

# [Milgrams studies on obedience and the ethical problems](https://assignbuster.com/milgrams-studies-on-obedience-and-the-ethical-problems/)

This essay is going to look at Milgram’s studies into obedience and then look at the ethical issues that have a risen from this type of study.

First and foremost to understand why studies like this were even under taken you have to know how obedience is defined. Obedience is defined in most all dictionaries as submitting to an other’s will or orders, though some dictionary may word it differently. Milgram (1963) carried out a study of obedience to authority figures, this study involved participants having to give a so called student shocks if they got questions wrong. During this experiment he wanted to show that society influence, however subtle, can drastically affect an individual’s behaviour. Milgram strongly identified with the suffering of the Jews in Europe and was influenced by Asch’s research into conformity (Blass, 2002). Obedience and conformity can have the same type of outcome when it comes to and behaviour that it induces within certain individuals and but can be called stereotyping as social influences, even though not in every case that is the case, they are also different in that the social influences when it comes to conformity involve the social norms of society as a whole influencing a individual to behave in a certain way and in cases of obedience are orders from a figure of authority. Since Milgram’s original studies into obedience, there has been huge debate and legislations put into place for the safety of the participants because of the lack of ethics involved in the past studies.

Before starting his experiment Milgram questioned a group of people, the group was a mixture of ordinary people and psychologists, after the questioning was then they come to the result that only 3% of participants would harm another human just to obey an orotheritiy figure. The original remote learner experiment took place at the Yale University. Forty volunteers took part after answering a newspaper advert appealing for volunteers to take part in a memory and learning experiment. All received payment on arrival before the experiment began. The participants were then introduced to another “ volunteer” and they drew lots to decide who would be teacher and who would be learner, the lot drawing was rigged so the real participant would always be made out to be the teacher. The second “ volunteer” was part of the experiment. The participant then watched as the learner was strapped into a chair connected to a shock generator. It didn’t actually give electric shocks as it was a fake generator and did not do anything, but the participants were lead to believe it was real. They were then lead in to the another room and asked by the ortherditity figure, who wore a white lab coat, to sit in front of a panel with switches ranging from 15 volts, labelled “ Slight Shock”, to 450 volts, labelled “ XXX”. The participant then read out words over the intercom for a word association game. If the learner gave a wrong answer or took too long to answer participants were expected to press the switches in order so the “ shocks” when get stronger each time. When each “ shock” switch was press a tape of recorded pain noises, pleading and finally silence was played. The participant was unaware this was recorded. The fake arothitry figure was present throughout the whole experiment and also gave orders, such as “ Please continue” or “ You have no other choice, you must go on” to encouragement for the participant to keep going. The experiment continued until the participant either refused to administer more shocks or until 450 volts “ xxx” was reached and given four times. The participants were then debriefed and taken to meet the learner. 84% of the participants reported that they were pleased to have taken part.

The findings were surprising given the predictions made in Milgram’s survey. 65% of participants in the original experiment continued administering shocks right up to 450 volts and all participants went up to 300 volts (Hayes, 1998). Most participants showed signs of stress and anxiety, even with the reassuring orders were given to them, most continued.

He concluded that ordinary people will obey orders, even if it means acting against their own consciences, but some many need more encouragement then others and demonstrated that they could be persuaded to act destructively without physical coercion. This is can be backed up by the fact that a lot of German soldiers in the Secord world were brought to trial they did say that one of the main reason why they did the terrible things they did was because they felt that they had to do what they commanding offices told them to do it, though some did do it of their own backs with no moral pain at remembering or talking about what they did.

Milgram wanted to find out what types of different factors are involved in making it more or less likely a participant would obey an authority figure so changed the experiment to be carried out in several different variations. When the experiment was located in a cheap office complex instead of a more influence building compliance rates fell to 47. 5%. If the participant and learner were in the same room compliance rates fell to 40% and fell to 30% when the participant was required to physically place the learners hand in place for the shock, each of these variations seems to try and tap into the part of the sell key that effects human attachment to others. If the experimenter gave directions by phone (not face to face) or seemed to be an ordinary member of the public rates went as low as 20%, seeming to prove that having to see the authority figure meant the participant was more willing to follow their own moral standing, and as low as 10% if other unsure participants were in the same room, but if the participant was paired with another teacher who pressed the button the obedience rate soared to 92. 5%. The first factor that appears to have effect on what makes a person more likely to obey was how real the authority figure seems to be. We are raised to recognise and obey authority figures and feel that they have some control over us. This may be good for organisation such as army, navy and the police, but can become dangerous if people feel obligated to follow orders they know are wrong this can happen in religions and cults. Respect for authority varies between countries. There have been some similar experiments carried out in Germany and they found there was a 85% obedience level, whilst experiments in Australia found there was only a 40% obedience levels to some this is not very suspiring due to Germanys history and the more relaxed nature of other counties like Australia, it could be said that if this experiment was carried out in all the countries over the world the back ground of the country and how the they are governed many have a large impact on the results. Milgram also showed the proximity of the authority figure to the participants had a large effect on if they follow their morals or orders. Buffers, such as using the phone or having someone else in the room, between authority figure and teacher also had an effect as they protected the participants from having to see the consequences of their actions and gradual build up of a repore with the participants. It was harder for them to refuse the more serious requests after complying with the less serious ones as if the teacher had just given a 250 volt shock and the shocks went up in fifties, it did not seem like a big jump so it was easy for the authority figure to get the teacher to continue with the test.

Milgram’s study does raise serious ethical issues when it comes to how experiments are run. For example the fact that they were using Yale as the location for the studies, and its name when advertising for volunteers, may have given the potential participants a false sense of security and feeling that their psychological needs would be taken care of as the university was well known and people repacked it. The participants were deceived about the exact nature of the study making it impossible for their informed consent to be given. The deception went on to cause the participants extreme stress. The participants were not given the right to withdraw at any time. They were in fact prompted to continue when they wanted to stop. It was clear the participants were under moral and mental strain from the pained noises they thought they could hear from the learner and some started to cope with this using defence mechanisms. These included trying to help the leaner by put a stress note on the correct answer when reading it out or even in some cases getting to rethink the answer that had be given. Some of the participants minimised what was happening to their victims i. e. not keeping the switch on for as long as they should. These were the same type of defence mechanism used in Nazi Germany where many refused to admit what was really happening, but unlike in Milgram’s study there were other defence mechanisms used due to the fact they were in the same room as the victims, these tended to include avoidance of eye contact as well as the ones described above. This does show that the participants were not protected from all types of harm that can be incurred within studies, however all participant were fully debriefed after the test had rest, this in its own way may have done a certain level of harm to the participants mental state as well. It has been argued that the unethical nature of Milgram’s studies affected the results he tried to achieve. Some did say that Milgram was measuring their sense of fear or obligation, rather than their sense obedience. However it seems that had Milgram been completely honest with his participants the study would have failed.

Apart from the ethical criticisms, it was pointed out that Milgram’s studies lacked experimental or internal validity. It was claimed that the participants did not fully believe they were administering shocks and were just pretending to be stressed in order to go along with the experimenter and play the role they felt had been subscribed to them. Milgram did try to dismiss these views by showing films of his studies and evidence from the debriefing interviews as proof that the participants were clearly under stress and believed they had administered shocks.

Milgram’s agency theory states that people operate on two different levels, as autonomous individuals with full control of their actions and awareness of the consequences of their actions, or seeing themselves as agents of others and not responsible for their own actions. Individuals that are acting on behalf of an external authority are said to be in an agentic state. Moving between an autonomous and agentic state is said to be the agentic shift. This is caused by the socialisation processes that train us to be obedient to authority from an early age, at school, at home and in society.

Even though the study itself was very unethical due to the lack of concern of the participants mental welfare though out and after the study, you could say due to studies like this are the reason why we now have such strict rules on how experiments can now be carried out and what type of experiments are even tried. So even though the experiment itself is flawed in how it was run and the results maybe questioned a lot, it did also show that we as humans do not always follow our own moral points of view and showed how some religions, cults and organatisitions may force (with no physical pain) their members to do things you do not want to and even cause themselves pain in doing so.