



Explanations for Obedience

AQA A-Level Psychology – Social Influence



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Milgram's Obedience Study (1963)

Aim

To investigate how far people would obey authority, even if it meant harming others.

Procedure

40 American males acted as "teachers" giving electric shocks to "learners" for wrong answers.

Findings

65% of participants obeyed to the maximum shock level despite showing signs of stress.



Milgram's Obedience Study (1963)

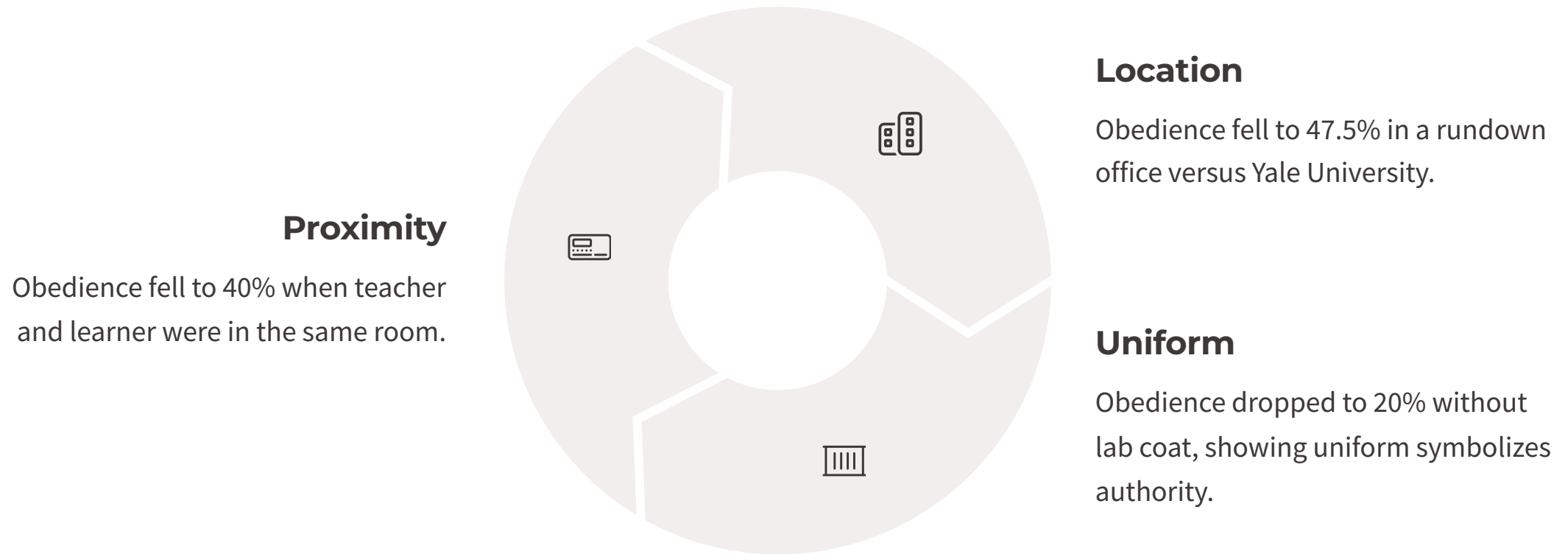
Procedure

- **Aim:**
To investigate how far people would go in obeying an instruction if it involved harming another person.
- **Participants:**
40 male volunteers (aged 20–50) recruited via a newspaper advert, told they were taking part in a study on memory and learning.
- **Roles:**
 - Participant was always the "teacher".
 - A confederate (Mr. Wallace) was always the "learner".
 - A stern-looking experimenter in a lab coat played the authority figure.
- **Set-up:**
 - The learner was strapped into a chair in another room and connected to fake electric wires.
 - The teacher had to administer a shock every time the learner gave a wrong answer.
 - The shock level started at 15 volts and increased in 15-volt increments up to 450 volts.
- **Responses:**
 - The learner (a confederate) responded with scripted protests, complaints about heart problems, screams, and eventually silence.
 - If the teacher hesitated, the experimenter used verbal prods, e.g.:
 - “Please continue.”
 - “The experiment requires that you continue.”
 - “It is absolutely essential that you continue.”
 - “You have no other choice, you must go on.”

Findings

- **Obedience Rate:**
 - 65% of participants went all the way to 450 volts, the highest level.
 - 100% went up to 300 volts.
 - Many showed signs of extreme stress—sweating, trembling, stuttering, biting lips, nervous laughter.
- **Conclusion:**
People are surprisingly obedient to authority figures, even when it involves hurting another person.
Obedience is not necessarily due to personality, but influenced by the situational context.

Situational Variables in Milgram's Variations



Further Research

Proximity

In the experimenter absent condition, where after giving the instructions to the subject they then left the room and gave future orders over the phone, findings showed that only 21% obeyed the orders (up to 450V) and a vast majority disobeyed. Some subjects actually repeatedly gave the minimum shocks, even though reporting to the experimenter that they were following procedures.

Reserve Police Battalion 101

In 1942, orders were given to carry out a mass killing of Jews (from Jozefow in Poland). Commanding officer Major Wilhelm Trapp gave the police officers an offer that if they didn't want to do this they could be given other duties. Regardless of factors present (as Milgram suggested) e.g. proximity and disobedient models, only a small minority took up the offer for other duties (Mandel, 1998).

Mandel argued that 'obedience' as a way to explain the horrible behaviour can only be an alibi. This is masking the core issue of 'antisemitism' behind the behaviour.

Location

Fromm (1973) argued that due to the subjects being aware they were taking part in a scientific study at a prestigious university, the findings could be challenged.

Fromm argued that to measure real-life obedience and specifically destructive obedience can be more difficult to measure. One example is the genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994, where many years of manipulation took place to dehumanise the target group.

This suggests that we need to be careful when drawing conclusions from Milgram's work to everyday life.

Historical Validity

Blass (1999) was interested to know if the same results would happen today that Milgram found over 50 years ago. Blass carried out a statistical analysis of obedience research from 1961 to 1985 and found no relationship between the amount of obedience and the time, making Milgram's research more historically valid.

More recent research (Burger, 2009) found similar levels of obedience pretty much identical to Milgram.

Uniform

Bushman (1988) conducted research where a female researcher (dressed in a 'police style', a 'business person' or a 'beggar') stopped people in the street. The researcher asked people on the street to give change to a male researcher for a parking meter that had expired.

Results were as follows:

- 1. Police style uniform: 72% obeyed
- 2. Business Person: 48% obeyed
- 3. Beggar: 52% obeyed

When the people were questioned as to why they obeyed the woman in uniform, they reported it was because she looked like she had authority.

The Power of Uniform

Durkin and Jeffrey (2000) found that children's understanding of authority is linked to visual perceptions (cues). Researchers used different scenarios to test children's understanding of authority. The scenarios were as follows and the children had to say who could carry out an arrest:

- 1. A police officer who had changed into civilian clothes.
- 2. A man in a different occupation who wore a police uniform temporarily, but has no link to the police.
- 3. A man in a uniform from a different occupation.

Research showed that children were more likely to select the man currently wearing a police uniform as someone who could carry out an arrest. Interestingly, younger children picked the non-policeman wearing a uniform more often than a real police officer wearing normal clothes.

Researchers argue that children's initial perceptions of authority are based on superficial aspects of appearances.

Psychological Explanations for Obedience



Obedience Psychology



Agentic State

People see themselves as agents executing orders with no personal responsibility.



Agentic Shift

Moving from autonomous state to agentic state.



Legitimacy of Authority

We obey those perceived as legitimate authorities (doctors, teachers, police).

Agentic State and Legitimacy of Authority



The Agentic State

In the agentic state, subjects do not see themselves as responsible for their actions, and rather attribute their behaviour to the authority figure. Milgram phrased this process 'the agentic shift', as the subjects moved from an autonomous state to an agentic state. Post study, subjects reported they would not have shocked people by themselves and were just following orders.

Psychologically, the subject giving the electric shocks feels responsible to the authority figure, yet doesn't feel responsible for their own actions.

Self-image is a further reason why subjects adopt an agentic state, due to wanting to maintain a positive self-image. Due to the action no longer making the subjects responsible, it no longer impacts their self-image and eliminates any guilt.

Subjects also have a bond to the experimenter and struggle to break free of this, which possibly explains why they struggle to leave the study. The fear of breaking away from the study is linked to appearing arrogant and rude - hence they help to keep a bond.



Legitimacy of authority

A legitimate authority (or perception) is the principal factor required to make the shift from an autonomous state to an agentic state. This power comes from the shared expectations in any given social situation.

This expectation would have been what the subjects have when they enter the study (they expect someone to be in charge). The man in the grey lab coat would tick this box and establish authority, which wasn't challenged.

The legitimate authority has defined the situation as something that they have no choice over, but to keep going and the verbal prods enhanced this. The subject would also feel some form of commitment towards the experimenter and is reassured that the subject being shocked will have no lasting damage.

Regarding commands that are destructive, they must be given in the context of an institution e.g. university or army. The institution doesn't even have to be a highly prestigious one, as was found in one of Milgram's variations by 'Research Associates of Bridgeport', which was an unimpressive set up. Regardless of the run down office block, findings showed that subjects still obeyed to high levels.



Real Life Atrocities

Milgram's research can be applied to many real-life scenarios. Firstly, the Holocaust and secondly the American soldiers obeying orders to kill people in My Lai, during the Vietnam War. Soldiers carried out orders to kill men, women and children (over 500 in total).

At the court trial, Lt William Calley did not accept any guilt, and reported he was just following orders from Capt. Ernest Medina.

Evaluation/Discussion



Real-life Obedience

Lifton (1986) found that the doctors at Auschwitz cannot be explained by the agentic state. Lifton found that the doctors had gradually changed from medical professionals to doctors carrying out disgusting experiments on helpless prisoners.

Staub (1989) argued that instead of an agentic shift, the experience of the doctors carrying out despicable experiments over a long time, actually changed the way they thought and behaved.



Plain Cruel?

Milgram did consider that some subjects used the experiment to express their sadistic impulses. This idea was also supported in Zimbardo's SPE, where certain guards ramped up the harassment.

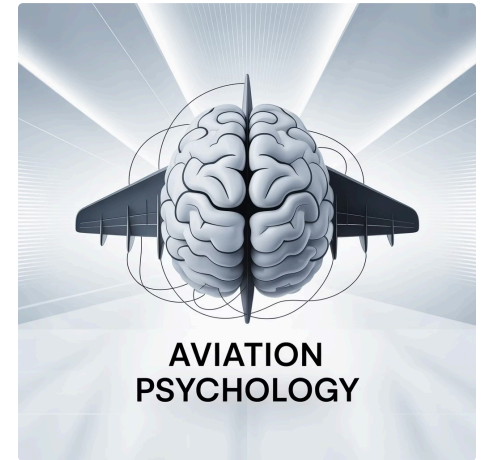
This suggests that for some subjects it might not be the 'agentic state' but rather their desire to inflict pain on others.



Loss of Control

Fennis and Aarts (2012) argued that the 'agentic shift' is more likely if the situation the subjects are in leads to a reduction in personal control.

Researchers found that a reduction in personal control led to greater obedience and was also relevant in bystander apathy (suggesting the agentic shift isn't only found in obedience to authority).



Aviation

Tarnow (2000) looked over data from a US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) in relation to accidents in the US from 1978 to 1990.

Findings highlighted how flight crew were dependent on obeying the captain due to their authority and experience (leading to some catastrophic accidents).

The NTSB found in 19 of the 37 flights, there were 'lack of monitoring' errors.



Questions

1. Outline the role of the agentic state in obedience. (4)
2. Outline the role of 'legitimacy of authority' in obedience. (4)
3. Outline and evaluate two explanations of obedience. (16)
4. Describe Milgram's research into obedience. (6)