

3-3 The case for and against Milgram's obedience study

3-3a The case against Milgram

Among those who were highly critical of Milgram's study was fellow psychologist Diana Baumrind. She started her critique by noting the dilemma that all research psychologists face: 'Certain problems in psychological research require the experimenter to balance his career and scientific interests against the interests of his prospective subjects' (Baumrind, 1964, p. 421).

Baumrind challenged Milgram on whether he had properly protected the *welfare of the participants*. She used direct quotes from Milgram's original report to illustrate the lack of regard she said was shown to the participants. In particular, she noted the detached manner in which Milgram described the emotional turmoil experienced by the volunteers. For example:

"In a large number of cases the degree of tension [in the participants] reached extremes that are rarely seen in sociopsychological laboratory studies. Subjects were observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan, and dig their fingernails into their flesh. These were characteristic rather than exceptional responses to the experiment." (Milgram, 1963, p. 375)

In Baumrind's view, and in the view of numerous others, the levels of anxiety experienced by participants were enough to warrant halting the experiment. What is more, just because someone volunteers to take part in the study (i.e. gives informed consent at the start of the study), it does not mean that the researcher no longer has responsibilities towards them and their wellbeing. On the *principle of cost-benefit*, Baumrind challenged the view that the scientific worth of the study balanced out the distress caused to the participants. She acknowledged that some harm to participants might be a necessary part of some research – for example, when testing out new medical procedures – as in those cases results cannot be achieved in any other way. Social psychology, however, is not in the same game as medicine and is unlikely to produce life-saving results. The strength of the conclusions does not, therefore, justify harming participants. Milgram related his study to the behaviour of people who worked in the Nazi death camps and suggested that his study illuminated the way that ordinary people living ordinary lives are capable of playing a part in destructive and cruel acts. Baumrind dismissed this justification for the study and suggested there are few, if any, parallels between the behaviour in the study and the behaviour in the death camps.

Baumrind went on to make a further criticism by considering the effect of this work on the public image of psychology, and suggested that it would be damaged because the general public would judge that the participants were not protected or respected.

A further potential problem with Milgram's experiment concerns the participants' *right to withdraw*. Do you think that this principle, embedded in the Nuremberg Code, was sufficiently observed in Milgram's research? Recall that one of the key aspects of the experimental procedure was that whenever a participant demonstrated a reluctance to carry

on with administering the shocks, they were told by the 'experimenter' in the grey coat 'you must go on', or 'you have no choice; you must go on'. It might be argued that telling a participant that they 'have no choice' but to continue with the experiment contravenes the right to withdraw, which is enshrined in the ethics code. To be fair, fourteen of the forty participants in the original study did withdraw, in spite of being told that they had no choice, so it could be argued that, ultimately, the participants did have a choice. It is just that making that choice was made more difficult by the presence of the 'experimenter' and by his prods. After all, the study was about obedience, and the instructions from the 'experimenter' were essential to the investigation. Exercising or not exercising the right to withdraw is what the study was about.

3-3b The case for Milgram

Milgram made a series of robust defences for the study, starting with a response to the newspaper article that first raised concerns. He dismissed the accusation that participants were severely traumatised by the experience. He argued that 'relatively few subjects experienced greater tension than a nail-biting patron at a good Hitchcock thriller' (quoted in Blass, 2007). This was rather disingenuous, given his other descriptions of their reactions (see above). However, Milgram made a more measured response to the academic arguments. He pointed out, for instance, that he could not have known the outcome of the research before he started. As you already read, before embarking on the study he asked fellow professionals how they expected people to behave, and they predicted that participants would not continue to obey and administer severe shocks to the 'learner'.

More importantly, Milgram was not oblivious to the psychological needs of his participants and was aware of the potential harm caused by the study. Immediately after the study, its true purpose was revealed to the participants. They were interviewed and given questionnaires to check they were all right. A friendly reconciliation was also arranged with the 'victim' whom they thought they had shocked. This procedure, known as debriefing, is commonplace today, but this was not the case in the 1960s. So, in this respect at least, Milgram was ahead of the game in terms of ethics procedures (Blass, 2004).

Milgram also conducted a follow-up survey of the participants one year after the study, to ensure that there was no long-term harm (Colman, 1987). The results showed that 84 per cent said they were 'glad to have been in the experiment', and only 1.3 per cent said they were very sorry to have taken part. Milgram also described how the participants had been examined by a psychiatrist who was unable to find a single participant who showed signs of long-term harm. Morris Braverman, a 39-year-old social worker, was one of the participants in Milgram's experiment who continued to give shocks until the maximum was reached. He claimed, when interviewed a year after the experiment, that he had learned something of personal importance as a result of being in the experiment. His wife said, with reference to his willingness to obey orders, 'You can call yourself an Eichmann' (Milgram, 1974, p. 54).

Milgram's basic defence was that the harm to the participants was not as great as it might appear, and for some of them the change in their understanding of their own behaviour and the behaviour of others was a positive event. He makes a further defence that we have to treat all people with respect and that this involves allowing them to make choices even if those choices are not always for the best. In direct response to Baumrind's criticisms he wrote:

"I started with the belief that every person who came to the laboratory was free to accept or to reject the dictates of authority. This view sustains a conception of human dignity insofar as it sees in each man a capacity for choosing his own behavior." (Milgram, 1964, p. 851)

3-3c Your judgement

So what do you think should be the final judgement on the ethics of Milgram's study? As you can see from the debate between Milgram and Baumrind, ethics is something that psychologists debate and often disagree on. Ethics principles, like all rules, are subject to interpretation and disagreement.

And yet, while individuals might have their personal view about whether a piece of research is ethical or not, what really matters is the judgment of institutions that regulate the profession. In the USA the regulatory body is the American Psychological Association. Its equivalent in the UK is the British Psychological Society. These institutions have ethics committees which issue guidelines and codes of conduct related to ethics in research and can reprimand researchers who can be shown to have violated the rules. At the time of Milgram's study, his research was investigated by the ethics committee of the American Psychological Association, who eventually came to the conclusion that it was ethically acceptable. Notably, however, Milgram's studies could not be carried out today, as the ethics guidelines have become more restrictive since the 1960s.

Finally, one further issue regarding Milgram's study is worth pointing out. Although the ethics of Milgram's research have been questioned, it could be argued that the obedience study, more than any other study in psychology, demonstrated *why* ethics are important. Recall that what Milgram's study showed was that ordinary people were willing to harm another human being just because they were told to do so by a person they believed was a psychologist, and because doing so was supposedly 'required by the experiment'. This shows that people generally are ready to give scientists the benefit of the doubt and go along with what they are doing, even when it involves harming individuals. This in itself illustrates how important it is to have some moderation of scientific activity, and have limits imposed on what scientists can and cannot do.