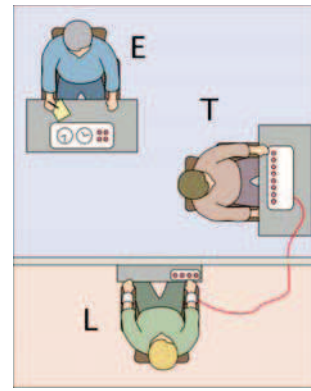


**The Milgram* experiment on obedience and authority 1961:
reflections on the ethics of social psychology.**

How do humans react when placed into a particular context like that of giving obedience to *socially recognized authorities*? Social authorities are individuals like judges, professors, police officers, prosecutors and administrators: we usually are taking for granted that they are able to act wisely and to properly represent the institutions which have elected them as public officers. But what if they suddenly *override* their limited and grounded range of action and start to taking decisions, giving orders or behaving in a way that contradicts their official duties? Stanley Milgram, American social psychologist at Yale University during the 60', asked himself what normal people would decide to do if recognized authorities, under their unique responsibility, ordered them to produce dangerous *harm* and physical pain to other individuals. He was struck by the "case Heichmann", the nazi criminal judged as guilty at the Jerusalem trial. Milgram's famous experiment on obedience and authority provided *stunning* outcomes, which were unpredictable before and put some hard questions on Ethics.



Experimental setting. July 1961: 40 individuals, belonging to different social classes. They were asked to sit in a room as "Teachers" (T) and to *merely* follow the orders given by an "Experimenter" (E) sitting aside. The experimenter (E) looked like a "Professor" and would order the Teacher, the subject of the experiment, to *trigger* painful electric shocks to a Learner (L) by moving a lever. The Learner, though, was an actor and a "confederate", a part of the staff: yet the Teacher didn't know this. He simply knew that the Learner was sitting in another room, connected to an electrical wire, and that was due to answer correctly simple questions (word pairs). Questions were to be put by the

Teacher himself, on order of the Experimenter. The Teacher sincerely would believe that for each wrong answer given to the questions the Learner would really receive the electrical shock: the stroke would be more and more intensive (by 15 Volts) as the Learner would fail answering correctly the questions. It is clear that in reality there were no such punishments. Being separated from the subject, the Learner would give the Teacher the real impression of a persons who is feeling more and more pain, as inflicted by the Teacher himself, yet on direct order of the "authority", the Experimenter. This latter would always insist to take full personal responsibility for the ongoing state of "pain" caused to the Learner by giving *verbal prods to T*: Please *continue!* - The experiment *requires that you continue!* - It is absolutely *essential that you continue!* - You have no other choice, *you must go on!* The question is: how many subjects really resist to authority and stop following such orders?

Experimental outcomes: Milgram's first set of experiments showed that **65 %** (26 out of 40, that is *two thirds!*) of the "Teachers" ended up administering the experiment's final massive 450-volt shock: yet many were very uncomfortable doing so. Each of these paused and questioned the experiment at least once; some said they would refund the money they were paid for participating in the experiment. Milgram repeated the experiment with some different variations: direct contact with the Learner, presence of a second Teacher, low prestige setting, Experimenter non-professor in charge, Teacher and Experimenter apart. In accordance with these different settings the percentage of 65% could drop to even 10%. Yet under standard conditions (as initially carried out), it still ranges about 65%. This confirms Milgram's final interpretation given in 1974 that:

"...ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority".

Milgram opened an insight to the question whether humans could become evil *for the sake of* conformity and obedience to recognized authorities: *Hannah Arendt's "Banality of Evil"* had maybe found an explanation...

*Stanley Milgram (1933-1984). American social psychologist, of Jewish family, Ph. D at Harvard in 1960, then assistant professor. He has been mostly known worldwide for his controversial study, the Milgram Experiment. He was strongly influenced in his commitments to showing the relationships between obedience and authority, by the events of the Nazi holocaust: he wanted to carry out an experiment that could show how humans surprisingly modify their behavioral patterns when they are exposed to orders coming from individual recognized as formal authorities, personally responsible for action and decisions. He first described his experiment in 1963 in an article published in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, and later on published his findings in 1974, in his book: *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*.

Notes for the Lecture

- Conformity and presence of other as influence to personal perception and beliefs: Solomon Ash conformity experiment. Milgram was a student of Asch: Asch was a Gestalt Psychologist.
- More Teacher variable: the conformity effect on obedience to authority: did the teachers refuse to proceed, then did the subject too. Just 4 on 40 (10%) kept on ; in the opposite case (all confederate – Teachers said yes, go on, then just 3% of the subjects could be enough strong to refuse going on, thus defying the Experimenter.
- **Hannah Arendt**: Banality of Evil.

The **Milgram experiment on obedience to authority figures** was a series of [social psychology experiments](#) conducted by [Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram](#), which measured the willingness of study participants to [obey](#) an [authority figure](#) who instructed them to perform acts that conflicted with their personal [conscience](#). Milgram first described his research in 1963 in an article published in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*,^[1] and later discussed his findings in greater depth in his 1974 book, [Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View](#).^[2]

The experiments began in July 1961, three months after the start of the trial of German [Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann](#) in [Jerusalem](#). Milgram devised his psychological study to answer the question: "Was it that Eichmann and his [accomplices](#) in [the Holocaust](#) had mutual intent, in at least with regard to the goals of the Holocaust?" In other words, "Was there a mutual sense of morality among those involved?" Milgram's testing suggested that it could have been that the millions of accomplices were merely following orders, despite violating their deepest moral beliefs. The experiments have been repeated many times, with consistent results within societies, but different percentages across the globe.

The subject was given the title teacher, and the confederate, learner. *The participants drew slips of paper to 'determine' their roles. Unknown to them, both slips said "teacher", and the actor claimed to have the slip that read "learner", thus guaranteeing that the participant would always be the "teacher"*. At this point, the "teacher" and "learner" were separated into different rooms where they could communicate but not see each other. In one version of the experiment, the confederate was sure to mention to the participant that he had a [heart condition](#)

The "teacher" was given an [electric shock](#) from the electro-shock generator as a sample of the shock that the "learner" would supposedly receive during the experiment. The "teacher" was then given a list of word pairs which he was to teach the learner. The teacher began by reading the list of word pairs to the learner. The teacher would then read the first word of each pair and read four possible answers. The learner would press a button to indicate his response. If the answer was incorrect, the teacher would administer a shock to the learner, with the voltage *increasing in 15-volt increments* for each wrong answer. If correct, the teacher would read the next word pair.^[1]

The subjects believed that for each wrong answer, the learner was receiving actual shocks. In reality, there were no shocks. After the confederate was separated from the subject, the *confederate* set up a tape recorder integrated with the electro-shock generator, which played pre-recorded sounds for each shock level. After a number of voltage level increases, the actor started to bang on the wall that separated him from the subject. After several times banging on the wall and complaining about his heart condition, all responses by the learner would cease.^[1]

At this point, many people indicated their desire to stop the experiment and check on the learner. Some test subjects paused at 135 volts and began to question the purpose of the experiment. Most continued after being assured that they would not be held responsible. A few subjects began to laugh nervously or exhibit other signs of extreme stress once they heard the screams of pain coming from the learner.^[1]

If the subject still wished to stop after all four successive verbal prods, the experiment was halted. Otherwise, it was halted after the subject had given the maximum **450-volt** shock three times in succession.

Before conducting the experiment, Milgram polled fourteen Yale University senior-year psychology majors to predict the behavior of 100 hypothetical teachers. All of the poll respondents believed that only a very

small fraction of teachers (the range was from zero to 3 out of 100, with an average of 1.2) would be prepared to inflict the maximum voltage. Milgram also informally polled his colleagues and found that they, too, believed very few subjects would progress beyond a very strong shock.

Milgram in his 1974 article, "The Perils of Obedience", writing: The legal and philosophic aspects of [obedience](#) are of enormous importance, but they say very little about how most people behave in concrete situations. I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much [pain](#) an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist. Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' [participants'] strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' [participants'] ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation.

There is a little-known [coda](#) to the Milgram Experiment, reported by [Philip Zimbardo](#): none of the participants who refused to administer the final shocks insisted that the experiment itself be terminated, nor left the room to check the health of the victim without requesting permission to leave, as per Milgram's notes and recollections, when Zimbardo asked him about that point.

Ethics

The Milgram Shock Experiment raised questions about the [research ethics](#) of scientific experimentation because of the extreme emotional stress and [inflicted insight](#) suffered by the participants. In Milgram's defense, 84 percent of former participants surveyed later said they were "glad" or "very glad" to have participated, 15 percent chose neutral responses (92% of all former participants responding).^[10] Many later wrote expressing thanks. Milgram repeatedly received offers of assistance and requests to join his staff from former participants.

Interpretations

Professor Milgram elaborated two theories explaining his results:

- The first is the *theory of conformism*, based on [Solomon Asch conformity experiments](#), describing the fundamental relationship between the group of reference and the individual person. A subject who has neither ability nor expertise to make decisions, especially in a crisis, will leave decision making to the group and its hierarchy. The group is the person's behavioral model.
- The second is the *agentic state theory*, wherein, per Milgram, *"the essence of obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes, and he therefore no longer sees himself as responsible for his actions. Once this critical shift of viewpoint has occurred in the person, all of the essential features of obedience follow"*.^[14]

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*We will pay five hundred New Haven men to help us complete a scientific study of memory and learning. The study is being done at Yale University.

*Each person who participates will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50c carfare) for approximately 1 hour's time. We need you for only one hour: there are no further obligations. You may choose the time you would like to come (evenings, weekdays, or weekends).

*No special training, education, or experience is needed. We want:

Factory workers	Businessmen	Construction workers
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All persons must be between the ages of 20 and 50. High school and college students cannot be used.

*If you meet these qualifications, fill out the coupon below and mail it now to Professor Stanley Milgram, Department of Psychology, Yale University, New Haven. You will be notified later of the specific time and place of the study. We reserve the right to decline any application.

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