

Charles K. Hofling

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Charles K. Hofling

Born: 1928 | **Died:** 1982

Nationality: American

Primary Field(s): Psychiatry, Social Psychology

1. Summary

Charles K. Hofling was an influential American psychiatrist and academic whose most significant contribution to social psychology and medical ethics was his seminal 1966 field experiment on **obedience to authority** within the professional medical community. Born in 1928, Hofling dedicated his career to empirically investigating human behavior, particularly focusing on the dynamics of power and adherence to hierarchical structures in high-stakes clinical settings. His research provided essential insights into how professional training, ethical norms, and personal judgment can be swiftly overridden by the perceived command of an authority figure.

Hofling served as a Professor of Psychiatry at **Washington University in St. Louis**, where he conducted the research that would later become known globally as the "Hofling Hospital Study." This research departed critically from contemporary laboratory studies of obedience, like those conducted by Stanley Milgram, by situating the experiment within a naturalistic, real-world professional environment. By observing nurses responding to orders from unfamiliar doctors, Hofling demonstrated the powerful, immediate, and often unquestioning nature of professional compliance. His findings not only became a cornerstone in the study of social influence but also had profound, practical implications for reforming medical training, promoting patient safety protocols, and advocating for greater autonomy for nurses in healthcare hierarchies.

2. Key Contributions

The Hofling Hospital Study (1966): Hofling's defining contribution was the field experiment "An Experimental Study in Nurse-Doctor Relationships." This study rigorously tested the extent of obedience among nurses by instructing them via phone to administer a clearly excessive and unauthorized dose of a fictional drug ("Astroten") to a patient. The methodology was designed to violate four separate hospital policies simultaneously: administering a dose exceeding the maximum limit, administering an unauthorized drug, taking an order over the phone, and taking an order from an unfamiliar doctor.

Empirical Evidence of Professional Obedience: The results of the 1966 study were alarming: 21 out of 22 participating nurses (approximately 95%) proceeded to prepare the drug for administration, stopping only when intercepted by a researcher. This striking rate of compliance provided powerful empirical evidence that the perceived authority of a doctor could override the

nurse's professional knowledge, ethical judgment, and explicit procedural training, highlighting a systemic vulnerability in the healthcare hierarchy regarding patient safety.

Enhancing Ecological Validity in Obedience Research: Hofling successfully moved the study of obedience out of the artificial laboratory setting and into a context of high ecological validity--a functioning hospital. This demonstrated that the phenomena observed by researchers like Milgram were not confined to contrived experimental conditions but were deeply embedded in real-world professional structures, lending new urgency and authenticity to the study of social influence and authority.

Catalyst for Medical Ethics Reform: By revealing the dangers inherent in unquestioning obedience, Hofling's work served as a critical catalyst for change in healthcare systems. It promoted extensive discussions about the need for greater professional autonomy for nurses, the cultivation of critical thinking skills, and the implementation of formal systems (such as improved communication protocols and Team Resource Management) to empower subordinates to challenge questionable or potentially harmful directives from superiors.

3. Intellectual Context and Impact

Charles K. Hofling's research emerged during a period of intense psychological inquiry into authority and social conformity, following closely on the heels of Stanley Milgram's controversial yet seminal laboratory experiments on obedience in the early 1960s. Hofling consciously built upon Milgram's foundation, but his distinct contribution was shifting the focus from the general population inflicting theoretical pain in a controlled lab to professional actions potentially causing real harm in a known environment. This naturalistic approach allowed Hofling to explore the interplay between institutional norms, professional responsibility, and hierarchical pressure, providing a nuanced understanding of obedience that was directly applicable to professional practice.

The impact of the Hofling experiment transcended social psychology, fundamentally reshaping discussions in medical ethics, organizational behavior in healthcare, and nursing education. The study directly challenged the traditional, rigid, and often paternalistic command structure prevalent in hospitals of the era, which implicitly enforced a "culture of obedience." By spotlighting the ethical imperative for nurses to exercise independent professional judgment, Hofling's work contributed significantly to empowering healthcare professionals to develop a "speak-up" culture, ensuring that patient safety takes precedence over strict adherence to authority.

Consequently, Hofling's findings have been integrated into medical and nursing school curricula worldwide, serving as a powerful case study illustrating the complexities of authority dynamics and the ethical pitfalls of institutional hierarchies. His work continues to influence policy and procedure development aimed at preventing medical errors that arise from communication failure and the

reluctance of subordinates to question authority figures, solidifying his legacy as a vital figure whose research directly improved the ethical and functional standards of healthcare systems.

4. Major Works

Hofling, C. K., Brozman, E., Dalrymple, S., Graves, N., & Pierce, C. M. (1966). An Experimental Study in Nurse-Doctor Relationships. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 143(2), 171-180.

5. Criticisms and Debates

Despite its profound influence, Hofling's 1966 study generated significant ethical and methodological debates, a common occurrence for groundbreaking social psychology research. Ethically, the primary criticism revolved around the use of **deception** and the potential psychological distress inflicted upon the nurses. Critics argued that exposing nurses to a situation where they nearly administered a dangerous drug, even with thorough debriefing, could have caused lasting anxiety, guilt, or a profound crisis of confidence regarding their professional competence and ethical standards.

Methodologically, questions were raised about the study's generalizability. The experiment was conducted in the specific cultural and organizational context of 1960s American hospitals, where the deference to doctors was arguably stronger than in modern settings. Furthermore, some critics suggested that the use of a fictional drug ("Astroten") and the lack of a familiar, established professional relationship with the doctor on the phone might have created a scenario that, while highly realistic, still differed from a truly high-stakes situation involving a known colleague or a real, recognized medication.

Finally, debates centered on the interpretation of the high compliance rate. While Hofling attributed the behavior primarily to unquestioning obedience to perceived authority, alternative explanations suggested that other factors, such as **professional trust**, the assumption of hidden knowledge on the doctor's part, or the desire to be helpful in a perceived emergency, may have contributed to the nurses' willingness to comply. These debates have ensured that the Hofling study remains a vibrant and essential subject for discussion in psychology and medical ethics classrooms, continually challenging students and professionals to consider the complex motivational drivers behind organizational behavior.

Further Reading

Hofling, C. K., Brozman, E., Dalrymple, S., Graves, N., & Pierce, C. M. (1966). An Experimental Study in Nurse-Doctor Relationships. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 143(2), 171-180.

McLeod, S. A. (2023, November 28). Hofling's Study on Obedience. *Simply Psychology*.

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