

# The Darker Side of Persuasion:

## STANLEY MILGRAM'S EXPERIMENTS ON OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

By Dr. Jayme A. Sokolow

In the 1960s, psychologist Stanley Milgram carried out a series of innovative electric shock experiments that dramatically showed how persuasion in modern society can result from obedience to authority. His laboratory experiments have profound implications for proposal professionals.

### VARIETIES OF PERSUASION

From ancient times to the present, the art of persuasion has been hotly debated. In classical Athens, Plato and Aristotle lampooned the Sophists, who were the Dale Carnegies of their time. The Sophists believed that ordinary men could be taught to be persuasive orators and effective legislators, for a fee. Aristotle, in contrast, argued that rhetorical persuasion was a difficult skill to master because it usually developed out of a combination of emotional empathy, logical and factual arguments, and style, "since it is not enough to know what to say (one must also know how to say it."

Although most proposal professionals have not read Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, they would probably agree with him. Successful proposals usually present solutions to vendors that are carefully organized, confident, and filled with plenty of factual evidence to support their arguments.

Today, the debate continues. When problems are routine and easily recognized, persuasion is often unnecessary because the solutions are obvious. When problems become more difficult and there is no widespread agreement about solutions, persuasion becomes a more complex art.

Persuasion usually involves conflict, for if people agree, they do not need to be persuaded. To overcome conflict and reach agreement, as Aristotle pointed out, people must demonstrate to each other that they share a common viewpoint. In other words, identification is an important element of persuasion.

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\*Each person who participates will be paid \$4.00 (plus 50¢ coffee) 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:  
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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¢ coffee) if I participate.

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### THE MILGRAM EXPERIMENTS

Stanley Milgram (1933-84), a social psychologist, performed a series of experiments in the 1960s about persuasion and obedience that upset many people because they grimly illustrated the darker side of persuasion that we believe cannot occur among free people in a democratic society. According to him, persuasion often occurs simply because we identify with an authority figure, whom Milgram defines as someone who appears to have a legitimate right to exercise control over us.

His experiments involved adult volunteers who carried out a series of painful acts in clear conflict with their consciences. Milgram wanted to know how far participants would comply with the experimenter's instructions before refusing to inflict further pain upon someone else.

To his chagrin, he discovered that "ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process." Based on his famous experiments, Milgram concluded that when we are asked "to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources to resist authority."

At Harvard, Yale, and the City University of New York, Milgram spent more than two decades studying group behavior in cities, the nature of conformity, and the impact of television on social behavior. His interest in conformity led him to devise a series of experiments about obedience that were memorably described in *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (1974).

Milgram's first experiment was conducted at the Interaction Laboratory of Yale University. Through a newspaper advertisement, he recruited 40 men from New Haven, Connecticut, to participate in a "scientific study of memory and learning." The experiment took one hour, and volunteers received four dollars plus fifty cents for carfare. Forty percent of the volunteers were professionals, another 40 percent were white-collar workers, and the remainder were skilled and unskilled workers. Forty percent of them were in their forties, 40 percent were in their thirties, and the rest were in their twenties.

After two people arrived at the laboratory, an impassive 31-year-old man in a gray laboratory coat firmly explained that the study would be concerned with the effects of punish-



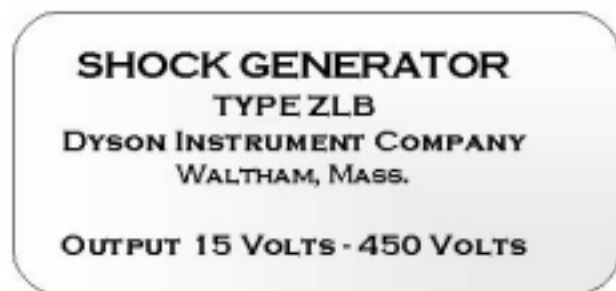
*The Laboratory setting had a sophisticated array of test equipment.*



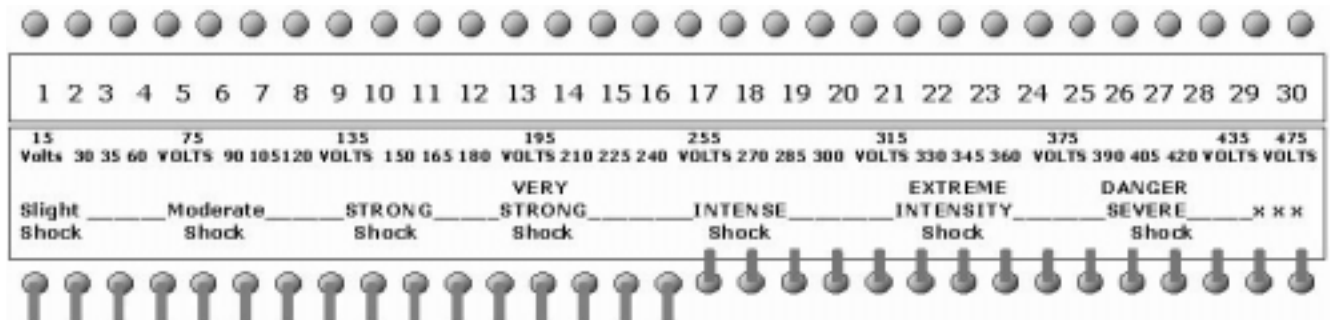
*"Could you hurt me?" Surprisingly, the study showed that most people could.*

ment on learning. This man, whom Milgram called the experimenter, announced that one of them would be designated the teacher and the other the learner. With his scientific dress, impassive demeanor, and control over the experiment, he was Milgram's authority figure. The experimenter had the two people draw lots to determine their roles, but volunteers did not know that the drawing had been rigged so that the volunteer would always be the teacher.

A portly and mild-mannered 47-year-old accountant played the role of the learner in Milgram's experiments. The experimenter led him into a room separated from the volunteer by a glass partition. He sat down in a chair while the experimenter strapped his arms to prevent excessive movement, attached an electrode to his wrist, and applied an electrode



paste to "avoid blisters and burns." The experimenter told him that he was supposed to learn a list of word pairs. Whenever the learner made an error, the teacher would give him progressively stronger electronic shocks.



An illustration of Milgram's Shock Generator Face.

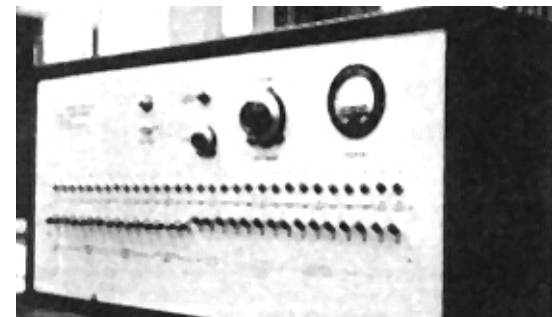
Volunteers were seated at a table in front of a large generator that had 30 lever switches labeled in 15-volt increments from 15 to 450 volts. At the upper left-hand corner, the device was labeled "SHOCK GENERATOR: TYPE ZLB, DYSON INSTRUMENT COMPANY, WALTHAM, MASS. OUTPUT 15 VOLTS—450 VOLTS."

Every four switches had the following descriptions above them in ascending order of voltage: Slight Shock, Moderate Shock, Strong Shock, Very Strong Shock, Intense Shock, Extreme Intensity Shock, and Danger: Severe Shock. Two more switches were marked XXX. When volunteers hit a switch, a bright red light would show above it. They also heard an electronic buzzing sound, saw an electric blue light flashing that was labeled "voltage energizer," heard relay clicks, and saw a voltage meter swing to the right as the voltage increased.

Before the test began, the teacher received a sample 45-volt shock on his wrist by hitting the third switch on the generator. Milgram devised this part of the experiment to show teachers that the generator was real. The generator, however, was not actually connected to the learner, who had been trained to act as if he were being shocked by it.

The teacher read a series of word pairs with four terms to the learner, who indicated which of the four terms had been paired with the first word by pressing one of four switches that lit up numbers in an answer box above the generator. The experimenter told the teacher to administer a shock to the learner each time he gave an incorrect response.

Teachers were also advised to "move one level higher on the shock generator each time the learner gives a wrong answer" and to announce the voltage level right before they administered the shock. When teachers reached 450 volts, the experimenter instructed them to continue shocking the learner two more times. Only then would the experiment conclude.



Milgram's Shock Generator.



The "Victim" is strapped down and the electrodes are applied.



The "Subject" is given a sample shock of 45 volts.



*"Shocking" the learner.*

If teachers asked whether they should continue, the experimenter would always respond in the following sequence:

"Please continue" or "Please go on."

"The experiment requires that you continue."

"It is absolutely essential that you continue."

"You have no other choice, you must go on."

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## After a 300-volt shock, he stopped answering questions.

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In each experiment, the learner gave a predetermined response to the word pair test of three wrong answers to one correct answer. At first, Milgram thought that the learner would not need to say anything when shocked because the lights and noise from the generator would stop teachers from increasing the voltage. When this did not occur, Milgram had the learner respond when a 75-volt shock occurred with simple grunts for the lower shocks to anguished cries at 120 volts. At 180 volts, the learner cried out, "I can't stand the pain," and at 270 volts, he screamed. After a 300-volt shock, he stopped answering questions.

At the end of each session, volunteers learned that they had not really administered any electrical shocks. Those who obeyed the experimenter were told that their reactions were perfectly normal while disobedient volunteers were commended for not shocking the learner. All of them received a written report that described the experiment along with a follow-up questionnaire.

### THE RESULTS

Milgram designed the experiment to present volunteers with a stark dilemma. They could administer increasing

stronger shocks by identifying with the experimenter or end the experiment by identifying with the learner.

Before Milgram first began his experiments, he asked 39 psychiatrists, 31 Yale students, and 40 middle class adults to predict how volunteers would respond to his experiment. All three groups estimated that volunteers would respond with a mean maximum shock level ranging from about 120 to 150 volts and then stop. Only four people predicted that volunteers would administer shocks as high as 300 volts.

In the first experiment, where the learner uttered no sounds, all 40 volunteers administered electrical shocks ranging from 300 volts (Intense Shock) to 450 volts (XXX). Twenty-six of them, or 65 percent, were willing to administer the highest voltage. With voice feedback from the learner, the mean maximum shock and obedience levels dropped only slightly. When volunteers heard the learner, eight of them stopped before 195 volts (Strong Shock), but 25 were still willing to administer 450 volts in response to incorrect answers.

Milgram designed 18 basic situations to determine a volunteer's willingness to obey the experimenter. Seventeen of the situations involved men. In the only experiment involving women, 14 of them administered shocks between 150 and 330 volts while 26 were willing to give the learner a 450-volt shock. Even when Milgram moved from prestigious Yale University to a shabby office in downtown Bridgeport, Connecticut, volunteers continued to use the high shock levers.

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## Almost 93 percent of the volunteers administered 450-volt shocks.

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The highest rate of obedience occurred in an experiment with two teachers, one of which had been coached to administer high intensity shocks. Almost 93 percent of the volunteers (37 out of 40) followed by administering 450-volt shocks.

### MILGRAM'S CONCLUSIONS

Milgram's experiments elicited howls of protests. Critics complained that he had deliberately deceived his volunteers and unethically exploited them. Milgram responded by arguing that people disliked his experiments primarily because of their results. "If everyone had broken off at light or moderate shock," he argued, "this would be a very reassuring finding, and who would protest?"

Milgram pointed out that his volunteers were not sadists but ordinary men and women. They disliked participating in the experiments and were greatly relieved to discover that the learners had not really been shocked.

For example, when one volunteer administered a 180-volt shock, he shook his head and had this conversation with the experimenter:

**Volunteer:** *"I can't stand it. I'm not going to kill that man in there. You hear him hollering?"*

**Experimenter:** *"As I told you before, the shocks may be painful, but—"*

**Volunteer:** *"But he's hollering. He can't stand it. What's going to happen to him?"*

**Experimenter:** *"The experiment requires that you continue, Teacher."*

**Volunteer:** *"Aah, but, unh, I'm not going to get that man sick in there.... know what I mean?"*

**Experimenter:** *"Whether the learner likes it or not, we must go on, through all the word pairs."*

**Volunteer:** *"I refuse to take the responsibility. He's in there hollering!"*

**Experimenter:** *"It's absolutely essential that you continue, Teacher."*

**Volunteer:** *"There's too many left here [referring to the word pairs]; I mean, Jeez, if he gets them wrong, there's too many of them left. I mean, who's going to take the responsibility if anything happens to that gentleman?"*

**Experimenter:** *"I'm responsible for anything that happens to him. Continue, please."*

**Volunteer:** *"All right. . . ."*

Based on his experiments, Milgram came to a disheartening conclusion. "With numbing regularity good people were seen to knuckle under to the demands of authority and perform actions that were callous and severe. Men who are in everyday life responsible and decent were seduced by the trappings of authority, by the control of their perceptions, and by the uncritical acceptance of the experimenter's definition of the situation into performing harsh acts."

Milgram further argued that in modern society people tended to identify with authority as long as it was considered legitimate. For him, this was the real meaning of morality in modern society—the abrogation of individual will to authority, regardless of its consequences.

Milgram discovered that there were occasions when volunteers would defy the experimenter. They were more likely to disobey under the following conditions:

- Close proximity to the learner (40 percent administered 450 volts).
- Touch proximity to the learner (30 percent administered 450 volts).
- Experimenter absent from the room during the test (20 percent administered 450 volts).
- Volunteers choose their own shock levels (2.5 percent administered 450 volts).
- Learner demands to be shocked (all volunteers stopped at 150 volts).
- Ordinary man acts as experimenter (20 percent administered 450 volts).
- Experimenter demonstrates how the test works (all volunteers stopped at 150 volts).
- Two experimenters issue contradictory commands (all volunteers stopped at 165 volts).
- Three volunteers administer the test with two rebelling against the experimenter (10 percent administered 450 volts).

In a 1976 interview in *Psychology Today*, Milgram discussed the implications of his experiments. According to him, "in order to have civilization you must have some degree of authority. Once that authority is established, it does not matter much whether the system is called a democracy or a dictatorship: the common person responds to governmental policies with expected obedience, whether in Nazi Germany or democratic America."

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## In order to have civilization you must have some degree of authority.

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Every society, Milgram pointed out, must have some structure of authority, but the range of freedom varies from place to place. The Holocaust "demonstrated the worst excess of obedience we've seen. But American democracy also has instituted policies that were severe and inhumane: the destruction of American Indians, the enslavement of blacks, the incarceration of the Japanese during the Second World War, [and] Vietnam. There are always people who

obey, who carry out the policies. When authority goes awry, individuals do not seem to have enough resources to put on the brakes... Morality, as well as blind obedience, comes from authority."

Despite our propensity to identify with authority regardless of its malevolence, Milgram thought we might be able to control its excesses. He argued that we had to become more aware of the "problem of indiscriminate submission to authority," which he hoped would be better understood as a result of his experiments. Since people will obey even depraved authorities, Milgram felt that we had a special obligation to "place in positions of authority those most likely to be humane and wise." Milgram also believed that people were quite inventive and hoped that we might one day develop a political structure that would give "conscience a better chance against errant authority."

Although Milgram sounded cautiously optimistic in his interview, his experiments can hardly engender much hope. In his laboratory he discovered what the German refugee and political philosopher Hannah Arendt called the "banality of evil" when describing Adolf Eichmann and his fellow Nazis.

Both Arendt and Milgram argued that our vaunted morality is really rather ephemeral. Ordinary people can become extraordinarily inhumane when obeying others. We are not all potential Nazis, but too many of us will blindly identify with authority.

#### MILGRAM'S EXPERIMENTS AND PROPOSAL PROFESSIONALS

In our better moments, we would like to believe that persuasion is part of a rational dialogue that leads to agreement. Logic, factual evidence, and style, as Aristotle might say, should be important elements in any persuasive argument.

Nonetheless, most proposal professionals have probably experienced their own versions of Milgram's experiments. Abusive management styles are sometimes used in the workplace. Are they appropriate?

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**In this high-pressured environment,  
sometimes we may treat our proposal  
teams in ways we later regret.**

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In our more candid moments, we might see a part of ourselves in Milgram's experimenter. When we manage proposals, we are authority figures to those around us. Proposal development is often a highly stressful activity with its pressing deadlines, long hours of work, and huge

contracts at stake. In this high-pressured environment, sometimes we may treat our proposal teams in ways we later regret.

Finally, there is a more controversial and profound issue for proposal professionals that goes to the heart of Arendt and Milgram's deepest concerns—we can be discretely silent or very inventive when obeying authority. How many of us have ever had moral qualms about the Statements of Work in our proposals and brought them to the attention of our superiors? How many proposal teams have resigned because they did not want to become involved in doing proposals to make napalm, guided missiles, nuclear bombs, or nerve gas? And, how many proposal teams have devised persuasive arguments for vendors to purchase products or services that actually harm the environment or injure people?

To raise these unsettling questions is not to equate proposal professionals with Nazis. In fact, Milgram argued that the best way to avoid unthinking obedience to authority is to be aware of the problem and to raise these kinds of questions in the workplace. Undoubtedly, some proposal professionals struggle with them on a daily basis.

Based on his experiments, Milgram concluded that obedience to authority does not usually "take the form of a dramatic confrontation of opposed wills or philosophies but is embedded in a larger atmosphere where social relationships, career aspirations, and technical routines set the dominant tone." All of us have developed very practical inhibitions against disobeying authority. How do we develop similar inhibitions against obeying abusive or malevolent authority? This is the question Milgram wanted us to constantly ask ourselves.

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