

Means of Persuasion

Some effective means of persuading people include:

- Repetition of the message
- Endorsement of the message by an admired or attractive individual
- Association of the message with a pleasant feeling

Coercive Persuasion

Persuasion is coercive when it limits people's freedom to make choices that are in their best interest and prevents them from reasoning clearly. Cults use coercive techniques to persuade their members to adopt ideas and practices. Coercive persuasion often involves practices such as placing people in emotionally or physically stressful situations, telling people their problems all stem from one cause, having a leader who is expected to be adored and obeyed, encouraging people to identify strongly with a new group, entrapping people so that they have to increase their participation in the group, and controlling people's access to outside information.

Obedience and Authority

Obedience is compliance with commands given by an authority figure. In the 1960s, the social psychologist Stanley Milgram did a famous research study called the obedience study. It showed that people have a strong tendency to comply with authority figures.

Milgram's Obedience Study

Milgram told his forty male volunteer research subjects that they were participating in a study about the effects of punishment on learning. He assigned each of the subjects to the role of teacher. Each subject was told that his task was to help another subject like himself learn a list of word pairs. Each time the learner made a mistake, the teacher was to give the learner an electric shock by flipping a switch. The teacher was told to increase the shock level each time the learner made a mistake, until a dangerous shock level was reached.

Throughout the course of the experiment, the experimenter firmly commanded the teachers to follow the instructions they had been given. In reality, the learner was not an experiment subject but Milgram's accomplice, and he never actually received an electric shock. However, he pretended to be in pain when shocks were administered.

Prior to the study, forty psychiatrists that Milgram consulted told him that fewer than 1 % of subjects would administer what they thought were dangerous shocks to the learner. However, Milgram found that two-thirds of the teachers did administer even the highest level of shock, despite believing that the learner was suffering great pain and distress. Milgram believed that the teachers had acted in this way because they were pressured to do so by an authority figure.

Factors That Increase Obedience

Milgram found that subjects were more likely to obey in some circumstances than others. Obedience was highest when:

- Commands were given by an authority figure rather than another volunteer
- The experiments were done at a prestigious institution
- The authority figure was present in the room with the subject
- The learner was in another room
- The subject did not see other subjects disobeying commands

In everyday situations, people obey orders because they want to get rewards, because they want to avoid the negative consequences of disobeying, and because they believe an authority is legitimate. In more extreme situations, people obey even when they are required to violate their own values or commit crimes. Researchers think several factors cause people to carry obedience to extremes:

- People justify their behavior by assigning responsibility to the authority rather than themselves.
- People define the behavior that's expected of them as routine.
- People don't want to be rude or offend the authority.
- People obey easy commands first and then feel compelled to obey more and more difficult commands. This process is called entrapment, and it illustrates the foot-in-the-door phenomenon.



