

# A-Level Psychology

## Social Psychology · Key Studies

Edexcel Psychology (9PS0)

Key Studies

9 entries

The named classic and contemporary studies you must know for Social Psychology - ready to quote in a 16-mark answer.

### Classic study

**Sherif et al. (1954/1961) - Robbers Cave**

**Aim:** to test whether competition between groups creates prejudice and whether shared goals can reduce it. **Method:** field experiment; 22 unacquainted 11-year-old boys at a US summer camp were split into two groups (Rattlers and Eagles), then put through three phases - in-group bonding, a competitive tournament for prizes, and a final stage of imposed superordinate goals (for example, fixing the water supply). **Findings:** strong in-group loyalty formed quickly; the competition phase produced hostility, name-calling and raids; only the superordinate goals, not mere contact, reduced the conflict. **Conclusion:** intergroup competition for scarce resources is enough to generate prejudice (realistic conflict theory), and cooperation toward shared goals reduces it. **Evaluation:** + high ecological validity as a natural field setting with real behaviour; – sampling bias as all participants were white, male, middle-class boys of similar age, limiting generalisability.

### Contemporary studies

**Burger (2009) - Replicating Milgram**

**Aim:** to see whether obedience levels are the same today as in Milgram's time, using an ethically acceptable procedure. **Method:** partial replication of Milgram with 70 participants; the shock generator was stopped at 150 volts (the point in the original where most who continued went on to the maximum), with careful screening and a two-step debrief. **Findings:** 70 percent of participants were prepared to continue past 150 volts, only slightly lower than Milgram's comparable rate, and there was no significant gender difference. **Conclusion:** obedience to authority has changed little over time and ordinary people still comply with destructive instructions under legitimate authority. **Evaluation:** + far more ethical, with screening and a 150-volt cap protecting participants; – the cap means the full range of obedience could not be measured, so direct comparison with Milgram beyond 150 volts is impossible.

**Reicher and Haslam (2006) - BBC Prison Study**

**Aim:** to investigate how people behave in groups of unequal power and when prisoners come to accept or resist that inequality. **Method:** a controlled observational study filmed for the BBC; 15 male volunteers were randomly assigned as guards or prisoners and lived in a purpose-built prison while measures of cortisol, attitudes and behaviour were recorded. **Findings:** guards failed to identify with their role and did not impose authority, while prisoners grew more united and eventually overthrew the regime; participants only acted tyrannically once their group identity broke down. **Conclusion:** people do not conform automatically to a brutal role; tyranny arises from failed group identity, not simply from being given power. **Evaluation:** + strong controls and objective physiological measures alongside observation; – the presence of cameras and knowledge of being filmed may have caused demand characteristics, reducing validity.

**Cohrs et al. (2012) - Personality and prejudice**

**Aim:** to examine how the personality traits of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) relate to prejudice and to the Big Five traits. **Method:** a correlational study using questionnaires completed by German samples; participants rated agreement with statements measuring RWA, SDO, the Big Five and prejudice toward various out-groups. **Findings:** high RWA and high SDO both correlated strongly with prejudice; low openness predicted RWA while low agreeableness predicted SDO. **Conclusion:** prejudice is linked to stable personality dispositions, supporting a dispositional explanation alongside situational accounts. **Evaluation:** + large samples and standardised scales give reliable, comparable data; – correlational design means causation cannot be inferred, as personality and prejudice may both stem from a third factor.

**Other key studies****Milgram (1963) - Obedience to authority**

**Aim:** to test how far ordinary people will obey an authority figure who orders them to harm another person. **Method:** lab experiment; 40 male volunteers acting as 'teacher' were ordered by an experimenter to give a confederate 'learner' increasing (fake) electric shocks up to 450 volts, with standardised verbal prods. **Findings:** 65 percent continued to the full 450 volts and every participant reached at least 300 volts, despite visible distress. **Conclusion:** ordinary people will obey destructive orders from a legitimate authority, suggesting situational pressure rather than personality drives obedience. **Evaluation:** + highly standardised and replicable, giving reliable findings; – low ecological validity and serious ethical problems including deception and lack of a clear right to withdraw.

**Milgram (1974) - Situational variations**

**Aim:** to identify which situational factors raise or lower obedience by varying the conditions of the original study. **Method:** a series of variations altered proximity to the victim, location, and the status and presence of the authority figure (for example, run-down offices, touch-proximity, and orders given by phone). **Findings:** obedience fell to about 40 percent in a run-down office, to 30 percent when the teacher had to force the learner's hand onto a plate, and to around 20 percent when orders came by telephone. **Conclusion:** obedience is strongly shaped by situational variables such as proximity, legitimacy of setting and closeness of authority. **Evaluation:** + isolating one variable at a time gives clear cause-and-effect evidence; – the artificial task and deception limit realism and raise the same ethical concerns as the original.

**Hofling et al. (1966) - Obedience in nurses**

**Aim:** to test whether obedience to authority occurs in a real-life hospital setting. **Method:** a field experiment in which 22 nurses received a phone call from an unknown 'doctor' instructing them to give a patient double the maximum dose of an unfamiliar drug, breaking several hospital rules. **Findings:** 21 of 22 nurses began to administer the drug before being stopped, even though it broke procedure. **Conclusion:** people obey a legitimate authority figure in real settings, supporting Milgram's findings outside the lab. **Evaluation:** + high ecological validity as it took place in a genuine workplace with real nurses; – low control over extraneous variables and ethical issues, since nurses were deceived and may have felt distressed.

**Adorno et al. (1950) - The Authoritarian Personality**

**Aim:** to investigate whether prejudice is rooted in a particular personality type shaped by upbringing. **Method:** over 2,000 mostly middle-class white Americans completed scales including the F-scale (potential for fascism), supported by interviews about childhood and attitudes. **Findings:** people scoring high on the F-scale tended to be hostile to those of lower status, respectful of authority, and to report strict, punitive parenting. **Conclusion:** a dispositional 'authoritarian personality', formed in childhood, predisposes some individuals to prejudice and obedience. **Evaluation:** + offers a dispositional explanation that complements situational accounts of obedience; – the scales suffer acquiescence bias and interviewer bias, and the correlational data cannot show that upbringing causes prejudice.

**Tajfel et al. (1971) -  
Minimal groups**

**Aim:** to test whether simply being categorised into a group is enough to produce in-group favouritism. **Method:** a lab experiment in which British schoolboys were assigned to meaningless groups (supposedly by their preference for one artist over another) and then allocated points or money between anonymous in-group and out-group members. **Findings:** boys consistently awarded more to their own group and often chose options that maximised the difference between groups rather than the in-group's total reward. **Conclusion:** categorisation alone, with no competition or contact, is enough to create discrimination, supporting social identity theory. **Evaluation:** + tight experimental control isolates categorisation as the cause of favouritism; – the artificial point-allocation task lacks ecological validity and may not reflect real-world prejudice.