

## OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

### Introduction

Obedience has been defined as: 'Following an order or instruction to do something, which is given by someone in higher authority in a hierarchical situation (i.e. where there is social power). It is assumed that without such an order or instruction, a person would not have acted the way s/he did.'

For many non-psychologists conformity and obedience are the same thing. However, they differ the three ways:

- In obedience, we follow an order or an instruction, whereas in conformity there is no explicit requirement to act in a certain way
- In obedience, the order is directed by someone in higher authority, whereas in conformity we are influenced by our peers/equals and affected by their example
- Obedience occurs in a hierarchical situation (i.e. where there is social power), whereas conformity typically occurs in a group situation

Obedience to authority was first experimentally studied in the early 1960s by **Stanley Milgram**. His studies are probably the most famous *and* infamous studies in Psychology!



Stanley Milgram in the 1960s

## How did Milgram study obedience to authority?

Milgram's interest in studying obedience to authority was stimulated by the explanations given by Nazis at the Nuremberg war crimes trials. Most of those on trial did not appear to be 'monsters', and Milgram was intrigued by the apparent contradiction between the ordinariness of the men involved and the terrible deeds they carried out. He was interested in how the accused explained their behaviour in terms of them 'just following orders, and whether other ordinary people would obey orders to harm an innocent fellow human being.

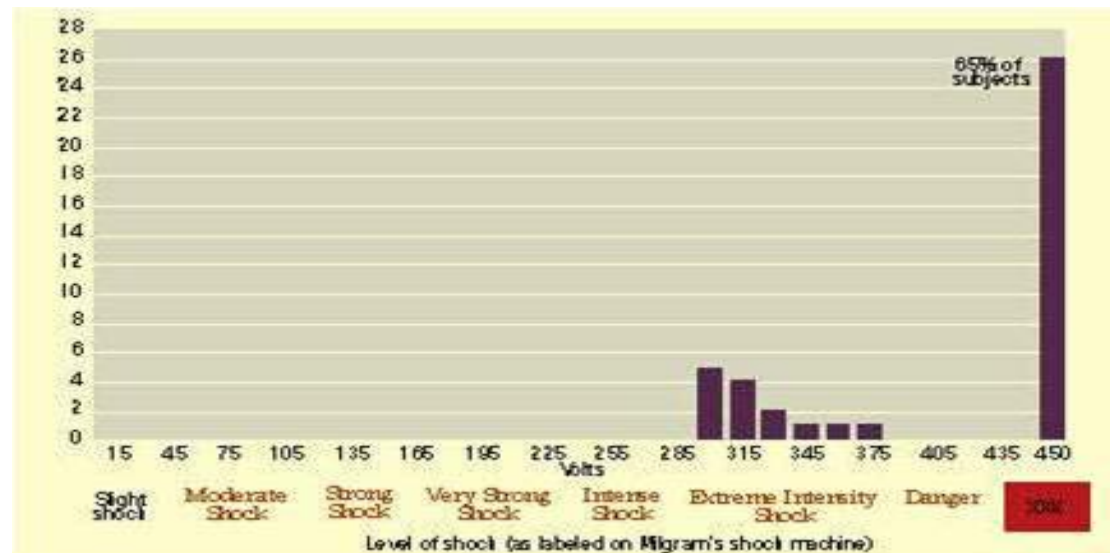
Historians believed that obedience could be explained in terms of **personality differences** between Germans and other nationalities. Milgram's original aim was to study the so-called '**Germans are different**' hypothesis. Before travelling to Germany, Milgram (1961) decided to use ordinary American people in a **pilot study** to make sure the method he had devised worked. However, the results that Milgram obtained from American people showed that obedience was *not* a result of personality differences. Instead, obedience is a product of the **situation** in which we find ourselves, and that under certain circumstances most (if not all) of us will be **destructively obedient**.

If people know that they are in a study, and they know what that study is investigating, they sometimes bias their behaviour. Psychologists call this a **demand characteristic**. Milgram decided that he couldn't tell people he was going to study how obedient they are, because nobody would want to be seen as being obedient and so would bias their behaviour to appear disobedient. Therefore, he had to hide the real purpose of his study from the people who were going to be in it, so that they would not know that he was studying how obedient they were. Psychologists call this approach **single blind control**.

You don't need to be able to describe Milgram's 'electric shock' procedure, but there's a copy of the original film on the Public Drive if you want to watch it again.

## What did Milgram find in his study?

The results from Milgram's Variation 2 study are shown below. In this variation, the teacher is in one room and the learner is in a different room and cannot be seen by the teacher. However, the teacher can **hear** the learner's groans and his demands for the experiment to be stopped.



Three findings stand out:

- (1) All participants were visibly distressed by the procedure and questioned what they were doing
- (2) However, not one disobeyed before 300 volts
- (3) 65% went all the way up to 450 Volts

Milgram concluded that under certain circumstances, most people will obey orders that go against their conscience. The atrocities carried out in World War II can be explained in terms of pressures to obey a powerful authority figure.

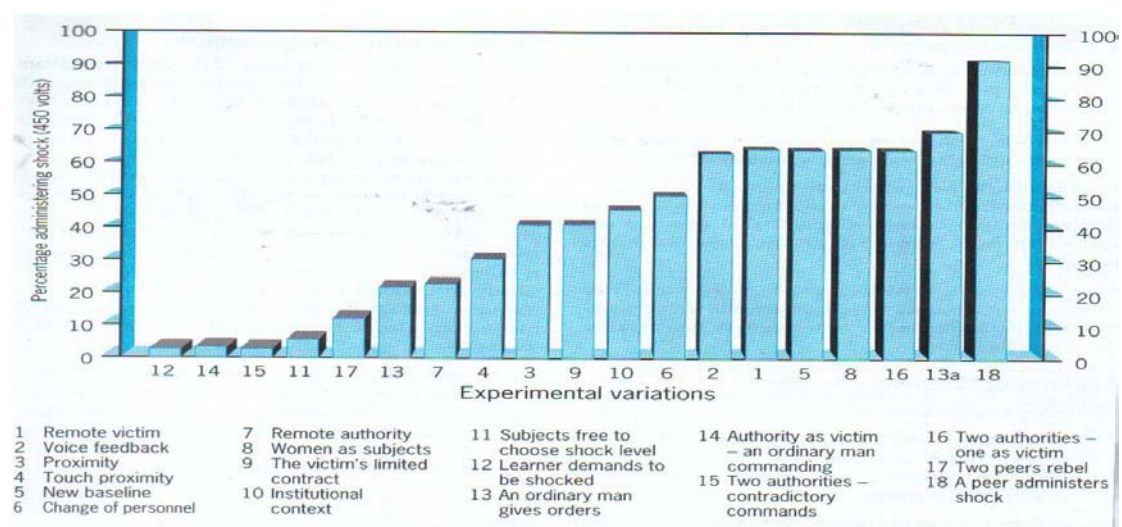




Pasqual Gino: "Good God, he's dead. Well here we go, we'll finish him. And I just continued all the way through to 450 Volts."

Milgram was extremely surprised and concerned by his findings. As he wrote in 1974: "The capacity for man to abandon his dignity, indeed the inevitability that he does so, as he merges his unique personality into the larger institutional structures, is the fatal flaw that nature has designed in us, and which in the long run gives our species only a modest chance for survival."

Like Asch had done with conformity, Milgram then systematically varied factors to see if they increased or decreased obedience. The results are summarised below. Factors which **increased obedience** are helpful in explaining **why obedience occurs**, whilst factors which **decreased obedience** are helpful in explaining **how obedience can be resisted**.



Variation 2 is the 'baseline' figure. Anything to the left of it is a factor decreasing obedience, and anything to the right of it a factor increasing obedience

## How can we evaluate Milgram's study of obedience to authority?

Orne & Holland (1968) claimed that people only behaved obediently because they knew that they **weren't really** giving the learner electric shocks. In other words, they believed that Milgram's study lacked **experimental validity** (also known as **internal validity** or **experimental realism**). However, there are at least two ways in which Milgram can defend himself against this criticism:

- (1) Post-Experimental interviews with participants indicated that vast majority believed they really were giving electric shocks
- (2) Participants' behaviour in the study also suggested they really believed they were giving electric shocks

"I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his ear lobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered 'Oh God, lets stop it'. And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end."

Milgram's description of a participant's behaviour

Milgram's study was also criticised for lacking **ecological validity** (also known as **external validity** or **mundane realism**). However, Milgram anticipated this criticism. One of his variations (Variation 10: Institutional Context) involved the study being conducted in some seedy offices in a run-down part of town, with no reference at all to Milgram or Yale University. This variation produced 50% total obedience as compared with 65% in the laboratory. Although lower, Milgram believed that there was essentially no difference between how much obedience is seen in the laboratory and how much is seen in the real-world.



The seedy offices used by Milgram

There are several studies not done by Milgram which also show that obedience occurs in real-world settings. These include studies conducted by **Hofling et al (1966)** and **Bickman (1974)**. Hofling et al found that 21 out of 22 nurses obeyed an instruction to give a patient twice the maximum daily dosage of his medicine, even though they could not be sure that the 'doctor' who had issued the instruction by telephone was genuine. Bickman found that ordinary people obeyed a student dressed in a 'guard's' uniform who told them to 'pick up that piece of litter'.

So far, we have evaluated Milgram's study in terms of the 'EE' in PEECH. This leaves us with PCH as other ways of evaluating the validity of Milgram's study:

- **Population validity:** This is the extent to which the **sample** that has been studied accurately depicts the **population** a researcher wishes to generalise the results to. Milgram studied 'ordinary people', so the criticism doesn't apply.
- **Cultural validity:** This is the extent to which a study carried out in one particular culture produces the same results when it is carried out in another culture. As the table below shows, different levels of obedience have been found in different cultures:

**International 'Milgram' studies**

Study	Country	Percentage obedient to the highest level of shock
Milgram	USA	62.5
Rosenham	USA	85
Ancona and Pareyson	Italy	85
Mantell	Germany	85
Kilham and Mann	Australia	40
Burley and McGuiness	UK	50
Shanab and Yahya	Jordan	62
Miranda et al	Spain	90
Schurz	Austria	80
Meeus and Raaijmakers	Holland	92

Source: Smith and Bond (1994)

Since different amounts of obedience are found in different cultures, it could be argued that Milgram's research lacks cultural validity (this issue is actually much more complex than we need to concern ourselves with).

- **Historical validity:** This is the extent to which study carried out at one time produces the same results when it is carried out at a later time. Because it raises many ethical issues (see below), psychologists are no longer allowed to carry out obedience experiments in the way that Milgram did. However, in specially commissioned Milgram-type studies (e.g. for Derren Brown's television programmes) obedience levels remarkably similar to those reported by Milgram have been found. So, Milgram's research could be said to have historical validity.

Perhaps the biggest criticism of Milgram's research was that it was **unethical** (the final 'E' in PEECH-E). It is certainly true that Milgram used **deception** in his study. However, Milgram defended himself against this criticism in the following ways:

- Without using **technical illusions** (Milgram refused to use the word 'deception'), the study could not have been done
- Deception is acceptable if participants accept it is **necessary** and the reasons for its use **worthwhile** (and most participants believed this to be the case)
- All participants were extensively **debriefed** after the study. This included giving participants psychological tests and counselling immediately afterwards, and having the participants interviewed by a psychiatrist one year after the study.

Milgram also failed to obtain **informed consent** from his participants. The problem is that whenever deception is used in psychological research it is obvious that participants will not be able to give informed consent. Therefore, Milgram is guilty as charged. However, like many psychologists he sees the issue about obtaining consent as being a difficult one to resolve successfully.

Another ethical criticism of Milgram's study was that his participants were subjected to **psychological/physical harm**. It is certainly true that three of the participants had full-blown epileptic seizures as a result of their involvement as 'teachers' in the study. Milgram defended himself against this criticism in the following ways:



- Experts he asked before the study didn't think participants would behave obediently (so Milgram didn't think they would be harmed by their experiences)
- Participants were 'momentarily stressed' by their experiences, but not 'harmed' by them
- Participants were extensively **debriefed** and given **counselling** to ensure there was no long-term harm done to them

One final ethical issue surrounding Milgram's study concerns the participants' **right to withdraw**. Milgram's critics said that participants were not told *explicitly* that they could leave at any time. Also, the 'verbal prods' they were given may have made it difficult for them to withdraw, and the fact that they were given the money before they had started the experiment may have made it difficult for them to withdraw. Milgram was scathing about this criticism: *the whole point of the study was to see if people exercised their right to withdraw when they found themselves doing something they disagreed with.*

### How can obedience to authority be explained?

**Personal responsibility:** It is clear from Milgram's film that the participants were extremely concerned by what they (thought they) were doing. When they were told to continue, one of the most common reactions was to turn to the experimenter and ask: "Who's **responsible** for what is happening to the learner?"

Remember that the teacher had been scripted to tell participants that **he** was responsible for whatever happens. If you look at the film again, you can see that participants are visibly relieved when told this, and that this alone was enough for them to continue giving the electric shocks. To explain this, Milgram's **agency theory** suggests that there are two states of social consciousness:

(1) **Agentic state:** We see ourselves as acting on someone else's behalf, and are therefore less likely to feel guilt about our behaviour

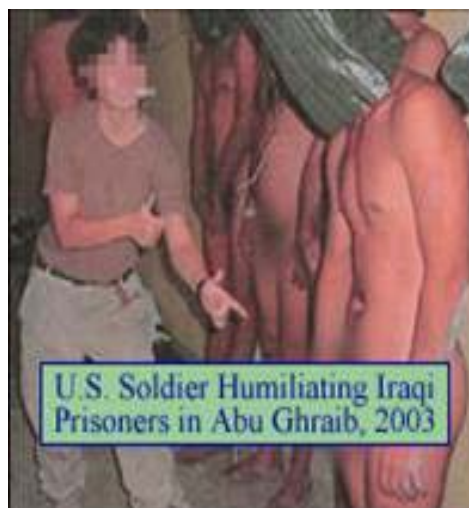
(2) **Autonomous state:** Our behaviour is voluntary and we are aware of our own actions and their consequences



Milgram argued that there are many real-life instances where obedience has led to harm, and that the perpetrators of this have used their **lack of personal responsibility** to justify their actions. Milgram saw this 'diffusion of responsibility' as being crucial to the often-used defence at the Nuremberg war crimes trials that the defendant was "only following orders".

In the agentic state, we are less likely to feel guilt about our behaviour because it is being done on someone else's behalf. According to Milgram: *"The essence of obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes, and (s)he no longer regards (her)himself as responsible for his (her) actions. Once this critical shift of viewpoint has occurred in the person, all the essential features of obedience follow."*

Agency theory can also be used to explain why American soldiers maltreated Iraqi prisoners during the second Gulf War...



Only following orders...

Milgram's agency theory is also supported by his own research. For example, in Variation 18 ('A peer administers the shock'), a naïve teacher read out the word-pairs, whilst a 'stooge' teacher gave the electric shocks. Milgram found that total obedience in this variation was 90% (the highest seen in Milgram's research). Presumably, the naïve teacher saw the other teacher as being responsible for what happens to the learner. Notice, though, that under current law, the naïve teacher would be just as guilty as the stooge teacher was something really to happen to the learner.

**The perception of legitimate authority:** Another feature of authority figures is that they often possess highly visible **symbols** of their power that make it difficult to refuse their commands. In Milgram's study, it was the experimenter's **laboratory coat** that acted as a symbol of power or authority. Milgram showed the importance of the laboratory coat in Variation 13 ('An ordinary man gives orders'). This variation was exactly the same as Variation 2 (which produced 65% obedience) with the exception that the experimenter did not wear his laboratory coat. Under these conditions, total obedience dropped to 22%. Several other studies have shown that visible symbols of power can make people obey. These include **Bickman's (1974)** study, and **Zimbardo's (1973)** prison simulation experiment.

**Socialisation:** A third explanation for obedience is **socialisation**. In all societies from the smallest hunter-gatherer groups to the largest nation states, there is some system of authority that we learn about from an early age. It ranges from the authority of teachers and employers, to the authority of the state represented in institutions such as the police and parliament. It is difficult to see how human society could operate effectively without some degree of obedience to some system of authority. Obedience could, therefore, be an **ingrained habit**.

**Foot-in-the-door:** A final explanation for obedience is called **the foot-in-the-door phenomenon**. This refers to the well-established fact that once a person has agreed to a small request it is easier to get them to agree to a larger request than if the larger request was made on its own.

In Milgram's experiments, participants may have been 'sucked in' by the series of **graduated demands**. These begin with the 'harmless' advertisement to take part in a study and end with the instruction to deliver potentially fatal electric shocks to another person. Having begun the study, and agreed to a **small request** (begin the shocks at 15 Volts), participants might have found it difficult to remove themselves from the situation they find themselves in.