Obedience and Authority

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What explains obedience to authority? Are certain individuals more or less

likely to comply? How does situational context factor into obedience?

From the assigned readings, we see that obedience to authority is a reflection of a psychological mechanism in which an individual slips into agentic state and views himself or herself simply as an instrument of authority and lacks any responsibility for what is performed on him or her. Obedience is having an essential structure which underlies the different situations in which is exhibited such as school, military, and home. From Milgram’s reading, we see that the concepts of obedience, legitimacy and authority do not pose any important conceptual challenges. Here, obedience is seen through the teacher’s depressing of levers using shock generators once ordered by the experimenter. This leads to authority being defined as the individual perceived to be in control of a situation in a social setting.

We go on to see from the readings that obedience to authority entails the surrender of a person’s private judgment on the issues at hand. However, the grounds for compliance tend to be different. There are those who comply on the basis of the legitimacy of the actions of those in authority positions while others comply as a result of the level of expertise of those in authority.

A person’s ability to comply to authority is determined by his or her personality. This can be seen through how liberals and conservatives view the various things they come across. Historically, the liberal (blue) states find it difficult to understand how the conservative (red) states view things. We see that conservatives tend to be fearful, threatened and xenophobic. From the reading, we see that fear tends to strengthen the sentiments of authority. This explains why conservatives tend to be obedience to some laws which the liberals believe they should not be there in the first place. For instance in the United States, we see the conservatives supporting illegalization of abortion and same-sex marriages. The opposition of the conservatives to these issues is attributed to their loyalty of the traditional ways of life.

Liberals tend to desire for novelty, expressive and enthusiastic. These aspects make them to susceptible to not obeying authority. Liberals usually want to understand why they should obey an order or laws. This explains why liberals in the United States are in support of abortion and legality of same-sex marriages. They believe that these laws compromise the wellbeing of Americans as they force them to do things they do not want to. For instance, liberals believe that we are all human beings thereby deserving equal treatment. The fact that homosexuals also pay taxes just like heterosexuals is enough to guarantee them equal treatment. Illegalizing their marriages violates their rights and is discriminatory.

The idea behind how different people react to authority is an underlying resonance or match between specific contents of ideological opinions and beliefs and the psychological characteristics of individuals subscribed to the ideologies. In this sense, we see conservatives preferring hierarchy and social stability thereby reinforcing the motivation to obedience and duty. On the other hand, we see liberals preferring equality and social change, aspects that reinforces and reflects the motivational need for creativity, rebelliousness and novelty. These aspects imply that conservatives are more likely to be obedience than liberals. Therefore, certain individuals are more likely to obey authority than others.

From Milgram’s reading, we see that around 65% of the participants in his experiment were able to go on up to 450V. However, the rate dropped to 47% when the he moved the experiment from a lab to down town offices. Here, we see that situational context has a significant impact on obedience. The significant drop shows that people tend to be more obedient in professional settings.

During Milgram’s experiment, we also see that the presence of the experimenter was an important factor for participants’ obedience. This is seen when Milgram tried out the experiment room and gave the ‘teacher’ instructions through telephone, the percentage of participants that continued to obey past 450V dropped to just 20.5%. The reason for the significant drop is because there was no legitimate authority as anyone could be on the phone. Lack of legitimate authority led to the participants not feeling obliged to continue being obedient beyond the 450 volts.

From these results, we see that contextual situations play a significant role to obedience. Most people are likely to obey orders coming directly from their bosses. However, people are unlikely to strictly obey orders from their bosses while they are not around. Here, we see an interesting explanation of obedience which is the perception of an authority figure. However, the authority must be legitimate in order to be obeyed. This explains why most people tend to be obedience in professional settings. Here, people in authority positions have legitimate powers which they can use to affect their careers.

Milgram’s experiment also shows that there are various subtle variables that have a significant impact on obedience. For instance, a person’s dress code has a significant impact on how people will obey a person’s orders. Assume a new boss reporting to work on the first day dressed in a casual manner. If the individual begins giving out orders before informing his or her juniors who he or she really was, the probability of him being ignored will be almost 1. However, if the same individual comes in dressed in a professional manner and start giving out orders, the probability of him being obeyed is very high. The employees are likely to obey the orders mainly because of the way they perceive him or her based on the dressing code. The same applies to officers wearing uniforms and the ones in civilian outfit. People are likely to obey the orders of the uniformed officer while ignoring the ones in civilian clothing.

In conclusion, we see that obedience is a situation where an individual views himself or herself as an agent of authority thereby dropping his or her private judgment on the issue or issues at hand. However, the propensity of individuals’ to obey tends to vary. This is because obedient is determined by a personality. Individuals that are conscientious, fearful and xenophobic are usually conservatives thereby likely to obey orders easily. This is because fear tends to strengthen authority sentiments. However, this is not the case among the liberals who are usually open, outgoing, rebellious and advocate for novelty. These people advocate for social change, hence not satisfied with the current status quo which they believe favors some members of the society while discriminating others. Therefore, these people are likely to be reluctant to obeying some orders or laws. We further see that contextual situations play a significant role in obedience. People tend to be more obedient in professional settings. At the same time, there are several subtle factors which affect how people obey an order, for instance a person’s dress code.

References

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