

Psychologists say Milgram's famous experiment on obedience to authority has been misunderstood

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Professor Kathryn Millard

Just over half a century ago, Stanley Milgram ran the most renowned studies in the history of psychology. He showed how ordinary people can do extraordinary harm to others when asked to do so. His conclusion, made famous through his film of the research, *Obedience*, was that humans are programmed to obey orders, no matter how noxious. But now, new research, complemented by a powerful new film, suggests that Milgram was wrong.

In his experiment, which took place at Yale University in 1961, Milgram asked volunteers to give what they thought were electric shocks of increasing strength to people who were trying but failing to learn a task. (In fact these 'students' were actors, but the volunteers believed the set up was genuine.)

In the best known variant of the study, some two-thirds of people continued all the way up to the maximum 450 volt level. The studies have aroused furious controversy ever since, not only for their findings but for fears about the distress inflicted on those who participated.

However, a paper in the British Journal of Social Psychology by researchers Professor Alex Haslam (University of Queensland), Professor Stephen Reicher (University of St Andrews), Professor Kathryn Millard (Macquarie University) and Professor Rachel McDonald (University of Kansas) argues that the meaning of the experiment has been widely misunderstood.

As a result of archival research by Millard—who spent several months researching in the archives at Yale—the team gained access to the feedback that 659 of the 800 volunteers provided at the end of the experiment – after they had been 'dehoaxed' by the experimenter.

Far from being distressed by the experience, the researchers found that most volunteers said they were very happy to have participated.

Professor Alex Haslam commented:

"It appears from this feedback that the main reason participants weren't distressed is that they did not think they had done anything wrong. This was largely due to Milgram's ability to convince them that they had made an important contribution to science:"

"This provides new insight into the psychology of oppression and gels with other evidence that perpetrators are generally motivated, not by a desire to do evil, but by a sense that what they are doing is worthy and noble.

Professor Stephen Reicher added:

"This new analysis suggests that we may have misunderstood the ethical as well as the theoretical issues raised by Milgram's studies. We need to ask whether it is right to protect participants' own wellbeing by leading them to think that harming the wellbeing of others can be justified as long as it is in a good cause."

These new understandings contribute to *Shock Room*—a film by award-winning Australian director Kathryn Millard that is now in the final stages of post-production.

The film begins where Milgram's film ended. It explores how people make the choice to obey authority – but also when they choose to disobey.

Professor Kathryn Millard said:

"Milgram's success comes down to the fact that he was a skilful dramatist as well as a psychologist. *Shock Room* breaks open the Milgram 'Obedience to Authority' paradigm and re-evaluates its conclusions. It tells a powerful new story about the dark side of human nature through a creative collaboration across art and science that has broad relevance for contemporary society.

More information: "'Happy to have been of service': The Yale archive as a window into the engaged followership of participants in Milgram's 'obedience' experiments," S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher,

Kathryn Millard and Rachel McDonald, Article first published online: 5 SEP 2014. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, [DOI: 10.1111/bjso.12074](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12074)

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