

# Obedience to authority essay examples

[Business](#), [Management](#)



“ Be quiet! Do this! Don’t do that!” We come across or hear commands, directions, instructions and orders almost every day. So many people obey orders on a daily basis and most of the people who obey orders usually feel coerced. Apparently, people obey orders to cooperate or because they are afraid. In fact, often people obey orders against their own desires and better judgment (Milgram). So is it possible that people are prone to unjust authority? Many people might disagree. Many might claim that examples such as Nazi Germany and Abu Ghraib are simply “ extreme” examples of the urge to obey authority and have nothing to do with real life, everyday experiences. Think again! Many have worn the mask of authority and many follow those in a position of authority like blind sheep. This paper will be examining scenarios where “ obedience to a figure of authority becomes dangerous” (Behrens and Rosen 752) based on articles from Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum, historical events, recent stories and personal experience.

### **Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem**

Above is the title of an article that was originally published by Erich Fromm in 1963. From early childhood children are taught that obedience is a virtue, and that disobedience is a flaw. Fromm argues that not all but some obedience can be destructive and freedom from such disobedience is the only way to achieve freedom is to disobey. Fromm seems to be proclaiming if the human race blindly obeys, it could end up destroying itself. How? The Holocaust is perhaps the best example of the destructive consequences of obedience to unjust authority. Millions of people were killed in concentration camps in Nazi Germany. Of course, they all were not directly killed by Hitler;

<https://assignbuster.com/obedience-to-authority-essay-examples-essay-samples/>

they were killed by those who followed Hitler's orders. In wars, it is part of a soldier's duty to obey orders, even if they seem unjust. Soldiers will blindly follow orders, even if it means mass killing and genocide, which of course has happened in the past, and if a war is unjust, then that makes a soldier a murderer (Taylor, and Kimball). So obedience to unjust authority can and has proven to be destructive. As Fromm's article implies, the problem lies in the fact that we are taught that all authority is just.

## **The Power of Situations**

Although Fromm described obedience in his article as a "moral problem," Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbett on the other hand in their article suggest it is not the character and moral choices of people that causes them to be obedient. Ross and Nisbett seem to be suggesting that the behavior of an individual is influenced by the power of situations and that people can be obedient in a given situation even if they wouldn't obey to the given order in other circumstances. Ross and Nisbett are confident that our behavior is determined by the situations within our present environment, and continuing where the authors left off; apparently they are suggested that it is this behavior influenced by situations that that lead to obedience to authority. In other words, a person's obedience to an order, even if it is an unjust one, depends on the situation.

After a lot of pondering and thinking to come with an example where a situation influenced a person to obey an unjust or even a dangerous order, I finally turned to personal experience or rather indirect person experience. Personally, I haven't taken much interest in on-campus Greek organizations,

but some of my friends are part of fraternities. While thinking of a suitable example I can remember them telling me about the humiliating, unethical, unjust, and perhaps even dangerous atrocities pledges had to go through just to become a member of the fraternity. Certainly, no one, including me, in their right mind would agree to do those things under normal circumstances. However, from a pledge's point of view, who does not wish to become a social outcast, the situation perhaps influences them to obey the orders of the frat leaders, regardless of what they are ordered to do.

## **The Perils of Obedience**

This article is written by Stanley Milgram, in which he describes the experiments he carried out on obedience, to test how many subjects would obey authority and how many would obey their own conscience. As Milgram describes in the article, he discovered in those experiments that most people will obey whatever an authoritative figure commands them to do, even if it meant ignoring their own sense of what is right and wrong, and moral judgment. In Milgram's experiment, participants were ordered by an authority figure to administer a shock ranging from "Mild Shock" to "Danger Severe Shock" to a learner (an actor). Unbelievably, 65% of the participants administered 450 volts, the maximum level of shock, although the learner showed signs of pain and suffering. Despite the examples presented above, it still wouldn't seem believable that someone would obey an authoritative order to the extent of conflicting with their own moral judgment and causing another person affliction or grief.

Surprisingly, the "McDonald's Strip Search" incident ("CBC. ca") from 2004

is a modern day, real-life example of Milgram's experiments. The unbelievable story was of a young McDonald's employee who was degraded, forced to strip and sexually assaulted in the back office of the Assistant Manager, who was on the telephone with someone impersonating a police officer and giving her orders of what to do. The Assistant Manager claimed that she had done what she had been told to do, yet it can be assumed that the manager must have realized that everything that she was putting that young girl through was inappropriate and unethical, which proves Milgram's point when he writes that " For many people, obedience is a deeply ingrained behavior tendency, indeed a potent impulse overriding training in ethics, sympathy, and moral conduct" (Behrens and Rosen 752).

### **Obedience Isn't Always Just**

Based on articles, historical events, recent stories and personal experience discussed in the paper, it is apparent that mindless obedience to authority has led to and can contribute to social destructiveness. Apart from the Holocaust, the mass suicides of the Jim Jones cult in Guyana, the debacle at Waco, the My Lai massacre are some other historical examples of blind obedience to unjust authority. As written in the book *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*, the question is not "" Should we obey the orders of an authority figure?" but rather, " To what extent should we obey?" (Behrens and Rosen 752). Obedience is not wrong, but mindless obedience is. Perhaps it is the situations that determine whether obeying to an order is just or unjust. Although disobedience is frowned upon by authoritative

figures, but under scenarios such as the ones mentioned, it may be better to disobey than to contribute to drastic consequences.

## **Works Cited**

Behrens, Laurence, and Leonard J. Rosen. Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum. 11. Boston: Longman, 2011. Print.

Milgram, S. Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View. New York: Harper and Row, 1974. Print.

Taylor, Rob, and Jack Kimball. " U. S. soldier charged with 17 murders in Afghan killings." Reuters. com. Thomson Reuters, 23 2012. Web. 30 Oct 2012. .

. " Ex-McDonald's employee awarded \$6. 1 million after strip search hoax." CBC. ca. CBC, 5 2007. Web. 30 Oct 2012. .