

## "I Was Just Following Orders"

"I was just following orders." That was the essence of Adolf Eichmann's defense when he was tried for his war crimes, which included masterminding the Nazis' attempted extermination of European Jews. Milgram wanted to determine the extent to which people are willing to follow authorities' orders. In particular, he wanted to identify the factors that lead people to follow commands that violate their ethics, such as commands to harm an innocent stranger.

### Method

The participants were a diverse collection of 40 men from the local community, recruited through advertisements to participate in a study at Yale University. When a subject arrived at the lab, he met the experimenter and another subject, a likable, 47-year-old accountant, who was actually an accomplice of the experimenter. The "subjects" were told that the study would concern the effects of punishment on learning. They drew slips of paper from a hat to get their assignments, but the drawing was fixed so that the real subject always became the "teacher" and the accomplice the "learner."

The participant then watched as the learner was strapped into an electrified chair through which a shock could be delivered to the learner whenever he made a mistake on the task (left photo in Figure 16.16 on the next page). The subject was told that the shocks would be painful but "would not cause tissue damage," and he was then taken to an adjoining room that housed the shock generator that he would control in his role as the teacher. This elaborate apparatus (right photo in Figure 16.16) had 30 switches designed to administer shocks varying from 15 to 450 volts, with labels ranging from "Slight shock" to "Danger: severe shock" and "XXX." Although the apparatus looked and sounded realistic, it was a fake, and the learner was never shocked.

As the "learning experiment" proceeded, the accomplice made many mistakes that necessitated shocks from the teacher, who was instructed to increase the shock level after each wrong answer. At "300 volts," the learner began to pound on the wall between the two rooms in protest and soon stopped responding to the teacher's questions. At this point, participants ordinarily turned to the experimenter for guidance. The experimenter, a 31-year-old male in a gray lab coat, firmly indicated that no response was

the same as a wrong answer and that the teacher should continue to give stronger and stronger shocks to the now silent learner. If the participant expressed unwillingness to continue, the experimenter responded sternly with one of four pre-arranged prods, such as, "It is absolutely essential that you continue."

When a participant refused to obey the experimenter, the session came to an end. The dependent variable was the maximum shock the participant was willing to administer before refusing to cooperate. After each session, the true purpose of the study was explained to the subject, who was reassured that the shock was fake and the learner was unharmed.

### Results

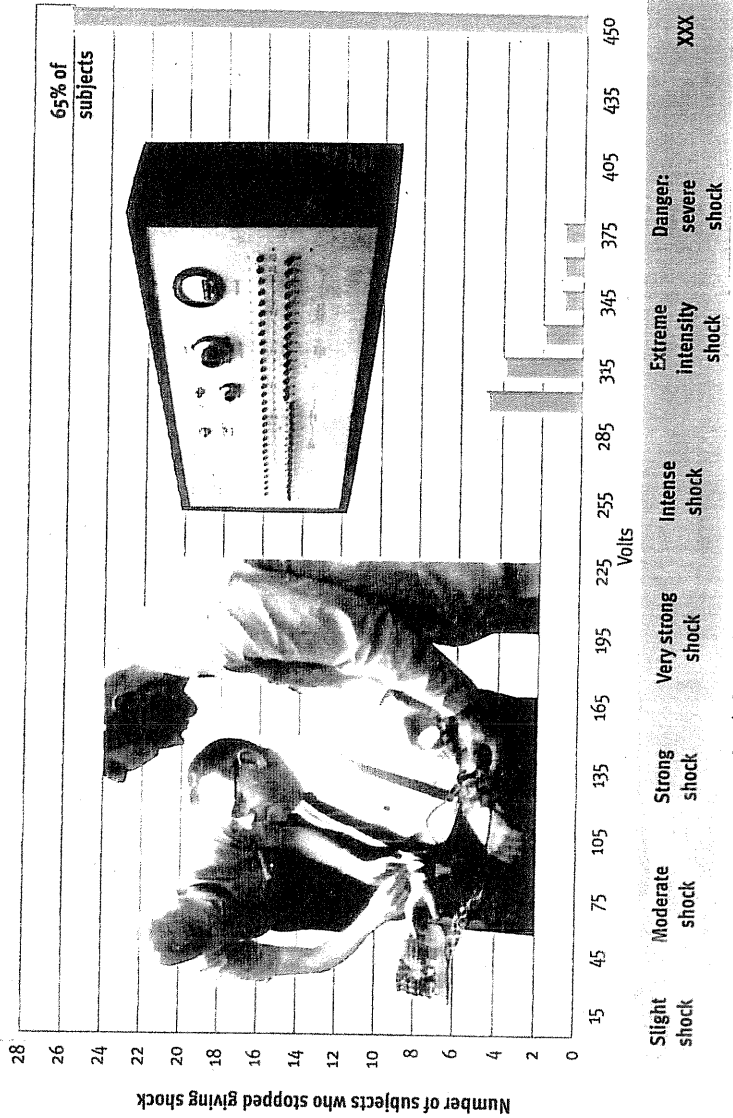
No participant stopped cooperating before the learner reached the point of pounding on the wall, but 5 quit at that point. As the graph in Figure 16.16 shows, only 14 out of 40 subjects defied the experimenter before the series of shocks was completed. Thus, 26 of the 40 subjects (65%) administered all 30 levels of shock. Although they tended to obey the experimenter, many participants voiced and displayed considerable distress about harming

the learner. The horrified subjects groaned, bit their lips, stuttered, trembled, and broke into a sweat, but they continued administering the shocks.

### Discussion

Based on these results, Milgram concluded that obedience to authority is even more common than he or others had anticipated. Before the study was conducted, Milgram had described it to 40 psychiatrists and had asked them to predict how much shock subjects would be willing to administer to their innocent victims. Most of the psychiatrists had predicted that fewer than 1% of the subjects would continue to the end of the series of shocks!

In interpreting his results, Milgram argued that strong pressure from an authority figure can make decent people do indecent things to others. Applying this insight to Nazi war crimes and other travesties, Milgram asserted that some sinister actions may not be due to actors' evil character so much as to situational pressures that can lead normal people to engage in acts of treachery and violence. Thus he arrived at the disturbing conclusion that given the right circumstances, anyone might obey orders to inflict harm on innocent strangers.



Level of shock (as labeled on Milgram's shock machine)

## Making Sense of Milgram's Findings

### Multiple Influences

Milgram, along with other researchers, identified several aspects of the experimental situation that had a strong impact on the subjects (see Blass, 1992, 2000; Milgram, 1965). Here are some of the forces that influenced subjects to continue obeying the experimenter's orders:

- **A previously well-established mental framework to obey.** Having volunteered to participate in a psychology experiment, Milgram's subjects arrived at the lab with the mental expectation that they would obediently follow the directions of the person in charge—the experimenter. They also accepted compensation on their arrival, which may have increased their sense of having made a commitment to cooperate with the experimenter.
- **The situation, or context, in which the obedience occurred.** The subjects were familiar with the basic nature of scientific investigation, believed that scientific research was worthwhile, and were told that the goal of the experiment was to “advance the scientific understanding of learning and memory” (Milgram, 1974a). All these factors predisposed the subjects to trust and respect the experimenter's authority (Darley, 1992). Even when subjects protested, they were polite and respectful. Milgram suggested that subjects were afraid that defying the experimenter's orders would make them appear arrogant, rude, disrespectful, or uncooperative.
- **The gradual, repetitive escalation of the task.** At the beginning of the experiment, the subject administered a very low level of shock—15 volts. Subjects could easily justify using such low levels of electric shock in the service of science. The shocks, like the learner's protests, escalated only gradually. Each additional shock was only 15 volts stronger than the preceding one.
- **The experimenter's behavior and reassurances.** Many subjects asked the experimenter who was responsible for what might happen to the learner. In every case, the teacher was reassured that the *experimenter* was responsible for the learner's well-being. Thus, the subjects could believe that they were not responsible for the consequences of their actions. They could tell themselves that their behavior must be appropriate if the experimenter approved of it.
- **The physical and psychological separation from the learner.** Several “buffers” distanced the subject from the pain that he was inflicting on the learner. First, the learner was in a separate room and not visible. Only his voice could be heard. Second, punishment was depersonalized: The subject simply pushed a switch on the shock generator. Finally, the learner never appealed directly to the teacher to stop shocking him. The learner's pleas were always directed toward the *experimenter*, as in “Experimenter! Get me out of here!” Undoubtedly, this contributed to the subject's sense that the experimenter, rather than the subject, was ultimately in control of the situation, including the teacher's behavior. Similarly, when teachers were told to personally hold the learner's hand down on a “shock plate,” obedience dropped to 30 percent. Overall, Milgram demonstrated that the rate of obedience rose or fell depending upon the situational variables the subjects experienced (Zimbardo, 2007).

Table 12.3

The Learner's Schedule of Protests in Milgram's Obedience Experiment

- 120 volts → Ugh! Hey, this really hurts.
- 150 volts → Ugh!!! Experimenter! That's all. Get me out of here. I told you I had heart trouble. My heart's starting to bother me now. Get me out of here, please. My heart's starting to bother me. I refuse to go on. Let me out.
- 210 volts → Ugh!! Experimenter! Get me out of here. I've had enough. I won't be in the experiment any more.
- 270 volts → (Agonized scream.) Let me out of here. Let me out of here. Let me out of here. Let me out. Do you hear? Let me out of here.
- 300 volts → (Agonized scream.) I absolutely refuse to answer any more. Get me out of here. You can't hold me here. Get me out. Get me out of here.
- 315 volts → (Intensely agonized scream.) I told you I refuse to answer. I'm no longer part of this experiment.
- 330 volts → (Intense and prolonged agonized scream.) Let me out of here. Let me out of here. My heart's bothering me. Let me out, I tell you. (Hysterically) Let me out of here. Let me out of here. You have no right to hold me here. Let me out! Let me out! Let me out! Let me out! Let me out of here! Let me out! Let me out!

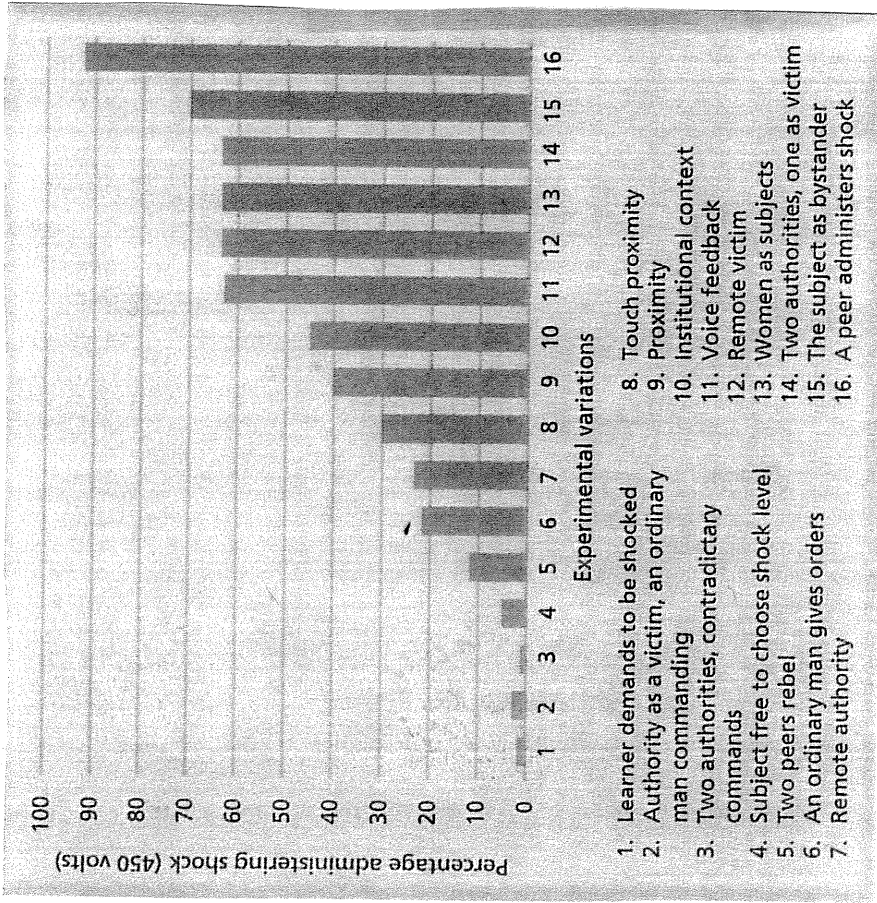


TABLE 14.1 Getting Good People to Do Bad Things

- Provide people with an ideology to justify beliefs for actions.
- Make people take a small first step toward a harmful act with a minor, trivial action, and then gradually increase those small actions.
- Make those in charge seem like a "just authority."
- Slowly transform a once compassionate leader into a dictatorial figure.
- Provide people with vague and ever-changing rules.
- Relabel the situation's actors and their actions to legitimize the ideology.
- Provide people with social models of compliance.
- Allow verbal dissent but only if people continue to comply behaviorally with orders.
- Encourage dehumanizing the victim.
- Make exiting the situation difficult.

## **Discussion Questions**

Answer the following discussion questions in your group BEFORE you create your presentation for the class. Use these questions to ensure that everyone in your group has a thorough understanding of all of the information.

1. What makes us more or less likely to obey authority? How do you determine if it is good/bad to obey?
2. How can leaders use the foot-in-the-door technique to increase obedience? When have you seen this in action?
3. Are there times when we must risk harming participants in order to gain helpful information? What do you consider to be too much harm? Did this study cross that line?
4. What types of studies could you use to replicate these findings? How would you set up this study?
5. How does this impact our lives today? Where have you seen examples of this?

# Character Activity

(Independent or Collaborative Learning)

Examine the assigned handout. Write a diary entry from the perspective of someone who is directly affected by the information presented in the handout. Your diary entry must both tell the story of the information presented and explain its impact, both on "you" (the character writing the diary entry) and on others.

## Assessment Criteria

Your completed assignment must meet all of the following criteria:

- Assignment uses a diary entry format and is written from the point of view of a person directly affected by the information presented in the handout.
- Diary entry tells the story of the information from the handout, including who, what, when, where, and why.
- Diary entry clearly explains how the information from the handout impacts "you" (the character writing the diary entry).
- Diary entry clearly explains how the information from the handout impacts others.
- Diary entry makes use of three or more of the following: sensory details, metaphor, exaggeration, emotion, and/or sarcasm.
- Diary entry accurately includes ALL of the following terms in a form other students can understand: Foot-In-The-Door Persuasion, Independent Variable, Dependent Variable, Obedience, Milgram, Generalizability

## Oral Presentation Rubric : Complex Instruction

Teacher Name: **Ms. Greenwald**

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1
<b>Props</b>	Group uses visual aids that meet all of the assessment criteria and make the presentation better.	Group uses visual aids which meet most of the assessment criteria and make the presentation better.	Group uses visual aids that do not meet most of the assessment criteria and do not improve the presentation.	Group does not use visual aids OR the visual aids distract from the presentation.
<b>Content</b>	All members show a full understanding of the topic.	All members show a good understanding of the topic.	Some members show a good understanding of parts of the topic.	Group members do not seem to understand the topic very well.
<b>Speaks Clearly</b>	Group speaks loudly, clearly and distinctly through the entire presentation.	Group speaks loudly, clearly and distinctly most of the time	Group speaks loudly, clearly, and distinctly only some of the time.	Group members often mumble or cannot be understood.
<b>Posture and Eye Contact</b>	Stands up straight, looks relaxed and confident. Establishes eye contact with everyone in the room during the presentation.	Stands up straight and establishes eye contact with everyone in the room during the presentation.	Sometimes stands up straight and establishes eye contact.	Slouches and/or does not look at people during the presentation.
<b>Collaboration with Peers</b>	All group members almost always listen to, share with, and support the efforts of others in the group.	Group members usually listen to, share with, and support the efforts of others in the group.	Group members sometimes do not listen to, share with, and support the efforts of others in the group.	Group members rarely listen to, share with, and support the efforts of others in the group.