

# ***This Week's Citation Classic***

Milgram S.. Behavioral study of obedience. *J. Abnormal Soc. Psychol.* 67:371-8, 1963.  
[Yale University, New Haven, CT]

**A simple procedure is devised for studying obedience. A person comes to the laboratory and, in the context of a learning experiment, is told to give increasingly severe shocks to another person (who is actually an actor). The purpose of the experiment is to see how far a subject will proceed before refusing to comply with the experimenter's instructions. Twenty-six of 40 subjects administered the highest shocks on the generator. [The Social Sciences Citation Index® {SSCI™} indicates that this paper has been cited over 255 times since 1966.]**

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" 'Behavioral study of obedience' was the first published account of a series of studies I had undertaken at Yale University on the response of individuals to destructive authority. It was not easy to publish the paper. It was submitted first to the journal of *Abnormal and Social Psychology (JASP)* and was duly rejected, then to the journal of *Personality*, which also turned it down. I decided to abandon the paper and began to write an expanded account of the experimental program. But some months later, in an unusual twist, the editor of *JASP* spontaneously recalled the initially rejected paper and published it.

"The responses to 'Behavioral study of obedience' were strong and varied. The first wave consisted of a score of congratulatory letters from social scientists around the country. The media, also, evidenced immediate interest, which I attempted to discourage. When *The New York Times* indicated they would publish an account, I tele-grammed its science writer, Walter Sullivan: 'I do not wish to have the experiment generally publicized at this time

because publicity will interfere with further research. The experiment only works if the subject does not know what it is about....' But the *Times* published its account anyway.

"The next response to the paper was an attack on its ethics and method, which appeared in *American Psychologist*.<sup>1</sup> Thus, we can see that behind the simple quantification of citations lie many complexities. The citation count gives a measure of the impact of a paper, but it is only a starting point for an analysis of its reception.

"The paper failed in several respects. First, whereas I had hoped that the experimental paradigm it presented would be widely used as a general tool for the study of obedience, it became more a subject of citation than replication. Second, the controversies surrounding the experiment tended to deflect attention from the substantive issues of obedience to authority.

"The paper was superseded by a fuller analysis of obedience, especially in two works: 'Some conditions of obedience and disobedience to authority'<sup>2</sup> (173 citations) and the book, *Obedience to Authority*<sup>3</sup> (186 citations). Yet the original paper has had an unusual durability, and continues to be reprinted in anthologies of psychology, political science, education, sociology, and readings of English prose. We may ask why.

"First, the paper is brief, simple, and seeks to apply scientific methods to the analysis of a human issue of compelling interest. Conceived in a scientific framework, it nonetheless contains significant dramatic elements. Finally, the very polarization of opinion which the paper provoked contributed to its longevity, as controversy leads to engaging and potentially instructive discussion, which many instructors have come to appreciate. This was an unanticipated consequence of a paper which, first and foremost, was intended as a clear report of what I had observed in the laboratory.

"In expanded form, the work was awarded the annual Socio-Psychological Award of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. A follow-up book, translated into several languages, was nominated for a National Book Award."

1. Baumrind D. Some thoughts on ethics of research: after reading Milgram's "Behavioral study of obedience" *Amer. Psychol.* 19:421-3, 1964.
2. Milgram S. Some conditions of obedience and disobedience to authority. *Hum. Relat.* 18:56-76, 1965.
3. ...., *Obedience to authority: an experimental view.* New York: Harper and Row, 1974. 224 p.