



Studying Obedience to Authority: Different Genders Facing Prestige and Dominance Authorities

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Abstract. It is commonly known that the Milgram's obedience experiment has been challenged on ethical grounds because of the potential psychological distress they might cause participants. Therefore, we are wondering how we can study obedience in an ethical fashion that minimizes distress and we make this investigation. Besides replacing the method to reduce psychological distress, we are also curious about whether people will show different levels of obedience when facing different kinds of authorities. Whether there will be significant results in gender differences of obedience is also one of our emphasis. To conclude, this paper investigates the differences in obedience between the male and females in the presence of different authorities, prestige and dominance. Because of limited resources, we did not really execute our designed experiment and we made assumptions according to some existing articles, which means we reasonably inferred our results. Our analysis indicates that there are literally gender differences in the obedience to different authorities. Horizontally, we summarize that women will obey dominance more than prestige and men will obey prestige more than dominance. Longitudinally, we conclude that women obey dominance more than men and men obey prestige more than women. We hope that our study can add more information on gender differences in obedience and increase people's awareness of the impact of the types of authority in experiments.

Keywords: obedience · gender differences · prestige · dominance

1 Introduction

The issue of gender differences has been discussed for a long time. Men and women have different physiology, therefore different ideologies and thought patterns, and the way they think about things affects the way they behave. The differences between men and women can be found in many aspects in various situations. When men and women are faced with the same people and the same things in the same environment, they will usually give different reactions and explain why they have different reactions. Inspired by Milgram's obedience experiment and some previous learning about gender differences, we are curious about the gender differences in results since this experiment has not concentrated on the gender differences in the degree of obedience to authority.

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Here, we look at the differences in the male's and female's levels of obedience to authority and whether there are significant results with two different kinds of authority, prestige and dominance. In specifically explanation, the purpose of our research, we are mainly focusing on the following questions: Will the males show more disobedience than women because they are courageous or assertive? How do men judge their obedience in the presence of these two kinds of authority and why? Will the female be as afraid as people usually think and so show more obedience than men? How does empathy affect people's impulse to disobey when the order has some negative effects on others? This research is a significant and interesting question to address because not only has Milgram not emphasized the gender differences in results but also his experiment has not divided the type of authority, which means it is monotonous to some extent.

2 Literature Review

The very famous Milgram obedience experiment is known to have some ethical problems and has been evaluated in several articles: participants suffered from severe of psychological and emotional distress [1–3]. Some of the major ethical issues in the Milgram's experiment involve: the lack of protection for participants; pressure from experimenters; interference with the right to withdraw the experiment. Thus, many participants left the experiment in a state of considerable distress. Despite the experiment researchers explained the procedure and the use of deception due to their concerns about the level of anxiety experienced by many participants, many of them were still confused about the accuracy. Therefore, in our study of the obedience experiment, we improved upon the original experiment to minimize the psychological stress and anxiety levels of the participants in order to avoid excessive ethical concerns. The details of the methodology will be explained later.

On top of that, In addition, our experimental study focused on gender differences in obedience because at the time of Stanley Milgram, gender differences had not yet received much attention from the general public. Although some previous researchers have noted the effect of gender on obedience after the Milgram's experiment and have done studies and analysis related to gender differences, their findings have shown no significant differences between the male's and female degree of obedience [4, 5]. We remain skeptical because perhaps it is probably different in our country because of different cultures and development, which means people have different beliefs and mindsets will behave totally differently. More importantly, as social complexity increases, the issue of obedience to authority should be further and more detailed. Therefore, our study refines some aspects that the previous studies have not considered, for example, by classifying types of authority, the prestige authority and the dominance authority, in order to measure the level of obedience. Prestige means that the authorities have abilities more than personality. This type is attained by having specialist knowledge or skills that others wish to learn, so they have professional literacy and recognized social status. On the other hand, dominance refers to the authority type that personality is more than abilities, and the dominant individuals use threat or fear to gain influence over others.

To conclude, in our designed experiment, we try our best to make the participants feel less anxious and mentally stressed by choosing another method to replace the electric

shock in the original experiment but it can still put psychological pressure on the participants and is enough to provoke them to disobey. Moreover, we explore obedience more specifically by dividing the kinds of authority, which has not been tested in the past and will be the really fascinating part. We compare our results horizontally and vertically. We estimate from four angles: the difference between female's degree of obedience for dominance authority and prestige authority; the difference between male's degree of obedience for dominance authority and prestige authority; the difference between male's and female's degree of obedience for prestige authority; the difference between male's and female's degree of obedience for dominance authority.

3 Method

In our improved experiment, we designed two separate sets of experiments, one with the prestige authority and one with the dominant authority. Both groups will get the total number of participants as well as the same number of men and women, respectively. Our experimental approach mimicked the original Milgram experiment but with some changes: we used hot sauce instead of the electric shock punishment in the original experiment, and we also made formal changes to what the virtual students did in order to make the use of hot sauce seem reasonable.

For the distinction between the two authorities, we believe it is important to have a careful representation. In the group of prestige authority, experimenters would dress appropriately, wearing formal clothing that represented their status, such as the white lab coats of laboratory personnel. Experimenters will display their degrees and prior accomplishments and they will explain the reason, and their purpose of the experiment, in a well-reasoned manner prior to the experiment. All of these reflect the professionalism of the prestige authority. In the group of the dominant authority, however, the experimenters' dress is perhaps less formal, and they use a stern tone to give orders. Even when the participants want to exit the experiment in the middle, the experimenter of dominance authority will use coercive and threatening words to intimidate the participants, but the experimenter of prestige authority would only use reasonable words to persuade the participants when they want to disobey.

Before participating in the experiment, the experimenters told the participants that they were testing the effect of the spiciness of the hot sauce on how active people's minds are. The experimenters will claim that some of the testers, the role of "students" in Milgram's experiment, are able to eat spicy food and some are unable to eat spicy food in order to prevent participants from assuming that the testers are quite able to eat spicy food. The independent variables in our experiment are gender and type of authority, and the dependent variable is the degree of obedience. Because there are many confounding variables, such as the nationality of the participants, the age range and the number of men and women in each group, we make these variables exactly the same in both sets of experiments, and achieved sampling by having participants complete a relevant questionnaire.

Now, let's take a closer look at each step of the experiment in action. First, participants each meet with the experimenter and are taken to a separate room (where they could not see each other's responses). Then, the participants will be told to increase the spiciness

of the hot sauce in each round of the test as requested. When they resist, they will be told “just continue” in a different way. Finally, the experimenters record the experimental data.

Throughout the process, the subjects would think that someone was really eating the hot sauce while doing the questions to test the reaction speed, because the subjects would be given some real reactions, such as the sound of people being spicy, relieving the spiciness of drinking out of a large bottle of mineral water and the screams that could not bear. But in fact, no one was eating the hot sauce given by the participants, these real reactions were faked or taped in advance.

4 Hypothesized Results

Analyzing the results vertically, we assume that the female’s degree of obedience to dominant authority is higher than their obedience to prestige authority. We infer that the male’s degree of obedience to prestige authority is higher than their obedience for dominant authority. Considering the results horizontally, we make assumptions that the female will obey the dominance more than the male and the male will obey the prestige more than the female.

We consider the reasons and rationale of our hypothesized results from these three aspects—gender differences in the level of courage, rationality and ability of empathy.

Let’s see why we think women obey dominance more in consideration of degree of courage. Women are less courageous than men because of some biological attributes, maternal instincts, and the impact of gender roles. Some research indicates women have less mental strength to withstand fear and moral strength to speak out against injustice when no one else will [6]. Thus, when facing prestige and dominance, women will relatively dare to disobey the former. Women show more obedience to dominance than men due to their acute lack of confidence. They will doubt whether their disobedience can succeed. They are less self-assured than men, which means women are not sure about whether they can really prevent students from suffering the pain of hot sauce whereas men are comparatively brave and their masculine temperament motivates them to disobey.

Let’s transfer to the inference of why the male obeys prestige more from the aspect of the degree of rationality. We did some research and concluded that men are more rational [7]. They indicate that when making decisions or taking action, men usually will find accurate reasons to serve as prerequisites so that they can ensure the results are manageable to some extent. Consequently, the male will obey the prestige more than dominance since the prestige experimenters have a professional identity which can play the role of support in men’s minds. On the contrary, the dominance experimenters who just send out orders without proving their reliability only make the male feel suspicious and choose to disobey. As for the female, they do not quite care about logic unless they are dealing with science topics. They sometimes just take action without thinking twice in everyday situations so the objective factors of prestige experimenters do not greatly affect women’s judgement. Men will carefully think about the authenticity of the identity of the experimenters so men will less deny the order of prestige and obey them more than women. Additionally, it is possible that men’s innate self-confidence can be overwhelmed in the presence of the professional prestige.

Overall. For obedience to both kinds of authority, women show more than men because of their stronger ability to empathize. Some established articles have argued that women will feel more emotional empathy than men [8]. When the female follow the order to add more hot sauce, they definitely will be aware of that students are in such pain caused by the hotter sauce. Women's empathy enables women to be aware of students' discomfort and decide to disobey the experimenters to stop the psychological pressure brought by giving punishment without personal reasons. Therefore, women have a stronger willingness to disobey to add more hot sauce in order to help and protect others than men.

Since our experiment has not really been executed and we do not have any data support, we only make assumptions on the basis of some related previous articles.

5 Limitations

The main limitation of the present study is that the sample size is too small and has only been covered in China, which means that the result would not be universal and comprehensive. Moreover, same as the Milgram's experiment, some ethical issues can still potentially be included in the experiment since psychological issues may be brought up after participants hear the reaction of people who eat spicy chili. What is more, the type of authority is subjective and self-defined.

6 Conclusion

First of all, the main contribution of this study is that we investigate people's obedience to different kinds of authority, which I didn't find any relevant articles about prestige and dominance. There was nobody dividing the type of authority in the study of obedience. From our perspective, the kind of authority can also be one of the crucial factors that affect the degree of obedience so we are looking forward to seeing more related academic articles. On top of that, this study has shown obvious gender differences in the degree of obedience to both kinds of authority, which I believe that it still requires some data support or real experiment to get more reliability and validity.

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