3-1 Stanley Milgram's obedience study

Stanley Milgram was one of the most innovative and productive social psychologists of his generation, who undertook a variety of studies that explored social psychological aspects of everyday life. However, he is largely remembered for one dramatic piece of work – the obedience studies.

In the first instance Milgram conducted the study on a sample of forty participants, all of them male. Each played the role of 'teacher' in the situation described in Section 1.1. Each participant went through the identical experimental procedure: all forty heard the same instructions, encountered the same 'experimenter' and 'learner', heard identical (pre-recorded) cries from the next room. The 'experimenter' in the grey lab coat offered the same words of encouragement. The sessions were filmed (Figure 4) and notes were taken by observers looking through an observation mirror.

Figure 1 Scenes from the Milgram study

Milgram found that, of the forty participants who took part in the study, all obeyed up to 300 volts, the twentieth switch on the shock generator. This is the point at which the 'learner' was heard screaming: 'I absolutely refuse to answer any more. Get me out of here. You can't hold me here. Get me out. Get me out of here.' However, only five of the forty participants refused to continue beyond this point. Four gave only one more shock before breaking off, with an additional five stopping between 315 volts and 435 volts. But as many as twenty-six continued to the end of the scale and administered the maximum 450 volts. This is despite the fact that, at 330 volts, they had already heard intense and prolonged screaming: 'Let me out of here. Let me out of here. … Let me out of here. You have no right to hold me here. Let me out! Let me out!' Shocks beyond 330 volts were accompanied by eerie silence. Nevertheless, twenty-six ordinary members of the public from Connecticut administered the maximum shock and continued to do so until the experimenter called a halt to the proceedings.

As well as counting the number of participants who went all the way on the shock generator, Milgram also observed their reactions. Participants who took part in the study generally displayed signs of nervousness and tension. Many were visibly uncomfortable and probably would not have continued had they not heard the experimenter say things like 'Please continue', 'Please carry on', 'It is absolutely essential that you continue' or 'You have no

choice; you must go on'. At the end of the study, many of the obedient participants heaved sighs of relief or shook their heads in apparent regret. Some even had laughing fits during the experiment, probably brought on by anxiety. Milgram (1963, p. 375) wrote that 'full-blown, uncontrollable seizures were observed for 3 subjects. On one occasion we observed a seizure so violently convulsive that it was necessary to call a halt to the experiment'. (You may have noticed that in this quote Milgram refers to people who took part in his study as 'subjects'. This was common practice in psychology in the 1960s. Today the word 'participant' is used instead as the word 'subject' is considered demeaning, and lacking in respect towards volunteers on whose participation much of psychological research ultimately depends.)

Do Milgram's findings seem plausible to you? Ordinary members of the public were prepared to administer electric shocks to another person on the mere (albeit persistent) request of a man in a laboratory coat. They did so despite the protests from the 'victim' and continued even after the supposed recipient of the shocks went quiet. Before the study, when Milgram asked his fellow professionals to predict how many participants would refuse to go all the way, they said that all of them would do so. In reality only 35 per cent did. In Milgram's study, the average voltage at which participants stopped shocking the 'learner' was 368 volts. Members of the public predicted that people would stop at around 140 volts. This is a remarkable discrepancy. It is therefore not surprising that Milgram's research went on to provoke considerable debate.

Box 1 Why do it this way?

Milgram's obedience work is remarkable, not only because of the important questions it sought to explore, but also because it is a fine example of good experimental procedure in social psychology.

The most important feature of any laboratory experiment is its *controlled* nature. Note that every person who took part in Milgram's research underwent an identical experience. All participants received the same instructions, encountered the same individuals (the 'experimenter' and the fellow 'volunteer') and heard identical cries and protestations from the 'learner'. To ensure consistency in the experimental procedure, Milgram even recorded the anguished cries in advance, and played them to participants from a tape.

This equivalence of experience across the forty participants was essential if meaningful comparisons were to be made. It ensured that any difference in behaviour observed in the study could not be attributed, for instance, to the fact that some participants heard louder or more desperate cries than others. For similar reasons, Milgram used the same 'learner' and 'experimenter' with each participant. He wanted to ensure that none of the results could be accounted for by differences in the personality or the demeanour of the confederates.

Another interesting aspect of Milgram's research is that he recruited participants from the general public, using a newspaper advert. At the time (and still now in many psychology departments) participants tended to be recruited mainly from among the student population. However, Milgram was interested in exploring the level of obedience to scientific authority among people with no direct link to the university or research environment, so he recruited from the general public.

Finally, in Milgram's original study, all forty participants were male. Why do you think this was the case? This was not because Milgram wanted to exclude women from his research. He later conducted further studies in which he explored gender differences in obedience. In the initial study, however, he decided to control for the potential effects of gender on the findings by limiting the sample to men.