

# Authority's physical proximity means greater obedience: A new look at results of famous experiment

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Who should be spared pain, hurt or disappointment, and who should be harmed? This internal dilemma accompanied the participants of the Milgram experiment, say experts from SWPS University. They have revisited the causes of obedience in that famous study and showed that the experimenter's physical proximity promotes subjects' obedience, while the learner's physical proximity decreases it. The research is [published](#) in *The Journal of Social Psychology*.

American social psychologist Stanley Milgram's demonstration of the human tendency to show extreme obedience to authority was one of the most important discoveries in the field of social psychology.

## **The power of authority**

In the early 1960s, Milgram developed an experiment that measured the willingness to obey an authority figure. Throughout the history of science, the experiment has been repeated many times on various social groups, both by Milgram himself and by other scientists.

Experiments in their original version, designed by the American, ended in the 1970s for ethical reasons. In recent years, the experiment has been replicated in a milder form, due to the importance of knowledge about human behavior, derived from studies on authoritarianism.

In the original version of the experiment, the participants (40 people) were told that the experiment was intended to study the effect of punishment on a subject's ability to memorize content. It was explained to them that it would involve the participation of two people, one acting as a teacher and the other as a learner.

The subject was assigned the role of teacher. The subjects did not know

that the entire experimental procedure was staged and that the alleged learner was an actor. The subjects' task was to administer an electric shock to the learner each time the learner made a mistake in the learning process.

The experimenter instructed the subject-teacher to administer successive, increasingly stronger electric shocks to the learner upon each incorrect answer. When the shock was administered, the learners made specific sounds indicating the pain they felt.

Most subjects (over 60%, depending on the version of the experiment) obeyed all the experimenter's instructions and finally pressed the 450 V button, the highest setting of the [electric shock](#) generator.

## **Where does obedience come from?**

"Milgram offered a simple and suggestive explanation for these results. He proposed that participants assumed the role of individuals who were subordinate to the experimenter and they did not feel fully responsible for their actions. Even though they experienced severe stress and tension, as they were aware of the fact that they were severely hurting another person, they were unable to walk away from the situation and refuse to continue with the experiment," said Professor Dariusz Doliński, a psychologist from SWPS University.

For many years, scientists have been looking for other mechanisms that could explain the obedience of participants in the famous experiment. Researchers at SWPS University, professors Dariusz Doliński and Tomasz Grzyb, proposed a theoretical model, supported by research, to shed new light on the reasons for the behavior of subjects in the Milgram experiment.

"Our approach is based on the assumption that one must consider the

relationship of the participant with the experimenter on the one hand, and their relationship with the learner on the other. Participants are in conditions of classical avoidance-avoidance conflict, when we are faced with two undesirable incentives and are forced to make a choice. The conflict is of such a nature that none of the choices is obvious and none is better than the other," says Professor Tomasz Grzyb, a psychologist from SWPS University.

## **A tragic conflict in a classic experiment**

On the one hand, the participants in Milgram's experiments did not want to harm the learners, as evidenced by their extreme stress, hesitation prior to pushing successive buttons and questions about whether they really had to do so.

On the other hand, they did not want to harm the experimenter who, to their knowledge, had prepared the studies, hoped to collect interesting data, and had invested time in conducting the experiment. Additionally, immediately after arriving at the laboratory, participants received money from the experimenter for participating in the study, which could strongly motivate them to reciprocate.

"So the participant had to somehow resolve this conflict, in which if he decided not to harm the learner, he would harm the experimenter, and if he decided not to harm the experimenter, he would have to harm the learner," says Professor Dariusz Doliński.

The researchers assumed that the relationship between the subject and the learner, and between the subject and the experimenter was significantly influenced by the staging of the experiment, which differed in its individual variants. A situation in which the experimenter and the subject are in the same room, and the learner in another, will be conducive to obedience.

## Proximity promotes empathy

Analysis of various variants of the Milgram experiment and other studies on the role that physical distance plays in shaping reactions to the suffering of others confirms this assumption. They have shown, among other things, that the parts of the brain corresponding to experiencing empathy (primarily [anterior cingulate cortex](#)) become more active when physical distance between the participant and the person in distress is smaller.

To confirm the model indicating the importance of staging in the Milgram experiment, researchers at SWPS University decided to conduct their own study.

"Milgram did not conduct his research under conditions where the participant is placed in one room with the learner while the experimenter stays in another room. Such conditions are crucial from the perspective of our proposed model, as obedience of the participants should be lowest under those circumstances," said Professor Tomasz Grzyb.

"Secondly, in the Milgram experiments discussed here, only male participants were involved. Lastly, Milgram conducted separate experiments at different times and then compared their results. Our intention was to conduct a single experiment where we could manipulate factors related to its spatial organization."

The designed study could also clarify whether the differences in subjects' obedience observed in the various Milgram experiments were actually a consequence of [physical distance](#), or due to other differences between the created conditions.

## Proximity to authority promotes obedience

In the study by professors Dariusz Doliński and Tomasz Grzyb, the participants (160 people in total) were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. 20 women and 20 men were examined in each condition. For ethical reasons, researchers used the obedience lite procedure, which involves stopping the experiment when the participant obeys the experimenter's tenth command, i.e. presses the button marked 150 V.

In the first condition, the participant (teacher) and the experimenter giving them instructions were in the same room, while the supposed learner sat behind a wall. In the second condition, all three individuals were in the same room, and in the third condition, each of them was in a different room. In the fourth condition, the participant and the learner were in the same room, while the experimenter sat in an adjacent room.

In the two conditions where the experimenter was in the same room as the study participant, 69 out of 80 individuals followed all of the experimenter's instructions. In conditions where the experimenter was absent, 59 out of 80 individuals were completely obedient.

In conditions where the learner was in the same room as the study participant, 57 out of 80 individuals followed all of the experimenter's instructions. In conditions where the learner was absent, 70 out of 80 individuals were completely obedient.

The obedience ratio was the highest in the group where the participant was in the same room with the experimenter and the alleged learner was in another room. It reached over 9.8 on a 10-point scale, which meant obeying all the experimenter's instructions.

"Our experiment has demonstrated that the presumed avoidance-avoidance conflict is more often resolved in such a way as to avoid hurting the learner when he is physically present (i.e., he is in the same

room as the participant). This is true particularly often when, simultaneously, the experimenter is not physically present," said Professor Dariusz Doliński.

"The results we have obtained suggest the importance of concurrently considering the distances between the participant and the learner, on the one hand, and between the participant and the experimenter, on the other. This approach sheds light on the interconnected nature of these distances and underscores their collective impact on participant behavior in Milgram's experiments."

The researchers emphasize that although the reactions of Milgram's subjects were affected by various situational as well as personality-based factors, the model they proposed, along with empirical verification, is another important step in expanding our knowledge of one of the most fascinating phenomena of social psychology: obedience to authority.

**More information:** Dariusz Dolinski et al, Obedience to authority as a function of the physical proximity of the student, teacher, and experimenter, *The Journal of Social Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/00224545.2024.2348479](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2024.2348479)

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