

LECTURE 40: EXCERPT

OBEDIENCE AND CONFORMITY

Perhaps the most challenging theoretical literature is the research that focuses on immediate social context being able to overturn or overcome what would otherwise appear to be the learning experiences of a lifetime.

That is, something in the characteristics of a social situation being able to trump what we would otherwise take to be fixed personality traits. Certainly the most controversial of the studies done in this area was the set of studies done by Stanley Milgram, who for many years was at Yale University and who finished up his academic life at the City University of New York.

Milgram's famous studies begin with an advertisement in the New Haven newspaper in which volunteers were invited to come to the Department of Psychology at Yale to participate in studies pertaining to education. The volunteers were drawn from the general male population of New Haven. When the subjects got



STANLEY MILGRAM

memory experiments, through research on animals, typically rats and the like, where reward and punishment was used to facilitate learning. Although it is very, very well known that punishment is a reliable instrument for improving learning among animals, there has been very little research done in the efficacy of punishment in human learning, and that

THERE IS AN INSTRUMENT THAT ALLOWS THE TEACHER TO INCREASE THE INTENSITY OF THE SHOCK EACH TIME THE LEARNER MAKES A MISTAKE ...

there—and they were handled one at a time—they were told roughly this: Psychology has learned a fair amount about learning and memory through the study of animal learning and

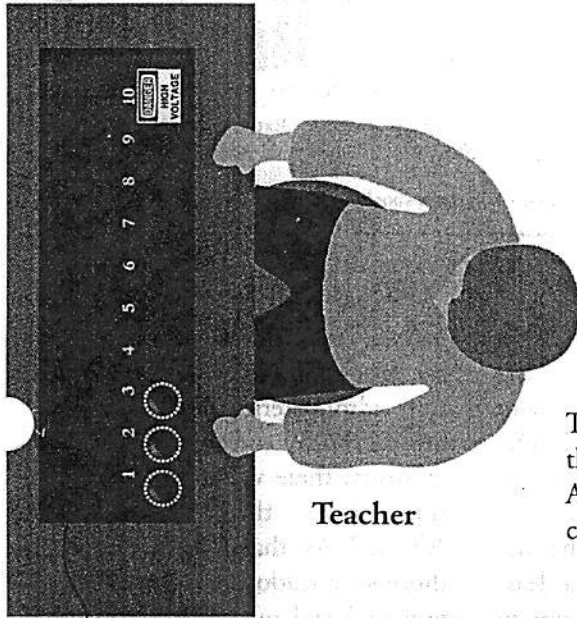
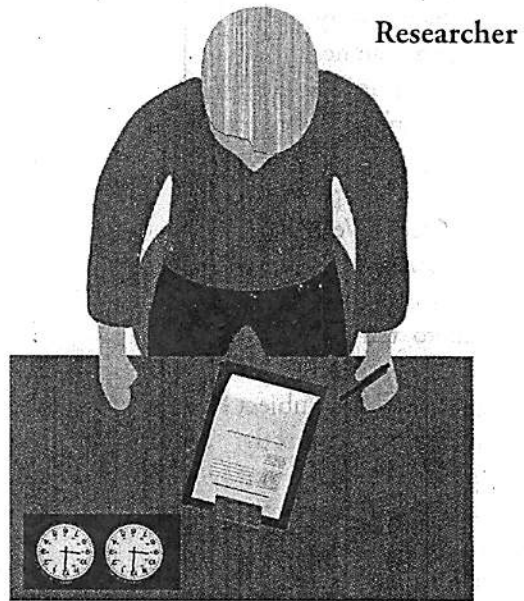
is what these studies were to be about. So that's what you heard if you came in as a volunteer in this research.

You are then shown the room in which the subjects in these studies are

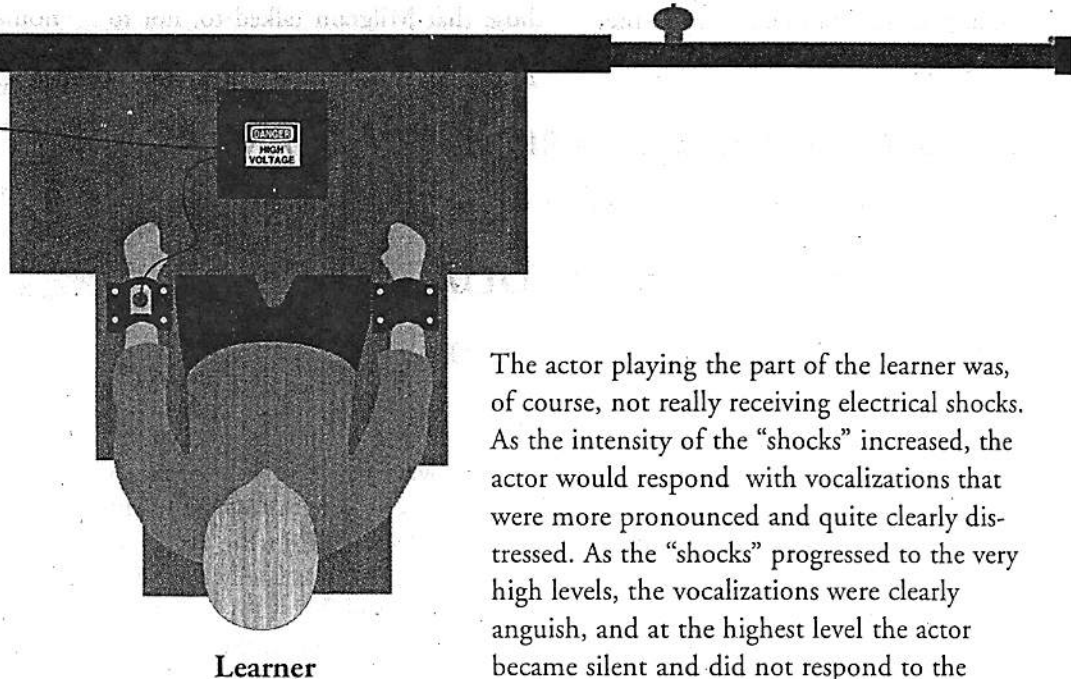
going to be educated, taught, and tested. You're going through all this in pairs, so there are always two of you getting all this. As far as you know, the member you are paired with is another volunteer from the New Haven community. You do know that one of you will function in the study as a "teacher" and one of you will function in the study as a "learner," or subject, and this will be done on a more or less random basis. You are told what the study is about, and then you are shown the subject's room. The subject's room has a chair, and the subject sits in that chair, and the subject's wrists are clamped down so that the hands are kept on the arm of the chair because shocks are going to be delivered in the course of the study. There is an instrument that allows the teacher to increase the intensity of the shock each time the learner makes a mistake, and who's the teacher, who's the learner will be determined sort of flip of the coin fashion. That's the setting, and at this point, the volunteer who isn't a collaborator is asked to sit down and experience what the mild shock feels like, so the volunteer does actually feel a mild shock. It's a kind of tingling sensation, it's a bit aversive, and it's at the lowest end of the scale, but that's the kind of shock that would be administered for the first error.

At this point the decision is made as to who will be the teacher and who will be the learner. Of course, the Milgram collaborator is always going to be the learner in these studies and the actual volunteer is always going to

In Stanley Milgram's famous experiment, people responding to an advertisement in the newspaper were asked to participate in a research project on the use of punishment to facilitate learning. The volunteers were asked to play the role of teacher. When the learner (presumably another volunteer, but actually an actor collaborating with the research team) made a mistake, the teacher was to administer an electrical shock. Each time the learner made a mistake, the teacher was supposed to increase the voltage of the shocks.



The teacher was in a room with the researcher conducting the experiment and separated by a wall from the learner. Although the teacher could not see the learner, he or she could hear the learner quite clearly.



The actor playing the part of the learner was, of course, not really receiving electrical shocks. As the intensity of the "shocks" increased, the actor would respond with vocalizations that were more pronounced and quite clearly distressed. As the "shocks" progressed to the very high levels, the vocalizations were clearly anguish, and at the highest level the actor became silent and did not respond to the shocks or the test questions.

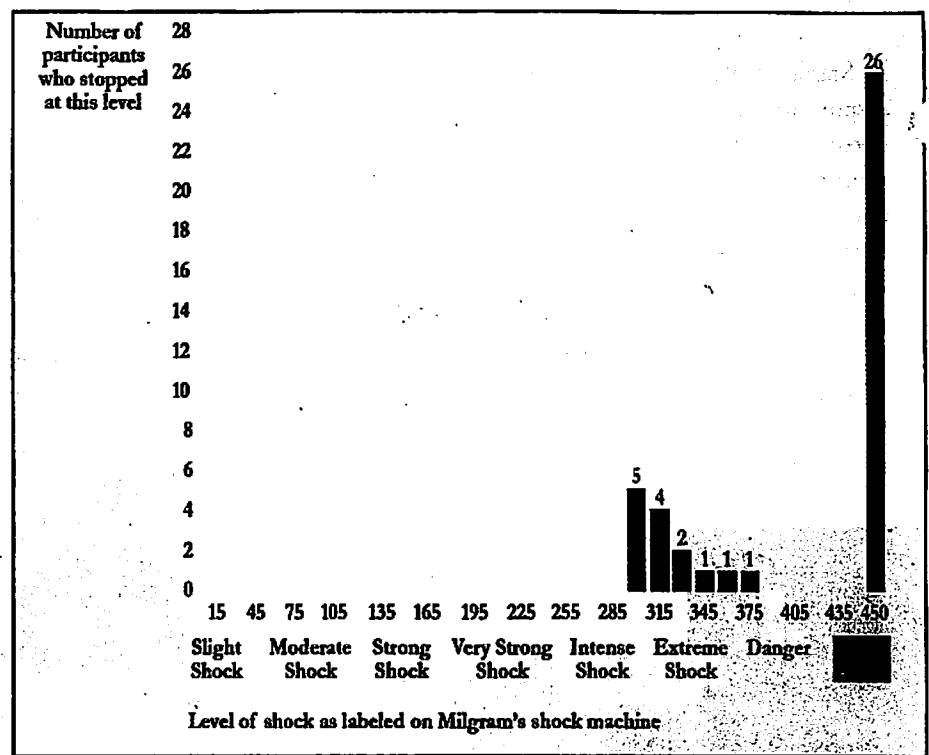
be the teacher. The teacher then goes to an adjoining room where he actually can manipulate the intensity of the shock, and, although he can hear what the person, the learner in the next room is saying, he doesn't actually see that person.

All right, how is the experiment going to be conducted? Well, it's a routine associative learning task where a stimulus of one sort is presented and the subject is then to tell you what word comes next. You present a list over and over again until the subject can get through the list correctly, without error, one time in a row, but of course the collaborator knows that on key trials he's supposed to make a mistake. In fact, he's supposed to make a number of mistakes along the path toward learning so that, in fact, if you increase the shock intensity a unit for every mistake, you're going to go the whole way. The dial is quite clearly marked, and at the upper end what you see is "DANGER—VERY HIGH VOLTAGE," so that's up there quite, quite bold.

Before Milgram did any of these studies he walked around and talked to graduate students and colleagues in the Department of Psychology at Yale because he wanted to know what they thought the result would be. What do

THE DIAL IS QUITE CLEARLY MARKED, AND AT THE UPPER END WHAT YOU SEE IS "DANGER—VERY HIGH VOLTAGE," SO THAT'S UP THERE QUITE, QUITE BOLD.

you think people will do in a situation like this? Interestingly, and I think Milgram would say predictably, they all said one of the following: "Well, it's not clear anybody's going to participate in this all. It's obviously a volunteer sort of thing. There would be a lot of people who wouldn't volunteer to do this." Nobody indicated that in the



TWO-THIRDS OF VOLUNTEERS IN MILGRAM'S EXPERIMENT OBEYED ORDERS AND ADMINISTERED WHAT APPEARED TO BE A FATAL DOSE OF ELECTRICITY.

actual experiment. anybody would go past the midway point. I mean, the proposition that somebody is going to start cranking this thing up to "DANGER—HIGH VOLTAGE" is absurd on its face.

So there is a consensus here that the psychology faculty at Yale—or at least those that Milgram talked to, not to mention the first-rate graduate stu-

indeed, did leave the study. The way the procedure works is this: Once you start administering what you take to be the shock, and start increasing its intensity, there will be some vocalizations from the adjacent room: "Ouch." As that intensity goes up, those vocalizations become more pronounced and quite clearly distressed. As you get into the very high levels, the vocalizations are clearly vocalizations of anguish, and at the highest level you don't hear anything at all. Fairly macabre, you'll agree.

There is a cohort of Milgram's, he's sort of checking meters and the like, and just in case one of the subjects says, "Look, I think I'm hurting this person" or "I'm not sure this is the right thing," all that he's supposed to say is, "You agreed to conduct the study, would you please continue." If further reluctance is expressed along the way, he's to be told rather more firmly, "You said you'd finish this, we do need the data set, please continue this until the experiment is concluded."

dents attracted by Yale—have all figured out what the results are going to be in advance. Nonetheless, Milgram decided, "We'll still do the study to see what the results actually are." So, the study is done.

We can speak for two-thirds of the volunteers who actually did complete the study, because about one-third,

Now, there are no actual constraints. There isn't any sort of contractual agreement or anything stopping anybody from saying, "Tell you what, why don't you and the entire Yale University community stuff a very large sock in this because I'm going home." Anyone could have done this, and about a third of the original subject pool did do this, but two-thirds didn't. However, many of the subjects who stayed, they discovered, did become quite nervous, sort of clammy-handed, the occasional kinds of giggling, that kind of nervous laughter when people are in a situation they find extremely stressful. But two out of three go all the way, start cranking this thing up and, to the best they could tell, cranking it up to the point where they are exposing another human being to nothing less than a dangerously high voltage—correlated with quite audible cries of discomfort, pain, and distress.

Well, what do we say about this? What do we say about persons whose

That is to say, how do you get people widely recognized as among the most cultivated and cultured people in the European world coexisting with a regime that sooner or later most people had to know were engaged in horrible and atrocious actions? Milgram thought his research illustrated that we are very, very inclined toward complicity, toward obedience in the face of what we take to be authority. The authority in the Yale laboratory is the authority that comes when people put on white laboratory coats and walk around with notepads, and where there is equipment and lights going on and off, and where one understands oneself to be engaged in scientific research. It's not a matter of doing it for pay. It's not a matter of your not being able to walk out of the place. It's just that a context like this summons us to conduct ourselves in a compliant way, even though later we might reflect on that obedience and compliance disdainfully and with great frustration and humiliation.

kept in the dark, exposed to conditions that create great anxiety and nervousness on their part, but that, of course, for the greater good and growth and prosperity of science.

The first round of criticism was: Oh, for goodness sake, these people are showing up at Yale University! Say what you will about the eccentricities of great universities, obviously their faculties are not devoted to modes of electrocuting innocent citizens. The reason that Milgram got this compliance is because most reasonable persons would recognize that if it is going on at Yale, conducted by a member of the Yale faculty, all of the necessary preconditions have been satisfied. The authorities and noble traditions of the place being what they are, clearly if research is going on, it must be okay.

So Milgram then proceeded to redo the studies, now in rented space in New Haven, Connecticut, with no expressed or implied affiliation with any university, and certainly with nothing to suggest that any of the par-

TWO OUT OF THREE GO ALL THE WAY, START CRANKING THIS THING UP AND, TO THE BEST THEY COULD TELL, CRANKING IT UP TO THE POINT WHERE THEY ARE EXPOSING ANOTHER HUMAN BEING TO NOTHING LESS THAN A DANGEROUSLY HIGH VOLTAGE ...

entire reinforcement history certainly fought against entering into a laboratory situation in which, in order to find out a few things about learning, you start electrocuting your neighbors? What do we say about hereditary theories of personality according to which it's all in the genes, or environmental theories where maybe it's all in the jeans? Here it is the context determining the outcome: People are obedient in settings of a certain character, a character capable of summoning obedient behavior.

Milgram thought research of this kind illuminated the dreadful facts of Germany in the Second World War.

Needless to say, there are profound ethical questions associated with research of this kind, too. The subjects in this study were not properly informed as to what they were doing, and, indeed, they were exposed to extremely stressful experiences without having an opportunity to provide what could be regarded as an informed consent. Some have suggested that in certain respects, Milgram's research is akin to, perhaps, the disease it seeks to cure. I mean, you've got a scientist getting important publications out toward tenure, promotions, celebrity, and the like, and mak-

participants had any academic affiliations at all. To make a long story short, he got the same results. So, the effect surely could not be attributed to some confidence people might have had, some halo effect that came to embrace the research because of the standing of Yale itself. It wasn't the Yale affiliation, and as Milgram pointed out, you can recover effects of this kind in a great, great variety of contexts in which there really is no apparent institutional authority that the subjects have any reason to believe will be controlling the affairs of the investigator. ■