

People Tend to Listen to Authority

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Outline

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Introduction

One characteristic of human behavior that is as a result of social influence is obedience. Obedience is an act that entails obeying direct instructions or orders. People are subjected to different instructions and orders in their lives. However, human beings do not listen or obey all orders and instructions issued. Nonetheless, orders or instruction given by people in authority tend to be listened more than any other (Jarvis, 2000). The life of a common citizen is full of instances, where obedience is required. For instance, motorists need to obey signals directed at them by the traffic police. School pupils are required to respond to instructions directed at them by their teachers. In addition, soldiers are supposed to obey orders from their commanding officers. All these instances show obedience for people in authority. Why is it that people tend to obey such figures? This paper examines why people tend to listen to people who are in authority.

Listening to authorities or simply being obedient to them is an issue that has captured the attention of many psychologists. However, none of them has made a remarkable contribution to this phenomenon more than the one, made by Milgram through the famous Milgram Experiment. This paper will examine the contribution of Milgram to the issue of being obedient to authorities, the theories behind the phenomenon as well as input from other notable scholars. One of the pioneering examples of obedience to authority is Adolf Eichmann case, which claimed the lives of more than six million Jews (Hayes, 2000). The remarkable thing about this genocide is that it was done by common people. In addition, although Eichmann oversaw the death of such a great number of Jews, he was not personally anti-Jew given that he had even aided his half-cousin to escape the genocide. However, Eichmann considered seeing himself as an obedient officer who

followed the demands of his duties. In so doing, he committed one of the most heinous crimes that the world has ever witnessed (Zanna, 1992).

Milgram Obedience Experiment

Obedience to authority is not constrained to members of the armed forces. For instance, in 1963, Milgram reported on a set of studies that established that ordinary people - as they were mere volunteers answering a newspaper advertisement- were ready to administer potentially fatal electric shocks to another person, simply because they had been told to do so by an experimenter. Before Milgram conducted the study, he undertook a survey, in which he asked ordinary people and professionals such as psychiatrists and psychologists about their view on what would be the likely outcome in such a situation. 3 percent of the people asked agreed that people would be ready to do this. However, when Milgram put the situation into practice, he discovered that the real outcome was far from this (Wren, 1999).

Milgram's study consisted of common people drawn from the population, through recruitment in a local newspaper. On arriving at the university, the participants were introduced to another volunteer who was, indeed, a confederate of the experimenter. They were told that the research would be a learning experiment, and asked to draw lots to decide who would be 'teacher' and who would be 'learner'. However, the lots were rigged so that the position of the teacher always went to the real research participant (Milgram, 1963). The learner was taken into the next room and strapped to a chair, with the research participant looking on. The 'learner' was then told that they would receive some electric shocks, which would not cause any permanent damage. The research participant was given a sample low voltage electric shock in order to give them a clue of what they were to expect. In fact, this was the only real electric shock used in the whole experiment, but this remained a secret to the research participant. As the study went on,

different responses were heard from the 'learner'. However, in actual sense, these were actually pre-recorded (Milgram, 1965).

In this basic experiment, Milgram discovered that all the research participants would go up to 300V, and more than half of all the research participants would carry on to the end – despite the silence from the next room. In other words, they would continue, even when it appeared that they might have actually killed the other person. The results, obtained in this research, were echoed in other researches, in other countries; although there was some cultural variance. For instance, in Amman, Jordan, the baseline obedience rate was as high as three fifths of the research participants, where as in Australia' the rate was a bit lower than the normal two thirds of the sample (Jarvis, 2000). In the Jordan case, the experiment was carried out in children between 6 and 16 years. The experimenter was female. The results of the experiment showed that more than 70 percent of children administered the maximum shock to same gender peers (Milgram, 1974).

This is an important variation since it seems to show that gender may also be a consideration, a factor how people behave in a situation, where they are expected to behave in a destructive way. The Australian study was an adapted version of the Milgram baseline study and had 63 males and 62 females. The researchers wanted to examine whether there would be any differences between executive behavior that is, issuing an order, and carrying out the order. The researchers found out obedience levels were higher in the former than in the latter condition. Overall levels of obedience were lower than those reported by Milgram. Interestingly, females were less obedient than males, especially when required to carry out an order to inflict pain. This phenomenon is grounded on the premise that inflicting pain on another female, especially when ordered by a male, may engender concern for the other female victim (Hogg & Cooper, 2007).

Field Experiments on Obedience of Authorities

Apart from Milgram's experiment on obedience, there have been other field experiments that have been conducted to demonstrate that people have a tendency to obey those in authority. In an experiment, conducted by Hoffling and others in 1966, the researchers wanted to find out if nurses would ignore the direct instructions of an unfamiliar doctor that is authority figure. The researchers conducted an interesting naturalistic study, in which every nurse was instructed by a doctor by telephone to find an unauthorized drug. On obtaining the drug, each nurse noticed that the doctors prescribed dose was well over the dose recommended on the label. On orders of the doctor, but in contravention of strict hospital regulations and routines, all but one nurse began to prepare the medicine to give to the patient. At this point, a confederate of the experimenter approached them, and the process was stopped. On being debriefed, the nurses complained that they were normally supposed to obey doctor, that is, their medical superiors. They also commented that if they questioned a doctor's judgment, it was often met with annoyance, and so too were attempts to perform their duties by the book (Smith & Diane, 2000).

Another field experiment was conducted by Bushman in 1988. Bushman performed an experiment in a real-life setting, where a female researcher, dressed either in a police-type uniform, as a business executive or as a beggar told people in the street to give change to a male researcher for a parking meter. More than seventy percent of people obeyed, when the lady was dressed in uniform. As expected, fewer people obeyed in the other conditions. However, interesting enough, being dressed as a business executive or a beggar made very little differences because the rates of obedience were almost the same. Therefore, people appeared not to be simply responding to the social status of the person giving the order but to the authority (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008).

Although the two field experiments, mentioned in this paper, have greater validity than Milgram's laboratory studies, in so far as they were carried out in a real environment. However, field experiments can have flaws, which can invalidate results. For instance, a passing group of the general public, when taken as a random sample, can be a flaw in itself. Samples of the general public are notorious for being biased through confounding and extraneous variables (Baumarind, 1964). These can be varied as the weather, time of the day, the environment the study took place in and whether unknown to the researchers, the study took place in the vicinity of a public building such as a school. It can be difficult also to control variables in a field studies, in the same one, can control in laboratory. For instance, in Bushman's example, it would have been very difficult to control the experiences of the participants prior to their contact with the uniformed confederate. It could be in the case of some that they may have come in contact with another uniformed official just prior to their contact with the confederate. The latter could have a bearing on how they behaved in the study (Crisp & Turner, 2007).

Agentic State Theory and Obedience

In essence, Milgram's experiment sought to explain his results from a socio-cultural perspective by claiming that human beings tend to live in a hierarchy, that is, a society based on the idea that individuals are ranked in terms of their power and importance. In turn, this creates a socially obedient environment. Therefore, people are supposed to obey socially significant figures such as parents, teachers, policemen, and supervisors. Such personalities also come to expect to be obeyed. Authority figures like doctors are part of powerful, and in some cases, authoritarian collectives such as schools and hospitals. At the same time, people are encouraged to be independent, self-serving and autonomous (Baron, 2008).

Milgram proposed that people possess two states of consciousness. These include the agentic state as well as the autonomous state. In the latter state, people are aware of the consequences of our actions, and therefore, voluntarily engage in or disengage from behavior. In the agentic state, individuals consider themselves as agents of others, that is, subordinates in an otherwise hierarchical system, and, as a result, they lose those aspects of themselves that can be termed as individuality. Adolf Eichmann is a classic 'real life' example of this in so far as his trial he pleaded, like other Nazis at the Nuremberg trials, that he was only obeying orders. In fact, Eichmann claimed that he wasn't the monster that the media of the day had painted him to be. Milgram's agentic theory accounts for this transition from seemingly ordinary Germans to the war criminals. As 'ordinary' Germans, they were autonomous in so far as they were independent and made their own decisions (Zimbardo, 1974).

Milgram proposed that people have evolved the tendency to obey those in authority as a way of maintaining a stable society. Clearly, for human beings to exist in a complex society there is a need for social rules. Sticking to rules requires that at least some of the time people give up some of their free will. Milgram proposed that people have evolved two states. In the autonomous state, people are free to act as they wished, including how their conscience dictates. However, when peoples' agentic state kicks in, people surrender free will and conscience in the interests of serving the wider group. When people are in an agentic state, they regard themselves as the agents as those in authority instead of being accountable for their actions (Berneheim, 1994).

People are socialized into developing an agentic state during childhood. For instance, in school, children learn to put aside their individual impulses in favor of maintaining order, hence, catering for the wellbeing of the whole class. Milgram proposed that, like children in class,

people are all constantly subordinating their needs and wishes to those of wider society. This phenomenon is witnessed in how people act in their jobs. Basically, people would say that they work for their own benefit and would not go out of their way for their employers. In reality, nonetheless, one people are in a job and they identify themselves as part of an organization, they tend to put the needs of the organization above their own (Milgram, 1974).

People in the agentic state also tend to re-define the meaning of the situation, so that they can accept the definition of their actions, which is provided by the authority under which they are working. For instance, some of research in Milgram's study mentally redefined the pain that they were causing as not dangerous, even though they felt worried, because this was how it had been defined by the experimenter. Looking at studies by stander interventions, it is clear that person's cognitive definition of the situation can be a major factor, affecting how a person reacts (Smith & Diane, 2000). A further and most crucial effect of the agentic shift is that people no longer feel accountable for their actions. Alternatively, they feel responsible to the higher authority, and are mainly concerned that they should 'do the job right'. According to Milgram, this is how ordinary people, like Eichmann appeared to be, when he was tried in 1963, can undertake heinous acts such as killing, murdering or torturing. It is interesting that the levels of obedience in Milgram's studies declined as 'teachers' became closer to the 'learner', and encountered the results of their actions (Milgram, 1965).

Features of the Milgram Experiment

In looking at obedience, there is a need to examine aspects of the situation, which, according to Milgram, induce the agentic state' in people, and keep them in. Milgram described this as happening through the formation of a social bond, which has three main characteristics in the experimental situation, which he had set up. The first feature of his studies was that the

actions of the participants were sequential in nature. At any given moment, research participants were not being asked to do much more than they had already done. Going on, therefore, became more reassuring than stopping, because stopping meant that the person must acknowledge that what they had already done was also unsatisfactory (Milgram, 1974).

The second element of Milgram's studies was that they were in the form of an illicit social contract. The demand characteristics of even fairly innocuous social psychological experiments are very high, because people feel that they have placed themselves in a situation, where they have agreed to cooperate, as much as possible. Research participants in the Milgram studies felt, as though, they would be breaking this social contract if they were to refuse to fulfill their role of good research participants. The third and last feature of Milgram's studies is anxiety. People felt a strikingly large amount of anxiety at the prospect of disobeying the experiment. Research participants in Milgram's study made several attempts rebel, which usually consisted of arguments with the experimenter. In addition, they exhibited a number of responses that entailed extreme tension and defensive giggling. However, despite showing that they wanted to rebel, they accepted the suggestion that the responsibility for their actions was not theirs, hence; continued with the experiment (Smith & Diane, 2000).

Moral Strain and Obedience

It was very clear throughout the Milgram's studies that the research participants were under a considerable amount of moral strain. Moral strain occurs, when people have to do something that is believed to be morally wrong in order to act as an agent of authority, working for the good of society. To show that participants in Milgram's, they tried to persuade him to cull off the study and showed every sign of being largely distressed about what was happening. There were several aspects of the experimental situation, which served to increase this moral strain.

One of them was the cries of anguish of the 'learners'. Although research participants were attuned to the experimenter, rather than the learner, they could not ignore these entirely. Similarly, the learner was issuing demands that were contrary to the demands of the experimenter. Another was the possibility of later revenge or retaliation from the learner either through courts or through personal violence (Berneheim, 1994).

Many research participants also felt their actions to be incompatible with their self-image, in that they were administering pain to an innocent victim. Some research participants coped with their moral strain by using psychological defense mechanisms such as denial, avoidance, degree of involvement as well as helping the learner (Wren, 1999). Denial was, particularly, common in participants, in the Milgram studies. In addition, it has also been widely reported that guards at the Nazi concentration camps were supplied with unlimited quantities of alcohol in order to aid them deny the horror, in which they were participating. Milgram argues that most situations, which induce obedience in everyday life, have buffers, which reduce the level of moral strain. Therefore, for instance, technology creates a distance between the perpetrator and the victim (Baron, 2008). The shock machine, with its precise switches and formal appearance, reduced the immediacy of what was happening. Physical distance acts as another buffer. For instance, the pilot of a bomber does not see the people who are killed or maimed by the napalm bomb. Social distance acts as a buffer too. Eichmann took care to have as little direct contact as possible with the concentration camps, or those who worked in them, despite having overall responsibility for them (Hayes, 2000).

Conformity Theory and Obedience

Research into conformity and obedience suggests that people will tend to follow others, rather than to assert themselves or act differently. However, this is clearly not always the case. In

some cases, people do rebel against authority, both openly and covertly. In addition, people do not always go along with the majority either sometimes minorities can exert a considerable influence (Wren, 1999). Recently, psychologists have become interested in independent behavior, and how people resist pressures to conform to social norms, or to obey authority. Not every research participant in Milgram's study obeyed the experimenters. In addition, the reactions of those who disobeyed were quite different from those who obeyed. Milgram described a research participant who had refused to continue with the study. When the voltage level rose to 210V, the participant turned to the experimenter, quite composed, and refused to comply. Milgram commented that she showed few of the signs of nervousness and anxiety displayed by the other research participants, and seemed to be quite calm throughout (Hogg & Cooper, 2007).

For this participant, conscientious disobedience was simply a rational act. When she was asked about her past background, it turned out that she had grown up in Nazi Germany. After the experiment, when she was asked to suggest how her background might have affected her, she hinted that she might have seen a lot of pain as she grew up. Another volunteer who refused to comply with the experimenter had witnessed the Second World War horrors. This participant accepted personally the full responsibility for the shocks that the victim was getting, pointing out that it was cowardly to assign the responsibility to the experimenter or anyone else (Smith & Diane, 2000).

Milgram compared agentic state to be equivalent to 'morally sleeping'. This meant that research participants who are morally sleeping will not notice small amounts of noise, but will be awakened by a loud one. People in an agentic state also retain residues of their own self, so if the situation is serious enough, in terms of their own experience, they will awaken and act according

to their own conscience. The two research participants who failed to comply with the experimenter in Milgram's studies perceived and acted on the moral implications of their actions because of their previous encounters with the social consequences of unquestioning obedience. For these two, characteristics of the situation, as it developed, passed their awakening threshold. The calmness of these people, by comparison with that of other research participants, was striking (Hayes, 2000).

According to Milgram, this is because they disobeyed. Disobedience was the act that brought moral strain at the end (Milgram, 1974). It followed a sequence that began with an inner doubt, which the participant was careful to express to the experimenter. This shaded gradually into a clearer dissent, which then became a threat to withdraw from the situation and finally resulted in disobedience. Milgram was particularly impressed, by the way, that the tension built up only while disobedience was being contemplated in the early stages. Once the research participants had made the decision disobey, the tension dissipated completely, and they were composed again. Milgram explained this in terms of a psychological exit from the agentic state and a return to the autonomous state, in which the person is fully responsible for their actions (Zanna, 1992).

An understanding of the reasons why people tend to listen or obey authorities requires the grasping of Milgram's work by recognizing that Milgram took a phenomenological approach to the study of social behavior. He treated subjective experience as valid data, on which to build more systematic analyses of the phenomenon in question. It was this willingness to treat personal experience of, and intuitions about everyday events seriously that led him to behavioral territories unexplored by others (Hogg & Cooper, 2007). Milgram introduced his first experimental report of his obedience research by lining it to the Holocaust and to earlier writings

on authority, obedience, social power, and suggestion. However, he concludes his introduction by stating that his work is a derivative, in the first case, from directly observing a social phenomenon: the person being commanded by a legal authority usually obeys. He further notes that obedience comes easily and frequent. It is an ever-present and vital characteristic of social life (Milgram, 1963).

Conclusion

In conclusion, observation is a key feature of the research to determine why people tend to obey authorities. Milgram pursued a largely theoretical approach in most of his studies. When he did invoke theory, he did so usually after the research was conducted. Therefore, instead of the more central role played by hypothesis-generating in social psychology, for Milgram, theory came into play in an attempt either to integrate or to elucidate findings he had already obtained. In essence, it can be argued that human beings tend to listen to authorities or obey them because they, as subjects, enter into a different experiential state, a state of agency, in which individuals does not consider themselves as behaving independently, but as an agent of an authority.

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