

Milgrams and
gamsons studies of
obedience
psychology essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Milgram and Gamson studies have been widely acclaimed as they were one of the first few to find astonishing results. Milgram's experiments demonstrate obedience of authority whereas Gamson's study, referred to as MHRC Encounter (with MHRC standing for Manufacturer's Human Relations Consultants) shows disobedience of authority. The findings of the two studies have been useful in terms of indicating the extent to which individuals obey authority and what factors influence a rebellion, especially when the authority is unjust. Although the studies have similarities, a major difference between them is that whereas the Milgram experiment required the individual to act alone, the MHRC Encounter was an experiment which featured a group of people, hence the results and findings are different. Despite the studies being very successful, they have also been criticised for being unethical for a few reasons, the main one being that participants were misled, as they were given the wrong information regarding the nature of the studies and their purpose. This essay will examine the two studies as well as looking at the ethical problems with them.

Milgram's experiment was set up 'at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist' (The Perils of Obedience). Therefore the experiment was set up to demonstrate how individuals act in response to unjust authority and how this could lead to people committing acts of torture. The two subjects participating were allocated a role of being either the teacher or the learner, with the primary focus being on the teacher.

The teacher, being under the false pretence that the experiment is a study of memory and learning, was instructed to give electric shocks to the learner

<https://assignbuster.com/milgrams-and-gamsons-studies-of-obedience-psychology-essay/>

for every wrong answer he gave. 'The question was at what point, what level of shock, would subjects disobey the scientist and refuse to go on' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 4) because as the voltage increases, the learners 'protest become more vehement and emotional'(The Perils of Obedience). If the teacher hesitated, they would be prompted by the experimenter to continue. The simple experiment featured twenty-one variations and the results indicated that '63 percent of actual subjects obeyed the scientist to the limit and delivered 450 volts' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 4) , which undermines the assumption made before that 'rebellion would come as soon as the victim asked to be released' (Brown, 1986, p. 4).

It can be argued that the experiment does not show obedience of authority but instead it is a reflection of human nature, as it shows 'aggression' (Kesenych, 2001, p. g. 145-149). The experiment could be seen as demonstrating this trait, as this could be the motive behind the subjects increasing the level of electric shocks.

However, this point can be criticised as it can be argued that flipping switches does not show any signs of aggression and if this was the case, then the experimenter's orders to keep elevating the level should not be necessary. This indicates that the study does in fact show obedience of authority.

An important factor of the experiment to be noted is that subjects playing the role of the teacher were obedient when being told to continue by authority that they felt was legitimate. This was proved by Milgram via one of the variations where one extra volunteer replaced the role of the

experiment when a 'prearranged phone call made it necessary for him to leave' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 10). The results reflect that 'the percentage of subjects obeying all the way dropped to twenty percent, enough of a difference to show that authority was necessary for high obedience and not simply somebody giving orders' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 10).

Milgram's experiment can be seen as providing accurate results as it featured twenty-one variations and because the subjects were unaware of the real reason behind the study (Ksenych, 2001, p. g. 135-137). Therefore, the results can be seen as more valid as the subjects acted according to what they felt best at the time with no influences on their decisions.

However, it can be argued that the reason given for the experiment, which was to help the advancement of science, is a factor which influenced their decision to carry on giving higher voltages to the learner, as the subjects were under the false impression that the study was being undertaken for a larger cause, which was the advancement of science. Therefore, they were able to justify their action due to the cause. If another reason had been given for the purpose of the research, there is a possibility that the subjects would not continue giving the shocks.

An important criticism concerns the ethics of the study, as the psychological effects on the subjects need to be taken into account. 'Baumrind (1964) and others criticised the experiment for exposing human subjects to excessive stress' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 6), which the subjects did experience during the experiment. After the first few experiments, Milgram knew that subjects would undergo discomfort, therefore it can be argued that the study was unethical (Patten, 1977, p. g. 355).

<https://assignbuster.com/milgrams-and-gamsons-studies-of-obedience-psychology-essay/>

On the other hand, it can be argued that a certain level of stress was required for the experiment to be successful, in order to get valid findings. To add to this, the follow up questionnaires 'reported that over ninety-nine percent felt either good or neutral about having participated' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 6) and the majority thought of it 'as an interesting revelation about human nature' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 6). Moreover, a year after the event, forty subjects were interviewed by one psychiatric examiner to see if the experiment had any psychological effects and the report indicated that none of the subjects were 'found by this interviewer to show signs of having been harmed by the experiment' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 6). This clearly shows that the study did not have any long term negative psychological impact on the subjects, making the experiment successful.

One way in which Milgram tried to reduce the level of stress of the subjects was by assuring them that through the electric shocks, 'in spite of the pain the learner will suffer " no permanent tissue damage"(Patten, 1977, p. g. 256), therefore reassuring the subjects that the learner will not experience any repercussions of the experiment. Yet, it can be argued that this contradicts the purpose of the experiment. A point which needs to be taken into consideration in relation to this matter is that 'subjects who are willing to inflict painful suffering on others upon command, we have at least a prima facie case for unethical obedience' (Patten, 1977, p. g. 252). This includes 'acts committed upon command must be clearly unethical, they must be acts for which subjects could have no reasonable ethical justification' (Patten, 1977, p. g. 252). Therefore, it can be suggested that the study is flawed as it does not show obedience to unjust authority, as there is ethical justification

for the subjects to proceed. The ethical justification for the subject being 'the promise that no harm is being committed from an experimenter he has every reason to believe is knowledgeable' (Patten, 1977, p. g. 257). Other factors such as the research being conducted for science advancement also contribute to the justification.

Whereas the Milgram study demonstrated obedience to authority, the Gamson's work concerned the 'study of encounters with unjust authority' (Gamson, 1982, p. g. 7). Gamson's study involved individuals responding to an advertisement which is for participation in research being conducted for Manufacturer's Human Relations Consultants (MHRC). Subjects are deceived into believing that for a fee, they will participate in a group discussion about community standards. However, this is cleverly done with their consent as prior to the actual meeting, they are asked to give consent willingly to take part in 'research in which you will be misled about the purpose until afterward' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 11).

The study involved eight to nine people from various backgrounds meeting in a room, which has video-taping equipment set up and they are asked to sign a 'Participation Agreement' which acknowledges that they have been paid, that they are aware they are being video taped and that the tape produced is the property of MHRC. The coordinate explains that the discussion will be about the following case: 'The MHRC Client, a large oil company, has terminated one of its service station managers, who is now suing them' (Gamson, 1982, p. g. 17). The reason provided by the oil company for the termination was because the station manager is 'living with

a woman out of wedlock, which violates reasonable standards for an employee who must deal with the public' (Gamson, 1982, p. g. 18).

A few participants were asked to argue as if they are offended by the conduct of the station manager, then 'after further group discussion and a break, an additional three people are asked to take this pro-company view. After an additional break, everyone is asked to make a summary statement from the viewpoint of a person offended by Mr. C's behaviour' (Gamson, 1982, p. g. 18). 'Finally, there is an affidavit to be signed and notarized which gives MHRC the right to introduce the tapes as evidence in court, editing them in any way they see fit' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 13). During the actual discussion, the subjects became more aware of the nature of the discussion and the real reason behind it. Due to the intervals they had in between the discussions, they had a chance to confer and this led to disobedience against the authority. The original study required eighty groups but due to the level of emotional discomfort and stress the experiment caused with the first thirty-three, the study was left uncompleted (Brown, 1986, p. g. 14).

Both studies share similarities as the authority oversteps the boundaries and acts unjustly. However, whereas the Milgram study reflects obedience the Gamson study reflects on disobedience. This is because the individuals of the MHRC Encounter are in a group, which Michael Walzer points out to be a 'collective act and it is justified by the values of the collectively and the mutual engagements of its members' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 17). Therefore, it can be argued that the key factor underpinning the rebellion of the MHRC Encounter is communication. The results show that 'of nineteen groups that had immediate rim talk, the first time they faced a dilemma of compliance, <https://assignbuster.com/milgrams-and-gamsons-studies-of-obedience-psychology-essay/>

sixty-three percent were successful in achieving collective resistance later on' (Gamson, 1985, p. g. 613). This demonstrates that communication allows exchange of information which is important as it reaffirms the ideologies of individuals concerning what is right and wrong. This leads to protest and rebellion when individuals collectively see authority acting unjustly.

Another difference between the Milgram and MHRC Encounter is that in the Milgram experiment, the subjects were unaware of the deception whereas they start to become more aware in the MHRC study, and this can be seen as a factor which influenced the rebellion resulting in disobedience. However, conclusions can only be drawn by comparing the two studies and based on the evidence, only assumptions can be made. If the studies had other variables, for example, if the Milgram study had one variable as two subjects playing the role of the teacher or if the participants of the MHRC study had not been aware of the deception as a variable, then the results of the studies may be slightly different and more accurate.

However, this was not possible in the case of the MHRC Encounter as the experiment itself proved to be very stressful for the participants, who were angered by the deception to an extent where 'at times violence threatened to break out. The responses were so powerful that the researchers called off the experiments before they were half completed in the interests of the safety of the participants' (Hunter, 2002, p. g. 651). This further emphasises that the experiment was unethical, as participants became aware of the real reason for the conduction of the research, hence they became fully aware that they had been misled.

However, it can be argued that they were not misled as before the discussion they gave consent to participating in research which they would be misled in. Yet, it can be suggested that the way they were told this piece of information was deceptive in itself, as this question was presented with three other questions which had no relevance to the research at all. This could have could have confused the subjects or because it is grouped with the other questions, not much importance is placed on it. Therefore, the subjects do not take much notice of the third question and give consent to all the questions.

Brown also adds 'that the salient differences leading to the different outcomes includes the dates of the studies (Milgram took place in 1963; MHRC took place in 1981) and the authority of the institutions (Milgram took place at Yale University, MHRC took place at a market research company)' (Hunter, 2002, p. g. 651). Firstly, it can be argued that the historical period does play a role in the way the subjects reacted as 'between 1963 and 1981 much happened to affect our view of authority' (brown, 1986, p. g. 16), such as the civil rights movement, opposition to the Vietnam war and the Watergate sandal which all contributed to a weakened view of authority. It has been suggested that the participates of the MHRC experiment disobeyed authority because of the changing view of it which occurred due to the events taking place. 'In the MHRC groups one person actually cited the Milgram experiment as a reason to resist, and others cited Watergate and the Vietnam War' (brown, 1986, p. g. 16-17), however there is no actual evidence to prove or disprove this possibility, although the chances of this being a factor contributing to the disobedience of authority is very high.

Moreover, the status of the institution proved to be an important factor in establishing obedience of authority, as 'in one variation Milgram moved his setup from New Haven to the city of Bridgeport and changed auspices from Yale University to Research Associates of Bridgeport (an invention)' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 17). The building and laboratory used for the experiment was adequate but not as elegant. This affected the results '48 percent of subjects, rather than 63 percent, were fully obedient' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 17). This decline in status is what Latane refers to as 'strength' (Brown, 1986, p. g. 20-21) and it has led to a decline in the percentage of obedience to authority, demonstrating that the status of the authority is very important, as MHRC Encounter experiment may have been undermined by the status attached to it. One of the subjects who participated in the experiment with the variation of status from the Milgram study said afterward: "What does we were not to check up on this deal. How do we know that these guys are legit?" (Brown, 1986, p. g. 17). This suggests that that participates of the research have to believe that the authority is not just any kind of authority but is a legitimate one.

As mentioned above, this explains one of the factors influencing the rebellion of the MHRC Encounter, as the group of people were more willing to rebel as there was not as much importance attached to the status of the research group. As the status was not as high, the power and authority the research company holds can be more easily questioned. This, along with the fact that the disobedience of authority was a collective act and the historical context of the time the study took place together contribute to the different results.

In conclusion, Milgram's and Gamson's work on obedience and disobedience have been widely acclaimed and useful in Sociology. By examining both studies separately and comparing them, conclusions can be drawn from them. Milgram's experiment demonstrates that the level of obedience of authority is so high that individuals are capable of inflicting pain on others when being told to do so by an authority with a high status. On the other hand, Gamson's study of disobedience demonstrated that individuals retaliate against authority when they are in a group, hence it is a collective act. This is because they have a chance to discuss with others and via communication they are able to reaffirm their values of what is right and wrong. Therefore, if collectively they feel that authority is acting unjustly, they rebel against it whereas in Milgram's experiment, subjects face authority alone and this is a major difference between the two studies. Although the studies are different, they both share similarities as both can be criticised for being unethical. Both studies misled the subjects and cause emotional stress. This in the case of the Milgram study could have influenced the results as subjects were willing to continue to shock the learner under the false impression that it was being done for the advancement of science, hence they were able to justify their actions, which to an extent undermines the concept of obedience of authority.

2804