

# 1.2

## MILGRAM'S STUDY OF OBEDIENCE (1963)

**Aim:** To investigate how far people will go in obeying an authority figure

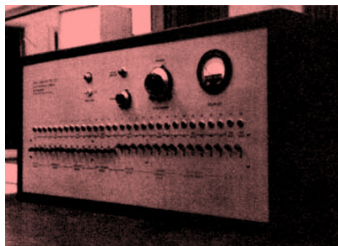
### PROCEDURE

- 1 Volunteers responded to an advertisement in a paper for an experiment at Yale which investigated the effects of punishment in learning, they were paid \$4.50 for participating
- 2 Via a fixed lottery, the subjects were chosen to play the role of **teacher** (the **confederate** or **accomplice**), and an actor, posing as another volunteered participant became the **learner**
- 3 The learner was strapped into a chair and had electrodes attached to him, and the teacher was informed that the shocks would result in no permanent damage. To prove the equipment was working, the subject (teacher) received an initial 45 volt shock themselves
- 4 The teacher is taken next door to the **shock generator room** where they are told to administer a shock to the learner of increasing severity for each incorrect answer he gives using a word game based on memory, over an intercom
- 5 The actor frequently gave wrong answers and would receive a shock for each one, each time the voltage would increase by 15 volts. After each shock, a recording of a painful scream was played back to the teacher over the intercom
- 6 After 300 volts there was silence from the learner – he was either unconscious or dead
- 7 The experiment came to an end when the teacher refused to continue or they reached the full voltage (450V)
- 8 After the experiment finished, the teacher was fully debriefed about the true nature of the experiment and was reintroduced to the learner, who had come to no harm



### APPARATUS

The shock generator was very realistic and consisted of 30 switches which increased the voltage by 15 volts each from 15 to 450V. They were spread in categories ranging from "Slight shock" to "Danger: sever shock" and the final 2 switches "XXX"



### THE SUBJECT

Milgram chose 40 males between the ages of 20 and 50 with a wide range of jobs from the New Haven Area. The use of males prevented interference on the basis of reluctance towards intersexual abuse

### THE LEARNER

The learner was a 47-year old American-Irish actor who acted as 'Mr Wallace' – a mild-mannered and likeable accountant. He was an average person

### THE EXPERIMENTER

The experimenter watched the teacher as he administered the shocks, and if the teacher hesitated because they found it uncomfortable, he would use one of his standardised prompts from "please continue" to "you must go on." He was a 31-year old dressed in a grey lab coat to give the appearance of an important, authoritative figure. He would be impassive during the experiment. The experimenter would not force the teacher to continue, but would sternly encourage them to carry on





## RESULTS

### LEVELS OF OBEDIENCE EXPECTED

When psychology students and professional psychologists were asked what percentage of the people participating in the experiment would go right through and administer the highest voltage of shock (450 volts – lethal), the answers ranged from 1 to 3; the mean value was 1.2

### LEVELS OF OBEDIENCE OBTAINED

When the study was carried out:

-  65% of participants continued to the maximum shock level of 450 volts
-  Not one participant stopped the experiment before 300 volts

### BEHAVIOURAL REACTIONS TO THE EXPERIMENT

According to Milgram himself, the degree of tension reached extremes for some subjects as some were “observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan and dig their fingers into their flesh.” What is interesting is how these quite clear signs of body language show that the study was making them uncomfortable, and even though they were under no obligation to continue (the experimenter wasn’t forcing them to continue), most subjects obeyed the experimenter throughout the entire 450 volts, simply because he appeared to be a figure of authority.

“One sign on tension was the regular occurrence of nervous laughing fits... Full-blown, uncontrollable seizures were observed for 3 subjects. On one occasion we observed a fit so violently convulsive that it was necessary to call a halt to the experiment. In post experimental interviews, subjects took pains to point out that they were not sadistic types, and that the laughter did not mean they enjoyed shocking the victim.” Milgram, 1963

## EVALUATION

**Generalisability** refers to the idea that the findings can be applied to the target population as a whole

**Reliability** refers to the idea that repeating the experiment would obtain similar or identical findings

**Application** refers to the idea that the findings can be useful in a real-life application in society

**Validity** refers to the idea that results should measure what they initially were supposed to measure

**Ethics** refers to the idea that an experiment should be carried out whilst taking into consideration ethical grounds

In terms of generalisability, the test subjects were all males within a specific age group. So the data obtained from the experiment cannot necessarily apply to a whole plethora of people. However, Milgram purposely chose not to use all college students, but instead wanted a range of men with varied jobs to get a good range of data. His experiment was reliable, because the experiment was repeated a number of times, and different variations of the studies went out. Milgram experimented changes in gender and nationality. Other psychologists (Sheridan and King, 1972) even tried altering the species, using animals as the learners (victims).

Can the findings from Milgram’s experiment be applied to society and be useful in everyday situations? The supposed experiment which the subjects believed they were originally signing up for would have been, experimenting on the effect of punishment on learning, in terms of memory and forgetfulness. However, what uses did the findings from the data have that are implemented today?

Milgram’s study was well standardised and obedience was accurately operationalised as the amount of voltage given – so the study was **experimentally valid**. However, two psychologists, Orne and Holland (1968) said that they believed the subjects knew that they were not causing the learners any harm. Because the experiment was an artificial test, and because the test subjects were aware that they were being studied, it was argued that the study lacked “mundane realism” and was therefore **not ecologically valid**. However, one might argue that because the subjects were not actually aware of what the real study was investigating, the nature of the subjects was more natural, as they were less suspecting that it was their part being investigated, even if the environment of the university was not a natural place.

You might also say that because the test subjects were completely unaware of the true nature of the experiment, it was not an ethical study. This may also be the case because the experience the subjects went through may have a negative effect on them post-investigation when they realised how they behaved.