
**Please note - an introduction and a conclusion are NOT required in the 16-marker answer. They are optional.*

Q. Outline and evaluate Milgram's study of obedience.

Ans.

Obedience to authority is a fundamental human behaviour, but it can also be a dangerous one. Milgram's classic study of obedience showed that ordinary people are capable of inflicting severe harm on others when ordered to do so by an authority figure.

The essay discusses Milgram's study of obedience, revealing how ordinary individuals can harm others under the influence of authority figures. It assesses the study's internal validity in comparison with its ecological validity, and addresses ethical concerns while highlighting its continued relevance in modern replications.

Stanley Milgram conducted a study on obedience, involving 40 American male participants. They believed they were taking part in a memory experiment. In the study, a confederate named 'Mr. Wallace' played the role of the 'Learner,' while the participant became the 'Teacher.' Another confederate acted as the 'Experimenter.' The Teacher was given the task of administering electric 'shocks' to the Learner whenever mistakes were made. These shocks increased in 15-volt steps up to a maximum of 450 volts, though the shocks were fake. If the Teacher wanted to stop, the Experimenter encouraged them to continue. The results showed that 12.5% of participants stopped at 300 volts, while a significant 65% continued to the maximum 450 volts. Qualitative results showed participants displayed extreme tension while giving shocks, with three even experiencing seizures. Before the study, psychology students predicted that only 3% would go to 450 volts, but the actual results far exceeded this expectation. Thus, Milgram's study showed that people tend to obey authority figures, even when it involves causing harm to others. This study shed light on the power of authority in influencing human behaviour.

One strength of Milgram's study was its internal validity. Milgram carefully designed the study setup, with scripted roles for participants, confederates, and an experimenter in a lab coat. The shock machine was labelled to make the shocks appear genuine, even though they were not. These measures ensured a consistent and controlled setting for participant. By keeping the experimental conditions consistent for all participants, the researcher increased the likelihood that any observed differences in obedience were due to the manipulation of the independent variable, that is, the authority figure's commands rather than other external factors. This gave a valid understanding of obedience under authority.

However, the study compromised on ecological validity in favour of internal validity. In a controlled lab experiment, a person easily obeys commands due to the authority figure's presence, knowing that it is just a study with no consequences to himself. In the real world, however, there are legal and ethical consequences for harming others. For example, if someone in a position of authority, such as a teacher, were to command a student to harm another student, they would likely face legal repercussions, such as being arrested or sued. Therefore, they would not obey authority as easily as they did in the study, casting doubt on the generalizability of findings to actual situations.

Further, the study also compromised on ethical considerations to meet its objectives. Diana Baumrind (1964) criticised Milgram for deceiving his participants. She pointed out that participants believed the allocation of roles as 'teacher' and 'learner' was random, but it was actually fixed. Moreover, participants thought the electric shocks administered were real when, in fact, they were not. Baumrind saw this deception as a breach of trust that could harm the reputation of psychologists in future. It could have also led to emotional distress and may have undermined the voluntary and informed consent that is essential in ethical research. The raising of this concern underscores the need for researchers to balance the pursuit of valuable insights with the ethical treatment of participants and maintaining trust within the field of psychology.

Despite its criticisms, Milgram's study has been replicated several times and it has proved its validity even in modern times. In a famous replication in 2009, Burger conducted a variation of Milgram's experiment, preserving many of its elements, including the use of the experimenter's lab coat and similar wording in the memory test. In this updated version, he found an obedience rate of 70 percent, with no significant difference between the obedience rates of males and females. Moreover, he introduced a condition with a second defiant confederate teacher, which, unlike Milgram's original findings, did not significantly reduce obedience. Burger's results suggest that the fundamental dynamics of obedience have not dramatically changed in the over 50 years since Milgram's original research.

In conclusion, Milgram's study of obedience revealed that people are willing to follow authority figures' orders, even when it means causing harm to others. This experiment, with its carefully controlled setup, demonstrated the power of authority in influencing human behaviour. However, it raised important ethical concerns regarding deception and the potential harm to participants. It also sacrificed real-world relevance for experimental control, making it unclear how these findings apply to everyday situations where legal and ethical consequences come into play. Despite these limitations, Milgram's findings have stood the test of time, as demonstrated by subsequent replications like Burger's in 2009. In essence, Milgram's study remains a thought-provoking example of how authority can influence human behaviour, challenging us to consider the ethical and psychological implications of obedience to authority figures.

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