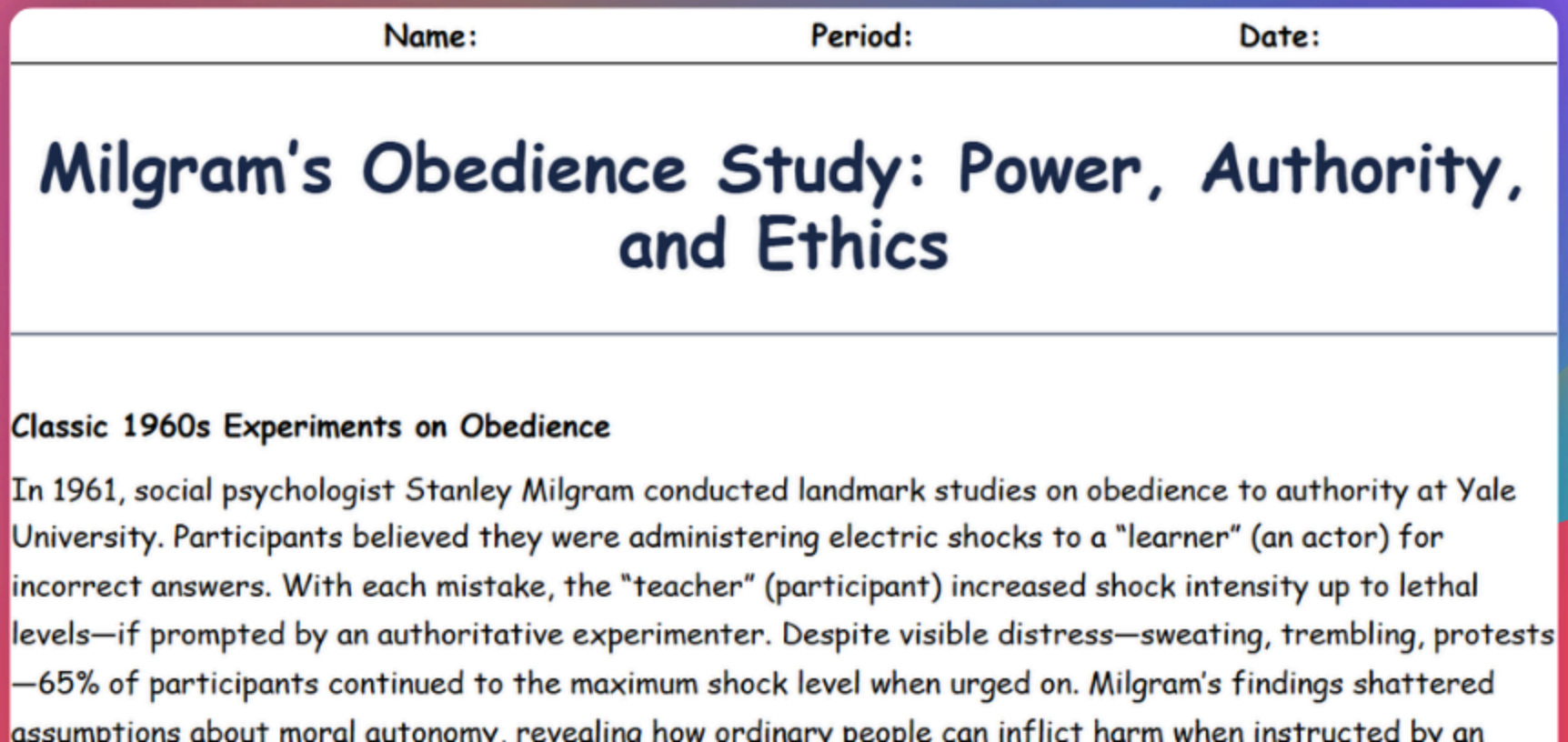
NO PREP

Milgram's Obedience Study

Power, Authority, and Ethics

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key



Name: Period: Date:

Milgram's Obedience Study: Power, Authority, and Ethics

Classic 1960s Experiments on Obedience

In 1961, social psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted landmark studies on obedience to authority at Yale University. Participants believed they were administering electric shocks to a "learner" (an actor) for incorrect answers. With each mistake, the "teacher" (participant) increased shock intensity up to lethal levels—if prompted by an authoritative experimenter. Despite visible distress—sweating, trembling, protests—65% of participants continued to the maximum shock level when urged on. Milgram's findings shattered assumptions about moral autonomy, revealing how ordinary people can inflict harm when instructed by an

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Key Findings on Compliance Under Distress

Milgram identified situational factors that modulate obedience: authority proximity, institutional legitimacy, and victim proximity. When the experimenter issued commands in person, obedience soared; when instructions came over the phone, compliance dropped significantly. Participants were more willing to obey in a prestigious university laboratory than in a nondescript office. Conversely, making the learner visible or physically closer (placing their hand on a shock plate) reduced obedience. These variables underscore that context often outweighs personal values in determining behavior.

Ethical Controversies and Guidelines

Milgram's use of deception, the extreme stress inflicted, and the initial absence of fully informed consent provoked intense debate. Participants believed they were harming others, enduring significant emotional turmoil, even if debriefed afterward.

In response, the American Psychological Association codified strict ethical guidelines: requiring clear informed consent, the right to withdraw at any time, thorough debriefing, and oversight by institutional review boards (IRBs) to ensure participant welfare.

Impact on Research Design and Civic Responsibility

Milgram's work transformed experimental methodology: researchers now weigh potential harm against scientific gains, minimize deception, and ensure participants leave studies without lasting distress. His findings also inform civic education: by understanding obedience dynamics, individuals can recognize undue influence, resist blind compliance, and uphold ethical principles in group contexts—from workplaces to political movements.

Key Information

Variable	Effect on Obedience
Authority Proximity	Higher when experimenter is physically present
Institutional Legitimacy	Higher in respected settings (university lab vs. office)
Victim Proximity	Lower when the learner is visible or accessible

Case Study Excerpt: Recreating Obedience in a Classroom Exercise

Dr. Alvarez, a high school psychology teacher, orchestrated a micro-Milgram demonstration. One student played the "authority," another the "learner," and classmates served as "teachers." The authority urged teachers to issue progressively louder buzzer sounds (simulating shocks) for errors in a simple memory task. Although many teachers hesitated—voices trembling, pauses lengthening—they usually complied when the authority insisted. During the debrief, Dr. Alvarez guided reflection: students shared discomfort, analyzed why they obeyed, and discussed strategies to resist unethical directives in real life.

1. Why did students in the exercise continue issuing buzzer sounds despite discomfort?

_____

_____

2. How did the debrief discussion reinforce ethical awareness?

_____

_____

Multiple Choice

1. Milgram found that obedience decreased when:
    a) The teacher received explicit training
    b) The authority figure was present in the same room
    c) The learner was physically close to the teacher
    d) The institution was prestigious

2. One key ethical criticism of Milgram's study was:
    a) Overreliance on volunteers
    b) Lack of statistical analysis
    c) Excessive monetary compensation offered to volunteers
    d) Use of deception without participant knowledge

3. Milgram's research primarily illustrates:
    a) Psychoanalytic defense mechanisms
    b) Operant conditioning principles
    c) Obedience to authority
    d) Cognitive development stages

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Authority Proximity	A) Lower obedience when the learner was visible or accessible
2. ___ Institutional Legitimacy	B) Reduced obedience when instructions came by telephone
3. ___ Victim Proximity	C) Post-experiment discussion clarifying procedures and addressing distress
4. ___ Deception	D) Higher obedience in respected settings (university vs. office)
5. ___ Debrief	E) Misleading participants about the study's true purpose

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Milgram's study revealed that _____ often override personal moral judgments under authoritative commands.

2. Ethical guidelines now require that participants have the right to _____ at any point during research.

3. The _____ review board assesses the risk–benefit ratio of proposed studies.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain how institutional legitimacy influenced obedience rates in Milgram's experiments.

2. Describe one way modern researchers minimize harm when using deception.

3. Discuss why understanding obedience is important for civic responsibility.