

Obedience to Authority: An Experiment by Stanley Milgram

As told by Dr. F. Elwell

Obedience to Authority

“Behavior that is unthinkable in an individual who is acting on her own may be executed without hesitation when carried out under orders.”



Obedience to Authority

“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 considers himself responsible for his actions.”

Obedience to Authority

Obedience as a determinant of behavior is of particular relevance for our time:

- Extermination camps of Nazi Germany
- Gulag in the former Soviet Union
- Similar atrocities in Mao's China, Cambodia, Uganda, and Bosnia.





PHOTO BY ARLO P. HODGE

Obedience to Authority

“Facts of recent history and observation in daily life suggest that for many people obedience is a deeply ingrained behavioral tendency, an impulse that may override training in ethics, sympathy, and morality.”

Obedience to Authority

There is a moral question of whether one should obey when commands conflict with personal conscience. There are two basic views:

- Conservative
- Humanist

Conservative View:

“Conservative philosophers argue that the very fabric of society is threatened by disobedience, and even when the act ordered by authority is wrong, it is better to carry out the act than to wrench the structure of authority.”

Humanist View:

“Humanists argue for the primacy of individual conscience in such matters, insisting that the moral judgements of individuals must override authority when the two are in conflict.”

Obedience to Authority

The central issue here, however, is to what extent human behavior is controlled from external sources of authority.

The Experiment:

Stanley Milgram set up a simple experiment at Yale University to find out how likely people are to obey authority figures even when the orders go against personal morality.

The Experiment:

Two people come to a psychology laboratory in response to a newspaper ad; they think that they are there to take part in a study of memory and learning.

Public Announcement

WE WILL PAY YOU \$4.00 FOR ONE HOUR OF YOUR TIME

Persons Needed for a Study of Memory

*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 50¢ 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
City employees	Clerks	Salespeople
Laborers	Professional people	White-collar workers
Barbers	Telephone workers	Others

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.
*You will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50¢ carfare) as soon as you arrive at the laboratory.

TO:
PROF. STANLEY MILGRAM, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY,
YALE UNIVERSITY, NEW HAVEN, CONN. I want to take part in
this study of memory and learning. I am between the ages of 20 and
50. I will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50¢ carfare) if I participate.

NAME (Please Print)

ADDRESS

TELEPHONE NO. Best time to call you

AGE OCCUPATION SEX

CAN YOU COME:

WEEKDAYS EVENINGS WEEKENDS

Fig. 1. Announcement placed in local newspaper to recruit subjects.

The Experiment:

“One of them is designated as a ‘teacher,’ the other a ‘Learner.’ The experimenter explains that the study is concerned with the effects of punishment on learning.”

The Experiment:

“The learner is conducted into a room, seated in a chair, his arms are strapped to prevent excessive movement, and an electrode is attached to his wrist.”



The Experiment:

“The ‘teacher’ is given a little jolt at this point, just to demonstrate to him that the shock machine is working and the punishment is real.”

The Experiment:

“The learner is told that he is to learn a list of word pairs; whenever he makes an error, he will receive electric shocks of increasing intensity.”

The Experiment:

“The real focus of the experiment is the teacher. After watching the learner being strapped in place, he is taken into the main experimental room and seated before an impressive shock generator.”

The Experiment:

“The ‘teacher’ is told that he is to administer a learning test to the man in the other room. When the learner responds correctly, the teacher moves on to the next item. When the learner responds incorrectly, the teacher is to shock him.”

The Experiment:

“The teacher is told to start at the lowest shock level (15 volts) and increase the level each time the learner makes an error, going through 30 volts, 45 volts, and so on.”

The Experiment:

“The teacher is a genuinely ‘naïve’ subject who has come to the laboratory to participate in the experiment.”

The Learner:

“The ‘learner,’ or victim, is an actor who actually receives no shock at all.”



The Experiment:

The goal of the experiment is to see how far a person “will proceed in a concrete and measurable situation in which he is ordered to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim.”

The Experiment:

At what point will the teacher refuse to obey?



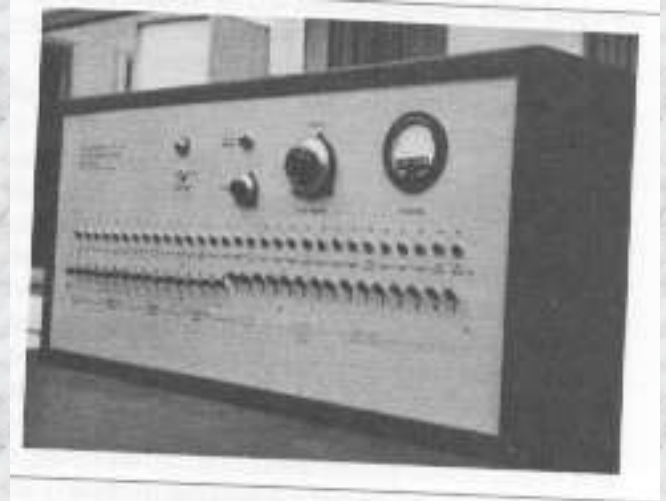
Obedience Vs. Empathy

“For the ‘teacher’ the situation is not a game. On the one hand, the suffering of the learner presses him to quit. On the other, the experimenter, a legitimate authority figure, orders him to continue.”

The Shock Generator

Each switch was clearly labeled with a voltage designation that ranged from 15 to 450 volts.

- Slight Shock
- Moderate Shock
- Intense Shock
- Extreme Intensity Shock
- Danger, Severe Shock
- XXX



Experimenter Feedback:

“At various points in the experiment the subject would turn to the experimenter for advice on whether he should continue to administer shocks. The experimenter responded with a sequence of prods, using as many as necessary to bring the teacher back in line.”

Experimenter Feedback:

The prods:

- Please continue.
- The experiment requires that you continue.
- It is absolutely essential that you continue.
- You have no other choice, you must go on.

Experimenter Feedback:

“The experimenter would begin the sequence of prods anew whenever the teacher balked at continuing the experiment.”

Victim Feedback:

“The vocal response of the victim was taped and coordinated to a particular voltage level on the shock generator. The victim indicated no discomfort until the 75 volt shock was administered, at which time the victim gives a grunt. From 150 volts on, he insisted that he be let out. After 330 volts he was not heard from at all.”

Victim Feedback:

“At 300 volts the victim shouted in desperation that he would no longer provide answers to the memory test. After 330 volts, the victim was not heard from again.”

Victim Feedback:

“At this point the teacher would usually turn to the experimenter for guidance. The experimenter would instruct the teacher to treat the absence of a response as a wrong answer, and to shock the learner according to the usual schedule.”

Victim Feedback:

“He advised the teacher to allow 5 to 10 seconds before considering no response as a wrong answer, and to increase the shock level one step each time the learner failed to respond correctly.”



“Pre-Test”

Before he conducted the study, Stanley outlined his experiment to groups of psychologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists and asked them to predict how many people would continue shocking the person to the end.



“Pre-Test”

“The consensus was that except for a few sociopaths that would be picked up in any sample of the American population, most people would either refuse to participate, or quit as soon as the victim began to protest.”

The Results:

The results can be viewed by clicking on the hyperlink below. There are four experimental variations presented on the chart. The number in the four columns indicates the number of people out of 40 subjects who refused to obey at each level of shock.

- [The results of the experiments](#)

Experiment Variations:

Several variations on the experiment that was just described:

- Remote: Teacher could dimly perceive the victim through a silvered glass. Could not hear. Tended to avoid their eyes.
- Vocal: the one just described.
- Proximity: Teacher placed in the same room with victim.

Experiment Variations:

Touch Proximity: Victim received a shock only when the victim's hand rested on a shock plate. The teacher had to force his hand on it. Required physical contact with the victim.

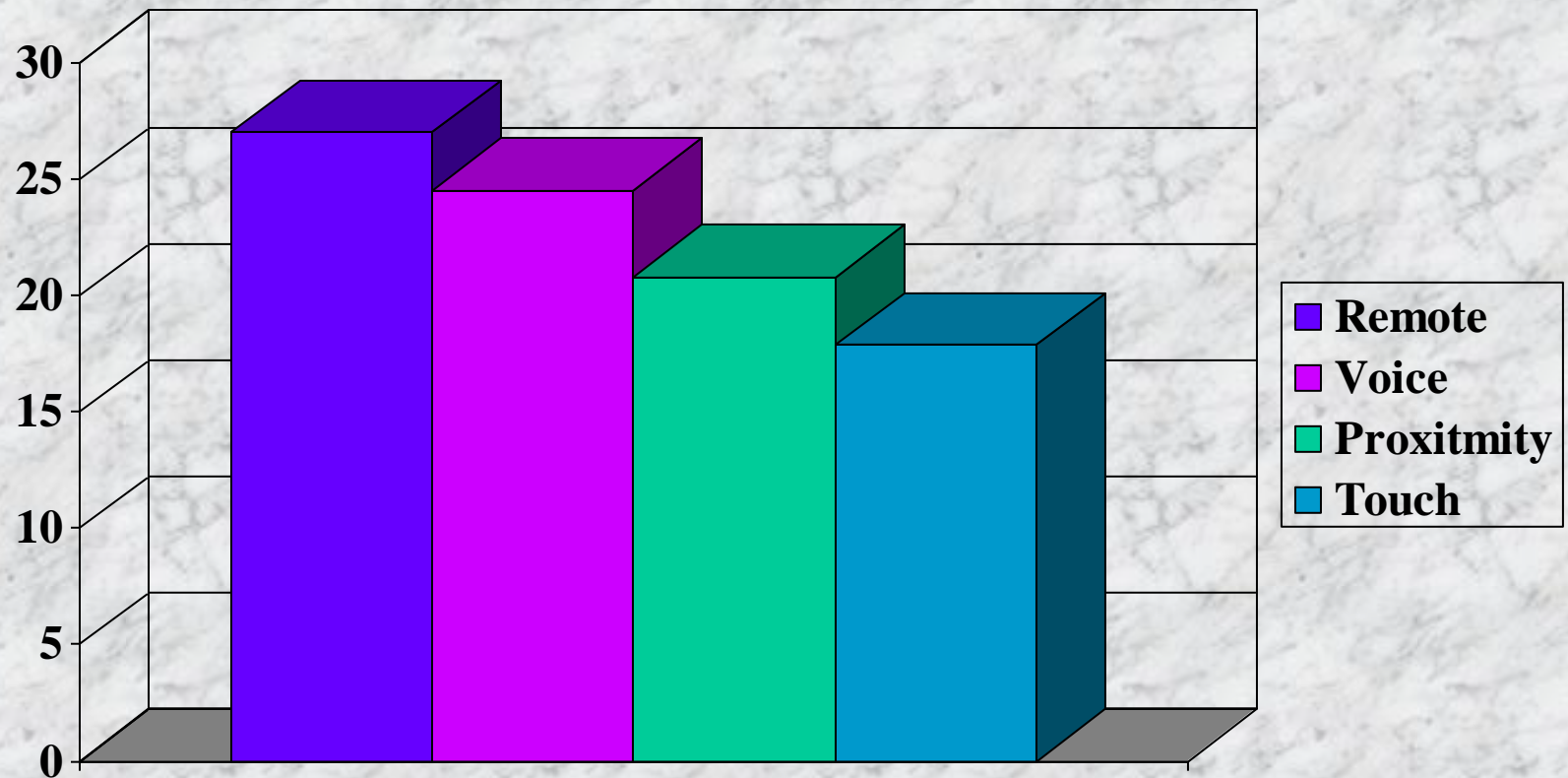


Generality:

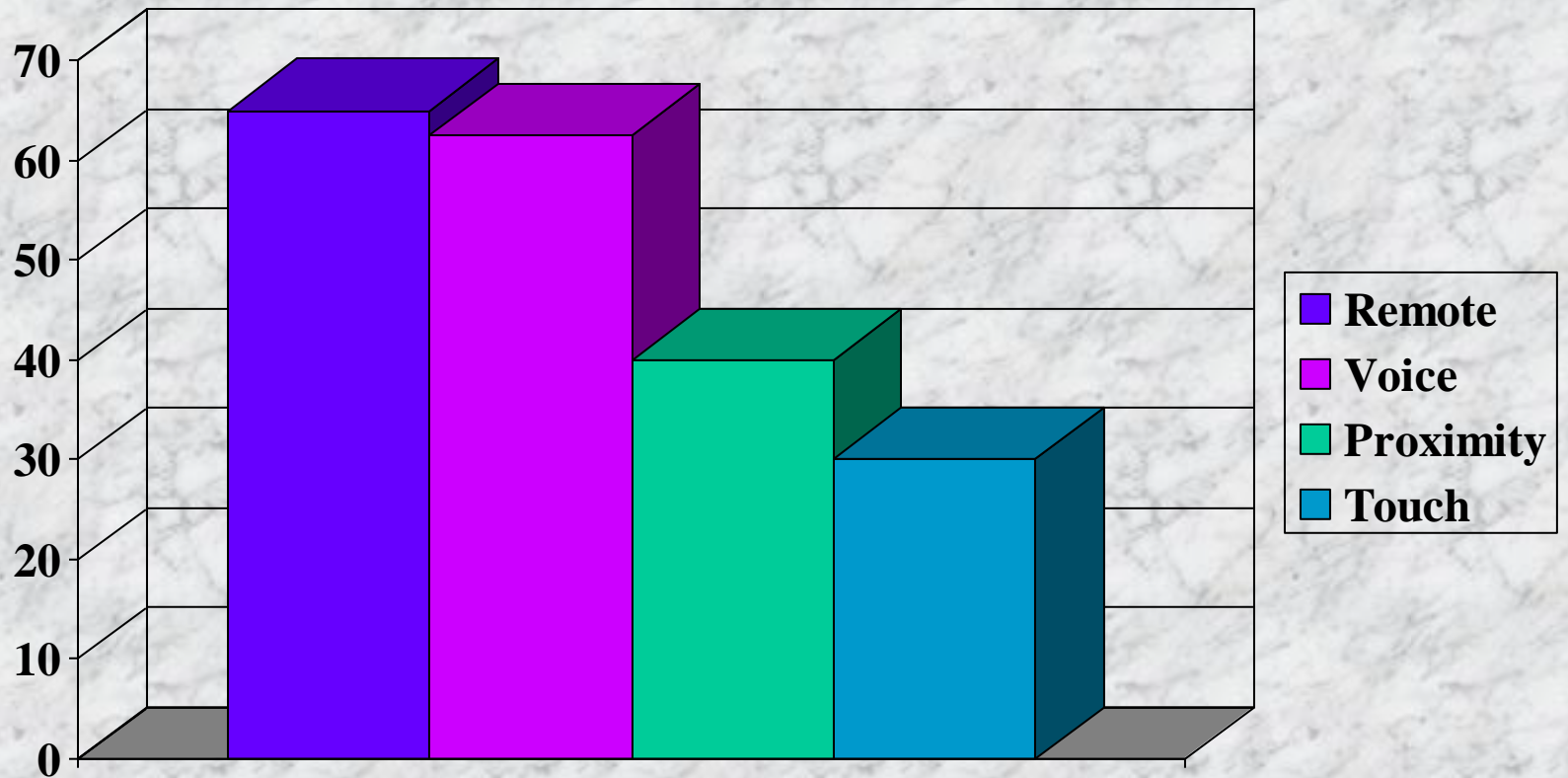
The closer the perpetrator is to the victim, the less pain he inflicts.



Mean Maxima Scores



Percent Who Finished



Please Note:

The authority figure that people were obeying did not have any real power over them.



Milgram Asks: Why Obedience?

- “People grow up in the midst of structures of authority.”
- “From our very first years, we are exposed to parental regulations, whereby a sense of respect for adult authority is stressed.”
- “Parental commands are also a source of morality. But the Judeo-Christian heritage itself stresses obedience.”

Why Obedience?

“When your parents say ‘Don't hit little kids!’ they are actually giving two commands: the manner in which you are to treat smaller children, and ‘Obey me!’”

Why Obedience?

“The demand for obedience remains the only consistent element across a variety of specific commands, and thus tends to acquire more strength relative to any particular moral conduct.”



1959 Les Films du Carrosse. All

Why Obedience?

“As soon as the child emerges from the cocoon of the family, she is transferred to an institutional system of authority, the day care and the school.”



Why Obedience?

“So the first 20 years of the young person's life are spent functioning as a subordinate element in an authority system.”

Why Obedience?

“Then, on the job, she learns that although some discreetly expressed dissent is allowable, the underlying posture of submission is required for harmonious functioning with superiors.”



Why Obedience?

“Throughout this experience with authority, the individual is rewarded for compliance and punished for disobedience.”



Why Obedience?

“The net result of this experience is the internalization of the social order--that is, internalizing the set of rules by which social life is conducted.”

Why Obedience?

“Although many forms of reward are given out for dutiful compliance the most ingenious is this: the individual is moved up a niche in the hierarchy, thus both motivating the person and perpetuating the structure of authority simultaneously.”

Why Obedience?

“And the chief rule is this: ‘Do what the man in charge says.’”



Hulton-Deutsch Collection

Credits:

This presentation is based on the work *Obedience To Authority: An Experimental View* (1969), by Stanley Milgram. The book is published by Harper Colophon Books.

