

Basis for milgram's obedience experiment essay

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



In this assignment I intend to evaluate Stanley Milgram's studies of obedience and in particular the ethical issues broken. I hope to determine whether the knowledge gained justifies his experiments. After the destruction and atrocities committed in World War II many historians argued that there must be some sort of character defect that made the German people more obedient.

Milgram's study was an attempt to test 'the Germans are different' hypothesis. The hypothesis states that Germans are more likely a person or people in authority regardless of what the act is. Socialpsychologyhandbook pg. 8) Milgram conducted an experiment into the nature of obedience in 1963 at the prestigious Yale University. The aim of the experiment was to investigate the level of obedience participant would go to in giving electric shocks to another person when ordered to by an authority figure. (Social psychology handbook pg. 8) Milgram issued an advertisement in a local paper requesting people aged 20-50 from all walks of life, excluding students to take part in an experiment at Yale University. The experiment would last an hour and the pay was four dollars fifty.

The participants were told they were getting paid for coming to the laboratory regardless of the results of the experiment. (Gross, 2010, pg. 416) 40 male participants were selected; they arrived at Yale university psychology department and were greeted by a young man dressed in a lab coat. He introduced himself as Jack Williams, the experimenter. He was to appear stern and emotionless throughout the experiment. There was also another participant introduced as a likeable and mild-mannered man named Mr Wallace, he was a confederate and everything from here on has been pre-

<https://assignbuster.com/basis-for-milgrams-obedience-experiment-essay/>

planned except the results of course. Gross, 2010, pg. 416) The participant were given a short introduction and told the aim of the experiment was to assess the effects of punishment on learning. The participant was then asked to pick a piece of paper out a hat to determine who would be playing the role of the teacher, and who was to play the learner. This was rigged in order for the experiment to work; Mr Wallace was always the learner and the participant the teacher. Next they were all led into an adjoining room and the learner (Mr Wallace) was strapped in full view of the participant into the electric chair and electrodes were attached to his arms and legs.

The teacher (the participant) was told that the electrodes were attached to the shock generator next room. The generator was a convincing fake created by Milgram. The participant and the experimenter went into the next room where the generator was. The teacher gave a 45 volt shock to convince them that it was real. The volt was battery power and not attached to the mains. The generator switches were labelled with voltage levels and verbal descriptions from: 15-60 slight shock up in intervals of 15 volts to 435-450 XXX. Gross, 2010, pg. 416) The learner was asked to memorise a series of paired words. The teacher was to then test the learner by giving him one the words in a pair along with four different words. The learner then had to answer which of the four words had originally been paired with the first one. The learner's answer was indicated by one of the four switches which lit up one of four lights on the generator machine. If the learner gave the correct answer, then they moved onto the next question.

If the answer was wrong the teacher had to tell the learner the correct answer, and then say that they were going to give them a shock which went

up higher 15 volts each time an incorrect answer was given. . (Gross, 2010, pg. 216). In the first experiment known as the ' remote-victim condition' the learner was to give vocal response until 300 volts was used, then the learner was scripted to start pounding on the wall and after 315 volts were administered to stop. In the second experiment the responses were voice recorded ' voice feedback' and the teacher was to believe these were the reactions of the learner from being shocked.

For example at 75 volts he made a grunt, at 150 he cried out and refused to be part of experiment asking to be set loose, at 315 he screamed out in pain and finally after 330 volts no sound could be heard. The teacher was instructed that if an answer was not given then it was to be treated as an incorrect answer and a shock was still to be given. If the teacher was to turn to the experimenter for guidance on whether to carry on giving shocks or indicate that they didn't want to go on the experimenter would reply with a series of ' prods'.

The ' prods' were responses such as ' please continue' ' the experiment requires that you continue' or ' It's absolutely essential that you continue'. These ' prods' were to be repeated in a sequence for example if ' prod 1' was unsuccessful then only could ' prod 2' be used if the learner disobeyed after the fourth ' prod' the experiment was to end. There was also a special prod used in case the participant was concerned on the physical state of the learner, which was ' although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent tissue damage, so please go on. ((Social psychology handbook pg. 11/12). After experiment the participants were introduced to the victim again to prove that he was unharmed. They were debriefed using open

ended questions and psychometric measures were used to make sure the participants left the experiment unharmed. Milgram found the results quite shocking and unpredictable. In the first 'remote victim' experiment all participants went up to at least 300 volts when the learner pounded on the wall, 65 per cent went all the way to 450 volts.

In the second 'voice feedback' condition 62.5 per cent went to the lethal 450 volts. He also found even though the participants hesitated and objected they still continued with the experiment. Although many were observed to tremble, stutter, dig their nails into their palms and even laugh, one participant had a seizure. (Gross, 2010, pg. 416/417). Milgram evaluated his own experiment and devised nine factors that could explain the reason why such high levels of conformity were visible. To test the factors he devised further versions of his experiment.

I believe that this strengthens the experiment the amount of control that Milgram was able to give and the different variations helped to strengthen Milgram's conclusion as to why we obey people in authority. (Gross, 2010, pg. 417). A weakness of the experiment is the sample used is not representative to the rest of the American population and can't be generalised. Only males who read the advert and were prepared to take part in a laboratory experiment were used. Milgram's have been accused of deliberately using an ethnocentric sample. (Class notes) I also believe that the experiment was not ecologically valid as laboratory is not considered a normal situation and this could have contributed to the experiment having demand characteristics as the participant might have thought that they were in a controlled safe environment and were also encouraged to do so by the experimenter.

Another big weakness of the experiment and one that Milgram has been heavily criticised on is ethics. Ethical guidelines are necessary to clarify the conditions under which psychological research is acceptable. British psychological society) (Ethics PowerPoint Moodle). Baumrind (1964) argued that Milgram's participants had been abused, their feelings not taken into consideration, and not enough was done to protect them from emotional and psychological stress. (Gross, 210, pg. 779) Part of the reason ethical guidelines were brought into force was because of Milgram's experiment. In my opinion certain ethical guidelines were broken, such as no deception should be used, and participants should be informed of all aspects of the experiment unless there is no alternative.

Milgram clearly didn't tell the participant that the learner was an actor and the 'shock generator' a fake. I'm sure that this breaks another ethic which is protection, meaning that the participants must not suffer any physical or psychological damage. I believe the participants did receive some emotional stress from the experiment to begin with. It's argued that Milgram did not take suitable measures to ensure this didn't happen, but Milgram argues that he didn't predict his results and they were unexpected.

That could be believable that Milgram believed the participants would not need protection, but after seeing the distress caused in his first experiment why continue repeating it 17 more times? The participant's right to withdraw was also breached. All participants must be informed of their right to withdraw without losing any payment and the results from these must be removed from the records. This wasn't made clear and the 'prods' used strongly suggest to the participant that withdrawal isn't possible.

There is also another important issue broken; consent was not given as the participants were not fully informed of what was happening in the experiment. However milgram argues that the participants were shown that Mr Wallace was unharmed after experiment and a debriefing was issued. A year after the experiment an independent psychologist interviewed the participants used, and found that no evidence of any lasting psychological damage was apparent. He also argues that the experimenter didn't make the participant shock anyone, they choose to do it themselves milgram wanted everyone to have free will. Social psychology handbook pg. 14/15) To answer the question is Milgrams experiment justified the answer I believe is yes. Although certain ethical issues are apparent such a situation was unavoidable, and as Milgram says " the central moral justification for allowing my experiment is that it was judged acceptable by those who took part in it" (" The Individual in a Social World", Milgram 1977) Its seems that it was necessary to brake certain rules in order for the experiment to be completed and more real to life.

If Milgram's participants were to be fully informed his results would not be real to life and his experiment a failure. I believe the experiment was very powerful and although unethical the results were important in the study of obedience.