



EVALUATION OF MILGRAM'S STUDY OF OBEDIENCE

An evaluation of how reliable and ethical Milgram's 1963 experiment was

The main measure of how reliable a psychological study is will more often than not be its **replicability**. Milgram used a standardised procedure for each participant – for example, the same script was used by the learner and experimenter; the same rooms were used during the experiment; and identical equipment was used each time. This ensured that all the participants had a similar experience, so there was no bias in the experiment. The strong controls meant that the studies could be repeated, to test whether the findings were reliable – and the experiment was, indeed, repeated by Milgram himself, among other psychologists, afterwards.

REAL WORLD APPLICATION

Milgram's work was of **practical value** because it showed that individuals have a tendency towards **destructive obedience**. He believed that, by showing this, his work had wider benefits to society as it could avoid such incidents in the future, as the one which triggered Milgram's investigations – the Holocaust.

Destructive Obedience - obeying orders which cause yourself moral distress

The study helps us to understand how historical events such as this could happen, where people obeyed orders against the moral code they normally lived by.

VALIDITY

- 1 The participants had to complete an artificial task by asking the learner to remember word pairs and then administer an electric shock whenever they didn't remember correctly. Many theories suggest that most participants felt protected from their actions because they assumed whatever happened at Yale was fine and so trusted the study. Thus, it could be argued the experiment lacked **experimental validity**

However, Milgram tried to ensure the participants thought the situation was real, for example, by giving them a 45 volt shock at the start. The obvious stress experienced by participants implies that most did believe that what was happening was real, so this would suggest that in fact there was some experimental validity in his method

- 2 The study took place in a laboratory in Yale University, a very well-respected university with an extremely popular reputation. This is an unnatural setting for most people, which suggests that normal behaviour wouldn't necessarily be usual. This means that the experiment lacked **ecological validity**
- 3 As Milgram's sample of participants consisted of adult males from a range of backgrounds, it could be said that the experiment had some **population validity**, but only for American male adults

However, Milgram later repeated the study in a large number of variations (see **1.4 Variations of the Milgram Experiment**), and many other psychologists have repeated the experiment. What was noticed is how the results tended to produce similar patterns (the number of participants who continued to the full 450V shock when it was all women in the experiment was almost the same as with the original men's experiment), and so you might say it did in fact have definite population validity

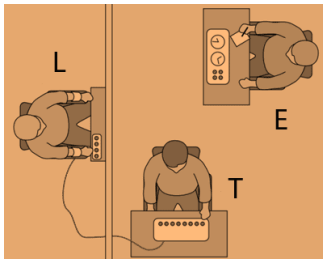
ETHICS

Ethical Grounds -

measures of how moral or ethical a study was based on the methodology and performance of the experimenter

The biggest criticism of Milgram's study has always been on **ethical grounds**. There are 5 important guidelines to consider: informed consent, deceit, right to withdraw, debriefing and competence. On the following page you will see in-depth analysis of each of these guidelines.

Informed Consent – In the study, the participants were not given the full details on the true nature of the experiment, so it initially sounds as though the experimenters did not gain correct informed consent, but you have to consider that had the participants been aware that the electric shocks were not real, the results gathered would not have been a clear indication of their obedience and behaviour because they would have known that the consequences of their actions were not real. Milgram therefore could not ask for informed consent but did try to be ethical so asked participants if they would like to take part in such a study and they did – this is **presumptive consent**. Another way of remaining ethical is to ask the participants before the study if they agree to take part, but inform them that sometimes deception is necessary – this is **prior consent**

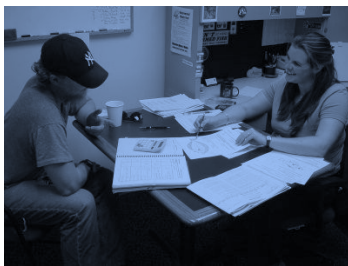


Deception – There was a severe amount of deception in Milgram's experiment, but (as before) this was all necessary for the results of the experiment to be valid. Examples of the deception used include faking the shocks, leading participants to believe they were given the teacher role by chance, telling them it was for a study on memory and forgetfulness, telling them the learner and experimenter were real and not actors, and many more

Right to Withdraw – There is a lot of controversy over ethics regarding the right to withdraw. Whilst the participants were free to leave and were not being forced to continue, they were strongly encouraged to carry on by the experimenter, and the experimenter even had a script with lines to tell the teacher such as "the experiment requires that you continue" which almost made the subject feel they had to go on. When the participants said that they wanted to stop, they were strongly urged to continue, thus it might be argued they did not have a true right to withdraw, making the study unethical



Debriefing – Because the experiment was very stressful for the participants and it involved a lot of deception, the debriefing process was essential. Additionally, the participants would have come to realise that had the fake "memory improving" experiment been real, they would have administered lethal shocks to random strangers, showing them they had the capability to commit murder. Therefore it is important for them and the experimenter to fully evaluate the experiment to ensure they are in a safe mental state before going home



Competence – Milgram knew the possible implications of the study; understood the ethical guidelines, did not feel the need to get advice from others; was suitably qualified as a scientist who had his PhD for three years; made sure that nobody would come to any immediate harm as a result of the experiment; adhered to the Data Protection Act and easily and correctly stored the data. However, the participants became distressed, making the experiment less ethical as a whole, but the fact that Milgram was competent to run the experiment and knew what he was doing means it wasn't necessarily unethical as a whole

