

Change Over Time in Obedience: The Jury's Still Out, But It Might Be Decreasing

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Jerry M. Burger's (2009) partial replication of Stanley Milgram's (1974) obedience study shows both the influence of culture and generations on behavior and the power of the situation. In Burger's data, disobedience has nearly doubled among male participants since the 1960s, a shift just as large as the increase in Americans' body mass index that has been labeled the "obesity epidemic." Differences in the ethnic composition of the two studies' samples, particularly the large numbers of Asian Americans in Burger's sample, may have suppressed what might have been an even larger increase in disobedience. Halting the experiment at 150 volts may also have suppressed change. Nevertheless, situations have a strong influence on behavior; thus generational shifts would not be expected to completely eliminate the effect. Burger's results are consistent with documented changes in personality traits over the generations, including increases in nonconformist traits such as assertiveness, self-esteem, and narcissism.

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From the first grainy black and white frame of film (Milgram, 1965), it is obvious that the Milgram obedience experiment is from another era. Men wear horn-rimmed glasses and call the experimenter "sir." They light cigarettes and smoke them in the lab. When the "learner" says his heart condition was checked out at the veterans' hospital, no one is surprised—back then, almost all men had served in the military at some point.

Today's world is very different, and so are the personality traits and attitudes of the average American young person, whom I call *Generation Me* in a book by the same name (Twenge, 2006). American culture has shifted to emphasize the rights of the self as more important than duty, and this has influenced the attitudes and personality traits of individuals, leading to significant differences among the generations. The social rules for behavior so prized in Milgram's early 1960s have declined (Twenge & Im, 2007), replaced by an assertiveness (Twenge, 2001) and self-focus so strong it has veered into increased narcissism (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Young people's self-esteem is at an all-time high in most samples (Gentile & Twenge, 2008), as are their expectations for the future (Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, & Sischo, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Even parenting has shifted in ways relevant for the study of obedience. When the men in Milgram's experiment were growing up

in the early 20th century, parents named obedience among the most important traits they valued in their children. By the 1980s, obedience had sunk to second to last, and parents instead hoped to raise children who were independent and tolerant (Alwin, 1996).

Thus it is somewhat surprising that people still obey the experimenter at a high rate in the Milgram obedience paradigm (Burger, 2009, this issue). Some might interpret this result as suggesting that there has been no generational change in obedience. However, there are many good reasons why this is not a correct interpretation of these data.

Differences Between Milgram's Participants and Burger's

One problem is that Burger's (2009) sample differed from Milgram's in many ways other than time of data collection. First, Milgram's participants were all male (Milgram did not include women until Experiment 8; Milgram, 1974). Thus the more fair comparison over time is between Milgram's participants, 82.5% of whom obeyed, and Burger's male participants, 66.7% of whom obeyed. This comparison produces a chi-square of 1.79, which, although not statistically significant, is equivalent to a d of .35 (the effect size metric d is the difference in terms of standard deviations). This shift is just as large as the much-publicized "obesity epidemic" ($d = .31$ for changes in body mass index over 30 years: Ogden, Fryar, Carroll, & Flegal, 2004). In other words, a d of a third of a standard deviation can have significant consequences.

It is also informative to reverse the percentages for obedience: Whereas only 17.5% of men disobeyed in Milgram's experiment, nearly twice as many men (33.3%) disobeyed in the recent replication. Thus, 90% more men disobeyed the experimenter in 2006 than did in 1962. A near doubling in disobedience is not consistent with the conclusion that obedience remains exactly the same.

The two samples also differ considerably in ethnic composition. Milgram did not provide an ethnic breakdown of his sample, though the film of the experiment and the demographics of New Haven in the early 1960s both suggest that the sample was almost entirely White, perhaps including a few Black participants. It is unlikely that any of

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Milgram's participants were Hispanic or Asian American. The U.S. Census did not even begin collecting data on these ethnic groups until 1980, and these two groups are underrepresented in the nonstudent population of New Haven even today, compared with national averages (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). In contrast, Burger's (2009) sample was very diverse in ethnicity, which is typical for the present day and typical for Northern California. Only a little more than half of the sample was White, 12.9% were Hispanic, and 27.2% were Asian American (including Indian).

The percentage of Asian Americans is especially important, as Asian Americans score significantly lower on individualistic personality traits, including self-esteem (Twenge & Crocker, 2002) and narcissism (Twenge & Foster, 2008), perhaps because most Asian cultures are more collectivistic and less individualistic than White American culture. Asian culture emphasizes fitting into the group and preserving group harmony (e.g., Heine, 2001; Kim & Markus, 1999). For example, children are expected to obey their parents and display filial piety more often in Asian American families than in White American families (Nguyen & Williams, 1989; Suzuki, 2001). Thus it is possible that Asian Americans might obey the experimenter in Milgram's paradigm at a higher rate than members of other ethnic groups. If so, this might suppress any generational decrease in obedience, as the Burger (2009) sample included more Asian Americans. Burger noted that the sample was too small to analyze for ethnic differences; however, an examination of the obedience levels within ethnicity might confirm or disconfirm this hypothesis.

The ethnic composition of Burger's (2009) sample is also problematic because it is unrepresentative of the current U.S. population, only 4% of which is of Asian descent

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Thus Burger's sample contains nearly seven times more Asian Americans than a nationally representative sample would. Although few samples in psychology are randomly selected or nationally representative, the way in which Burger's sample differs from the nation as a whole might have suppressed any generational change in obedience.

Confounds between time and ethnicity have precedent in birth cohort research. In contrast to a nationwide meta-analysis finding increases in narcissism from 1982 to 2006 (Twenge et al., 2008), Trzesniewski, Donnellan, and Robins (2008) reported no change in narcissism among college students from the University of California (UC) campuses (primarily UC Davis) over the same time period. However, the Asian American enrollment at these campuses nearly doubled over that time period, from around 23% in the early 1980s to 45% at UC Davis in 2006. With more people in the samples who, on average, scored lower on narcissism, the increase over time was suppressed. When these data were examined separately by ethnicity, narcissism increased significantly between 2002 and 2007 among both White and Asian American students, with the yearly change being twice as large as that in the nationwide, 24-year analysis (Twenge & Foster, 2008).

Burger's (2009) sample was different from Milgram's in other ways as well. Burger's sample was from the West Coast, and Milgram's from the East Coast. More of Burger's sample was college-educated than was Milgram's sample. The differences between the samples in gender, ethnicity, region, and education suggest that it is difficult to draw solid conclusions about change over time on the basis of two samples that vary in many ways other than year of data collection. Ideally, analyses of change over time should rely on many samples—or on nationwide samples that are similar to each other—before drawing conclusions about generational change or the lack thereof.

The Change Might Be Larger, But We Wouldn't Know

In addition, Burger's (2009) experiment may have significantly underestimated the true generational change. As Burger acknowledged, stopping the experiment at 150 volts was the experiment's most significant limitation. Although 79% of Milgram's participants who got to 150 volts continued to 450 volts, there is no way to know whether the same percentage would continue today. It is possible that they would not. As the film of Milgram's experiment demonstrates (Milgram, 1965), most participants did not go willingly to 450 volts but instead continually argued with the experimenter. The individualism and assertiveness encouraged in Americans over the last few decades would be particularly useful during this part of the experiment. Thus it is difficult to say how many participants today would continue up to 450 volts. A recent meta-analysis of Milgram's studies found that behavior at 150 volts was a crucial turning point and a good predictor of overall obedience (Packer, 2008); however, it is unknown whether that is still true today.

Aggression, Not Just Conformity

Milgram (1974) argued that participants' willingness to continue shocking the victim was not about aggression but about conformity. Nevertheless, aggression as an alternative explanation is difficult to rule out completely. In particular, it is possible that the modern participants' decision to continue shocking the learner was partially based on desensitization to violence and aggression because of increased exposure to it in the media (Carnagey, Anderson, & Bushman, 2007). Although it is difficult to quantify precisely, today's television, movies, and music are considerably more violent than those in the early 1960s. Modern Americans also have the option of playing violent video games, many of which allow the player to shoot, beat, and otherwise harm victims. Across both correlational and experimental research, exposure to violent media has been shown to cause people to become more aggressive (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). In addition, narcissism has increased over the generations (Twenge et al., 2008), and narcissists have more trouble empathizing with others (Campbell & Buffardi, 2008). These trends toward increased aggression might have influenced more of the recent participants to continue to shock the learner. This would appear as obedience even if it was caused by increased aggression, making the change over time appear flat.

Individualism May Not Prevent Conformity

It is also possible that obedience in Milgram's paradigm is unrelated to changes in personality traits such as narcissism and assertiveness. Although one might expect that an overly self-confident, assertive person would resist conformity, the cultural shifts in the importance of these traits might have undermined any connection. In short, individualism is the new conformity. It is no longer antiestablishment to declare that everyone is unique and should do his own thing—that now is the establishment message of American culture (Twenge, 2006). As Hal Niedzviecki (2006) pointed out in his book *Hello I'm Special*, it is difficult to be truly unique in a culture that lauds uniqueness. Thus Americans who are more individualistic may just be following the herd. When the herd tells them to "question authority," they do, and when the herd tells them to obey authority, they do.

Given the doubling in disobedience evident in the men in Burger's (2009) study, this explanation seems unlikely. Nevertheless, the change in behavior between Milgram's and Burger's experiments ($d = .35$) is smaller than many other birth cohort changes. A study of changes in locus of control covered the same early 1960s to 2000s time period as the Milgram-Burger comparison, and the increase in college students' externality was a d of .80 (Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004). The increase in college students' narcissism over 24 years—about half the time period being considered here—resulted in a d of .33 (Twenge et al., 2008), and self-esteem increased by a d of .62 between the late 1960s and the early 1990s (Twenge & Campbell, 2001).

A Strong Situation

Why was the decrease in obedience smaller than other birth cohort changes? The shifts in ethnic composition and other confounds are one possibility. Even if those were corrected for, however, it is likely that around 50% of people today would still obey. Put simply, the Milgram obedience paradigm is a strong situation. Even with the significant shifts in the American personality and culture, obeying an authority figure is still a fairly strong social norm. Just as the prison guards at Abu Ghraib became cruel 32 years after the Stanford Prison Experiment, many Americans today will still obey authority—just not as many as in the early 1960s.

In other words, Burger's (2009) experiment is a demonstration of a more universal principle: Both individual personality traits and the situation influence behavior. When a participant enters the Milgram paradigm, he or she is influenced by his or her own beliefs, worldview, and tendencies, but the strong social norm of obedience quickly begins to exert its influence as well. Although personality psychologists like to emphasize traits as a guide to behavior, and social psychologists prefer to focus on the situation, the truth is that both are right. Personality and situation effect sizes are even similar in size (Funder & Ozer, 1983). When it comes to the evidence, we should all be both personality and social psychologists.

Conclusion

Burger's (2009) partial replication of Milgram's obedience experiment provides an intriguing glimpse at how behavior has—and has not—changed between the early 1960s and the present. This time period witnessed enormous cultural shifts in family structure, technology, attitudes, focus on the self, and norms for behavior. Consistent with the growing individualism of American culture and its citizens, obedience seems to have decreased—and might have been shown to decrease even more if the two samples were more comparable. However, even the tremendous cultural shifts of the last four decades cannot completely change the social norm of obedience. Americans are different now, but the situation still strongly influences our behavior.

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