

# Personality factors for obedience



## **Introduction**

Obedience has long been studied in the field of psychology, and Stanley Milgram's obedience studies are notably the most renowned in the area of social psychological research (Burger, 2009). One of the factors that fuelled Milgram's obedience studies was his identification as a Jewish person and his desire to understand the Holocaust - a salient example of destructive obedience, whereby Nazi war criminals explained their responsibility for deaths totalling in the millions by claiming they were simply obeying orders (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009). While one must err on the side of caution when drawing inferences from laboratory studies to apply unto complex social behaviours such as the genocide of an entire people, Milgram's studies provide a basis to understanding the social psychological factors that contribute to people acting in unpredictable and unexpected ways (Burger, 2009).

Whilst Milgram (1963) developed a series of 18 studies, the study employed by most psychologists is Experiment 5. In this experiment, the participant was assigned the role of "teacher" and tasked to administer a paired-associate learning test to the "learner" - a confederate whom was tasked to give many wrong answers. The teacher was instructed to administer an electric shock ranging from 15 to 450 volts to the learner for each incorrect answer, starting with the lowest switch followed by gradual 15-volt increments for each incorrect answer. As the shocks administered increased, the learner pleaded for the teacher to stop, complained of heart issues, and finally stopped responding. The major dependent variable studied was the point at which the participant refused to continue.

Contrary to expert predictions that no one would be able to push all 30 switches, Milgram's experiments showed that 65% of participants administered shocks all the way to the end of the range (Milgram, 1963).

Milgram's studies thus posed an important question that is of both psychological and moral in nature: how far will a person go in blindly obeying an authority figure's instructions to inflict severe pain on a stranger?

Researchers have uncovered four situational determinants that led to the high rates of obedience in the Milgram experiments: obedience to authority; gradual increase in demands; limited sources of information in an extreme and novel situation; and a diffused or lack of responsibility. People were more likely to follow an authority figure's commands when their authority is seen as legitimate, and the experimenter was seen as this through his association with the experiment, university, and scientific community (Burger, 2009). The gradual 15-volt increments and the absence of additional relevant information to help inform participants how they ought to respond further contributed to participants' obedience (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009). Finally, participants reportedly placed the responsibility for their actions on the experimenter and claimed they were only following orders in administering shock (Milgram, 1963), thereby illustrating the role of diffused responsibility resulting in obedience.

Milgram's obedience studies had a profound impact on the trajectory of personality and social psychology, resulting in a shift in emphasis from person or trait variables toward environmental and situational variables when determining behavioural outcomes (Doliński et al., 2017). Milgram's experiments were classified as a "strong" situation capable of overwhelming

personality factors due to its extreme and novel nature, illustrating the strength of situational factors on human behaviour (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009; Burger, 2009). It showed the role of strong situations in mitigating the relationship between personality and social behaviour by eliciting powerful social norms, resulting in compliance to requests from an authority figure (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009; Twenge, 2009).

Most of the research that exists examines the impact of situational factors on human behaviour, while the issue of personality factors remains topical in behavioural research (Burger, 2009). Nonetheless, behavioural variance remained high amongst participants in Milgram's studies, which suggests that some of the variance in obedience can be attributed to personality variables despite the personality-dampening effect of strong situations (Begue et al., 2014). Whether a combination of individual trait variables can predict disobedience remains an open question, requiring further empirical evidence.

### Rationale

Few studies have been conducted to explore personality factors in predicting disobedience patterns (Burger, 2009). Existing empirical data (Begue et al, 2014; Burger, 2009; Twenge, 2009) suggests that in a strong situational context, individual-level behavioural determinants are not necessarily overwhelmed. For instance, studies have found a correlation between pre-existing behavioural commitment to upholding personal beliefs and values (measured by political and social activism) with disobedience in the Milgram paradigm (Begue et al., 2014). Another study found participants with higher

dispositional empathy expressed reluctance earlier on in the experiment, although this did not translate to lower shocks administered (Burger, 2009). This is consistent with evidence that ethical competence can be measured through an individual's empathy, personal values, and five-factor personality model (Pohling, Bzdok, Eigenstetter, Stumpf, & Strobel, 2016).

The Five-Factor Model of personality can be used to measure moral personality (Pohling et al., 2016), and Begue et al. (2014) found participants who scored high in conscientiousness and agreeableness were shown to administer higher levels of shock, which suggests these traits could contribute to destructive obedience given the right context. Only one study (Miranda, Caballero, Gomez, & Zamorano, 1981) had been modelled on Milgram's procedure to examine the relationship between extraversion and obedience. The study found no significant effects, but recent studies have shown extraversion to be linked to assertiveness, self-confidence, and transformational leadership (Judge & Bono, 2000; Pohling et al., 2016).

Additionally, Twenge (2009) attributed an increase in disobedience observed in recent studies to our society's growing individualism. Individualism can be defined as the view of the self as self-directed, autonomous, and separate from others (Santos, Varnum, & Grossmann, 2017). The original participants in Milgram's studies were found to obey orders because they gloried the experimenter and desired to identify with the in-group (Haslam, Reicher, Millard, & McDonald, 2015). Therefore, we believe conducting an updated study examining extraversion (in conjunction with ethical competence) as a predictor of disobedience in a Milgram paradigm will be supportive in accounting for the recent rise in individualism.

A global shift from collectivism to individualism has been recorded over the last 50 years, along with a decline in obedience and conformity (Santos et al., 2017). Therefore, our study aims to combine the new and existing evidence in examining the interaction between disobedience and individualistic personality traits including extraversion and ethical competence (measured by dispositional empathy and behavioural commitment in upholding personal values). One would expect individuals scoring high in these traits to be able to overcome situational influences in the face of strong situations, thereby demonstrating an ability to turn a case of destructive obedience into constructive disobedience.

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