

## Lesson Six

# Obedience

### Aims

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to

- look at explanations of obedience including:
  - agentic state and legitimacy of authority
  - situational variables affecting obedience including proximity and location, as investigated by Milgram, and uniform
  - dispositional explanation: the Authoritarian Personality
- examine factors affecting resistance to social influence, including social support and locus of control
- understand how a minority can influence the majority, with particular reference to consistency, commitment and flexibility
- consider the role of social influence processes in social change
- be aware of ethical and methodological issues in studying social influence

### Context

We have already learnt how others influence our behaviour in the lesson on Conformity. This next lesson looks at the reasons why we obey people and whether we can create situations where we might behave totally out of character. We also look at the way individuals can change the perception of a group in minority influence.



Lawton & Willard: *AQA A-level Psychology Book 1*, pp. 17-39.

## Understanding the Difference between Conformity, Compliance and Obedience

**Conformity** theory tells us that we change our behaviour when we take on someone else's view either because we have no knowledge, so we seek out information from others, or we want to fit in with the social norms of society. It is a form of gentle persuasion.

With **Compliance** we become involved in a direct relationship with another person or group, as we conform to someone else wishes whilst retaining in private our own personal view. There is more pressure and stress exerted on us when we comply, and we are compelled to make a decision.

**Obedience** is stronger than either conformity or compliance. There is a hierarchy in which one person is perceived to have a higher status than another, commanding obedience to their demands from the lower status person. There are rules and punishments, and occasionally rewards, therefore there is potentially more at stake if you were to choose to disobey than if you were to choose to comply or conform. The personal opinion of the lower status person is not perceived to be as valid as that of the higher status.

### Definition of Obedience

**Obedience** refers to a type of social influence whereby somebody "acts in response to a direct order from a figure with perceived authority". There is also the implication that the person receiving the order is made to respond in a way that they would not have otherwise done.

### Study: Bickman (1974) – obedience to a uniform

**Leonard Bickman** conducted a field experiment on the streets of New York in which strangers were approached in the street by a man who was a confederate of the researcher. They were given some instructions such as to pick up a discarded paper bag or stand on the other side of a bus stop sign. The question is, are they 'asked politely' as in a request or "told decisively" to do these tasks? If they are asked politely, there is a stronger possibility that the person is able to choose not to do it. If told decisively, then it is expected they will obey regardless of whether they want to do it. This is a subtle distinction but one that is worth keeping in mind.

Let's look at some of the phrases used:

- a) "Pick up this bag for me!"
- b) "This fellow is over-parked but doesn't have any change. Give me a dime!"

- c) “Don’t you know you have to stand on the other side of the pole?  
The sign says “no standing”...”

Notice that there is no ‘please?’ or ‘would you mind?’ The inference is ‘just do it’.

Sometimes the confederate wore ordinary clothes, and sometimes he was dressed in a security guard’s uniform when he uttered the instructions.

The results showed conclusively that more people obeyed the man when he was wearing the guard’s uniform (80% obedience rates), than when he was dressed as a milkman or a civilian.

**Evaluation:** This is not a particularly good study for various reasons.

- 1) Obedience doesn’t happen in real life in quite this way. How often has someone asked you to pick up litter that you didn’t drop? In this situation people would be puzzled as to why they had been asked to do something that had nothing to do with them. They would probably be guessing that there were some social norms that they were breaking but they didn’t happen to know what they were. They had nothing to lose so they obeyed. It was just a bit odd.
- 2) In (b) and (c) some reasoning is given for the expected behaviour, which will affect how people respond. (a) is a better indicator of whether someone will blindly obey.
- 3) Furthermore, personality and tone of voice are extraneous variables that are hard to control but may have had an effect on the results.
- 4) On the other hand, it was a field study that took place in a real place, not in a laboratory. So, under the circumstances that were created, the behaviours were as natural and true to life as they could be.

This study has shown us, albeit with limitations, that people do behave differently when confronted by people in a uniform. They assume, rightly or wrongly, that the person wearing the uniform has a vested authority and has the power to ask you to do something that you would not otherwise do.

But how far will we go in obeying an authority figure? Is there a point when will we “snap” and refuse to obey an order? This brings us to one of the most famous (and notorious) experiments in the history of psychology.

## Milgram's Obedience Tests (1963)



**Stanley Milgram** (left) was a Professor of Psychology at the prestigious Yale University in Connecticut and he was interested in the question of why so many ordinary German people in the 1930s and 1940s had followed instructions (e.g. when working in concentration camps) which involved causing pain or even killing other innocent human beings. Bear in mind that this was a hot topic after the war, as Hitler had exterminated thousands of people on the basis of their ethnicity which in itself he had considered to be a genetic character flaw. Were the German soldiers a breed apart or is it the case that, put in a similar situation where we are expected to obey a higher authority without question, then we, that is you and I, might be capable of causing pain or even killing other people?

It sounds like an outrageous suggestion that anyone is capable of hurting people or killing them in cold blood. Most of us consider that we are fairly gentle people who just want to get on with our lives. Could there be any truth in this suggestion?

Whether we like it or not, I am sure you can see that it is very important psychological question, and one of great significance to society.

Milgram carried out a study to see just how far ordinary people will go if asked to inflict pain on a fellow citizen.

He placed an advertisement in the local newspaper asking for “persons needed for a study of memory”. Paid volunteers from all walks of life were invited to “help us complete a scientific study of memory and learning” This was not true at all — obedience not memory was the subject of the experiment and some of the volunteers lived to regret their decision to participate.

Public Announcement

**WE WILL PAY YOU \$4.00 FOR ONE HOUR OF YOUR TIME**

**Persons Needed for a Study of Memory**

\*We will pay five hundred New Haven men to help us complete a scientific study of memory and learning. The study is being done at Yale University.

\*Each person who participates will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50c carfare) for approximately 1 hour's time. We need you for only one hour: there are no further obligations. You may choose the time you would like to come (evenings, weekdays, or weekends).

\*No special training, education, or experience is needed. We want:

- |                 |                     |                      |
|-----------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Factory workers | Businessmen         | Construction workers |
| City employees  | Clerks              | Salespeople          |
| Laborers        | Professional people | White-collar workers |
| Barbers         | Telephone workers   | Others               |

All persons must be between the age of 20 and 50. High school and college students cannot be used.

\*If you meet these qualifications, fill out the coupon below and mail it now to Professor Stanley Milgram, Department of Psychology, Yale University, New Haven. You will be notified later of the specific time and place of the study. We reserve the right to decline any application.

PROF. STANLEY MILGRAM, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY, YALE UNIVERSITY, NEW HAVEN, CONN.

I want to take part in this study of memory and learning. I am between the ages of 20 and 50. I will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50c carfare) if I participate. You will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50c carfare) as soon as you arrive at the laboratory.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
 ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 TELEPHONE NO \_\_\_\_\_ Best time to call you \_\_\_\_\_  
 AGE \_\_\_\_\_ OCCUPATION \_\_\_\_\_ SEX \_\_\_\_\_  
 CAN YOU COME:  
 WEEKDAYS \_\_\_\_\_ EVENINGS \_\_\_\_\_ WEEKENDS \_\_\_\_\_

Milgram selected 40 male recruits to take part at various intervals. When they turned up, everything must have seemed very academic and professional in Yale's psychology department. A man in a lab coat ("Jack Williams") would introduce them to a Mr. Wallace, also supposedly another volunteer (but really an actor). Mr. Wallace, in his late 50s, seemed to be a very ordinary, slightly overweight accountant who was going to undergo some memory tests.

It was explained that one of them would be the teacher and the other the learner. Lots were drawn to decide who would be teacher and who would be learner although the lots were fixed so that the real volunteer would take the teacher role, the job being to apply punishments to the learner when the learner got a question wrong.

Mr. Wallace was put in a contraption resembling an electric chair, linked to a generator, and the volunteer, now in the next room, was given control of a set of levers, each of which was clearly marked as follows:

<u>Volts</u>	
15- 60	slight shock
75-120	moderate shock
135-180	strong shock
195-240	very strong shock
255-300	intense shock
315-360	intense to extreme shock
375-420	danger: severe shock
435-450	XXX

Before the experiment started, the teacher was given a shock of 45 volts, so he had some knowledge of what the learner would experience if he or she got it wrong. Milgram had asked professionals, students and teachers prior to the study what they thought would happen, and no-one thought that the teacher would give a shock of over 195 volts and 80% thought they would not go above 135-180 volts.

The teacher, the volunteer, had to read out a series of word pairs, such as 'blue-girl', or 'fat-neck'. After this, the teacher read out just the first word of the pair and the learner had to state the word that made up the second part of the word pair. This kept up the illusion of the study being about memory.

When Mr. Wallace made mistakes, the "teacher" was to inflict a shock, going up by 15 volts each time. The question was quite simple: when would the "teacher" refuse to continue to participate?

The results were frightening. In the basic experiment, Mr. Wallace was heard to pound loudly on the wall at 300 volts and after 315 volts no further answers were given and no more pounding was heard. 65% of "teachers" went on giving shocks right up to and including 450 volts. Every single subject went up to at least 240

volts. Those who got as high as 375 volts went right on up to 450 volts.

You can watch excerpts from this classic study on YouTube here: [www.ool.co.uk/0607pa](http://www.ool.co.uk/0607pa).

### Variations on Milgram's initial study

There were eighteen different variations on this experiment, each designed to find out exactly why the level of obedience was so depressingly high. Some involved a script that the teacher would hear at different stages (e.g. at 180 volts the learner would shout "I can't stand the pain"), others had a white-coated experimenter either present or absent. In another variation, the teacher and learner would be in the same room with the teacher having to force the learner to keep his hand on the shock plate. The white coats were changed for grey coats. Alternatively, the teacher would be in a room with two other "teachers", really actors, one of whom would announce at 150 volts that he was not going to continue, the other at 210 volts.

### Causes of Change in Obedience Rates

All these variations had an effect on obedience rates:

- 1) When his fellow teachers were **dropping out**, it became much easier for the subjects to do likewise but still 10% of real subjects continued all the way up to 450 volts.
- 2) The **closeness** of the experimenter also had a big effect. If the experimenter was out of the room, it was much easier to drop out or to secretly give lower shocks than were supposed to be administered.
- 3) If the experimenter wore a **laboratory coat**, obedience increased.

## Ethical Issues

### Stress

However they performed, it is clear that the volunteers for this experiment underwent considerable stress. Individual conscience battled against the need to obey, and few took pleasure in apparently inflicting pain. Different subjects trembled and groaned, some verbally attacked the experimenter. Three participants had full-blown uncontrollable seizures. Unlike Zimbardo who curtailed his study when he realized the damage, actual or potential, being caused, Milgram continued "for the sake of science".

## Briefing and Debriefing

It is necessary to withhold information at the start of an experiment if by providing that information the results of the study will be jeopardized. That would clearly have happened in this case.

Milgram was at pains to point out that every participant was thoroughly debriefed, after which 80% said they were happy to have taken part in the experiment. However, it was shown at a later date that the debriefing in some cases had taken place sometime after.

## Opportunity to Withdraw

Volunteers were told that they could withdraw at any point in the experiment, and indeed many did and stopped the experiment.

What is not known is how many refused to take part when they knew that they had to give electric shocks. How many people turned round and went home? You might like to see if you can find out the answer. It is important because there is a suggestion that we shall look at shortly that says that there is a type of person who has an "Authoritarian Personality", and if this is true it might be that the experiment encouraged people with this type of personality to take part in the first place.

Nevertheless, the basic result of the experiment needs to be re-emphasized. Large numbers of people were prepared to continue obeying instructions even when (for all they knew) another human being was in extreme pain or dying as a result. They chose this rather than suffer the embarrassment of challenging the experimenter and dropping out. How could that possibly be comparable? Why did they go on and on?

## Evaluation of Milgram's Experiments

Milgram made a big contribution to our understanding of the human mind and in particular the topic of social influence but he has not been without his critics.

It is not surprising that, with results as depressing as these, many people challenged Milgram's research. Some tried their own versions of the experiment but most were eventually forced to conclude that Milgram's results were reasonable. When the experiment was tried in Germany, for instance, the obedience rate was even higher at 85%. So the results are now generally accepted and psychologists everywhere have had to adjust their understanding of obedience to authority and its place in our decision-making processes.

But Milgram can certainly be criticized on ethical and methodological grounds. Many have felt that his was an experiment which should never have been performed or, at least, not in this way.

<b>Activity 1</b>	Which aspects of Milgram's experiment leave <i>you</i> most unhappy?
	<p>A few ideas are given below.</p>

First and foremost, the **levels of stress** suffered by the volunteers seem to be unacceptable. How can we justify experiments in which there is a serious risk of a human subject suffering from a convulsive seizure? It is very unlikely that such an experiment would be sanctioned now, some thirty years later. Today we have doubts about whether rats and monkeys should be subjected to pain of this kind, never mind human beings. Volunteers were paid \$4 for their services but they were wholly unprepared for the experience they would undergo.

The level of **deception** seems unreasonably high. On the original newspaper advertisements, the point that this was a study of memory and learning was made over and over again — volunteers would even sign to the effect that “I want to take part in this study of memory and learning”. The attention to detail was such that it was very hard for subjects to work out what was really going on. The drawing of lots for “teacher” and “learner” was a particularly devious touch.

Was enough consideration given to post-experimental counselling? This was an experience which may have scarred many of the volunteers for life. Imagine going through a process whereby it seems that you have been given an electric shock which may have killed someone, only to be told that *you* were actually the subject of the experiment. What's more, large numbers could hardly avoid the conclusion that they had failed dismally. They too could have carried out Hitler's orders in a concentration camp. Most of us are never faced with that knowledge. What was it like to live with that knowledge afterwards?

Milgram defended himself in several ways. He did debrief every single participant and informed them of the true purpose of the study. He also conducted follow-up interviews and provided

counselling if they needed it. When interviewed a year after the study, 84% of participants felt glad they had participated and 74% felt they had learnt something of personal importance.

But consider the problem faced by other psychologists. Should they accept Milgram's results unquestioningly? Knowing what they did, did they have any right to repeat such a damaging and unethical experiment? Did the ends justify the means?

## Possible Explanations for the High Obedience Rate

Having read about this study, you must wonder *why* they carried on against their own will.

### Agentic State

One compelling argument is that they did not feel responsible for their actions. After all, someone else was actually paying them to do this experiment, and presumably the experimenter had gained permission from an ethical board at the university and they were supervising everything that happened, so they wouldn't let anything go wrong, would they?

**Agentic state** literally means we perceive ourselves to be an agent of someone or something else, in this case of a higher authority. We suspend our own beliefs temporarily to take part or help someone out. We are no longer ourselves. We lose our identity and act as instruments, rather like puppets are manipulated by someone else holding the strings. The puppet has no control over his actions and has to do the bidding of the puppeteer. Importantly, the higher authority has all the responsibility as well, and therefore we can "get away with murder".

These experiments show how fickle people really are. From subsequent interviews, many made it clear that they did not feel truly responsible for what was happening ("I had to do what I was told"). If the experimenter was there, giving them all sorts of prods and prompts, it was relatively easy to deny personal responsibility. When the experimenter was absent, it was much harder to deny personal responsibility.

Milgram's argument was that given the right situational (environmental cues) excessive obedience can be produced in any person. It is the situation which people find themselves in which produces obedience.

This conclusion may be correct, but other arguments have been put forward.

### Study: Burger, Girgis & Manning (2011) “In Their Own Words”

These researchers obtained a transcript of the individual sessions and noted how the volunteers, i.e. the teachers responded to particular demands of the experimenter. When they refused to go on, the experimenter gave stock answers.

1<sup>st</sup> time: “Please continue”.

2<sup>nd</sup> time: “The experiment requires that you continue”

3<sup>rd</sup> time: “It is absolutely essential that you continue”

4<sup>th</sup> time: “You have no choice, you must go on”.

If the participant refused again, he was allowed to leave.

You can see that with each command, the level of intensity increases. This was also matched by increasing intensity in the experimenter’s voice.

Burger decided to repeat this study, but of course he couldn’t risk the volunteers administering a ‘death’ charge, so the maximum he put them through was 150 volts, which had been shown in Milgram’s study was significant. All of those who had been willing to press the lever at 150 volts were willing to go on and administer the lethal shock of 450 volts. So it seems a good decision to choose 150 volts as a cut-off level.

<b>Activity 2</b>	Before reading on, what do you think happened to the obedience rate in Burger’s study?
	

You probably think that with the increased pressure, the ‘teacher’ continued to press the lever and deliver more severe punishments.

Burger et al found the complete OPPOSITE! As the experimenter became more forceful, obedience *decreased*.

When it got to the 4<sup>th</sup> time of asking, every single one of Burger’s volunteers disobeyed and not even one got as far as the 150 volts level.

An interesting finding was that the amount of concern expressed at the harm they were doing was NOT a factor in whether or not they continued. Those who expressed concern required more prompts but they would still continue to 150 volts. That is evidence for the **Agentic State** mentioned earlier. They were absolved of responsibility for their actions by their new status as a 'volunteer'.

What can have caused this major difference between the two studies? Well, it is not actually known whether Milgram reported on the questions and tone of voice used, so maybe the difference is not so great after all. We just don't know.

The findings that, with increased forcefulness, obedience decreased made Burger think that maybe obedience wasn't being tested after all, but more the individual's willingness to act out of character. It may be telling us more about our boundaries and limits than obedience.

## Evaluation

This study shows just how difficult it is to be a researcher and to interpret data correctly.

It is very useful in that it shows how science and psychology develop. Milgram put forward a theory and an enormously important study which has stood the test of time for over 50 years. Even today, it is widely believed to have credibility. In 2011, Burger's study challenged the very essence of the theory and altered it. This is exactly how psychology develops and matures as a science.

## Legitimacy

Another factor in obedience is Legitimacy.

**Kelman & Hamilton** (1989) suggest that there are three main factors in legitimacy:

- Legitimacy of the system
- Legitimacy of authority within the system
- Legitimacy of demands or orders given,

**Legitimacy of the system** refers to the organisation. This can be a government, a school, a police force, a work place, in fact any organisation that you may be a part of. Each one has its own set of rules, demands and expectations that you understand and can accept or reject as you think fit. For instance a church would be unlikely to be accepted without an element of faith or worship of some kind. Its legitimacy lies in what it promotes. On the other hand, you will accept that if you drink and drive, you may well up

in court if you are breathalyzed and found to be over the limit. In this case the court has legitimate authority.

Did Milgram's study have legitimate authority? Yes, and in more than one way.

- a) The experiment was conducted at Yale University (the equivalent of Oxford or Cambridge).
- b) Milgram was a Professor, with authority in this setting.
- c) It took part in a laboratory setting, which would give credence to it as a scientific study on memory.
- d) The manner in which it was carried out was scientific and in accordance with what you expect from a university study.

So, for the volunteer, all this adds up and there is nothing at all to query at the start. This initial belief in the legitimacy of the system was enough for the volunteers to continue even when they suspected they should stop. Attitude theory tells us that we have to remain consistent in our beliefs and attitudes otherwise it causes cognitive dissonance, which is basically holding two conflicting ideas in our head at once. Bearing in mind that there was no time to 'think', the legitimacy of the system would have had a greater bearing on their decision to continue than their personal disposition.

The external authority of the experimenter prevailed over the internal authority (conscience) on so many occasions because of the circumstances in which that external authority was established.

### **Legitimacy of authority within the system**

This refers to the power that individuals hold within a given organisation. We saw earlier in the Bickman study that more people obey a guard rather than a milkman when being ordered to do something. Similarly, you would believe a vicar has legitimate authority to talk to you about faith.

We are all familiar with the phrase "Who do you think you are?" when we overstep the mark in offering advice. There is a common sense understanding that with a profession comes a set of rules and guidelines specific to that person who is qualified to hold them.

If we overstep the mark or try to demand obedience without owning that legitimacy, obedience will decrease.

In Milgram's study, the white coats reinforce the point that this person was a legitimate authority and the individual felt himself to be no more than an "agent" of that authority, fulfilling a role to the best of his ability.

Milgram's own conclusion was as follows:

'A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority.' (1974).

### Legitimacy of demands or orders given

This is the one where we might have expected to see the greatest controversy in Milgram's study.

Were the demands being made legitimate? That is, were they reasonable and acceptable in the light of the experiment that the volunteer had agreed to be a part of?

The demands have to be in accordance with the legitimacy of the authority, in this case the researcher himself.

Initially, the demands were accepted, even though the volunteer would be giving a physical shock to another human being.

Clearly, most volunteers questioned whether they should carry on giving the shocks after a certain point, but still they carried on.

Milgram was aware that this would be an issue, and the legitimate authority, the researcher in his white coat, was given instructions as to what to say if his authority was questioned, with phrases like "the experiment demands that you continue", or "you must continue in the name of science".

These phrases added weight to his argument as volunteers would accept that experimentation in the name of science sometimes requires you to go beyond what you would choose to do in real life.

### Situational factors

**Situational factors** are things in the immediate environment that affect how we behave. If, for instance it is a bright sunny day in June, than we will probably be in a better mood than if it is a dull cloudy day in February. It is simply down to the situation which we can (possibly) do nothing about.

In Milgram's study there were several situational factors that affected obedience, including:

- The presence of an authority figure: obedience decreased as proximity decreased. When the experimenter was not in the same room as the participant but gave orders over the telephone obedience levels dropped to 20%.

- The proximity of the learner: obedience drops as proximity increases. When the teacher had to place the hand of the learner on the metal plate to receive the shock obedience rates fell to 30%.
- The location: when the experiment was moved to a run-down office block in a disused part of town obedience dropped. However 48% still gave the maximum shock!
- The experimenter's dress: when the legitimacy of the authority figure, the experimenter, was varied, by allowing a casually dressed participant to give orders obedience dropped to just 20% giving the maximum shock.

### Dispositional Explanations: The Authoritarian personality

Milgram's initial intention was to see whether Germans are more obedient to authority than other nationalities. But because he found such high levels of obedience amongst Americans, he didn't repeat his studies in Germany. However, other researchers have found even higher obedience levels in Germany (**Mantell**, 1971) and other countries, and this raised the question of whether there may be personality differences which lead some people to be more conforming and obedient than others.

### Adorno's F scale

Evidence that this is indeed the case came from the work of **Adorno et al (1950)**, who identified what they termed the "**authoritarian personality**". They reached the conclusion that this personality exists after carrying out a detailed survey called the "**F scale**" (F for Fascist). They did the study because the relationship between Hitler's personality and his power had been brought into question, and many people felt he must either be mad, or driven by his personality to be able to inflict such devastation on people and countries.

If there was one person in power who could behave like this, maybe it is a common type of personality that we should all be aware of when appointing people to high positions, in government or business. Hence the research.

### Examples of questions on the F scale

Adorno's study asked participants to Agree / Disagree on a variety of statements. There was no middle ground offered. Here is an example of the questions:

- Q1. People can be divided into two distinct classes – the weak and the strong Agree/Disagree
- Q2. No weakness or difficulty can hold us back if we have enough willpower Agree/Disagree

As a result of this research they concluded there was indeed such a thing as an authoritarian personality.

### Features of the Authoritarian Personality

This type of personality has a tendency to relate to other people in terms of power and to see them as either inferior or superior, rather than seeing others as equal to themselves. They also tend to uncritically accept the values of people higher in authority than themselves and to reject or dismiss the value of people that they see as less powerful (for example, minority groups). They also tend to be more conforming to conventional middle-class values, and to the views of the majority (**Crutchfield**, 1955).

Adorno also found that authoritarian personalities had often experienced strict and rigid discipline based on physical punishment during their childhood.

### Recent research: Suurkulu and the Authoritarian Personality Pattern

Research continues to provide evidence for the existence of an Authoritarian personality.

**Suurkulu** (2014) concluded that there is a particular pattern in the type of behaviours in a person with an authoritarian personality for which biological evidence exists. He refers to Survival-Oriented-Behaviour (SOB) which is anxiety-provoking behaviour caused by emotional instability, which demands that the person is very controlling. There is evidence that the prefrontal cortex is suppressed. This is the part of the brain responsible for making good judgments and for good overall mental performance. Put together a burgeoning need to control, emotional instability and wayward perceptions and judgments and you have the authoritarian personality. He also comments on the authoritarian personality having a preoccupation for violence and sex. He defines it thus:

The **Authoritarian Personality Pattern (APP)** “is the consequence of a high level of chronic mental stress brought about by pronounced inner insecurity”.

This insecurity often relates back to childhood, emotional abuse and poor parenting, in which case it would relate to both social learning theory and psychodynamics.

His work gives us a rounded picture of a true authoritarian personality *in its extreme form*. We can all behave in an authoritarian way from time to time but we would not say that it governs our personality. When it does, then this will lead to what we would perceive to be abnormal behaviours and thinking. Suurkulu says that such people are unsuitable for leadership roles, but they are just the kind of people who seek them out!

We can certainly believe this of our some politicians, and it would support the initial idea of Adorno's work concerning Hitler's leadership, but there was *no evidence to support this in Milgram's study*. This does not mean that it does not exist, but that the conditions did not allow it to be observed. It would say more about the researcher than the volunteers, as he was the one who was insisting that the teacher carried on giving the shocks. So, Milgram's study cannot be used to support the idea of the authoritarian personality in itself, but it may still be a valid concept.

If you are interested in the authoritarian personality and would like to know more about its characteristics, you can read Suurkulu's article here: [www.ool.co.uk/0617pa](http://www.ool.co.uk/0617pa).

## Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966)

This concept is related to legitimate authority in that it is about where we see the responsibility lies for our actions.

Is it *within* ourselves, in which case we have an "inner locus of control" or is it elsewhere, in which case we have an "external locus of control"?

If you have an inner locus of control, you will take responsibility for your actions. You will make things happen, rather than wait for things to happen to you. It is generally thought that people who have an inner locus of control cope better with stressful situations and remain healthier as a result of that. By taking action, you can have an effect on the outcome which is psychologically good for you.

If you have an external locus of control, you will perceive the responsibility as lying with someone else. You do not have control over the situation. You allow other people to make decisions for you. You will tend to blame others or the 'situation' for your current position, and you will often feel helpless. Clearly, this might be linked to agency theory where the control is also external.

However, much as this a compelling theory, it is arguable whether we can define people by their locus of control. We may have a personal preference for one or the other, but all of us will show both

elements in our personality from time to time. It is likely to be the situation that dictates what we display at any one time.

If a person was totally governed by one or the other, they would show psychopathic tendencies, either always demanding to be in charge or never ever accepting responsibility for anything! Psychotherapists' consulting rooms are made up of many people who display such tendencies.

In fact studies have only shown weak correlations (associations) between obedience and locus of control. One of the closest was found by **Latif** (2000) who compared locus of control with moral reasoning. The lowest level of moral reasoning is "blind obedience", according to Kohlberg. They found a +0.42 correlation (1 is a perfect match) between the belief that blind obedience is morally correct and an external locus control. However, this study was about attitudes not behaviour, and attitudes do not determine behaviour. There are many reasons why we might not act in accordance with our beliefs, so even positive correlation is only partially valid.

### Activity 3

Is there any evidence in the studies of conformity or obedience for individuals having an internal or external locus of control?

Conformity : Think about a) the confederates b) participants  
Obedience: Think about a) the researcher b) the "teacher"  
c) the "learner".



We have spent a long time examining Milgram's study – for good reason, it is one of the most influential psychological studies of all time. But it is not the only one. Another well reported study of obedience was done by **Hofling** who wanted to know whether nurses would be obedient when they 'knew' they were giving incorrect doses of medicine which could harm a patient.

If you have access to the internet you might like to look up this webpage which gives a very detailed account of this study: [www.ool.co.uk/0619pa](http://www.ool.co.uk/0619pa).

In the examination, of course, you have limited time, so here is a summary of the study.

## Study: Hofling et al (1966) Obedience in Hospitals

**Aim:** To investigate the extent nurses will obey an unreasonable order given by a doctor.

**Procedure:** 22 nurses from 3 hospitals took part. They were selected by genuinely being on duty on an evening shift. There was a control group of 12 graduate nurses and 21 nursing students from a different hospital.

During the shift a doctor rang up the nurses' station and ordered a dose of 20mg of 'Astroten' to be given to patient X. The doctor was unknown to any of the nurses. There was a doctor on the ward acting as an observer unbeknown to the nurses. During the call the doctor said he had not completed the forms, was running late and would do so as soon as he got to the hospital. He said the drug was urgently needed and must be administered as soon as possible.

When the nurses went to the drugs cupboard they found the "Astroten" with clear instructions saying the maximum dose was 10mg, and this should not be exceeded. (It was in reality glucose).

If it appeared that the nurse was about to administer the fake drug, the observer doctor intervened.

All nurses were debriefed within 30 mins of the end of the call.

**Results:** The calls between the doctor and nurse were generally brief. 21/22 nurses started to administer the fake drug. During debriefing only 11 admitted they had noticed the 'do not exceed' notice on the packet. In the control group 10/12 graduates and all of the students said they would NOT have administered the drug.

**Conclusion:** When presented with instructions from a doctor with higher authority than the nurses, most nurses will obey the command irrespective of the outcome.

**Evaluation:** The AQA specification does not require us to look at whether we always behave as we all think we will. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that belief is no predictor of behaviour. So, the fact that the control group almost all said they would have behaved differently should be taken with a pinch of salt.

- This study supports Agency theory, in that the nurses did not feel that they needed to take responsibility as that was

the role of the doctor. The nurses were just doing what was asked of them.

- The study has high ecological validity. It had “population” validity as it was a real situation where nurses were working.
- It was a field study; therefore it has high experimental validity.
- The nurses were not able to give informed consent.
- Some of the nurses were very distressed.
- The nurses were not given the opportunity to check out the (fake) drug.
- 15 of the nurses could recall similar incidents in real life! It should also be noted that there is a 12% daily error rate for such things in the USA. It is considered that this is due to the “unquestioning deference to authority that doctors demand and nurses expect” (Hofling et al, 1966). This last sentence makes us aware of how norms in society really do affect what we think and how we behave.

However, this was a fake drug, which the nurses had not come across. What would happen if they knew the effects of overdosing on a drug they were familiar with?

A follow-up study was carried out by **Stevenson et al (1977)** who used the same experimental conditions with the exception of two key changes. The fake drug was “Valium”, a drug well known to the nurses, and the doctor who phoned was a doctor who was known to the nurses. They found that only 2/18 obeyed the request. Having more knowledge (informational social influence) empowered the nurses to *reject* the doctor’s commands.

## Defiance of Authority

This refers to the act of defying an order from an authority figure despite pressures to obey, as we have just seen in the Stevenson study. Factors that reduce obedience such as proximity of victim/authority figure, presence of allies all increase defiance.

The presence of disobedient peers helps the person see defiance as legitimate. **Gamson et al (1982)** showed that in certain conditions, people will not obey orders from authority. Individuals who are members of groups are more likely to disobey because of the possibility of collective action. We will look again at this in the third lesson when we examine the implications of social influence.

Defiance of authority can also be explained by **individual differences**. If an individual possesses a high level of moral reasoning they may be more likely to disobey especially if an order goes against their conscience. Some of Milgram’s participants showed no emotion and were happy to follow orders whereas some

stopped relatively early on. One of Milgram's participants, Gretchen Brandt, had actually experienced life in a concentration camp and she refused to give any shock.

When Milgram's study was repeated with different people, it was found that educated people were less obedient and more likely to defy authority.

Finally, when people want to protect their sense of freedom they may react by doing the opposite of what they are told. This is known as the **'boomerang effect'**.

Additional reading online at Simply Psychology:  
[www.ool.co.uk/0621pa](http://www.ool.co.uk/0621pa).

#### Activity 4

Match the following terms to the correct description:

1. NORMATIVE SOCIAL INFLUENCE
2. LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY
3. CONFEDERATE
4. BOOMERANG EFFECT
5. AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY
6. OBEDIENCE
7. DEBRIEFING



- a) When people do the opposite of what is being asked.
- b) Type of person who is more likely to obey.
- c) Outcome of social influence where a person acts in accordance with orders from an authority figure.
- d) A type of social influence which is based on a desire to be liked.
- e) Those whom society approves as holders of social power.
- f) A post-research interview designed to inform participants of the true nature of the study.
- g) An individual in a study who is not a real participant and has been instructed how to behave by the experimenter.



Now read Lawton & Willard: *AQA A-level Psychology Book 1*, pp. 17-39.

## Practice Test

1. How does obedience differ from conformity?
2. In Milgram's study, up to what voltage were most people prepared to shock another person? If they reached this voltage there was a strong chance they would go on to give the maximum voltage.
3. Write a definition of "agentic state".
4. How did the Burger study differ from that of Milgram?
5. Kelman theorized that there are three levels of legitimacy. What are they?
6. Describe a person with an "authoritarian personality".
7. If a person has an external locus of control, how would you expect them to behave?
8. What is the "boomerang effect"?
9. What are situational variables? Identify one from any study of obedience and say how it might have affected the study.
10. In general, what ethical issues are common to studies of obedience?

## Suggested Answers to Activities

### Activity One

You have most likely referred to the distress caused to the teacher, and the amount of deception in the experiment. It is an emotive study.

### Activity Two

Answer in the text.

### Activity Three

In Asch's study, it can be argued that the Confederates showed an internal locus of control by choosing to be involved in the study, and an external locus of control in allowing behaviour to be dictated by the experimenter. However, the participants themselves who conformed displayed at least once an external locus of control.

In Milgram's study, the teacher displayed an external locus of control by doing as he was told. The learner was exhibiting an external locus of control. The researcher himself showed an internal locus of control by acting on his own wishes and beliefs.

Remember, behaviours will be very different in real life as opposed to being in a laboratory, or will they? Hofling's study might indicate otherwise!

### Activity Four

- When people do the opposite of what is being asked- BOOMERANG EFFECT
- Type of person who is more likely to obey- AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY
- Outcome of social influence where a person acts in accordance with orders from an authority figure- OBEDIENCE
- A type of social influence which is based on a desire to be liked- NORMATIVE SOCIAL INFLUENCE
- Those whom society approves as holders of social power- LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY
- A post-research interview designed to inform participants of the true nature of the study- DEBRIEFING
- An individual in a study who is not a real participant and has been instructed how to behave by the experimenter- CONFEDERATE