

why is milgram's study considered to be unethical

why is milgram's study considered to be unethical remains a pivotal question in the history of psychology, fundamentally shaping modern research ethics. Stanley Milgram's controversial obedience experiments, conducted in the early 1960s, aimed to understand the extent to which individuals would obey authority figures, even when commanded to perform actions that conflicted with their personal conscience. While the study yielded profound insights into human behavior and the power of situational factors, its methodology involved severe breaches of what are now considered fundamental ethical principles. This comprehensive article will delve into the specific ethical transgressions that have made Milgram's work a perpetual subject of debate, including the extensive deception of participants, the psychological distress inflicted, the violation of the right to withdraw, and the perceived inadequacy of debriefing. Understanding these issues is crucial for appreciating the evolution of ethical guidelines in psychological research and the critical importance of safeguarding participant welfare.

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Understanding the Milgram Obedience Experiment

The Milgram obedience experiment was a series of social psychology experiments conducted by Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram, beginning in July 1961, shortly after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Milgram designed the study to investigate the command of authority on individuals, specifically addressing the question of whether ordinary people would inflict pain on others if instructed to do so by an authority figure. The experimental setup involved a "teacher" (the actual participant), a "learner" (an accomplice of Milgram), and an "experimenter" (another accomplice in a lab coat).

Participants were told the study was about memory and learning. The "teacher" was instructed to administer electric shocks of increasing intensity to the "learner" for incorrect answers, ranging from 15

volts ("slight shock") up to 450 volts ("XXX - danger: severe shock"). Crucially, the shocks were not real, but the "teacher" believed they were. The "learner" would feign increasing discomfort, protests, and eventually silence as the shock levels escalated. Milgram's shocking findings revealed that a significant majority of participants—65% in the initial experiment—administered the maximum 450-volt shock, demonstrating a startling capacity for obedience to authority even when it caused apparent severe distress to another person.

The Core Ethical Violations: Deception and Lack of Informed Consent

One of the primary reasons **why is Milgram's study considered to be unethical** is the extensive and profound deception employed throughout the experiment. Participants were led to believe they were participating in a study about learning and memory, rather than an experiment on obedience to authority. The "learner" was an actor, and the electric shocks were entirely simulated. This level of deception meant that participants could not give truly informed consent, a cornerstone of ethical research.

The Nature of the Deception Used

The deception was multifaceted and critical to the study's design. Participants were deceived about:

- The true purpose of the experiment.
- The identity of the "learner" (who was an accomplice, not a genuine participant).
- The reality of the electric shocks (they were fake).
- The "random" assignment to roles (participants were always the "teacher").

This elaborate ruse prevented participants from understanding the true nature of their involvement and the potential psychological implications. They entered the experiment under false pretenses, which severely compromised their autonomy and ability to make an educated decision about their participation.

Absence of Genuine Informed Consent

Informed consent requires that participants be fully apprised of all aspects of a study that might influence their decision to participate, including the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw. In Milgram's study, this fundamental requirement was not met. Participants could not consent to being involved in an experiment that would place them in a morally challenging situation, causing them significant emotional distress under the belief that they were harming another human being.

The lack of informed consent is a critical ethical violation because it undermines the respect for persons, a

principle that emphasizes the autonomy of individuals and the necessity to protect those with diminished autonomy. Milgram's participants were denied the opportunity to exercise their autonomy through genuine consent, which is a major factor in **why Milgram's study is considered unethical**.

Psychological Distress and Harm to Participants

Beyond deception, the Milgram experiment inflicted significant psychological distress on its participants, a major aspect of **why Milgram's study is considered unethical**. Eyewitness accounts and Milgram's own observations documented the acute stress experienced by many "teachers" as they believed they were administering painful, potentially lethal electric shocks.

Observed Signs of Stress

Participants exhibited extreme signs of tension and discomfort. Milgram reported instances of:

- Sweating and trembling.
- Stuttering and nervous laughter.
- Groaning and biting their lips.
- Some participants even had full-blown seizure-like convulsions.

The emotional turmoil was palpable, as individuals struggled with the conflict between their moral compass and the experimenter's authoritative commands. The genuine distress experienced by these participants, believing they were causing harm, raises serious questions about the ethical limits of experimental manipulation.

Long-term Psychological Effects and Lack of Follow-up

While Milgram conducted a follow-up questionnaire months after the experiment, finding that 84% were "glad" or "very glad" to have participated and only 1.3% regretted it, critics argue this self-report might not fully capture the long-term impact. The profound experience of believing one was capable of inflicting severe pain on another person, even under duress, could have lasting effects on an individual's self-perception and trust in authority. The possibility of unresolved guilt, anxiety, or altered self-image post-experiment without adequate psychological support is a significant concern.

Modern ethical guidelines emphasize the responsibility of researchers to protect participants from both immediate and lasting harm. Milgram's study, by intentionally placing individuals in a high-stress, morally conflicting situation without fully preparing them for the psychological repercussions, clearly fell short of these protective measures.

Violation of the Right to Withdraw

Another critical ethical failing that contributes to **why Milgram's study is considered unethical** is the apparent infringement on the participants' right to withdraw from the experiment. While participants were technically told they could leave at any time, the experimental setup and the experimenter's prods created immense pressure that made withdrawal extremely difficult.

"Prods" Used by the Experimenter

When participants expressed hesitation or a desire to stop, the experimenter, an authority figure in a laboratory coat, used a series of standardized verbal prods to encourage them to continue. These prods included:

1. "Please continue." or "Please go on."
2. "The experiment requires that you continue."
3. "It is absolutely essential that you continue."
4. "You have no other choice; you must go on."

These commands, delivered with increasing insistence, made it incredibly challenging for participants to assert their right to discontinue. The psychological pressure exerted by the experimenter effectively eroded the participant's perceived autonomy, trapping them in a situation that caused them profound distress. This goes against the ethical principle that participation in research must be voluntary at all stages.

Pressure to Continue Despite Distress

The ethical guidelines stress that participants should feel free to withdraw without penalty at any point. In Milgram's experiment, participants were not only pressured to continue but were also experiencing intense moral conflict and emotional distress. To be compelled to persist under such circumstances, when they believed they were causing harm, is a clear violation of their rights. The setup made it difficult to simply walk away without feeling disobedient or irresponsible, especially given the perceived scientific importance of the "learning experiment." This lack of a clear and unhindered path to withdrawal is a significant factor in the enduring ethical criticism of the study.

Inadequate Debriefing and Protection from Harm

The debriefing process is a crucial ethical component of any psychological study, especially those involving deception or the potential for distress. It aims to inform participants of the true nature of the experiment, explain any deception, alleviate distress, and ensure they leave the study in a psychological state no worse

than when they entered. The adequacy of Milgram's debriefing has been a major point of contention and a reason **why Milgram's study is considered unethical** by many.

The Importance of Immediate and Thorough Debriefing

A thorough debriefing should:

- Disclose any deception used and explain its necessity.
- Address any potential psychological harm or stress experienced.
- Provide an opportunity for participants to ask questions.
- Offer resources or support if lingering distress is evident.
- Reinforce the participant's value to the research regardless of their behavior.

For a study as impactful as Milgram's, where participants faced a profound moral dilemma, the debriefing needed to be exceptionally sensitive and comprehensive to mitigate any lasting negative effects.

Concerns About the Effectiveness of Milgram's Debriefing

While Milgram did conduct a debriefing, its timing and effectiveness have been questioned. Participants were informed that the shocks were fake and the "learner" was unharmed. However, critics argue that simply revealing the deception might not have been enough to undo the psychological impact of believing one had inflicted severe pain. The realization that one was capable of such obedience, and had experienced such intense moral conflict, could still be distressing. Some argue that an immediate, intensive, and individualized debriefing session with a trained psychologist would have been more appropriate, given the extreme levels of stress and moral quandary induced.

The standard for debriefing has significantly evolved since Milgram's time, emphasizing not just disclosure but also psychological care and support. The concerns surrounding Milgram's debriefing highlight the inherent risks when studies intentionally induce high levels of stress or moral conflict, solidifying its position in the debate about unethical research practices.

The Legacy of Milgram's Ethical Controversy

The intense ethical debate surrounding Milgram's obedience experiments had a profound and lasting impact on the field of psychological research. The study became a benchmark example for discussing the boundaries of acceptable research practices and directly contributed to the development of rigorous ethical guidelines and oversight mechanisms. This legacy is a testament to the fact that **why Milgram's study is considered unethical** fundamentally reshaped the way science is conducted with human participants.

How the Study Shaped Modern Research Ethics

Prior to Milgram's work, ethical review processes were less formalized. His study, along with other controversial experiments like Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment, served as a stark warning about the potential for psychological research to harm participants. These experiences catalyzed the establishment of explicit ethical codes and regulations designed to protect human subjects.

Key ethical principles that gained prominence partly due to Milgram's controversy include:

- The necessity of obtaining fully informed consent.
- The obligation to protect participants from physical and psychological harm.
- The absolute right of participants to withdraw at any point without penalty.
- The importance of thorough and sensitive debriefing, especially when deception is used.
- The principle of beneficence (maximizing benefits and minimizing harm) and non-maleficence (doing no harm).

Role of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)

Perhaps the most significant development spurred by studies like Milgram's was the widespread establishment of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the United States, and similar ethics committees globally. IRBs are independent committees that review and approve all research involving human subjects to ensure it meets ethical standards and protects participant welfare. They scrutinize research proposals for:

- Adequacy of informed consent procedures.
- Minimization of risks and maximization of benefits.
- Fair selection of participants.
- Confidentiality and anonymity.
- Appropriateness of debriefing.

It is widely agreed today that a study with the ethical shortcomings of Milgram's experiment would never receive approval from a modern IRB. This stringent oversight is a direct consequence of the lessons learned from the Milgram ethical controversy, ensuring that the pursuit of scientific knowledge does not come at the cost of human dignity and well-being.

The Enduring Impact on Research Practices

The ethical considerations raised by Milgram's obedience experiment continue to resonate deeply within the scientific community. While its findings on the power of authority remain highly influential, the methods employed serve as a constant reminder of the critical importance of ethical rigor. The debate around **why Milgram's study is considered unethical** ensures that researchers are perpetually mindful of their responsibilities to human participants.

Today, any research involving deception must demonstrate its absolute necessity, prove that no alternative methods exist, and commit to a robust debriefing process that actively monitors for and addresses any distress. The balance between scientific advancement and participant protection is a delicate one, and Milgram's work stands as a historical marker for where that balance was once misjudged. His study, though ethically problematic, paradoxically became a foundational text for establishing the very ethical principles it violated, forever changing the landscape of psychological and social science research.

Q: What were the primary ethical concerns with Milgram's study?

A: The primary ethical concerns with Milgram's study revolved around extensive deception, the psychological distress inflicted on participants, the perceived violation of their right to withdraw from the experiment, and the adequacy of the debriefing process. Participants were led to believe they were harming another person, causing them significant emotional conflict and stress, all under false pretenses.

Q: How did deception play a role in why Milgram's study is considered unethical?

A: Deception was central to the Milgram experiment. Participants were falsely told the study was about memory and learning, not obedience. The "learner" was an actor, and the electric shocks were fake. This meant participants could not give informed consent, as they were unaware of the true nature, risks, and purpose of the experiment. This lack of genuine informed consent is a major reason for its unethical classification.

Q: Did participants in the Milgram study experience psychological harm?

A: Yes, many participants experienced significant psychological distress and harm. Milgram observed overt signs of stress, including sweating, trembling, stuttering, nervous laughter, and even full-blown seizures in some cases. Believing they were inflicting severe pain on another person caused intense moral conflict and emotional turmoil, raising serious questions about the protection of participants from harm.

Q: Was the right to withdraw respected in the Milgram experiment?

A: While participants were initially told they could withdraw, the experimenter's use of insistent "prods" (e.g., "The experiment requires that you continue.") created immense pressure that made it very difficult

for participants to actually exercise this right. This coercive pressure is widely considered a violation of the participant's autonomy and their ethical right to discontinue participation without penalty.

Q: How did Milgram's study influence modern ethical guidelines in research?

A: Milgram's study, alongside others like the Stanford Prison Experiment, profoundly influenced modern research ethics. It directly contributed to the establishment of rigorous ethical codes, such as those from the American Psychological Association (APA), and mandated the creation of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) to review and approve all research involving human subjects. These measures ensure informed consent, protection from harm, the right to withdraw, and thorough debriefing are central to ethical research practices.

Q: What is meant by "inadequate debriefing" in the context of Milgram's study?

A: Inadequate debriefing refers to concerns that while participants were eventually told the truth about the deception and the fake shocks, this might not have been sufficient to alleviate the psychological impact of believing they had caused severe harm. Critics argue that a more thorough, sensitive, and potentially psychologically supported debriefing was necessary to address the profound moral conflict and distress experienced, ensuring participants left the study without lasting negative effects.

Q: Would Milgram's study be approved by an IRB today?

A: No, it is almost universally agreed that Milgram's study would not be approved by a modern Institutional Review Board (IRB). The extensive deception, the high potential for psychological harm, the infringement on the right to withdraw, and the perceived inadequacy of debriefing would violate multiple core ethical principles now enforced by IRBs globally.

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