

The Impact of Individual Differences and Personality on Obedience

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Abstract. In this research paper, I will explore and examine studies on obedience within psychology, using the OCEAN personality scale to determine whether there is a correlation between personality and the level of obedience displayed by individuals. This topic is relevant in psychology because it has numerous practical applications that can assist teachers and counselors in developing strategies for early identification of disobedience or students who are overly compliant, helping the youth to which if unmonitored can increase their likelihood of gangs and unlawful acts. Aside from the classic Stanley Milgram studies and subsequent sets of studies, there has not been a great deal of research on obedience and its relationship to interpersonal personalities. I assess and correlate a variety of previous studies to determine whether a correlation exists. Results show that people with specific OCEAN scale traits, such as agreeableness and conscientiousness, have a correlation with obedience, where initially these attributes are viewed favorably by society, but under the wrong influence, they are more susceptible to being controlled.

Key Words: Obedience, Personality, Longitudinal Studies, Behavior.

1. Introduction

The word obedience is often defined as a form of social influence that is elicited in response to direct instructions from a person in a position of authority. In the most influential set of obedience studies, which were carried out by Stanley Milgram in the early 1960s, the volunteers were given a series of verbal orders in succession from the authority figure. Personality can be broken down into its most elemental components, which are a person's unique thought processes, emotional states, and behavioral tendencies. It is generally accepted that an individual's personality develops from within themselves and that it maintains a significant degree of stability throughout their lives. The manner in which we characterize the attributes of other people might provide insight into our own personalities. Take, for instance, the phrases "She is giving, caring, and a bit of a perfectionist" or "They are dedicated to their friends and protective of them." There are five fundamental qualities of personality, sometimes known as the "Big 5" personality traits or the "OCEAN" scale. Many different personality psychologists are in agreement that there are these five essential aspects of personality. Extroversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism are the five fundamental characteristics that make up a person. Variations of the Milgram study has been conducted that focuses on the aspect of personality and its impact on obedience. Studies such as Begue, Beauvois, Courbet, Oberle, Lepage, and Duke produces data that proves certain personality traits makes you more prone to obey. It is something that has always piqued my curiosity to learn about how different aspects of a person's personality can affect and be affected by their level of obedience.

2. OCEAN Scale

In the OCEAN scale, people with high levels of the trait openness tend to have diverse interests. They are ready to learn new things and love new experiences, as well as intrigued by the world and other people. People with a high level of this attribute tend to

be more creative and adventurous. People with a low level of this personality attribute are typically more conventional and may struggle with abstract thought. People of high levels of the conscientiousness trait demonstrates attentiveness, impulse control, and goal-directed action. Highly conscientious individuals are typically structured and attentive to the smallest of things. They prepare ahead, consider how their actions influence others, and adhere to deadlines. A person with a lower

score in this key personality feature is less ordered and orderly. They may postpone in order to finish tasks, sometimes missing deadlines entirely. Extroversion is a personality attribute characterized by high levels of emotional expressiveness, sociability, talkativeness, and assertiveness. Extraverted individuals are outgoing and acquire energy in social situations. Being in the company of others energizes and excites them. People with low levels of this attribute or who are introverted tend to be more reserved. They waste less energy in social situations, yet social gatherings can be tiring. To "recharge," introverts frequently demand a period of seclusion and silence. The personality attribute neuroticism is characterized by sorrow, irritability, and emotional instability. Neurotic individuals tend to endure mood fluctuations, anxiety, impatience, and depression. Those low in this personality attribute are typically more emotionally stable and resilient. Lastly, the individuals with the trait agreeableness demonstrates trust, compassion, love, affection, and other prosocial traits and actions. People with a high level of agreeableness tend to be more cooperative, whereas those with a low level of agreeableness tend to be more competitive and even manipulative.

Research indicates that both biological and environmental factors contribute to the formation of our personalities. According to twin studies, both nature and nurture contribute to the formation of each of the five personality traits. 123 pairs of identical twins and 127 pairs of fraternal twins were examined in a study of the genetic and environmental influences on the five attributes. 53% of extraversion, 41% of agreeableness, 44% of conscientiousness, 41% of neuroticism, and 61% of openness were

shown to be heritable, according to the data. In addition, longitudinal studies indicate that these five major personality qualities tend to remain generally persistent throughout adulthood. A four-year study of adults of working age revealed that unfavorable life events have minimal effects on personality. According to studies, maturation may influence the five personality qualities. People tend to grow less extraverted, less neurotic, and less receptive to new experiences as they age. On the other side, agreeableness and conscientiousness seem to rise with age.

3. Previous Research on Obedience

Stanley Milgram, a psychologist at Yale University, conducted one of the most well-known studies of obedience in psychology. He ran an experiment examining the contradiction between authority obedience and personal conscience. Milgram (1963) sought to study whether Germans were especially submissive to authority figures, as this

was a frequent explanation for the Holocaust. Milgram recruited subjects for his experiment using newspaper advertisements seeking male recruits for a Yale University research on learning. Participants were paired with another individual, and they drew lots to determine who would be the 'learner' and who would be the 'teacher.' The draw was fixed such that the participant was always the instructor and one of Milgram's confederates was the student (pretending to be a real participant). The learner Mr. Wallace was placed in a room with electrodes affixed to his head. The instructor and researcher then entered the next room, which had an electric shock generator and a series of switches ranging from 15 volts (a light shock) to 375 volts (intense shocks) to 450 volts (lethal shocks). After he has memorized a list of word pairs, the "teacher" tests him by naming a word and asking the student to identify its partner/pair from a list of four options. When a student commits a mistake, the teacher is instructed to inflict an electric shock, with the intensity of the shock rising each time. On the shock generator were 30 switches designated from 15 volts to 450 volts. For each of the learner's (deliberate) incorrect responses, the instructor administered an electric shock. When a teacher refused to apply a shock, the experimenter was to issue a series of commands or prods to ensure that the experiment continued. There were four prods, and if the first one was ignored, the experimenter would read out the second one, and so on.

The Prods

Prod 1: Please continue.

Prod 2: The experiment requires you to continue.

Prod 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.

Prod 4: You have no other choice but to continue. (Mcleod)

The results indicate that 65 percent of participants continued to 450-volt levels. Each participant maintained 300 volts. Milgram conducted multiple experiments; he conducted

18 versions of his study. He only altered the circumstance (IV) to determine how this affected compliance (DV). A more reasonable explanation for the participants' behavior would be that something about them as individuals prompted them to comply, but a more plausible explanation is that the circumstances they were in impacted and caused them to behave as they did. The formality of the environment, the demeanor of the experimenter, and the fact that they had volunteered and been compensated for their participation in the experiment may have influenced their behavior. Ordinary people are likely to obey an

authority figure's directions, even to the point of murdering an innocent person. Obedience to authority is instilled in all of us by our upbringing. People are more likely to submit to the authority of others if they perceive it to be morally and/or legally justified. This attitude to legal authority is learned in various contexts, such as the home, school, and employment.

4. Milgram's Agency Theory

Milgram explained the actions of his subjects by proposing that persons have two states of behavior in social situations: aggressive and passive. The autonomous state (aggressive) – individuals direct their own actions and accept responsibility for the outcomes. The agentic state (passive) occurs when individuals allow others to guide their actions and then pass on the blame for the results to the person who gave the orders. In other words, they work as agents for the will of another individual. Milgram proposed that two conditions must be met for an individual to reach the agentic state: The individual giving the directions is viewed as qualified to direct the behavior of others. That is, they are considered valid. The individual being commanded has faith that the authority will assume responsibility for what transpires. According to agency theory, people will obey an authority if they feel that the authority will be accountable for the

consequences of their acts. Some features of Milgram's findings support this. When participants were informed that they were responsible for their own conduct, for instance, nearly none of them were willing to comply. In contrast, the experimenter's assurance that he would assume accountability persuaded many unwilling individuals to continue.

5. The Link Between Personality and Levels of Obedience

So, is there actually a link between an individual's personality and their likelihood to be obedient? Psychologists who believe that personality is the origin of variations in humans anticipate that human behavior will be consistent across a variety of social contexts. They believe that there are a variety of measurable personality qualities that can be used to predict our behavior in a given situation. Psychologists that emphasize dispositional elements in behavior explanation assume that human behavior will be consistent across situations and stable over time. For instance, if you are an extrovert today, you will continue to be an extrovert tomorrow and in a year's time. Knowing this, is there data or research to support this theory? Society places an emphasis on particular personality types. Being a loving parent and a high achiever in school, as well as exhibiting little aggression and excellent mental health. However, a new study demonstrates that the personality type that produces these desirable attributes can also result in "destructive and unethical compliance" in certain circumstances.

5.1 Begue et al.

Begue, Beauvois, Courbet, Oberle, Lepage, and Duke extended the well-known Milgram experiment in an effort to determine whether particular personality types were more vulnerable to mindlessly following authority. Begue et al. conducted a similar experiment to the Milgram study,

however this time under the pretense of a television game show in which the authority figure was the host. The 76 volunteers were drawn from Paris and the

surrounding areas and ranged in age from 25 to 55. The participants were mostly unfamiliar with Milgram's experiment. In one case, some contestants were informed that their episode would be televised despite their inability to win money, but the results were not significantly different. The other candidate was secretly planted by the researcher, and the selection process was modified so that the actual participant was always the "questioner" and the plant was always the "contestant." The questioner posed the participant multiple-choice questions based on word memory and was directed to administer progressively stronger electric shocks for each incorrect response. As the voltage of the simulated shocks increased, the participant (who had been taken to a separate room) began to make painful moans and eventually ceased responding. The experiment concluded when the questioner either answered all 27 questions (which would have required them to believe they had administered two 460 volt shocks to the unresponsive contestant) or refused to continue playing despite receiving all five "prods" from the game show host ("go on with the questions"; "go on, don't let yourself get upset"; "the rules say you must go on"; and "you can't make him lose; what wi..."). (*"Personality as a Predictor of Obedience"*)

Table 1. Descriptive data and intercorrelations for primary variables of interest

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	M	SD
1. Shock intensity ^a	.192	.032	.256*	.338**	.075	-.025	.319*	.202	402.24	104.61
2. Male gender	—	.068	.043	.049	.037	-.286	-.001	.107	—	—
3. Extraversion	—	—	.304*	-.175	.115	-.157	.035	-.016	3.20	0.84
4. Agreeableness	—	—	—	.266*	.267*	.263*	.065	.151	4.07	0.51
5. Conscientiousness	—	—	—	—	.113	.059	-.030	.041	4.25	0.58
6. Neuroticism	—	—	—	—	—	.108	.184	-.004	3.67	0.74
7. Openness	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.333*	-.154	3.65	0.63
8. Political orientation	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.351*	5.52	1.40
9. Political activism	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	7.05	1.87

Note. ^aSpearman's rank correlation coefficients are reported given shock intensity's negative skew. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

(*"Big Five - How Does Obedience Correlate with the Big 5 Factors of Personality? - Psychology and Neuroscience Stack Exchange"*)

Each participant was sent an unrelated survey 8 months following the experiment to identify personality qualities on the Big Five scale (Openness, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Neuroticism), as well as questions regarding political orientation and political activism. As predicted by Begue et al., participants with high levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness were more likely to induce the most severe shocks. The results give empirical evidence that individual differences in personality and political characteristics are significant in explaining obedience to authority. Conscientiousness and agreeableness traits were a proper prediction of the intensity of the victim's electric shocks. Despite being a potent determinant of behavior, the results show that situational context does not always trump individual-level determinants of behavior. The relationship between agreeableness and conformity and compliance leads to the desirable social behaviors of avoiding upsetting others or violating social standards. It is remarkable that personality qualities like agreeableness and conscientiousness, which are frequently related with beneficial outcomes like greater mental health, social ability, academic performance, parenting, reduced aggression, and peer relationships, can also lead to harmful and immoral compliance. "Evil" behavior, such as harmful obedience, may be "banal" in the sense that it does not rely on extreme cruelty or ideological hatred, but it may also be helped by qualities that are consensually acceptable in other contexts, such as with family. Even though our findings indicate that dynamic personal and social traits may be detrimental in a context involving counterproductive authority, they also indicate that certain behaviors that may destabilize social functioning, such as political engagement, may express and even strengthen individual dispositions that are both beneficial and indispensable to the entire society, at least in certain important phases. The individual who pushes a stranger aside from the front of a speeding car is an impulsive person who does not think twice

before acting. And sometimes the attentive parent who gets along well with others and blends in is the one who would comply if an authority instructed them to harm someone. Our personalities define our identities. Nonetheless, with individuals who are aware of their acts and actively make their own moral decisions, humans of all personalities can prevent a repeat of the past's atrocities.

5.2 Findings

Through Begue et al., from the data collected, the study also shows how gender (male or female) and the other 3 traits of the OCEAN scale, extroversion, openness and neuroticism does not significantly correlate with levels of obedience. The primary limitation of this study was that its findings were based on correlations between participants' behavior in a Milgram-style obedience study and their responses to a phone survey conducted eight months after their participation in the experiment. We cannot rule out the possibility that their participation in the initial experiment led to individual differences in disposition. Given the relative stability of the personality variables we

measured especially the Big Five (Bergeman et al., 1993), it is safe to believe that the experiment did not significantly influence personality traits. In addition, due to the length of time between the experiment and the administration of the personality tests, any impact on personality would have likely diminished with time. Psychology researchers have attempted to decipher the function of your personality and how it impacts your level of obedience for over fifty years. The findings give new empirical data demonstrating the significance of individual differences in agreeableness, conscientiousness, political orientation, and social involvement.

6. Other Related Studies

Thomas Blass (1991) also analyzes work on personality elements linked with obedience, based on the early work of Stanley Milgram and his research assistant Alan Elms, examining "locus of control" and authoritarian personality characteristics. Some people have a "internal locus of control," meaning that they take greater responsibility for their actions because they believe they are in control of what they do and what happens to them, while others have a "external locus of control," meaning that they take less responsibility for their actions and believe that what they do and what happens to them is governed more by the situation and other people around them, circumstances. Blass initially believed that people with an internal locus of control are more likely to be defiant, whilst those with an external locus of control are more likely to be obedient. However, the facts on this topic are highly conflicting. However, Blass has re-analyzed data collected by Holland (1966) and discovered evidence that "internals" are more likely to drop out than "externals."

People with high levels of the authoritarianism trait are submissive to authority but harsh to those viewed as subordinate to themselves. This personality pattern reflects a desire for security, order, power, and status, with a desire for structured lines of authority, a conventional set of values or outlook, and a tendency to be hostile toward or use as scapegoats' members of minority or nontraditional groups. Blass first believed that the higher the shocks applied, the more authoritarian the personality. Individuals who scored high on authoritarianism were significantly more likely to comply, whereas low authoritarianism was related with disobedience and withdrawal from the study.

7. Implications

These measurable personality traits may aid teachers or counselors in developing tactics for early identification of disobedient or students that are too compliant. Scientists can now identify children whose authoritarian personality makes them susceptible to join gangs, for instance. Criminal gangs frequently order its members to commit unlawful and immoral acts. As a type of "initiation test" to prove their worthiness to join the gang, young members have committed heinous knife and gun crimes on the urging of gang leaders, resulting in some terrible outcomes. If personality traits influence obedience, these can be recognized early on. The notion that certain individuals are "natural

followers" or are predisposed to be prejudiced and wary of strangers is plausible on the surface. Individual differences include distinguishing characteristics, such as age, sex, and education. It contains personalities that may be very submissive, so in the end research on this particular subject can be very helpful and beneficial to society which is why it is important.

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