

Classic Studies of Psychology

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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 all the factors that comprise an experiment, such as variables, methods, analysis, and the results of an experiment, as well as potential sources for bias.

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. Milgram Obedience Experiments
2. Stanford Prison Experiment

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. Well, 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. If they questioned what they were doing, then 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 affect that authority can have, as well as the drive to obey, on people's choices, even those who are considered to be "normal" people.



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 goal time period of two weeks.

The purpose was to see how normal people responded to prison conditions and how environment influences behavior. However, it was also intended to see how people responded to certain roles that were associated with different groups.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** 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?

On the first day, the prisoners, as well as the guards, started to fall into these different 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.

During the second day, one prisoner began to act in an erratic manner; he started yelling, going into fits of rage, and couldn't be controlled. The guards, on the other hand, started to impose measures and

countermeasures in response. 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.

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

Despite the intended goal of two weeks, the experiment only lasted for six days before the conditions became so extreme and they began to worry for the health of the participants, and it was shut down.

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 definitely 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. These guidelines are put in place today by the American Psychological Association, or 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

Today 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.

In the Stanford Prison Experiment, participants were randomly grouped into categories of prisoners and guards, and locked into a simulated prison, for a targeted timeframe of two weeks. The intent was to test how normal people responded to prison conditions and how environment influences behavior. It was also intended to see how 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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