Factors for increased obedience

Gross defines obedience as an outcome of social influence whereby somebody acts in response to an order from another person. It is assumed that without such an order, the person would not have acted in this way. The significance of obedience became more prominent after the Nazi atrocities of World War II. The general consensus was that citizens from Germany had a different character from the citizens of other countries, as they obeyed Hitler as their authoritarian figure despite the moral implications. For this reason, Stanley Milgram (as cited in Gross, 2008) carried out research to see whether Germany was a more highly obedient nation compared with the rest of the world. According to Blass (2002) Milgram believed that behaviour of the Nazi's was not caused by disposition, but by the situation many people had found themselves in.

Setting up his experiment at Yale University in 1963, Milgram recruited 40 American volunteers to participate in a study designed to see whether individuals would obey an authority figure and inflict pain on another person using electric shocks. Milgram, along with 40 other psychiatrists, predicted that Americans would show low levels of obedience and that less than 1 percent of them would administer the highest voltage. (Gross, 2008)

During the experiment, the participants were greeted by an experimenter and a stooge pretending to be another participant. Deceived into thinking that the study concerned the role of punishment in learning, each participant had to draw lots to determine whether their roles in the experiment were to be that of a teacher or a learner. This was manipulated so that the real participant always drew out the teacher role. The learner was then strapped into a chair and electrodes were attached to his arm. The volunteer was then

taken into an adjoining room where they were told that they needed to ask the learner a number of questions. They were instructed to administer an electric shock ranging from 15V to 450V to the learner if they got a question wrong. Each wrong answer would be followed by a shock that increased by 15V each time. The teacher could not see the learner, but could hear him grunting or complaining about the pain at various stages of voltage. If the volunteers acting as the teacher verbally protested about carrying on, a set number of prompts were given by the experimenter such as " the experiment requires you to continue". No electric shocks were actually administered during this experiment as the real purpose of it was to determine a person's obedience to authority. The complaints of the accomplice learner were all pre-recorded. (Milgram, 1963)

Results showed that all of the participants progressed to at least 300V on the shock generator and 65 per cent to the full 450V. Most of the participants showed signs of extreme anxiety (such as nervous laughter or seizures) but continued despite verbally threatening to leave the experiment. (Milgram, 1963)

A number of criticisms arose from Milgram's study, including both the experimental and ecological validity. These were criticised largely by Orne and Holland (1968) who believed that Milgram obtained high rates of obedience because the participants did not believe the experimental situation was real and also that the laboratory setting bore little resemblance to real-life situations. However, Milgram (1964) disputed this and cited evidence from films of the study showing the extreme stress participants showed, claiming such stress could not be acted.

The ethical issues surrounding Milgram's experiment were also criticised, largely by Baumrind (1964). He stated that the experiment was highly deceptive and lacked informed consent. He also accused Milgram of not putting measures in place to stop the participants experiencing both physical and psychological harm. However, Milgram (1964) responded that he had debriefed each of his participants in-depth and that 85% of them had stated that they would be willing to take part in further research.

Milgram (as cited in Myers, 1993) went on to conduct several variants of his study, changing the social conditions in each of them to investigate the factors that influence obedience. After these were conducted, he concluded that there were several reasons that people obey authority. These included a diffusion of responsibility, the agentic state theory, legitimacy of the authority figure, and the effects of group influence.

Gross (2010) explains that many volunteers in Milgram's experiment raised the issue of responsibility for any harm to the learner at some point during or after their participation. The experimenter had certain set answers to any questions raised during the study, one of which was " I'm responsible for what goes on here." When this was said, Milgram reported that many of the participants showed visible signs of relief, which he believed was due to the diffusion of responsibility. Milgram saw this diffusion of responsibility as crucial to understanding the atrocities commited by Nazis and it is closely related to the agentic state theory.

Participants also showed continual signs of distress and conflict throughout the experiment and Milgram (1963) stated this conflict appeared to be

caused by two opposing demands – the external authority of the experimenter giving orders and the internal authority of the conscience. Therefore, Milgram (1964) believed that participants went through a mental adjustment known as the agentic state to overcome this conflict. He believed that people behave on an autonomous level, but under certain circumstances an agentic shift can take place, meaning responsibility is placed on the person giving orders. Milgram also believed that this shift was possible because we are taught to obey from an early age.

Myers (1993) explains that another experimental variation undertook by Milgram showed that the legitimacy of the authority figure is also important. In this experiment, the experimenter was replaced by a clerk part way through the study. After this replacement, 80 percent of the teachers refused to comply fully. Milgram argued that the authority figure had various visual symbols that added to his legitimacy, including uniform. In this case, the experimenter wore a grey laboratory coat along with other smart clothing.

The importance of conformity in the role of obedience was also highlighted by Milgram. Furthering Asch’s research on conformity in 1951, Milgram decided to place the teacher with two confederates. During the experiment, both confederates defied the experimenter, so he ordered the real participant to continue alone. However, ninety percent refused, conforming to the defiant confederates. (Gross, 2010)

Milgram’s conclusions and theories about the factors that lead to obedience have been criticised. Blass (1991) argued that Milgram payed too much

attention to the situational effects on obedience and not enough to individual differences. Blass (2009) also criticised the theory that obedience is higher when orders come from a legitimate authority. He highlighted further research done by Rosenhan in 1969 which resulted in 53 percent of participants giving the maximum shock despite knowing that their orders were coming from an undergraduate with no professional supervision.

In more recent research, Burger (2009) replicated Milgram's research as closely as possible whilst modifying it so that it would be ethically approved. He did this by carefully screening his participants and altering the maximum shock level to 150v, rather than 450v. The results of his study were statistically equivalent to those of Milgram's, showing that the rate of obedience appears to have stayed the same over time. This rate was also related to the same situational factors set up within the original experiment.

However, Gibson (2011) analysed the rhetorical nature of the experimenter's role in Milgram's study and concluded that the orders given were designed to convince and persuade rather than to be directly obeyed, meaning that it is difficult to generalise Milgram's findings to situations where obedience, as it is conventionally understood, may arise.

Although many psychologists still criticise Milgram's procedures, many also regard them as extremely important and Elms (1972) believed it was the most morally significant research in psychology. In 1965 Milgram was awarded the prize for ' Contribution to Psychological Research' by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (Banyard & Flanagan, 2005). This showed that despite ethical issues being raised in regard to his

study, Milgram provided society with a key piece of research that contributed to the explanation of the atrocities in World War II. His research also still has the capacity to shock people and continues to raise tremendous debate today.

Burger's (2009) research findings have been a promising step forward in trying to understand the causes of obedience. Not only did this research support Milgram's original findings but did so whilst eradicating many of the ethical criticisms of the study. Burger also concluded that " Although changes in societal attitudes can affect behavior, my findings indicate that the same situational factors that affected obedience in Milgram's participants still operate today." (Burger, 2009. P. 9)

In response to Gibson's (2011) criticism that the prods given by experimenters were designed to convince and persuade participants rather than simply give an order to be obeyed, it is perhaps important to ask whether anybody simply obeys an order without a cause to do so in most real life situations. That cause could stem from persuasion or, taking the example of a teacher and pupil, it could stem from the childs fear of the consequences if they do not obey. Therefore, obedience and persuasion, along with other factors, are very closely related and investigating the importance of persuasion as a cause for obedience would be a useful topic for further research.