

To what extent does Milgram's research help us to understand why people obey?

Milgram's famous study of obedience was set up to test the 'Germans are different hypothesis'. After piloting his research in America, he planned to continue it in Germany but his results showed that this was unnecessary. In the original study (1963), the participants were 20–50-year-old men, who had answered an advertisement in a newspaper, volunteering for a study on learning, to be conducted at Yale University. It would take about an hour and the payment would be \$4.50.

The experimenter, who was wearing a grey laboratory coat, and Mr Wallace, who was a mild and harmless-looking man in his 50s, met the participants. In fact, Mr Wallace was a stooge, and everything that happened after this, except the degree to which the real participant obeyed the experimenter's instructions, was staged. In the remote-victim experiment, 100 per cent of participants shocked up to at least 300 volts and 65 per cent went all the way up to 450 volts. In the voice-feedback condition, 62.5 per cent went on giving shocks up to 450 volts; however, many displayed great anguish when doing so. Indeed, one experiment had to be stopped because the participant had a seizure.

To try to explain these findings, Milgram conducted several variations, such as transferring the setting to a run-down, down-town office. The result was still high at 47.5 per cent, which suggests that institutional context played some part, but wasn't a crucial factor. When the teacher and learner were in the same room, and then in a later variation where the teacher had to force the learner's hand down onto the shock plate, the results dropped to 40 per cent and 30 per cent respectively. This indicates that proximity was an important factor, but the figures are still high. When the experimenter left the room and gave subsequent instructions by telephone, obedience dropped to 20.5 per cent. In fact, the participants often pretended to deliver a shock or delivered one lower than they were asked to, suggesting that they were trying to compromise between their conscience and the experimenter's instructions. In his absence, it was easier to follow their conscience. When the teacher was paired with another (stooge) teacher who refused to give shocks past 210 volts, only 10 per cent of the real participants continued to obey the experimenters instructions to continue giving shocks. Finally, when the teacher was paired with another (stooge) teacher and had only to read out the word pairs, the obedience rose to 92.5 per cent which shows that it's easier for participants to shift responsibility from themselves to the person who actually 'throws the switch'.

According to Milgram, the reasons why people obey can be seen as a characteristic of the social situation rather than a personal characteristic. For example, when personal responsibility was stressed (i.e. they were told they were responsible for what happened), obedience was sharply reduced (Hamilton, 1978). Milgram saw personal responsibility as crucial to understanding the atrocities committed by the Nazis. It would seem the point of tension was between the external authority of the experimenter who said 'shock' and the internal authority of conscience which said 'don't shock'. When the conscience wins and the participant ceases to shock, the experimenter stops being a legitimate authority in the eyes of the participant. The most common mental adjustment was for the participant to see him/herself as an agent of external authority (the agentic state). This represents the opposite of an autonomous state and is what makes it possible for individuals to work in a hierarchical social system. Legitimate authority replaces a person's own self-regulation (Turner, 1991). Authority figures often possess highly visible symbols of their power and status that make it difficult to refuse their commands. In Milgram's experiments, the experimenter always wore a grey lab coat to indicate his authority position. Bickman (1974), Bushman (1984) and Zimbardo *et al.* (1973) also demonstrated the impact of such 'visible symbols'. According to Gilbert (1981), Milgram's participants may have been 'sucked in' by the series of graduated demands, starting with a harmless advertisement for volunteers for a memory study and ending with delivering potentially lethal electric shocks, i.e. they may have been sucked in by the foot in the door effect.

The primary evaluative points of Milgram's experiment concern the ethical considerations surrounding the study. It seems fairly clear that Milgram's study does not take into account personal harm: the deception the 'teacher' experienced and having no opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. Yet Milgram defends his study by questioning what it is exactly in the study that produces concern in

people. He asks whether the ethical criticisms are based as much on the nature of the unexpected results as on the procedure itself. As Aronson points out, would people be equally concerned about the ethics of the study if none had gone beyond 150 volts in the study (which were Milgram's expected results after consulting 40 psychiatrists prior to the study)? Aronson found a high correlation between the obedience rate he reported to his students and their condemnation of Milgram's methods.

Methodological criticisms arise from the study also. Milgram's study cannot be seen as representative of the American population as his sample was self-selected. Yet a total of 636 participants were tested in 18 separate experiments across the New Haven area, which was seen as being reasonably representative of a typical American town. Milgram did point out that he thought that those who went to the full 450 volts exhibited an authoritarian personality and could well have seen the learner as being responsible for their actions. Furthermore, whilst only 40 women were used, they showed the same 65 per cent obedience rate as their male counterparts, reducing further criticisms of a biased sample.

Orne & Holland (1968) accused Milgram's study of lacking 'experimental realism', i.e. participants might not have believed the experimental set-up they found themselves in and knew the learner wasn't really receiving electric shocks. Sheridan & King's (1972) study seemed to remove this possibility after they found that 75 per cent of participants would deliver seemingly fatal electric shocks to a puppy, which had collapsed (due to an odourless anaesthetic being administered). Orne and Holland went further by accusing Milgram's study of lacking 'mundane realism' where the results do not extend beyond the experimental setting. The high obedience rates would therefore be a result of 'demand characteristics'. But naturalistic studies of obedience refute this claim (Hofling *et al.*, 1966).

Milgram's findings have been replicated in a variety of cultures and most lead to the same conclusions as Milgram's original study and in some cases see higher obedience rates. However, Smith & Bond (1998) point out that with the exception of Jordan (Shanab & Yahya, 1978), the majority of these studies have been conducted in industrialised Western cultures and we should be cautious before we conclude that a universal trait of social behaviour has been identified. As a final note regarding the possible 'mundane realism' of the experiment, Milgram stated that the process of complying with the demands of an authority figure is essentially the same irrespective of where the demands are made, whether in the real world or in the confines of a laboratory.

In conclusion, the huge amount of criticism that Milgram's study has received perhaps points to the fact that it suggests an aspect of human behaviour we have difficulty accepting. It seems easier to believe that there are a few people in the world who do inhumane things and that most of us would never consider such actions. Yet a glance at the atrocities found in a variety of places as a result of conflict and war clearly indicate that the power of obedience to an authority figure is still of primary concern to the human race.