

Milgram (1963) ~ Behavioural Study of Obedience

Extended Answer Questions – suggested answers

1. The Social Approach studies the effect of situational factors on behaviour; describe what Milgram (1963) was studying in his investigation. (4 marks)

Milgram wanted to investigate obedience to authority, particularly if the form of legitimate authority was asking someone to harm another person. Milgram created an artificial setting where participants were invited to lab at Yale University and after being allocated the role of 'teacher' (with a confederate playing the role of 'learner') they were taken to a room with a large electric shock generator. They were instructed to ask the learner a series of questions and failure to answer correctly meant they had to administer a 15 volt electric shock, which increased in small increments to 450 volts. The 40 male participants were all tested individually and 100% went to 300 volts with 65% reaching the maximum 450 volts. If participants refused to carry on they were told by the authority figure to continue. This experiment highlighted the influence of authority on levels of obedience and demonstrates that people will obey even if it means causing harm to someone else.

2. In the Social Approach researchers try to avoid demand characteristics by breaking ethical guidelines in their research. Explain two ethical guidelines using examples from Milgram's study and state why it was necessary for him to conduct his study this way. (8 marks)

Demand characteristics are when participants change their behaviour to please the researcher, giving invalid results as they display behaviour which is not a true reflection of how they would normally behave. One ethical guideline is deception which is where some elements of the investigation are not revealed to the participants, sometimes at the end and sometimes not at all. In Milgram's experiment the participants were led to believe that the experiment was about punishment and learning, not obedience to authority. They were also led to believe that the electric shock generator was real and that the person allocated the role of 'learner' was also a genuine real participant like them. This may seem dishonest but Milgram would have argued in this case it was necessary to deceive the participants in order to avoid demand characteristics. Another ethical guideline is the right to withdraw, which is where participants have the right to leave the experiment or cancel their participation at any time without further obligation. In Milgram's experiment he prevented participants from doing so by giving the experimenter 4 verbal prods to use if participants objected. This meant they had to ask to leave on four separate occasions. In most cases participants would only ask once or twice, this gave Milgram the opportunity to gather more obedient data. He would argue this was necessary to get a true picture of obedience to authority, adding to the validity of his findings.

