

CIE Psychology A-level

Social Psychology

Notes



Part 1: Milgram's Research into Variables Affecting Obedience

Participants	Randomly selected participants - 40 male volunteers.
Aim	To observe whether people would obey a figure of authority when told to harm another person i.e. evaluating the influence of a destructive authority figure.
Procedure	<p>A participant given the role of 'teacher' and a confederate given the role of 'learner'. This was decided through a random allocation. Participant had to ask the confederate a series of questions. Whenever the confederate got the answer wrong, the participant had to give him an electric shock, even when no answer was given. The electric shocks incremented by 15 volts at a time, ranging from 300V to 450V, where 330V was marked as 'lethal'. Participants thought the shocks were real when in fact there were no real shocks administered, and the confederate was acting. The shocks were falsely demonstrated to be real prior to the start of the study.</p> <p>Participants were assessed on how many volts they were willing to shock the confederate with.</p> <p>The experimenter's role was to give a series of orders / prods when the participant refused to administer a shock, which increased in terms of demandingness for every time the participant refused to administer a shock. The same 4 prods were used each time when participants refused to administer the shocks. The first 3 demanded obedience to science, whereas the final prod demanded obedience specifically to the confederate.</p>
Findings	All participants went up to 300V and 65% went up to 450V. No participants stopped below 300V, whilst only 12.5% stopped at 300V, showing that the vast majority of participants were prepared to give lethal electric shocks to a confederate.
Factors affecting obedience	<p>Proximity Participants obeyed more when the experimenter was in the same room i.e. 62.5%. This was reduced to 40% when the experimenter and participant were in separate rooms, and reduced to a further 30% in the touch proximity condition i.e. where the experimenter forcibly placed the participant's hand on the electric plate.</p> <p>Location Participants obeyed more when the study was conducted at a prestigious university i.e. Stanford. This is because the prestige of such a location demands obedience and also may increase the trust that the participant places in the integrity of the researchers and their experiments.</p> <p>Uniform Participants obeyed more when the experimenter wore a lab coat. A person is more likely to obey someone wearing a uniform as it gives them a higher status and a greater sense of legitimacy. It was found that obedience was much higher when the experimenter wore a lab coat as opposed to normal clothes. However, demand characteristics were particularly evident in this condition, with even Milgram admitting that many participants could see through this deception.</p>



Evaluation	<p>Strengths</p> <p>Debriefing - The participants were thoroughly and carefully debriefed on the real aims of the study, in an attempt to deal with the ethical breach of the guideline of protection from deception and the possibility to give informed consent. In a follow up study conducted a year later, 84% of participants were glad they were part of the study and 74% felt as if they learned something. This suggests that the study left little or no permanent or long-term psychological harm on participants.</p> <p>Real life applications — This research opened our eyes to the problem of obedience and so may reduce future obedience in response to destructive authority figures e.g. obedience has resulted in negative social change - the Nazis obeyed orders and as a result, Hitler managed to get what he wanted and what he wanted was not what the majority of people wanted. Such research also gives an insight into why people were so willing to kill innocent Jews simply when told to, and so highlights how we can all easily be victims to such pressures. A general awareness of the power of such influences is useful in establishing social order and moral behaviours.</p> <p>High in internal validity — Gina Perry reviewed the interview tapes and found that a significant number of participants raised questions about the legitimacy of the electric shocks. However, quantitative data gathered by Milgram directly suggested that 70% of participants believed that the shocks were real - these findings appear plausible when considering that 100% of the females used in Sheridan and King's study administered real electric shocks to puppies. This suggests that although the findings were certainly surprising, they were also likely to be accurate.</p> <p>Highly replicable – The procedure has been repeated all over the world, where consistent and similar obedience levels have been found. For example, in a replication of Milgram's study using the TV pseudonym of Le Jeu de la Mort, researchers found that 85% of participants were willing to give lethal electric shocks to an unconscious man (confederate), whilst being cheered on by a presenter and a TV audience. Such replication increases the reliability of the findings.</p> <p>External validity has been established by supporting studies – Hofling et al (1966) observed the behaviour of doctors and nurses in a natural experiment (covert observation). The researchers found that 95% of nurses in a hospital obeyed a doctor (confederate) over the phone to increase the dosage of a patient's medicine to double what is advised on the bottle. This suggests that 'everyday' individuals are still susceptible to obeying destructive authority figures.</p>
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Weaknesses

Ethical issues:

- There was deception and so informed consent could not be obtained. This deception was justified by the aim of avoiding demand characteristics/ the 'Please-U' effect/ participant reactivity (where participants change their behaviour in response to knowing that they are being observed).
- There was psychological harm inflicted upon the participants - They showed signs of psychological and physiological distress such as trembling, sweating and nervous laughter. Such findings were also replicated in the Jeu de la Mort study, showing that these results were not simply due to participant variables/differences.
- It raises a socially sensitive issue – Milgram's findings suggest that those who are responsible for killing innocent people can be excused because it is not their personality that made them do this, but it is because of the situation that they were in and the fact that it is difficult to disobey – some may strongly disagree with this, and especially the judicial system, where (except in viable cases of diminished responsibility), individuals are expected to take moral responsibility for their actions.
- Lack of internal validity – The experiment may have been about trust rather than about obedience because the experiment was held at Stanford University. Therefore, the participants may have trusted that nothing serious would happen to the confederate, especially considering the immense prestige of the location. Also when the experiment was replicated in a run-down office, obedience decreased to a mere 20.5%. This suggests that the original study did not investigate what it aimed to investigate.

Part 2: Conformity to Social Roles, as investigated by Zimbardo

Zimbardo's study

Participants	24 American male undergraduate students
Aim	To investigate how readily people would conform to the social roles in a simulated environment, and specifically, to investigate why 'good people do bad things'.
Procedure	<p>The basement of the Stanford University psychology building was converted into a simulated prison.</p> <p>American student volunteers were paid to take part in the study. They were randomly issued one of two roles; guard or prisoner. Both prisoners and guards had to wear uniforms.</p> <p>Prisoners were only referred to by their assigned number.</p> <p>Guards were given props like handcuffs and sunglasses (to make eye contact with prisoners impossible and to reinforce the boundaries between the two social roles within the established social hierarchy). No one was allowed to leave the simulated prison.</p> <p>Guards worked eight hour shifts, while the others remained on call. Prisoners were only allowed in the hallway which acted as their yard, and to the toilet. The guards were allowed to control such behaviour, in order to emphasise their complete power over the prisoners! No physical violence was permitted, in line with ethical guidelines and to prevent complete overruling.</p> <p>The behaviour of the participants was observed.</p>



Findings	<p>Identification occurred very fast, as both the prisoners and guards adopted their new roles and played their part in a short amount of time, despite the apparent disparity between the two social roles. Guards began to harass and torment prisoners in harsh and aggressive ways – they later reported to have enjoyed doing so and relished in their new-found power and control.</p> <p>Prisoners would only talk about prison issues (forgetting about their previous real life), and snitch on other prisoners to the guards to please them. This is significant evidence to suggest that the prisoners believed that the prison was real, and were not acting simply due to demand characteristics.</p> <p>They would even defend the guards when other prisoners broke the rules, reinforcing their social roles as prisoner and guard, despite it not being real.</p> <p>The guards became more demanding of obedience and assertiveness towards the prisoners while the prisoners become more submissive. This suggests that the respective social roles became increasingly internalised.</p>
Evaluation	<p>Strengths:</p> <p>Real life applications – This research changed the way US prisons are run e.g. young prisoners are no longer kept with adult prisoners to prevent the bad behaviour perpetuating. Beehive-style prisons, where all cells are under constant surveillance from a central monitoring unit, are also not used in modern times, due to such setups increasing the effects of institutionalisation and over exaggerating the differences in social roles between prisoners and guards.</p> <p>Debriefing – participants were fully and completely debriefed about the aims and results of the study. This is particularly important when considering that the BPS ethical guidelines of deception and informed consent had been breached. Dealing with ethical issues in this way simply makes the study more ethically acceptable, but does not change the quality (in terms of validity and reliability) of the findings.</p> <p>The amount of ethical issues with the study led to the formal recognition of ethical guidelines so that future studies were safer and less harmful to participants due to legally bound rules. This demonstrates the practical application of an increased understanding of the mechanisms of conformity and the variables which affect this.</p>



Weaknesses:

Lacks ecological validity - The study suffered from demand characteristics. For example, the participants knew that they were participating in a study and therefore may have changed their behaviour, either to please the experimenter (a type of demand characteristic) or in response to being observed (participant reactivity, which acts as a confounding variable). The participants also knew that the study was not real so they claimed that they simply acted according to the expectations associated with their role rather genuinely adopting it. This was seen particularly with qualitative data gathered from an interview with one guard, who said that he based his performance from the stereotypical guard role portrayed in the film Cool Hand Luke, thus further reducing the validity of the findings

Lacks population validity – The sample only consisted of American male students and so the findings cannot be generalised to other genders and cultures. For example, collectivist cultures, such as China or Japan, may be more conformist to their prescribed social roles because such cultures value the needs of the group over the needs of the individual. This suggests that such findings may be culture-bound!

Ethical issues:

Lack of fully informed consent due to the deception required to (theoretically) avoid demand characteristics and participant reactivity. However Zimbardo himself did not know what was going to happen, so could not inform the participants, meaning that there is possible justification for a breach of ethical guidelines.

Psychological harm – Participants were not protected from stress, anxiety, emotional distress and embarrassment e.g. one prisoner had to be released due to excess distress and uncontrollable screaming and crying. One prisoner was released on the first day due to showing signs of psychological disturbance, with a further two being released on the next day. This study would be deemed unacceptable according to modern ethical standards.

Part 3: Explanations for Obedience: Agentic State, Legitimacy of Authority, and Situational Factors

Agentic state – This is when a person believes that someone else will take responsibility for their own actions. When a person shifts from an autonomous state (the state in which a person believes they will take responsibility for their own actions) to the agentic state, it is called an Agentic Shift. Therefore, agency theory is the idea that people are more likely to obey when they are in the agentic state as they do not believe they will suffer the consequences of those actions. This is because they believe that they are acting on behalf of their agent.

Legitimacy of authority – This describes how credible the figure of authority is. People are more likely to obey them if they are seen as credible in terms of being morally good/right, and legitimate (i.e. legally based or law abiding). This is why students are more likely to listen to their parents or teachers than other unknown adults. In Milgram's study, the people saw the experimenter as legitimate as they knew he was a scientist and therefore is likely to be knowledgeable and responsible - this is called expert authority. This authority was legitimate (justified) because the researcher held the highest position within the social hierarchy of the experimental scenario.

Situational factors – These include the appearance of the authority figure, the location/ surroundings and proximity (and the role of buffers).



- A person is more likely to obey someone wearing a uniform as it gives them a higher status and a greater sense of legitimacy. It was found that obedience was much higher when the experimenter wore a lab coat as opposed to normal clothes. However, demand characteristics were particularly evident in this condition, with even Milgram admitting that many participants could see through this deception.
- A person is more likely to obey someone in a location linked to higher status and legitimacy. Milgram's study was conducted at a prestigious American university (Stanford), and so obedience was greater than in a variation of the study conducted in a rundown office. This is because the prestigious nature of specific locations demand obedience from participants as well as potentially increasing the trust that they place in the researchers.
- A person is more likely to obey when they are less able to see the negative consequences of their actions and are in closer proximity to the authority figure. This is because it increases the pressure to obey and decreases the pressure to resist. In Milgram's study, obedience was higher when the experimenter was in the same room (62.5%) as the participant as opposed to being in a different room and speaking over the phone i.e. the remote instruction condition (20.5% obedience levels).

N.B. For details of the following study, please look at the appropriate fact sheets: Piliavin, I M, Rodin, J and Piliavin, J (1969), Good Samaritanism: An Underground Phenomenon? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 13(4), pp 289-299.

