



## NOTES AND SHORTER COMMUNICATIONS

### Right-Wing Authoritarianism and role as predictors of attributions about obedience to authority\*

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**Summary**—Subjects saw a short 12-min version of the documentary, *Obedience*, showing a participant continuing to 180 V. The more authoritarian the viewer, the less the amount of responsibility he or she attributed to the teacher–subject for punishing the learner. Overall, viewers allocated the greatest amount of responsibility to the experimenter, less to the teacher–subject, and least to the learner.

#### INTRODUCTION

The point of departure for the present study is the well-known obedience paradigm of Stanley Milgram (1974; see Blass, 1991, 1992, 1993 for reviews). Over the last few years, the author has been conducting a research program involving viewers' reactions to edited portions of the documentary film, *Obedience* (Milgram, 1965). Previous studies have used the film to shed some light, indirectly, on possible causes for the behavior of Milgram's Ss and to advance our understanding of processes of more general interest to attribution researchers (See Blass, 1990a, b).

One purpose of the present study was to examine the predictive role of the personality construct of Right-Wing Authoritarianism [RWA (Altemeyer, 1981, 1988)] in attributions of responsibility in the Milgram obedience scenario. Altemeyer's RWA scale is the product of an extended program of conceptual and psychometric refinements of the original California *F*-scale, spanning more than two decades. In contrast to the latter with its nine dimensions, the RWA is meant to tap an attitudinal cluster consisting only of three dimensions, i.e. authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism. Its psychometric advance is largely in its balanced item wording and in higher inter-item correlations than was found in previous measures of authoritarianism. Although the work on the RWA stands out as an exemplary case of sequential, programmatic development of a personality scale, it is limited somewhat by the fact that so far most of the correlates studied by Altemeyer have themselves been self-report measures, and the fact that the Ss have come largely from the student body at Altemeyer's own university, the University of Manitoba. The present study attempted to broaden both the range of target behaviors and S samples the RWA has been applied to, and thereby contribute to its development.

A second purpose of the study was to investigate perceiver's attributions of responsibility in the obedience experiment as a function of participant's role [experimenter, teacher (S), or learner] and outcome (high vs low amount of shock administered) since Milgram (1974, p. 203), in a post-experimental procedure, found Ss' responsibility attributions to vary as a function of the two factors.

#### METHOD

##### Subjects

Thirty-two Introductory Psychology students who, screening showed, were not familiar with Milgram, the obedience experiments, nor the film were participants.

##### Procedure

Ss completed the RWA scale and then were individually shown a 12-min edited version of Milgram's (1965) documentary film, *Obedience*, which contained actual footage from the original obedience experiments.

The edited segment they saw was the same one shown to Ss in an earlier study (Blass, 1990a) and contained the following scenes: (1) An introductory explanation of the 'memory project' is given by the experimenter to a S and the confederate. (2) The rigged drawing is shown, making the S the 'teacher' and the confederate the learner. (3) The learner is strapped down and electrodes attached to him while a S looks on. The procedure is explained to the learner including the fact that he would get shocked every time he makes a mistake. The learner mentions a heart problem and is reassured by the experimenter that although the shocks may be painful, they're not dangerous. (4) The experimenter explains the workings of the shock generator to another S. (5) Another S is shown receiving a sample shock and detailed instructions about the learning procedure are given to him. (6) The final segment shows a S, referred to in Milgram's (1974) book by the pseudonym, Fred Prozi, going through the shock sequence beginning with his giving 90V. In the full version of the film, he is shown ending up completely obedient, i.e. giving the 450-V shock. In the edited version shown to Ss in the present study, the tape was stopped right after Prozi administered the 180-V shock.

Then they were given a booklet which contained the following dependent measures to complete:

- (1) Ss had to guess "the highest amount of the shock the last subject ended up giving" by circling the appropriate number (180–450V) on a schematic diagram of the shock generator.
- (2) Two attributional measures were given, one assessing the importance of personal characteristics (dispositional attribution) and the other, the characteristics of the situation "in causing him to behave as he did".
- (3) Another question asked how much the experimenter could be trusted "to insure that no harm came to the learner".
- (4) In the final dependent measure, adapting Milgram's (1974, p. 203) wording, Ss were asked to indicate "how much was each participant *responsible* for the fact that the learner was given electric shocks against his will. Specifically, how much of the total responsibility belongs to the experimenter, to the subject you just saw, and to the learner". The response options provided for the allocation of percentages of responsibility to the experimenter, S, and learner, and showed that they should add up to 100%, or 'total responsibility'.

The final page of the booklet contained screening questions to determine whether or not the Ss had seen the film or were familiar with the obedience experiments.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Median splits were used to classify Ss as high or low on the RWA scale and the shock prediction measure, respectively. The responsibility-attribution scores were then analyzed by means of a 2(RWA score: high vs low)  $\times$  2(Shock prediction: high vs low)  $\times$  3(Role of participant) factorial ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor. The only significant effect was a main effect of role of participant,  $F(2,56) = 18.78$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , such that the viewer-subjects allocated a majority of the responsibility to the experimenter ( $X = 59.65\%$ ), less to the teacher ( $X = 21.96\%$ ), and the least amount to the learner ( $X = 18.31\%$ ).

It is interesting to note that the percentage of responsibility allocated to the experimenter by external perceivers in this experiment (59.65%) is substantially larger than the percentage of responsibility attributed to the experimenter by Milgram's actual Ss [about 38% (see Milgram, 1974, p. 203)]. Thus, we have a reversal of the actor-observer effect, i.e. observers gave more of a situational explanation for the target person's behavior than did the target person himself or herself. This is especially noteworthy in light of the fact that the obedience experiment has historically served as a primary illustrative example of dispositional bias [i.e. to explain the typical underestimation of shock magnitude by observers (see Ross, 1977)].

Next, all the dependent measures were intercorrelated. The primary findings from this analysis were:

- (1) A significant negative correlation,  $r(30) = -0.36$ ,  $P < 0.02$ , between RWA scores and per cent of responsibility allocated to the teacher. That is, the more authoritarian the individual, the less the responsibility he or she attributed to the teacher-subject for the punishment he was inflicting on the learner. This finding is consistent with the construct of right-wing authoritarianism. It makes sense that the person who believes in submission to authority (the high RWA person) should *not* hold another person responsible for his actions in an authority-dominated situation. However, this kind of reasoning should also dictate that high-authoritarians would ascribe more responsibility to the authority (the experimenter) than low-authoritarians, and yet this was not found: the correlation between RWA score and percentage of responsibility allocated the experimenter was not significant.
- (2) There was a significant positive correlation between the shock-prediction score and percentage of responsibility attributed to the learner,  $r(30) = 0.30$ ,  $P < 0.05$ . This result is reminiscent of Milgram's (1974, p. 203) finding that his obedient Ss attributed about twice as much responsibility to the learner (25.3%) than did his disobedient Ss (12.8%). Perhaps both his and my findings reflect a tendency to blame the victim for the punishments he receives—a tendency which historically has found expression in perpetrators of mass killings dehumanizing their victims, as was the case in the Nazis' attempted genocide of the Jews.

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