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Authority as Related to the Milgram Studies

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Authority as Related to the Milgram Studies

Cover Page Footnote

This paper was prepared for Persuasion and attitude change class under the direction of Dr. Richard Perloff

Theoretical Framework

The common thesaurus defines “authority” as “the power to give others, make decisions, and enforce obedience,” and synonyms include “command, control, charge, dominance, rule, supremacy, sovereignty, etc.” (Thesaurus, 2015). These are strong words that hint at absolute situations where one person is at the mercy of another. According to Stanley Milgram, the person of authority is the teacher and the subordinate is the learner. Milgram made his experimenter appear as the representative of a legitimate authority, and thus one who seems to have the right to issue commands and whom people feel the obligation to obey.

The social structure also matters in cases of authority. As Milgram states, “an authority system consists of a minimum of two persons sharing the expectation that one of them has the right to prescribe behavior for the other” (Blass, 1999). Milgram notes that a legitimate authority is one who is “perceived to be in a position of social control within a given situation” and that the “power of an authority stems not from personal characteristics but from his perceived position in a social structure” (Blass, 1999). The social structure is his position as an authority figure or a person in a position of authority.

“What is it about a legitimate authority that enables an individual to elicit destructive obedience, the kind that bears kinship to the behavior of a Nazi storm trooper?” First is the ability of a legitimate authority to define reality for the person who accepts his or her authority. As Milgram explains, “there is a propensity for people to accept definitions of action provided by legitimate authority. Although the subject performs the action, he allows authority to define its meaning” (Blass, 1999). The subject feels responsible to the authority directing him but feels no responsibility for the content of the actions that the authority prescribes (Blass, 1999) and refers to it as the agentic state. In 1965, Milgram made the point even stronger saying, “With numbing regularity good people were seen to knuckle under the demands of authority and perform actions that were callous and severe. Men who are in everyday life responsible and decent were seduced by the trappings of authority, by the control of their perceptions, and by the uncritical acceptance of the experimenter’s definition of the situation, into performing harsh acts” (Blass, 1999). The agentic state is described as a situation where the individual can relinquish their responsibility for

the actions performed, thereby attributing the reasons for performing the actions as following orders.

However, after re-examining the rationale of how ordinary people can become perpetrators of atrocity, the contemporary relevance of Milgram's studies is what becomes most striking, especially in the way that these studies can help advance our understanding of the highly pressing social question: when do people do authority's bidding? On this basis, Prod 2 ("the experimenter requires that you continue") proves rather successful, but Prod 4 ("you have no other choice you must continue") does not. The incremental nature of the task, the novelty of the situation, the ability to deflect responsibility, and the lack of opportunity to reflect on one's actions interfere with participants' ability to adopt a critical stance towards the experimenter's demands, and hence limit opportunities for resistance (Reicher, Haslam, and Miller 2014).

Miller et al. considered how Milgram's studies have been used to understand a series of real-world phenomena, including genocide, corporate behavior, legal responsibility, and resistance. Their analysis criticizes the myopia of social psychologists in reducing such phenomena to a matter of obedience alone. In addition, Ent and Baumeister consider the ways in which Milgram's work reflects and impacts the way we view obedience itself. They critically assess Milgram's liberal premise that obedience is a bad thing, instead arguing that it is helpful, if not indispensable, to any form of social functioning and to the application of any cultural norms, be they destructive or constructive. Ent and Baumeister dispute the notion that obedience is an abdication of self-control, concluding that free will is not automatically absent where authority is present. While such critics are skeptical of Milgram, they do agree that the Milgram experiments are valuable if only for how much further they continue to inspire the search for better answers (Reicher, Haslam, and Miller 2014).

As Milgram and his collaborators agreed to fulfill their specialist roles, their coordinated collective actions led to the formation of a bureaucratic process that, at every link in the organizational chain, was ideologically-driven (for "science"), inherently coercive (apparently "important"), strain-resolving (apparently "harmless"), and goal-oriented ("maximize" completions). Consequently, all those in this process had unwittingly become interdependent links in an organizational chain of Milgram's making. This observation is important because, had the

stressful experiments caused a participant to have, say, a heart attack (for which there was an actual risk), Williams, Milgram's lab assistant who gave instructions to the teachers, could have argued that he was just following his employer's instructions to hound participants. Thus, Milgram could have been blamed for the experimenter's directly harmful prods. Within the competitive "up-or-out" U.S. university system, the very junior Milgram (who was in just his late 20s at the time) could have blamed his more senior collaborators at Yale and the National Science Foundation (NSF) for allowing him to pursue such cutting edge research (Russell, 2014). However, because Milgram himself never directly hurt anybody, he could also have come full circle and blamed his assistant Williams for pushing the participants too hard – the point being that the division of labor inherent in the bureaucratic essence would have made it possible for all links in the organizational chain, should they have chosen, to displace responsibility for their eventually "harmful" contributions.

What would anyone of us have done had we been the participant or for that matter the experimenter, or, most difficult of all, Milgram himself? In converting his research ideas into reality, Milgram had to draw upon the sponsorship, labor and expertise of many others. He provided his helpers with different rationales that were supplied to participants, which, by way of morale inversion, all condoned the infliction of harm. The bureaucratic process is forceful in the achievement of malevolent goals largely because the process leading to such ends is, via the division of labor, divided among specialists who need only engage in smaller parts of the process (Russell, 2014). Considering the bureaucratic process may lead someone to consider the validity of the agentic state referred to by Milgram where the participant feels no direct responsibility for his action and justifies it by attributing responsibility to others.

There is also the question of why Milgram's teachers obeyed the instructions they were given. Are they wolfish, sadistic torturers, or are they more like mindless sheep led by an experimenter? In part, the deep appeal of the Milgram experiments is an attempt to tell the wolves from the sheep. Early work on perceptions of Milgram's teachers was initially interpreted as supporting lay dispositionism, a fall back to simplistic mode of explanation. At the time, the prevailing view was that perceivers failed to appreciate the immense power of Milgram's experimenter and consequently attributed strong, negative dispositions to the teachers. Although

it is clear that naïve preceptors often react with dismay upon hearing about Milgram's obedient teachers, researchers should move beyond lay dispositionism in order to understand these reactions. A theoretical analysis of obedience in terms of reasons and goals should not be confused with exculpation; explaining behavior by reasons does not excuse it. Reasoning comes in different flavors ranging from justifications of action to confessions, and people's judgment reflects the content of those explanations. Understanding the mental states – the desires, reasons, and intentions – is key to solving the puzzle of the teachers' obedient behavior. Without an appreciation of mental states, people would be unable to distinguish between malicious and benign behavior, between accidents and purposeful actions, and between acts that are likely to be repeated and those that are not. And thus, without mental states, people would be unable to tell the wolves of Milgram's experiments from the sheep (Monroe & Reeder, 2014).

Another point that should be discussed is whether the experiment was ethically wrong. Diana Baumrind has argued that Milgram's procedures took away participants' dignity, self-esteem, and trust in rational authority, and questioned whether such research was ever justified. However, Milgram responded in vigorous defense of his work. On the basis of the follow-up studies he argued that the great majority of the participants (84%) were "glad" or "very glad" to have taken part and only a tiny minority (1%) were "sorry" or "very sorry" (Reicher, Haslam, & Miller, 2014). He also argued that nearly three-quarters (74%) felt that they had learned something of personal importance during the studies (Reicher, Haslam, & Miller, 2014). But these follow-ups also reveal that over half the participants (60%) reported being either "extremely upset" or "somewhat nervous" during the studies and over a third (36%) reported being bothered by the studies afterwards, with 7% of reporting that they had been bothered "quite a bit" (Reicher, Haslam, & Miller, 2014). So, even employing Milgram's own evidence, it is difficult to draw clear-cut conclusions about the impact of his studies on participants. After a feature in *The Psychologist* on the 50th anniversary of the studies, one letter writer reported that "Milgram's actions [...] were not unethical but also criminal. If this is regarded as good and ethical science, as it seems to be by your authors, then we might as well shut up shop" (Reicher, Haslam, & Miller, 2014).

Some questions to consider include whether the students obeyed the authority because of the original experiment's time period and, consequently, how people might react if the Milgram

experiment was carried out today. Would participants obey or defy? Before answering this question, it should be noted that real-life situations have mirrored the Milgram experiment almost like replications. In one such example, a random person called one of the McDonald's branches, and after identifying himself as a police officer, succeeded in ordering the manager into carrying out an outrageous search on an 18-year-old girl (Courier-Journal, 2005). Unlike Milgram's experiments, this was not a controlled situation, and its perpetration and very spontaneity both lend further validity to Milgram's work on obedience: we might say that today, people seem to more inclined to obey those in supposed positions of authority without questioning.

Would it have mattered if the participants were literate or educated? The answer is not so simple: there is a substantial difference between being literate and being educated. A person can be either or both: one might be educated but not literate enough to decipher or understand common principles. For example, most people know about politics but might not necessarily understand the difference between Ohio issue two and three. In Milgram's experiments, many of the participants were Yale students, so it can be assumed that they were educated enough to be admitted as students in a prestigious university. It could be that either they understood the situation but attributed their response to the "agentic-state" and didn't feel responsible for the reason, or they thought they were helping the researcher to achieve a "phenomenon of great consequence" as Milgram himself referred to it.

From these considerations it can be determined that the Milgram studies are relevant to many different aspects of life, ranging in discipline from psychology and sociology to politics and business. Obedience is a societal norm that is taught from birth, and attitudes learned from a young age are not easily shaken, which would help explain the validity of the Milgram obedience experiment. In addition, in the basis of the agentic state that Milgram explained, the responsibility for performing the action ordered can be pushed to the other person, thereby obliterating possible individual guilt. On the question of ethics, it can be noted that the Milgram experiment did more good than harm, based on the utilitarian perspective: after all, the person supposedly being shocked was acting and it was a test of obedience. In the words of Reicher, Haslam, and Miller, "The mark of any great research lies not only in how far it takes us, but also in how much further it inspires us to go. Equally, the mark of any great scientist lies to a considerable extent in their providing

others with the tools and the motivation to go beyond them. Stanley Milgram was just such a scientist.” Even while acknowledging both the critiques and the praises directed that it has received, we can also observe the proven relevance of Milgram’s controversial work in its real-world reflections and the continuing debates that surround it.

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