PEOPLE DO WHAT THEY ARE TOLD TO DO

STANLEY MILGRAM (1933–1984)

IN CONTEXT

APPROACH
Conformism

BEFORE
1939–45 During World War II, approximately six million Jews are systematically killed on the orders of Nazi Germany.

1950 Solomon Asch demonstrates the power of social pressure to make people conform in his line-task experiments.

1961 Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann is tried, and claims he was just "following orders."

AFTER
1971 Philip Zimbardo conducts his prison experiment, which demonstrates that in certain situations, otherwise good people can perform evil deeds.

1989 American psychologists Herbert Kelman and V.L. Hamilton state that members of a group obey authority when they accept its legitimacy.

Social psychologist Stanley Milgram dramatically changed our understanding of human obedience when he published *Behavioral Study of Obedience* in 1963. This paper contained results of an experiment that seemed to suggest that the majority of people are capable of causing extreme harm to others when told to do so by a figure of authority. It also caused people to question the ethical limits of psychological experimentation.

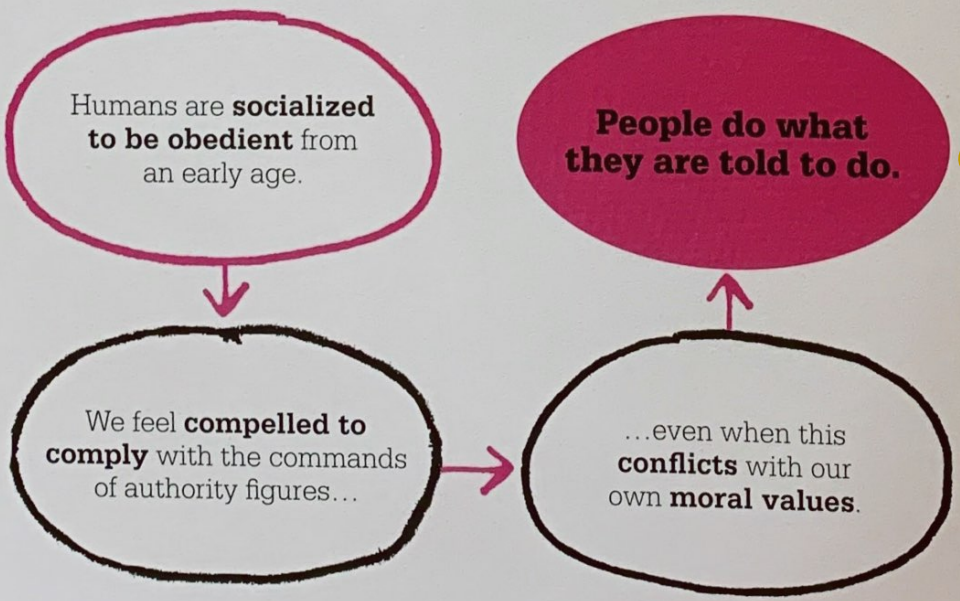
Milgram became particularly interested in studying obedience during the trial of German Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann. The prevailing view was that there was something inherently different about the 20th-century Germans; in the 1950s, psychologists such as Theodor Adorno had suggested that the Germans had certain personality characteristics that made them specifically susceptible to committing the atrocities of the Holocaust. Eichmann, however, claimed he had just been "following orders," so Milgram set out to investigate if this could be true—would an ordinary person lay aside what he knew to be right or wrong merely because he was ordered to do so? His study went on to demonstrate important aspects of the relationship between authority and obedience, and it remains one of the most controversial experiments in the history of psychology.

The power of the group

Milgram believed that it was the situation of World War II and the compulsion to obey—rather than the dispositions of the Germans—that had enabled Nazi cruelty. He maintained that the behavior was a direct result of the situation, and any of us might have behaved identically in that very same context. In the late 1950s, Milgram had worked extensively with Solomon Asch on his conformity studies and had witnessed people agreeing with the decisions of a group, even when they knew these decisions to be wrong. The experiments showed that people are prepared to do or say things that conflict with their own sense of reality. Would they also allow their moral judgments to be affected by the authority of a group or even a single figure?

The Milgram experiment

Milgram set out to test whether normally kind, likeable people could be made to act against their own moral values in a setting where some kind of authority held sway. He devised an investigation of how obedient a selection of "ordinary" men would be when they were told by an authority figure to administer electric shocks to another person. The experiment took place in a laboratory at Yale University in 1961, where Milgram was a professor of psychology. The participants were recruited through a newspaper advertisement, and a total of 40 men were selected from a wide range of



See also: Solomon Asch 224–27 ▪ Serge Moscovici 238–39 ▪ Philip Zimbardo 254–55 ▪ Walter Mischel 326–27

> The most famous and controversial of all obedience experiments.
> **Richard Gross**

occupations, including teachers, postal workers, engineers, laborers, and salesmen. They were each paid $4.50 for their participation; the money was given to them as soon as they arrived at the laboratory, and they were told that the payment was theirs to keep regardless of what happened during the experiment.

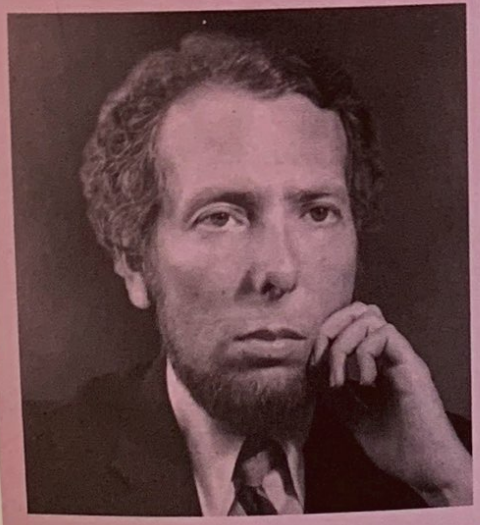
In the laboratory, Milgram had created a phony (but very impressive and realistic-looking) electric shock generator. This had 30 switches marked in 15-volt increments with labels that indicated the intensity of different ranges of shock levels, from "slight shock" at one end, to "extreme intensity shock," "danger: severe shock," and finally, one marked simply "XXX," at the other.

The role of the experimenter or "scientist" was played by a biology teacher who introduced himself to the participants as Jack Williams. In order to give the impression of authority, he was dressed in a gray laboratory technician's coat and maintained a stern and emotionless demeanor throughout each of the experiments.

The participants were told that the study intended to investigate the effects of punishment on learning. They were told that of two volunteers, one would be the learner and the other the teacher. In fact, one of the two "volunteers" in each case was not a participant but a stooge: he was a likeable accountant called Mr. Wallace, who had been trained to play the role of the victim. When Mr. Wallace and the genuine participant drew paper from a hat to determine which role they would play, the draw was always rigged so that Mr. Wallace took on the role of "learner" in every instance. In full view of the participant, the "learner" (Mr. Wallace) was strapped into an "electric chair" with an electrode attached to his wrist; the participant was told that this electrode was attached to the shock generator »

Convincingly wired up, Mr. Wallace pretended to be an innocent volunteer. His screams failed to prevent 65 percent of participants from administering the highest level of fake electric shock.

Stanley Milgram



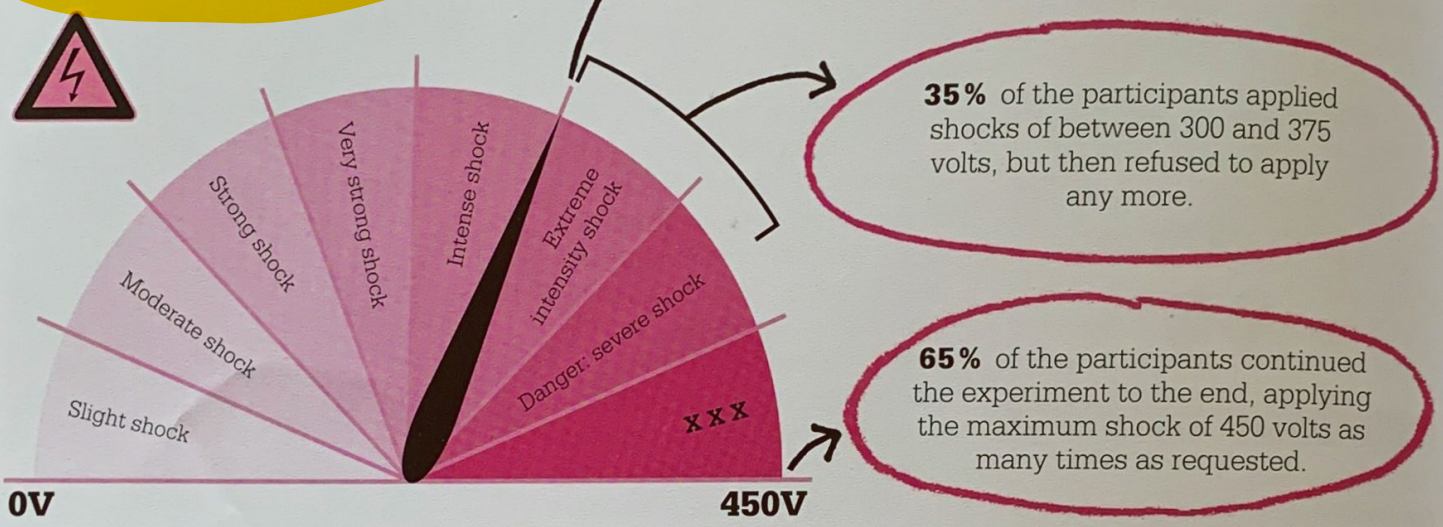
Stanley Milgram was born in 1933 to a Jewish family in New York City. His Hungarian parents ran a bakery in the Bronx, and he attended James Monroe High School with Philip Zimbardo.

A high academic achiever and a leader among his peers, Milgram initially studied political science, but went on to receive a PhD in psychology from Harvard in 1960 under Gordon Allport. After working with Solomon Asch on conformity studies at Harvard, he became assistant professor at Yale, where he carried out his obedience experiments. In 1961, he married Alexandra Menkin, with whom he had two children. In 1963, he returned to Harvard, but was denied tenure because of the controversy surrounding his experiment, so he moved to the City University of New York, where he taught until his death at the age of 51.

Key works

1963 *Behavioral Study of Obedience*
1967 *The Small World Problem*
1974 *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*

Milgram's shock generator produced totally unexpected results. A team of 40 psychiatrists predicted that fewer than 5 percent of participants would administer shocks as high as 300 volts; in fact, every participant went to this level.



100% of the participants applied shocks up to 300 volts; the point at which the learner began to shout in apparent pain.

35% of the participants applied shocks of between 300 and 375 volts, but then refused to apply any more.

65% of the participants continued the experiment to the end, applying the maximum shock of 450 volts as many times as requested.

located in an adjacent room. The participant heard the "scientist" tell the "learner" (Mr.. Wallace) that "although the shocks can be extremely painful, they cause no permanent damage." To make the situation appear more authentic, the scientist then wired up the participant and gave him a sample shock of 45 volts—which was in fact the only shock strength that the generator could produce.

At this point, the participant was moved to the room containing the shock generator and asked to assume the role of "teacher." He was asked to read a series of word pairs (such as "blue-girl", "nice-day") aloud for the learner to memorize. After this he was to read out a series of single words; the learner's task was to recall the pairing word in each case and to indicate his answer by pressing a switch that illuminated a light on the shock generator. If the learner's answer was correct, the questions continued; if the answer was incorrect, the participant was instructed to tell the learner the correct answer, announce the level of shock he was about to receive, and press a switch to administer the shock. Participants were instructed to increase the shock level by 15 volts (in other words, to keep moving up the shock scale on the machine) with every wrong answer.

Applying the shocks

As part of the experiment, the learner (Mr. Wallace) had been briefed to answer incorrectly to around one question in every four, to ensure that the participant would be required to start applying electric shocks. During the experiment, the learner would pound the wall once the voltage had reached 300, and shout: "I absolutely refuse to answer any more! Get me out of here! You can't hold me here! Get me out!" As the shock level increased, the learner would shout more frantically, and then eventually cease making any noise at all; questions would be met with nothing but an eerie silence. The participant was told to treat any unanswered question as an incorrectly answered question and apply the next level of shock voltage. If he expressed misgivings about continuing the experiment, he received a verbal prod from the "scientist" to encourage him, from a simple request to continue, to finally being told that he had no choice but to go on. If he refused to obey after the last prod, the experiment was terminated.

> "With numbing regularity, good people were seen to knuckle under the demands of authority and perform actions that were callous and severe."
> **Stanley Milgram**

In advance of the experiment, Milgram had asked several different groups of people, including ordinary members of the public as well as psychologists and psychiatrists, how far they thought participants would go when asked to administer the electric shocks. Most people thought participants would stop at a level that caused pain, and the psychiatrists predicted that, at most, one in 1,000 would continue to the highest level of shock. Astonishingly, when the experiment took place, Milgram found that all 40 of the participants obeyed commands to administer shocks up to 300 volts. Only five people refused to continue at this point; 65 percent of the participants obeyed the instructions of the "scientist" right to the end, obeying commands to administer shocks to the top level of 450 volts.

Their discomfort at doing so was often evident: many showed signs of severe distress, tension, and nervousness over the course of the experiment. They stuttered, trembled, sweated, groaned, broke out into nervous laughing fits, and three people had full-blown seizures. In every instance of the experiment, the participant stopped and questioned it at some point; some even offered to refund the money they were paid at the beginning. Interviews after the experiments confirmed that, with only a few exceptions, participants had been completely convinced that the "learning experiment" was real.

All participants were fully debriefed so they understood what had actually taken place, and they were asked a series of questions to test that they were not emotionally harmed by the experience. The participants were also reunited with the "learner" (Mr. Wallace) so that they could see that no actual shocks had been administered.

Feeling obliged to obey

Milgram noted several features of the experiment that may have contributed to such high levels of obedience; for example, the fact that it took place at the prestigious Yale University gave it credibility. In addition, participants believed that the study was designed to advance knowledge, and they had been assured that the shocks were painful but not dangerous. Being paid may have increased their sense of obligation, as did the fact they had volunteered to take part. To test these explanations, Milgram ran many variations on the study, but changing the context had only minor effects on the results.

Milgram wanted to see if the inclination to obey authority figures can become the major factor in determining behavior, even in extreme circumstances. It is clear from the reactions and responses of the participants that obeying the "scientist" was violating their own sense of morality and negatively affecting them both physically and emotionally, but the pressure to comply was simply too powerful to defy in most cases.

> "Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process."
> **Stanley Milgram**

This sense of obedience, Milgram felt, comes from the fact that people are socialized from a very young age (by parents and »

By the 1960s, Yale University was known to the general public as being highly prestigious; its authority may have seemed literally unquestionable to the participants of Milgram's study.

teachers) to be obedient and to follow orders—especially the rules set forth by authority figures. As Milgram says, "obedience is as basic an element in the structure of social life as one can point to… it serves numerous productive functions." But equally, the inhumane policies of the death camps in World War II "could only be carried out on a massive scale if a very large number of persons obeyed orders." His experiments clearly demonstrated that normally harmless people become capable of committing cruel acts when a situation pressures them to do so.

In describing his results, Milgram also turned to the theory of conformism, which states that when a person has neither the ability nor expertise to make a decision, he will look to the group to decide how to behave. Conformity can limit and distort an individual's response to a situation, and seems to result in a diffusion of responsibility—which Milgram felt was crucial to comprehending the atrocities carried out by the Nazis. However, the conflict between a person's conscience and external authority exerts a huge internal pressure, and Milgram felt that this accounted for the extreme distress experienced by the participants in his study.

Ethical concerns

There were many ethical concerns associated with Milgram's study. When it was first published, the ensuing controversy was so great that the American Psychological Association revoked his membership for a full year. However, it was eventually reinstated, and Milgram's 1974 book *Obedience to Authority* received the annual Social Psychology Award.

The major concern was that the participants in the experiment were explicitly deceived, both about the nature of the study and about the reality of the electric shocks. Milgram's defense was that he could not have obtained realistic results without employing deception, and all of the participants were debriefed after the experiment. Self-knowledge, he argued, is a valuable asset, despite the discomfort that the participants may have felt when forced to confront the fact that they behaved in a previously unthinkable way.

However, many psychologists remained uneasy, and the study was ultimately crucial in the development of ethical standards of psychological experimentation. It helped to define important principles such as the avoidance of intentional deceit of participants, and the need to protect experimental participants from emotional suffering.

Cross-cultural validity

Another criticism of Milgram's study was that he used an unrepresentative sample: American men do not necessarily reflect the general population. Even so, Milgram was able to conclude that obedience was not a particular feature found in the minds of 20th-century Germans, but something more universal. A number of cross-cultural replications

The behavior of Nazis during World War II had been attributed to a prevalence of the "authoritarian personality" in the population; this was questioned by Milgram's experiments.

> "Obedience to authority is not a feature of German culture, but a seemingly universal feature of human behavior."
> **Stanley Milgram**

> In wartime, a soldier does not ask whether it is good or bad to bomb a hamlet.
> **Stanley Milgram**

American soldiers in Vietnam reported that their behavior became unacceptable by degrees—as with the shock generator—until they found themselves murdering innocents.

of the original experiment have demonstrated remarkably high consistency in results within societies, but slight differences between one country and another. For example, in most of North America and Europe, results are very similar to those found in Milgram's original experiment, with very high percentages of obedience. Asian studies, however, show even greater levels of obedience (in East Asian and Muslim countries in particular), while aboriginal African and Latin American populations, as well as the Inuit peoples of Canada, show far less obedience.

Virtual torture

In 2006, the psychologist Mel Slater set out to see what the effect would be if participants were made explicitly aware that the situation was not real. His replication used a computer simulation of the learner and shock process, so participants administering the shocks were fully aware that the learner was computer-generated. The experiment was run twice: first with the virtual learner communicating only by text, and then with the computer-generated model visible on screen. Those with only text contact with the learner had little trouble administering the shocks; but when the virtual learner was visible, participants acted exactly as they had in Milgram's original experiment.

Society demands obedience

The notion of a society rests on an understanding that individuals are prepared to relinquish some personal autonomy and look to others of higher authority and social status to make decisions on a larger scale or from a higher, broader perspective. Even the most democratic of societies requires the rulings of a recognized, legitimate authority to take precedence over individual self-regulation, in pursuit of the greater collective good. In order for any society to function, its populace must agree to obey its rules. Legitimacy is, of course, the key, and there are countless historical examples of people using their authority to persuade others to commit crimes against humanity.

Equally importantly, Milgram showed that it is "not so much the kind of person a man is, as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act." Instead of examining personalities to explain crimes, he says, we should examine the context, or situation.

Milgram's seminal study was heavily criticized at the time, not least because it painted an unappealing and chilling portrait of human nature. It is easier to believe that there are fundamental differences between the Nazis and the rest of humanity than to accept that in certain situations, many of us are capable of committing extraordinary acts of violence. Milgram held up a light to the dark realities concerning power and the consequences of our tendency to obey authority figures, and in so doing, he simultaneously absolved and made villains of us all. ■