

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

Günter Bierbrauer

Universität Luzern, Switzerland

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 conducted. 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

¹ This paper is based on a talk given at the International Congress of Cross-Cultural Psychology at Reims, France, July 18, 2014.