

# WJEC Psychology A-level

# Social Psychology

Notes



## Social Psychology - 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><b>Proximity</b><br/>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><b>Location</b><br/>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><b>Uniform</b><br/>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

**Strengths**

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.



## 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.

- Lack of ecological validity – The tasks given to participants are not like those we would encounter in real life e.g. shooting somebody in the face is different from flicking a switch, meaning that the methodology lacks mundane realism, producing results which are low in ecological validity.

