Attribution of Responsibility and Trust in the
Milgram Obedience Experiment

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The two primary theoretical explanations for the findings of the Milgram (1963, 1974) obedience studies are that of Milgram, stressing the role of relinquished responsibility to the authority on the one hand, and that of Mixon (1971, 1972), for whom trust in the experimenter is the key element on the other hand. The aim of the 2 studies reported in this article, using edited portions of the film Obedience (Milgram, 1965), was to explore the naive social perceiver’s understanding of the dynamics of obedience to authority through his or her attributions about responsibility and trust, and thereby to provide some input into the theoretical controversy between Milgram and Mixon. Both studies were more supportive of Milgram’s than of Mixon’s position.

Although it has been over thirty years since Milgram (1963) first reported his startling findings that a majority of subjects (65%), commanded to give what they believed were increasingly painful shocks to another person, were fully obedient, his work still stimulates research, comment, and analysis (e.g., Elms, 1993; Krauthammer, 1985; Markle, 1995; Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1987; for reviews, see Blass, 1991, 1992, 1993; Miller, 1986). Yet, despite the continued attention, an understanding of behavior in the obedience studies remains elusive and a source of controversy.

The two main theoretical positions attempting to explain obedience in the Milgram studies are those of Milgram (1974) and Mixon (1971, 1972). Milgram believes that obedience is made possible through the subject’s entry into an “agentic state” in which a person no longer views himself as acting autonomously, but rather as an agent of an authority. A main feature of the state of agency is a shift in responsibility—the subject sheds responsibility for his actions and hands it over to the person in charge. Actions, no matter how destructive they may be, are no longer guided by moral considerations but

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1An earlier version of this report was presented at the annual meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on March 30, 1990.

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rather by how well they carry out the authority’s commands. Mixon (1971, 1972), on the other hand, has a more benign view of obedient behavior. He finds it understandable that subjects should obey, given the reassurances about the learner’s safety conveyed both by the credible scientific context and the experimenter’s statements that although the shocks may be painful, they are not dangerous. It is only when subjects begin to have doubts about the safety of the learner that they become disobedient. Thus, for Mixon, the key element is trust in the experimenter and his reassurances about the safety of the procedures.

The empirical support for both theoretical positions is mixed (see Blass, 1992, for a review). Even Milgram’s (1974) own evidence for his shift-in-responsibility process is weak. Subjects in his four-part proximity series were asked postexperimentally to divide up a “responsibility clock” among themselves, the experimenter, and the victim. Consistent with his theory, obedient subjects allocated less responsibility to themselves than did defiant participants, but contrary to his agentic-state conceptualization, they were not more likely to relinquish it to the authority. The figures for both defiant and obedient subjects were virtually identical (Table 1).

The aim of the present studies was to explore the naive social perceivers’ understanding of the dynamics of obedience to authority through his or her attributions about responsibility and trust, and thereby to provide some input into the theoretical controversy about how to explain obedience in the Milgram studies. Clearly, the most direct input would come from further studies of obedient behavior using Milgram’s paradigm, rather than attributional studies. However, even if I were inclined to conduct such studies, it is highly unlikely that any Institutional Review Board (IRB) would permit it. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, no Milgram-type obedience studies have been conducted in the U.S. since the mid-1970s, with the most recent replications being conducted elsewhere (Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1987, in Holland; Schurz, 1985, in Austria). Yet, I believe it is of value to investigate the layperson’s understanding of, and attributions about, obedience in the Milgram study, since it is widely assumed by attribution researchers that it is important to study people’s causal attributions about events because they presumably act on those attributions (e.g., Jones et al., 1971; Kelley & Michela, 1980).

**Study 1**

**Method**

The subjects were 38 introductory psychology students who were individually shown a short (about 12 min long), edited videotape version of Milgram’s
Table 1

Assignment of Responsibility by Milgram’s Defiant and Obedient Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experimenter</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Learner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defiant subjects</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obedient subjects</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* From Milgram, 1974, p. 203. Reproduced by permission of Alexandra Milgram.

(1965) documentary film, *Obedience*, which was similar to the one used in another study (Blass, 1995). The final portion of the videotape shows a subject, referred to by the pseudonym “Fred Prozi” in Milgram (1974), at the shock generator. The full version of the film shows him continuing to the end and giving 450 V. The edited version shown to my subjects was stopped right after Prozi gave the 180-V shock.

Subjects were then given a booklet containing the dependent measures to complete. They were randomly assigned to either an obedient set or a defiant set condition by the variation of information on the cover sheet of the booklet, as follows:

In the experiment you just saw, 65% of the subjects continued up the shock generator and ended up pressing the final switch—450 V. The subject you saw was one of those people. [The subject you saw was not one of those people. He pressed the next two switches—195 V and 210 V—and then stopped.] Please answer the following questions.

The two dependent measures followed on the next two pages. One, adapting Milgram’s (1974, p. 203) wording, asked subjects to indicate “how you think the subject you just saw divided up responsibility for the fact that the learner was given shocks against his will.” The response options provided for the allocation of percentages of responsibility to the experimenter, the subject, and the learner, and showed that they should add up to 100%, or “total responsibility.” The second dependent measure asked the subject to indicate on a 9-point scale how much he thought “this subject trusted the experimenter to make sure that the learner would not be harmed.” The last page contained questions to screen subjects with prior familiarity with the film.
Table 2

Assignment of Responsibility by Subject in Milgram's Film as Estimated by Viewers of the Film (Perceivers)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceiver's set</th>
<th>Experimenter</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Learner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defiant</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obedient</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Seven subjects (3 in the obedient set and 4 in the defiant set conditions) who indicated they had seen or might have seen the film before were eliminated from the analyses, leaving a total of 31 subjects. Scores on the responsibility allocation measure were analyzed by means of a 2 × 3 (Perceiver's Set × Role in Obedience Experiment) mixed analysis of variance, with repeated measures on the second factor. There was a significant main effect of role, $F(2, 58) = 21.09, p < .001$, due to the fact that much less responsibility was allocated to the learner ($M = 10.80\%$) than to either the experimenter ($M = 47.10\%$) or the subject ($M = 42.10\%$). More interestingly, there was a significant Set × Role interaction, $F(2, 58) = 7.02, p < .002$. As can be seen in Table 2, when the subject in the film was thought to have been obedient, he was seen to have allocated more responsibility to the experimenter than to himself, while the reverse was the case when he was thought to have defied the experimenter. This pattern is entirely consistent with Milgram's agentic-state perspective. There was, however, no significant effect of set on the trust measure, $F(1, 29) = 1.37, p = .251$, contrary to what one might have expected on the basis of Mixon's theorizing.

Study 2

Method

Another group of 38 subjects were shown an edited videotape version of Milgram's (1965) film, Obedience. Three indicated that they had seen or might have seen the film before and were therefore dropped from the analyses.
Subjects were randomly assigned to watch one of two versions of the tape, either a "No responsibility" version, which was the same tape as the one used in Study 1 (i.e., the tape stops right after Prozi gives 180 V) or a "Responsibility" version, in which the tape continues briefly, just long enough to show a dialogue in which a reluctant Prozi asks the experimenter "... who's going to take responsibility if anything happens to that gentleman?" and the latter answers: "I'm responsible for anything that happens to him. Continue please." The tape is stopped at this point. Subjects then completed three dependent measures. In the first, using a schematic diagram of a shock generator showing shock levels beginning with 180 V and continuing in 15-V increments to 450 V, subjects were asked to guess the highest amount of shock given by the last subject (Prozi). The second was the same trust measure that was used in Study 1. The third indicated to the subjects that a certain percentage of the participants in the study (depicted in the film) gave the highest shock possible (450 V) and were asked to indicate what they thought that percentage was.

Results

Although subjects who saw the responsibility version of the film expected that Prozi had ended up higher on the shock generator (\( M = 212.65 \) V) than those seeing the no-responsibility version (\( M = 195.00 \) V), this difference was not significant, \( F(1, 33) = 1.07, p = .309 \). A look at the individual scores, however, revealed a pattern consistent with Milgram's postulated link between relinquishing responsibility and obedience: A majority of the subjects in the no-responsibility condition (13 out of 18) believed Prozi went no higher (i.e., marked 180 V on the scale), but less than half of the responsibility subjects (7 out of 17) responded this way, \( \chi^2(1, N = 35) = 3.44, p < .07 \). Also, responsibility subjects estimated that over twice as many participants had been fully obedient (\( M = 18.03\% \)) than did no-responsibility subjects (\( M = 7.56\% \)), but this difference was not significant, \( F(1, 33) = 2.04, ns \). Judgments of trust did not vary as a function of film version seen, \( F(1, 33) = 0.28, p < .603 \).

General Discussion

Overall, perceivers' judgments regarding connections between responsibility attributions and shock levels administered were fairly consistent with the patterns of relationships expected on the basis of Milgram's agentic-state theorizing. No support was found, however, for Mixon's theoretical perspective.

We are left with the intriguing finding, in Study 1, that the pattern of perceivers' responsibility attributions was more consistent with the agentic-state dynamics postulated by Milgram than those of his actual subjects, whose
responsibility allocations were only partially supportive of his theory (compare Table 1 and Table 2). A comparison of the two patterns reveals that the major difference between them is that perceivers believed that an obedient subject would tend to relinquish responsibility onto the authority, while among Milgram’s obedient subjects most of the shift in responsibility that took place was actually in the direction of the learner. In fact, as can be seen in Table 1, Milgram’s obedient subjects assigned about twice as much responsibility to the learner (25.30%) as did his defiant subjects (12.80%). My observer subjects, however, saw both a defiant and an obedient subject assigning similarly small amounts of responsibility to the learner (12.50% and 9.00%). In other words, a substantially greater degree of derogation of the learner seems to have taken place among obedient subjects (25.30%) than outside observers would have expected (9.00%). A possible explanation for this difference is that for the actual obedient subjects trying to teach a list of word pairs to the learner, the failure to do so could reflect negatively on their own competence. By attributing responsibility to the learner, they protect themselves from seeing themselves as failures. However, no such self-protective motives need to guide the attributions of outside observers whose competence is not at stake.

References


Milgram, S. (1965). Obedience (a filmed experiment). Distributed by Media Sales, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802.