Outline and evaluate research into obedience.

Milgram studied 40 participants and varied the conditions of the situation in order to calculate its effect on obedience. In this study, there were two confederates – the experimenter and a man acting as another volunteer participant. The real participant was always the teacher and was instructed to test the learner’s ability to recall word pairs, and when one was answered incorrectly to give increasing electric shocks ranging from 15 to 450 volts. The learner (confederate) in another room used voice feedback to give mainly wrong answers. A recording of the confederate was played to the participant where, at first, he only answered the shocks in silence but this developed to him pounding on the wall and eventually he stopped giving responses, saying nothing. The experimenter had a series of ‘prods’ to repeat throughout the study, such as ‘it is absolutely essential that you continue’. Milgram found that 26 of the 40 participants (65%) continued to the maximum shock level of 450 volts, despite it being labelled XXX and clearly harmful, representing the great extent of their obedience. 100% of participants obeyed up to 300 volts when the learner first objected, where only 12.5% stopped.

A limitation of Milgram’s study is that it has many ethical issues. Milgram deceived participants by telling them they were involved in a study on the effects of punishment on learning, rather than telling them the true purpose of the study, meaning they couldn’t have made a truly informed decision before giving their consent. The participant’s right to withdraw was also compromised as the ‘prods’ from the experimenter made it difficult for some participants to exercise this right. Despite these ethical issues, Milgram did debrief the participants fully after the experiment to ensure that they had come to no harm.

A further limitation of his research is that it lacks internal validity because of its lack of realism. Perry discovered that many of Milgram’s participants had been sceptical about whether the shocks were real. Despite the fact that the learner cried out in pain, the experimenter remained cold and distant, which led participants to believe that the learner was not suffering any real harm. This presents how the results may have been manipulated by other factors, such as whether the participants believed they were administering real shocks.

A final limitation of Milgram’s study is that it lacks external validity which is shown through the obedience alibi. Mandel claims that Milgram’s conclusions about the situational determinants of obedience do not influence obedience in real life, so his research may not be relevant to explain real-life atrocities. In 1942 Poland, men were ordered to carry out a mass killing of Jews but their commanding officer allowed the men to be assigned other duties if they preferred. Despite the close proximity to their victims and disobedient peers (which Milgram showed to increase defiance), the vast majority carried out their orders, suggesting that variables such as personality may influence how obedient people are.