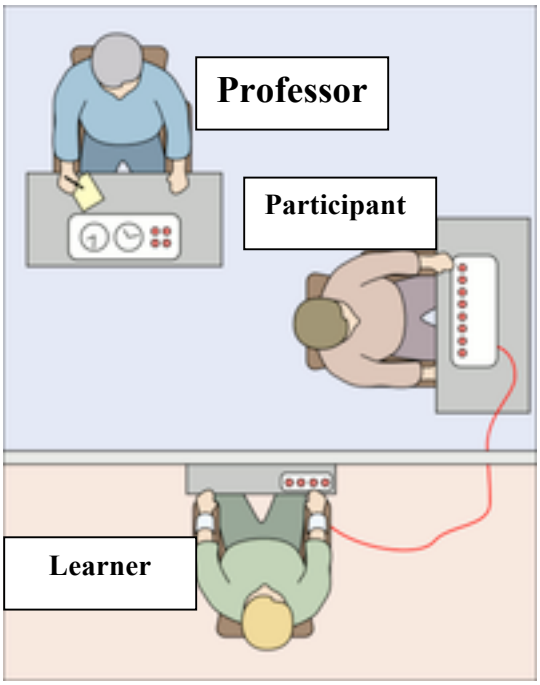
The Milgram Experiment (1961)
“But I was just following orders.”

In 1961 psychologist Stanley Milgram, wanted to measure people’s willingness to obey an authority figure who instructed them to perform acts that conflicted with their personal conscience. Subjects were recruited through newspaper ads that advertised the experiment would last one hour and participants would be paid $4.50 whether they completed the task or not. The participants were men between the ages of 20 and 50, from all educational backgrounds, ranging from an elementary school dropout to participants with college degrees.



The participants were told that they were needed to help with a study that tested the effects of punishment on learning. Their role was to sit in a separate room while another participant (the learner) was being tested and press a button that shocked them every time they answered incorrectly. The key was that every time the person being tested got an answer wrong the voltage of the shock increased. Unknown, to the participant was that no shock was really being administered but rather the “learner” was actually an actor pretending to be shocked in the room next door.

When the test started and incorrect answers were given, the participant could hear mild sounds of discomfort from the “learner” next door. They could also see a meter that seemed to show the increase in voltage with every incorrect answer. After a number incorrect answers and voltage level increases, the actor started to bang on the wall that separated him from the participant. After several more incorrect answers the “learner” began banging on the wall and complaining about his heart condition.

If at any time the participant indicated his desire to halt the experiment, he was given a succession of verbal prods by the experimenter, in this order:

1. “Please continue.”
2. “The experiment requires that you continue.”
3. “It is absolutely essential that you continue.”
4. “You have no other choice, you must go on.”

If the participant still wished to stop after all four successive verbal prods, the experiment was halted. Otherwise, it was halted after the participant had given the maximum 450-volt shock three times in succession.

Before the experiment was conducted Milgram polled seniors majoring in psychology as to what the results would be. All respondents believed that only a sadistic few would be prepared to give the maximum voltage, however, in Milgram's first set of experiments 65% (26 out of 40) of participants administered the experiment's final 450-volt shock, though many were quite uncomfortable in doing so; everyone paused at some point and questioned the experiment, some even saying they would return the check for the money they were paid. No participant refused to give further shocks before the 300-volt level. Repeated studies have shown that between 61-67% of participants are usually willing to administer the maximum voltage when asked to do so.