
Social Psychology: Classic And Contemporary Study In Relation To Obedience

Mitchell (2009), defines social psychology as the field that attempts to understand how the thought, feeling, and behaviour of individuals are influenced by the actual or imagined presence of others. The importance of social psychology is highlighted by Delamater(2018), who states social psychology helps Scientific researchers to understand people's thoughts and helps to explain the causes of human behaviours.

Haslam and Smith (2012), define a classic study as one where the study is known well by all researchers outside the field of social psychology, as well as in the field. They further suggest that a contemporary study, is one that improves upon the methodology of a classic study and this leads to more understanding in the theories.

The area of social psychology discussed will be obedience. Obedience may be defined as a form of social influence obtained in response to 'direct orders from an authority figure' (Gibson,2019:244). This definition is further strengthened by Miller (1995), who states obedience is when an individual acts in a certain manner that is consistent with a command or rule, from a person of a higher social status.

Participants from the classic study are between the ages of 20-50 and were all white males (Milgram,1963). Nicholson (2011), argues that many researchers of the time would use the terms 'men' and 'man' when referring to all of society in general. Additionally, Coontz (2007), reinforces this point, suggesting that 'men' referred to essential and representative, whilst female referred to inessential. This could be a potential reason for Milgram including mostly male participants in his study, as men were superior at the time, however, Milgram did not state a reason for doing this(Nicholson,2011). Interestingly, the data regarding female subjects are not reported in this 1963 classical study. It is evident that by recruiting mostly men in the experiment, there is a gender imbalance. This idea has further been developed by Dickinson and Adelson (2012), who suggest that by having a gender imbalance in a study there is a risk of losing representatives in a population, they further argue that it is necessary to have both genders so that differences may be detected (Dickinson, Adelson,2012).

However, on the contrary, Participants in the contemporary study were of both genders and the children were equally divided by sex(Kawashima and Martins, 2015). This is in accordance with Tannenbaum (2016), who emphasises the fact that gender is a factor that should be considered in study designs as this helps to ensure research is representative and can apply to everyone.

In Milgram (1963), Participants were from New Haven, and participants in Kawashima and Martins (2015), were from the state of Sao Paulo. This suggests that due to participants being from one geographical area, in both studies, the results are not generalisable. Blair and Zinkhan (2006), highlight the importance of generalisability by implying that if the data is not generalisable, then the question of using that data in a research project arises. Blair and Zinkhan (2006), comment further on this stating the data must reflect a wider population of interest and not just one specific area.

In Milgram (1963), 40 males took part in the experiment, and in Kawashima and Martins (2015), 90 children and 26 teachers were included. Given this, it is still arguable that both studies are still generalisable due to the sample size. This is supported by Blair and Zinkhan (2006), who comment that generalisation of data can be done through the sampling process, meaning if the sample quality is good there will be less chance of non-response bias. These ideas have further been developed by Lakes (2013), who argues that sample size affects the reliability of results and can impact research findings. Lakes (2013), further reinforces this by commenting that the more generalisable the data is the more valid the results will be.

In Kawashima and Martins (2015), the consent of all participants was given before data collection began. Consent to take part in the study was given by the guardians of the children as they were all under the age of 16 (BPS). This is in accordance with the British Psychological Society (BPS), whereby it states that for children under the age of 16, consent should be given by parents or those who are legally responsible for the child. All consent forms were signed and documented, and written consent was given by participants (Kawashima, Martins,2015). This is in agreement with the BPS, where it suggests that consent from the participants whether verbally or written should be given, and children who participated were given authorisation from those in charge of them (Kawashima, Martins,2015).

Additionally, the study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) (Kawashima, Martins,2015). This means the study was conducted in accordance with all the rules and regulations of the REC. The REC is responsible for ensuring that the safety and welfare of the researcher and participants are considered, and all research is reviewed by a competent body (BPS).

However, conversely, Milgram went against ethical protocol, as Russell (2014), argues that Milgram failed to obtain consent from participants. Moreover, this goes against the protocol of the REC, whereby it states that researchers should ensure valid consent is gained from participants. The subject is being told that the experiment is in the context of a learning experiment to study the effects of shock on memory (Milgrim,1963). However, Shanks (2012), contends that this is a deception as the real reason for the experiment was to see how far a subject would go in inflicting harm on an innocent individual, just to obey an authoritative figure. Additionally, this deception is in opposition to the BPS, as it states that deceiving participants in a study is not acceptable as it may cause harm to its recipients. The BPS further reinforces this point by stating that the code of ethics expects all psychologists to openly tell all participants as much information as possible, and no participant should be deliberately given false information.

The study of obedience took place in the laboratory (Milgram,1963). Falk and Heckman (2009), best define a laboratory experiment as a methodology used for 'advancing casual knowledge' (pg3). They argue that lab experiments lack generalisability and realism, they further explain that issues with lab experiments include data being unrealistic, which in turn means that the data cannot be used in the real world. On the contrary, however, Leritt and List (2007), argue that the data gained from a laboratory experiment can be generalised. They further reinforce this by commenting that the laboratory allows the experimenter to test for a specific hypothesis. Webster(2014), strengthens this point made by stating that the lab allows variables to be manipulated, which would be difficult to control in a natural setting.

In Milgram (1963), the methodology consisted of putting severe punishment to the victim for the learning experiment. Punishment was carried out through the means of a shock generator with

30 switches graded from 1-30 (Milgram,1963).

The procedure of the experiment caused severe levels of tension, including sweating, trembling, and digging fingernails into the skin (Milgram,1963). It is evident that participants were put under a lot of stress. Baumrind (1964), supports this by stating that the subject has got the right to believe that the experimenter has taken the welfare of the subject into consideration, however further argues that this is not always the case and subjects are sometimes placed in an uncomfortable situation and concludes that Milgram's experiment is an example of this. Causing the participant's stress goes against the BPS ethical code of conduct. This point is strengthened by Bernabe (2012), who reports that the RECs carry out a risk assessment to ensure that any risk participants may be exposed to is minimised. Bernabe (2012), discusses further that risk assessment is crucial in ensuring no participants are harmed. Bernabe's point is in accordance with the BPS which set out to ensure that the rights and welfare of participants are considered. Furthermore, the BPS reviews all types of research where human participants are involved to ensure the safety of participants is prioritised.

The procedure Milgram used was not just critiqued for covering up the real reasons for the experiment, but also because it was unethical (Grybz,2018). The experiment caused participants an immense amount of stress and anxiety. Grybz (2018), argues that Milgram admitted himself that when placed in the laboratory, his subjects were put under high levels of pressure and were forced to engage in behaviours that were against their values. Grybz (2018), further reinforces this by commenting that it had been decided that for ethical reasons no experiment proposed by Milgram could be conducted. This is further consolidated by McArthur (2009), who argues that Milgram's experiment would be rejected by the ethics committee if proposed today. McArthur (2009), further goes onto suggesting that this is due to the psychological harm and deception caused, as participants were oblivious to the true nature of the experiment. These ideas have been further developed by Baumrind(1964), who argues that permanent harm was caused during the experiment and this was not just due to the discomfort and deception subjects had to go through, but also because of the feeling of guilt inside the subjects when they realise they would have shocked an innocent individual if the current was on.

At certain points of the experiment, the subject may turn to the experimenter for advice on whether to carry on (Milgram,1963). When the subject did this the experimenter responded with a series of 'prods (Milgram,1963). Prod 1: 'please continue or please go on' (Milgram, 1963: 254). This goes against the REC which clearly states that all participants have the right to withdraw, and yet despite the participants wanting to withdraw they were told 'it is absolutely essential that you continue' (Milgram,1963:374). The codes of ethics further highlight that all participants have the right to withdraw freely without any consequences, but still, participants are told 'you have no other choice you must go on' (Milgram,1963:254).

Procedure: The clinical Piagetian interview was used as the data collection method in Kawashima and Martins(2015). The questions asked followed a Stimulus story surrounding Carla who wanted to make a flower out of modelling clay instead of a dog. Before this, the teacher told everyone to make a dog out of modelling clay. The teacher said that because Carla did not obey her, Carla will not get help. Participants were then asked via the interview method if the teacher did the correct thing. (Kawashima, Martins,2015). This method used is an advantage as participants included children. Ormrod (1985), further discusses this advantage by commenting that this method allows children to describe the thought process, verbally rather

than by written means. This makes it easier for them and is age appropriate as an alternative method would mean writing their responses; which may be difficult for 4-6-year olds. McGuirk and O'Neill(2016), further supports this by commenting that using questionnaires would mean answers would be limited as questionnaires are closed questions, whereas interviews are open-ended which means the responses would be more in-depth. Ormond (1985), further highlights that the clinical Piagetian interview method is when the interviewer presents a child with a problem and the child tries to answer it whilst describing the rationale.

Similarly, Milgram also used the interview process. After the experiment was completed, subjects were interviewed via open-ended questions (Milgram,1963). The qualitative research method was used in this study. Maher (2008), reports that qualitative research allows one to explore behaviour based on real-life and allows participants to give their own opinions. Tuckett (2012), argues that issues are raised with interviews in whether each participant has been given the same opportunity to provide their opinion on the scenario, and further suggests that issues may also occur in the way the interview has been presented. If it is not presented in a fully systematic way, results will reflect the method of questioning rather than the truth (Tuckett,2012). However, contrarily, Opdenakker (2006), argues that the face to face interview method has its advantage of social cues such as body language and this helps the interviewee get a lot more extra information.

Results from the classic study are highlighted by Shanks (2012), who reports that through his obedience study, Milgram has shown us how easy it is to manipulate individuals and make them go against their values when authority is in place.

Results from the contemporary study indicate that when authority does not live up to their duties as teachers and do not consider the rights of a child, the child does not agree with authority. Therefore, not receiving help from the teacher will result in the child not wanting to obey authority (Kawashima, Martins,2015).

This essay has critiqued both classic and contemporary studies and outlined the methodological approaches used, it will now move onto how the concept of obedience, is a topic of social psychology and its relevance to education.

Hornikx (2011), suggests that teachers are epistemic authorities that provide children with reliable information, this may be why they obey. Raviv (2003), further strengthens this, stating teachers are obeyed in schools by pupils as they trust their knowledge, and in schools' teachers are encouraged to ensure they are an epistemic authority. Plant (2019), further argues that the teacher plays the role of the authoritative figure and has influence over the classroom, whilst the student obeys and is more likely to follow what the teacher says rather than working out their answers. These ideas have further been developed by Lakshaman (2015), who contends that the teaching profession automatically reinforces obedience, as the teacher is the authoritative figure and it is she that gets to decide most aspects of teaching, and students tend to obey the teacher as they are the expert authority.

This point is further highlighted by Dirsmith (1983), who conducted a study to test the response of students in obeying authority. Two groups were presented, Group A was dressed in formal attire and group B was dressed in a sweater and shirt. It was thought by the students the group dressed in formal attire was more knowledgeable, thus more likely to be obeyed. Similarly, in Milgram (1963), the experimenter was told to look strict and was dressed in a grey technician's

coat. Helm (1985), argues the experimenter is seen as the authoritative figure and he is also dressed in a manner that symbolises authority- a grey technicians coat in a laboratory setting- and appears to be serious throughout. The subjects straight away regard him as entitled to giving commands.

It is argued by Pace and Hemmings (2007), that teachers are given the right and responsibility to oversee the classroom and are right in expecting obedience. Authority and obedience are especially important in education, however many educational thinkers thought obedience and authority in the classroom as an 'oppressive force'. However, despite this, having obedience is a fundamental feature of classroom life. Teachers being obeyed and being the authoritative figure in the classroom is not assumed but is gained through interactions.

This essay will now move onto discussing the changes in attitudes, towards ethical conduct in social psychology over the years.

Benjamin (2009), argues that many studies in the history of psychology have contributed to later development and changes. He further claims that due to Milgram's obedience study, researchers are much more conscious of ethical issues in their work. The result of this has been changes in research ethics codes, and procedures are now in place to review research proposals in institutions (Benjamin,2009). Additionally, De Wet (2010), points out that research now must adhere to ethical rulings and principles, for the experiment to be carried out. De Wet (2010), further comments that all research conducted must abide by ethical requirements as any type of research has the possibility of causing harm, the harm may not be within the research itself but may cause harm later.

These ideas have additionally been developed by Jacobson (2007), who states that approval of human research had become a standard 30 years ago, Researchers in the past who used their own life experiences as material to carry out research have now been discouraged to do so by the ethics committee, as it is perceived as 'unauthorized data collection' (pg4). Jacobson (2007), additionally suggests times have now changed and the ethics committees now expect to see written consent and confidentiality built within the methodology of research. It is evident from both classic and contemporary studies, that standards in ethics have become more rigorous today. This point is further consolidated by Vogles (2014), who argues that after Milgram's experiment, guidelines were developed as the study was ethically controversial. Vogles (2014), concludes that those carrying out research involving humans in today's time must follow ethical guidelines.

In conclusion , this essay has critically examined a classic and contemporary study in relation to obedience and discussed the theoretical and methodological approaches used. It has then moved onto the concept of obedience and related it back to education in classrooms. Finally, it discussed the changes in attitudes towards ethical conduct.