

Aim: To find out whether ordinary Americans would obey an unjust order from a person in authority to inflict pain on another person. Milgram wanted to discover what factors in a situation led people to obey.

Procedures:

- ❑ 40 male volunteers, each paid \$4.50, were deceived into thinking they were giving electric shocks.
- ❑ The participants were told that the study concerned the role of punishment in learning. The genuine participant always had the teacher's role and a confederate played the part of the learner. His task was to memorise pairs of words. When tested, the "learner" would indicate his choice using a system of lights. The "teacher's" role was to administer a shock every time the learner made a mistake. The teacher sat in front of the shock generator that had 30 levers, each of which indicated the level of shock to be given. The participant watched the confederate being strapped into a chair in an adjoining room with electrodes attached to his arms.
- ❑ To begin with the accomplice answered correctly and then began to make mistakes. Every time he made an error, he was to be given an electric shock administered by the participant. Shocks started at 15 volts and rose in 15-volt increments to 450 volts. If the teacher hesitated in administering the shocks, the researcher encouraged him to continue.
- ❑ No shocks were actually administered.
- ❑ The experiment continued either until the teacher refused to continue or until 450 volts were reached and given four times. The participant was then debriefed and taken to meet the learner-accomplice.

Findings:

- ❑ All participants went to at least 300 volts on the shock generator.
- ❑ 65 % of participants went to the end of the shock generator. That is, they believed they had administered the full 450 volts.
- ❑ Most participants found the procedure very stressful and wanted to stop, with some showing signs of extreme anxiety. Although they dissented verbally, they continued, however, to obey the researcher who prodded them to continue giving the shocks.

Conclusions:

- ❑ Under certain circumstances, most people will obey orders that go against their conscience.
- ❑ When people occupy a subordinate position in a dominance hierarchy, they become liable to lose feelings of empathy, compassion and morality, and are inclined towards blind obedience.
- ❑ Atrocities such as those carried out in WWII may be largely explained in terms of pressures to obey a powerful authority.

Variations on the original experiment:

- ❑ Venue for experiment moved from Yale University to run-down offices in a nearby town
- ❑ Participants were told that the "learner" had agreed only if "you let me out when I say so"
- ❑ Teacher and learner in the same room
- ❑ Teacher had to force learner's hand on to the plate to receive shocks
- ❑ Teacher given support from two other "teachers" (confederates) who refuse
- ❑ Experimenter left the room and instructed the teacher by telephone from another room
- ❑ Teacher paired with an assistant (confederate) who threw the switches