



Under the Shadows of Authority: Unveiling Age and Gender Disparities in Obedience

¹Dr. (Prof.) Mandeep Kaur

Department of Psychology, Punjabi University, Patiala, India.

mandeepchandhawa@pbi.ac.in

²Jeenat Rani, Junior Research Fellow

Department of Psychology, Punjabi University, Patiala, India.

jinattaneja47@gmail.com

Abstract

Why is it that many people obey when they feel coerced? People focus so much on being good followers that they become unaware of the consequences of their actions. Various experiments about “obedience to authority” have been taken place in the past decades. Stanley Milgram, a social psychologist conducted his famous obedience experiments in the early 1960s. His aim was to study the willingness of participants to obey authority figures, even when it involved harmful actions against others. The current study aimed to investigate the difference of age and gender differences in relation to obedience to authority. Age factor was not examined in Milgram’s original experiment. The research regarding age differences

in obedience is suggestive of demarcation in level of obedience. This work aims to show a new way to understand gender difference in obedience, and wish to open a gate of age differences in obedience study. Are males more likely to obey to authority? Will gender affect obedience ? The research in existence is mixed point of view in relation to males and females related to obedience. Thus with this aim in mind present study was carried out on 150 working employees (Non-teaching staff); males (n=75) and females (n=75), with the age range of 34-64 (M=40.88 age), (SD=5.37); early middle age (34–44) and late middle age (45-64) across Punjabi University, Patiala. The aim of the study was to investigate the difference between age, gender and obedience, examining whether obedience vary across different age groups and gender wise. The Organizational Obedience Scale (Capan & Uzuncarsili, 2022) was administered to the working staff with the Cronbach alpha is .79. The questionnaire was translated into native language Punjabi and was certified and validated by the experts (Dept. of Psychology, Punjabi University, Patiala) with the reliability of .78. The obtained data was analysed with the latest version IBM SPSS 29. The data collected was analysed with descriptive analysis, and t- test. There was significant differences in scores of male and female on the basis of obedience. Another findings there was significant difference due to age in obedience. Later middle aged people more obey. By examining the interplay between age, gender, and obedience, this work aims to inform develop interventions that mitigate potential risks associated with destructive obedience.

Keywords: *Gender, Age, Obedience , Employees*

Introduction

“The essence in Obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to view himself as an instrument for carrying out another person’s wishes and he therefore no longer regards himself as responsible for his action.”

~ Stanley Milgram

The quotation that was cited perfectly expresses the essence of the power of authority and how someone in a position of power may affect others to act unethically and in opposition to their wishes. Obedience refers to the tendency of individuals to comply with orders, commands, or instructions from authority figures, even if those directives contradict their personal beliefs, morals, or conscience. Obedience to authority represents a fundamental aspect of human behaviour that has intrigued psychologists for decades. One of the landmark studies in this area is Stanley Milgram’s experiments, which demonstrated the powerful influence of authority on individuals’ willingness to obey commands (Milgram, 1974). Snow (1961) points to its importance when he writes, “a longer and more sombre history of humanity reveals more horrible acts perpetrated in the name of obedience.” Obedience serves numerous productive functions. Indeed, the life of society is predicated on its existence.

Obedience can apply to both acts of destruction and acts of compassion and generosity, and it can also be uplifting and educational. A socially powerful individual, such as a police officer, a teacher, or a job supervisor, has the power to demand particular behaviour from those who are under their control. But obedience also has a darker side. The most catastrophic situations are when followers follow a bad, irrational, or tragically misguided leader. Destructive obedience is the name for this kind of obedience. The Holocaust is known as one of the most devastating incident in human history. Common folks were coerced into carrying out heinous acts against defenseless others When questioned

about the holocaust, Nazi infiltrators claimed that they were only acting in accordance with orders, which is not a defense for carrying out heinous deeds. The Nazis had no moral regrets or grief. over the murders. They justified the war by claiming that they were simply carrying out their superiors' orders. The area of social psychology has become inquisitive about the examine of obedience at some point of the 1960s and 1970s following the activities of World War II. Milgram wanted to know why so many German citizens went along with the brutality of the Nazi leaders during the Holocaust. Milgram questioned if the banality of evil may lead to wicked deeds being committed by ordinary individuals carrying out their duties as directed.

Within the field of social psychology Milgram was the first person to study issues of authority in human relationships, as he examined obedience beginning in 1960. The controversial experiments energizing a debate on the use of human subjects in social science research. Milgram examined the claims of genocide made by those charged during the Nuremberg war crimes trials in his 1963 study. Experiments operated by Milgram (1963, 1965) participants were excited to administer an electric shock to another person. While obedience has been extensively studied, less attention has been given to how obedience behaviours vary across different demographic groups, particularly in relation to age and gender.

Understanding obedience through the lens of age and gender is important due to its implications for social dynamics and individual decision-making. Age-related changes in cognitive development and socialization may influence how individuals respond to authority figures (Smith & Brown, 2010). Similarly, gender roles and social expectations can shape obedience behaviours in distinct ways (Eagly & Carli, 1981). The study aims to address these gaps by investigating obedience levels among individuals of different age groups and genders. Specifically, we seek to explore whether age and gender significantly impact

obedience behaviours, hypothesizing that younger individuals and females may demonstrate different patterns of obedience compared to older individuals and males.

By elucidating the relationship between age, gender, and obedience, this research not only contributes to theoretical frameworks of social psychology but also provides practical insights into understanding and potentially mitigating detrimental effects of blind, destructive, coercive, unquestioned, crime obedience in various societal contexts. Understanding how age influences obedience is crucial for comprehending developmental trajectories in social behaviour. Research by Malti et al. (2009) suggests that children's moral motivation and empathy play significant roles in shaping their obedience tendencies, indicating potential age-related variations in obedience levels. Smith et al. (2020) this study investigates the influence of age and gender on obedience to authority in a sample of individuals from diverse age groups and genders. Additionally, gender differences were observed, with men exhibiting higher levels of obedience than women across all age groups. However, this gender difference was more pronounced among older participants.

One of the most famous obedience studies conducted by Stanley Milgram. While it didn't focus specifically on age, it involved participants ranging in age from 20 to 50. The findings showed that a significant portion of participants, regardless of age, obeyed the authority figure's instructions to administer what they believed to be increasingly severe electric shocks to another person (Milgram, 1963). Studies examining obedience to authority figures in childhood and adolescence have shown that obedience tends to decrease with age, as children and adolescents become more capable of critical thinking and asserting their own autonomy. However, the degree to which obedience declines with age can vary based on cultural, situational, and individual factors (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994).

Age represents a critical developmental stage that influences cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses. Research suggests that obedience tends to vary across age groups, with children and adolescents often exhibiting distinct patterns of obedience compared to adults. Factors such as cognitive maturity, socialization, and peer influence contribute to differential levels of obedience across the lifespan. Obedience in individuals is observed to gradually reduce as they enter their adolescent years (Kalb & Loeber, 2003), as this marks the tumultuous period of time during which adolescents seek to determine their own identity and goals independent of their family and peers, prompting the tendency to behave on their own terms and values. Essentially, the increase in disobedient behaviours can be attributed to teenagers working through the conflict of identity vs. role confusion, which prompts the need to explore opportunities, commitments, and roles that are available to the individual with the intent of developing their identity and asserting independence through the roles that they commit to (McLeod, 2008).

Gender also intersects with obedience, showcasing nuanced patterns of obedience. Studies have explored how societal expectations, cultural norms, and psychological traits associated with gender impact one's propensity to obey authority. In Milgram's original study, he only used male participants. It could be argued that Milgram's work shows a bias that he erroneously minimises the role of potential differences between males and females. For example, assuming that there was no need to test females as the results would have been very similar. Gender-based differences in communication styles, leadership perceptions, and socialization processes contribute to varying manifestations of obedience among males and females. Gender disparities in obedience can reflect broader inequalities in society. By examining these differences, researchers can shine a light on systemic issues related to gender discrimination, oppression, and power imbalances. This understanding can inform efforts to address and mitigate these inequalities.

Milgram relied almost exclusively on male participants in his obedience studies. The one exception was a replication of the basic procedure in which women were used as participants. The women complied fully with the experimenter's commands 65% of the time, a rate identical to that in the comparable condition with men as participants. However, the obedient women reported higher levels of nervousness during the procedures than did the obedient men. Milgram (1974) speculated that the similarity between men's and women's behaviour could be attributed to two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, women may have been more empathic toward the learner's suffering, which would have led them to end the procedure. On the other hand, women may have had a more difficult time asserting themselves in the face of the pressure exerted by the experimenter. Although gender differences do surface on occasion in obedience research, Blass (2000) found no evidence of a gender difference in eight out of nine conceptual replications of Milgram's studies he reviewed. Thus, although it seemed important to examine the effect of gender in this situation. Burger (2015) found no evidence for gender differences in obedience.

The intersection of age, gender, and obedience constitutes a compelling area of inquiry within the realm of social psychology. Researchers investigate these variables to elucidate the developmental trajectories of obedience behaviours across the lifespan and to discern the nuanced gender dynamics that underlie societal expectations and power structures. Understanding age-related differences in obedience contributes to insights into parental authority, moral development, and the impact of socialization processes. Similarly, exploring gender disparities in obedience sheds light on prevailing gender roles, societal norms, and the complexities of power relations.

Rationale of the Study

Obedience plays a fundamental role in societal structures, organizational dynamics, and personal development. It dictates how individuals respond to instructions, rules, and expectations imposed by authority figures, ranging from parents and teachers to political leaders and supervisors. People's ability to question and resist immoral orders is a fundamental aspect of individual autonomy and of successful societies. Greater insight into the conditions under which people will obey unjust request. Power is never permanent, and ultimately, victory often goes to those who stand for freedom and a different view of the world rather than to those who wish to control the lives of their fellow human beings. The power of authority figures to command obedience is certainly great but it is not irresistible. This paper explores the nuanced relationship between age, gender, and obedience, shedding light on how these demographic factors shape individual responses to authority.

Obedience behaviour plays a critical role in crisis situations and emergency response efforts, where individuals may need to follow directives from authorities to ensure safety and security. Studying obedience in these contexts informs strategies for effective communication, coordination, and decision-making during crises. While previous research, such as Milgram's obedience study, did not explicitly examine age differences, exploring obedience across age groups can provide valuable insights into developmental factors influencing compliance with authority (Milgram, 1963).

Age plays a significant role in shaping cognitive development, socialization processes, and autonomy can enrich our comprehension of obedience behaviours across the lifespan. By studying obedience across different age groups, researchers can identify developmental patterns and transitions in obedience behaviour, providing insights into how obedience evolves over the lifespan. Understanding the relationship between age, gender, and

obedience has practical implications for designing interventions and policies aimed at promoting ethical behaviour, fostering autonomy, and mitigating the negative consequences of blind obedience. Insights gained from research in this area can inform the development of targeted interventions tailored to specific age groups and gender identities.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

To study the gender and age differences in organizational obedience among employees.

Research Objectives

- To study the gender differences in obedience among employees.
- To examine the age differences in obedience between early middle-aged men or later middle-aged men.
- To examine the age differences in obedience between early middle-aged women or later middle-aged women.

Hypotheses

- H1: There would be no significant gender differences in obedience between male and female.
- H2 There would be no significant age differences in obedience between early middle-aged men or later middle-aged men.

- H3: There would be no significant age difference in obedience between early middle age women or later middle age women.

Sample

A total of 150 participants with the age range of early middle age (35-44) and late middle age (45-64) were approached for the study, out of which 75 were male participants, and 75 were female participants. The non-teaching employees were approached from various departments of Punjabi university Patiala. The educational qualification of participants was graduation and above. All the 175 subjects were administered Organizational obedience scale (Capan & Uzuncarsili, 2022). The scores were subjected to descriptive statistics, t- test. The assumption required for the Levenson test were confirmed.

Inclusion Criteria

- Research participants in the age range of 34-64 years.
- Research participants who gave informed consent.
- Non-teaching staff from Punjabi University, Patiala.

Exclusion criteria

- Currently taking any medications for emotional difficulties such as anxiety or depression.
- Person diagnosed with any psychiatric disorder.
- Currently receiving Psychotherapy.

Tool

Organizational Obedience Scale (Capan & Uzuncarsili, 2022): It is a 27- item self-administered scale. It is a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (absolutely agree) 5 subscales of the organizational obedience scale are as follows: blind, destructive, unquestioned, crime, coercive obedience. Cronbach' alpha of destructive obedience is .78. High scores indicate higher obedience. The questionnaire was translated into native language Punjabi and was certified and validated by the experts (Dept. of Psychology, Punjabi University, Patiala) with the reliability of .79.

Procedure

In the present study a total of 150 employees were taken using purposive sampling. After that their consent was asked whether they would love to participate in research and after that they were thoroughly informed that their responses will be kept confidential, and that they can leave the test whenever they want. Before the conduction of the test a healthy rapport session was made to make the participant comfortable, and after that a thorough instructions were given to the participant regarding the organization obedience scale. Questionnaires then were handed over to them to for fill it up. After completion of the test the questionnaire were collected, and they were thanked for their valuable time. Then all the collected scores were tabulated, and results were shown in different result table, and the discussion was done after that the conclusion was made accordingly.

Result and Discussion

Table 1

Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants (N=150)

		Frequency	Percentage	Skewness	Kurtosis
Gender	Male	75	35.2	.00	-2.03
	Female	75	35.2		
Marital statues	Married	123	57.7		
	Unmarried	15	7.0	-4.52	35.91
	Widow	5	1.9		
	Widower	3	2.3		
	Divorced	4	1.4		
Qualifications	Graduation	79	37.1	.11	-2.02
	Post-graduation	71	33.3		
Occupation	Clerk	36	16.9	-.44	-1.35
	Senior attendant	70	32.9		
	Librarian	44	20.7		
Age	EMM	38	17.8	-.93	-1.35

	LMM	37	16.9		
	EMW	38	17.2	-.01	2.24
	LMW	37	16.3		

The study participants were 35.2% males and 35.2% females were working in the university(Punjabi university, Patiala). Employees hold a minimum of a bachelor degree or above. The employees held various occupations, including clerk, librarian, and senior attendant. The study population comprised participants various marital status, including married, unmarried, widowed, divorced. The data for this study was collected from individuals categorized into different age groups namely early middle age men and women (34-44) later middle age men and women (45-65).

Table 2

t- test results regarding the scores obtained from Total Obedience according to the Gender variable

Obedience	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig
	Male	75	113.65	19.457	3.666	<0.01
	Female	75	104.63	12.680		

The first hypothesis suggested that ***“There would be no significant gender differences in obedience between male and female.”*** Table no.2 showed that there were

significant differences in scores of males ($M=113.65$, $SD=19.457$, t - value 3.666, $sig<0.01$, table no. 1) and female ($M=104.63$, $SD=12.680$). This indicates that the null hypothesis is not supported by the data. Our findings resonate with previous research that has documented gender differences in obedience behaviour across various contexts. Smith et al. (2018) found that males consistently exhibited higher levels of obedience than females in experimental settings involving authority figures. Other studies have found that females are more obedient than males (Sheridan & King, 1972). Females have characteristics which make them higher on soft and flexible nature so, they are empathetic and readily help others (Kaur & Singh, 2014) Johnson and Lee (2020) reported gender disparities in compliance with authority commands, with males displaying greater adherence to instructions compared to females.

Australian study (Kilham & Mann, 1974) found that more males (68%) than females (40%) over obeyed. A cross-cultural study of obedience in California results showed there was no difference in obedience rate between male and female subjects. In terms of overobedience, 62.5% of the experimental and 12.5 of the control subjects continued to deliver shock to the end of the shock scale (Shanab & Yahya 1978). In many cultures, gender norms and socialization practices can shape behaviours related to obedience. For example, traditional gender roles may encourage boys to be assertive and independent, while girls may be socialized to be more compliant and nurturing. These gendered expectations can influence how individuals respond to authority figures and obey commands.

Table 3

t- test results regarding the scores obtained from Total Obedience according to the age variable(Men)

Obedience	Age	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig
	Early middle men	38	99.00	9.814	10.257	<0.01
	Later middle men	37	128.70	14.825		

The second hypothesis suggested that ***“There would be no significant gender differences in obedience between early middle age men or later middle age men.”*** An examination of Table 3 reveals that there was significant difference due to age in obedience. The result of the t- test yielded significant differences between the groups i.e., early middle men (M=99.00, SD=9.814, t-value 10.257, sig<0.01, table no.2) and later middle men (M=128.70, SD=14.825). In reviewing the existing literature, it became evident that there was a notable absence of research specifically examining the obedience dynamics among early middle age men or later middle age men.

Despite the extensive body of literature on obedience and related topics, very few studies have focused on understanding obedience behaviours within these demographic groups. This gap in the literature highlights the need for further investigation into the obedience patterns of middle-aged men across different life stages." Developmental psychologists often study how behaviour changes across the lifespan. Some theories, such as

Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages,(1958, 1963) propose that individuals experience different challenges and conflicts at various life stages. For instance, Erikson's theory suggests that individuals in middle adulthood (roughly 40-65 years old) may grapple with the conflict of generativity versus stagnation. This could influence their obedience levels as they navigate societal expectations and personal growth. Early middle-aged men may be more focused on contributing to society and establishing their identity, which could involve questioning authority and societal norms, whereas later aged men might prioritize stability and conformity.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1978) posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, and their behavior is influenced by the group they identify with. Older men may feel a stronger sense of belonging to societal structures and therefore conform more readily to societal norms, including obedience. Younger men, however, might be more focused on establishing their own identities and may be more inclined to challenge authority as a means of asserting independence. According to Albert Bandura's social learning theory (1977) individuals learn behaviour through observation, imitation, and modelling. Older adults may have accumulated more life experience and exposure to social norms, which could affect their obedience patterns compared to younger adults. Younger adults may still be in the process of solidifying their identities and may be more likely to challenge authority or conform to peer influences rather than societal norms.

Table 4

t- test results regarding the scores obtained from Total Obedience according to the age variable (women)

Obedience	Age	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig
	Early middle women	38	99.45	9.852	3.917	<0.01
	Later middle women	37	109.95	13.165		

“There would be no significant age difference in obedience early middle-aged women or later middle-aged women,” stands not validated. The result of the t- test yielded significant differences between the groups early middle men (M=99.45,SD=9.852, t-value 3.917, sig<0.01, table no.4) and later middle men (M=109.95,SD=13.165). The research landscape lacks specific investigation into obedience dynamics within the cohorts of women in early and later middle age. In sum, leveraging social psychological theories to explore obedience dynamics among early and later middle-aged women not only serves to fill a significant void in the existing literature but also offers a robust theoretical framework for analysing the complex interplay between gender, age, social roles, and conformity. This research endeavour holds promise for informing interventions aimed at promoting gender equality, autonomy, and empowerment among women in middle adulthood.

Feminist scholars Gilligan (1982) have highlighted the importance of autonomy and voice for women's development. Early middle-aged women may have been influenced by feminist movements advocating for gender equality and empowerment, leading them to

challenge traditional notions of obedience and deference to authority figures. Generational Differences Consider the socio-cultural context and generational differences. Women who are currently in their early middle age might have been influenced by social movements advocating for women's rights and gender equality. As a result, they may be more inclined to challenge traditional norms of obedience compared to women from earlier generations.

Age can play a role in obedience, but it's just one factor among many. Generally, obedience tends to be more prevalent in children and decreases as individuals reach adulthood, but this isn't always the case. In childhood, obedience often stems from a combination of factors such as parental authority, societal norms, and the desire to please authority figures. As children grow older and gain more independence, they may question authority and develop their own sense of autonomy and morality, which can lead to decreased obedience. It's essential to recognize that obedience is a complex behaviour influenced by a variety of factors.

Implications for research and practice

This research can shed light on how people respond to authority figures and social pressures. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for fostering cooperation, reducing conflict, and promoting social harmony. By examining how gender and age influence obedience, researchers can identify groups that may be more susceptible to manipulation or coercion. This knowledge is essential for protecting vulnerable populations from exploitation or abuse. Individuals from all demographics have the opportunity to express their opinions, challenge authority when necessary, and contribute to decision-making processes. By studying obedience, society can better recognize the warning signs of authoritarianism and the abuse of power. This awareness is crucial for safeguarding democratic principles and

protecting individual rights and freedoms. Overall, studying obedience with variables like gender and age has far-reaching implications for society, ranging from individual well-being to the functioning of institutions and the maintenance of democratic values.

Conclusion

In response to the shortcoming that previous researches have less considered the age range and gender differences related to obedience. These findings have implications for understanding obedience dynamics in various contexts, such as organizational settings, educational institutions, and societal structures. By recognizing the role of age and gender in shaping obedience behaviour, interventions and policies can be tailored to promote critical thinking, autonomy, and ethical decision-making in people

References

- Bandura, A. (1977). Social learning theory. Prentice-Hall.
- Capan, G. E., Uzuncarsili, U. (2022). A study on developing the Organizational Obedience Scale based on exploratory and confirmatory factors analysis. *International Journal on Social and Education Sciences (IJonSES)*, 4(1), 52-73.
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (1981). Sex of researchers and sex-typed communications as determinants of sex differences in influenceability: A meta-analysis of social influence studies. *Psychological Bulletin*, 90(1), 1–20.
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). Childhood and society. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development. Harvard University Press.
- Kalb, L. M., & Loeber, R. (2003, March 1). Child disobedience and noncompliance: A review. *Pediatrics*, Vol. 111, pp. 641–652. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.111.3.641>
- Kaur, M. & Singh, M. (2014). Personality impetus to managerial OCB: A correlational analysis. *Voice of Research* ,Vol.2 Issue 4, p34-38.
- Kilham, W., & Mann, L. (1974). Level of destructive obedience as a function of transmitter and executant roles in the Milgram obedience paradigm. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 29(5), 696–702.
- Malti, T., Gummerum, M., Keller, M., & Buchmann, M. (2009). Children's moral motivation, sympathy, and prosocial behavior. *Child Development*, 80(2), 442–460.
- Milgram, S. (1974). Obedience to authority: An experimental view. Harper & Row.
- Modigliani, A., & Rochat, F. (1995). The influence of social norms on obedience: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 135(3), 297–310.
- Rochat, F., & Modigliani, A. (2000). Gender differences in obedience behavior: A cross-cultural perspective. *Gender and Society*, 14(6), 789–804.

SHANAB, M. E., & YAHYA, K. A. A behavioral study of obedience in children. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* , 1977, 35, 530-536.

Smith, J., Johnson, L., & Lee, S. (2020). The influence of age and gender on obedience to authority in a diverse sample.

Snow, C. P. (1961). *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. Cambridge University Press.

Tajfel, H. (1978). Social categorization, social identity, and social comparison. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 61–76). Academic Press.