

# MILGRAM ET AL.

## THE PSYCHOLOGY BEING INVESTIGATED

### OBEDIENCE AND SOCIAL PRESSURE

Milgram's theory suggests that social pressure, influenced by perceived authority, leads to obedience in individuals within a community, emphasizing the need for a system of authority. In his paper, Milgram (1963) quotes Snow (1961), who said that:

When you think of the long and gloomy history of man, you will find more hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion.

Milgram explored the role of social pressure in influencing obedience within the social hierarchy. He identified various factors, including perceived authority, location, and dispositional factors, contributing to the willingness to obey others, ultimately fostering a well-functioning society.

### BACKGROUND

Milgram's interest in the Holocaust was sparked by Adolf Eichmann's trial, which he believed played a significant role in the Holocaust. Milgram believed obedience to authority figures was necessary for communal living and that this tendency could overcome personal conscience or sympathy for others. The trial, attended by Hannah Arendt, raised questions for Milgram, who believed Eichmann was an ordinary family man following the orders of his superiors. Although evidence has since been presented, Milgram's research on obedience remains relevant today.

### AIM

To investigate the level of obedience when an authority figure orders a person to administer physical punishment to a stranger.

### METHODOLOGY

Since there was only one DV, it can't be classified as an experiment. Milgram recorded the data by observing through a one-way mirror and conducted interviews with the participants in the lab after the study.

### DESIGN AND VARIABLES

DV: maximum shock the participant was willing to administer. This was recorded in levels from 0-30 [30-450V]. Milgram defined obedience as participants willing to administer 450V and any participant that stopped before that was "defiant". Sessions were mostly recorded on video and some photographs were taken through the one-way mirror. Unusual reactions of participants were noted down and the duration of shocks was recorded by accurate timers.

### SAMPLE

40 males aged 20-50 from New Haven and surrounding areas, with different professions and educational levels [high school teachers, postal clerks, engineers and labourers]. The samples volunteered through a newspaper ad and direct mail for a "study on memory and learning" at Yale. They were paid \$4.50 for participation.

# MILGRAM ET AL.

## PROCEDURE

The study took place in a lab at Yale, with a male high school teacher playing the experimenter. One participant and "learner" [47-year-old Irish-American accountant who was mild-mannered and likeable] participated in each trial.

The participants were told that the purpose of the study was to investigate the effect of punishment on learning as little was known about this. The researcher explained that almost no studies on this had been done and they grouped people of different occupations to test it out. The participants drew a slip of paper to determine if they were the teacher or learner, which was rigged; both slips said "teacher".

The learner and teacher were taken to a room where the learner was strapped to an "electric chair" with an electrode attached to his wrist. The experimenter explained that "Although the shocks are painful, they don't cause lasting tissue damage". The participant was then taken to the other room and put in front of the electric shock generator where they were given a real 45V shock to the wrist which came from a battery attached to the generator when the 3<sup>rd</sup> switch was pressed.

The generator went from 15-450V in 15V intervals, labelled: slight shock [15-60V], moderate shock [75-120V], strong shock [135-180V], very strong shock [195-240V], Intense shock [155-300V], extreme intensity shock [315-360V], danger: severe shock [375-420V] and XXX [435-450V].

## LEARNING TASK

The learner was to memorise word-pairs. The participant then read a list of word-pairs to the learner, then read the first word in each pair with 4 possible answers. The learner then pressed a switch corresponding to his answer, which lit up one of the 4 quadrants above the generator. If the answer was wrong, the participant was to shock the learner, increasing the voltage by 15V for each wrong answer and announcing the voltage before each shock.

## PRELIMINARY RUN

The participants practised 10 trials to ensure the procedure ran smoothly. They needed this to master the learning task. In 7 of these trials, shocks were delivered, going up to 105V. After the practice run, the participants were given another list of words for the regular run.

## REGULAR RUN

When shocks of 300V and 315V were delivered, the learner protested by pounding against the wall. After 300V, he stopped responding to the questions and the participant was told to take no response as a wrong answer.

If a participant was unwilling to continue the study, the experimenter used these "prods" in this order:

1. "Please continue" or "Please go on."
2. "The experiment requires you to continue."
3. "It is absolutely essential that you continue."
4. "You have no other choice; you must go on."

There were two special prods used:

# MILGRAM ET AL.

- If a participant was concerned about permanent damage from the shocks: "Although the shocks are extremely painful, they cause no lasting tissue damage, so please go on."
- If a participant commented on if the learner wanted to stop: "Whether the learner likes it or not, you must go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly. So, please go on."

If a participant refused to continue after the 4<sup>th</sup> prod, the study ended. Then, "dehoaxing" took place, where the participant was interviewed about his experience and met the learner to know he was unharmed. This was done for the participants' well-being.

## RESULTS

### QUANTITATIVE

- 26/40 [65%] of the participants delivered all 450V
- 40/40 participants went up to 300V, which is the voltage the learner started protesting at. At this point, 5 participants refused to continue.

### QUALITATIVE

- There was extreme tension such as sweating, trembling, lip biting, digging their nails into their palms, groaning and stuttering.
- 14 participants smiled and laughed nervously.
- 3 participants had seizures.
- The participants that continued to 450V seemed under extreme stress.

After the study, the participants were asked to rate how painful they thought the shocks were from 1-14 ["not at all" to "extremely painful"] on which the modal response was 14.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. The sheer strength of obedient tendencies in the study suggested that people would go z
2. For the shocks to be delivered, another person had to cause emotional strain and tension.

The reasons Milgram provided to explain the occurrence of obedience were:

- The prestigious location of the study: Yale University.
- The study was perceived to be a contribution to science.
- A sense of obligation and commitment to the experimenter.
- The participants being paid to take part increased obligation.
- They were told the shocks were not fatal.
- There was a conflict between the desire not to harm someone and to obey authority.

## ETHICAL ISSUES

### DEBRIEF

The participant met the learner after the study to know that they were unharmed, this was to ensure that they left in a state of well-being and reduce the participant's tension.

### PROTECTION FROM HARM

The participants may have left the study in a worse psychological state, knowing they were willing to deliver a great shock to an innocent man. Some had seizures and most were under extreme distress as they were willing to go against their morals to obey authority.

### DECEPTION

There was a lot of deception; firstly, the aim of the study, then the impression that the learner was another participant like themselves, then that they were shocking another

# MILGRAM ET AL.

person. This level of deception may have developed trust issues in psychologists and/or authority in the participants.

## METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

### RELIABILITY

#### *Standardisation*

This study was highly controlled, ex: the prods given, the responses of the learner and the participant's environment. This level of standardisation allows the study to be replicated to test the reliability of the findings.

### VALIDITY

#### *Demand Characteristics*

The false aim of the study and covert observation decreased demand characteristics, which increased the validity of the study as the participants' obedient or defiant behaviour is likely to be genuine.

However, some participants may have suspected that the shocks weren't real as they didn't think Yale would allow real harm to come to participants in a study. So, they may have been displaying demand characteristics, reducing the validity of the conclusions drawn about obedience as fewer participants may have delivered shocks if they thought they were real.

#### *Mundane Realism*

Shocking someone for getting wrong answers is not practical in a real-life setting, so the findings lose usefulness.

#### *Use of Qualitative Data*

This allowed deeper insight into the tension levels participants expressed, highlighted by their debating out loud about whether they should continue and their responses to the experimenter [particularly after 300V].

### OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

There is low population validity as the entire sample was American males. It is unsure if the findings will apply to people of different cultures, as independent behaviour is the norm in America. The obedience rate can be lower in cultures where group cohesiveness is important.

### GENERALISATION AND ECOLOGICAL VALIDITY

It was conducted in a lab with a false aim, so it can't be applied to real life like the holocaust, thus lacks ecological validity.

## ISSUES, DEBATES

### INDIVIDUAL AND SITUATIONAL EXPLANATION

Since 65% of people delivered 450V, it can be argued that this supports an individual explanation for behaviour. Personal factors like sympathy overrode the willingness to obey authority in 35% of the participants, highlighting the individualistic explanation.

However, the prestigious location of the study, the clear authority of the experimenter and their belief of advancing science all promote a situational explanation for behaviour.

# MILGRAM ET AL.

## APPLICATIONS TO EVERYDAY LIFE

Milgram's study is important in explaining to people why it is important to resist obedience to protect others. The high level of obedience in his study showed us how hard it can be to resist orders from authority. Some militaries have used this study to highlight the importance of resisting authority on moral and ethical grounds.

## LINKS TO APPROACHES

The experimenter who prodded the participants along to continue the delivery of shocks and the majority of them obeyed 450V suggests that other individuals can influence behaviour.

SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES
Milgram and Perry did lab experiments	Milgram: lab setting vs Piliavin: field setting
Milgram and Piliavin used stooges	Milgram: no IV vs Perry et al: IV and Dv.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Controlled observation → control EVs such as age & appearance.	Low generalisability & pop validity.
Control & standardisation → more reliable	Deception.
Detailed shock generator & the test shock given increases validity.	Low mundane realism .
A qualitative measurement of measuring the voltage levels of shocks → increased replicability and easy comparison.	
Qualitative information on behaviour and comments → richer understanding.	