

Milgram's Obedience Experiments: Lesson Plan

Topic	
<p>Milgram's obedience experiments showcase just how much influence an authority figure can have over an individual. Even if an individual knows an action is wrong, they still might perform it because 1) a trusted authority told them to do so, 2) they are distanced from the victim of their action (either emotionally or physically), and/or 3) they feel as if they have no choice but to comply. These influences can be manipulated to both deprive people of their autonomy and also empower them to make good choices.</p>	
Possible subjects/classes	Time needed
Psychology Sociology Civics/Politics/Government	30-45 Minutes
Video link:	
https://academy4sc.org/topic/milgrams-obedience-experiments-dont-be-too-shocked/	
Objective: <i>What will students know/be able to do at the end of class?</i>	
<p>By the end of this lesson, students will be able to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify why the original Milgram experiment had such a high obedience rate. • Explain the general factors that influence an individual's level of obedience • Explain how these factors can be manipulated not only as a weapon used immorally by the powerful but as a means of resistance against said power. 	
Key Concepts & Vocabulary	
Obedience, manipulation, ethical, unethical	
Materials Needed	
{anything that the teacher needs to prepare for the lesson, other than the video}	
Before you watch	
Before class:	

Write about an instance when you listened to an authority even though they did not agree with the authority's decision and thought it was morally wrong. Explain why you followed this decision.

In class:

While reviewing either a past lesson or homework assignment (not the pre-lesson homework though!), introduce a short series of odd tasks for students to perform. The first task should be harmless if slightly odd but progressive tasks should become stranger and more questionable with the final task being the strangest. For example, tell students pencils can no longer be kept on their desk but must remain on their lap before ordering them to snap a pencil in half. Feel free to provide false explanations for these orders - "there's been a new study that shows small displays of aggression help relieve tension from students and leads them to become more confident in their abilities" or "the janitor just swept this floor so once you sit at your desk, keep your feet on the desk railing rather than the floor" - but don't be concerned if they sound off. The goal is to make these explanations barely plausible. These tasks should be integrated seamlessly while reviewing other work so that students don't have time to communicate with each other or question the tasks' validity.

Observe which students comply and which do not. After finishing the last task and observing the students' reactions, ask one of the students who went along with the tasks why they did so. Then ask one of the people who didn't obey (or who only half-heartedly went through the motions) why they didn't.

While you watch

What were Milgram's obedience experiments?
What horrific historical event made him conduct the experiment?
Why should we be aware of this experiment in our daily lives?

After you watch/discussion questions

1. Discuss the results of the introductory activity. Have students come up with a short list of reasons for why they did or did not follow the list of tasks.
2. Ask the students which factor they think had the greatest influence on whether or not someone chose to comply. Ask them to explain their answer.
3. Have students brainstorm how changes in their environment could affect the results of the introductory activity. For example, would it be harder or easier to comply if there was only one student in the classroom? If there were more students who visibly complied? If it was a fellow student issuing these commands?

Activity Ideas

1. See corresponding worksheet for activity and an essay prompt.
2. Have students design a non-harmful experiment to test Milgram's hypothesis.
3. Ask students to reflect on other real-life examples (or examples from books they've read) of this experiment.

Sources/places to learn more

1. Burger, Jerry M. "Replicating Milgram: Would People Still Obey Today?" *American Psychologist*, vol. 64, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1–11. *hollis.harvard.edu*, doi:[10.1037/a0010932](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0010932).
2. Fenigstein, Allan. "Milgram's Shock Experiments and the Nazi Perpetrators: A Contrarian Perspective on the Role of Obedience Pressures during the Holocaust." *Theory & Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 5, 2015, p. 581.
3. Griggs, Richard A., and George I. Whitehead. "Coverage of Recent Criticisms of Milgram's Obedience Experiments in Introductory Social Psychology Textbooks." *Theory & Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 5, 2015, pp. 564–580. *hollis.harvard.edu*, doi:[10.1177/0959354315601231](https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354315601231).
4. Miller, Arthur G. *The Obedience Experiments: A Case Study of Controversy in Social Science*. Praeger, 1986.
5. Russell, Nestar. *Understanding Willing Participants, Volume 1: Milgram's Obedience Experiments and the Holocaust*. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2018.

Notes

The biggest factor for whether or not someone obeys an authority figure is whether they think they have any choice in the matter. For the introductory activity, students may say that they "didn't question" the tasks. Be sure to connect this back to lack of choice - they automatically obeyed because they didn't even consider they had another option.