

# Psychology@LSE – Beyond Obedience

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***Shock Room*, a new documentary film by Professor Kathryn Millard challenges the findings of Stanley Milgram's infamous obedience studies.**

If you mention Stanley Milgram to any psychology student the first thing that comes to mind is obedience. His seminal studies conducted at Yale University over 50 years ago involved participants who were asked to administer electric shocks to a confederate posing as another participant. The findings helped to show that participants would obey even when that meant causing cruelty to others, and have been used ever since to highlight the potentially destructive power of authority on behaviour. However these findings are now being challenged.

In the new documentary-film *Shock Room*, screened at the LSE as part of the 50-year celebrations of the Department of Social Psychology at the school, filmmaker Professor Kathryn Millard and psychologists Professor Steven Reicher and Professor Alex Haslam, who both featured in the film, take a fresh look at Milgram's findings. The film restages the findings from previously unfiled experimental conditions, challenging his explanation about the extent to which humans actually obey authority and counters the general narrative of Milgram's studies, which is often defined by the one experiment he actually filmed.

The re-examination of Milgram's studies attempts to step away from referring to them as 'obedience studies' for in doing so we forget and/or do not acknowledge that the participants in the study do in fact display their agency. Interestingly, in examining Milgram's data, stored in the archives of Yale University, Millard notes that while people do indeed follow and obey authority, Milgram's findings also show that people rebel. In fact, 58% of the overall participants who took part in Milgram's studies, across all variations of the experiment, disobeyed. In highlighting this, the film not only challenges Milgram's conclusions but also swings the spotlight onto other social phenomena, namely agency and choice, that were in play during these experiments.

Agency is not simply demonstrated in acts of rebellion, resistance or even compliance. The film introduces the notion of 'the noble cause', whereby individuals will take part in potentially morally-questioning behaviours, even when moved by the apparent pain and suffering of others, so long as they feel they are making some form of a contribution – in the case of Milgram's studies, helping science by continuing to take part in the study. For indeed, the re-examination of Milgram's study suggests that how we orientate ourselves to multiple voices within our context influences how we act.

Choice, Millard claims, is the critical issue however. In Milgram's studies, four prompts formed the script for the experimenter to read from when participants questioned continuing with the experiment. Only one of the four was an actual order – "You have no other choice, you must go on". Interestingly, when this order was used, participants always stopped. What can be deduced from this, the film shows, is that participants will continue to be active contributors to the study for as long as they feel they have the a choice. The moment they are denied choice, they resist.

But in reality do people always have a choice? Are not the choices we have and make governed by repercussions and consequences? Milgram's experiments were conducted, to an extent, within an artificial and controlled environment, whereas any decisions we make in the real, more complex and uncontrolled world to obey or disobey authority can have much more serious consequences.

*Shock Room* does not attempt to falsify Milgram's conclusions. However it does question the extent to which we obey. We do not *necessarily* blindly follow authority. We must feel aligned to the objectives and we become distressed when we can see we are collaborators in pain and suffering. And it would seem, the more we are denied

choice, the more we resist.

Thus, we must review Milgram's findings through a lens which acknowledges, appreciates and reflects the fact that obedience, resistance and agency are equally important components in understanding our behaviours as humans. By looking at Milgram's studies as obedience studies alone we are denying social psychology as a discipline, and wider society, the richness his findings can potentially provide.

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