Stanley Milgram's Legacy to Cross-Cultural Psychology. How would the Results of his Obedience Studies Replicate in non-Western Cultures?[1]

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Abstract

Although Milgram's demonstrations on blind obedience figure as the most prominent studies in social psychology, his role as one of the earliest cross-cultural experimentalist and the potential for research on obedience from a cross-cultural perspective is widely ignored. In his first publication he compared French and Norwegians on their tendency to conform to group norms. He indicated he was planning further research in national characteristics that might help to illuminate the Nazi epoch in German history by comparing Germans and people from other European countries. These studies were to become the famous Milgram experiments on blind obedience. Between 1968 and 1985 ten replications in countries outside the USA were conduced. Remarkably, the average obedience rates were very similar. Does this suggest that blind obedience is a universal aspect of social behaviour? This conclusion might be premature as behaviour we define as obedience may have different meaning in different cultures. Since the Milgram phenomenon is the prime example of the so-called „fundamental attribution error" which demonstrates that (western) outside observers vastly underestimate the situational pressure, it is likely that non-western observers may take more situational explanation into account and therefore attribute less personal responsibility and blame which may lead to different moral evaluations of misdeeds resulting from blind obedience.

Keywords

Obedience – cross-cultural replications – fundamental attribution error – German character – honour killing – suicide bombers

Psychologists and many non-psychologists alike remember Stanley Milgram as the author of the famous studies on obedience – perhaps the best known series of experiments ever conducted in psychology. However, his role as one of the earliest cross-cultural psychologists is almost forgotten.

Early in his career Milgram developed a lifelong interest in the cross-cultural study of social behaviour beginning with his dissertation, in which he compared social conformity in Norway and France from 1957-1959. Originally, he planned to include Germany as well. As he had predicted, he found that the Norwegian participant conform more than the French participants. His results were based on various replications in both countries.

He argued that research on national differences is „largely speculative and impressionistic with very little … systematic observation of concrete behaviour" (Blass, 2004, p. 32). In his studies, he was careful to observe rigorous methodological standards not employed by other researchers at that time.

He indicated that he was „planning further research in national characteristics … that might help to illuminate the Nazi epoch in German history" by studying „Germans (who) might be found to be more aggressive than Americans, to submit more readily to authority and to display greater discipline" (Milgram, 1961, p. 51). These studies were to become the famous Milgram experiments on blind obedience (Milgram, 1963, 1974).

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In his so-called „base line condition“ he found that around 65 per cent of his American participants fully obeyed the experimenter up to the maximum shock level of 450 volts administered to the „learner“ in the course of an alleged „learning experiment“. However, his studies were based upon deception and no shocks were actually administered. In addition to the baseline condition, he conducted over 20 variations of his procedure. His central finding showed that our extreme readiness to obey authority can under specific conditions be so strong that it can move us to act in ways contrary to our own moral principles.

From our current perspective, however, this research programme focussing on the origins of the Holocaust was rather ambitious but evidently failed because the historical events are much more complex than could be grasped in a psychological experiment.

He started his series of obedience studies at Yale. To his own surprise he observed so much obedience among his American participants that he found it unnecessary to make German comparisons. Nevertheless, a replication was carried out in Germany a few years later (Mantell, 1971).

Despite the unparalleled interest in Milgram's research on blind obedience, research on this phenomenon was virtually nonexistent in the US for more than 20 years [with the last replication in Austria (Schurz, 1985)]. Shortly after Milgram published his results, new ethical standards for the treatment of participants were in force in American and European universities and made replications of Milgram-type obedience research impossible. I do not know however, whether similar standards also came into effect in non-Western research settings.

However, according to Blass (2012) and Smith & Bond (1998), replications were conducted between 1968 and 1985 in the following ten countries outside North America: Spain, Austria, Germany, Jordan, Scotland, Australia, India, Puerto Rico and Holland. Blass (2012) compared the average obedience rates in studies conducted outside North America employing the Standard Condition and found them remarkably similar and significantly not different outside the US 66 % and in the US 61 % (see Table 1). Does this suggest that blind obedience is a universal aspect of social behaviour? This conclusion might be premature in view of the following considerations:

First, the countries in which these studies have been carried out are, with the exception of Jordan and India, Western countries and therefore we should hesitate to conclude that we have identified a universal aspect of social behaviour.

Second, comparisons of the obedience rates can only be made with caution. For example, the method of subject recruitment and experimental procedures may be different and the time periods when the studies were conducted may differ. This may explain in part the differences found in the studies listed in Table 1.

Third, since only two studies in a non-Western country (Jordan) have been replicated, we have to be very sensitive to the potentially different meanings of blind obedience in different cultures. For instance, it is likely that in countries where power distance (PD) is high (Hofstede, 1991), the rates of obedience may even be higher.

Fourth, the two most important variables operating in the Milgram paradigm are institutional authority and scientific legitimacy. How do people with different cultural backgrounds construe these two phenomenons in an obedience experiment? In the West, scientists have come to represent authority, just as tribal chiefs may represent authority in other societies.

Table 1: A cross-cultural comparison of obedience rates in replications of Milgram's standard conditions (adapted from Blass, 2012).

Foreign Studies		
Author(s)	**Country rate in %**	**Obedience**
Ancona and Pareyson (1968)	Italy	85
Edwards et al. (1969)	South Africa	87.5
Mantell (1971)	Germany	85
Kilham and Mann (1974)	Australia	28
Shanab and Yahya (1977)	Jordan	73
Shanab and Yahya (1978)	Jordan	62.5
Miranda et al. (1981)	Spain	50
Gupta (1983) (Average of 1 Remote and 3 Voice-Feedback conditions)	India	42.5
Schurz (1985)	Austria	80

U.S. mean obedience rate = 60.94 %; Foreign mean obedience rate = 65.94 %

A high status and the role scientists enjoy in the West are not universal. What is the possible equivalence of these variables in non-Western cultures?

What are the promises for replicating obedience studies from a cross-cultural perspective?

There may be a new option in replicating Milgram's original paradigm. In 2009 Burger obtained the permission of the ethical board of his university to replicate Milgrams's base line condition without necessarily endangering the experiment's participants. Essentially, his results were statistically indistinguishable from Milgram's. Perhaps his procedure can serve as a model for further replications from a cross-cultural perspective as well.

As mentioned, the assertion that the Milgram type of blind obedience is universal seems rather premature, because the behaviour we define as obedience may have different meanings in different cultures. The absence of systematic cross-cultural comparisons does not permit such a conclusion.

In Western cultures, the concept of obedience has a negative meaning. Since the genocides in the First and Second World War, obedience has come to be regarded as a far less desirable quality in Western societies. In other cultures, however, obedience may be regarded a virtue. For instance, a tribal chief can represent authority or a religious leader can command blind obedience. For example, in collectivistically oriented cultures, adjusting to fit the request or expectations of other is highly valued and is sometimes a moral imperative. In these cultures conformity and obedience may be seen as being necessary for social functioning, rather than as a sign of weakness. However, when we speak of blind obedience, we must focus on its negative impact.

It may be that the kind of relationship between authority and a naïve actor plays a decisive role in other cultures. Whereas the experimenter in the original Milgram experiment was a stranger to the „teacher", this relationship may be conceived differently in other cultures. For instance, Bond & Smith (1996) found that social conformity effects were stronger outside Western Europe and North America when the majority did not consist of out-group members.

There are many other examples in which acts of blind obedience cause innocent victims. I would like to mention two: „honour killing" and „suicide bombers". When in some countries young girls run away from their homes because they oppose marrying a man who has been chosen by their father, they are killed by their own family members, and thus become victims of an „honour killing" (The New York Times, 2014). The father not only decides about his daughter's fate, he may also order other family member to kill his daughter. Another disturbing example of blind obedience are the so-called „suicide bombers" who kill others and eventually themselves in the name of god or religious beliefs.

The „fundamental attribution error" in other cultures

Milgram's obedience research is not only about the magnitude of destructive obedience itself, but also about a related complimentary phenomenon which makes the moral implications of the obedience phenomenon comprehensible. How do we, as outside observers, view the actors who fully obey orders? It turns out that the judgement of outside observers is completely flawed. Systematic research on the conceptualization of actors shows that naïve observers tend to attribute the behaviour of the Milgram „teacher" to his personal dispositions rather than to the determining influence of the situation. In a simulation of Milgram's standard condition, Bierbrauer (1979) observed that even participants who role-played the „teacher" vastly underestimated the situational pressure of a typical Milgram-subject and attributed his behaviour to his personal dispositions (see Figure 1). Ross (1977) labelled this phenomenon as the well-known „fundamental attribution error". From a cross-cultural perspective, numerous studies have shown that Asians attach more weight to the situational context than westerners (e.g. Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Morris & Peng, 1994). For instance, Miller (1984) observed that Indian students gave many more situational explanations and fewer trait-based explanations than US students. The moral implications of the obedience phenomenon only become understandable from this perspective. Outside observers with a western background are more likely to presume „free will" or faulty dispositions. Perhaps this is less the case for non-westerners who take more situational explanations into account (Tang, Newman & Huang, 2014). Therefore, obedient behaviour conceptualized in a non-western context may have different moral implications than in the West. When observers are more sensitive to the situational constraints of the actor, they should attribute less personal responsibility and blame and the wrongdoer is more likely to be exonerated from his misdeeds.

Cross-cultural replications require an in-depth analysis of the different roles of authority and legitimacy operating in a particular culture. In Milgram's series of experiments, the person in command represented scientific authority. How do people in other cultures chose leaders as having a right to issue commands and to whom do they feel an obligation to obey? How, for

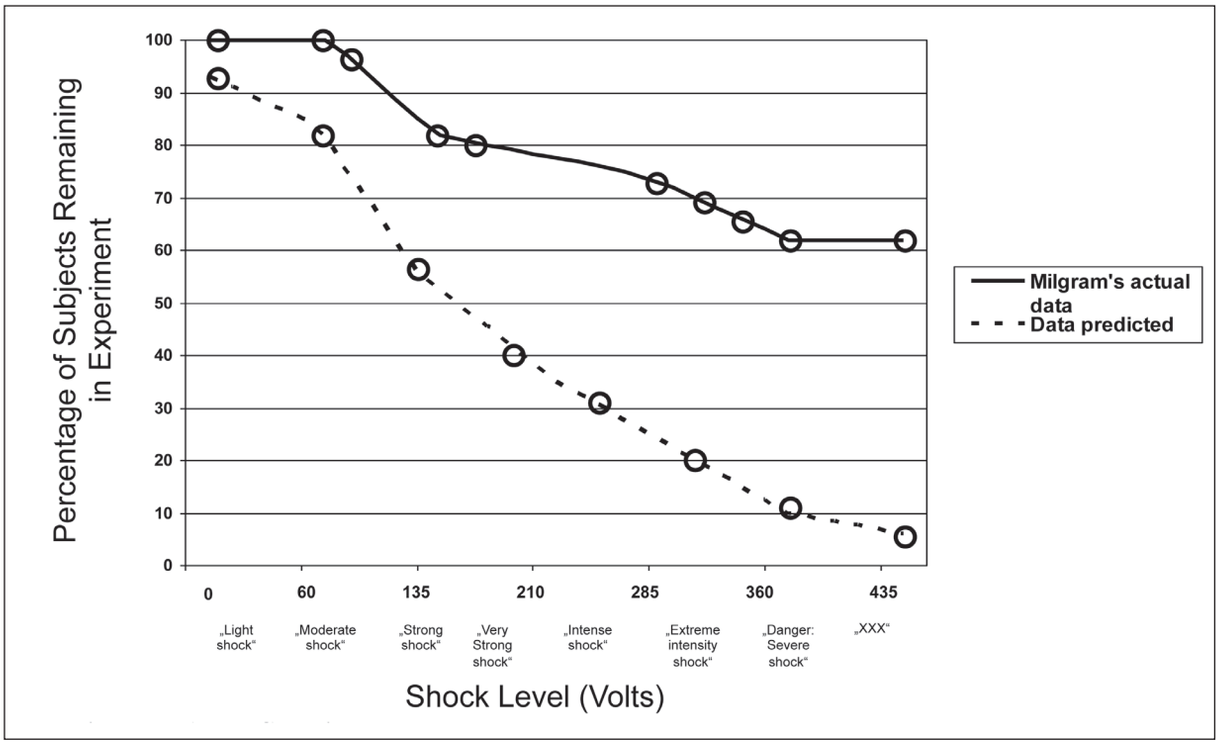

Figure 1: Predicted and Actual Compliance.

The upper curve presents the Milgram data (exp. 5) and shows the percentage of subjects who remained in the situation, continuing to administer shocks as the voltage increased. The lower curve is from a study in which role-playing subjects participated in an reenactment of the Milgram experiment and attempted to predict what percentage of the actual subjects would continue to be obedient as shock increased. The role-playing subjects vastly underestimated the magnitude of the situational forces and the likelihood of obedience in the Milgram situation (Cf. Bierbrauer, 1979).

instance, do they construe authority and legitimacy of fathers or religious leaders? In the context of our Western understanding of the moral implications for such behaviours, we have a clear answer. However, from a cross-cultural perspective we might obtain a better understanding of the causes for extreme forms of authoritarian obedience and their moral implications. There are intriguing questions which could be studied in the context of the Milgram obedience paradigm from a cross-cultural perspective to find answers to important global issues for which we lack knowledge.

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[2] The references for the studies listed in Table 1 are taken from Blass (2012).

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