

Theories of authority and obedience



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Obedience has always been ubiquitous while at the same time was easily overlooked. According to Milgram, obedience can be defined as “ the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose. It is the dispositional cement that binds men to systems of authority” (1). This paper claims that ordinary people who have a strong personal moral code tend to blindly follow orders given by an authoritarian figure when they become part of a structured organization governed by authority. This action of blindly following orders to do things that they personally know are wrong and can cause horrible results is referred by Zimbardo as “ turning evil” (The Lucifer effect). What is meant by *blindly following orders* is that people fail to think of the consequences of the actions that they have been ordered to undertake. Many researchers have come to the conclusion that it is not the mentally ill or the ones with behavior problems who end up doing the most harmful things but rather the normal people. The key concept of the paper is that ordinary people by “ simply doing their job” with a sense of obligation towards an authoritarian figure can cause immoral and unethical circumstances to arise (Milgram 6).

The main source to be analyzed will be Milgram’s book *Obedience to Authority* , which examines his *teachers and learners experiment* . The end result of the experiment is that average people did “ become agents in a terrible destructive process” (6). However, the process by which people become evil is of equal importance. Moreover, the second source of the paper is Zimbardo’s book, *The Lucifer Effect* , which further examines the main concept of the research through real-life examples. It mainly focuses

on how good people can turn evil by obeying someone's orders under certain situations. Directly connected with this outcome is the term "Banality of evil", which comes from Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (xiv). This term means that evil things occur when ordinary people follow orders and feel that the evil things they are doing are normal. In this paper, both experimental and real life situations are examined in order to illustrate the power that authority has on individuals who have normal codes of morality and behavior, and how they will perform ruthless acts they wouldn't have done otherwise.

Milgram states that our own nature is the root of being obedient since "we are born with the potential for obedience." This inborn structure, along with the influences each person has from society, "produce the obedient man" (125). He states, the reason ordinary people blindly follow orders given from an authoritarian figure lies in the changes that occur in people's behavior when from acting individually they enter a hierarchically coordinated organization. He concludes that the conscience an individual has about moral and ethical standards, and what that person thinks is right or wrong, is not further followed with the orders given from an authoritarian figure. Individuals will act blindly without thinking whether the actions they have to undertake conform with their personal values. When ordinary people enter a hierarchical structure system, they lose their personal judgment of each order given from someone who is higher in the hierarchical ladder. Therefore, the nature of the action ordered is not filtered by the person's own belief, and as a result, heinous consequences might occur.

Milgram's *teachers and learners experiment* is one characteristic situation of blind obedience that occurs due to the change in people's behavior when moving from the individual function to the organization function. "The main question is how far the participant will comply with the experimenter's instructions before refusing to carry out the actions required of him" (Milgram 3). Before mentioning the results of the experiment and how the participants who had ordinary behavior managed to turn evil by obeying the experimenter and conducting immoral and unethical actions, I want to highlight one of the keystones in this research; Milgram's *agentic state*. The *agentic state*, or state of agency, is "the condition a person is in when he sees himself as an agent for carrying out another person's wishes" (Milgram 133). As individuals enter an authoritarian system which is hierarchically organized and moves away from being autonomous, they fail to follow their own beliefs and perceptions and they turn into an *agent* who follows blindly and uncritically the orders given from above. Most importantly, when the person is in the *agentic state* he "no longer views himself as responsible for his own actions but defines himself as an instrument for carrying out the wishes of others" (Milgram 134). People, by being in the *agentic state*, are becoming blindly obedient to the authority figure. Especially, if the actions ordered are unethical and immoral, as it is in the *teachers and learners experiment*, people can become evil and cause severe pain for example, by giving electric shocks to the learners.

In order to examine the consequences of the *agentic state* on participants, the most vital factors that lead the subjects in this state and transform them into blind obedient servants, need to be mentioned first. One of the factors is

the *perception of authority* . According to Milgram, authority can be defined as “ the person who is perceived to be in a position of social control within a given situation” (138). Milgram declares that what matters is how the individual perceives authority in a social structure. Specifically, the experimenter and the set-up of the situation, which seems like a scientific laboratory, create authority’s appearance, which is what influences the participants. Two other main factors he suggests are the *entry into the Authority System* and *the Overarching Ideology* . In order for a person to fully become an *agent* who only follows orders, he or she has to become part of the authority system. The entry into the laboratory serves the role of entering into the authority system. It is very important that the participants enter voluntarily since in that way, a sense of commitment and obligation towards authority is created. Regarding *the overarching ideology* , “ science and its acceptance as a legitimate social enterprise provides the overarching ideological justification for the experiment” (Milgram 142). The ideological justification of the experiment’s purpose is what drives participants to obtain willing obedience, perceiving their behavior as helping a desirable end to occur.

The three factors (*perception of authority* , *entry into the Authority System* , *the Overarching Ideology*) are necessary in shifting into the *agentic state* . Once the participants are in this state of altered personality, two main consequences arise which cause the former ordinary people to transform into evil servants. One of the consequences is the process of *tuning* , when the subject has “ maximal receptivity to the emissions of the authority, whereas the learner’s signals are muted and psychologically remote”

(Milgram 144). Milgram states that learners are viewed as simple obstacles rather than human beings that need to be overcome in order for the authoritarian relationship of experimenter-learner to be satisfied. In addition, authority is perceived as an *impersonal force* and the experimenter as a *suprahuman* character, having powers above and beyond a normal person. Orders given exclusively by the authoritarian figure will be followed whether they promote immoral and unethical actions and severe negative results ensue.

The other main consequence is the *loss of responsibility* and is characterized as the most far-reaching one in the *agentic state*. “A man feels responsible to the authority directing him but feels no responsibility for the content of the actions that the authority prescribes” (Milgram 145). The people believe they have an obligation towards the authoritarian figure and their accountability depends on how well they have performed the actions called for by the authority. The heinous nature of the actions ordered are not taken into consideration simply because “they see them as originating in the motives of some other person” (Milgram 146). Also, because they are not in the autonomous state, the superego cannot control their actions and the inhibitory forces are not capable of examining whether the orders given compromise their moral values and principles. Hence, the people end up being blindly obedient and they adopt a different personality which forces them to do terrible actions with even more harsh results.

According to Zimbardo, the experts predicted that most subjects would not give strong electric shocks when orders to do so. They forecasted that on average “less than 1 percent would go all the way to the end, that only

sadists would engage in such sadistic behavior, and that most people would drop out at the tenth level of 150 volts” (271). However, the shocking truth was that “ two of every three (65 percent) of the participants went all the way up to the maximum shock level of 450 volts” (271). The key factor that made the participants obey and continue even after the point where the victim-learner was not responding was the experimenter’s reassurance that he will take the responsibility of their action. A characteristic example is a teacher’s report which states the initial refusal: “ I didn’t know what the hell was going on ... I was not taking responsibility for going further. That’s it.” (271). Although, the loss of personal responsibility is one reason for continuing, Zimbardo suggests another reason. He highlights that the participants did not know how to exit the experiment. “ It is a simple matter of up and then out.” (272). The results of the experiment reveal exactly what the purpose of the paper was; to prove that it is not the sadists or the psychopaths who conduct the most unethical, immoral and cruel actions but the ordinary people. The normal people are the ones who, under specific situations and by the influence of an authoritarian figure, will blindly follow orders.

A real-life example of every-day men becoming evil and being indoctrinated into extraordinary killing occurred during the 2nd world war. It was the actions of Reserve Battalion 101, a unit of the German Order Police, consisting of approximately 500 men from Hamburg, which played a crucial role in the extermination of Jews in Poland and the implementation of Hitler’s Final Solution. According to Browning, the members of the Unit were middle-aged ordinary men, neither sadists nor Nazi fanatics. However, despite the

option they were given from their commander not to participate in the Unit's actions, 90 percent of the men didn't refuse and took part in the shootings. The Unit's inhumane and unethical achievement was the death of at least 83, 000 Jews (142). Browning's conclusion is similar to the one given by Milgram in the *teachers and learners experiment*. The members of the Battalion were as normal as the participants in Milgram's experiment, and the reason for the unrealistic killing lies in their blind obedience to the authoritarian figure. Browning suggests that ordinary people will tend to obey and follow orders given from above, even though the orders might come into conflict with their personal judgment and values. The explanation for this statement was given by Milgram: specifically, in both cases the people were placed in a hierarchically organized structure; therefore, people's ethical boundaries didn't apply to the orders given from authority. People lost their personal identity related to the orders given: their inhibitory forces were no longer able to inspect whether the orders were within their ethical limits. As a result, both participants of the experiment and members of the Battalion ended in conducting actions they wouldn't have done otherwise.

Last but not least, one of the most vital historical examples that clearly illustrates that the ones who tend to blindly follow orders given from authority are ordinary people, is the case of Adolf Eichmann. Despite Eichmann's cruel actions of arranging the execution of millions of Jews, he was completely normal without any trace of abnormal behavior: " Half a dozen psychiatrists had certified him as " normal" –" More normal at any rate ... " not only normal but most desirable" (Arendt 25–26). Arendt's

concluded that “ the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were ... terribly and terrifyingly normal.” She states that this “ new type of criminal ... commits his crimes under the circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or feel that he is doing wrong” (276). “ It was as though in those last minutes [of Eichman’s life] he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought defying *banality of evil* ” (252) . Hannah Arendt, through her detailed analysis of the war crimes trial of Eichmann, was the first to present the fundamental phrase “ Banality of evil.” She showed that “ social forces can prompt normal people to perform horrific acts” (Zimbardo 289).

The experimental and real-life examples that were examined in the paper suggest that the key factor for ordinary people to blindly obey an authoritarian figure is their entry into a hierarchically organized structure, and the loss of their individuality. By entering in such well-structured system, people turn evil and they conclude horrible actions they wouldn’t have done if they weren’t part of it. Therefore, it may be possible that the conclusion drawn from these examples could be applied in today’s highly coordinated world. The modern militaries, the business, political and governmental organizations are also hierarchically structured. This may indicate that nowadays people within these organizations can still be transformed into modern evil servants who will serve and obey the interests of the most powerful people. However, it might also be plausible that due to the more liberalized world we live in, people instead of obeying they could actively

resist the orders given from above or they may even act in an aggressive and violent way against authority. Obedience to authority will always be a theme available for further research and with more than one possible explanations of why people obey and follow orders.