

The Psychology of Authority in War and Modern Decision-Making

My guiding research question:

How do psychological mechanisms, such as obedience to authority, fear, and social proof, influence moral decision-making during wartime, and what does this tell us about the persistence of these mechanisms in the modern day?

Overview of Survey

To answer my research question, I created a survey that asks users questions based on Stanley Milgrim's ideas about obedience to authority. Milgrim was a scientist in the mid to late 1900s, most famous for his psychological study of obedience (Milgrim). This survey specifically explores how the psychological mechanisms he focused on like obedience to authority, fear, and social proof impact moral decision making in war-like scenarios.

In the survey, there are around 4 questions in each of the following categories: baseline obedience, fear and coercion, moral autonomy, social proof, and ethical awareness. The goal of the survey is to assess whether users prioritize authority, peer influence, or personal ethics when making decisions and at the end the user is categorized in a Milgram-like context based on an analysis of the user's tendencies. For example, users who show high obedience and low moral autonomy might align with profiles of historical soldiers who push the responsibility for their unethical actions to their superiors (which often happens during wartime atrocities). On the other hand, users who score high in moral autonomy and ethical awareness might make decisions similar to resisters during wartime. An example of this person would be any members of resistance movements who prioritize their values over societal norms or coercive pressure.

By simulating ethical dilemmas faced in wartime conflicts and in Milgrim's experiments, I want to show how the same mechanisms present during Milgrim's experiments continue to shape behavior in modern society. The persistence of these mechanisms reveals how authority, fear, and social proof continue to be powerful forces in both soldiers' and the regular citizen's decision making process. Understanding and fostering moral autonomy is important to help people to learn how to resist unethical actions in high-pressure situations.

Survey Design

The survey questions help us understand how users make moral decisions in response to demands of authority figures and assess how these modern individuals might react under similar pressures that soldiers went through around the time of Milgrim's experiments. Some questions evaluate the user's likelihood to obey authority figures even when the instructions conflict with their personal morals. These questions explore how factors like fear of punishment, social pressure, and the presence of authority influence the user's decision making. I also included questions that assess the user's moral autonomy: how comfortable the user is to question authority and whether they consider the ethical implications of their actions before doing them. I created these questions to gauge the user's balance between obedience and their personal values, like how Milgram studied participants wrestling with their conscience during his experiments.

Survey Results

After the user completes the survey, they will see a summary page with the results of the survey. For each category the user will see what their level is for that category. For example, if the user answers questions related to obeying authority while ignoring their morals negatively, they will have a low score for the obedience to authority scale. Each card that displays the user's level for each category also has an insight that explains what their score means.

The user will also see an obedience score. This score is calculated based on a weighted sum of the users score on the survey questions since each question has a different weight of importance as it relates to shaping obedience. For example, I gave baseline obedience and agentic state higher weights since there were central themes in Milgrim's findings. Each question gets a score between 1 and 4 based on the user's response. Higher scores indicated higher obedience traits. The weighted average is a score between 1 and 4 which is then classified into one of three levels of obedience: "Highly Obedient," "Moderately Obedient," or "Resistant to Authority." Following user testing, I implemented categorization based on thresholds of the final obedience score: scores of 33% and below are classified as "Resistance to Authority," scores between 34% and 66% as "Moderately Obedient," and scores above 66% as "Highly Obedient."

Lastly, the user will see a historical soldier profile that relates to their scores and responses. The soldier profiles each have a different level of obedience to authority and moral autonomy and are drawn from key moments in history: the Nazi soldiers during World War II, the U.S. soldiers involved in the My Lai Massacre, and members of the White Rose Resistance during the Nazi regime. Each group has different psychological responses to authority, fear, cohesions, and moral conflict. These profiles allow users to take the insights learned from the Milgrim experiments and put them into historical context.

The first profile, *The Obedient Soldier*, represents users who are highly obedient and have low moral autonomy. During World War II, many soldiers in the Reserve Police Battalion 101 in Nazi Germany willingly carried out immoral orders in order to obey their authority figures. Since these soldiers were heavily influenced by the authority of their superiors and the social pressures in their units, it was difficult for them to question the morality of their actions during war.

In *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Christopher Browning examines how the German soldiers were conditioned during training and deployment to obey authority even when the orders they were given involved heinous acts. Due to this training, Browning states that the soldiers entered what Milgram calls “agentive state” when making their decisions. Essentially, they internally shifted the responsibility for their actions to their superiors in order to justify their actions. Browning notes that in this state the soldiers "are the instrument of another's will" (Browning). Since they had a lack of moral autonomy, they were less likely to challenge the morality of their actions and often rationalized or dehumanized their victims.

The users that are most similar to this profile are heavily influenced by psychological mechanisms such as obedience to authority, fear, social proof, and the agentive state. Similar to Milgram's participants who obeyed the experimenter's orders despite the ethical conflict, these users are likely to follow any order from a figure of authority and make decisions based on the pressures they receive from their peers.

The second profile, *The Moderate Soldier*, represents users who are moderately obedient and have moderate moral autonomy. A historical example of this are the U.S. soldiers that were involved in the My Lai Massacre during the Vietnam War. According to *The My Lai Massacre: A Military Crime of Obedience*, the soldiers that complied with the orders from their superiors to carry out the mass executions made their decisions based on the fear of the consequences if they decided to rebel. Some soldiers also experience guilt due to killing innocent people. The users who match this profile have similar decision making patterns as the participants in Milgram's experiment who were torn between obeying the experimenter and listening to their morality. Despite their internal moral conflict, these users tend to succumb to the authority and peer

pressure which demonstrates how fear and coercion can push individuals to override their conscience.

The final profile, *The Resister*, represents users who have low obedience and high moral autonomy. One historical example of this is the group of German students who resisted the Nazi regime in what was called the White Rose Movement. Sophie Scholl, a member of the movement, expressed that a moral action should be taken regardless of the consequences. Together, the members of the White Rose Movement stood up for what they thought was morally right by rejecting Nazi orders, distributing anti-Nazi leaflets, and protesting against the atrocities committed by the Nazis. They also paid the price for their resistance, though Milgram's participants who resisted authority faced far less severe consequences, the participants in both scenarios demonstrated the same fundamental principle: standing firm in their moral convictions despite intense social pressure to conform to authority. In contrast to the soldiers represented by the other two profiles, users who fall into this profile tend to exercise strong moral autonomy and act according to their personal ethical standards.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this survey, inspired by the insights from Milgram's obedience experiments, explores the psychological mechanisms that influence users' decisions in high-pressure, authority-driven situations that often conflict with personal morals and ethics. Through questions addressing obedience, fear, moral autonomy, social proof, and ethical awareness, the survey categorizes modern users in a Milgram-like context and provides insights into how their responses relate to historical wartime profiles and the enduring nature of obedience and social influence.

However, as a survey, it cannot fully replicate the immersive, high-pressure conditions of Milgram's controversial experiments, which relied on simulated shock machines, scripted actor responses, and an authoritative presence to evoke genuine moral conflict. Although these original experiments were groundbreaking, they sparked ethical debates about Milgram's use of deception as well as the psychological harm he inflicted on participants.

Despite these limitations, the survey is still able to fulfill its purpose by asking users general questions related to obedience to analyze what psychological mechanisms influence their decision-making. The survey brings these mechanisms into a modern context and demonstrates how these themes are timeless and continue to shape contemporary behavior.

Works Cited

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