

# Persuader Characteristics: Authority

**Rationale:** Authority is a powerful motivator of behavior and increases persuasiveness and compliance.

By the end of this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Describe authority
- Identify cues that communicate authority
- Describe the Milgram experiment and its findings
- Identify ethical concerns associated with the Milgram experiment

{video}

No visual aid was used for this lesson.

## Outline of the Lesson

- I. Review of previous session's content
- II. Lesson opening
  - A. Meet John Gray, PhD
    1. Author of "Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus" and 15 other best-selling books
    2. He received a BA and MA in "Creative Intelligence" from the Maharishi International University in Iowa.
    3. John Gray received his PhD from unaccredited Columbia Pacific University after completing a correspondence course in 1982. He was featured prominently in Columbia Pacific's marketing literature in the 1990s prior to its subsequent court-ordered shutdown in 2000.
  - B. Who do you see as an authority figure in your life? In society?
  - C. How can you tell that they are authority figures?
- III. Overview
  - A. Defining authority
  - B. Cues of Authority
  - C. Milgram Studies and the Zimbardo/Stanford Prison experiment
  - D. Automaticity and obedience to authority

## Body

- I. Defining authority
  - A. Derived from a "social position"
  - B. Position is conferred by people. It is not related to a physical attribute, like strength.
  - C. People with authority have:
    1. The power to punish or reward.
    2. Access to power and information.
  - D. Research focuses on a person's willingness to conform to the demands of an authority, even if those demands violate the person's sense of

what is right.

## II. Cues of authority

### A. Clothes

1. Uniforms
  - a. Police
  - b. Security guards
  - c. Military
2. Clothes associated with high-status professions
  - a. Business suits
  - b. Judges' robes
3. Clothes associated with certain types of expertise
  - a. Lab coats
  - b. Tweed coats with suede elbow patches

### B. Titles

1. Reverend/Father/Sister or other titles indicating religious authority
2. Doctor
3. Professor
4. Queen/King and other titles indicating royalty

### C. Trappings

1. Jewelry (or crowns!)
2. Cars
3. Letterhead stationery
4. The corner office

## III. Milgram Studies (1963, 1965, 1974)

A. Experimenter wore lab coat (symbol of authority) and stressed the importance of the study.

B. 2 participants at a time:

1. Learner
2. Teacher

C. Experimental procedure:

1. Supposed research question: Does punishment increase learning?
2. Teacher must administer increasing levels of shock every time the learner makes a mistake.
3. Shock levels were from 15-450 volts, labeled in gradations from "Slight Shock" to "Danger: Severe Shock," to "XXX".
4. Milgram shocked the "teacher" (the research subject) with 45 volts so they could see how it felt.
5. The scientist and the teacher then strapped the learner into the device in a separate room.
6. The "learner" (an actor) questioned the safety because of his heart condition.
7. When the learner got questions wrong, the teacher would shock the learner.

D. Did people try to stop? Most people tried to stop. The researcher would respond:

1. "Please continue."
2. "Go on."
3. "The experiment requires you to continue."

4. "It is absolutely essential that you continue."
5. "You have no other choice, you must go on."

E. The results:

1. The estimate was that between .1% and 3% would obey (estimated by students and by psychiatrists).

Results of Milgram Experiment

Voltage	No. of Defectors	%	Cumulative %
300	5	12.5%	12.5%
315	4	10.05	22.5%
330	2	5.0%	27.5%
345	1	2.5%	30.0%
360-435	2	5.0%	35.0%
450	26	65.0%	100%

2. 65% (26 of 40 people) continued to administer increasingly higher voltage of electric shocks all the way to the end of the shock series, despite the fact that the learner had quit responding at 300 volts.
3. No one quit before the 300 volt mark, the point at which the learner refused to participate any more.

F. Who were these horrible people?

1. Men
2. Age: 20 - 50 years old
3. 20% were professionals
4. 40% had white collar jobs
5. 40% were unskilled labor
6. Personalities were normal and well-adjusted
7. They matched the demographics of the population of New Haven, Connecticut

G. Factors that affect obedience to authority

1. **Physical Proximity:** When the learner was in the same room as the teacher, obedience level dropped from 65% to 40%.
2. **Personal Responsibility:**
  - a. When assured the experimenters were responsible, the "teacher" (research subject) continued.
  - b. Later experiments had research subjects acting as observers and gave them responsibility for outcomes. Under these conditions, they stopped the experiment when the "learner" gave negative reactions to the shock.
3. **Rebellion:** When we see others rebel, we are less likely to go along with authority.

H. What are the ethics of this kind of research?

1. Subjects had a hard time with the experiment. They were reduced to "twitching, stuttering wrecks."
2. Milgram debriefed them and included a friendly reconciliation meeting between teacher and learner.
3. Follow-up survey showed 85% were willing to be future research participants.

4. Participants were deceived and were led to believe that they injured another person, which may have caused damage to their sense of self.
  5. This type of research can no longer be done in the U.S.
- IV. The Stanford Prison Experiment (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973)
- A. Power can be internalized. Symbols and trappings can affect the person who uses them, not just the public or those who are targeted.
  - B. Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.
- V. Sometimes obedience is automatic, but sometimes we obey because we fear punishment for not obeying.
- A. Our early socialization teaches us to respect figures of authority: police, firefighters, teachers, physicians, etc. ("Click-Whirr")
  - B. Most of the time it is probably rational to follow leaders and authority figures, but authority is a peripheral cue.
  - C. When obeying authority isn't automatic, slower responses can be seen as problematic by authority figures:
    1. Traffic stops
    2. Mental illness
  - D. Try to critically evaluate the true expertise and legitimacy of an authority figure.
  - E. Question authority when social and organizational change is needed.

## **Conclusion**

- I. Review
  - A. Defining authority
  - B. Cues of Authority
  - C. Milgram Studies and the Zimbardo/Stanford Prison experiment
  - D. Automaticity and obedience to authority
- II. Learning activity
- III. Lesson closing

## **References**

- Gass, R. H., & Seiter, J. S. (2014). *Persuasion: Social influence and compliance gaining* (5th ed.) Pearson.
- Haney, C., Banks, W. C., & Zimbardo, P. G. (1973). A study of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison. *Naval Research Review*, 30, 4-17.
- Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioral study of obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67(4), 371-8. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0040525>
- Milgram, S. (1965). Some conditions of obedience and disobedience to authority. *Human Relations*, 18(1), 57-76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872676501800105>
- Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to Authority; An Experimental View*. HarperCollins.

## **Learning Activity**

Complete one of these two class activity options.

## **In the Classroom**

1. Divide into small groups
2. Discuss the following questions:
  - In class, we discussed some cues of authority, but there are many others. How is authority communicated using space? Time? What other ways is authority communicated?
  - What social positions do you occupy that come with authority?
  - What are the cues that signify those positions?
  - How can we identify times when we need to question authority?
3. Share your responses with the class

## **Remote**

1. Download this document: [L13-persuader-characteristics-authority-activity.docx](#)
2. Answer the questions in the document
3. Upload the completed activity document here

## **Variations and Accommodations**

Follow guidance from local accommodation authorities. Please contact your instructor if any accommodations are necessary