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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paidCognitive structuring and obedience toward authority[☆]Tomasz Grzyb^{a,*}, Dariusz Doliński^a, Jakub Trojanowski^a, Yoram Bar-Tal^b^a SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty of Psychology in Wrocław, Poland^b Tel-Aviv University, Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Israel

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ABSTRACT

For decades the classic Milgram studies have inspired psychologists to seek individual differences that impact the level of obedience to authority. In this article the authors propose a procedure in which obedience is examined in virtual reality, and they posit the hypothesis that an interaction of several factors determines obedience. The first is the match (or lack thereof) of the participant's and the learner's sex; the second is need for cognitive closure. Analysis of the result for the dichotomic variable (total obedience vs absence of total obedience) as well as the intervallic variable (level of obedience: from total absence to absolute) demonstrated that high level of need for closure influences obedience only in conditions where the participant and the learner are of the same sex. In addition, this effect was stronger for males than for females.

The publication of the results of Milgram (1963, 1965) in which it was demonstrated that it is possible for a majority of ordinary people to administer an electric shock of 450 V to a person sitting behind a wall shook the world of social psychology. Milgram's experiments were replicated in a short time by other teams of researchers (e.g. Bock & Warren, 1972; Kilham & Mann, 1974; Shanab & Yahya, 1978). It was found that each time an authority was involved (a university professor) in persuading a subject to inflict electric shocks on another participant, they would obey orders. The experiment was soon followed by further attempts to answer the question as to why this happens (Milgram, 1974) and to explore factors which may moderate the level of obedience (e.g. Fisher, 1968; Kaufmann, 1967; Mixon, 1972).

Although most studies of obedience carried out in the Milgram paradigm have pertained to situational factors, there has also been significant focus on individual differences. Factors taken into consideration included the following: extroversion-introversion, authoritarianism, interpersonal trust, social intelligence and internal vs. external locus of control (see: Blass, 1991 for review). Although a certain role played by the aforementioned dispositional variables has been demonstrated, the strength of the effects was moderate and the obtained results were often inconsequential. It is certainly necessary to search for other individual factors which could complement the list of determinants of obedience to authority.

In the planned research we decided to look at the role of cognitive and motivational factors which, in the context of obedience toward authority, have not yet been examined. The need for cognitive closure (NFC) is a construct derived from Kruglanski's lay epistemology theory

(Kruglanski, 1989, 1999). The theory describes the process of the creation (seizing) and validation (unfreezing-freezing) of cognitive content. Need for cognitive closure (NFC) is frequently defined as the desire for a definite answer to a given question and avoiding the state of ambiguity. This need promotes a fast freezing of the epistemic process, and thereby achieving certainty and ending the aversive state of uncertainty. Research has demonstrated that higher NFC is associated with greater conformity with group norms and intolerance toward deviation from group norms or other collectively-held cognitions (Chao, Zhang, & Chiu, 2010; Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Shah, Kruglanski, & Thompson, 1998). Moreover, NFC is found to play a role in social influence processes. Along these lines, Damen, van Leeuwen, Diksterhuis, and van Baaren (2014) demonstrated that higher NFC individuals' resistance to the influence of an authority figure was associated with greater depletion of resources than that of low NFC individuals. Kruglanski, Webster, and Klein (1993), in turn, demonstrated that in the condition of a priori incomplete information, high NFC individuals are more open to persuasion than low NFC individuals. Thus, one may assume that NFC is associated with a greater tendency to obey the experimenter's instruction to deliver the electric shock to the "learner".

Despite the fact that the need for cognitive closure seems to be a rather obvious "candidate" for a determinant of obedience in subjects persuaded by the authority figure to electrocute the learner, the issue has never been investigated for a very simple reason; namely, soon after Milgram (1963, 1965) reservations of an ethical nature about his research began to emerge.

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Criticism started to be voiced that the procedure proposed by Milgram was unethical not so much because of its concealing the real intentions of the experiment from participants, but rather due to the fact that it exposed them to a tremendous amount of stress and discomfort. Milgram himself admitted that while his subjects were in the laboratory they were put into a very oppressive situation and were persuaded to engage in behaviour which stood in complete opposition to their values and the social norms they observed. Consequently, although there remain numerous problems related to obedience to authority unsolved by psychology, it was decided that for ethical reasons no further research in the model proposed by Milgram would be conducted. The role of the need for cognitive closure could not have been investigated in the Milgram paradigm, as the theoretical proposition by Kruglanski emerged only at the close of the 1980s.

However, it was noticed quite recently by Burger (2009) that in the study described by Milgram (1974) as Experiment 5, a key moment is the behaviour of the participant when persuaded to press the tenth button (marked with a symbol of 150 V). At that point the learner sitting behind the wall demanded to halt the experiment and reminded that they had previously informed the experimenter about their heart problems. Ignoring the voice, the experimenter ordered the participant to press the tenth button. It turned out that if the participant obeyed that order, they were very likely to obey all the following orders of the experimenter. Obeying the instruction to press the tenth button is referred to by Burger as the “point of no return”. A person who crosses this barrier, unable to say “no” at this point, will most likely not be able to object to the experimenter through the end of the experiment. Burger was interested to know whether, almost 50 years on from Milgram's original experiment in conditions of widespread democracy and awareness of human rights, people would still be so prone to conform to authority; he thus concluded that Milgram's experiment could be replicated in a variant in which it is conducted until the moment of pressing the tenth button. It turned out that obedience to authority is presently only slightly lower (a statistically insignificant difference) than in Milgram's original experiment.

Dolinski and Grzyb (2016) decided to explore obedience to authority by using a model based on Milgram (1974), which is less controversial than Experiment 5. In Experiment 2 the learner does not complain of heart problems. For ethical reasons, Dolinski and Grzyb also terminated their experiment at the moment when the participant pressed switch 10, or refused to do to. (In his replication, Burger also examined the reactions of participants pressing the tenth switch to the shout of the learner, who demanded to be let out of the laboratory). An analogical design was used in the experiment by Dolinski et al. (2017). They pointed to the fact that in all of Milgram's experiments, as well as in all of the replications of the original experiment conducted so far, the learner was a male. While Dolinski et al. did not achieve a statistically significant influence of interaction of learner and participant sex on obedience, this could have resulted from the small number of individuals involved in the study. This is also why we feel it is worth taking the issue up again, also taking into consideration the individual variable of NFC.

It should be observed that the psychological literature presents extensive data attesting to the fact that different norms govern men's and women's expression of aggression, as well as the effect of gender on conformity (Krumov & Larsen, 2013). Although much of the research centres on gender differences (how men and women differ in aggressive behaviour or obedience (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Eagly & Wood, 1991, 1999)), there is enough research examining the interactive effect of the gender of the actor and that of the target (Cross & Campbell, 2012; Davidovic, Bell, Ferguson, Gorski, & Campbell, 2011; Feld & Felson, 2008; Felson & Feld, 2009). The results, however, have not always been consistent. Feld and Felson (2008), for example, found that people are more accepting of retaliation by women against women than men against women. However, retaliation by women against men and against women is accepted to a similar degree. That is, there is a

stronger norm against men's aggression toward women than vice versa. Similar results have been reported by Felson and Feld (2009). Cross and Campbell (2012), on the other hand, found that both men and women reported higher aggression toward same-sex than opposite-sex targets. Thus, if NFC increases the tendency to obey to an authority figure, but also increases the tendency to behave in accordance with the group norms, we hypothesize that the effect of NFC on obedience will be stronger in situations which are consistent with the norm. That is, in the case of a participant and a target of the same sex.

It would be therefore advisable to conduct the study in the Milgram paradigm assuming the end of the experiment at the tenth button (150 V) and accounting for the gender of participants and the learner, as well as for the level of participants' need for cognitive closure.

One would have to bear in mind, though, that studies investigating the influence of factors related to personality and individual differences in the context of experiments carried out in the paradigm proposed by Milgram are extremely difficult. A study consistent with Milgram's procedure alone is complex, time-consuming, and causes discomfort for the participants. This is best demonstrated by the size of the samples involved in Milgram's original studies – according to Gina Perry (2012), the samples consisted of 20 to 40 individuals (in all 24 experiments conducted by Milgram – the only exception was Experiment 21 which was to envisage the procedure and provide an answer to the question regarding the obedience of other people). Generally, such sample sizes do not allow for definitive acceptance or rejection of hypotheses related to personality factors or individual differences due to the low strength of the experiment. On the other hand, increasing the sample size in the “traditional” Milgram experiment is extremely costly, particularly from the ethical perspective. Therefore, we decided to propose a completely different and innovative method for conducting the study.

We began by asking the question of whether, instead of placing the participants in a real situation during which they are persuaded to electrocute a person sitting behind the wall, it would not be better to create an analogous and largely realistic situation in cyberspace. The possession of photographic documentation from the study described by Dolinski et al. (2017) gave us the opportunity to conduct such an experiment. Conducting the experiment in conditions of internet simulation gave us two clear benefits when compared to application of the traditional procedure applied by Milgram and those who later imitated him. The first and obvious benefit is a significant decrease in the risk of discomfort among participants, and the related elimination of incredibly important and frequently raised ethical dilemmas (...) in the case of experiments on obedience. Second, while the traditional Milgram procedure is very time-consuming and labour-intensive, the modification we propose and transfer of the experiment to cyberspace facilitates the involvement of a large number of participants. This is vital for verification of hypotheses assuming complex interactions, particularly ones accounting for individual differences.

1. Method

The research was conducted with the assistance of the Polish research website *Ariadna* (the Polish counterpart of Amazon Mechanical Turk). There are approximately 100,000 respondents aged 14–70 registered in the panel from among which the sample group was drawn. The panel is certified by the Polish Association of Public Opinion and Marketing Research Firms as well as the Quality Control Program of Pollsters' Work and operates in accordance with the international code ICC/ESOMAR.

1.1. Participants

There were 351 participants in the research (206 of whom were women, which constituted 58.7% of the sample). People under 20 and over 60 years old were not included in the experiment. The average age of participants was 35.61 (men: 37.64, women: 34.18). Students and

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