

Study on the Relationship between the Obedience of Personality and the Authority of Experts and Governments

Pan Langxuan

Shenzhen Experimental Chenghan School, Shenzhen 518000, China

ABSTRACT. *The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between personality-related obedience and two types of Authority under the 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak. This study identifies Conscientiousness and Agreeableness as two personality factors, and Legitimate and Expert as two authority factors. The study then designs a novel experiment and uses the durable logic and evidence to form predicted results: in the coronavirus outbreak period, personality factor Conscientiousness and Agreeableness are correlated with the degree of obedience to government and expert as authority; people are generally more obedient to the government than to the expert; however, differences in personality have no significant effect on people's obedience to authority.*

KEYWORDS: *Obedience, Authority, Personality, Government, Expert*

1. Introduction

Stanley Milgram set up research to understand why so many people participated in violent acts during the Holocaust. He designed an experiment to determine that under the intimidation of specific authority, whether people will obey orders to do immoral things [1]. However, there are a lot of debates about the morality of this experiment over the years after the Milgram's experiment was done. Researchers identified there are many ethical violations of the Milgram's research, such as letting the participants know that the electric shock they gave to the "learners" could kill them would provide participants long-term psychological harm [2]. The first and the main problem of this study is to avoid ethical violations when conducting research.

The recently experienced 2019 novel coronavirus provides some afflatus to this study. An intriguing phenomenon during this period is that people are highly obeying to do something, such as wearing masks, staying at home, no partying, and no friend visiting. Affected by this hot and relevant topic, this study forms its overarching context: testing people's obedience to authority under the global health emergency.

The study then identifies Legitimate and Expert as two types of authority, which consistent with the roles of Government and Expert in the coronavirus outbreak period. The first research question of the study is to compare people's compliance to two kinds of authority during the global health emergency.

This study also associates obedience to authority with personality factors. Begue, Beauvois, and Courbet's study shows that personality factors Conscientiousness and Agreeableness would be associated with obedience to authority[3]. The second research question of this study is to examine this hypothesis when the context is changed.

The last research question is to examine the relationship between two sets of variables.

The study has four hypotheses in total. The first two are about personality: Agreeableness and Conscientiousness are positively correlated to the obedience to authority under the global health emergency. Due to the reason that the government is law-driven, the third hypothesis is that people are more obedient to government than to expert. The last hypothesis states that differences in personality do not have significant effects on the obedience to the two types of authority.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Milgram's Experiment

The most famous experiment of the topic “obedience to authority” is Milgram’s experiment, an operation that asked participants to give electric shocks to the “learner”[1]. The purpose of the experiment was to test the extent to which human nature could exert its power of rejection when confronted with an immoral command from an authority. As a result, in Milgram's first experiment, 65 percent of the participants (26 out of 40) achieved the maximum 450-volt penalty, despite showing signs of discomfort. The research provides valuable insights on obedience to authority. However, the experiment itself was ethically challenged by many following researchers because of the extreme emotional pressure it placed on its participants, and it is now considered an immoral experiment.

2.2 Types of Authority

Regarding Milgram’s experiment, Blass identified types of Authority in his study [4]. He states that there is a close relationship between French and Raven’s schema [5] and obedience work [4]. Our study chooses two types of Authority from that study: Legitimate, which participants believe it has a right to command them, and expert, which participants believe is as having some special knowledge or expertise[4].

2.3 Relationship between Personality and Obedience

The previous study which examines the relationship between personality and obedience to authority found that Conscientiousness and Agreeableness are associated with the willingness to give higher-intensity electric shocks in the Milgram’s experiment, which means there is higher obedience to authority [3]

3. Method

3.1 Participants

100 Chinese college participants whose ages are at a minimum of 18 are selected randomly from the public. They each receive 40CYN (equivalent to approximately US\$53)

3.2 Dependent Measures

The NEO inventory will scale participants on the five factors: Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness to Experience (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C). The NEO inventory reflects the degree of obedience the subject measures according to his competence level and prospect value.

Prospective theory questionnaires about how much value participants think the request behavior has, how the request behavior will influence the participant, how much influence their behavior will make, and so on.

3.3 Procedure

In our experiment, the experimenter will play the role of the authority. When the participant arrives, the experimenter will assign him The NEO-PI-3, which is a revised NEO Personality Inventory intended for individuals age 12 and older and is also a questionnaire that measures a comprehensive model of general personality traits. Responses on the inventory use a five-point Likert scale in order of intensity, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Next, our experimenter will have an interview with the participant based on some relevant topics regarding the epidemic except the matter of obedience, which plays the role of the cover story. Of course, our interview’s content won’t use for result analysis. When the interview ended, the participant will be informed that he has finished the experiment and need to wait for a moment. Then, another experimenter will come in immediately and ask the participant to share an article in their WeChat moments. The participant will be told that the required article is about the latest discovery of the epidemic condition released by the official accounts of this institute and needs to spread to the public to inform more people. Participants will randomly face either the expert type or the legitimate type of feedback. The experimenter will use a sequence of feedbacks, which has an incremental level of command, to the participant. The feedbacks will always use in sequence: only if Feedback 1 has been unsuccessful, can Feedback 2 use. Either when the participant obeys any order before Feedback 3 or when the participant refuses to obey till Feedback 3 says out. The experiment is considered terminated. The experimenter will tell the participant the whole truth of this experiment immediately and ensure that the participant does not share any information on their WeChat moment. Just in case, the test also prepares

several ways to respond to certain conditions. First, there is a special feedback can be used only if the participant requires the experimenter to provide any documents that can prove the truthfulness of the article: if they ask so, the experimenter will tell the participant “All the necessary information has been included in the article”. Second, if the subject says that he wants to read the article first, the experimenter will reply, “Of course, but other participants of the experiment have arrived. So please browse it quickly.” Then, the experimenter stops the participant’s scanning in 30 seconds. In the end, being informed the true intentions of the experiment, the participants need to finish a short post-experiment questionnaire based on the Prospect Theory of Obedience.

4. Results

4.1 Personality and Obedience

The correlation formula can find a clear relationship between Consciousness, Agreeableness and the obedience to authority in global health emergencies. The study combines the mean scores of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness and compares the score with the score of obedience from two groups. In order to make the hypothesis more accurate and authentic, the study also examines the score from the Prospect theory and the score of two personalities since the Prospect theory also measures the level of obedience. The predicted result for the first research question is that all values measured by the correlation formula have a close value around 1, meaning that agreeableness and conscientiousness are highly correlated with the level of obedience. Therefore, the results confirm the first two hypotheses: in the global health emergency, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness are positively correlated to the obedience to authority.

4.2 Government or Expert

The study averages each group's score of obedience according to the number of feedback participants received. To show the reliability of the test, the study again uses the same method to compare the scores drew from the Prospect theory. The predicted result is that the mean scores regarding government are higher than that from the expert. To test the significance, the study also uses ANOVA as a reinforcement to compare two group's score of feedback and the score of prospect theory respectively. The predicted outcome is that there is a significant difference in obedience between the government group and the expert group. Based on the information above, the study confirms the third hypothesis that in the global health emergency, people tend to be more obedient to the government than to the expert.

4.3 Relationship between Each Variable

The study uses the Variance for analysis to work with data by SPSS to answer the last research question that if differences in personalities have effects on people’s obedience to the two different authorities. First, the study will set “ α ” as 0.05. Then the study will compare the relationship between four variables respectively. H_0 and H_1 in the calculation are set as hypotheses, and after calculating the value of F and the value of F_{α} , if both F values are larger than F_{α} , then there is so significant difference. Therefore, the predicted result substantiates the fourth hypothesis that differences in personality have no significant effect on people’s obedience to the two different authorities.

4.4 Alternative Explanations

If the correlation between two types of personality and the authority is not significant, the reason might be that the context of the literature we previous review is not based on the health emergency, so the personalities may not be correlated with obedience under such sophisticated context. Another reason might be that the nature of experiment is different. In Milgram’s experiment, the participants are required to give electric shock, but to avoid the ethical issue, the experiment of this study only asks them to share an article on their WeChat moments, which is naturally different from the orders of the Milgram’s experiment. Moreover, if the actual result shows that people show more obedience toward the expert. One possible explanation is that at a time the government does not have the credibility as it used to have, so people lose trust in their government and won’t obey its order.

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