

Leadership researchers typically distinguish leadership from power (e.g. Chemers, 2001; Lord, Brown, & Harvey, 2001). Leadership is a process of influence that enlists and mobilises others in the attainment of collective goals; it imbues people with the group's attitudes and goals and inspires them to work towards achieving them. Leadership is not a process that requires people to exercise power over others in order to gain compliance or, more extremely, in order to coerce or force people. Leadership may actually be more closely associated with conformity processes than power processes, and power may be social construct rather than a cause of effective leadership (Hogg, 2010; Hogg & Van Knippenberg, 2003; Hogg, Van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012a; Reid & Ng, 1999).

John Turner (2005) has critiqued traditional perspectives on power and influence. The traditional perspective is that power resides in control of resources and is the basis of influence that psychologically attaches people to groups. In contrast, Turner argues that attachment to and identification with a group is the basis of influence processes. Those who are influential are invested with power, and power allows control of resources. Turner's approach is a social identity analysis (see Chapter 11). It invokes social identity theory's conceptualisation of influence in groups (e.g. Turner, 1981b; see the section 'Social identity and self-categorization' in this chapter) and of leadership in groups (e.g. Hogg & Van Knippenberg, 2003; see the section 'Social identity and leadership' in Chapter 9).

Obedience to authority

In 1951 Solomon Asch published the results of a now-classic experiment on conformity, in which student participants conformed to incorrect judgements of line lengths made by a numerical majority (see later in this chapter for details). Some critics were soundly unimpressed by this study: the task, judging line length, was trivial, and there were no significant consequences for conforming or resisting.

Stanley Milgram (1974, 1992) was one of these critics; he tried to replicate Asch's study, but with a task that had important consequences attached to the decision to conform or remain independent. He decided to have experimental confederates apparently administer electric shocks to another person to see whether the true participant, who was not a confederate, would conform. Before being able to start the study, Milgram needed to run a control group to obtain a base rate for people's willingness to shock someone *without* social pressure from confederates. For Milgram, this almost immediately became a crucial question in its own right. In fact, he never actually went ahead with his original conformity study, and the control group became the basis of one of social psychology's most dramatic research programmes.

A larger social issue influenced Milgram. Adolf Eichmann was the Nazi official most directly responsible for the logistics of Hitler's 'Final Solution', in which 6 million Jews were systematically slaughtered. Hannah Arendt (1963) reported his trial in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, bearing the riveting subtitle *A Report on the Banality of Evil*. This captures a scary finding, one that applied to Eichmann and later to other war criminals who have been brought to trial. These 'monsters' may not have been monsters at all. They were often mild-mannered, softly spoken, courteous people who repeatedly and politely explained that they did what they did not because they hated Jews (or Muslims, etc.) but because they were ordered to do it – they were simply obeying orders. Looks can, of course, be deceiving. Peter Malkin, the Israeli agent who captured Eichmann in 1960, discovered that Eichmann knew some Hebrew words, and he asked:

'Perhaps you're familiar with some other words,' I said. 'Aba. Ima. Do those ring a bell?'

'Aba, Ima,' he mused, trying hard to recall. 'I don't really remember. What do they mean?'

'Daddy, Mommy. It's what Jewish children scream when they're torn from their parents' arms.' I paused, almost unable to contain myself. 'My sister's boy, my favorite playmate, he was just your son's age. Also blond and blue-eyed, just like your son. And you killed him.'

Genuinely perplexed by the observation, he actually waited a moment to see if I would clarify it. 'Yes,' he said finally, 'but he was Jewish, wasn't he?'

Malkin and Stein (1990, p. 110)

Milgram brought these strands together in a series of experiments with the underlying premise that people are socialised to respect the authority of the state (Milgram, 1963, 1974; also see Blass, 2004). If we enter an **agentic state**, we can absolve ourselves of responsibility for what happens next. Participants in his experiments were recruited from the community by advertisement and reported to a laboratory at Yale University to take part in a study of the effect of punishment on human learning. They arrived in pairs and drew lots to determine their roles in the study (one was the 'learner', the other the 'teacher'). See Box 7.2 for a description of what happened next, and check how the shock generator looked in Figure 7.2.

Agentic state

A frame of mind thought by Milgram to characterise unquestioning obedience, in which people as agents transfer personal responsibility to the person giving orders.

Factors influencing obedience

Milgram (1974) conducted eighteen experiments, in which he varied different parameters to investigate factors influencing obedience. In all but one experiment the participants were 20- to 50-year-old males, not attending university, from a range of occupations and socio-economic levels. In one study in which women were the participants, exactly the same level of obedience was obtained as with male participants. In an attempt to see if twenty-first-century Americans would be obedient like their 1970s counterparts, Burger (2009) conducted a partial replication of the original Milgram studies (a full replication was not possible due to research ethics concerns – see the next subsection on 'The ethical legacy of Milgram's experiments'). Burger discovered only slightly lower levels of obedience than in the original 1970s studies.

Milgram's experiment has been replicated in Italy, Germany, Australia, Britain, Jordan, Spain, Austria and The Netherlands (Smith, Bond, & Kağıtçıbaşı, 2006). Complete obedience ranged from over 90 per cent in Spain and The Netherlands (Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1986), through over 80 per cent in Italy, Germany and Austria (Mantell, 1971), to a low of 40 per cent among Australian men and only 16 per cent among Australian women (Kilham & Mann, 1974). Some studies have also used modified settings: for example, Meeus and Raaijmakers (1986) used an administrative obedience setting where an 'interviewer' was required to harass a 'job applicant'.

One reason why people continue to administer electric shocks may be that the experiment starts very innocuously with quite trivial shocks. Once people have committed themselves to a course of action (i.e. to give shocks), it can be difficult subsequently to change their minds. The process, which reflects the psychology of sunk costs in which once committed to a course of action people will continue their commitment even if the costs increase dramatically (Fox & Hoffman, 2002), may be similar to that involved in the foot-in-the-door technique of persuasion (Freedman & Fraser, 1966; see Chapter 6).

A significant factor in obedience is *immediacy of the victim* – how close or obvious the victim is to the participant. Milgram (1974) varied the level of immediacy across a number of experiments. We have seen above that 65 per cent of people 'shocked to the limit' of 450 V when the victim was unseen and unheard except for pounding on the wall. In an even less immediate condition in which the victim was neither seen nor heard at all, 100 per cent of people went to the end. The baseline condition (the one described in detail earlier) yielded 62.5 per cent obedience. As immediacy increased from this baseline, obedience decreased: when the victim was visible in the same room, 40 per cent obeyed to the limit; and when the teacher actually had to hold the victim's hand down on to the electrode to receive the shock, obedience dropped to a still frighteningly high 30 per cent.

Immediacy may prevent dehumanisation of the victim (cf. Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Loughnan, & Kashima, 2008), making it easier to view a victim as a living, breathing person like oneself and thus to empathise with their thoughts and feelings. Hence, pregnant women

Box 7.2 Research classic**Milgram's procedure in an early study of obedience to authority**

Together with the experimenter in the Yale laboratory, there was a teacher (the real participant) and a learner (actually, a confederate).

The learner's role was to learn a list of paired associates, and the teacher's role was to administer an electric shock to the learner every time the learner gave a wrong associate to the cue word. The teacher saw the learner being strapped to a chair and having electrode paste and electrodes attached to his arm. The teacher overheard the experimenter explain that the paste was to prevent blistering and burning, and overheard the learner telling the experimenter that he had a slight heart condition. The experimenter also explained that although the shocks might be painful, they would cause no permanent tissue damage.

The teacher was now taken into a separate room housing a shock generator (see Figure 7.2). He was told to administer progressively larger shocks to the learner every time the learner made a mistake – 15 V for the first mistake, 30 V for the next mistake, 45 V for the next and so on. An important feature of the shock generator was the descriptive labels attached to the scale of increasing voltage. The teacher was given a sample shock of 45 V, and then the experiment commenced.

The learner got some pairs correct but also made some errors, and very soon the teacher had reached 75 V, at which point the learner grunted in pain. At 120 V the learner shouted out to the experimenter that the shocks were becoming painful. At 150 V the learner, or now more accurately the 'victim', demanded to be released from the experiment, and at 180 V he cried out that he could stand it no longer. The victim continued to cry out in pain at each shock, rising to an 'agonised scream' at 250 V. At 300 V the

victim ceased responding to the cue words; the teacher was told to treat this as a 'wrong answer'.

Throughout the experiment, the teacher was agitated and tense, and often asked to break off. To such requests, the experimenter responded with an ordered sequence of replies proceeding from a mild 'please continue', through 'the experiment requires that you continue' and 'it is absolutely essential that you continue', to the ultimate 'you have no other choice, you must go on'.

A panel of 110 experts on human behaviour, including 39 psychiatrists, were asked to predict how far a normal, psychologically balanced human being would go in this experiment. These experts believed that only about 10 per cent would exceed 180 V, and no one would obey to the end. These predictions, together with the actual and the remarkably different behaviour of the participants are shown schematically in Figure 7.3).

In a slight variant of the procedure described above, in which the victim could not be seen or heard but pounded on the wall at 300 V and 315 V and then went silent, almost everyone continued to 255 V, and 65 per cent continued to the very end – administering massive electric shocks to someone who was not responding and who had previously reported having a heart complaint!

The participants in this experiment were quite normal people – forty 20- to 50-year-old men from a range of occupations. Unknown to them, however, the entire experiment involved an elaborate deception in which they were always the teacher, and the learner/victim was actually an experimental stooge (an avuncular-looking middle-aged man) who had been carefully briefed on how to react. No electric shocks were actually administered apart from the 45 V sample shock to the teacher.

Note: See extracts from Milgram's work at <http://www.panarchy.org/milgram/obedience.html>.

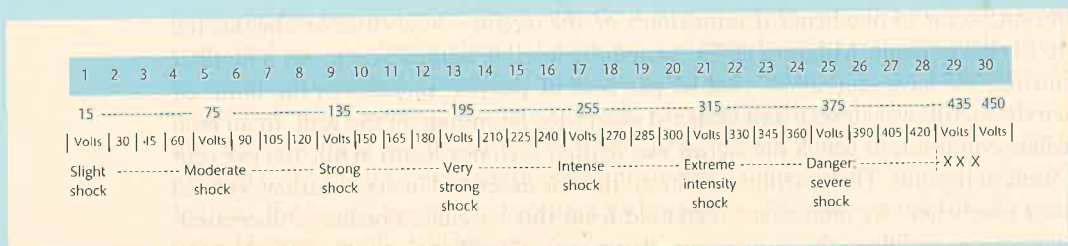


Figure 7.2 Milgram's shock generator

Participants in Milgram's obedience studies were confronted with a 15–450 Volt shock generator that had different descriptive labels, including the frighteningly evocative 'XXX', attached to the more impersonal voltage values.

Source: Milgram (1974).

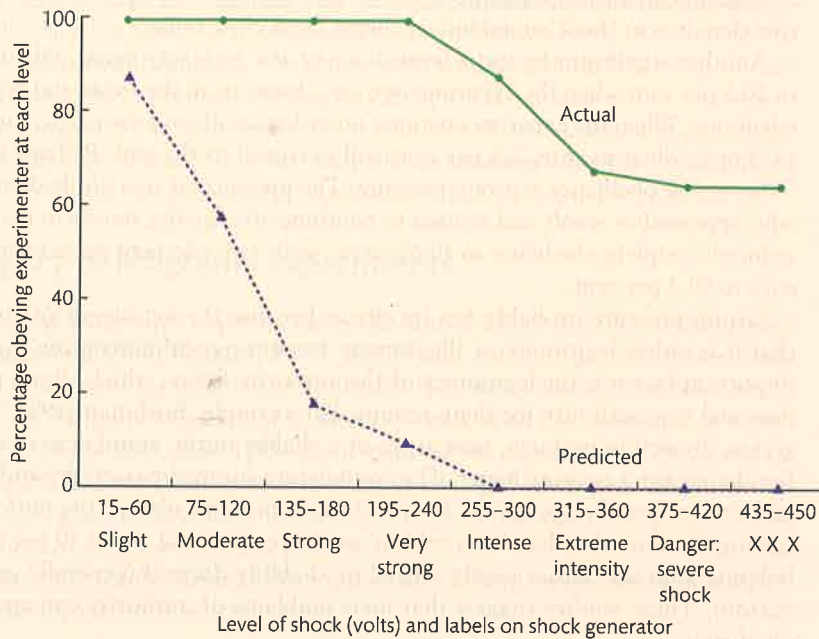


Figure 7.3 Predicted versus actual levels of shock given to a victim in Milgram's obedience-to-authority experiment

'Experts' on human behaviour predicted that very few normal, psychologically balanced people would obey orders to administer more than a 'strong' electric shock to the 'incompetent' learner in Milgram's experiment – in actual fact 65 per cent of people were obedient right to the very end, going beyond 'danger: severe shock', into a zone labelled 'XXX'.

Source: Based on data from Milgram (1974).



Obedience to authority

This guard's uniform symbolises complete unquestioning obedience to the British Monarch as a legitimate authority.

express greater commitment to their pregnancy after having seen an ultrasound scan that clearly reveals body parts (Lydon & Dunkel-Schetter, 1994); and it is easier to press a button to wipe out an entire village from 12,000 metres or from deep under the ocean in a submarine than it is to shoot an individual enemy from close range.

Another significant factor is *immediacy of the authority figure*. Obedience was reduced to 20.5 per cent when the experimenter was absent from the room and relayed directions by telephone. When the experimenter gave no orders at all, and the participant was entirely free to choose when to stop, 2.5 per cent still persisted to the end. Perhaps the most dramatic influence on obedience is group pressure. The presence of two disobedient peers (i.e. others who appeared to revolt and refused to continue after giving shocks in the 150–210 V range) reduced complete obedience to 10 per cent, while two obedient peers raised complete obedience to 92.5 per cent.

Group pressure probably has its effects because the actions of others help to confirm that it is either legitimate or illegitimate to continue administering the shocks. Another important factor is the legitimacy of the authority figure, which allows people to abdicate personal responsibility for their actions. For example, Bushman (1984, 1988) had confederates, dressed in uniform, neat attire or a shabby outfit, stand next to someone fumbling for change for a parking meter. The confederate stopped passers-by and ‘ordered’ them to give the person change for the meter. Over 70 per cent obeyed the uniformed confederate (giving ‘because they had been told to’ as the reason) and about 50 per cent obeyed a confederate who was either neatly attired or shabbily dressed (generally giving altruism as a reason). These studies suggest that mere emblems of authority can create unquestioning obedience.

Milgram’s original experiments were conducted by lab-coated scientists at prestigious Yale University, and the purpose of the research was quite clearly the pursuit of scientific knowledge. What would happen if these trappings of legitimate authority were removed? Milgram ran one experiment in a run-down inner-city office building. The research was ostensibly sponsored by a private commercial research firm. Obedience dropped, but to a still remarkably high 48 per cent.

Milgram’s research addresses one of humanity’s great failings – the tendency for people to obey orders without first thinking about (1) what they are being asked to do and (2) the consequences of their obedience for other living beings. However, obedience can sometimes be beneficial: for example, many organisations would grind to a halt or would be catastrophically dysfunctional if their members continually, painstakingly negotiated orders (think about an emergency surgery team, a flight crew, a commando unit). (Now consider the first ‘What do you think?’ question.) However, the pitfalls of blind obedience, contingent on immediacy, group pressure, group norms and legitimacy, are also many. For example, American research has shown that medication errors in hospitals can be attributed to the fact that nurses overwhelmingly defer to doctors’ orders, even when metaphorical alarm bells are ringing (Lesar, Briceland, & Stein, 1977).

In another study focusing on organisational obedience, 77 per cent of participants who were playing the role of board members of a pharmaceutical company advocated continued marketing of a hazardous drug merely because they felt that the chair of the board favoured this decision (Brief, Dukerich, & Doran, 1991).

Before closing this section on obedience, it is worth noting that reservations have been expressed over the connection between destructive obedience as Milgram conceived it on one hand, and the Holocaust itself on the other. Cialdini and Goldstein (2004), in their review of social influence research, have pointed out that:

- Milgram’s participants were troubled by the orders they were given, whereas many of the perpetrators of Holocaust atrocities obeyed orders willingly and sometimes sadistically.
- Although the Nazi chain of command and the experimenter in Milgram’s studies had apparent legitimate authority, the experimenter had expert authority as well.

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Reicher, Haslam and Smith (2012) take a slightly different tack that draws on the social identity theory of leadership (e.g. Hogg, Van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012b). Drawing on Milgram's findings across his various studies, they reinterpret the results as reflecting group-membership-based leadership rather than obedience to an authority figure. The participants are in an uncertain and stressful situation where they need guidance about what to do – they need leadership. Whether they administer strong shocks or not is a matter not of obeying or disobeying the experimenter, but of whether the conditions of the experiment encourage identification with the experimenter and the scientific community that the experimenter represents, or with the learner and the general community that the learner represents.

The ethical legacy of Milgram's experiments

One enduring legacy of Milgram's experiments is the heated debate that it stirred up over research ethics (Baumrind, 1964; Rosnow, 1981). Recall that Milgram's participants really believed they were administering severe electric shocks that were causing extreme pain to another human being. Milgram was careful to interview and, with the assistance of a psychiatrist, follow up with the more than 1,000 participants in his experiments. There was no evidence of psychopathology, and 83.7 per cent of those who had taken part indicated that they were glad, or very glad, to have been in the experiment (Milgram, 1992, p. 186). Only 1.3 per cent were sorry or very sorry to have participated.

The ethical issues really revolve around three questions concerning the ethics of subjecting experimental participants to short-term stress:

- 1 Is the research important? If not, then such stress is unjustifiable. However, it can be difficult to assess the 'importance' of research objectively.
- 2 Is the participant free to terminate the experiment at any time? How free were Milgram's participants? In one sense, they were free to do whatever they wanted, but it was never made explicit to them that they could terminate whenever they wished – in fact, the very purpose of the study was to persuade them to remain!
- 3 Does the participant freely consent to being in the experiment in the first place? In Milgram's experiments the participants did not give fully informed consent: they volunteered to take part, but the true nature of the experiment was not fully explained to them.

This raises the issue of deception in social psychology research. Kelman (1967) distinguishes two reasons for deceiving people. The first is to induce them to take part in an otherwise unpleasant experiment. This is, ethically, a highly dubious practice. The second reason is that in order to study the automatic operation of psychological processes, participants need to be naive regarding the hypotheses, and this often involves some deception concerning the true purpose of the study and the procedures used. The fallout from this debate has been a code of ethics to guide psychologists in conducting research. The principal components of the code are:

- participation must be based on fully informed consent;
- participants must be explicitly informed that they can withdraw, without penalty, at any stage of the study;
- participants must be fully and honestly debriefed at the end of the study.

A modern university ethics committee would be unlikely to approve the impressively brazen deceptions that produced many of social psychology's classic research programmes of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. What is more likely to be endorsed is the use of minor and harmless procedural deceptions enshrined in clever cover stories that are considered essential to preserve the scientific rigour of much experimental social psychology. The main ethical requirements in all modern research involving human participants are also discussed in Chapter 1, and see the American Psychological Association's (2002) Code of Ethics at <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code2002.html>.