

## The Milgram case

*We will discuss this case in class. Please read all of the assignments indicated below and come to class prepared with assessment of the value of Milgram's research project.*

The Milgram case focuses on ethical issues involved in using humans in social science research. It is an interactive exercise in which students are asked to play the role of Institutional Review Board (IRB) members at Yale University in 1962. The IRB is evaluating a psychology proposal submitted by a researcher named Stanley Milgram. The case is written by James Svara and Van Kloempken of North Carolina State University.

### Part One

Imagine you are a faculty member and a member of the IRB at Yale University in 1962. Your committee receives a request for approval of a study by an assistant professor of Psychology at Yale, Stanley Milgram.

### Your assignment

Read: 1. Klemphen, "Role of IRB"  
2. Svara, "Request for Approval"  
3. Svara, "Milgram informed consent form"  
4. Svara, "Predicted results"

After carefully reviewing Milgram's IRB proposal and consent form, decide whether you will vote to allow Milgram to proceed with his experiment. Come to class prepared with reasons for your decision.

*Note to instructors: Divide the class into 3-5 teams. Direct each team to select one representative to sit on the IRB. Assemble the IRB at the front of the class. The instructor plays the role of Milgram and presents his proposal to the IRB. The IRB is given an opportunity to ask questions. Milgram responds. The IRB then deliberates publicly about the case, taking comments from the other classes. They may question Milgram again if they wish. Then they vote to approve or reject. They may if they wish attach conditions to their approval. After the vote is announced the class takes a break.*

## Part Two

We move forward in time. The IRB approved Milgram's experiments with conditions. He has conducted the trials and has prepared a follow-up study. He is approaching the IRB for a second time. He has filmed all of the trials, and here presents three clips. The first footage is an overview of the experiment; the second clips show two subjects.

*Note to Instructor: Show three clips*

- A. *Introduction (6 min.)* Introduces Milgram, the experiment protocol, the teacher and learner. At 2:30 surveys shock box instrument panel.
- B. *Laugh (17 min.)* White golf shirt shocks all way to 450 volts, continues at that maximum level until experimenter ends session. NOTE: This clip does not show the subject continuing all the way up the scale, but the subject, despite the strenuousness of his protests, is eventually persuaded to perform as instructed.
- C. *Refuse (5 min.)* Checked shirt refuses.

*Assuming role of Milgram address the class as one large IRB. Pass out "Table 1: Predicted vs. Actual Results," found on p. 2 of "Milgram's Obedience to Authority Study."*

Milgram emphasizes these points:

- A. The research is surprising, ground-breaking, and critical.

No one predicted that so many subjects would be willing to administer the maximum shock.

- B. The subjects must experience extreme emotional stress.

Valid results cannot be obtained if the subjects are not stressed. "If, instead, every one of the subjects has broken off at 'slight shock,' or at the first sign of the learner's discomfort, the results would have been pleasant, and reassuring, and who would protest [continuing the experiment]?"

- C. Despite the stress imposed, learners are not being harmed.

84 % of former participants surveyed later said they were "glad" or "very glad" to have participated. 80% "felt that more experiments of this kind should be carried out." Many later wrote to Milgram expressing thanks. Some would like to join his staff. One wrote that his participation had prepared him to declare conscientious

objector status during the Vietnam war, adding: “While I was a subject in 1964, though I believed that I was hurting someone, I was totally unaware of why I was doing so. Few people ever realize when they are acting according to their own beliefs and when they are meekly submitting to authority . . . (As a result of the experiment) I am fully prepared to go to jail if I am not granted CO status.” Milgram, Stanley *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (Harpercollins, 1974), p. 195.

NEW PROPOSAL: “Touch-proximity” follow-up study

Research questions to be answered:

1. Why are subjects so willing to shock?
2. Will they be less willing if they are in proximity to the learner?

Will you vote to allow Milgram to proceed? Why, or why not?

*Note to instructors: The instructor again plays the role of Milgram, defending his new proposal. The entire class now plays the role of IRB. Milgram responds to their questions. The class votes on the new proposal.*

*Instructor may wish to close with a question for further thought: Is Milgram’s experiment consistent with the three Belmont principles?*

**Respect for persons** (recognition of the personal dignity and autonomy of individuals) and the **informed consent process** (potential subjects are provided information about the study in a manner comprehensible to them and then allowed to choose whether or not they wish to participate)?

**Beneficence** (obligation to protect persons from harm by maximizing anticipated benefits and minimizing possible risks of harm) and an **analysis of the risks and benefits** (insuring anticipated risks are proportional to potential benefits)?

**Justice** (benefits and burdens of research are distributed **equitably**) and the assurance subjects are not chosen simply because they are available and easy to manipulate.