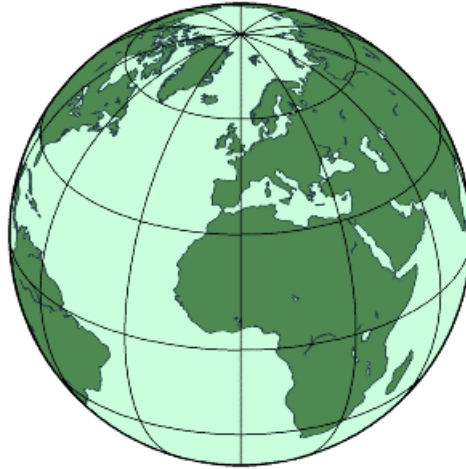


# Obedience to Authority



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# Introduction

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- After World War II, nazi leaders were tried for war crimes
  - Some of the accused claimed “I was just following orders” as their (unsuccessful) defence
- Stanley Milgram was a social psychologist at Yale University:
  - He was curious about the “I was just following orders” defence
  - He decided to test the willingness of people to follow orders that conflict with their conscience
  - The results of his experiments were published:
    - Initially in academic journals in the 1960s
    - Then later in his 1974 book *Obedience to Authority*
- This chapter:
  - Describes the experiments and their results
  - Explains their relevance to people who want to change the world

# 1. Description of the experiments

# Description of the experiments

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- Members of the public were recruited to take part in an experiment:
  - They were told it was to test the effects of punishment on learning
- An experiment consisted of:
  - A “learner” who was strapped into an electric chair in one room
  - A “teacher” who sat in another room. He used an intercom to ask the learner multiple-choice questions:
    - The learner pressed one of 4 buttons to answer
    - If the answer was wrong then the teacher pressed a button to administer an electric shock
    - The electric shocks increased in intensity for each incorrect answer (from 15 volts to 450 volts, in 15-volt increments)
  - An “experimenter” (in a lab coat) supervised the teacher:
    - If the learner’s screams of pain disturbed the teacher, the experimenter asked the teacher to continue

# The real purpose of the experiment

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- Both the teacher and learner were members of the public recruited to take part in the experiment
  - The roles of “teacher” and “learner” appeared to be randomly assigned
- The teacher did not realize that:
  - The “random” assignment of roles was rigged
  - The learner was an actor who *pretended* to receive electric shocks
  - The learner’s right and wrong answers and cries of pain were scripted (beyond a certain voltage level, the learner remained quiet, indicating that he might be unconscious or dead)
- The real experiment was to test obedience to authority:
  - In particular, when obedience meant doing something contrary to one’s conscience
  - At what point would the teacher refuse to continue the experiment?

# Variations of the experiment

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- The experiment was performed on 40 “teachers” at a time:
  - Then a change was made and the modified experiment was repeated on 40 new “teachers”
- Many variations of the experiment were performed, including:
  - Using men or women in the role of teacher
  - Using a mild-mannered or hard-looking actor in the role of student
  - Having the learner complain of heart problems
  - Putting the student in the same room as the teacher
  - Requiring the teacher to press the student’s hand onto a metal plate to give the electric shock
  - Putting the “experimenter” into another room and enabling the teacher to contact him by telephone
  - Dividing the teacher’s duties among 3 people (2 of whom were actors) and having the two actor-teachers refuse to continue the experiment at particular voltages

## 2. Expectations and results of the experiment



# Modest expectations for the experiment

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- Stanley Milgram realized that:
  - The experimenter would not have “real” authority over the teacher
    - The volunteer teacher could *not* be fined, imprisoned or sacked for disobeying
  - Because of this, the experiment could not replicate realistic situations of authority in, for example, the army
- However, Stanley Milgram thought his “modest” experiment would still be useful:
  - The experiment might provide some insights to help him develop better experiments in the future

# Predictions of the experimental results

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- Before starting the experiments, Stanley Milgram asked some colleagues to predict the outcome of the experiments:
- They predicted:
  - About 2/3 of the teachers would refuse to continue the first time the learner demanded the experiment be stopped
  - About 1 in 1000 teachers would continue the experiment to the maximum voltage level

# Actual experimental results

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- The results of the experiment surprised everyone:
  - The majority of teachers continued the experiment to the maximum voltage level
  - This surprising result is what caused Milgram to do so many variations of the experiment
    - He was trying to discover the factors that might cause people to *disobey* authority
- The teachers were *not* sadists:
  - They represented a wide variety of demographics
  - Most displayed signs of increasing stress as the experiment went on
  - Many argued and pleaded with researchers to stop the experiment, but continued reluctantly when the researcher asked them to do so

### 3. Insights from the experiments

# Insights into human behaviour

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- The experiments provide some insights into human behaviour
- Insight 1:
  - Most humans have a strong urge to obey authority *even when*:
    - Authority instructs them to do something against their conscience
    - The “authority” does not have any means to punish people who disobey
- Insight 2:
  - When faced with a conflict: (1) do something wrong or (2) disobey, we pass the responsibility for the wrong-doing to the figure of authority
  - Hence the “I was only following orders” defence of war criminals
- Insight 3:
  - Inflicting hurt on another person can cause you to despise them (your conscience retrofits reasons to justify you hurting the person)

# What is the relevance to changing the world?

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- Those insights are interesting insights into human behaviour
  - But they are not necessarily relevant if you want to change the world
- The experiments do provide other insights that *are* relevant
  - But before discussing those insights, we need to take a slight detour

# A theory to explain obedience to authority

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- Near the end of *Obedience to Authority*, Stanley Milgram presents a theory to explain *why* people obey authority:
- Milgram notes that authority hierarchies are ubiquitous in human societies:
  - Family: children obey parents; one spouse obeys the other
  - Religion, schools, places of work, the army, hospitals, team sports, systems of government, policing ...
- Authority hierarchies can also be observed in other animal species
- This ubiquity suggests that authority hierarchies might be intrinsic to the nature of humans (and other species)

# Summary of Milgram's theory

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## ■ Within any species:

- Uncontrolled competition among individuals will wipe out the species
- Evolution gives individuals a conscience that limits competition **(1)**

## ■ In addition:

- A society in which each individual is a “Jack of all trades and a master of none” has a poor chance of survival
- Specialized division of labour increases a society's chances of survival
- Such divisions of labour can be coordinated with a hierarchy of authority
- For this to work, individuals must be willing to obey authority **(2)**
- This improves the survival chances for the society (and its individuals)
- Challenges to authority are stopped (viciously if necessary) because they decrease the society's chances of survival

## ■ Evolution has decided that (2) takes precedence over (1):

- This results in a strong instinct to obey authority *instead of* conscience



# Summary of Milgram's theory (cont')

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- An individual acting within a hierarchy:
  - “No longer views himself as acting out of his own purposes but rather comes to see himself as an agent for executing the wishes of another person.”
- This means an individual does not feel guilt if he obeys orders to do something immoral:
  - “I was just following orders”
- Morality is still present, but with a different focus:
  - The individual “feels shame or pride depending on how adequately he has performed the actions called for by authority”
- We can now discuss some insights relevant to changing the world

# Insight 4

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- Bringing about change may require you to challenge existing authority:
  - Change the status quo → challenge the status quo's authority hierarchy
  - Do not be surprised if some people try to viciously suppress your challenge of authority
- Examples:
  - A government:
    - Might use dirty tactics to fight terrorists
    - Might also use dirty tactics to investigate peaceful protestors or those who publicly express criticisms of the government
  - A company has been doing a particular task the same way for years:
    - An employee finds a different and better way to do the same task
    - The employee's idea might be suppressed
    - The employee might be punished or sacked

## Insight 5

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- If you are fighting oppression then:
  - Many of your oppressors might *not* actually hate you
  - Instead, they could be just following orders
  
- Nelson Mandela's autobiography contains an example:
  - See Chapter 72 of *Long Walk to Freedom*
  - Nelson Mandela was held at Robben Island prison
  - A commanding officer with a reputation for brutality was moved there
  - This commanding officer made life hell for the prisoners
  - Later when the commanding officer was being transferred to another prison, he surprised Nelson Mandela by wishing him "Good luck"
  
- Nelson Mandela's conclusion:
  - The commanding officer "was not evil; his inhumanity had been foisted upon him by an inhuman system"

## Insight 6

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- Obedience drops if the teacher is aware of the learner's pain:
  - Learner is in another room and the teacher *cannot* hear his screams (obedience is 65%)
  - Learner is in another room and the teacher *can* hear his screams (obedience is 62.5%)
  - Move the learner into the same room as the teacher (obedience drops to 40%)
  - Have the teacher force the learner's hand onto a metal plate to administer the electric shock (obedience drops to 30%)
- If you want an “evil corporation” to stop doing evil:
  - Find ways for its employees to directly sense (hear, see, touch, smell, taste) the effects of its evil policies

# Insight 7

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- Many obedient teachers tried to sabotage the experiment:
  - They emphasised the correct answer when reading a list of possible answers
  - If the experimenter was not in the room then they administered the lowest voltage shock
- A real life analogy is an employee who leaks sensitive information to activist groups or journalists

# Insight 8

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- Experiments were done on a group of 3 teachers:
  - One teacher read questions, another indicated if the learner's answer was right or wrong, and the last teacher administered electric shocks
  - Only one teacher was a volunteer; the other two were actors
  
- Results:
  - If the two actor teachers obey then the volunteer teacher's obedience increases (to 92.5%)
  - If the two actor teachers disobey then the volunteer teacher's obedience decreases (to 10%)
  
- These experiments show the importance of group effects:
  - Feeling you are just a cog in a wheel makes it difficult to disobey immoral orders ("If I don't do it then somebody else will")
  - Seeing others disobey immoral authority gives you courage to disobey
    - This is why people in authority must *quickly* suppress disobedience

### 3. Summary

# Summary

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- Stanley Milgram's *Obedience to Authority* shocked the world:
  - Good people can easily do evil
- According to Milgram's theory:
  - Evolution has decided that obedience to authority takes precedence over an individual's conscience
  - Challenges to authority are often subdued, with violence if necessary
- Bringing about change may require you to challenge existing authority:
  - Change the status quo → challenge the status quo's authority hierarchy
  - Do not be surprised if some people try to viciously suppress your challenge of authority



## Summary (cont')

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- If you are fighting oppression then:
  - Many of your oppressors might *not* actually hate you
  - Instead, they could be just following orders
- If you want an “evil corporation” to stop doing evil:
  - Find ways for its employees to directly sense (hear, see, touch, smell, taste) the effects of its evil policies
  - Some employees with a troubled conscience may leak sensitive information to activists or journalists
- Group effects play an important role in obedience:
  - Feeling you are just a cog in a wheel makes it difficult to disobey immoral orders (“If I don’t do it then somebody else will”)
  - Seeing others disobey immoral authority gives you courage to disobey