prisoners and guards, and locked into a simulated prison, for a targeted time frame of two weeks. The intent was to test how normal people responded to certain roles that were assigned to them. The experiment only lasted six days before it was shut down due to the extreme conditions that resulted, and the psychological harm being inflicted upon the participants.

As a result, a specific need was recognized for ethical guidelines in experimental practices, which are put in place today by the American Psychological Association, or APA.

Good luck!

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