

Research Paper

Exploring the Relationship between Obedience to Authority and Aspects of Empathy among Working Professionals

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ABSTRACT

The study assessed the relationship between obedience to authority and various dimensions of empathy among working professionals belonging to banking, HR, and teaching professions. The study also sought to determine if the working professionals with high obedience to authority differ from those with low obedience to authority on the various dimensions of empathy. The sample comprised 120 professionals who were working full-time, with 40 individuals representing the banking, HR, and teaching professions each. Tools used included the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983) and a self-constructed questionnaire for assessing the empathy dimensions and obedience to authority, respectively. The ANOVA results indicate that there was no significant difference in terms of obedience to authority and empathy, based on the profession of the individuals. The independent samples t-test results showed that those who were high in obedience to authority scored more in personal distress compared to those low in obedience to authority. The findings using Pearson's correlation method also indicate a weak but significant positive relationship between obedience to authority and some dimensions of empathy.

Keywords: *Obedience to Authority, Empathy, Interpersonal Reactivity, Working Professionals*

Studies on obedience to authority raise concerns about modern society, power dynamics, individual responsibility, and moral character. Obedience is the act of compliance to the commands of a legitimate authority. (Milgram, 1963). In democratic societies like India, challenging authority is crucial to keeping power in check. Civil servants or employees in private organizations may unintentionally contribute to harmful outcomes, like fraud or scams, by simply following orders. When someone is ordered to injure another person, they comply. This is known as destructive obedience. Milgram (1974) noted that ordinary people, doing their jobs without hostility, can become agents of destructive processes. People may rationalize immoral behavior under the influence of corrupting forces, even if they are otherwise good. Understanding the effects of obedience can help individuals avoid becoming unwilling contributors to evil and better resist harmful commands. This in turn can contribute to better psychological well-being at workplace.

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Exploring the Relationship between Obedience to Authority and Aspects of Empathy among Working Professionals

Milgram concluded that there were several reasons that people obey authority. for a variety of reasons. These included the impacts of group influence, the legitimacy of the authority figure, the agentic state theory, and the diffusion of responsibility.

Several personality factors might affect the extent to which someone is likely to obey orders. Milgram's work has contributed to the theory that situational circumstances can override dispositional ones, allowing us to act in ways we never would have imagined we were capable of. "Power of Social Situation" and role of "reciprocal determinism" has a huge impact on how people behave in situations that demand compliance with an authority figure. People with certain personality types may find themselves in submissive settings or even in situations where they can express their need for control more frequently in the real world. Their behaviour may be influenced by the circumstances, but the individuals that comprise the setting also have an impact on it.

Individual differences in personality play a huge role whether an individual at any given point, averaging across many situations, will obey to authority without giving it a second thought, and not hesitating to speak up when the tasks in terms of commands given by the authority figures are against one's moral consciousness. This is especially so in situations where the individual must act against his or her personal choice or responsibility, to say, even bring the downfall of others in the society in a direct or indirect manner. In these acts of destructive obedience, empathy allows one to see things from the opposite party's perspectives or explore alternate choices without having to obey to authority. It also could result in reconsidering and assessing one's guilt, moral concern for the other's wellbeing and attributing responsibility to oneself or to the authority figures. Empathy concern and harmony is highly valued in collectivistic cultures like India and Russia.

Empathy is operationally defined as the "reactions of one individual to the observed experiences of another" (Davis, 1983). It is a necessary and essential component of any relationship or social group. It is at the root of all pro-social behaviour and compassionate action.

Burger's (2009) research findings have been a promising step forward in trying to understand the causes of obedience. Burger also concluded that "Although changes in societal attitudes can affect behaviour, many findings indicate that the same situational factors that affected obedience in Milgram's participants still operate today." (Burger, 2009) In a study done by Burger et al. (2009), Empathic Concern was thought to be linked with high levels of obedience. Empathic Concern is described as the tendency to experience feelings of sympathy and compassion for unfortunate others. The likely link with Obedience was that - the more empathetic, the less obedient (more defiant) the participants will be. But the actual link to obedience discovered was that - overall, no significant differences were found for empathic concern between the obedient and defiant participants. It was noted that ultimately, higher empathy did not directly relate to lower obedience to authority in the experiments, even though there were personal consequences of feeling terrible.

The obedience paradigm is one type of social interaction where empathy and personal distress can both play significant roles (Milgram, 1963). This paradigm creates a social dilemma in which participants are compelled to both prevent damage from occurring and comply with the experimenter's orders to inflict suffering on another individual. Personal distress seems to be linked to another trait, namely neuroticism. A study by Zigler-Hill,

Exploring the Relationship between Obedience to Authority and Aspects of Empathy among Working Professionals

Southard, Archer, and Donohoe (2013) examined the influence of neuroticism and negative affect on reluctance to engage in Destructive Obedience by employing a variation of Milgram's obedience study. Findings highlighted that individuals with low levels of neuroticism reporting highest negative affect levels during the session were the most reluctant to carry out the experimenter's commands to go on with the procedure.

Obedience to authority reduces cognitive conflict before an action (Caspar, E. A., & Pech, G. P., 2024). The findings in a study by Casper (2020) suggest that obeying orders reduces vicarious brain activation towards victims' pain. Empathy-related regions are less active when obeying orders compared to acting freely. Coercion reduced neurocognitive processes associated with guilt. Reduced empathy- and guilt-related activations could facilitate harming under orders.

Dietz and Kleinlogel (2014) posit the theory that the ethical dilemmas regarding the organization's well-being are affected by empathy, which in turn played a role in obedience to authority. In the results it was observed that managers who possess more empathy were less likely to obey the requests of an authority figure which required them to reduce the wages of their employees in comparison to their counterparts who were non-empathetic. The findings suggest that during difficult times for an organization, empathy can act as a safeguard for ethical decisions, without negatively affecting the effectiveness of the organization. The finding also indicates that - obedience to authority, as influenced by empathy, plays a role in maintaining organizational effectiveness and well-being of both the employers and stakeholders of the company. Another study by Brief et al. (2008) revealed that modern racism predicted discrimination in a situation where a legitimate authority figure gave a business-related justification for such biases.

Burger, Girgis, and Manning (2011), investigated the data got during the replication of Milgram's obedience studies to tackle some persistent questions with reference to the original studies. The researchers coded the participants' comments made through the sessions of the experiment and debriefing. Findings suggest that the participants who did follow the instructions of the experimenter were notably less likely to express a sense of personal responsibility than those who refused to follow the experimenter's instructions. And it was also found that those who had expressed concern for the learner's well-being showed greater reluctance to continue with the experiment than did the ones who did not express this particular concern. This shows that obedience to authority was likely to be lower if empathy is high in subjects, and that it is likely to be higher if sense of personal responsibility is diminished.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To examine the significant difference between teachers, HR professionals and bank officials with respect to Obedience to Authority.
2. To examine the significant difference between teachers, HR professionals and bank officials with respect to Empathy.
3. To examine significant difference between individuals scoring high and low on obedience to authority with respect to various dimensions of Empathy.
4. To assess the relationship between Obedience to Authority and various dimensions of Empathy.

Exploring the Relationship between Obedience to Authority and Aspects of Empathy among Working Professionals

Hypotheses

H1: There will be no significant difference between teachers, HR professionals and bank officials with respect to Obedience to Authority.

H2: There will be no significant difference between teachers, HR professionals and bank officials with respect to Empathy.

H3: There will be no significant difference between those who score high/low in Obedience to Authority with respect to Perspective Taking (PT) dimension of empathy.

H4: There will be no significant difference between those who score high/low in Obedience to Authority with respect to Fantasy subscale (FS) dimension of empathy.

H5: There will be no significant difference between those who score high/low in Obedience to Authority with respect to Empathic Concern (EC) dimension of empathy.

H6: There will be no significant difference between those who score high/low in Obedience to Authority with respect to Personal Distress (PD) dimension of empathy.

H7: There will be no significant relationship between Perspective Taking (PT) dimension of Empathy and Obedience to Authority.

H8: There will be no significant relationship between Empathic concern (EC) dimension of Empathy and Obedience to Authority.

H9: There will be no significant relationship between Personal Distress (PD) dimension of Empathy and Obedience to Authority.

H10: There will be no significant relationship between Fantasy subscale (FS) dimension of Empathy and Obedience to Authority.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Procedure

The survey questionnaire was administered on individuals in the age group 20-40 in the various professions - namely Teachers, HR professionals and Bank officials. The sample consisted of 67 females and 53 males. The mean age of the sample was 31.275. The mean years of experience was found to be 6.241. A purposive sampling method was used to collect the data, and an Ex post facto research design was used to carry out the study. The entire sample is taken from urban area. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants and informed consent was taken from them. The participants then completed two questionnaires respectively – a self-constructed Obedience to Authority tool and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) developed by Davis (1980, 1983).

Tools Used for the Study

- i) **Obedience to Authority Questionnaire (Self-constructed tool):** This tool consists of 22-items with one item (20th item) being reverse-scored. This tool can be administered via paper-and-pencil or online surveys. It uses a 5-item Likert scale with two anchors (A=Does not describe me well; E=Describes me very well). Face validity and construct validity were established.
- ii) **The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980, 1983):** The tool consists of 28-items answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Does not describe me well” to “Describes me very well”. The measure has 4 subscales pertaining to different facets of empathy, each made up of 7 different items. These subscales are (taken directly from Davis, 1983): Perspective Taking – the tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological point of view of others Fantasy – taps respondents' tendencies to transpose themselves imaginatively into the feelings and actions of fictitious characters in books, movies, and plays Empathic Concern – assesses "other-oriented" feelings of sympathy and concern for unfortunate others Personal

Exploring the Relationship between Obedience to Authority and Aspects of Empathy among Working Professionals

Distress – measures "self-oriented" feelings of personal anxiety and unease in tense interpersonal settings. The IRI has demonstrated good intra-scale and test–retest reliability, and convergent validity is indicated by correlations with other established empathy scales (Davis, 1980).

Statistical Analyses

Descriptive measures like mean, standard deviation and variance were calculated. One way ANOVA was used to compare the three different groups with respect to obedience to authority and empathy scores. An independent t test was used to analyse the significant difference between individuals high and low on obedience to authority, with respect to various dimensions of empathy. And Pearson’s correlation was used to compute the relationship between obedience to authority and the various dimensions of empathy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 represents analysis of variance between teachers, HR professionals and bank officials with respect to obedience to authority

SOURCE	df	SUM OF SQUARES	MEAN SQUARE	F	Sig.
BETWEEN GROUPS	2	768.21	384.10	2.08	0.12 NS
WITHIN GROUPS	117	21561.65	184.28		
TOTAL	119	22329.86			

NS – Not Significant

As indicated in Table 1, there were no statistically significant differences in obedience to authority among teachers, HR professionals, and bank officials, $F(2, 117) = 2.08, p = .12$. Thus, the null hypothesis was retained, suggesting that individuals across the three professions reported similar levels of obedience to authority.

Table 2 represents analysis of variance between teachers, HR professionals and bank officials with respect to empathy

SOURCE	df	SUM OF SQUARES	MEAN SQUARE	F	Sig.
BETWEEN GROUPS	2	13.06	6.53	0.05	0.94 NS
WITHIN GROUPS	117	13759.53	117.60		
TOTAL	119	13772.59			

NS – Not Significant

Results indicated no statistically significant differences in empathy among teachers, HR professionals, and bank officials, $F(2, 117) = 0.05, p = .94$. The null hypothesis was therefore retained, suggesting that individuals across the three professions reported similar levels of empathy. Socio-cultural factors may account for the comparable levels of both obedience to authority and empathy across groups.

Exploring the Relationship between Obedience to Authority and Aspects of Empathy among Working Professionals

Table 3 - Independent 't' test between those high and low in obedience to authority (OA) on various dimensions of empathy, irrespective of the professions of the individuals

VARIABLES	GROUPS	N	M	SD	t
Perspective Taking (PT)	HIGH ON OA	35	44.48	14.13	0.55 NS
	LOW ON OA	36	42.66	13.76	
Fantasy Scale (FS)	HIGH ON OA	35	51.74	10.93	3.23**
	LOW ON OA	32	40.68	16.30	
Empathic concern (EC)	HIGH ON OA	39	46.87	14.70	1.45 NS
	LOW ON OA	39	42.33	12.92	
Personal Distress (PD)	HIGH ON OA	38	50.18	13.81	3.62**
	LOW ON OA	34	38.17	14.20	

****p<0.01, NS – Not Significant, OA – Obedience to Authority**

From table III, it is evident that there is no significant difference between individuals who score high or low in obedience to authority, with respect to perspective taking (PT) and empathic concern (EC) dimensions of empathy. Hence null hypotheses H3 and H5 which state that there will be no significant difference between those who score high/low in Obedience to Authority with respect to perspective taking (PT) and Empathic Concern (EC) dimensions of empathy respectively, are retained. There is a significant difference in fantasy scale dimension of empathy between those who score high on obedience to authority (M = 51.74, SD = 10.93) and those who score low on obedience to authority (M = 40.68, SD = 16.30). The mean difference was significant, $t(38) = 3.23$, $p = < 0.01$. Hence null hypothesis H4 which stated that there will be no significant difference between those who score high/low in Obedience to Authority with respect to Fantasy subscale (FS) dimension of empathy, was rejected. This indicated that the mean fantasy scores were higher for those with higher levels of obedience to authority than those with lower levels of obedience to authority. The higher imaginative empathy component could have contributed to empathy even with the authority figures, which maybe corresponds to more acceptance and compliance to the commands of the authority, which in turn perpetuates the high obedience levels. It is also observed from table III that there is a significant difference in personal distress dimension of empathy between those who score high on obedience to authority (M = 50.18, SD = 13.81) and those who score low on obedience to authority (M = 38.17, SD = 14.20). The mean difference was significant, $t(38) = 3.62$, $p = < 0.01$. Hence null hypothesis H6 which stated that there will be no significant difference between those who score high/low in obedience to authority with respect to personal distress (PD) dimension of empathy, was rejected.

Overall, higher obedience to authority was associated with greater fantasy and personal distress, but not with perspective taking or empathic concern. The fact that those high in

Exploring the Relationship between Obedience to Authority and Aspects of Empathy among Working Professionals

obedience to authority scored more in personal distress might be because those who are more obedient to authority are more prone to self-oriented anxiety given the ethical dilemmas they face in stressful situations. For example, ethical dilemmas in workplace situations include having to go with the superior's commands even if the subordinate thinks that obeying the commands would be morally wrong or could hurt another person in the organisation directly or indirectly.

According to research, people who experience personal distress may even become more motivated to withdraw from the stressor to reduce it (Tice et al., 2001). This could essentially involve obeying authority figures to spare those who obey from the painful consequences of defying them.

Table 4 shows the significant relationship between various dimensions of empathy and obedience authority among the individuals, irrespective of the professions.

VARIABLES	N	M	SD	r
Perspective Taking (PT)	120	17.36	4.24	0.13 NS
Obedience to Authority (OA)	120	45.13	13.69	
Fantasy Scale (FS)	120	13.80	5.27	0.27**
Obedience to Authority (OA)	120	45.13	13.69	
Empathic Concern (EC)	120	16.83	3.84	0.19*
Obedience to Authority (OA)	120	45.13	13.69	
Personal Distress (PD)	120	13.93	4.55	0.30**
Obedience to Authority (OA)	120	45.13	13.69	

****p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, OA – Obedience to Authority**

Significant positive correlations were found between the fantasy dimension of empathy ($M = 13.80$, $SD = 5.27$) and obedience to authority ($M = 45.13$, $SD = 13.69$), $r = .35$, $p < .01$, $n = 120$; the empathic concern dimension of empathy ($M = 16.83$, $SD = 3.84$) and obedience to authority, $r = .35$, $p < .05$; and the personal distress dimension of empathy ($M = 13.93$, $SD = 4.55$) and obedience to authority, $r = .35$, $p < .01$. These observations indicate that dimensions of empathy like fantasy scale (FS), empathic concern (EC) and personal distress (PD) are weakly but positively associated with obedience to authority. Hence null hypotheses H_8 , H_9 and H_{10} which state there will be no significant relationship between obedience to authority and the empathy dimensions of fantasy scale, empathic concern and personal distress respectively, are rejected. Further research is needed to see how empathy might affect obedience to authority in real life situations.

CONCLUSION

1. There was no significant difference between teachers, HR professionals and bank officials with respect to Obedience to Authority and Empathy.
2. The findings showed that those who were high in obedience to authority scored more in personal distress compared to those low in obedience to authority, irrespective of the professions of the individuals in the study.
3. There was a weak but significant positive correlation found between obedience to authority and empathy dimensions of empathic concern, fantasy scale and personal distress, irrespective of the professions of the individuals in the study.

Limitations

1. Due to a limited sample size, generalizations cannot be done to a larger population.
2. Since self-report measures were used, the answers of the participants could be subject to social desirability bias factor.
3. Non-probability sampling method was used for recruiting the participants of the study.
4. There might be some unintentionally reported wrong answers due to misinterpretations of the questionnaire items by the respondents.

Implications

Research challenges the assumption that people possess moral autonomy and independence, showing they may be passive conformists. Many individuals struggle to challenge authority based on conscience or values like empathy. In distressing situations, people tend to obey authority rather than assert their own stance. This can contribute to lowered psychological well-being at workplace. Factors like the desire for personal control and authoritarianism also impact obedience. These factors may mediate the role of empathy in obedience, highlighting the need for future research on these variables.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. Further research can be done on the dispositional factors affecting obedience to authority, and to study its implications on society.
2. Gender differences in obedience to authority can be explored in future studies.
3. There is also a need for a standardized tool for the measure of obedience to authority, and research could be done on the same.

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Exploring the Relationship between Obedience to Authority and Aspects of Empathy among Working Professionals

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Conflict of Interest

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