

**A Level Psychology**

**Lecturers**

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Boris Johnson and his advisers could learn a lesson from the infamous Milgram experiments - but perhaps not the lesson you think (Photo by Frank Augstein-WPA Pool/Getty Images)

[](https://inews.co.uk/author/raj-persaud)

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<https://inews.co.uk/opinion/comment/coronavirus-lockdown-psychology-misunderstanding-2535996>

This article was written by a Psychologist assessing how the Government strategy to make the public stay at home during the Coronavirus lockdown fits with research evidence.

In their approach to coronavirus lockdown, our leaders may have made a fundamental mistake about human psychology.

The evidence shows that giving people a direct order is one of the least effective ways of securing their compliance.

A key psychological turning point [in this pandemic](https://inews.co.uk/topic/covid-19) is fast approaching: the upcoming [review of the lockdown](https://inews.co.uk/news/health/lockdown-uk-coronavirus-when-end-date-review-government-covid-19-restrictions-extend-2533211). How much more the public can take of all the sacrifices? Even a relatively minor rebellion has the potential to put the whole country at risk, and psychologically fracture community solidarity, perhaps irrevocably.

We are being told that because [the Prime Minister, through illness, is indisposed](https://inews.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus-stanley-johnson-boris-johnson-covid-19-break-hospital-stay-2535562), so the announcement may be postponed (though legally it must take place by 16 April). This apparently innocuous statement reveals much about the psychological reasoning, behind the scenes, over how to maintain national acquiescence.

At first glance, this appears straight out of spin manipulation lesson number one, which is to delay a decision on something you never wanted to do anyway (lift the lockdown), which buys you time, and over circumstances difficult to quibble with: the need for the Prime Minister to recover.

This strategy places a lot of store in the authority of Boris Johnson to secure obedience from the public.

However, the current equation between "Obedience" and "Authority", which seems to be driving these tactics behind closed doors in Whitehall, is in fact based on a largely discredited theory of Behavioural Science. This flawed approach strains the relationship between the ruled and our ruling class, possibly to breaking point.

**The 'Obedience to Authority' experiments**

The results of the most famous experiment in the history of the behavioural sciences, Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram’s notorious "Obedience to Authority" experiments, suggest that popular obedience could soon decline dramatically, particularly if the Government continues operating as it has been. The lesson of these 1960s experiments could hold the key to saving quarantine now - as long as we don't draw the wrong conclusions from them.

In Milgram’s research, members of the public were persuaded by white-coated authority figures to administer seemingly life-threatening electric shocks to strangers. But the subjects remained unaware that the person receiving the shocks was in fact part of the experiment, merely play-acting the effects of electrocution. Some 65 per-cent of the public went all the way up to administering such a high voltage that the experimenter’s confederate appeared to have been rendered unconscious, or possibly dead.

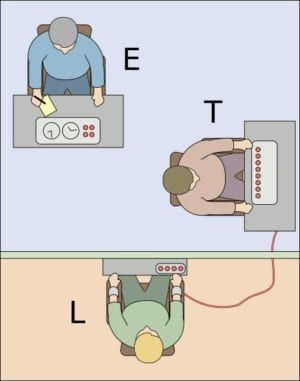


Diagram showing layout of Milgram’s experiments

(Wikimedia Commons)

The astounding power of the "white-coated" authority figure to secure blind obedience was seemingly confirmed by these results. Credence for the first time was now lent to the previously incomprehensible claims during the Nuremberg Trials of so many "ordinary Germans" passively following Nazi orders to murder innocents. The authority of the "white-coated" academic and scientist is particularly apposite right now.

It seems to be no accident, if you have read the Milgram experiments, that our ministers are always flanked by professors and doctors when they give [their daily briefings](https://inews.co.uk/news/health/boris-johnson-speech-uk-coronavirus-time-today-when-dominic-raab-live-watch-hospital-2484382). It seems fair to assume that our government invokes the authority of the "white-coat" to secure blind obedience, exactly as Milgram’s experiment apparently indicated.

But this strategy misunderstands the correct take-home lesson of the most influential, yet notorious, obedience experiment of all time.

A very different interpretation was recently published from the University of Queensland, Australia and the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. [Psychologists Alexander Haslam and Stephen Reicher argued](https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-110316-113710) that when one looks closely at what happened during the Milgram experiment, as opposed to what most *think* happened, it was not in fact issuing orders to the public that achieved cooperation.

**'In this experiment, the direct orders were most likely to be disobeyed by subjects'**

If they encountered non-compliance, the experimenter issued polite requests, becoming increasingly forceful, before culminating in a direct order. This new investigation found that it was the direct order, of all the different persuasive verbal "prods", which was, in fact, most likely to be disobeyed by subjects in the Milgram experiment: almost opposite to the widespread message conventionally taken from it.

It was instead a subtle yet more powerful psychology: the identification of the subject with the joint enterprise, in Milgram’s case, to apparently further the cause of the scientific discovery. The subjects bought into the idea that they were sharing a joint mission with the experimenter, and that was why they "obeyed".

The compelling evidence is that giving people a direct order is one of the least effective ways of securing their compliance.

There is no natural widespread tendency to instinctively obey commands from authorities. Instead participants in the Obedience to Authority research are most biddable when encouraged to continue for the sake of the experiment. They are most likely to comply when they are invited to cooperate in a joint enterprise, which they believe in.

Haslam and Reicher have conducted separate experiments which suggest that those who don’t, for example, subscribe as much to the scientific outlook, nor the scientific enterprise, may not be as liable to identify with the project of the "white-coated" expert, and are not, therefore, as likely to be obedient to them.

Even more worrying is Haslam and Reicher’s conclusion that ordering people to do things can backfire and generate more non-compliance.

Clues that these psychologists’ thesis may be coming true might lie in the evidence that the Government’s repetitive injunctions seem to be less effective over time. There are anecdotal reports of increasing traffic on the roads and of people in parks not obeying the rules. The danger is, as the mandarins blindly worship at the altar of "obedience to authority", that this might provoke a yet more authoritarian response.

If public perception is growing that no one in Government is enduring the same consequences they are expecting the ordinary public to suffer, this will create a mental obstacle to convincing us we should all continue to subscribe to "sharing" lockdown.

How long can the myth that this is a genuine "joint project" continue to be sold to a public being ordered into participating in an "experiment" that often feels like it's lurching badly out of control?

Answer the following questions regarding this article and lockdown:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | Find a psychological definition for the following terms: |
|  | * Compliance = |
|  | * Obedience = |
|  | * legitimate authority = |
| 2 | Have you followed the rules during lockdown? |
| 3 | Explain your personal reasoning for doing so/not doing so. |
| 4 | What might make/have made you behave differently? |
| 5 | How much have other people affected your behaviour? (known as social influence) |
| 6 | Do you think the Government employed the best strategy to make you follow instructions? |
| 7 | Can you think of anything else they could have done to influence your behaviour? |
| 8 | What do you think about the Psychologist’s opinion in the article? |

**Frequently asked questions**

**How is this subject assessed?**

A Level Psychology is assessed via 3 x 2 hour exams. Throughout the course we will thoroughly prepare you for the exams with skills development, exemplar answers and practice questions.

**What skills are required?**

A Level Psychology suits students who have an interest in understanding human thinking and behaviour, and those that are able to write essays, complete mathematical calculations and have competence in Human Biology.

**Do I need to do A Level Psychology to study it at university?**

It’s not essential, but it’s a good idea! It’s useful to know what Psychology is before signing up for a degree. The A Level provides a broad-spectrum introduction to the subject.

**What trips / guest speakers are there?**

These vary from year to year depending on available opportunities, for example we have been to see Derren Brown, the renowned social Psychologist Philip Zimbardo and visited the Freud museum. There are always interesting online guest speaker opportunities within the subject.

**What other subjects does Psychology go with?**

The nature of A Level Psychology, with essay writing, human biology and maths skills make it a versatile subject that compliments many others. It combines particularly well with social sciences, humanities, maths and science, English and even PE.

**Recommended Reading**

The best suggestion for some recommended reading would be to sign up to the BPS digest email. They send out a summary of recent research each week and you will usually find at least one article that you are interested in. You can sign up by clicking [here](https://us11.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=ef6b58887f03b7e6e6ae5b2b9&id=b626c035bb).

There are lots of different Psychology A level websites available and they all have some useful information. Our students particularly like: [Simply Psychology](https://www.simplypsychology.org/)

There are many books that are useful to read, in fact we could write a book about useful books for Psychology. So, if you would really like to read something more, here are a few suggestions:

* Introducing Psychology: A Graphic Guide to Your Mind and Behaviour  
  *Nigel Benson*
* The Little Book of Psychology: An Introduction to the Key Psychologists and Theories You Need to Know   
  *Emily Ralls and Caroline Riggs*
* Mindwatching: Why We Behave the Way We Do   
  *H.J. Eysenck and Michael W. Eysenck*
* Psychology: A Very Short Introduction   
  *Gillian Butler and Freda McManus*
* Freud for Beginners   
  *Richard Appignanesi and Oscar Zarate*
* The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales   
  *Oliver W Sacks*