

Disobedience: resisting authority

You are learning how to...	In the context of...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read, understand and summarise complex documents about psychological material. • Analyse psychological research to generate suggestions about how to alter human behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Resisting and disobeying authority.

Is it possible to disobey?

It is easy to conclude from the study of social influence that human beings are a pretty awful lot and, in fairness, the evidence we have seen does support that view to some extent. We have seen how people will defy the evidence of their own senses in order to fit in with the group (e.g. Asch, 1951), endanger those with whose care they have been professionally entrusted (e.g. Hofling et al, 1966) and deliberately hurt, possibly kill an innocent stranger on the say-so of a man whose credentials amount to little more than a lab coat and an office in a University (Milgram, 1974). However, to focus only on those who conformed and those who obeyed does an injustice to those people – in experiments and, more importantly, in many real-life situations – who did not bow to group pressure, those who refused to obey. Psychological research has been able to shed some light on various reasons for independence and disobedience. It is tempting to take the dispositional approach and thereby assume that the people who resist authority have some personal quality that allows them to stand up to the pressure to obey. Whilst this may play some part it is important to understand that many of the factors that help people to disobey authority are, in fact, situational.

The fact that Milgram was able to cause wide variations in the overall level of obedience in his participants illustrates the importance of situational factors in disobedience. One of the principal variables was the salience of the victim's suffering. Although the sound of the victim's screaming and begging had relatively little impact on the rate of obedience (62.5% compared to a 'baseline' of 65%), the effect of the participant being able to see (40%) or having to touch the victim (30%) was more dramatic. At least two reasons for this drop suggest themselves. One the one hand it may be that, confronted with the victim's suffering, the participant felt greater personal responsibility for their actions and this forced them from an agentic to an autonomous state. On the other hand it might be that the shift was brought about by the feelings of empathy the victim's visible suffering provoked in the participant. Either way, the increased disobedience in these variations on the study was brought about by a situational change, not dispositional factors within the participants.

Another situational factor that facilitates disobedience is exposure to disobedient models. The effect that these can have is clearly illustrated by the Milgram study in which two confederates paired with the real participant left the study early on, declaring that they would go no further. Under these conditions only 10% of participants gave the maximum 450 volt shock (still a disturbingly large proportion, but substantially lower than the 65% in the first study). Milgram (1965) identified at least three reasons why this study produced such high rates of disobedience. First, the establishment of a group norm of disobedience may have put the participants under pressure to conform (to the behaviour of the confederates) that was stronger than the pressure they felt to obey the experimenter. Second, the behaviour of the confederates may have demonstrated the possibility of defying the experimenter, which simply might not have occurred to the participant before (one said afterwards, 'I didn't realise I could [refuse to obey]'; Milgram, in Gross, 1996). Third, the withdrawal of the two confederates may have sharpened the participant's sense of personal responsibility as the only person left to give the shocks. It may also be that the presence of another disobedient person operates in an analogous way to a dissenting confederate in the Asch studies: by breaking the unanimity of the group they make it easier for the participant to act independently, even if the participant doesn't actually agree with the dissenter.

Besides these two important situational variables, a number of other factors influence participants' readiness to disobey authority in Milgram-type situations. As we have already seen, factors that alter the participant's sense of personal responsibility for their actions have an influence on obedience. In a famous film clip from the original studies, a participant argues strenuously with the experimenter that the well-being of the victim should be checked and the experiment terminated. He even gets out of his chair, declaring 'I'm not gonna kill that man!' only to return and recommence shocking the victim once he has established that the experimenter will take responsibility for what happens. Conversely, when people are made to feel personally responsible for their actions, destructive obedience is reduced (Hamilton, 1978). Additionally, disobedience becomes more likely when the legitimacy of the authority figure is undermined by encouraging people to question their motives, expertise or judgement (Taylor et al, 1997).

Beyond some rather dubious evidence relating to the authoritarian personality, attempts to identify dispositional influences on disobedience have been unsuccessful (Taylor et al, 1997). However, whilst evidence for 'disobedient' personality traits is lacking, there is some suggestion that ability to empathise with the suffering of others may facilitate resistance to malevolent or destructive orders. The most convincing evidence for this comes from the work of Samuel Oliner, who as a child escaped from the Bobowa Ghetto in Poland and was sheltered by a non-Jewish woman who helped him to survive the holocaust in which his family was murdered. As an adult, Oliner conducted a study of the 'rescuers' who had sheltered escaped Jews in Nazi Europe in defiance of the regime. Compared to a sample of 126 non-rescuers who had also lived through the war, the 406 rescuers tended to report an upbringing that emphasised social norms of helping others, often linked to the ethics of a family, community or religious group (Oliner & Oliner, 1988). Most rescuers emphasised their empathic responses to the suffering of the Jews they helped shelter. In the words of one woman:

"How could one not have helped such a man? He was shivering, poor soul, and I was shivering too, with emotion." (Oliner & Oliner, 1988; p189).

Such findings may shed light on why some participants in the Milgram studies disobeyed. Some appear to have done so because of empathic responses borne out of their own experiences (one cited her own experiences in Nazi Europe as a reason for disobeying). It also seems likely that the effect of making the victim's suffering more salient (e.g. by seating them opposite the participant) reduces obedience, at least in part, because of the empathic response it elicits from the participant.

An interesting reanalysis of Milgram's data carried out by Rochat & Modigliani (1995) throws light on a further variable that can predict disobedience although it is not obvious whether it should be characterised as situational or dispositional. They found that those participants in the Milgram studies that protested early on in the procedure were those who were most likely ultimately to disobey. Immediate resistance to authority seems to decrease the likelihood of later obedience in a range of contexts (Van Avermaet, 2001). Rochat & Modigliani (1995) illustrate this through an analysis of events in the French village of Le Chambon during the Nazi occupation. The citizens of Le Chambon collectively defied the Nazis' attempts to have them persecute war refugees, and played an active part in saving the lives of many thousands, despite the threat this posed to their own lives. In Rochat & Modigliani's analysis, the key to this sustained, collective act of defiance was that it was started very early, at the behest of the village's religious leaders, before a pattern of obedience to authority could emerge.