# SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Today's lecture will cover several topics, but they all have one message in common: Situations are powerful, and they are more powerful than we want to believe.

Today we will talk about research that was conducted in the 60's and 70's, in the aftermath of World War II. People were trying to understand what had happened during the war, and how atrocities such as the Holocaust happened. It was true that Hitler was the master planner, but Hitler alone could not have made the Holocaust happen. Other people participated, carried out his orders, the executions, etc. The question was: how was it that so many people participated? People who were not psychologists tended to believe that the people who participated in the Holocaust were just bad people, and that it was just a time in history when many bad people ended up together. But social psychologists disagreed. They believed that maybe other factors contributed to what had happened; they were interested in the power of the situation in making people behave the way they did.

## OBEDIENCE

### Milgram's study on obedience

**Stanley Milgram** was one of the researchers who were interested in the power of the situation. He was a psychologist at Yale, and he conducted in the 60's the most famous and most controversial study in social psychology. Participants in the study were recruited from the New Heaven community through a newspaper ad, and were paid $4 to participate; it was worth more at that time then today. Now try to imagine that you were a participant in the study. You and another participant arrive at the same time. As you arrive, you are told that the study is on learning and memory. The researchers explain that they are interested in whether punishment helps people learn and remember things. You draw a piece of paper and the other participant too. The pieces of paper say that you will be the teacher, and the other participant will be the learner. The learner sits down, and is attached to electrodes that give him electric shocks. The shocks are painful but not dangerous. You, the teacher, sit in front of the shock generator in another room. You can't see the other participant but you can hear him. You are told that you will read pairs of words, and the task of the learner is to remember which words were paired together; every time the learner gets it wrong, you give him an electric shock. You start a low voltage (15 volts), and you can go all the way to 450 volts.

You start the task, and at 75 volts, the learner says "OW". At 120 volts, the learner says "ugh, this really hurts". At 150 volts, the learner says "get me out". At 300 volts, the learner says: " I refuse to answer, get me out". At 345 volts and over, the learner stops answering, there is silence. How far would you go as a teacher before refusing to go on administering shocks to the learner? Would you stop at 75 volts, when the learner first

starts to complain? Would you stop when you hear the silence? Would you go all the way? When the question was asked in our class, none of us predicted that they would go all the way.

We then watched the video of what really happened during the experiment, and how far the teachers were going in administering the shocks.

Here are some questions to keep in mind during the video: what are the factors that are influencing the teachers? What is getting them to want to stop administering shocks? What are the factors that are making it difficult for them to leave?

**The Milgram study video**

Participants in the study were 40 males, ages 20-50 that varied in level of education and occupation. The study was described to participants as a study on the effects of punishment on learning. The researcher explained that he was interested in how much punishment was necessary for learning to occur and that some participants are assigned the teacher role, others the learner role. It is drawn at random. The task is described to both participants as follows: the teacher reads a list of word pairs. The learner has to remember each pair. Then the teacher says the first word in a pair and four possible answers for the second word. The learner presses the switch for what he believes to be the right answer. If the answer selected is wrong, the teacher says "incorrect", then he says the number of volts he will administer, administers the shock, and finally says the right answer. The teacher and the learner are not in the same room, so the teacher hears the learner but does not see him. Before beginning, the teacher receives a shock at 45 volts, so the teacher gets a sense of how painful the shocks are. There is an experimenter wearing a white lab coat standing behind the teacher and making sure the teacher follows the instructions. We see during the video that participants were reacting to the task and protesting in several ways. Participants would say for instance:

- "He did some yelling, how far can we go on with this?"
- "take your check back"
- "Who is responsible?"
- "I can't go on"
- "we should check on him"
-

To which the experimenter would answer:

- "The experiment requires you to continue"
- "Whether the learner likes it or not we must go on until he learns the words correctly"
- "You have no other choice"
- "I am responsible"

There were signs of nervousness, some participants laughed or smiled anxiously, and 17 out of 40 participants reported tension and emotional strain.

It turned out that the learner was not being shocked. The learner was a confederate. The drawing was rigged so that the real participant was always the teacher. The screams and protestations from the learner were taped. The real purpose was to see how far the teachers would go. All the teachers were fully informed of the details of the study and saw that the learner was fine.

Now, the interesting question: how many participants went all the way? 30 Psychiatrists predicted before the experiment began that 1/10 of a percent would go all the way, and that would be the sadistic people. Guess what: 63% of the participants went all the way and fully obeyed the orders that were given by the experimenter, despite all of the protesting.

**Implications of the Milgram study**

What are the implications of Milgram study?

1. First, this study had a great influence on research ethics. Studies like this one cannot be conducted anymore. At the time that study was conducted, there was no such thing as a review board, or participant rights, etc. Now there are limits to what can be expected from a participant. Since this study, two main things have changed in the way research is conducted:

- **Informed consent**: the participant is informed of his/her rights, of what is expected of him/her, and of the risks that the participant might be exposed to by being in the study.

- **Right to withdraw**: participants are allowed to withdraw from a study at any point if they feel uncomfortable, without being penalized.

2. A great deal was learned from this study about the power of the situation. Obviously, the participants in the study were very anxious, but people kept doing it. People can do things they don't want to do because the situation is so powerful and people can't step outside of the situation and say "no". We might think that these results only apply to people in the 60's, but approximations of this study that were conducted recently showed the same. Most of us would go all the way. What are the situational factors that kept people going?

- **Authority** : the experimenter is supposed to be an expert, a professor at Yale, and has a white lab coat. People respect authority and therefore would go along

- **Responsibility:** people would continue if they knew for sure that they were not responsible if something happens to the learner

- **Proximity**: participants were sitting next to experimenter, but the learner was in another room. So the experimenter had more influence than the learner

- **Unfamiliarity of the situation**: participants did not really know about the cover story, they did not know what the right way to behave in this situation was. All they had was a self assured researcher, who kept telling them to go on. This makes it difficult for people to use their principles and say "no".

Follow up studies were conducted to learn more about the factors that influenced the teachers. The researchers found that the percentage of people who went all the way decreased compared to the original study if:

- The study was moved off the Yale campus and called something else (45% went all the way)
- the teacher is sitting with the learner ( 40% went all the way)
- the teacher is required to put the learner's hand on the shock machine (30% went all the way)
- the experimenter gives orders over the phone instead of being present (22% went all the way)
- Instead of an experimenter, another participant is asked to give the orders ( 20% went all the way)
- There are two other "teachers" who pretend to rebel ( 9% went all the way)
- If the teacher gets to choose the shock level to administer (3% went all of the way)

Note that when there are two other "teachers" who execute the orders of the experimenter, 90% of participants go all the way, compared to 63% in the original study.

**CONFORMITY**

The idea of **obedience** is based on conforming to what an authority figure says. **Conformity** is about how peers influence us. The social psychologist **Solomon Asch** was very interested in this in the 60s. The question was: when do we conform to the expectations of the group and when do we not? Research had already shown that people tend to conform to the group in ambiguous situations. When people don't really know what's going on, they use others for information on what to do. This is called **informational influence.** Asch was interested in what happens when the situation is NOT ambiguous.

Participants came into the study and found 7 other "participants". All the participants were in a room so that the real participant was number 6, there were 5 participants ahead, and one after the real participant, and they each had to give an answer one at a time in that order. The task was to look at a line on the left, and pick one line out of 3 that was of the same length as the line to the left. Line 2 was obviously the correct

answer, but "participants" 1 to 5 picked line 3. Asch found that 37% of the real participants picked line 3 which was the incorrect line. This is a case of **normative influence:** participants were going along because they didn't want to stick out, wanted to get along with others. Unlike in informational influence, participants knew what was right, the situation was not ambiguous. In normative influence, the desire to be accepted as part of the group leads to the group having influence on people.

There were variations of this study as well. It was found that people were less likely to choose the wrong answer when the answers were to be written anonymously instead of said out loud. The number of "other participants" had a big effect. If it was 8 instead of 7, 40% of people went with the wrong answer. If one of the confederates disagreed and did not pick the wrong answer, only 5% of participants went along, regardless of how many confederates picked the wrong answer. Social norms are very powerful. We are influenced to follow social norms without realizing it, for instance when we stand in line.