Obedience

Hypothetical scenario

• You’re assistant manager at a restaurant
  – Police officer calls
  – Describes a theft there, and the perpetrator
  – The description matches an employee
  – Officer asks you to confiscate the employee’s clothing and do a strip search
• What do you do?

Milgram’s obedience experiments

• Three roles: Teacher, learner, experimenter
• The teacher was the participant
• The learner was a confederate
  – Looks like a participant, to the actual participant
• The experimenter was the authority figure
• Cover story: The teacher was to teach words to the learner, observed by the experimenter

Milgram’s obedience experiments

• The teacher:
  – First read all the word pairs: blue → girl
  – Then tested them: blue → boy, girl, grass, hat
• If the learner made an error:
  – The teacher gave the right answer, for next time
  – Then administered an electric shock, increasing the shock level after each error
• Shocks and learner’s responses were fake

Discussion points

• Foot-in-the-door technique?
• Ethical issues?
• Effects of era?
• Effects of participant demographics?

Effects of psychological distance

- Percentage of subjects who obeyed in each condition
Predicted rates of obedience

- Milgram asked 40 psychiatrists to predict obedience
  - Average prediction: that 0.1% would obey up to 450 V (the max)
- Actual: About 60% obeyed up to 450 V
  - Example of the fundamental attribution error

Discussion points

- Foot-in-the-door technique?
  - Obedience at high shock levels might have been less without the low shock levels initially
- Ethical issues?
  - Participants were under a lot of stress
  - An obedient participant learns they’re capable of inflicting great harm

Discussion points

- Effects of era?
  - The early 1960s were a different time
- Effects of participant demographics?
  - Tested only men, in all three roles