

**Consider whether the Findings of the Obedience Studies, of Milgram, Hofling and Zimbardo justify the Methods used to obtain them?**

Obedience is the act of obeying orders from others in the form of dutiful or submissive behaviour. We often don't notice how much of an influence people have on our behaviour, and there are many different factors which affect the way we act. For example, the people we are with, the level of authority that they may have compared to us, the setting, the situation and quite obviously our personality type.

People obey authority for a number of reasons, such as to avoid punishment, for a reward or benefit and most importantly due to a certain person's authoritarian status. If somebody seems to have more power than ourselves, we tend to feel the need to obey them. Why do we feel obliged to respect and obey somebody, because of their high position in the hierarchy of authority?

There have been many intriguing obedience studies which have helped psychologists to get a better insight into how and why us humans decide to obey or disobey, depending on the situation that we are in. Although these studies have helped to reveal some important truths about human nature, does that make the unethical and unpleasant ways in which they were discovered acceptable?

An impressive study which shows the power that people can have over our behaviour was carried out by Milgram (1963). He set up an experiment in which volunteer research participants were required to give increasingly painful electric shocks to another person, as part of a study which they thought was about learning. The participants were aware of the danger involved and that it could prove fatal. They could hear the other person in the room next-door, who they had seen being strapped to the chair, giving out loud cries of pain, and then suddenly becoming silent, as if they had just died. However, that person was an actor, and the cries were pre-recorded, yet the participants weren't aware of that.

Milgram continuously gave the participants prods, which led them to believe that they had no other alternative than to continue. This proves that there was no sign of a right to withdraw. The participants were also hugely deceived, as they didn't know the true nature of the study. To add to this, Milgram didn't consider any protection from the stress and emotional disturbances that they experienced, which could have potentially been extremely dangerous to their wellbeing.

A shocking 65% of them gave the shocks up to the maximum possible level of 450 volts, which would have caused death. As astonishing as the results are, is it right to deceive people in this way?

The results showed both positive and negative outcomes. As the conditions of the experiment were very controlled, the results can be seen as reliable. There weren't many confounding variables (such as different genders or nationalities), that could have interfered with the results' accuracy. Because of this, it is much easier to identify possible causes and effects.

Another beneficial effect was that the participants learnt from their actions, and (whether a negative aspect or not), were able to discover more about themselves. To support this, in a follow-up questionnaire, just less than 1% of the participants said that they had any regrets about becoming involved in the study.

However, the results also had their downfalls. The experiment has very low ecological validity. Inflicting pain on others is clearly not an everyday task for most people, and most probably something that the participants had never experienced before. As it took place in laboratory-like conditions, involving scientific machinery, it can definitely not be perceived as 'true to the real world'. In addition to this, Milgram had a very unrepresentative sample. He chose to study only American, white, middle-class men. It could be argued that by only using men, it produced a set of biased results. The study was also only limited to those who read the newspaper article, and were willing to participate, yet these men who replied may be somehow different to the general population. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised, as they wouldn't apply to all people.

Personally, I feel the worst outcome of all, was the mental harm that the study caused the participants to suffer. After the experiment, there would have been an element of guilt and shame, which could have easily led into depression or even suicide. Being put into such a serious situation would quite clearly cause a large amount of stress, which is inappropriate, and such experiments should have been prohibited because of this. This could lead people into believing that the experiment wasn't worthwhile, as the results weren't ecologically valid or representative of the population, yet it put the participants under intense pressure, which was capable of affecting their mental state.

Another famous study which shows the power of social roles was performed by Hofling (1966). It was conducted in a real-life setting, a hospital, and the aim was to see if nurses would obey doctor's orders even if it meant going against the hospital's regulations. While on duty, the nurse would receive a phone call from an unknown doctor, about a particular patient. The nurse was then asked to give the patient a dose of a drug called astroten. First, they were asked to go to the cabinet and check it was there, this gave them the chance to see the bottle was labelled 'maximum dosage 10mg'. The doctor then asked the nurse to give the patient a 20mg dosage.

An overwhelming 21/22 nurses obeyed the instructions and had to be stopped before they prepared the medication.

This experiment was very unethical due to the lack of informed consent. The nurses were completely unaware that they were participating in an experiment. To add to this, after having been explained to about the study, the nurses would have quite obviously felt a sense of both guilt and humiliation, which is unacceptable, due to the fact that they hadn't even accepted to taking part. It could have possibly led to severe stress or depression.

On the other hand, from the study, psychologists can get a good insight into the power of authority and the large extent to which professionals are respected and trusted. And one could argue that if the nurses had been aware of the study, they would have acted unnaturally, and there would have been other social influences that would have affected their behaviour, therefore the results wouldn't have been as accurate.

Yet, it could be said that that the results aren't dispositional- how their personality would have caused them to act, but more situational, that they were just doing their job and obeying a doctor's instructions, like they have always been taught to do. This makes it quite difficult to infer causes and effects from the results.

As it was a field experiment, it obviously shows high ecological validity, unlike Milgram's study which took place in a highly artificial setting. This means that

the results can be applied to the real-world, which is an important benefit from the experiment.

There are again positives and negatives from this study as well. Although it showed interesting facts about obeying authoritarian figures, people deserve the right to decide whether or not they want to be involved in such studies.

Finally, quite a different method of observing obedience was carried out by **Zimbardo (1971)**. Participants were recruited via a newspaper article and offered \$15 a day, to participate in 'a two-week prison simulation'. He selected 25 white, middle-class males, who seemed to be 'psychologically stable and healthy'. They were then randomly divided into two groups- the prisoners and the prison guards. The 'prisoners' were arrested in their own homes. They were then searched, handcuffed and taken away, in front of their whole neighbourhood. The treatment they received was horrendous. They were forced to wear a loose smock, and a chain around one ankle. They were often blindfolded or stripped naked. The guards pushed the prisoners, if they felt they weren't working at a quick enough speed. They were allowed out only for meals, exercise, to work or to go to the toilet. They were even called by numbers instead of their names. The guards wore military-like uniform and mirror-reflected sunglasses – to avoid any eye contact. They carried clubs, handcuffs and whistles to add to the element of fear. As the guards increased their aggression, the prisoners started to lose control over their lives. In less than 36 hours, a prisoner was released due to severe depression. Three more suffered similar problems. The experiment stopped after just six days due to the effects that it had on the prisoners' mental health, who had initially been seen as 'psychologically healthy'.

The successful outcome of the study is that it brought across a very strong idea of the personality transformation people can experience, depending on the situation that they are put in. However, it brought out the power-hungry and sadistic characters, yet also the fearful and unstable ones, which are maybe sides of people that they didn't want to discover.

The experiment clearly had a huge negative impact on the prisoners. The way in which they were treated created a large amount of suffering. The severe stress they experienced led to the majority of them needing counselling immediately, and some have most probably not fully recovered. Such a traumatic ordeal is sure to leave somebody scarred for life, which is unforgivable.

In addition to this, the results themselves weren't very useful. Due to the artificial set-up the experiment lacked ecological validity, it was a role-play, not a real-life scene, and therefore cannot be applied to the real world. The sample was also unrepresentative; the participants were all white men, mostly students, who happened to read the article and all of a similar mental state. Because of this, we cannot generalise the results to all people. The experiment was also very uncontrolled. The experiment was mainly just being observed, so some of the data could be biased, depending on how the information was interpreted.

I feel that none of the findings of these experiments justify the way in which they were carried out, as they are all unreliable or invalid in some way. The procedures that took place were all unethical; I feel Zimbardo's study being the worst. Although Hofling's may have been the least traumatic, informed consent is essential. I feel that all the methods used in these studies were unjustifiable, and that the results collected definitely do not make them acceptable.

