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Obedience to Authority As Obedience To Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Author: Editor

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Abstract. This article considers political implications of the Milgram obedience studies and of how these studies have fared in professional and lay discourse. A point of departure for the article is a volume edited by Thomas Blass on the studies.

One might posit that the essence of research in political psychology comprises a demonstration of psychological phenomena that seem to cause, be functionally associated with, or otherwise be necessary and/or sufficient in the appearance of important political phenomena. And for those political psychologists who are impelled to help foster human rights and prevent human atrocity, important political phenomena would surely include the physically damaging and painful treatment of people as directed by a figure of authority.

Social psychologist Stanley Milgram carried out such research in the 1961-1962 time frame. He effected a basic procedure wherein an experimental subject was directed by an experimenter to give progressively more severe electric shocks to an individual in an adjoining room each time that individual gave a wrong answer to a memory task. Even though no one was really being shocked, this seemed not to be apparent to the experimental subject. Each experimental subject seemed to believe that the individual was being shocked or could be shocked depending on experimental subject choice. Milgram varied a number of variables including the physical and behavioral presentation of the authority figure, verbal cues from the individual, and various demographic aspects of the experimental subject. A general finding was that about 2/3 of the experimental subjects complied with the experimenter's request to punish mistakes on the memory task up to the last and most severe shock--i.e., even with dangerous and potentially fatal shocks of up to 450 volts.

One common interpretation of Milgram's work is that so-called regular people from many walks of life can be induced to engage in behavior that many of us might relegate only to those who are pathological, aberrant, and evil. Ancillary interpretations include that there is pathology, aberrancy, and evil in all of us; that situational factors may be much more powerful in eliciting behavior than dispositions and traits; and that we may differ in dispositions as to how situationally influenced we can be.

That Milgram--apparently motivated to understand Nazi and German atrocities during World War II--seemed to be on to something did not seem to be at Issue. Both professional psychologists and the lay public alike might have expected a mushrooming forth of research building on the Milgram basic procedure to get at and hopefully minimize and even prevent some variants of human atrocity.

But this did not happen. Instead, many theorists and researchers focused on the ethical treatment of experimental subjects. Specifically, they explored whether Milgram had engaged in unethical behavior by inducing experimental subjects to engage the task of whether to shock someone else and to correspondingly experience noxious cognitive-affective states such as anxiety. The upshot of such ethical calculus was significant difficulty in building on Milgram's work. In essence, Milgram's work became not a light at the end of the tunnel but only a dead end.

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And why this dead end? There are at least four possibilities. First, Milgram's work appropriately sensitized and nurtured an upgraded experimental ethics. With the history of psychology often revealing a motive to divorce psychology from value and a cognition that this motive could even be actualized, Milgram demonstrated that there could not be a Solomonic judgment. Once he did this, no more needed to be done. (However, see Herrera (1997) for an alternative viewpoint.)

Second, Milgram was himself an example of what he sought to study. He directed people to engage in unethical behavior and, thus, was engaging in it himself. His concern for unethical behavior might even be considered a reaction formation--being so against something because he was actually for it.

Third, Milgram's work could have been a motive force to prevent or at least minimize human atrocity throughout the world. The a posteriori focus on Milgram's own ethics fulfilled the requirements of a subjugating discourse leading to a false consciousness among those who might have threatened the viability of atrocity as a political tool.

Fourth, Milgram's basic procedure became so well-known that it has by now been socially transformed into something without further import for understanding or changing the world. Here, Milgram's work on authority may have lost its authority. And if political psychologists do not pick up the scent, they may deserve to lose their authority as well. (See Blass, T. (2000). *Obedience to authority: Current perspectives on the Milgram paradigm*. Erlbaum; Butler, P.V. (1998). *Destructive obedience in 1924: Landis' "Studies of emotional reactions" as a prototype of the Milgram paradigm*. *Irish Journal of Psychology*, 19, 236-247; Herrera, C.D. (1997). *A historical interpretation of deceptive experiments in American psychology*. *History of the Human Sciences*, 10, 23-36; Lutsky, N. (1995). *When is "obedience" obedience? Conceptual and historical commentary*. *Journal of Social Issues*, 51, 55-65; Rochat, F., & Modigliani, A. (1995). *The ordinary quality of resistance: From Milgram's laboratory to the village of Le Chambon*. *Journal of Social Issues*, 51, 195-210; Zimbardo, P.G. (1995). *The psychology of evil: A situationist perspective on recruiting good people to engage in anti-social acts*. *Japanese Journal of Social Psychology*, 11, 125-133.) (Keywords: Authority, Human Rights, Milgram.)