

Understanding obedience

Baseline conditions

Stanley Milgram conducted 18 variations of his obedience study. The results below show the percentage who went beyond 450 volts in three key variations:

Remote feedback — Learner could not be seen or heard. Obedience = 65%

Voice feedback — Learner could be heard but still not seen. Obedience = 62.5%

Voice feedback, new baseline — Learner had a heart condition, heard but not seen. Obedience = 65%

Agentic state

We act on behalf of an authority figure (i.e. are their agent) and feel no personal responsibility. (Contrast with the autonomous state.)

Legitimacy of authority

We are socialised to believe that certain people have authority over us (for example, police officers, teachers, parents). Society functions smoothly because of this authority structure.

Cultural differences

Collectivist cultures tend to be more obedient because they have shared group goals.

Individualist cultures tend to be less obedient because they value personal autonomy (making your own rather than group decisions).

Social impact theory

The strength, immediacy and number of authority figures and sub-ordinates affects levels of obedience.

The authoritarian personality

Adorno et al. proposed that harsh parenting causes children to be more submissive to people in authority.

Locus of control (LOC)

People with an internal LOC are more like to take personal responsibility for their behaviour and less likely to obey.

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Situational explanations

Explaining why people obey in terms of other people or the environment generally.

Situational explanations:
'why' we obey in terms external factors.

Dispositional explanations:
'why' we obey in terms of internal factors.

Situational variables:
'what' affects our obedience level.

Dispositional (personality) explanations

Explaining why people obey in terms of their disposition (i.e. their personality).

Proximity to victim

Experiment 3 (proximity)

The closer you are to the victim, the less likely you are to obey... because you are more aware of the consequences of your actions.

Teacher and learner were in the same room — 40% obedience.

Proximity to authority

Experiment 7 (telephonic instruction)

The further you are from the authority figure, the less likely you are to obey... because you feel more responsibility.

Experimenter gave instructions to teacher on the phone — 20.5% obedience.

Situational variables

Features of the environment that may influence a person's behaviour.

Location

Experiment 10 (rundown office)

The less prestigious the environment, the less likely you are to obey... because the authority figure has less legitimacy.

Teacher and learner in a rundown office instead of the university — 47.5% obedience.

Status

Experiment 13 (ordinary man gives orders)

You are more likely to obey someone in uniform... because a uniform conveys authority and people learn to obey authority.

Experimenter was an ordinary member of the public — 20% obedience.

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