

# Obedience and conformity

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PSY 268 Contemporary Issues in Psychology

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# Overview

- Obedience and conformity as psychological phenomena
- Obedience to authority experiment (Milgram)
- Obedience experiment revisited
- Conformity (Asch)
- Discussion



# Obedience and Conformity

- What is conformity and obedience ?
- What are implications of obedience (both +/-) ?



# Obedience and Conformity

- Why do people obey?
- What are implications of obedience?

*Obedience is a part of the foundation of society. Without obedience, only chaos and anarchy would exist. Obedience provides stability, productivity and the well-being of the citizens become non-existent.*



# Obedience and Conformity

*How obedient society can be without losing its individuality?  
Society with no individuality... mindless drones, unthinkingly  
carrying out orders for the authorities.*

*Our individuality is often subverted by the blind obedience humans  
feel towards those in a position of power.*

*In order for human beings to maintain their individuality  
and a stable society, a balance between obedience and  
insubordination is necessary.*



# Who is Stanley Milgram

- August 15, 1933 – December 20, 1984
- American social psychologist
- Conducted various studies- the most notable being his controversial study on obedience to authority (in the 1960s)
- Was influenced by the events of the Holocaust, specifically the trial of Adolf Eichmann developing this experiment.



# Inspiration for the experiment

- Eichmann – was charged with task of facilitating and managing the logistics of mass deportation of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps. After the war, he fled to Argentina, lived under a false identity, working for Mercedes-Benz until 1960. He was captured by Mossad operatives in Argentina, and taken to Israel to face trial on 15 criminal charges, including crimes against humanity and war crimes. He was found guilty and executed by hanging in 1962.
- "Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?"

*"The social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson: often 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."* –Stanley Milgram, 1974



# Inspiration for the experiment

- Efforts to understand human behavior are often limited by the kind of situations in which we observe them.
- "Context is everything."

**PERSONAL DETERMINANTS**

**VS**

**SITUATIONAL  
DETERMINANTS (CONTEXT)**

*often 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." –Stanley Milgram, 1974*





# The experiment

- “Study of memory and learning”
- One hour – for \$4.00 plus 50 cent (carfare)  
One hour and no further obligations

## 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 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
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 50c 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 50c carfare) if I participate.

NAME (Please Print) .....

ADDRESS .....

TELEPHONE NO. .... Best time to call you .....

AGE ..... OCCUPATION ..... SEX .....

CAN YOU COME:

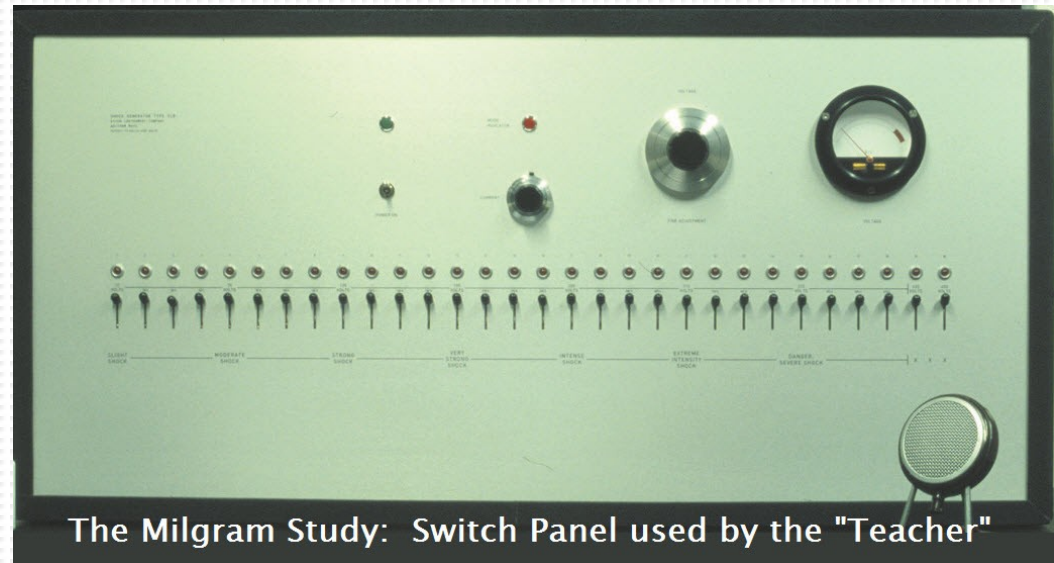
WEEKDAYS ..... EVENINGS ..... WEEKENDS .....

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

# The experiment - Method

- Intimidating shock generator  
(30 volts-450 volts, increasing in 15-volt increments)
- "slight shock," "moderate shock" and "danger: severe shock." The final two switches-"XXX."
- "teacher" -"student"

Participant believed that he was delivering real shocks to the student, the student was a confederate who would pretend to be shocked.



The Milgram Study: Switch Panel used by the "Teacher"

# The experiment - Method

- Focus on the teacher
- **CONFLICT:** 'student' start to show discomfort when receiving the shocks:
  - 75 V - student grunts
  - 120 V - complains loudly
  - 150 V - demands to be released
  - 285 V - agonized screams
  - Around 300 V ...no responses



# The experiment - Method

- Focus on the teacher
- Most participants asked the experimenter whether they should continue. The experimenter issued a series of commands to prod the participant along:
  - "Please continue."
  - "The experiment requires that you continue."
  - "It is absolutely essential that you continue."
  - "You have no other choice, you must go on.,"
- Special attention payed selection of „experimenter“ – stern and intellectual, and „learner“ – mild and submissive



# Results

- Beyond expectations of Yale students and professionals (most people won't go over 150 V):
- 65% of the participants delivered the maximum shocks.
- Of the 40 participants, 26 delivered the maximum shocks while 14 stopped before reaching the highest levels.
- Subjects became extremely agitated, distraught and angry at the experimenter. Yet they continued to follow orders all the way to the end.



# Ethical Issue

- Anxiety was experienced by many of the participants
  - debriefed at the end of the experiment to explain the procedures and the use of deception.
  - Milgram later surveyed the participants and found that 84% were glad to have participated, while only 1% regretted their involvement.
- Six years later (at the height of the Vietnam War), one of the participants in the experiment sent correspondence to Milgram: *“While I was a subject in 1964, though I believed that I was hurting someone, I was totally unaware of why I was doing so. Few people ever realize when they are acting according to their own beliefs and when they are meekly submitting to authority... To permit myself to be drafted with the understanding that I am submitting to authority's demand to do something very wrong would make me frightened of myself... I am fully prepared to go to jail if I am not granted Conscientious Objector status. Indeed, it is the only course I could take to be faithful to what I believe. My only hope is that members of my board act equally according to their conscience...”*

# Ethical Issue

- Why did Milgram's experiment cause such a debate?
- his findings were disturbing and revealed unwelcome truths about human nature
- more serious problems with the experiment's methodology: Milgram himself raised certain concern with how believable the experimental set-up was to subjects involved.



- What do researchers do to prove their findings correct???
- “Play” with variables (independent) the conditions of the experiment to find factors affecting the outcome (dependent variable)





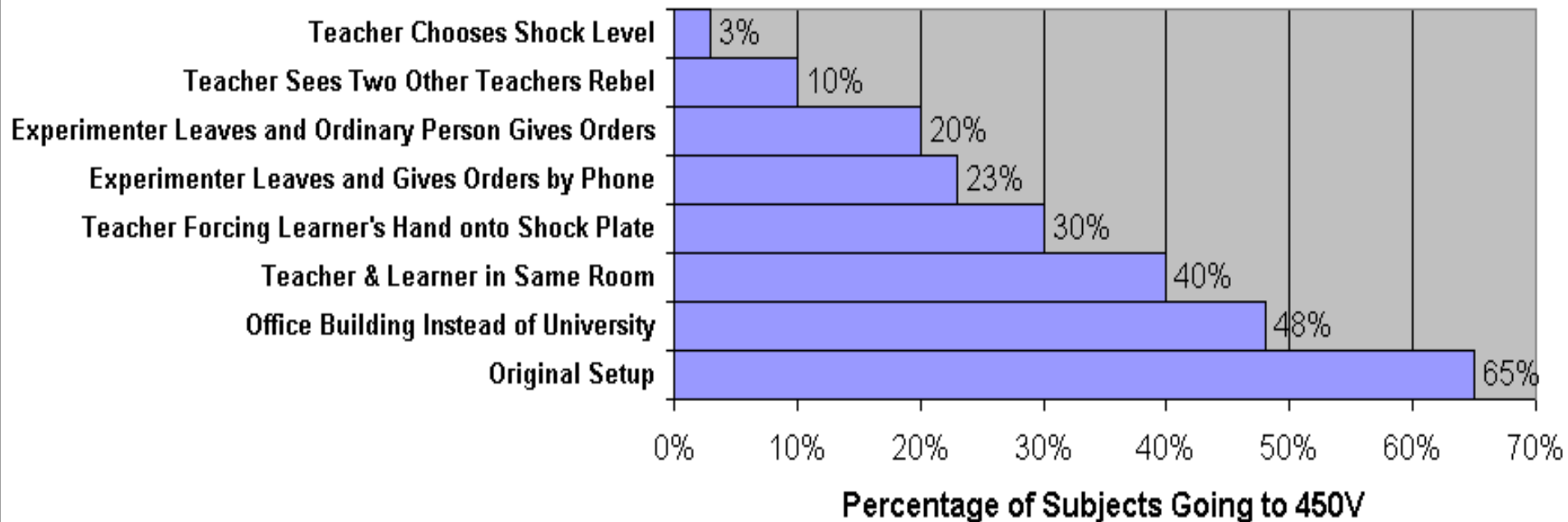
# Variations of the experiment

- Teacher chooses the level of the shock
- Presence of others – rebelling teachers, presence or absence of the experimenter
- Proximity of the “student”
- Proximity of the experimenter
- ...



# Variations of the experiment

## Variations on Milgram's Experiment



- Thomas Blass (1999) reviewed further research on obedience and found that Milgram's findings repeat in other experiments .
- determinants of levels of obedience:
  - The physical presence of an authority figure dramatically increased compliance.
  - The fact that the study was sponsored by Yale (a trusted and authoritative academic institution) led many participants to believe that the experiment must be safe.
  - The selection of teacher and learner status seemed random.
  - Participants assumed that the experimenter was a competent expert.
  - The shocks were said to be painful, not dangerous.
- Later experiments conducted by Milgram:
  - presence of rebellious peers dramatically reduced obedience levels.



**SITUATION  
CONTEXT**



**PERSONAL  
CHARACTERI  
STICS**

*"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, 1974).*



# Obedience as “agentic state”

- Shift from acting in terms of one’s own purposes to acting as an agent for someone else – “agentic shift”
- Researchers became skeptical to this conclusion
- WHY?



# Obedience as “agentic state”

- Researchers became skeptical to this conclusion
- WHY?
- Different levels of obedience across the study
- Differences in the extent to which participants enter into agentic state (lack of evidence)



# Obedience as “agentic state”

- No evidence that the different levels of obedience witnessed across the study variants relate to differences in the extent to which participants enter into this state (agentic)
  - Agentic state conceptualized as All-or-nothing affair
  - Relationship between participants and experimenter (researcher)
  - THEREFORE – need for more complex explanation



- Overcoming ethical issues
  - Changing the task (not so harmful, e.g. boring repetitive task...but ...)
  - New strategies – e.g. Slater’s virtual reality simulations; stopping at 150 V (since people who went to 150 V went all the way to XXX)





- Focus not on **WHETHER** but **WHY** people obey and disobey
- **WHY** then??? ...



- Three areas in particular need to be considered:
  - Different situational arrangements affect group formation and identification between the participants and the different parties within the obedience paradigm (proximity conditions? In- and out- group phenomena?)
  - What sort of appeals make people side with the experimenter rather than with the learner (lack of rhetorical resources to challenge the legitimacy of the experimenter?)
  - Specific aspect of language in the obedience study (some were simple requests, not orders)



# Conformity

*“changing one’s behavior or beliefs in response to explicit or implicit (whether real or imagined) pressure from others”*

- Following your own beliefs versus following social norms?
- Most social norms, explicit or implicit, are obeyed by most persons much of the time
- Society’s expectations about how we should behave in various situations

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuvGh\\_n3I\\_M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuvGh_n3I_M)

- Why do people conform to others or social norms?



# Types (levels) of conformity:

- H. Kelman

- Compliance is public conformity, while possibly keeping one's own original beliefs for yourself. Compliance is motivated by the need for approval and the fear of being rejected.
- Identification is conforming to someone who is liked and respected, such as a celebrity or a favorite uncle. (attractiveness of the source, deeper type of conformism than compliance)
- Internalization is accepting the belief or behavior and conforming both publicly and privately, if the source is credible. It is the deepest influence on people and it will affect them long time.



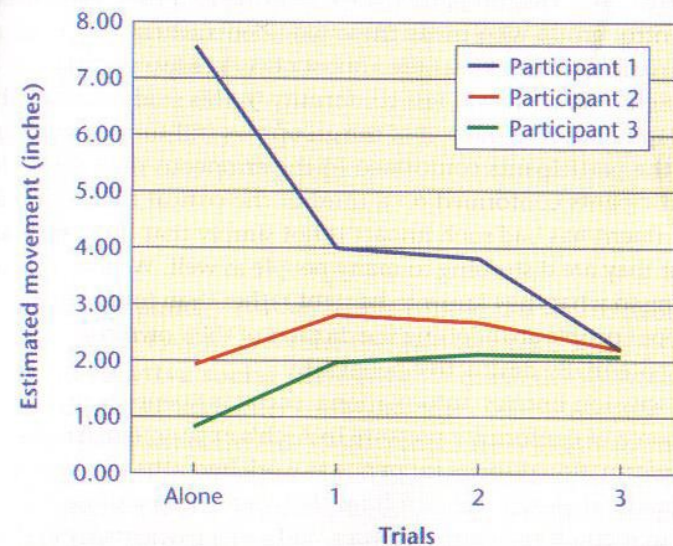
- **Sherif s experiment (1935)**
- demonstrating that people conform to group norms when they are put in an ambiguous situation
- **Autokinetic Effect Experiment**
- Method: lab experiment  
autokinetic effect – this is where a small spot of light (projected onto a screen) in a dark room will appear to move, even though it is still (i.e. it is a visual illusion).



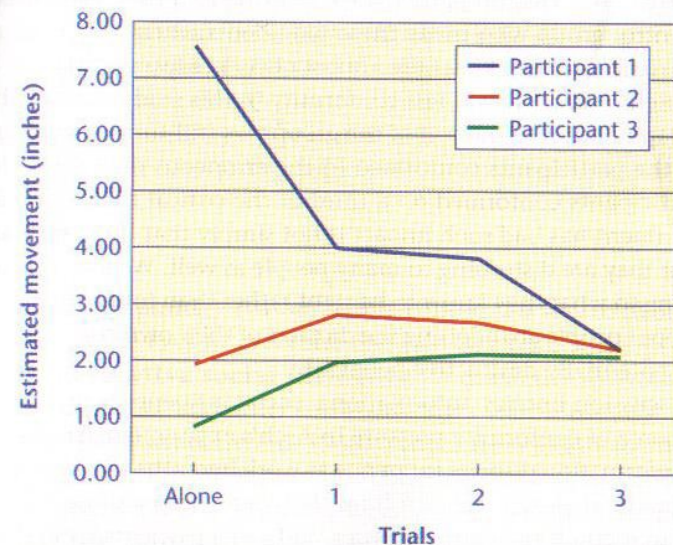
- **Sherif s experiment (1935)**
- when participants were individually tested their estimates on how far the light moved varied considerably (e.g. from 20cm to 80cm).
- Then - tested in groups of three.
- Sherif manipulated the composition of the group by putting together two people whose estimate of the light movement when alone was very similar, and one person whose estimate was very different. Each person in the group had to say aloud how far they thought the light had moved.



- **Sherif's experiment (1935)**
- **Results:** over numerous estimates (trials) of the movement of light, the group converged to a common estimate.
- the person whose estimate of movement was greatly different to the other two in the group conformed to the view of the other two.



- **Sherif's experiment (1935)**
- **Conclusion:** When in an ambiguous situation (such as the autokinetic effect), a person will look to others (who know more / better) for guidance (i.e. adopt the group norm).  
They want to do the right thing but may lack the appropriate information.  
Observing others can provide this information.





- **Informational conformity:**
  - A person lacks knowledge, thus looks to the group for guidance.
  - in an ambiguous (i.e. unclear) situation and socially compares their behavior with the group.
  - This type of conformity usually involves **internalization** – where a person accepts the views of the groups and adopts them as an individual.



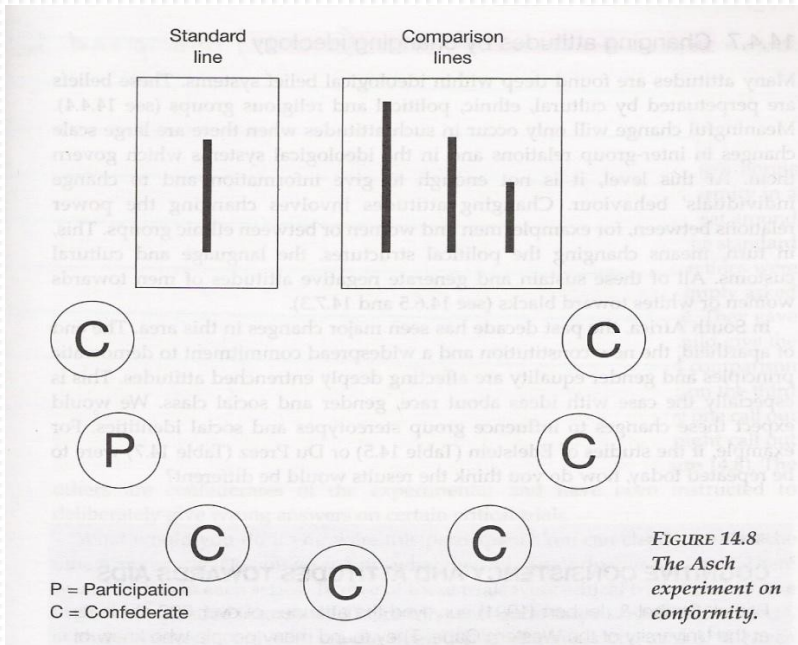
- Normative conformity:
  - Yielding to group pressure because a person wants to fit in with the group. (E.g. Asch Line Study.)
  - Conforming because the person is scared of being rejected by the group.
  - This type of conformity usually involves **compliance** – where a person publicly accepts the views of a group but privately rejects them.
  - .



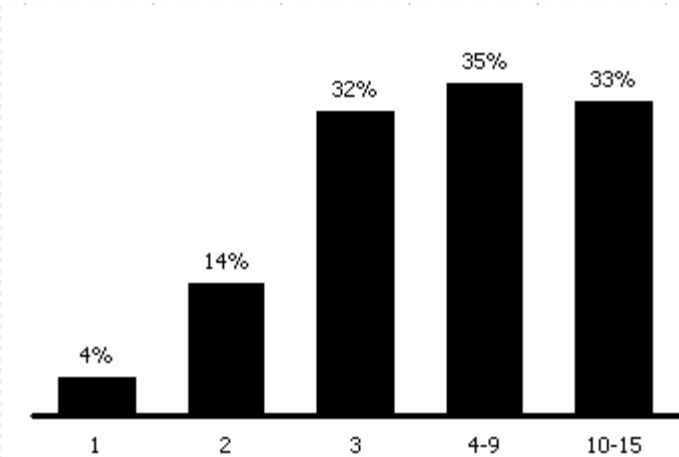
# Ash Line Experiment

- 1951 – 2nd most famous study in social psychology
  - Supposedly a simple perceptual discrimination task
  - First two trials: confederates give correct response
  - Trial 3 – new set of lines, participants 1 by 1 call out incorrect answer
  - Next 15 trials – incorrect response on 11





- overall rating of conformity 37% (Asch, 1955)
- Out of 50 participants, 13 never conformed
- 14 conformed on more than 50% the trials



# Conformity across cultures

- Great differences between cultures: highest levels of conformity in collectivist cultures e.g. among Zimbabwean students in 1960s (Smith & Bond, 1993)
- „The more one's fate is interdependent with others, the greater is the likelihood of conformity occurring“ (Smith & Bond, 1993, p. 154)



- What kind of “lesson” we should learn from the discussed studies?
- Do you think those studies have an important contributions to science (understanding of human behavior)?
- What about ethical aspect?
- What are the limitations of those studies?



# Discussion

- Ethics vs. scientific testing
- Should ethics always come before the scientific testing (experiments) that can help us better understand human behavior?
  
- Pro
- Con
- Jury