

Request for Approval from the IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research  
Back-to-the-Future Yale University

**Investigation of Variations in Human Obedience to Authority**

Principal Investigator: Stanley Milgram,  
Assistant Professor of Psychology  
1962

*Proposal Narrative: Detailed description of the study*

Introduction: “Obedience is the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose. It is the dispositional cement that binds men to systems of authority. Facts of recent history and observation in daily life suggest that for many people obedience maybe a deeply ingrained behavior tendency, indeed, a prepotent impulse overriding training in ethics, sympathy, and moral conduct.” [1]<sup>1</sup> It is less than twenty years since the end of World War II and the discovery of the crimes committed by Nazi Germany, but we still do not understand how these atrocities could have occurred. Despite the importance of obedience, we know little about the extent to which “ordinary” persons will obey authority when ordered to do something that violates normal standards of conduct nor the factors that produce variation in the extent of obedience. “The crux of the study is to vary systematically the factors believed to alter the degree of obedience to the experimental commands and to learn under what conditions submission to authority is most probable and under what conditions defiance is brought to the fore.” [26]

Overview of experiment. Subjects are simply informed that they will take part in a study of memory and learning. It is expected that all subjects will either refuse to start administering shocks or will break off the study at intermediate stages of the experiment. We wish to learn who will obey instructions and to what extent they will do so.

The importance of this topic justifies using methods that involve deception of subjects and obtaining only partial consent from them to participate in the experiment. Without an appreciation of the role of obedience in shaping human action, “a wide range of significant behavior cannot be understood. For an act carried out under command is, psychologically, of a profoundly different character than action that is spontaneous.” [xi] Given the nature of the topic, there is no way to obtain the information from subjects without using deception. In view of the importance of the findings and the minimal risk to subjects (described below), the experimental design is justified. There is no way to achieve the research objectives unless the situation seems real to the subjects. The standards for the treatment of human subjects permit the use of deception when the value of the knowledge gains justifies it and there is no other way to secure this knowledge, so long as subjects are protected.

Subject Population: Persons drawn from working, managerial, and professional groups in the New Haven area who respond to newspaper advertisement. The effort to attract subjects will be supplemented with direct mail solicitations of names sampled from the

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<sup>1</sup> All page numbers from Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

telephone directory if the response to the newspaper ad is not sufficient. Respondents must be at least 20 years old and no older than 50.

Experimental Procedures: The participants are the experimenter, teacher, and learner.<sup>2</sup>  
EXPLAIN BASIC PROCESS.

- The “experimenter” briefs the participants, issues instructions to the teacher, and answers questions during the experiment. There are a sequence of “prods,” and the experimenter uses as many as necessary to attempt to bring the subject into line. [21]
  - Prod 1: Please continue, *or*, Please go on.
  - Prod 2: The experiment requires that you continue.
  - Prod 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.
  - Prod 4: You have no other choice, you *must* go on.
  - Special prods: If the subject asks about injury to the learner, “Although the shocks may be extremely painful, there is no permanent tissue damage, so please go on.” If subject says that the learner does not want to do on, “Whether the learner likes it or not, you must go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly. So please go on. (Followed by prods 2, 3, and 4, if necessary.)
  - **If the subject refuses to obey the experimenter after prod 4, the experiment will be terminated.**
- The “teacher”—the actual subject—asks questions and administers progressively more severe shocks if the “learner” answers incorrectly or fails to answer.
- The “learner” in a separate room is a confederate of the experimenter. He is not receiving any shocks. He speaks through a microphone to give his answers and respond to the shocks administered with a set script depending of the level. ADD SCRIPT OF RESPONSES FROM EXPERIMENT 5.
- The “shock generator” has levers corresponding to thirty levels of shock ranging from 15 to 450 volts. (See Figure 1.)

Potential Risks: To give the teacher some idea of the nature of the shock, each will be given a sample shock at level 3—45 volts. This is a slight shock that poses no risk.

The subjects will experience some degree of stress. “In this situation the subject must resolve a conflict between two mutually incompatible demands from the social field. He may continue to follow the orders of the experimenter and shock the learner with increasing severity, or he may refuse to follow the orders of the experimenter and heed the learner’s pleas. The experimenter’s authority operates not in a free field but against the ever-mounting countervailing pressures from the person being punished.” Obviously, the subject “teacher” will experience some distress in dealing with this conflict. The release from this conflict can be attained at any time by the subject’s choosing to defy

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<sup>2</sup> The format is based on a combination of the voice-feedback method (experiment 2) and the revised “new base line” condition (experiment 5.)

instructions and stop administering the supposed shocks. Interviews of psychiatrists, college students, and middle-class adults indicate clearly that most subjects will break off the experiment by level 12 of 30 (the end of the “strong shock” range) and that virtually no subjects will continue beyond stage 20, i.e., before entering the “extreme intensity shock” range. The results predicted by the panels of respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Predicted Results

Shock Level		Psychiatrists	College	Middle Class
			Students	Adults
No Shock		2		3
Slight	1	1		
	2			
	3			1
	4	1		1
Moderate	5	6	4	7
	6	1	3	1
	7	4		1
	8	4	1	3
Strong	9	1	3	2
	10	14	12	9
	11		1	2
	12	2	6	3
Very Strong	13	2		1
	14		1	
	15			1
	16			1
Intense	17			1
	18			
	19			
	20	1		3
Extreme Intensity	21			
	22			
	23			
	24			
Danger: Severe	25			
	26			
	27			
	28			
XXX	29			
	30			
Number subjects		n=39	n=31	n=40
Avg. max. shock level		8.20	9.35	9.15
% "obedient"		0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

There is the possibility that some subjects may feel a sense of guilt for following instructions that appear to cause suffering on the part of the learner even for a short time or to a moderate level. This will be addressed in the debriefing process.

Debriefing process:

Immediately after each subject had reached their maximum shock level, the true nature of the experiment was explained to each subject during an extended discussion period. The “victim” will be brought in to show the subject that no damage was done and there were no ill feelings. Based on the predictions of the expert and lay panels, we do not expect subjects to experience tension for a very long period of time because most will refuse to obey before the midpoint in the shock range.

We acknowledge that in a trial run of the experiment using students as subjects, no one defied instructions before level 20 and 65% administered the maximum shock. In this design (remote experiment 1), there was no voice feedback from the learner (only a pounding sound on the wall at level 20 and no answers after level 21). “It was thought that the verbal and voltage designations on the control panel would create sufficient pressure to curtail the subject’s obedience.” (22) In addition, we feel that the students did not believe the experiment was real because of the “shock generator” looked phony. It has been replaced with the new model. We expect that the greater realism of the experimental setting and the introduction of voice-feedback will substantially increase defiance to approximately the levels predicted in our surveys. The programmed responses from the learner, presented earlier, will introduce a force that we expect will “strengthen the subject’s resistance to the experimenter’s commands, and reveal individual differences in terms of a distribution of breakoff points.” (22)

In this new approach, the conflict between the instructions of the experimenter and the pleas of the learner will, however, increase the tension experienced by the subject. We will take two steps to relieve any stress the subject feels:

1. In the debriefing, the decisions of both obedient and disobedient subjects will be supported by the experimenters feelings of conflict or tension were said to be “normal.”
2. Subjects will be told that they would receive a comprehensive report of the entire experiment once the series of tests were completed. At that point, we will also examine their reactions to have participated in the experiment.

Compensation: Subjects will receive \$4.00 (plus 50 cents carfare) for participating in this study. [Approximately \$25 in current dollars.]

Collaborators: I have consulted with the social psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg who is a colleague in the Psychology Department. He supports the study and interviewed the students who participated in the trial version experiment 1.

Additional Information: NSF has pledged to provide support for this experiment. [Normally, IRB review would occur before submitted the grant proposal, but since this is a new procedure at Back-to-the-Future Yale University, the prior review did not occur. It is an important indicator of the scientific value of this study that NSF would indicate its willingness to provide funding.]

See attached modified consent form.

*IRB members will ask questions and make a decision. For the sake of the second stage of the simulation, it is assumed that the IRB approves the study with conditions including a monitoring requirement. The board wants a report and will observe sample interviews.*

## Stage 2: Arguments presented when returning to the IRB

Review results referring to Experiment 5. Despite the increasingly strenuous objections from the learner and the references to heart pain, 65% of the subjects administered the maximum shock. This was the same as in “remote” no feedback classroom version, although 25% stopped shocking the learner before stage 20. None of the subjects in the remote version stopped before stage 20. We acknowledge that far more subjects than we expected are experiencing the tension that builds up in the experiment when it continues to the end. Here are two sample interviews with the debriefing.

Tape of two subjects: one defiant and one obedient

Note evidence of tension. “There were in some subjects striking reactions to emotional strain.” Summary - Fig. 8, p. 42. Justification, end of p. 43.

Discuss debriefing

Milgram dismisses the actual level of stress. “Momentary excitement is not the same as harm.” (194) Results from questionnaire completed by respondents after receiving the report on the study: 84% indicated that they were “glad” to have been in the experiment, and four-fifths of subjects “felt that more experiments of this kind should be carried out.” (195) Present Milgram’s arguments about the importance of the findings. The experiment should not be discontinued because the results are unexpected and unpleasant. “If, instead, every one of the subjects has broken off at ‘slight shock,’ or at the first sign of the learner’s discomfort, the results would have been pleasant, and reassuring, and who would protest [continuing the experiment.]” (194)

Request that permission be given to continue the experiment with introduction of more variations.

*What questions would you ask as an IRB member at this stage? Would you approve continuing the experiment? If so, would you impose additional conditions?*

Ending discussion and commentary

Note that Milgram was sensitive to the subject’s stress but was also willing to use experimental formats that produced very high stress levels. In the touch-proximity experiment (see second paragraph, p. 46), “The scene is brutal and depressing: his [the teacher’s] hard, impassive face showing total indifference as he subdues the screaming learner and gives him shocks.”