

Quadrant II – Transcript and Related Materials

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Notes

Destructive Obedience: Why It Occurs?

Why does such destructive obedience occur? Why were participants in these experiments—and so many people in these tragic situations outside the laboratory—so willing to yield to this form of social influence? Social psychologists have identified several factors that seem to play a role, and together, these combine to make an array of situational pressures most people find very hard to resist.

First, in many situations, the people in authority relieve those who obey of the responsibility for their own actions. “I was only carrying out orders” is the defense many offer after obeying harsh or cruel commands. In life situations, this transfer of responsibility may be implicit; the person in charge (e.g., the military or police officer) is assumed to have the responsibility for what happens. In Milgram’s experiments, this transfer of responsibility was explicit. Participants were told at the start that the experimenter (the authority figure), not they, would be responsible for the learner’s well-being. In view of this fact, it is not surprising that many obeyed; after all, they were completely off the hook.

Second, people in authority often possess visible badges or signs of their status. They wear special uniforms or insignia, have special titles, and so on. These serve to remind many individuals of the social norm “Obey the people in

charge.” This is a powerful norm, and when confronted with it, most people find it difficult to disobey. After all, we do not want to do the wrong thing, and obeying the commands of those who are in charge usually helps us avoid such errors. In Milgram’s study, the experimenter wore a white lab coat, which suggested that he was a doctor or someone with authority. So it’s not surprising that so many participants obeyed the commands this person issued.

A third reason for obedience in many situations where the targets of such influence might otherwise resist involves the gradual escalation of the authority figure’s orders. Initial commands may call for relatively mild actions, such as merely arresting people. Only later do orders come to require behavior that is dangerous or objectionable. For example, police or military personnel may at first be ordered only to question or threaten potential victims. Gradually, demands are increased to the point where these personnel are commanded to beat, torture, or even murder unarmed civilians. In a sense, people in authority use the foot-in-the-door technique, asking for small actions first but ever-larger ones later. In a similar manner, participants in Milgram’s research were first required to deliver only mild and harmless shocks to the victim. Only as the sessions continued did the intensity of these “punishments” rise to potentially harmful levels.

Finally, events in many situations involving destructive obedience move very quickly: demonstrations turn into riots, arrests into mass beatings or murder, and so on, quite suddenly. The fast pace of such events gives participants little time for reflection or systematic thought: People are ordered to obey and—almost automatically—they do so.

Such conditions prevailed in Milgram’s research; within a few minutes of entering the laboratory, participants found themselves faced with commands to deliver strong electric shocks to the learner. This fast pace, too, may tend to increase obedience.

In sum, the high levels of obedience generated in Milgram’s studies are not as mysterious as they may seem. A social-psychological analysis of the conditions existing both there and in many real-life situations identifies several factors that, together, may make it very difficult for individuals to resist the commands they receive (these are summarized in Figure 8.18).

The consequences, of course, can be truly tragic for innocent and often defenseless victims.

Destructive Obedience:

Resisting Its Effects

Now that we have considered some of the factors responsible for the strong tendency to obey sources of authority, we turn to a related question:

How can this type of social influence be resisted? Several strategies may be helpful in this respect.

First, individuals exposed to commands from authority figures can be reminded that *they*—not the authorities—are responsible for any harm produced. Under these conditions, sharp reductions in the tendency to obey have been observed.

Second, individuals can be provided with a clear indication that beyond some point, total submission to destructive commands is inappropriate. One procedure that can be effective in this regard involves exposing individuals to the actions of *disobedient models*— people who refuse to obey an authority figure's commands. Research findings indicate that such models can reduce unquestioning obedience- although as Burger (2009) reported, not always.

Third, individuals may find it easier to resist influence from authority figures if they question the expertise and motives of these figures. Are those in authority really in a better position to judge what is appropriate and what is not? What motives lie behind their commands—socially beneficial goals or selfish gains? Dictators always claim that their brutal orders reflect their undying concern for their fellow citizens and are in their best interest, but to the extent large numbers of people question these motives, the power of such dictators can be eroded and perhaps, ultimately, be swept away.

Finally, simply knowing about the power of authority figures to command blind obedience may be helpful in itself. Some research findings suggest that when individuals learn about the results of this social psychological research, they often recognize these as, and sometimes change their behavior to take into account this new knowledge. With respect to destructive obedience, there is

some hope that knowing about this process can enhance individuals' resolve to resist. To the extent this is so, then even exposure to findings as disturbing as those reported by Milgram can have positive social value.

The power of authority figures to command obedience is certainly great, but it is not irresistible. Under appropriate conditions, it can be countered or reduced. As in many other areas of life, there is a choice. Deciding to resist the commands of people in authority can, of course, be highly dangerous: they usually control most of the weapons, the army, and the police. Yet, history is filled with instances in which the authority of powerful and entrenched regimes has been resisted by courageous people who ultimately triumphed, despite the long odds against them. The lesson from this and related events is clear: Power is never permanent and, ultimately, victory often goes to those who stand for freedom and decency rather than to those who wish to control the lives of their fellow human beings