




# Revisiting the Milgram Experiments

Obedience to *Authority* or Simple  
*Cultural* Control?

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# Revisit fundamental principle

- We are *always* under environmental control
  - So...
  - When are **NOT** being obedient?
  - When are **NOT** under stimulus control?
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# Observable, tangible evidence

- **Clothes**
  - Are you wearing any?
  - Why?
  - For their function?
  - For their style?



# Clothes are relevant because...?

- Empirical proof of:
  - Culture
  - Shared culture
  - Controlling agencies
  - And...*obedience*



# Milgram got it *almost* right

- Different orientation
- Reliance on agentic-autonomous approach
- Much of his interpretation is commensurate with behavior analysis



# What is culture?

- *"...all the variables affecting him [a person] which are arranged by other people" (p. 419).*
- *"...culture...is...enormously complex and extraordinarily powerful" (p. 419).*



# What make it so powerful?

- *“Behavior comes to conform to the standards of a given community...”(p. 415).*
- *“...the community extends the classification of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to certain forms of behavior” (p. 417).*
- *“...shape [this]...behavior to group standards are powerful” (p. 418).*



# Relevance?

- *“‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ eventually have the force of ‘conforming’ and ‘non-conforming’” (p. 418).*
- *“Instances of behavior which are nonconforming, but not otherwise aversive to the group are henceforth treated as if they were aversive” (p. 418).*






# Cultural control

- *“...social stimuli are important because the social reinforcers with which they are correlated are also important” (p.302)*
- *“...imitation may be so skillful...that we are likely to attribute it to some special mode of interpersonal contact...(p. 304).*



# Controlling agencies

- Government and Law
  - Religion
  - Psychotherapy
  - Economic Control
  - Education
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# Characteristics of controlling agencies

- *“...controlling agencies manipulate particular sets of variables (p. 333)”*
- *“...the total culture, in which all our controlling agencies and all other features of the social environment work together simultaneously and with a single effect (p. 334).”*



# Establishment of obedience

- *“...the controlled individual is obedient to the dictates of the agency if he behaves in conformity with its controlling practices” (p. 338)*



# Relevance?

- *“By establishing obedient behavior, the controlling agency prepares for future occasions which it cannot foresee and for which an explicit repertoire, cannot, therefore, be prepare in advance...*
- *When novel occasions arise to which the individual possess no response, **he simply does what he is told.**” (p.338)*



# Relevance to Milgram?

- The individual subjects were predisposed to obedience due to prior learning history and the situational stimuli of the lab.
- It is less of a surprise that so many people obeyed and more of a surprise that more people didn't given the extent to which controlling agencies regulate human behavior.




# Relevance to Milgram?

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- Those that dissented and disobeyed did so because of the control of *some* agency, because it is not possible to do so otherwise.
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# Milgram's Misses

- Free will
  - Willing obedience
  - Independent entities
  - Able to define situations
  - Give self over to authority
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# Agreements

- Moral ideals are inseparable from obedient attitude
- Demand for obedience, only consistent element across variety of commands
- Use of “rewards” when compliant
- Situational stimuli are crucial
- Experimenter becomes SD



# Agreements

- Situational obligations
  - Context is important
  - Avoidance as negative reinforcement for continued shocks
  - Physical presence of experimenter
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# Unacknowledged agreements

- Subject is bound by authority system
- “Ordinary men” were not SD's for administration of shocks
- “Internalization” of social order
- Internalized basis for obedience
- Acceptance of ideology of legitimate authority




# Unacknowledged agreements

- Agentic state is the “...mental organization which enhances the likelihood of obedience.”
- Obedience is the behavioral aspect of that state
- Transformation to the agentic state is only partial for those who “disobeyed.”
- Disobedience is transfer of stimulus control



# Discussion

- Culture and other people are always source of and under social-environmental control.
  - We are obedient to *something* all of the time.
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# Discussion

- We need to appreciate more fully the impact of controlling agencies and culture in daily life as we are *not* the ones who are controlling much of it.
- Propaganda plays a significant role in determining our behavior.



# Real question is...

- Not necessarily *who* is controlling the *controllers* (they are being controlled by contingencies), but who is controlling the variables that are in the environment?
- S/he who controls *the environment*, controls the population.



# References

- Milgram, S. (). Obedience to authority.
- Skinner, B.F. (1953). Science and human behavior, NY: Free Press.