Ideal and real : illusion and reality in Stanley Milgram's accounts of the Obedience to Authority experiments

by

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Abstract

Through a close reading of Stanley Milgram's published and unpublished accounts of the Obedience to Authority experiments I will demonstrate that Milgram shaped the story of his research, excluding material that might subvert the positivist ideal.

In the creative component, using unpublished qualitative material that Milgram gathered from his subjects during the course of his research, I will reclaim the stories of the silent, de-identified subjects and explore the experience of the experiment from their point of view.

The two components of the thesis will work side by side to demonstrate the gap between official accounts of the experiments and what actually occurred and how Milgram constructed a credible narrative of his experiments that silenced competing narratives.
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“One peculiar aspect of the accomplishment of scientific discourse is that it appears to hide itself
...to write science is commonly thought not to write at all, just simply to record the natural facts.”
(Bazerman 1988, p 14)
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Chapter 1 – Introduction and overview of dissertation

It is summer, 1961 in New Haven, Connecticut. People hurry in through the entrance of Yale University to the psychology department. Ordinary people, citizens of New Haven, are arriving to be volunteers in an experiment that has been advertised in the local paper as a study of memory. On this balmy night, they cannot foresee the impact of the experiment in which they are about to take part.

Inside the building's laboratory, each volunteer is met by a stern-looking man in a grey lab coat. He explains that the volunteer is to act as a teacher in an experiment about the effect of punishment on learning. The teacher's job is to punish incorrect answers by administering electric shocks to a learner, who is in a room next door. He introduces the teacher to the learner, whom he then straps into a chair and fits with electrodes to his wrist.

The teacher must administer an increasing level of electric for each wrong answer by pushing a switch on a machine. Switches are labelled from 15 to 450 volts and range from ‘slight shock’ to ‘danger: severe shock’.

At 75 volts, the learner can be heard grunting in pain; at 120 volts he complains loudly; at 150 he begs to be released, at 285 he screams in agony and soon after, he falls silent. Confronted by the sounds of the learner's pain, despite their own agitation and stress, more than half of these ordinary people follow the instructions of the lab-coated authority figure and

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administer what they believe to be dangerous and perhaps even fatal electric shocks to people just like themselves.

In fact, as the volunteers learn at the end of the experiment, the electric shock machine was a prop, and both the experimenter and the learner were actors.

This is the story of the now famous Milgram obedience experiments. Or it’s one story. The paragraphs above represent the standard story reproduced in the media, films, books and plays, and handed down to generations of psychologists through lectures and textbooks.

But I could have told it another way. In the version above I’ve told it in the present tense, to give a sense of immediacy and relevance, and included sensory details to make it vivid, alive. Alternatively, I could have used the second person, encouraging you, the reader, to identify with the volunteer who arrived for his scheduled appointment at the Yale lab that night. If I’d done so, though, I would have lost you. Maybe at the point where you had to imagine yourself agreeing to give electric shocks to someone else, or perhaps later, at the point where I asked you to imagine hearing the man cry out. It would have been hard for you to identify with a Milgram volunteer. Who could imagine themselves being transformed that way - from an ordinary, seemingly law-abiding citizen into a torturer who obeyed the instructions of the stern-faced experimenter and continued to give shocks to a man who screamed in pain? You just couldn’t imagine yourself doing what they did. You would have switched off, turned the page.
But that’s the challenge of the OTA story. As this thesis argues, it has to be told a certain way in order to be believable, because it’s a story that defies our expectations. It’s a story of dramatic transformation that pits expectations about the way we behave against the depressing reality of our shortcomings. It’s said to provide an insight into the behaviour of Nazi perpetrators during the Holocaust, soldiers during the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, and prison guards in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. But then again, that depends on the way it’s told.

Overwhelmingly it’s a story about the power of science, and the power of the scientist as storyteller, editing and shaping a story for particular effect. But did it really happen as it’s been told?

**Research methodology**

I have used six main sources of information:

- Stanley Milgram’s personal archive, held at the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University.

  - Milgram’s published descriptions of the OTA experiments, (particularly debriefing and subject reactions to their involvement) (Milgram, 1963; 1964B, 1964c; 1965a; 1965b; 1974).

  - Volunteers’ published accounts of taking part

  - Audiotapes of the experiments (in particular conditions, 3, 23 and 24)

  - Transcripts of interviews with volunteers conducted by Dr Paul Errera in 1962

  - Comments from subjects on the follow up questionnaires

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I collected copies of all documents and audio visual material that related to the editing and shaping of the story of the Obedience to Authority experiments. I sorted over 1,000 documents and photographs of documents into thematic categories. I then compared and contrasted the material with published accounts in the OTA literature – both Milgram’s own and other authors whose research was based on OTA archival material eg Blass, 2004 – and analysed the differences with the aim of gaining a picture of changes between versions of the story of the OTA research.

**Overview of dissertation**

As a relatively new science – it is generally agreed to have been born in 1879 in Wilhelm Wundt’s laboratory at the University of Leipzig (Danziger, 1990, p 17) - psychology borrowed its scientific methods from the natural and physical sciences and severed its ties with philosophy in order to be accepted as a truly scientific discipline. Experimentation and quantification were regarded by its founders and followers as the hallmarks of progress, generating objective knowledge and conferring on psychology the status of a real science (Gillespie, 1988, pp 114).

Social psychology as a distinct discipline emerged in the mid 1950s, even though research into social issues was around long before that. Like its parent discipline, social psychology developed as an empiricist, laboratory-based discipline that relied on quantification as the ultimate evidence of scientific respectability (Danziger, 1990, p 136). Despite its focus on
social issues and its promise of providing answers to social problems, the dominant paradigm of
social psychology reflected the idea that ‘we should understand individual behavior by

Social psychology moved into the laboratory, where human social behaviour was
observed, dissected, and analysed by the psychological scientist. The ideal scientist in positivist
terms is one who recognises that reality or truth is waiting to be discovered, who is objective and
unbiased and whose individual values or beliefs have no bearing on the research. The aim of the
psychological scientist’s research is to describe, predict, control and explain human behaviour to
produce universal laws or truths through assiduous application of the scientific method (Breen,
2010, p 68).

While the modern psychological scientist equates power with objective knowledge
obtained through experimentation, outside the discipline, there has been increasing recognition
of knowledge as a process of construction rather than discovery (Gillespie, 1998, pp 115).

In the late 1950s, Karl Popper argued against inductive reasoning, and Norwood R
Hanson argued that facts were not pre-given but derived from the scientist’s particular theoretical
orientation (Graumann and Gergen, 1996, p 3-4).

Kuhn’s landmark book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) challenged
traditional notions of scientific progress, suggesting that it was not the result of the steady
accumulation of objective knowledge, but paradigm shifts arising from conflict and the
subsequent overthrow of one scientific subculture by another (Graumann and Gergen, p 3-4).

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From the late 1960s, postmodernism and poststructuralism brought a radical questioning of scientific positivism, challenging the notion of scientific ‘objectivity’ and exploring the ways in which scientific discourse is constituted by, and in turn constitutes, relations of power. Philosopher Michel Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973) and elsewhere, argued that modern science was not engaged in producing unchanging and immutable truth, conceived as something outside itself that merely needed to be ‘discovered’, but in constituting knowledge as part of the process of reconstituting the power relations between scientist and subject, doctor and patient.

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault described how in the eighteenth century new medical practices generated new ways of thinking about patients and produced a new discourse about them. The relocation of medical practices from home to hospital, the professionalisation of doctors and the development of modern medical techniques generated new kinds of knowledge, supported by, and in turn sustaining, institutions of power:

> The medical gaze was also organized in a new way...it was no longer the gaze of any observer, but that of a doctor supported and justified by an institution, that of a doctor endowed with the power of decision and intervention  

(Foucault 1973, p 89).

Patients were also transformed:

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...into an object of a gaze, indeed a relative object, since what was being

deciphered in him [the patient] was seen as contributing to a better knowledge of

others (p 83).

The power of the scientist’s clinical gaze, and its ability to transform that which it looked
at and spoke about, was as relevant to psychology as it was to medicine. The movement of
social psychology into the laboratory brought about new work practices (adapting the laboratory
from the study of chemicals and gases to the study of humans), and new ways of observing
psychological events had to be invented. Furthermore, the definition of the psychologist’s object
of study was contingent on the laboratory setting:

Through the creation of laboratory instruments and techniques, the reeling,

cacophonous world of human experiences had to be transformed into discrete,

feasible problems that could be analyzed in controlled settings. (Morawski, 1988,
p vii)

This brought about a new relationship between the experimenter and the subject. The
experimenter turned his all-powerful all-observing gaze onto the passive object, the human
subject. Behavioural tasks replaced conversation and observation rather than conversation
became the goal (Morawski, 1988, pp viii).

In the 1960s and 1970s a crisis of confidence spread through the social sciences, fuelled
by revelations about the use of medical experiments on concentration camp inmates and the role
of leading scientists in the development of the atomic bomb. In psychology, experiments like
Milgram’s obedience research and Laud Humphreys’s covert studies of homosexuals in public toilets, and later, even in their homes, added fuel to the fire of outrage at the psychological abuse of subjects (Denzin 2000, p 141).

Doubts about the scientific status of psychology and experimental social psychology in particular led to a radical questioning of its paradigm. Psychological science, and the social psychological science that Stanley Milgram practised, was singled out for attack. The experimental situation, formerly the standard scenario in which scientific psychological research was conducted, was increasingly viewed as contrived and artificial, and incapable of simulating human social experience. In addition, there was widespread recognition that experimenter bias, including the cultural, ideological and biographical experiences of researchers, played a part in the results they obtained (Parker 1989, p 19).

Traditional social psychology, with its reliance on principles and practices drawn from the ‘hard sciences’, was criticised for limiting rather than broadening understanding of human behaviour. Its quantitative techniques were increasingly viewed as substituting measurement for meaning and for extrapolating universal laws from historically and culturally specific practices (Parker, 1989, pp 18-20).

Milgram’s research caused a drastic re-examination within the profession of the acceptable use of subjects in psychological research (McGaha 1995). As a result, the APA revised their ethical guidelines, placing a much greater emphasis on informed consent, ensuring that experiments like Milgram’s would be almost unrepeatable today (Blass, 2004, pp 285).

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Social psychological discourse expresses the values and assumptions of the positivist tradition which entrench the notion of the scientist as objective, detached observer. But as Gergen and Davis have argued, positivism does not allow for awareness of how research is shaped by the researcher:

*The problem with positivism is its failure to acknowledge its reflexivity. Positivism has no awareness of its own presuppositions, and, in fact, claims to have none. As a result, the picture of reality it draws is not presented as a picture, but as the picture. In a world where there are any number of lenses available through which to see reality, it is as though positivism disavows the use of any lens.* (Gergen and Davis, 1985, Page 243)

Foucault argues that any particular discourse ‘a system of statements which construct an object’– is strengthened each time it is evoked (Parker, 1989, p 61). This is of particular relevance to Milgram’s work. The discourse of positivism is reproduced time and again in various texts produced by Milgram about the OTA, revealing the power relations implied through that discourse. For example, the notion that social psychology was a proper science devoted to the betterment of mankind allowed Milgram to justify his methods and licensed him to treat his participants (subjects) in ways that privileged the scientist over the subject, the quantitative over the qualitative, the apparently objective over the subjective.

The results of Milgram’s research allowed his subjects to be classified and labelled as normal and abnormal, obedient or disobedient, good or evil, which in turn had implications for...
the way they were treated by Milgram and others, and even for the subjects’ own view of themselves.

Despite radical and critical attacks on social sciences and widespread public scepticism about the claims of psychology as science, Milgram’s obedience research continues to be invoked as a kind of moral fable about the perils of obedience. The OTA discourse reinforces notions that Milgram the scientist had discovered a truth about human nature in his New Haven laboratory, a truth that transcends time and place and speaks to us about history and humankind.

My argument in this thesis is that Milgram’s research was shaped by the personal, historical and social circumstances in which it was carried out and that the interpretation of his research was shaped by the narratives Milgram generated. In struggling to portray himself as the ideal scientist, Milgram shaped the story of his research, excluding material that might subvert the positivist ideal. In spite of the iconic status accorded to Milgram’s OTA research, Milgram’s results were not as straightforward as he suggested, and in fact were more complex and ambiguous than popular depictions would have us believe.

Through a close reading of a range of Milgram’s written texts both published and unpublished, public and private, I will exhum the narratives of subjectivity on the part of his experimental ‘subjects’ that couldn’t be admitted into Milgram’s version of his experiments. In particular, I will explore Milgram’s writing about the people who volunteered for the experiment and how his and others’ discourse about the OTA constructed a particular identity for them, how they were shaped to fit a particular vision of the world and were denied their own voice.

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Chapter 2 - Origins and influences - Obedience To Authority (OTA) research

This section will argue that accounts of the origins of the Obedience to Authority (OTA) research support the view of Milgram as the ideal scientist by excluding cultural and ideological influences.

Milgram’s own account of the origins of his research highlights his purely intellectual development as a scientist, detailing his childhood fascination with experimentation– ‘it was as natural as breathing’ (Tavris, 1974a, p 77) – and the intellectual influences he absorbed, particularly from his early mentor Solomon Asch. These ideas culminated in ‘an incandescent moment’ (Tavris, p 80) when the idea of the OTA research occurred to him.

While Milgram made the connection between his OTA research and the behaviour of the Nazis during the Holocaust from the very beginning of his research, he was slow to acknowledge his Jewish background publicly as an influence (Fermaglich, 2006, p 97) although he noted it on numerous occasions in his private papers:

*My interest in (obedience) is purely personal, and concerns the fact that many of my friends and relatives were badly hurt by other men who were simply following orders.* (SMP, Box70, Folder 291)
The first time he made a direct published reference to it was in 1977, fifteen years after the experiments were complete and after years of controversy (Fermaglich, 2006, pp 89). In an article in defence of the ethics of his research, he said:

*the laboratory paradigm merely gave scientific expression to a more general concern about authority, a concern forced upon members of my generation, in particular upon Jews such as myself, by the atrocities of World War 2.* (Milgram, 1977, p 92)

Since Milgram’s private papers became available in the archives at Yale in 1993, others have given a more detailed version of the personal and cultural factors that led to Milgram’s research, including his background as the child of Jewish parents in the Bronx during the Second World War and the influence of the Holocaust on his family. As a child, he listened anxiously to the radio for news of his European relatives (Blass 2004, p 8). He referred to the Holocaust in his Bar Mitzvah speech in 1946, and relatives who’d survived the Nazi concentration camps stayed with the Milgram family at around the same time (Fermaglich 2006, p 100). Milgram’s lifelong interest in scientific experimentation, his passion for stagecraft and practical jokes, his academic prowess and high intelligence, his interest in the arts and other cultures, his drive and persistence in the face of rejection and his academic ambition have all been identified as influences on his OTA research (Blass 2004, p 1-16).

Milgram’s abiding interest in national characteristics and stereotypes was evident at college and in his planned doctoral research, a comparison of conformity among German, French
and English subjects. (Russell, 2009, p 34) But a critical and unacknowledged factor in the
evolution of his research was Milgram’s socialisation into the positivist tradition, and his
initiation into the recently developed discipline of social psychology.

Danziger describes the story of psychology prevalent at this time as one drawn from
nineteenth-century natural sciences:

...reminiscent of the tale of Sleeping Beauty: The objects with which
psychological science deals are all present in nature fully formed, and all that the
prince-investigator has to do is to find them and awaken them with the magic kiss
of his research (1990, pp 2).

But unlike the natural sciences from which psychology drew so much of its scientific method,
social psychology had a problem. It studied human subjects, who brought with them particular
sources of error. Social psychologists had long been worried about human subjects’ potential to
jeopardise their scientific efforts. In 1933 Rosenzweig (cited in Korn, p 34) pointed out that
human subjects brought to psychological experiments all sorts of motivations, thoughts and
feelings that could contaminate the experimental results.

Subjects were not participants in any sense of the word but represented an Other:
they were the unknowing and uncaring raw material of the scientific enterprise in
social psychology. And above all, they could not be trusted – all manner of
deceptions, manipulations and checks must be built into an experiment to guard
against this Other. (Stam 2000, p 375)
This view of human subjects as needing to be controlled permeated social psychological research. The use of cover stories, stooges, confederates and deception became widespread practice. (Korn, 1997, p 34) Experimental social psychologist tried to guard against subjects’ divining the purpose and meaning of the experiment and reducing the influence of subjects’ subjectivity.

Milgram was a product of this intellectual tradition. He had absorbed its principles from his teachers, his textbooks, the journals he read and the experiments he conducted during his graduate training.

The history of the OTA research and its origins as reproduced in psychology textbooks tends to be ‘celebratory’ (Harris, 1997). A story is told of the intellectual progress of the research, with only passing recognition of the social and cultural factors that shaped it. It’s a story – similar to the story of scientific psychology itself – that emphasises the continuities between Milgram’s research and that of his predecessors, most notably Solomon Asch.

Asch was famous in social psychology for his study demonstrating how people remain independent in the face of strong group pressure. (Asch, 1955) In Asch’s study, a naïve subject joined five others around a table. Each of the six was asked their opinion on the relative length of three lines. Five of the six people gave a previously arranged wrong answer, leaving the sixth person, the naïve subject, to offer a judgment either consistent with the others’ or based on his own belief. Asch found that 63% of people trusted their own judgement and 37% conformed with the group and gave an answer they knew to be wrong.
Harris says that official histories of Asch’s experiment expunge the political inspiration for his research. No mention is made of his anti-fascist beliefs or the political influence of his alignment with Communist colleagues at Brooklyn College as factors that inspired his work on group pressure and conformity (1997, pp 24),

Milgram made no mention of Asch’s political influences either. Probably in order to portray himself as free of contaminating values or beliefs, Milgram acknowledged Asch’s influence on his OTA research in terms of social psychology rather than political stance.

\textit{Asch was a brilliant and creative man, who possessed great philosophic depth. He is certainly the most impressive social psychologist I have known.} (Tavris, 1974a, p 77)

And yet as Fermaglich points out, both of Milgram’s mentors at Harvard - Allport and Asch - as well as much of American psychology at that time was influenced by the ‘Nazi destruction of European Jewry’. Allport’s studies of prejudice, and Asch’s of conformity, were both formulated and interpreted in the context of these events (Fermaglich, 2006, p 97).

Milgram worked as Asch’s teaching assistant in his second year at Harvard where he was exposed to the detail of Asch’s research techniques and the deception required for his studies of conformity and group pressure. Having completed his PhD research – an ambitious cross-cultural comparison of conformity in Norway and France based on Asch’s research – Milgram spent a year working part time for Asch at Princeton, helping him to edit his book on conformity and writing his own dissertation.

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As Milgram’s mentor, Asch was in a more powerful position when it came to academic and scientific power (Bourdieu, 1984) with a well established and respected reputation, academic clout and an influential book about to be published. Milgram, on the other hand, just back from his ambitious European research and impatient to continue, had no office, and no acknowledgement from Princeton of his existence. During his year at Princeton, Milgram felt shunned, invisible and unacknowledged by both his mentor and the institution but ironically it was at Princeton, in the spring of 1960, that he first conceived of the OTA experiment (Blass, 2004, p 57). While Milgram downplayed the tension that existed between himself and Asch during that year, it may well have been the thwarting of his ambition, a sense of resentment towards his mentor and academic competition with Asch that inspired him.

Milgram told one interviewer he was conscious that decisions about the length of lines in Asch’s experiment seemed ‘trivial’ and he wanted to explore how group pressure could push people to behave in ways that were more important.

*I was trying to think of a way to make Asch’s conformity experiment more humanly significant. I was dissatisfied that the test of conformity was judgements about lines. I wondered whether groups could pressure a person into ...behaving aggressively toward another person, say by administering increasingly severe shocks to him.* (Tavris, 1974a, p 80)

His first ‘mental step’ towards the OTA research was the idea of having a group of actors and a naïve subject each with their own shock generator:

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I transformed Asch's experiment into one in which the group would administer increasingly higher levels of shock to a person, and the question would be to what degree an individual would follow along with the group. (Evans, 1976, p 347)

But before he could run the experiment, he’d have to have a control group so see how far people would go without any group pressure.

At that instant, my thought shifted, zeroing in on this experimental control. Just how far would a person go under the experimenter’s orders? It was an incandescent moment. The fusion of a general idea on obedience with a specific technical procedure. Within a few minutes, dozens of ideas on relevant variables emerged, and the only problem was to get them all down on paper (Tavris, 1974a, p 80)

Although Asch’s conformity research arose from similar preoccupations to Milgram’s OTA research, Korn reports that Asch found his pupil’s obedience research ‘distasteful’ (p 70) and was uncomfortable about being associated with it. 1 Perhaps this was because Asch felt a lingering unease about the use of deception and its effects on subjects in his own research (Korn, pp 79).

1 When Asch was asked in an unpublished interview what it meant when people described him as the “intellectual mentor” of Stanley Milgram, Asch replied: “..I am not responsible for that research…” and indicated that he was unwilling to discuss Milgram’s OTA research further. (AHAP, ASCH (S.E.) PAPERS, M 2869, Box 2873 Folder 5)
As this section has demonstrated, Milgram shaped the story of the origins of his research to fit the discourse of the scientist in social psychology – excluding the personal, cultural, private and subjective factors that might have influenced his choice of topic. By containing the story in this way, Milgram was reinforcing the objective claim of his science, and his own claims to be impartial. But research into Milgram’s papers reveals a contradictory view.
Chapter 3 - Preparations for the experiments

In this section I will demonstrate that Milgram’s drive and ambition to make his mark as an emerging social psychologist led him to shape a research program that would have maximum impact.

At the end of summer 1960, Milgram was offered academic positions at both Harvard and Yale. By the time he arrived at Yale in September 1960, he was undoubtedly under considerable pressure to succeed, both personally and professionally. Here he was, the first of his working-class family to go to college, now an Assistant Professor at one of the country’s Ivy League universities, he was no doubt keen to continue to ‘make his mark’ (Blass, 2004, p 62). He certainly had the drive and ambition, fuelled by the success of his PhD research, prestigious mentors and job offers from two of the country’s top universities. In a letter to Gordon Allport at Harvard in October, Milgram described his research plans for the next ten years as:

- *Studies in Action Obedience and Conformity (1961-1963)*
- *Aesthetic Sensitivity and Mescal (1961)*
- *Time Groups and Social Influence (1962)*
- *Studies in Social Intrusion (1962-1964)*
- *Understanding Alien Speech (1963-1965)*
- *Experiments in German Character (1965-)*
- *Babel Groups (1967-)*
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Experimenta Analysis of Social Regard (1969 - )

What he needed was a research project that would add significantly to psychological knowledge, that would enhance not just his own reputation, but that of his profession and his employer, as well as signalling his arrival as a social psychologist. He cast around for ‘the boldest and most significant research possible’ (Blass, p 63).

During this period, the world was still struggling to understand the Holocaust, although the term itself only entered common usage as a result of the televised trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 (Shandler, 1999, p 83), Milgram himself had long been preoccupied with the factors that shaped this event. American social psychology at this time was keen to define itself as relevant to the kind of cultural concerns of the day and to be validated as a science that could use laboratory techniques to reveal universal truths.

Russell (2009, p 53) argues that Milgram was influenced by the belief current at that time that Nazism sprang from particular aspects of the German character and in particular a heightened propensity to follow orders from authority. This belief had gained currency after the Nuremberg trials, where following orders was used by Nazi war criminals to justify their treatment of the Jews. In particular Milgram was influenced by the work of William Shirer, whose work he referenced on the second page of his book *Obedience to Authority*, who believed there was a causal link between German national character and the rise of Nazism. This shift of emphasis away from anti-Semitism was echoed in Raul Hilberg’s hugely influential book, *The Destruction of the European Jew* published in 1961. In his book, Hilberg argued that
the ‘Final Solution’ was a systematic, step-by-step, bureaucratic process conducted by ordinary Germans (Russell, p 31).

For Milgram’s research to make an impact on the field, it had to yield surprising or startling results (Russell, pp 51) that were well beyond what was already known, to generate unusual or groundbreaking insights that would make his name. As a young, untenured assistant professor Milgram had little academic or scientific power. By choosing a topic that might shed light on the Holocaust, Milgram gave his research immediate legitimacy and relevance and the potential for what Bourdieu called ‘intellectual renown’ (1988, p 40) that could cement his position within the academy.

Milgram aspired to be one of the giants of social psychology. In a letter to Jerome Bruner mid way through his research program, he wrote:

...My hope is that the obedience experiments will take their place along with the studies of Sherif, Lewin and Asch (SMP : Box 1A Folder 3 : letter dated Feb 6, 1962)

Milgram therefore entered the early stages of his research aware of the kind of results that would gain attention. As his early notes show, he approached the experiments with the goal of ‘creating the strongest obedience situation’. (SMP, Box 46, Folder 165, Title: Notes general, 1961-1962)

Milgram used his Small Group Psychology class to help him conduct what he would later call his pilot studies. It was the students who came up with the prototype of the shock machine

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based on Milgram’s rough drawing. (Blass, 2004, p 67-8) In late November and early December 1960, Milgram and his students began the pilot, using 20 Yale undergraduates as subjects. With his class, Milgram refined and made changes to the procedure to create a believable and more powerful experimental situation. Together they explored the effect alterations to the experimental situation would have on subjects’ behaviour: they explored the effect of making the learner’s protests louder, and of making the learner less visible during the experiment. While Milgram did not report the number of obedient subjects in the pilot studies, the following quote indicates that the numbers were significant. Milgram said of the results of this pilot study:

...the behavior of the subjects astonished the undergraduates, and me as well....I do not believe the students could fully appreciate the significance of what they were viewing, but there was a general sense that something extraordinary had happened. (as cited in Blass, 2004, p 68)

By the end of the pilot studies, Milgram realised he was on to something big. He quickly grasped the difference between expectations of how his subjects would behave and how they actually behaved, and recognized that this gave his experiment enormous power. He highlighted this again and again as a demonstration of the importance of his findings.

And yet, as Russell points out, the high rates of obedience he achieved in his pilot studies were the result of a carefully crafted technique, developed through trial and error to make it increasingly difficult for people to disobey (Russell 2009, p 51). Milgram had to develop a feasible cover story, because an experiment that was transparently about obeying orders would
mean subjects would resist. He also labelled the switches on the machine more ambiguously from ‘lethal’ to ‘severe’, because fewer people would be prepared to administer shocks they knew to be lethal (Russell, page 63).

On the basis of the success of his pilot studies. Milgram was granted $24,700 by the National Science Foundation in May 1961 for a two-year program of research. Now with the pressure on to come up with significant results, Milgram set about perfecting the experimental set-up, hiring staff, adding props and costumes to create a more believable and authoritative setting.

Contrary to the rather simplistic dichotomy presented in summaries of the research, which labeled subjects simply as obedient or disobedient, Milgram’s subjects were implicated in a gradual process that elicited compliance and made it difficult for them to break off. Milgram made a series of adjustments aimed at entrapping volunteers in a sticky web of obligations that they found it difficult to extract themselves from. Subjects were manipulated into obeying, most often against their better judgement. Milgram himself acknowledged this in an unpublished note:

At times I have concluded that, although the experiment can be justified, there are still elements in it that are ethically questionable, that it is not nice to lure people into the laboratory and ensnare them into a situation that is stressful and unpleasant to them... There and then I decide, as a purely personal matter, not to do an experiment that forces the subject into a moral choice and marshals

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Critical to the success of Milgram’s research was the shock machine. Milgram described the machine in an early letter to the NSF and wrote that it was ‘more than a stage prop’ (SMP, Box 43, Folder 128).

Figure 1: Sketch of shock machine n.d. (SMP, Box 46, Folder 165)

To Milgram the shock generator served ‘as a metaphor of Nazi evil’ (Fermaglich, 2006, p 88) but it was also the means by which he could establish his scientific credentials by making use

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ideal and real: illusion and reality in Stanley Milgram's accounts of the OTA experiments

of technology to distance himself from the conduct of the experiment. Milgram took great care
with the construction of a new shock machine. He designed it, bought the parts and oversaw its
construction. In his papers at Yale, there are crude then increasingly detailed sketches of the
machine (SMP, Box 46, Folder 163)

To play the role of experimenter, Milgram appointed Jack Williams, a 31-year-old high
school biology teacher whom Milgram described as ‘impassive’ and ‘stern’. (Milgram, 1974, p
16) ‘Stern’ was code for ‘more likely to command obedience’. The fact that Williams was
prepared to take a second job during his teaching break implies that he needed the money and
was presumably glad of the extra work over summer. His costume was a grey lab coat, and his
script was rehearsed repeatedly until he could deliver it with a rapid-fire, brisk efficiency that
hardly gave volunteers time to think.
For the role of learner, Milgram interviewed James Justin McDonough. The notes he took during the interview begin with a sense of excitement.

Excellent as victim. A+ victim. Can work the acceptable hours. This man would be perfect as victim. He is mild and submissive, not at all academic...Worked on the railroad for 25 years and is completely reliable. The only trouble is he cannot act too well in my estimation, but can train. Has 8 children. Easy to get along with.' (SMP, Box 43, Folder 127)
For ‘mild and submissive’ we can read compliant. ‘Not at all academic’ is code for him being believable. Part of McDonough’s role as the affable victim was to give wrong answers on a fairly simple memory test, so it was useful if he didn’t look too bright or ‘academic’. ‘Worked on railroad’ and the reference to his numerous children implies he will be dependent on the money from the job.

In Williams and McDonough Milgram had found men who would be reliable; this was vitally important. Turnover in his experimental team could contaminate his results.

Once he’d selected his actors, Milgram got down to finalising the script. Williams’ was a densely typed ten pages, detailing every word the Experimenter was to speak from the start of the experiment through to the point where the subject stopped –because he had either reached maximum voltage or refused to continue. Williams’ script was complete with responses or ‘prods’ for when a volunteer hesitated or talked about discontinuing. McDonough’s script in contrast was largely a series of protests, cries and screams cued to voltages on the machine. Milgram spent a fortnight practising with the actors to make them convincing in their roles and told an interviewer:

\begin{quote}
It took a tremendous amount of rehearsal. Two full weeks with constant screaming on my part, constant. (Tavris, 1974b, p 75)
\end{quote}
This chapter has demonstrated that Milgram had a clear idea of the results he wanted to achieve before his officially funded program of research had started. His drive and ambition, the contextualisation of his research as an explanation of Nazi behaviour, and his awareness of the
importance of generating ‘significant’ findings all led him to shape his preparations to achieve a particular result – high rates of obedience.
Chapter 4 - Recruiting subjects.

A close reading of Milgram’s advertisement for volunteers indicates that he already had a preconceived notion of the kind of person likely to obey authority, and this was reflected in the ad he devised to attract subjects.

Milgram decided not to use Yale students in his funded research, despite the fact that the use of undergraduates in psychology experiments was common at that time (Korn, 1997, p 82). He reasoned that word of the real purpose of his experiment would spread too easily among the student population (Milgram, 1974, p 14). He was also responding to criticisms from fellow academics who dismissed the high rates of obedience in his pilot studies as merely demonstrating the natural ruthlessness of undergraduates at an elite institution (Blass, 2004, p 70). On a practical level, Milgram’s funds had come through just before the summer break, when most Yale students had gone home.

Milgram was forced to recruit non Yale subjects, people from the broader New Haven community. He later used this decision to bolster his argument that his results were applicable to ordinary people.

He placed an ad in the local newspaper calling for volunteers. In writing the ad, Milgram abandoned scientific jargon in favour of the language of sales and marketing to persuade (male) readers to apply.
The ad that Milgram devised implies a lot about the readers of the ad, and the power relationship between the academic community and the local community at that time. It also reveals that even unconsciously, Milgram had a view of his ideal potential subject, someone who would not resist the commands of a figure of academic authority. Who better to take a subservient role than an uneducated working man?

Milgram devised a half-page advertisement for the New Haven Register, a daily newspaper that focused on news, sports and local events in and around New Haven. (See Appendix 1 for transcript of the advertisement)
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Figure 3: Advertisement in New Haven Register June 18, 1961 (SMP, Box 46, folder 163)
Despite Milgram’s insistence that he was looking for a cross-section of men for his research, his newspaper ad was designed to attract men who needed money, men of a certain class.

The layout of the ad with its attention-grabbing heading, its hierarchy of text sizes and use of bold text for particular phrases makes the ad easy to read. The fact that the reader could earn $4 for ‘a study of memory’ makes the job being advertised seem effortless.

Even though Milgram used the terms ‘public announcement’ asking for ‘persons’ in the ad, it’s clear that he’s using the words ‘public’ and ‘persons’ to imply men, and this is expressed directly when he mentions that ‘500 New Haven men’ are required.

The tone, rhythm and phrasing of the ad mimic ads for closing-down sales. The repetition of the four dollars, the one hour required, and the fact that there are no further obligations sounds like someone spruiking. ‘Yes, ladies and gentlemen, four dollars for only one hour. That’s right, just one hour of your time.’

In fact the observant reader might well have been suspicious of the commercial tone of the ad, given that it was advertising an experiment at Yale, although this was tucked away in the fine print in the coupon at the bottom of the ad. The lack of a logo or any institutional branding is odd given that Yale had approved the ad. (SMP, Box 43, Folder 127)

The fact that ‘No special training, education or experience is needed’ is highlighted, set off in its own space, emphasising that unskilled men can and should apply. Milgram provides
examples of the sorts of men who are required. This detailed and concrete listing of jobs, is laid out in a series of columns to help readers scan it. Interestingly, the blue-collar jobs are listed with fairly specific titles - factory workers, laborers, barbers, telephone workers, construction workers. On the other hand, Milgram uses vaguer terminology for higher-status jobs – city employees, business men, professional people, white collar workers.

Milgram concludes with instructions on what to do if the reader meets ‘these qualifications’. His use of the word ‘qualifications’ is intended perhaps to flatter the reader (when in fact the only prerequisites are being aged between 20 and 50 and being male). A sense of urgency is conveyed by the instruction to reply ‘now’. The use of the word ‘coupon’, usually used to imply something redeemable for a prize or gift, reinforces the notion that men who act quickly will benefit over those who don’t. The final sentence reinforces the idea that applicants will be ‘selected’ and that selection is a privilege. The last sentence implies that there will be many more applications than there are spots. The only word missing from the final paragraph is ‘hurry’.

Towards the bottom of the ad, Milgram mentions the amount to be earned for the fourth time and links it to being paid on arrival, suggesting that the ad is aimed at people for whom money is an urgent issue.

Instead of simply asking for name and contact details, the ‘coupon’, which is designed to be cut out and mailed, is worded as a commitment to taking part. It begins with a statement of interest in participation, affirmation of eligibility (although subjects are asked their age further
down), and (just in case the reader didn’t get it any of the other times) a fifth and final mention of the payment.

The ad ran on Sunday 18 June, 1961. (See figure 1) As well as the large display ad in the news section, Milgram paid for extra 5 x 1 inch column ads concentrated mainly in the sports pages.

*You can earn $4.00 in 1 hour and help a scientific study. See advertisement in Section__, page ____.*

*Good memory or bad memory – you can earn $4.00 in 1 hour. See advertisement in Section__, page ____.*

(SMP, Box 46, Folder 163)

Milgram was disappointed with the response. Despite the paper’s Sunday circulation of 106,000, he received only 296 replies. In his notebook, Milgram speculated about the reason:

*One factor working against a heavy response was that the weather was beautiful on that weekend, following a long period of poor weather. Thus it is possible that fewer persons read the newspaper that day than on other Sunday’s [sic]. Moreover, it seemed to me that the very people who would answer the ad might be the ones who were out picnicking etc...* (SMP, Box 46, Folder 163)

Interestingly, Milgram didn’t consider that some readers might have treated the ad with suspicion. No, it was the ‘very people’ he wanted to attract who were at fault. These men - who
only read the paper on Sundays, who were more likely to be reading the sports pages, who were
likely to be attracted by the offer of earning an extra few dollars - were more likely to be
distracted from reading by warm weather. Their interest in picnics and ballgames, their
fickleness and distractibility, meant his ad was unread.

Milgram next tried direct mail as a technique for recruiting subjects. By mid-July he had
sent letters to one thousand people whose names and addresses he selected from pages 1-312 of
the 1960-61 New Haven telephone directory, excluding ‘business establishments and women’
(SMP, Box 46, Folder 163).

For a transcript of the letter, see Appendix 2.
Figure 4: Recruitment letter (SMP, Box 46, Folder 163)

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The recruitment letter, involves a direct relationship between the writer and the reader (it’s addressed to ‘Sir’ and signed by Milgram) forcing Milgram to adopt the active voice so that the passive, anonymous tone of the ad has disappeared.

Milgram invokes authority with the letterhead which mentions an impressive-sounding project at Yale, with him, a PhD as Director. He appeals directly to people’s altruism (‘we need your help’) in the first sentence, a phrase that is repeated with variations throughout. Simultaneously, while Milgram shifts the emphasis away from money as a prime motivation (he mentions it only three times in the letter) he has increased the hourly rate to $4.50. He is clearly aware that people are more cautious than he gave them credit for. The fact that there are ‘no strings’ and ‘no obligations’ is repeated four times, as if he feels the need to reassure the reader that this is a genuine (‘sincere’) and benign scientific enterprise and the reader can have faith in the people running it.

The tone of the letter is more conciliatory and less commanding than the newspaper ad, with the use of the personal pronoun ‘you’ creating a more intimate, inviting feel and a sense of equality between the reader and the writer. The ‘you musts’ of the ad are replaced with ‘you may’ in the letter.

Similarly the short sentences give the letter a direct and conversational tone.

However, the power relations in this letter are clear. While the reader is instructed in detail on what to do (fill out card, drop it in a mailbox etc), the ‘Project Director’s’ job is vague but all-powerful. ‘We reserve the right to decline any application’.

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Included with the letter was a business reply card. Of the 1000 letters sent, 116 people had responded by mid-August. This was a much healthier response rate than the newspaper advertisement. From here on Milgram adopted the letter as his primary recruitment technique; in total, more than 5000 letters were sent out between Aug 25 1961 and Feb 9, 1962. (SMP, Box 46, Folder 163)

A close reading of Milgram’s advertisement and recruitment letter demonstrates that power relations were already being enacted in the written communication between Milgram and his potential subjects. Milgram, far from recruiting a random sample, already had an idea of the men he wanted to recruit – those impressed by authority, flattered to be involved in a scientific endeavour at a prestigious institution, and likely to be glad of extra money.
Chapter 5 - Notes on obedience – the official notebook and diary

notes

Phantoms would seem to represent the very antithesis of the scientific order... Yet..this “other” world of phantoms and the phantasmal is coterminous with science itself. By “other” worlds I mean those things which trouble the mind of scientists and haunt the house of science – subjective desires, epistemological uncertainty or doubt, the encumbrance of the body, unsteady splits between subjects and objects, and deception. (Shotter and Bayer 1998, p 187)

In this section I will demonstrate that Milgram personally struggled with the tension between the demands of the scientific ideal and the realities of conducting research that caused people intense personal stress, but that these subjective doubts had no place in official accounts of his research. Phantoms haunted Milgram’s house of science.

Milgram kept an official (but unpublished ) record of what was happening in his OTA research in what he called the Obedience Notebook.

The opening page of the notebook reads:

LOG BOOK OF THE OBEDIENCE PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

This book is to serve as a record of the progress of the experimental project. All actions directly and indirectly concerned with the reconstruction and interpretation of

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the experimental results are to be included in these pages. All major findings are to be included. All experimental instructions. The means of obtaining subjects. A general description of each experimental condition and the primary findings.

No page should be removed from this book once information of this character has been recorded in it.

If everything were lost other than this book, we should not be hindered in any important way in giving a careful and precise account of the experimental study.

S.M.

July 3, 1961 (SMP: Box 46, folder 163)

The notebook reflects Milgram’s desire to record his experimental processes in a scientific manner. He recorded information under eight main headings:

Subject recruitment (32 pp)
Exp procedure (15 pp)
Interpret. (25pp)
Findings (72)
Writings and related work (5)
Expt’l Program (7)
Finance and Personnel (4)
Misc. (6 pages)

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As a record of the scientist’s progress, the notebook outlined in detail his method and the steps he took in reaching his conclusions, including statistical summaries of his subjects in 24 variations of the original experiment.

It’s a notebook that gives a detailed account of his method and one which reinforces the notion that ‘the scientific method remains the citadel of scientific authority’ (Hughes, 1995, p 395).

The experiments began on August 7, 1961 in the Sociology Department’s Interaction Laboratory on the first floor of Linsley Chittenden Hall. The research program involved running groups of subjects through different variations of the Obedience experiment. Generally, 40 subjects were run through each condition.

Milgram named and described each condition in the Obedience notebook along with the percentages of subjects who obeyed or resisted in each one. (See Appendix 3) In each condition Milgram altered the variables to see what impact it had on obedience. In the first four conditions he varied the distance between the Learner and the Teacher to see what effect it had on his subjects’ behaviour. Would more people obey if they couldn’t hear or see the Learner? (Yes). Would more people resist if they had to force the Learner’s hand onto a metal plate to get the shock? (Yes) Would the learner’s mention of a heart condition affect what voltage teachers were prepared to give him? (No) Would women be as obedient as men? (Yes) Would people be less obedient if the experiment was held in a downtown office building rather than Yale? (Yes)
The variations became more convoluted over time. Milgram kept detailed notes of changes he made with each condition, including notes on changes to the room, adding more actors, varying the script and reversing roles as he tested the effects of different variables on subjects’ willingness to press the increasing voltage switches on the shock machine. Each of the 24 variations is described in detail in his obedience notebook.

Interestingly, these 24 different studies have been conflated into one iconic depiction along with the oft repeated statistic that 65% of people obeyed the authority’s orders and gave maximum levels on the shock machine. In fact this statistic refers only to the first variation of the 24 – the Remote condition. This was the first condition reported by Milgram in his first journal article and used 40 subjects. In fact, obedience rates varied considerably depending on the particular scenario that he had created for that particular variation and in one condition, obedience dropped to zero.

Milgram defined obedience or defiance according to how far subjects went on the shock machine. Anyone who stopped before the 30th switch or 450 volts, was defined as defiant. Anyone who proceeded to the maximum voltage was determined to be obedient.

Very few of Milgram’s subjects blithely followed orders. Many subjects who continued to maximum voltage and who were classified as obedient protested and argued with the experimenter. In fact Milgram incorporated responses in the experimenter’s script to counter subjects’ protests. Subjects would frequently turn to the experimenter (usually seated behind them) to point out that the Learner wanted out, that they themselves didn’t want to continue, that
they wanted to check on the Learner to see if he was all right. Experimenter John Williams
would reply with one of four prods, starting with the first, and continuing through the list if the
subject still refused to continue.

1. Please continue, or please go on
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. (Milgram, 1974, p 21)

If after the fourth prod the Teacher still refused, the experiment was terminated and the
subject was determined to be obedient or defiant. Those who went to 450 volts (maximum
voltage) were labeled obedient, even if they had protested or argued with the Experimenter
during the experiment. Despite the wealth of data that Milgram collected on his subjects –
including how often they smiled or laughed during the experiment - he did not keep records of
the number of subjects who protested or threatened to withdraw but who continued to the final
switch. Milgram, watching from behind a one-way mirror in the lab, observed extreme stress and
anxiety in some of his subjects as they wrestled with the demands of the experimental situation
and tried to work out what to do.

In Milgram’s notebook we can trace what Hughes calls the construction of “a dominant
group as the norm and the subordinate group as the other.” (p 401) She describes a five-step
process for the scientific construction of the Other – the naming of variables, quantification,
statistical analysis, reification and objectification.
Hughes’ five-step process can be traced in Milgram’s obedience notebook as he moves through the process of recruiting and testing his volunteers, then classifying them as ‘obedient’ and ‘disobedient’.

Hughes argues that variables chose for study brings with them a social history and meaning. In Milgram’s case, the widely reported brainwashing of American POWS during the Korean War raised troubling notions of humans being robbed of their identity and independence (Biderman, 1962, p 547) and the Nuremberg trials conjured the disturbing spectre of conformity and slavish obedience to orders. (Milgram, 1974, p 8))

Objectification, the second step, begins early. In Milgram’s notebook individuals are made anonymous, their names replaced by numbers, their identity expunged. This is the very essence of objectivity – the ability to turn a person into a thing, an object of study.

The final step Hughes identifies is reification, in which the variables that have been measured are transformed into concrete entities. In Milgram’s OTA research, the complex and multifaceted behaviours of Nazi bureaucrats responsible for the extermination of Jews were reified into the entity called obedience to authority, which was then further reified into a voltage level on a shock machine. The reified entity was then measured among subjects, with the scientifically objective result confirming that the dominant group was defiant (good), and the subordinate group, the Other, were obedient (bad). Statistical analysis of their behaviour reinforces the notion that numbers are seen to speak for themselves, entirely detached and neutral. The social construction of the ‘Other’ is complete.

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While this process of objectification of his subjects was taking place, Milgram was troubled by doubts about his own behaviour. These doubts took the form of worries about the significance of what he was doing as well as the ethics of his own behaviour in putting subjects through the experiment.

At the same time that Milgram the scientist was carefully recording information in this notebook, a notebook infused with the language of scientific experimentation, he was keeping an episodic personal diary of his reactions and feelings as they unfolded during the research.

Milgram was not unaffected by the suffering of his subjects. An unpublished note written halfway through the experimental program, reveals how uneasy he felt about the situation he had created.

*Several of these experiments, it seems to me, are just about on the borderline of what ethically can and cannot be done with human subjects. Some critics may feel that at times they go beyond acceptable limits. These are matters that only the community can decide on, and if a ballot were held I am not altogether certain which way I would cast my vote.*

*An important distinction is to be drawn between the situation as the subject sees it, and the situation as it actually is. It does, indeed, seem horrible when a man with a heart condition pleads to be let out of an electric chair, and the experimenter refuses. This would surely be unethical and, to my way of seeing it, immoral.*
But there is also a level of reality behind this appearance. The man in the electric chair is an actor. He has a sound heart. He experiences no discomfort. He is playing a role. So the ethical question is not where at first one might thinks [sic] it lies. It is not a question of hurting [illegible] people.

The ethical issue, then, boils down to two points. The first, and more important one is: a.) Is it ethical to apply pressures to a person which may lead him into what he believes to be an act which he would otherwise not perform for reasons of personal conscience? From the subject’s standpoint, the victim is being shocked. He has harmed – although temporarily- another individual – he has violated his own conscience. B. The second question is related to the first: is it ethical to deceive [sic] persons in spcyhological [sic] experiments. There is perhaps another question – is it ethical to subject persons to emotional stresses of an extreme sort in the course of experimentation?

Counter questions: Can the subject derive some benefit – moral benefit from his participation? Does it have some educative value. 

Doesn’t the man have a choice, which some excerice [sic] morally?

(SMP “Obedience: Ethics of experimentation” unpublished note, January 1962, Series 11, box 46, folder 165.)

In this note to himself Milgram begins by describing the experiments as ‘ethically questionable’. He then tries to assert that the experiments would be of moral value to

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participants. Finally he concludes that his subjects have a ‘choice’, shifting the blame to his subjects and the choices they make and away from his methods and the situation he has created.

At the same time, Milgram the scientist was no doubt excited and impressed with the power of his results. Here was an opportunity to take his place alongside his mentor, Asch, and make a lasting and significant contribution to an event that the world was still struggling to understand. Added to that was the highly publicised trial of Adolf Eichmann which occurred simultaneously with Milgram’s research program and was televised nightly on American TV, a ‘landmark’ in television history (Shandler, 1999, p 83). Milgram could not fail to draw parallels between the two events. The progress of Eichmann’s trial was a likely factor in helping Milgram regain confidence in both the idea of his research and the ethics involved.

But it wasn’t just a connection between Eichmann and his subjects that Milgram sensed, but a connection between himself and Eichmann a theme evident in the following note to himself as he struggled with his own responsibilities towards his subjects:

*Consider for example, the fact – and it is a fact indeed, that while observing the experiment I- and many others – know that the naïve subject is deeply distressed, and that the tension caused him is almost nerve shattering in some instances. Yet, we do not stop the experiment because of this.*

*Remember also, that when the first group of 14 Yale students observed the experiment, they burst into laughter, were actually falling onto the floor with*
laughter. And no observer has ever thought to interrupt the experiment, although
we know a man was suffering deeply.

If we fail to intervene, although we know a man is being made upset, why
separate these actions of ours from those of the subject, who feels he is causing
discomfort to another. And can we not use our own motives and reactions as a
clue to what is behind the actions of the subject.

The question to ask then is: why do we feel justified in carrying through
the experiment, and why is this any different from the justifications that the
obedient subjects feel.

I feel, though I cannot quite find the words for it, that the reactions of the
observers – those who sit by “enjoying the show” - are profoundly relevant to an
understanding of the actions of the subject.

(SMP ‘Extending the field of observation’ unpublished note, in Obedience
notebook, March 1962, Series 11, Box 46, Folder 163)

One of those who joined Milgram behind the one-way mirror as an observer was Lawrence
Kohlberg, a psychologist known for his ground-breaking work on morality, who later regretted
his passivity.

At the time I did not have what I now have, a conviction that I could have
intervened, not by force but by moral reason to aid my friend Milgram in

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clarifying and developing his own moral reasoning about what he was doing


At other times, during the course of his research Milgram worried that it was meaningless. He had created a powerful scenario that was engaging and affecting for the subjects involved, but what did it say? Milgram was asking himself this question once the experiments were over. He wondered in his notebook if the experiments succeeded as drama rather than as science.

Several men of intelligence, having observed the experiments, felt that the procedures bared for them profound and disturbing truths of human nature. On another occasion, three young Yale professors, after witnessing an evening session, declared that the experience was a brilliant revelation of human nature, and left the laboratory in a state of exhilaration. Similar reactions were forthcoming from other observers. Whether all of this ballyhoo points to significant science or merely effective theater is an open question.

I am inclined to accept the latter interpretation. One reason is that almost all witnesses say to their friends: “You have to see it to understand it,” or “You can’t imagine what happens unless you see it yourself; words simply won’t do.” This is precisely the kind of talk one would expect to hear in connection with a play or some other artistic performance. In genuine science a mathematical or verbal description of the phenomenon is good enough. But the truth or
significance of music, or a theatrical performance, or a painting, depends on direct confrontation and experiencing of the event. So the drawing power of the experiments stem in part from their artistic, non-scientific component. This makes them more interesting; it does not necesarily [sic] make them more valuable for a developing science of man. (SMP : Box 46, folder 164, Evaluation of obedience research, science or art? July 1962, )

In the following three months, Milgram sent out, and began receiving back, questionnaires from the people who had been his subjects. During this period he was putting finishing touches to his first journal article on the topic of his research.

It’s interesting that at this point, with the research complete and professional recognition clearly round the corner, Milgram privately began to question his own motives, acknowledging to himself that it was his ambition rather than his altruism that had motivated the research.

Perhaps this was because of the feedback he was getting from subjects about how they felt about taking part. Although 83% agreed that they were glad or very glad to have taken part, additional written comments on the questionnaire revealed that some people had been profoundly upset or troubled by the experience.

In August 1962, he wrote :

It would be plesant [sic] to remark that these experiments were undertaken with a view toward their possible benift [sic] to humanity; that
knowledge of social man, in this instance, was sought for its possible application to the betterment of social life…

Moreover, considered as a personal motive of the author the possible benefits that might redound to humanity shrink withered to insignificance alongside [sic] the strident demands of intellectual curiosity. When an investigator keeps his eyes open throughout a scientific study, he learns things about himself as well as about his subjects, and the observations do not always flatter. (SMP : Box 46, folder 173 “Ethics of experimentation”, August 1962)

Exactly what Milgram learnt about himself that he didn’t like, he doesn’t say, but a letter to a former student, Leon Mann in which he contrasts his new wife’s work with his own, gives some clues:

Sasha ….is doing a year of field work in a psychiatric clinic for children. She is really cut out for this kind of help-the-poor people activity, and her positive contributions to social welfare are a healthy counterbalance to my own destructive efforts.

Those efforts, by the way, are proceeding at a snail’s pace…..Perhaps punishment for abusing so many nice people….. (SMP : Box 1a, folder 4)

While Milgram makes light of it in his letter, his research methods, and in particular the stress experienced by his volunteers, caused uneasiness and tension not just in himself but in the broader Yale community, and in his own department. In the same letter, Milgram reports on life
at Yale and names one colleague in particular who ‘has assumed vast moral indignation about the Milgram experiments entirely appropriate to an asshead.’ (SMP : Box 1a, folder 4)

Perhaps it was the same colleague who complained to the American Psychological Association – the peak professional body for psychologists in the US – which consequently notified Milgram in November that they could not approve his membership until they had investigated complaints about the ethics of his research. (SMP : Box 1a, folder 4).

The last thing Milgram would have wanted would be ostracism from his professional community and it must have been an anxious time.

This section has contrasted Milgram’s public and private writing to demonstrate that he struggled with ambivalent feelings and ethical doubts during his research. The next section will show that this tension was completely expunged from all his official accounts of the OTA experiments.
Chapter 6 - The first journal article

In this section I will demonstrate that Milgram crafted his first published account of his research with maximum impact in mind. His first journal article, while conforming to scientific norms, was also shaped to incite curiosity and interest in his readers. It established a powerful rhetorical frame through which to view his results. In it we can also see the complete objectification of his subjects.

The first published account of Milgram’s Obedience to Authority experiments appeared in the October 1963 issue of the Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology. An earlier draft had been submitted to the Journal of Personality whose editor Edward Jones rejected it in March 1962, with the following comments:

*The major problem is that this is really the report of some pilot research on a method for inducing stress or conflict...At present your data indicate a kind of triumph of social engineering...We are led to no conclusions about obedience, really, but rather are exhorted to be impressed with the power of your situation...the psychological processes leading up to the obedient act remain a mystery...I really feel very ambivalent about your research.* (SMP, Box 1a, Folder 3)

In having his revised article accepted for publication Milgram had clearly met the journal’s demands for a particular structure and style. He had the APA (Style) Manual to guide
him, a publication Bazerman describes as serving ‘as a codification of behaviourist rhetoric.’
(Bazerman, 1988, p 274)

The particular beliefs associated with positivist social science – ontological,
epistemological, axiological and methodological (Creswell, 2007, p 17) - are all here in
Milgram’s first paper, either implicitly or explicitly expressed in the rhetorical choices he makes.

This first article, untainted by later defensiveness, captures Milgram’s unmediated
attitude to both the research and his subjects. The article is title Behavioral Study of Obedience
and begins with the following abstract:

This article describes a procedure for the study of destructive obedience in the
laboratory. It consists of ordering a naive S to administer increasingly more
severe punishment to a victim in the context of a learning experiment. Punishment
is administered by means of a shock generator with 30 graded switches ranging
from Slight Shock to Danger: Severe Shock. The victim is a confederate of the E.
The primary dependent variable is the maximum shock the S is willing to
administer before he refuses to continue further.

As is the convention in scientific writing, the abstract is written in a deliberately depersonalised
tone. The procedure is ‘described’, the naïve S is ‘ordered’, but the describer and the one giving
orders are absent, seeming to have no influence or control over the outcome. This device
reinforces Milgram’s supposed impartiality as an observer, but also allows him to distance

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himself from the subject and what took place. It is implied that he merely set the stage and let the
behaviour under study unfold.

Milgram’s volunteers – the people being studied - are simply and collectively referred to
by the letter S. The ‘naïve’ S – a term generally used to mean unknowing, with connotations of
being credulous, unsophisticated or simple – is ordered to give increasingly ‘severe punishment’
to a ‘victim’. Milgram leaves the reader to absorb this rather disturbing fact, telling us that the
punishment takes the form of electric shocks, and describes the number of switches and shock
intensity levels before mentioning that the victim is the experimenter’s ‘confederate’, a term
associated with both good and evil (Shotter and Bayer 1998, p 196).

And who is the experimenter, or E? An initial reading suggests it is Milgram, but we
know from fuller descriptions later, that he is not Milgram, but a second actor who plays the role
of Experimenter. Already Milgram is both abstracting and extracting himself from the situation.

The ‘primary dependent variable’ is the maximum shock the S is ‘willing’ to administer.
With this use of the word ‘willing’, Milgram downplays the reluctance that he reported later in
the article was common amongst his subjects.

The abstract continues:

26 Ss obeyed the experimental commands fully, and administered the highest
shock on the generator. 14 Ss broke off the experiment at some point after the
victim protested and refused to provide further answers. The procedure created

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extreme levels of nervous tension in some Ss. Profuse sweating, trembling, and stuttering were typical expressions of this emotional disturbance. One unexpected sign of tension—yet to be explained—was the regular occurrence of nervous laughter, which in some Ss developed into uncontrollable seizures. The variety of interesting behavioral dynamics observed in the experiment, the reality of the situation for the S, and the possibility of parametric variation within the framework of the procedure, point to the fruitfulness of further study.

The first two sentences move along briskly. Here we have Milgram using active voice to tell us that over half of the 40 subjects went to the ‘highest shock’. Milgram switches back to an impersonal tone to describe the ‘extreme levels of nervous tension’ they experienced as if to distance himself from responsibility for their stress. There is something chilling about the juxtaposition of the ‘profusely sweating, trembling, and stuttering’ subjects with the distant tone of the language. The description of subjects’ responses in such clinical terms as ‘interesting behavioral dynamics’ and the ‘fruitfulness of further study’ reinforces Milgram’s objectivity and status as scientific observer.

What’s interesting about this abstract is what is does not tell us. Milgram does not tell us that the machine did not deliver shocks, that the victim felt no pain, that the experimenter was an actor. Hewithholds information until the body of the article, as a writer does to incite curiosity and hook a reader into a story. Perhaps he played down the sleight of hand in the abstract.
because he felt that the use of deception was a small matter of secondary interest, that what mattered most was that he elicited ‘destructive obedience’ in the lab.

Following the abstract, Milgram begins the article proper with two general statements about the role of obedience in social life. In the third sentence he makes a link to recent history.

*Obedience, as a determinant of behaviour, is of particular relevance to our time.*

*It has been reliably established that from 1933-45 millions of innocent persons were systematically slaughtered on command. Gas chambers were built, death camps were guarded, daily quotas of corpses were produced with the same efficiency as the manufacture of appliances.*

Milgram has swiftly established a link to the horrors of the Holocaust. He also re-presents Eichmann’s defence and the defence of those tried at Nuremberg that their involvement in the extermination of European Jews was simply a matter of obeying orders.

Following the introduction, Milgram describes the procedure in enough detail that it could be replicated, then gives a summary of results, in which we are told that 14 subjects out of the 40 defied the experimenter, while the rest obeyed. Perhaps anticipating scepticism, Milgram provides evidence that subjects believed the illusion was real (reporting that most subjects indicated after the experiment was over that they believed the shocks were extremely painful) and that they experienced considerable tension. He instances the subjects’ nervous laughter:

*Fourteen of the 40 subjects showed definite signs of nervous laughter and smiling.*

*The laughter seemed entirely out of place, even bizarre. Full blown,*
uncontrollable seizures were observed for 3 subjects. On one occasion we observed a seizure so violently convulsive that it was necessary to call a halt to the experiment. The subject, a 46-year-old encyclopedia salesman, was seriously embarrassed by his untoward and uncontrollable behaviour.

r. (p 375)

Milgram’s choice of words in this description is revealing. The laughter is ‘bizarre’. A laughing ‘fit’ becomes a ‘full blown, uncontrollable seizure, violently convulsive’. This use of clinical language reinforces his superior status as well as inviting the reader to view the behaviour as pathological. Already, we get a sense of the judgmental view Milgram took of his obedient subjects. He goes on:

In the post-experimental interviews subjects took pains to point out that they were not sadistic types, and that the laughter did not mean they enjoyed shocking the victim. (p 375)

Despite these protestations, Milgram thinks otherwise. To him, their laughter was abnormal, it was ‘untoward’ and ‘uncontrollable’.

Milgram does not speculate about other possible reasons for his subjects’ laughter. For example, that the laughter might have been a normal or rational response to an irrational situation, that people may have been laughing at the ridiculousness of the position they found themselves in. Nor does he consider the possibility that the laughter may have been amusement,
that people may have sensed the experiment was a set-up. (Stam, 1998, pp 79) Instead he labels the laughter bizarre on the assumption that the subjects believed the situation was real.

In the discussion section of the paper, the one section where the researcher is free to speculate on the implications of his findings, Milgram begins by describing two ‘surprising’ findings, the strength of subjects’ obedient tendencies and the emotional strain volunteers experienced. Milgram describes the behaviour of one of his subjects. Milgram uses the man’s body language, dialogue, non-verbal and verbal behaviour to paint a picture of his deterioration and stress as the experiment progresses.

*I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his earlobe and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered: “Oh God, let’s stop it.” And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end. (p 377)*

This 79 word, oft-quoted snippet, juxtaposing poise and confidence with a ‘stuttering wreck’, inadvertently reveals the experimenter’s power. It is the power of the laboratory that in twenty minutes a man can be taken to the point of ‘nervous collapse’. And yet, just as we might be feeling sympathy for the squirming businessman, in the last sentence, Milgram undercuts this. It is not the experimenter or the experiment that is at fault. It is the subject who has caused his own downfall, by slavishly following the experimenter’s ‘every word' and continuing to obey orders.
This evocative paragraph with its physical description of the subject, the account of his actions and his dialogue, was the first public introduction to the nameless bodies that were Milgram’s subjects.

In this section I have shown that Milgram’s first journal article functioned to reinforce both the legitimacy of his research and his status as a man of science, but also inadvertently revealed the negative view he had of those subjects in his experiments who had obeyed.
Chapter 7 - Milgram’s book - *Obedience to authority*

In this section I will outline public and professional reactions to Milgram’s first journal article and how these reactions set the stage for his writing of the definitive work on the experiments, *Obedience to Authority*.

If Milgram hoped for attention when his journal article was published, he certainly got it. Milgram’s research burst into print in the autumn of 1963.


It’s no wonder the media leapt on the article. Milgram mentioned the gas chambers and the links between his experiments and the Holocaust in the second paragraph. He established early in the article the surprising and shocking nature of the (obedient) subjects’ behaviour, and he made much of how observers of the experiment were astounded by the results. It met all the criteria for a highly newsworthy story. Once the story hit UPI wire service, newspapers, TV and radio programs all wanted to cover it.

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Milgram seemed desperate to limit publicity about the research. His attempts to bypass media interest seem strangely naïve, especially given the enormous interest the American public had shown in the Eichmann trial, and by implication, the events of the Holocaust. It is possible that he wanted to contain the reporting of his research because premature exposure would make his book ‘old news’ by the time it was published. But when *Life* magazine called, he was tempted:

*I tried to discourage them, but stupidly asked how much money they would pay me for it. My policy will be to refuse any offer. (short of $25,000)* (SMP: Box 46, folder 145)

The flurry of press reports that followed tended to follow the emphasis of the *New York Times* story, focusing on the sensation of the results and picking up on the parallel with the behaviour of Nazis in Germany, thus reinforcing the notion of the universality and power of Milgram’s results. Only a minority of articles, including one that appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, questioned the morality of his methods. (Blass, 2004, p 1212)

A month after the first journal article, Milgram received a rejection letter from Robert Hall, Program Director for Sociology and Social Psychology at National Science Foundation, saying they had declined his application for further research funding because the reviewers were worried about the effect on subjects and felt that Milgram lacked a theory, that the research ‘demonstrates without explaining’. The letter was prescient, echoing many of the criticisms that would later be directed at Milgram’s OTA. Hall went on to elaborate on more specific concerns,
including whether or not it was obedience that was being measured and how this could only be
determined if Milgram took his subjects’ ‘phenomenology’ into account. He recommended that
Milgram take a leaf out of Asch’s book and use detailed post experimental interviews with
subjects, and lastly, he pointed out that Milgram had provided no proof that the subjects found
the situation believable. (SMP, Box 43, Folder 129)

The first published reaction from Milgram’s peers came less than a year later, in the form
of an article in American Psychologist, a high-profile publication distributed to all members of
the APA. In her article, psychologist Diana Baumrind, was scathing about Milgram’s methods.

Milgram was reportedly ‘totally astonished’ (Blass, 2004, p 124) by Baumrind’s attack,
yet it seems unlikely that the controversy caught him off guard. Even before his findings were
published, there had been signs of serious unease at Yale and within the American Psychological
Association. As he put it in a letter to Leon Mann:

*The Baumrind article came as a surprise, but not such a very great surprise, since
there have been foreboding from the timorous, the concerned, and the stupid for
many years now...*(SMP: Box 18, Folder 263, July 9, 1964)

Nevertheless, published criticism of ethically questionable social psychological research was rare
(Korn, 1997, p 98).

Baumrind argued that Milgram’s article revealed ‘a posture of indifference’ towards his
subjects. She challenged the parallel Milgram claimed between his lab and Nazi concentration

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camps, and implied that experiments like Milgram’s brought the profession into disrepute and should not be condoned. (Baumrind, 1964)

Baumrind’s criticisms picked up on many of the doubts that Milgram himself had struggled with yet none of these self-doubts informed his public response to Baumrind. In the next issue of the APA journal, Milgram argued that any distress on the part of his subjects was temporary, that a follow-up questionnaire and interviews with a selection of them found no evidence of long-term harm, and that while a lab was certainly not the same as a death camp, what was important was that he had been able to illuminate the power of authority. He argued that he did treat his subjects with dignity and in fact assumed, unlike Baumrind, that his subjects were capable of making choices about how to behave, rather than Baumrind’s view that they were passive recipients of orders. Milgram promised that the detailed results of the questionnaire and the psychiatrist’s report would be published in a ‘forthcoming monograph’ but he never made good on this promise. As Korn argues, the defence that his subjects were not harmed by taking part was ‘not proven’ (1997, p 108).2

2 Milgram arranged for a psychiatrist, Dr. Paul Errera, to conduct follow up group interviews with subjects who had indicated that they had been bothered by taking part. Errera concluded that none were harmed by their participation. Around 130 obedient and defiant subjects were invited to the 11 group interviews held between February and May 1963, but less than a quarter invited attended and as few as one or two arriving for a session. The group interviews were held in the same Interaction Laboratory in which the research took place and once again Milgram watched behind a one way mirror. (Box 45, Folder 162)
But if he thought he had laid the ethical controversy to rest, Milgram was wrong. Baumrind’s critique of his research sparked what McGaha and Korn (1995, p 147) called ‘the most intense debate on research ethics in the history of psychology’.

Other critics suggested that Milgram had measured trust or faith in science rather than obedience and queried whether the subjects believed the experiment was real and that subjects understood unconsciously that no harm was being done (Orne 1962; Orne 1968; Mixon 1972).

But while there were those who decried or dismissed the research, there were just as many who defended it. American psychology developed a deep ambivalence towards Milgram around this time, and while in Bourdieu’s terms, Milgram gained in ‘the capital of intellectual renown’ (pp 40) he was sidelined by the academy. He was passed over for tenure at Harvard and reluctantly accepted a position at the much lower-status City University of New York where he worked until his death in 1984. (Blass, 2004, p 152-159)

The controversy that raged over Milgram’s research after the publication of his first and subsequent journal articles set the stage for his writing of the definitive work on the experiment, *Obedience to Authority*.

In the eleven years between his first journal article in 1963 and the publication of his book in 1974, Milgram published ten journal articles about particular experiments in his overall program. His accounts of the experiments therefore emerged in a fragmented fashion over an 11-year period (Fermaglich, 2006, pp 87), although it quickly made its way into psychology textbooks. *Obedience to Authority* was intended as the first full account of the entire research

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program, providing an overarching theory that would satisfactorily explain why his subjects – obedient and disobedient – had behaved the way they did. Milgram also wrote the book with a view to rebutting his critics, (re)asserting the importance of his findings and appealing to the mass market.

Far from being the scientific monograph Milgram originally planned\(^3\), Obedience to Authority includes photographs, anecdotes, case studies and references to popular culture from the *Caine Mutiny* to *Dr Strangelove*. Milgram’s early sketches of the cover indicate he was aiming for popular rather than academic appeal.

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\(^3\) The book was originally conceived as the first part of a three volume study. The first volume was to concentrate on the situational aspects of obedience, the second and third volumes were to concentrate on the clinical and psychiatric aspects and the political implications. (SMP, Box 70, Folder 290)
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Figure 5: Milgram's sketch of book cover n.d. (SMP, Box 63, folder 148)
Perhaps there is something in their national character that makes them follow orders unquestioningly.

Perhaps that is what makes them Americans.

Figure 6: Milgram's sketch of book cover (2) n.d. (SMP, Box 63, folder 148)
Banished from the book is any information that might give his critics ammunition. Gone is the subjects’ laughter that he made so much of in his first paper, although at the time he had promised that it would be explained (Stam, 1998, p 179)\(^4\). Included is a summary of some data from his subject questionnaires to demonstrate that no one was harmed by taking part. Half of the book is devoted to Milgram’s theory of the ‘agentic state’, in which the individual no longer views himself as a responsible for his own actions but defines himself as an instrument for carrying out the wishes of others’ (Milgram, 1974, pp 134). Early in the book Milgram reiterates the importance of his work to an understanding of the Holocaust as well as giving it more contemporary relevance, including references to My Lai massacre in Vietnam.

Milgram had much invested in his research being seen as an explanation of Nazis’ behaviour during the Holocaust. If his research shed light on such a significant and troubling episode in history, Milgram could argue the risk to his subjects was worth it. In other words, the means justified the ends. Milgram could dismiss criticism and justify what was regarded as callous treatment of his volunteers.

He paid scant attention to those who resisted authority in his experiments, focusing instead on those subjects who obeyed. The title says it all. *Obedience to Authority* is about

\(^4\) Milgram did co-author a 22 page paper ‘Laughter under stress’ with Rhea Diamond but it was rejected by the editor of the Journal of Psychiatry for its lack of reference to key literature as well as the ‘troubling’ ethical issue of using deceit and conspirators. (SMP, Box 68, Folder 251, April 13, 1966)
Milgram’s obedient subjects. Those people who defied the experimenter are given little attention in this 189-page book.

A central argument in Milgram’s book, also evident in his earlier journal articles, is that the people who obeyed were not ‘monsters’ or ‘sadistic types’. (Milgram, 1974, p 5) Milgram relegates the discussion about personality to an appendix, as if indicating how small a role it played in his subjects’ behaviour. In the appendix he described unsuccessful efforts by Elms, Kohlberg and himself to find personality traits or particular attitudes that would predict who would obey in the experiment and who would resist.

Milgram lent direct and explicit support to Hannah Arendt’s conclusion that Eichmann was ‘an uninspired bureaucrat who simply sat at his desk and did his job’. (1974, p 5) Like

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5 And yet, in an early draft, Milgram had written ‘every man who gives himself to authority is a psychopath’ but changed this on the advice of Alan Elms who said in a letter to Milgram dated June 25, 1971, that such comments were ‘too extreme.’ (Box 61, Folder 110)

6 Milgram wanted to concentrate in the book on situational aspects of obedience and planned to write about personality variables in the second volume of the trilogy. But in an unpublished note to himself Milgram admitted he was probably procrastinating:

[Individual differences] always bother me, and somehow [sic] distract me from thinking in terms of the situational comparisons. The best solution, for me, is to say that I need not bother with them [individual differences] for they will be dealt with in another volume. (Perhaps I will never get around to that second and third volume but only the illusion that they will be written allows me to get down to writing this first volume.’ (Box 70, folder 290, n.d.)

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Eichmann, his subjects were not sadistic or brutal personalities, but those with a sense of duty or obligation.

*That is perhaps the most fundamental lesson of our study: ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process.* (Milgram, 1974, p 6)

The kind of ‘destructive obedience’ he studied in the lab could be traced not to an individual’s personality but to the situation they found themselves in. In a three page chapter early in the book he highlights situation as the reason why so many people underestimated the levels of obedience he would find:

*Most people...focus on the character of the autonomous individual rather than on the situation in which he finds himself. With this view, they are likely to expect few subjects to go along with the experimenter’s orders.* (Milgram, 1974, p 31)

This repeated connection with Arendt’s work reveals that Milgram’s view of his subjects merged unconsciously with his view of Nazi perpetrators. In Milgram’s mind, his obedient subjects were Eichmanns. This is most evident in the passages in the book describing obedient and defiant subjects. Given his argument in the book that personality had nothing to do with obedience, and the time and effort he fruitlessly put into finding some connection between level of education,

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7 Steven Marcus, a reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review*, first detected this inconsistency between Milgram the objective, value-free scientist and his contemptuous portrait of his obedient subjects in his review of Milgram’s book.

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religion, political preferences, length and type of military service, it is strange that Milgram provides lengthy case studies of individual subjects in his book. Possibly this was to make the book more readable and engaging for the mass market. But it had the added, presumably unintended, effect of reinforcing negative stereotypes about the sort of people who obey orders from an authority. Milgram’s descriptions of ten subjects reveal that in spite of his protestations, he associated obedient (immoral) behaviour with the less intelligent, less well educated and those of lower class. In contrast, he describes his defiant subjects as intelligent, educated, and middle to upper class.8

Here is a description of defiant subject, Jan Rensaleer:

The subject is a thirty-two-year-old industrial engineer, sporting blond hair and a mustache. He is self contained and speaks with the trace of a foreign accent. He is neatly dressed. In the interview he tells us that he emigrated from Holland after the Second World War and that he is a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. He is mild-mannered and intelligent. (p 50)

Jan Renseleer is cultured, well turned out, polite and smart. And even though he defies the experimenter at 225 volts and breaks off the experiment,

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8 But Bartov (2003 p 189) says that Milgram has got his history wrong. Bartov points out that supporters of Nazism were more likely to be middle class, with university educations and that ‘inside Germany it was first and foremost members of the working class who opposed the regime” (p. 189)
...He still feels responsible for administering any shocks beyond the victim's first protests. He is hard on himself and does not allow the structure of authority in which he is functioning to absolve him of any responsibility. (p 52)

Contrast this description of Bruno Batta, a welder with a 'rough hewn' face that says much about his character.

*Mr. Batta is a thirty-seven-year-old welder. He was born in New Haven, his parents in Italy. He has a rough-hewn face that conveys a conspicuous lack of alertness. His over-all appearance is somewhat brutish. An observer described him as a “crude mesomorph of obviously limited intelligence...[Yet] he relates to the experimenter with a submissive and deferential sweetness.* (p 45)

Batta is clearly slow.

*He has some difficulty in mastering the experimental procedure and needs to be corrected by the experimenter several times....* (p 45)

Batta, who is required to push the learner’s hand on to the electric plate to receive the shock, ignores the learner when he first complains and continues with the experiment.

*All the while he maintains the same rigid mask. The learner, seated beside him, begs him to stop, but with robotic impassivity he continues the procedure. What is extraordinary is his apparent total indifference to the learner; he hardly takes*
cognizance of him as a human being...The scene is brutal and depressing: his hard, impassive face showing total indifference as he subdues the screaming learner and gives him shocks. He seems to derive no pleasure from the act itself, only quiet satisfaction at doing his job properly (p 46).

Unlike Jan Renseleer, whose behaviour Milgram excuses sympathetically, Batta is an object of disgust. Where Rensaleer’s behaviour was put down to the situation he was in, Batta’s behaviour is clearly a reflection of his character. Rensaleer feels remorse, Batta feels none.

Here is Elinor Rosenblum, a housewife and one of forty women Milgram recruited for experimental condition number 20. This passage, unlike the others, does not begin with her age or a physical description; instead it is her pretensions that are the focus.

*Mrs. Rosenblum takes pleasure in describing her background: she graduated from the University of Wisconsin more than twenty years ago, and her husband, a film distributor, attended Dartmouth. She does volunteer work with juvenile delinquents once a week and has been active in the local Girl Scout organization and the PTA. She is fluent and garrulous and projects herself strongly, with many references to her social achievements (p 79-80).*

Mrs Rosenblum proceeds with the experiment.

*She attempts to project an image of competence and social grace...She maintains a pretentiously correct, almost authoritative tone in reading the word pairs to the*
learner, which contrast with the weak, girlish comments she directs to the experimenter. (p 80)

Afterwards, in discussing her reactions with the experimenter, she explains she was still shaking, that she was ‘nervous because I was hurting him.’ Milgram concludes:

She was nervous not because the man was being hurt but because she was performing the action...A self centred quality permeates her remarks.

In contrast, here is Gretchen Brandt, medical technician

The subject is an attractive thirty-one-year-old medical technician who works at the University Medical School. She had emigrated from Germany five years before and speaks with a thick German accent. (p 84)

Brandt refuses to continue past 210 volts, and is ‘firm and resolute throughout.’

The woman’s straightforward, courteous behavior in the experiment, lack of tension, and total control of her own action seems to make disobedience a simple and rational deed. Her behavior is the very embodiment of what I had initially envisioned would be true for almost all subjects. (p 85)

Here is Fred Prozi, unemployed and around fifty years old. Milgram describes him as:

Dressed in a jacket but no tie, he has a good-natured, if slightly dissolute, appearance. He employs working-class grammar and strikes one as a rather ordinary fellow.
It goes without saying from this description that Prozi will eventually obey orders to continue to the maximum voltage on the shock machine. In the meantime, he becomes agitated and argues with the experimenter, and at one point pleads with the experimenter to go and check on the learner. The transcript that Milgram includes is distressing to read as we witness Prozi’s confusion and distress. Despite this, Milgram concludes:

*The language employed by the participant is revealing. Despite the considerable tension of the situation, a tone of courtesy and deference is meticulously maintained. The subject’s objections strike us as inordinately weak and inappropriate in view of the events in which he is immersed. He thinks he is killing someone, yet he uses the language of the tea table (p 77).*

Milgram undermined the claims of his carefully objective and scientific research in his rendering of the obedient subjects. In his portraits we catch a glimpse of Milgram the man - subjective, biased and far from value free. Perhaps it was impossible for him to be anything else. The following passage from his private papers indicates that from the outset he did not feel objective or empathic towards his obedient subjects, despite his insistence that all of us, placed in the same situation, would be just as likely to obey. Milgram saw himself in his research not primarily as a scientist, but as a victim.

*Persons sometimes assume that the investigator identifies with the role of the experimenter. But the fact of the matter is that, in the present study, my deepest*
and most thoroughgoing identification is neither with the experimenter nor the subject, but with the victim.

Under what conditions does one ask about destructive obedience? Perhaps under the same conditions that a medical researcher asks about cancer or polio; because it is important a threat to human welfare and has shown itself a scourge to humanity. Perhaps the need to understand and conquer the disease becomes more pressing when a member of the family has been hurt by it.

The nightmare that engulfed Europe in 1933-45 claimed many victims; none was hit so hard as European Jewry. It is only an accident of geography that I was not born in Prague and sent to Dachau with my coreligionists... My only response, as a survivor remnant, and a student of human behavior, is to try to understand the elements in the human situation that allowed for the tragedy. And insofar as I see myself as part of that tragedy, it is in the role of hounded, not the hound victim. (Box 62, Folder 126)

Milgram constructed a particular identity for his obedient subjects, that of Nazi perpetrators. He framed his laboratory experiment as a stage on which was enacted the Nazis’ extermination of the Jews, a stage on which a struggle was played out between morality and immorality, victim and torturer, good and evil. The moral frame through which Milgram viewed his subjects influenced how he treated them, his interpretation of results, his handling of criticism and the way he shaped the story of his research.
Part Two – Creative Non Fiction

Ideal and real: illusion and reality in Stanley Milgram's accounts of the OTA experiments
Chapter 1 – The shock machine

In 1992, Stanley Milgram’s shock machine was taken out of its home at the Archives of American Psychology at the University of Akron to take part in a traveling exhibition for the one hundredth anniversary of the American Psychological Association (APA).

Its inclusion as an exhibit in the history of the APA was controversial. Exhibition curator Caryl Marsh walked a diplomatic tightrope between psychologists outraged by its inclusion and those who felt it had earned a place in an account of the history of American psychology. At the exhibition, visitors came to an enclosed corridor with a black and white chequerboard floor. A sign at the start of the corridor said, “Attention! Please walk on the black squares ONLY!”

Nine out of ten visitors hopscotched down the corridor, only stopping when they reached the large plexiglass case at the end. Inside the case was Milgram’s shock machine, and beside it, a description of how the machine was used to explore our propensity to follow orders.

Visitors’ reactions covered the full gamut – amusement, distaste, admiration, disgust, curiosity, anger. Thirty years after his original experiments, Milgram’s machine had lost none of its provocative power. (Marsh, in Blass, 2000)

Milgram has been dead now for twenty-five years, and most of his volunteers, must be dead now too. The shock machine – as both object and symbol – is all that remains.

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I’m here to see the shock machine - the first stop on what friends jokingly call my Milgramage - with David Baker, Director of the Archives of American Psychology at the University of Akron. Baker is a regular guest on the Discovery Channel, and he enthuses about the stories in the archives that are just waiting to be told as we make our way through its labyrinth of rooms. The archive is a treasure trove of psychological bric-a-brac. But I’ve come here to see one thing. Finally we reach the Reading Room. Baker pushes open the door and steps to one side.

My first impression is how big the machine is, and how real it looks. It’s three feet long, 15 and 1/2 inches high and 16 inches deep. It has a row of thirty switches with lights above each one, and underneath a label describing the degree of shock being delivered. The first group of switches are labelled ‘Slight Shock’, the next ‘Moderate shock’, then ‘Strong Shock’, ‘Very Strong Shock’, ‘Intense Shock’, ‘Extreme Intensity Shock’ ‘Danger : Severe Shock’. The final two switches are simply labelled ‘XXX’. There’s an array of other buttons and dials, a main power switch, an attenuator, a voltage energiser, a voltage meter. A label in the left-hand corner states that the shock generator was built by “Dyson Instrument Company, Waltham, Mass.” an area well known for its electronics manufacturing.

Even switched off and inside a glass case, it’s a sinister-looking piece of equipment. I’ve heard its low crackling buzz on audiotapes, seen black and white photographs of its panel of lights and switches, but it looks surprisingly contemporary - maybe because stainless steel is
fashionable now, as is ‘industrial’ looking furniture. As if you would find it in any number of doctors’ surgeries or science labs, as if you could switch it on and use it now.

Milgram had to make the machine look real. The success of his experiments depended on it. His earliest notes on the developing idea of the experiment included a rough drawing of the shock machine.

He designed it, bought all the necessary electronic parts, and oversaw its building and assembly. The machine was assembled and soldered in Yale’s electronic and mechanical shops, with the finishing touches, the engraving on the front panel, done by Hermes Precision Engravers in New York. (SMP, Box 1a, Folder 5) Milgram was particularly proud when two passing engineers at Yale, invited to inspect the machine, failed to notice it was a prop. (Blass, 2004 pp 78)

Between August 1961 and May 1962, around 850 people, including 40 women, kept their appointments at Milgram’s lab. The one constant over those nine months was the shock generator. For the volunteers it was an instrument of torture. For Milgram it was an instrument of measurement and a yardstick dividing people into followers and dissenters, agents of the Third Reich and members of the Resistance.

I stand there with David Baker and think of the hundreds of trembling hands that pushed those switches, the stuttering voices, the sweating palms, the wild and uncanny laughter.
I’m disappointed when I see the machine is behind glass. I had hoped to touch it, to push the switches, hear its low buzz, watch the lights flash, the needles swing on the dial, the machine itself appear to come to life.

Instead I move around the glass case, taking photos, trying to get one where my image is not reflected in the glass. But it’s impossible; every picture of the machine has the ghostly outline of a person reflected in it. After a while Baker leaves and I sit in the Reading Room, browsing through the Archives’ catalogue. But I can’t concentrate. I’m drawn to the machine.

When it’s time to go, I lean over the glass case and put my hands flat against it. The glass hums against my palms. I look around for an air-conditioning duct or a piece of equipment that could be causing the vibration, but the room is still and quiet. There’s nothing but rows of wooden tables and displays in more glass cases around the walls.

I lean over and put my hands against the glass again and close my eyes, feeling the power of the machine, its ghostly hum, through my fingers.
Section 2 - A guided tour of Yale

I arrived in New Haven on Sunday morning, and booked myself in for a guided tour of the campus. Yale is huge, with its 260 buildings beginning at the edge of New Haven green – a square of grass in the centre of town bounded on four sides by leafy streets and spreading outwards to dominate New Haven, where it’s also the city’s largest employer.

At Yale’s Visitor Centre we were seated in a sideroom to watch a video that gave a potted history of Yale’s 300 years. The video told of Yale’s more famous graduates, including five US Presidents and four of the last six; its prowess in science and medicine – there are currently 1200 labs on campus and the defibrillator was pioneered at Yale; sporting facilities - when Yale bowl was completed in 1914 it was the largest amphitheatre built since the Colosseum; the arts graduates including Meryl Streep, Vincent Price, Henry Winkler and Jodie Foster and the current graduates, in gowns and mortar boards, cheering and releasing green balloons. The room was filled with teenagers and their parents who looked suitably impressed by the time the video was over. For some of these families, the visit to Yale was a form of window-shopping and Yale made sure it had its most impressive goods on display.

The rain started almost as soon as the tour began. Behind me, someone’s mobile phone rang. The woman who answered it said, ‘We’re at Yale,’ then turned away and lowered her voice. She laughed, ‘I feel smarter already.’
We huddled under our umbrellas as our guide, a young Chinese American law student from Kansas, directed our attention to Yale’s hotchpotch of architecture. We stood under a stone archway looking across a grassy quadrangle with medieval stone buildings on all sides, spires and towers and turrets rising behind behind tall trees, reminiscent of Oxford or Cambridge, and even more so in the drizzling rain.

But behind the thick stone walls, the climbing ivy, the Romanesque statues, Yale is like a movie set. A homage to deception, to fakes and replicas. Things that look old are only recently built. Most of the Yale buildings, with their gothic spires and soaring archways, were built between 1917 and 1931. The Harkness Memorial Tower, where a 54- bell carillon is played each day by student and professional carillonneurs (sometimes the bells sound shaky and out of synch, at others they sound assured and calm), looks as if it’s been here for centuries but was built in 1921. The stone blocks are reinforced by steel framing; the glass in the diamond window panes was buried in the sand at Long Island for a year to get the right cloudy, scoured medieval look. Things aren’t what they seem. The 90-year-old female benefactor of the Payne Whitney building wanted to donate a cathedral for Yale, but her two sports-loving sons wanted to build a gymnasium. They got the architect to design a building that looked like a cathedral from the outside so that they could show their mother the grand entrance and the soaring spires. Behind them, though, was a maze of basketball courts, swimming pools, rowing clinics, and a rooftop baseball pitch.

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We stopped at the front entrance of the Sterling Memorial Library, the largest of Yale’s 40 libraries. It takes up the equivalent of a city block and houses one million of Yale’s twelve million books. Rainwater tick-tocked into the puddles as our guide pointed up to the statue on the roof of the library – the building’s architect, James Gamble Rogers.

Rogers, our guide told us, wanted to build a cathedral at Yale because the pinnacle of every great architect’s dream was to leave behind a great cathedral. But Yale said no, they had enough churches; they wanted a library. Undeterred, he went on and built a cathedral anyway, calling it his ‘cathedral to knowledge.’ With this, our guide waved us up the steps and through the front entrance.

The circulation desk was an ornately carved wooden altar, dwarfed by a nave with a painting of Mother Yale descending from heaven holding an orb of light and the book of truth in her hands. She represented the Yale motto, “Lux et veritas” - light and truth. Public phones in the library were secreted in wooden booths like confessionals, and the card catalogue looked like a row of church pews. Everywhere there were soaring ceilings, stone floors, and murmurs that sounded like voices in prayer.

Outside again, our guide thanked us for our attention. I was surprised that he hadn’t mentioned either Linsley Chittenden Hall or Stanley Milgram in his 45-minute commentary. After the others had wandered off, I asked for directions and he pointed out Linsley Chittenden Hall on the other side of a quadrangle – a gloomy-looking dark grey building with iron bars on
the basement windows. There was no plaque, no evidence that the experiments dubbed the most famous in the history of psychology had happened here.

That bothered me all the way home. Then I reasoned that probably too many famous things had happened at Yale to fit into any one commentary or history of the institution. But in the night I woke up, still thinking about it. I couldn’t shake the feeling that Yale was treating Milgram and his research like something they’d rather forget.
Chapter 3 – Manuscripts and Archives

On Monday morning I hurried under a sandstone archway and up three steps and through a heavy wooden studded door that it took all my strength to push open. Even though it was only 8.30 am, the air was already thick and wet. I pulled at the back of my shirt, flapping it out with my hand, to stop it sticking to my skin.

I’d been preparing for months for this trip, and even though I was impatient to start – I had only three weeks, or fifteen precious library days. I forced myself to stop and savour the moment. To my left was another set of heavy wooden doors, with a wrought-iron music stand that displayed a sign announcing the entrance to the Manuscript and Archives section. The corridor I stood in was lined with ornately carved wood panelling like a presbytery or a church.

I hoisted my pack again and pushed against the heavy wooden doors. The room beyond was surprisingly small, lined with glass-fronted bookcases; in the centre was a large wooden table with reading lamps and two computers featuring the library’s homepage.

A young man with a tight black T-shirt and a buzz cut looked up as I entered.

I filled out the paperwork that gave me permission to enter Manuscripts and Archives, which lay beyond yet another set of double doors, and hung the official reader’s card around my neck, then picked up my backpack, ready to begin. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. It’s so great to be here, I nearly said, but his rather serious face, the formal way he addressed me as ‘Miss Perry’ and the hushed atmosphere of the anteroom seemed to discourage excitement.

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All I had to do now, he said, was put in my order for boxes. They were stored offsite, he said, and were delivered twice a day, transported across campus on trolleys through underground tunnels. He glanced up at the clock – if I hurried and put the form in now, he said, the boxes themselves would be delivered by 1.00 pm. I thought I’d read the Manuscripts and Archives website closely, but obviously not closely enough. A four-hour wait before I could start. I felt a surge of panic. What else had I missed?

Even though the room was air-conditioned and cool, my hands were sweaty as I filled out the form.

Within fifteen minutes of my arrival, I was back out in the main corridor. It was 8.45 am. I passed the Newspaper room – a massive room with brown leather wingback chairs, low leather couches, long wooden tables and shaded lamps – then turned around and went inside. Along the walls, deep bookshelves labelled with the names of different countries were stacked with newspapers. I trawled the shelves – past Eastern Europe, Canada, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Africa, Middle East, North Africa, Western Europe (Germany, Portugal, Spain), Current Commonwealth of Independent States (formerly USSR), Bucharest, Serbia, Latin America – newspapers from every country in the world except Australia. I moved back and forth, gazing up and down, but Australia wasn’t there. In a corner I found a large globe of the world on an ornately carved stand. I turned the globe until I found Australia, floating in a sea of blue, and rested my fingertips on it, glad to locate it somewhere in this vast room.

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There were only two other people in the room – one a worried-looking young woman who chewed the end of a strand of hair as she took notes from a thick textbook at a table near the doorway. I guessed she was doing a catch-up summer class because she failed one last semester. The other was an older woman in baggy floral shorts who lay full length in a wingback chair with her feet up on the matching footstool, reading what looked like an airport novel. The red quilted handbag and the plastic Yale bookshop bag at her feet told me that she was a tourist. But the languid and easy way she lay in the chair told me she was a visiting academic and was using the time between attending a conference or conferring on an academic paper to put her feet up somewhere out of the heat to secretly read a trashy novel.

I found a table at the back of the room and sat down. I had four hours to kill before my boxes arrived. I decided to use the time to go over my notes. Still, I was annoyed with myself, twiddling my thumbs on my first day. I’d been itching to find out more about Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiment since I first heard about them, in a draughty lecture theatre one day in 1975.

Back then I was a first-year psychology student at Latrobe University. I don’t really know why I chose psychology, perhaps unconsciously because I wanted to understand myself better, not surprising in a seventeen-year-old. But the rather vague and romantic notion I had of psychology was very different from the sort taught at Latrobe. I discovered that psychology that wanted to be taken seriously, particularly at a newly established university keen to make its reputation, had its
roots firmly grounded in medicine and biology. Until I got to university, I’d been a humanities student. Now I found myself enrolled in a science degree, conducting experiments and writing lab reports based on studies of animal behaviour, learning a new language that turned monkeys into primates, babies into neonates, hunches into hypotheses. Our lecturers were primarily influenced by Skinnerian psychology, and we were taught how to observe and measure animal behaviour, subjecting it to statistical analysis that either supported or disproved an initial theory. We timed mice learning the way out of a maze, measured the depth of field of newly hatched chickens, studied the effect of chemical neurotransmitters in rats’ brains. I struggled to keep up, and at times I was tempted to give it away.

But then at some point we moved from animals to people. Social psychology was the subject where I first heard of Stanley Milgram. And for the first time since I’d started my degree, I felt excited, exhilarated even, aware suddenly of the potential of what I was studying. Milgram breathed life into the dry clinical world of the laboratory.

But I remember thinking even back then that Milgram’s research raised more questions than answers, that the story ended almost before it had begun. Who were the unnamed people who took part and how did they feel afterwards? And Milgram, who was he and where did he get the idea for such an ingenious experiment?
I didn’t question the account of the experiment we were presented with back then. Our textbook was authoritative, American: Harlow, McGaugh and Thompson’s *Psychology*. Published in 1971, it preceded Milgram’s first full account of his research by three years. The authors would have been relying on a handful of Milgram’s published journal articles to put together their account of the experiments. It begins:

*Although human cruelty and brutality are much easier to recognize at a distance – especially a distance in time – there is considerable evidence that many of us in all periods of history, including this one, have been specialists in inhumanity.*

*Unfortunately, many ‘normal’ human beings are perfectly capable of such behavior.*

The authors then go on to describe Milgram’s experiment, a description that I know 35 years later, is full of inaccuracies. Volunteers are described as ‘readily responding’ to orders and there is no mention of their anguish. The learner has to read a list of ‘nonsense syllables’ and the labels above the switches on the machine are described as ranging from ‘mild’ through ‘painful’ to ‘lethal.’ They continue:

*The experimenter who conducted these studies has been harshly criticized on ethical grounds. While concern for the well-being of individuals subjected to deceitful information and instruction is certainly justified, it is likely that much of*
the criticism stemmed from the nature of the findings. The degree of willingness of the subjects to comply with the requests made in these studies is not a particularly pleasant observation. The findings, however disturbing, may help us understand why atrocities are so common. We need to know why it is that over 50 million human beings were killed by other human beings in the years between 1820 and 1945. We also need to know why we routinely subject each other to less lethal forms of punishment. (p 404)

By not mentioning the subject’s distress and by repeatedly using the word ‘lethal’ to describe the final shock level on the machine the authors reinforced the notion that the subjects in this experiment were heartless killers.

No wonder that when I read this book I wanted to know more, particularly about the people who took part.

Fast forward thirty years. It was one of those between times, as a freelance writer, where I let myself imagine writing purely for pleasure, as I had when I first started out. I imagined writing just the stories I’d most like to write. Milgram was top of the list. And once it was written down, I couldn’t let it go.

I googled and found that Dr Thomas Blass was soon to publish the first biography of Milgram, The man who shocked the world. From Blass’s book I understood that the version of the OTA presented in most textbooks, including mine, was a simplification of a much more
complex story. For a start, there was no one single experiment, but 24 variations. (See Appendix 3). According to Blass, the experiments were simultaneously typical of social psychology at that time as well as breaking the mould, redefining what was acceptable in the name of psychological research. Blass described how Milgram had corresponded with some of his subjects over the years, and had conducted a survey after the experiments were over to see what his subjects thought about the experience.

But Blass’s book still felt incomplete. There was still that gap in the story, the absent voices of Milgram’s volunteers, telling us what life was like for them after the experiment was over, after Milgram was catapulted to fame on the basis of their actions in his lab. Although Blass quoted two volunteers in the book, it wasn’t enough for me. If I thought reading the biography would ease the itch, I was wrong. It made it worse.

I still didn’t know much more about the people who took part in Milgram’s experiments, let alone what happened to them afterwards. The snippets I did know were mostly provided by Milgram himself, mostly from his one book on the topic, *Obedience to Authority* published in 1974. In the book he included partial transcripts from recordings of the experiments, statistics from questionnaires he sent out to his subjects and comments he received back from people who took part. But he was selective about what he published and they remained snippets.

In the book Milgram gave one account, based on a questionnaire he sent out to them all, arguing that none of his subjects were harmed by the experience, and that in fact most of them were glad to have taken part. But this never jelled with me. How could people who had agonised,

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sweated, stuttered and groaned through the experiment later say it had no effect on them? How could you shock a man without its having an effect on you afterwards? It made me suspicious of Milgram as a narrator.

In 1993, nine years after his death, Milgram’s widow donated his papers to Yale. All the material Milgram gathered about his Obedience volunteers is in the archive. He observed and recorded everything. There are audiotapes of the 850 experiments, and subject files on each volunteer, including background information such as name, address and occupation as well as the scoring sheets from their appointments in the lab, as well as films and photographs. But much of the material about his subjects is restricted until 2039, to protect the identity of those who took part; unless you pay to have the material de-identified – a costly process where the names of the volunteers are blacked out on the file or beeped over on the audiotape before being released.

Luckily for me a handful of scholars have paid to have different parts of Milgram’s subject files de-identified, and these files are available for viewing.

When I arrived in the archives I was hoping that somewhere in those 158 boxes, those 90.25 linear feet of files, I’d hear from Milgram’s volunteers. I was hoping to piece together the story of what happened to the people in the experiment after the lab was closed, the lights were switched off and they returned home to their wives and families. I also hoped to find this famous, largely unpublished questionnaire with its baffling conclusion that most subjects were glad to have taken part.
That’s what I had come here to find out, almost fifty years after the original event. I had read and re-read the Finding Aid to the manuscript collection and identified 33 of the 158 boxes as the ones I wanted to study. The contents of each box were briefly described in the Finding Aid, but I didn’t know how big the boxes were, or how much material they contained. All I knew was that I had fifteen days to work my way through 33 boxes. I was sick of waiting around. I couldn’t sit still any longer. I left the Reading Room and I wandered the grounds of Yale, restlessly waiting for time to pass, until it was time for the first of Milgram’s boxes to make its way through the tunnels and emerge into the light.
Chapter 4 – Condition 24

The first of the boxes had arrived when I got back and I was allowed into the Archives themselves. With its soaring ceiling and delicate wrought iron staircases, the room was like a chapel, the staff offices tucked away behind pillars like side altars, the familiar diamond-paned windows high up in the thick sandstone walls.

The archivist from the anteroom that morning directed me to my boxes, which were on one of a line of trolleys parked along a wall.

People sat here and there at the long rectangular wooden tables. Some stood, unrolling maps, others tapped at keyboards. I wanted to ask them all what they were doing here. What was it that had brought them here to spend the summer poring over books and papers instead of holidaying. But no one looked up. The room was stuffy, and old-fashioned silver pedestal fans whirred, shifting hot air around.

Impatient to start, I took two boxes to a spot closest to one of the fans, and opened the first one greedily. The box was filled with beige folders, each numbered and titled.

The first box was a disappointment. Most of the letters and papers were items I’d read elsewhere. After two hours I finished with it, then pulled the second one towards me, feeling a sense of anti-climax, like someone who’s eaten a meal too fast and still feels hungry afterwards, aware even as they rushed that they should be taking their time.
As I opened the second box and pulled out a pile of folders I noticed that archivist I’d met that morning, whose nametag said, ‘Stephen’, had appeared at my table. In a soft voice he said I was to take no more than one folder out of the box at a time – the table was strewn with folders – and that I was not to change the order of any of the papers inside the folders inside the box. I nodded, my face hot, and wondered if it was my imagination that the room had gone even quieter and the man behind me had stopped typing.

How was I supposed to know these rules, I wondered? Were they on the MSSA website too? Had I missed them? I put the folders back in numerical order in the box, wondering despondently what I was doing here. The hot air pushed round by the metal fans rifled the papers in the open folder in front of me. I’d forgotten it but now the feeling came rushing back from my first year of university, the mystery and the power of academia, its ability to make you feel naïve, stupid.

I slowed down and followed his instructions conscientiously. Put all the papers back in the right order. Returned all but one folder to the box. Read everything. Slowly. And even though most of it was familiar, the detail hooked me in. Here were letters Milgram wrote to one funding body after another, telling them about his research idea, reusing the same material in each letter but pitching it slightly differently to suit his audience. He was persistent, methodical, keeping carbon copies and writing notes to himself whenever he got a response.

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His first letter, sounding out the Office of Naval Research in October 1960 (written at a time when his research was little more than an idea he was kicking around with his students) emphasised the usefulness of his research in wartime.

*If you are trying to maximize obedience, and command a person to do something in violation of his inner standards, with how much information do you present him? Do you tell him from the start the worst of what he may be expected to do, or do you extract compliance from him piecemeal? The latter procedure seemed to be the technique of the Red Chinese in trying to extract compliance from our troops in POW camps. This issue can be studied directly within the framework of the present experiment.* (SMP Box 43, Folder 126)

In the same box were the contracts from the National Science Foundation which eventually funded the research, along with Milgram’s progress reports. In one, dated January 1962, he gives an update on the 18 conditions already completed, along with some early findings. Surprisingly, Milgram concludes on the basis of his first four conditions or 150 subjects that he has discovered ‘a striking relationship between obedience and educational level’.

Although subsequent statistical analysis proved him wrong, Milgram appeared to cling to the notion that the obedient subjects were less educated (and therefore less intelligent) than those who disobeyed.

In this early progress report he’s jumped the gun, reporting too early on something that hadn’t been established. I began to wonder about his impulsiveness, his desire to impress.

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I opened the third box expecting to find familiar material again, but the contents looked different and it took me a while to understand what I was looking at. Inside the box were 58 manilla folders with four-digit numbers stamped in the right-hand top corner of each, all filed in numerical order.

Each manilla folder contained a legal waiver, on the letterhead, ‘Research Associates of Bridgeport, 1188 Main Street, Room 535, Bridgeport 3, Connecticut.’ It read: In participating in this experimental research of my own free will, I release Research Associates of Bridgeport and its employees from any legal claims arising from my participation.

There was a blank space below for a signature.

I realised I was looking at a box full of subject files for condition 23. This was an experiment which Milgram relocated away from Yale to test if the university itself had had some influence on people’s willingness to obey orders. A researcher before me had obviously paid to have these files de-identified, but still there was enough information – each subject’s age, occupation, address - to take me closer to the subjects than I’d been before.

Bridgeport was an industrial town near Yale and this was where Milgram held what he said was the final experiment in April and May 1962. Milgram rented space in the Newfield Building, which he deliberately chose because it was an anonymous-looking office building. On 12 April he wrote to Bridgeport police alerting them that his ‘field research team’ would be working in Bridgeport for six weeks and enclosing a description of the research. He concluded:
‘We have studied more than seven hundred subjects in New Haven with no difficulties arising. But we consider it best to keep local law enforcement agencies informed of this work….’

Was he expecting some sort of trouble, I wondered. Or had someone in New Haven already been in touch with the police there? (SMP Box 1A, folder 5)

It took me an hour or more to go back and forth through the files and make sense of what I was looking at. Normally Milgram ran a maximum of 40 subjects in each condition, but there were 58 files in the box. Nineteen of the files had the number 24 on them. I went back to my notes and found a reference to it in an early report to the NSF, where he described it as the ‘relation’ condition.

By then it was ten to five, and Stephen announced that it was time to stop reading.

That night I went through Milgram’s book, which made no mention of a second experiment at Bridgeport, or of a condition 24. I checked my copy of Blass’s book, but it too was silent. Why had neither of them mentioned condition 24? I went back and forth through my photos of the contents of the files. It was like putting together the pieces of a jigsaw without having a picture to guide me. Slowly a picture emerged. Instead of one volunteer in condition 24, there were two. From their addresses I found that some lived in the same street, others in the same house. They came to the lab together. Milgram had recruited pairs of friends, relatives, neighbours. One pair were father and son. He recruited nineteen pairs of volunteers in total for this experiment.

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I woke up in the night, fully dressed, the bed still strewn with papers and the laptop’s screen glowing a pale blue. While I’d slept my mind had been working. I understood what condition 24 involved. It took me a long time to get back to sleep again. I hoped the reason Milgram hadn’t published anything about condition 24 was because he was ashamed, and because when he thought about it, he had trouble sleeping as well.

The next day, Stephen helped me find the audiotapes of condition 24. Nineteen cassette tapes in one box, de-identified, available and ready for listening. I wondered who the scholar was before me who had made this discovery and why I hadn’t heard about it.

Through my headphones I listened to the first of the experiments from condition 24, subject number 2425 who has arrived at the lab with his friend and neighbour. Experimenter John Williams’ patter is practised by now. He’s been giving the same spiel five nights a week and all weekend for nine months. His delivery is brisk as he greets the two men and tells them that the experiment is about punishment and learning. The two friends draw lots for the role of Teacher and Learner.

From the paperwork I could see that the man given the Teacher role was a 32-year-old Jewish high-school teacher. From the moment he was assigned the role, I found it impossible to identify with anyone but him, the only person unaware, drawn into the play, nervous, hesitant, eager to please.
Williams straps the Learner into the chair in the adjoining room and the Teacher looks on. The following exchange takes place.

**LEARNER**  Good grief. Are you sure this is….I don’t want to sit here and be electrocuted now…

**WILLIAMS**  The shocks may be painful….Let me explain briefly to you what’s going to happen…he’ll say blue, and then he’ll read four more words and your job is to remember which of the four words was originally paired with blue.

**TEACHER**  Yeah, how bad do these shocks get?

**WILLIAMS**  They won’t be dangerous but they may be painful.

Back in the main room, Williams explains the task again to the Teacher and then is ready to begin. I imagined Milgram in the adjoining room with the Learner, whispering to him about what he wanted him to do, what he wanted him to say as each switch was pressed on the machine.

**TEACHER**  Oh, boy (nervous laughter)

**WILLIAMS**  Brisk pace, please. Attention learner, your teacher is about to begin the test. Try and remember the word pairs. Ready? Begin.
Having read the word list, the Teacher begins the test of the Learner’s memory. After each question there’s a faint buzz as the Learner indicates his answer and the answer shows up in a light box sitting on top of the shock machine. The Teacher gives his friend three shocks but it’s not until the fourth shock at 75 volts that he hears any reaction.

TEACHER  Soft rug pillow hair grass. Wrong. 75 volts.
LEARNER  Ow.
TEACHER  Soft hair (nervous laughing).
TEACHER  Cool day shade, water, cave (voice shaking)
TEACHER  Wrong, 90 volts. (laughing)
LEARNER  Ow!
TEACHER  Cool cave.
TEACHER  Gold do- llar, necklace, moon, paint (voice shaking badly)
TEACHER  Right.
TEACHER  Hard stone, head, bread, work
TEACHER  Wrong. 105 volts.
LEARNER  Ow!

TEACHER  Hard head.

TEACHER  Wet night, grass, duck, cloth.

TEACHER  Wrong. 120 volts.

LEARNER  Ow!! (long and drawn out)

TEACHER  Wet duck.

TEACHER  Brave, woman, soldier, dog, horse.

TEACHER  Wrong. 135 volts.

LEARNER  Aah!

TEACHER  Brave woman.

TEACHER  White cloud, horse, rock, house.

TEACHER  Wrong.

LEARNER  Aah! Jerry!

TEACHER  150 volts.

TEACHER  Should I stop?

WILLIAMS  No, continue please.

TEACHER  White horse. Even if he doesn’t want to?

WILLIAMS  The experiment requires that you go on. Please continue.

TEACHER  Oh boy. (pauses) Sad face, music, clown, girl.

TEACHER  Right.

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TEACHER    Short, sentence, movie, skirt, time.

TEACHER    Wrong. 165.

LEARNER    Ow! Hey Jerry, let’s stop it. I wanna get out of here, come on!

WILLIAMS   Continue, please.

TEACHER    Even though he’s against it?

WILLIAMS   Continue, please.

LEARNER    Hey, Jer?

TEACHER    (calling out to friend) He told me to keep going! (then to Williams)

            Even if it’s against his will?

WILLIAMS   Please continue, teacher, the experiment requires that you go on.

TEACHER    Oh boy.

TEACHER    Short time.

TEACHER    Sharp axe, needle, stick, blade.

TEACHER    Wrong. One eight oh.

LEARNER    Ow! Hey Jerry, that’s too much!

TEACHER    Sharp needle.

LEARNER    Come on, let me out.

TEACHER    Slow-

LEARNER    Let me out of here, come on.

TEACHER    Look, I’m not going to do this against his will.

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LEARNER Get me out of here, come on Jer!

TEACHER If he’s against it, I can’t do it.

WILLIAMS The experiment requires that you continue.

TEACHER Yeah, but if he’s against it I’m not going to continue. I mean this guy’s in pain. I can’t do it.

WILLIAMS As I said, the shocks may be painful but they’re not dangerous.

TEACHER Would you ask him if he wants to continue?

WILLIAMS No, we can’t have any contact once we’ve started the test. We should avoid any talking as a matter of fact. It’s absolutely essential that you continue.

TEACHER All right.

TEACHER Slow walk, dance, truck, music.

TEACHER Wrong. One nine five.

LEARNER Ow, Jer, get me out of here these straps. Come on! (YELLING)

TEACHER Slow dance.

TEACHER Red …brick, rose, sunset, wagon

LEARNER Come on Jer, let’s stop this. (SHOUTING)

TEACHER No, I’m not gonna continue, I’m sorry. You can have your money back.

I’m not going to continue.

WILLIAMS The money is not the issue, teacher.
TEACHER     No, I’m sorry.

LEARNER    Hey Jerry, get me out of these straps, I’m not foolin’. Let’s go. I’m serious.

WILLIAMS  The experiment requires that we continue, teacher.

TEACHER    Well I’m disassociating myself from the experiment. I can’t go on like this.

LEARNER    Get me out of here!

WILLIAMS  It’s absolutely essential that you continue.

TEACHER    I’m sorry, I can’t.

WILLIAMS  You have no other choice, teacher.

TEACHER    Why? Why do I have no other choice? He is screaming, I can’t continue doing this. I have to face this guy.

LEARNER    Jer, come on!

TEACHER    I have to be with him, he’s my neighbour and I can’t go on with this.

WILLIAMS  If you don’t continue we’ll have to discontinue the entire experiment.

TEACHER    May I speak to him?

WILLIAMS  Well, we’ll have to discontinue. No, you’re not allowed to have a conversation.

TEACHER    I can’t, I can’t go on.

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Williams then takes the Teacher through a standard set of questions asked of all subjects when the experiment is over.

WILLIAMS Let me ask you this, at what point were most tense and nervous, during the experiment?

TEACHER Around here, when he started calling to me.

WILLIAMS 135 volts?

TEACHER Beginning at ow. He started to call me and it became personal it wasn’t just a test anymore. It may be a test to you but this was a person that I know.

WILLIAMS Well, let me say this. He wasn’t really being shocked.

TEACHER He was just yelling?

WILLIAMS He was just yelling for your benefit. Did you have any doubts that he was being shocked?

TEACHER No! I thought he was being shocked. That’s why I looked over your shoulder when you were putting the straps on him.

WILLIAMS Let me tell you a little bit about what we’re doing here. Actually observing how people react to orders, you see. You might find similar situations in the army –

Milgram then enters from the next room and joins in the conversation.
WILLIAMS We’re observing how people react to orders. There’s a certain amount of tenseness involved. This is Stanley Milgram by the way.

MILGRAM Hi.

WILLIAMS It’s very similar to a situation in the army where a guy has to take orders and he may be reluctant to carry these orders out in many cases, yet he does because an officer or a person of higher rank tells him to…a situation a nurse finds herself in when she was to give a needle because the doctor has told her to. She may be reluctant to inflict pain.

TEACHER When I started flipping them (switches) my voice began to crack and I started to laugh. I had to hold down a laugh.

MILGRAM Were you laughing?

TEACHER I started to laugh.

MILGRAM Very interesting? (to Williams) Did you tell him about that?

WILLIAMS No, I haven’t mentioned it yet.

MILGRAM Well, a lot of people laugh in this situation. It’s the laughter of tension rather than the laughter of humour. What sort of things were going through your mind as the voltage increased?

TEACHER I thought he had an awful lot of guts when I started going beyond here….when I got to 195 or something I thought God! It’s toasting him!
I was so relieved when he started getting the right answers. I was shaking, I was nervous. He’s ordering me and I’m afraid to tell him to go to hell, you know. It’s important, I know, I’m working on my thesis, it’s important, but whee!

MILGRAM At what point did your friend tell you he wanted to quit?

TEACHER It was maybe three or four back from where I actually stopped. That was the first time he said it but then... The last few he seemed to delay in giving an answer. Maybe I was hoping he was, I don’t know.

MILGRAM I was answering.

TEACHER I knew someone was, someone was making a noise.

MILGRAM I was delaying it to make you think.

TEACHER He was delaying and I thought jeepers creepers. Then I looked up and you said (inaudible) numbers didn’t mean much to me in the beginning but when I get to beyond here and going up and up and up (inaudible)

MILGRAM (to Williams) You broke the news, didn’t you that he wasn’t really being shocked.

TEACHER Oh yeah, I was glad to hear it. (laughs) Very glad. It’s a horrible feeling – this guy’s my neighbour. I was talking to this guy’s wife this afternoon, they’re expecting their third child. All of a sudden I realised I’ll be talking

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to him on the way home. I hope he’ll at least drive me home. It’s a long ride home (laughs).

The Learner is brought back into the lab.

TEACHER Did he tell you anything when he put you in that chair? Did you know anything in that chair? When you were put in that chair did you know anything about it?

LEARNER Yeah.

TEACHER You rat.

BOTH Laughter.

TEACHER Oh buddy! You’re in big -

WILLIAMS He thought you really did -

TEACHER I got very nervous.

LEARNER How far did you get on this thing Jer?

TEACHER 195.

LEARNER Were you up around here?

WILLIAMS A lot of people go through to the end.

TEACHER Really?

WILLIAMS Yes, they do.

TEACHER How the hell?
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Williams and Milgram go on to describe to the two men the procedure they run through, the prods Williams uses to keep people going, the way that after 350 volts the Learner falls silent so the man at the machine thinks the Learner is dead.

MILGRAM It’s taped. It’s blood-curdling.

TEACHER You got me worried now. How far do you think I would have gone?

(laughs nervously). It bothers me now.
WILLIAMS  Do you mean if it was somebody you didn’t know?

LEARNER  I don’t think you would have gone –

MILGRAM  Let him speak. Go ahead…

TEACHER  How far would I go? I mean he said one thing to me. The whole thing- and all I could think of was the whole complicated apparatus stopping now because we stopped..the whole nationwide testing maybe. He made it sound like a big deal and I thought oh boy, I wonder if I would have really stopped. Chicken-hearted I am, but how chicken-hearted? How far would I go?

MILGRAM  People have different reasons I think. Sometimes some people have a reason, for example you’re working on your Masters and working on an experiment and you know an experiment may be valuable and if it did stop something would be lost –

TEACHER  But how can I rationalize it in my own mind?

How could he rationalise it? Milgram doesn’t give him an answer. He and Williams are clearly keen to wrap it up. They have another pair due to arrive in just a few minutes. Williams escorts the Teacher out of the room and the Learner is given a few minutes to write about why he thought his friend stopped when he did. Within a few minutes, both volunteers have left the lab

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and Williams gets on with business. The tape ends with Williams saying, ‘That was subject 2425, subject 2426 coming up.’

What was most striking about this tape was the degree to which Williams was improvising and deviating from what Milgram had implied was a tightly controlled script. Instead of four verbal prods for the Teacher to continue, I counted thirteen times that Williams insisted that the Learner go on. I checked Milgram’s book again and there was no mention of one where Williams warns that the experiment will have to be aborted unless the subject obeyed. Here’s what Milgram wrote about the prods.

*The experimenter responded with a sequence of “prods” using as many as necessary to bring the subject into line.*

*Prod 1:* Please continue, or, Please go on.

*Prod 2:* The experiment requires that you continue.

*Prod 3:* It is absolutely essential that you continue.

*Prod 4:* You have no other choice, you must go on.

The prods were made in sequence: Only if Prod 1 had been unsuccessful could Prod 2 be used. If the subject refused to obey the experimenter Prod 4, the experiment was terminated. The experimenter’s tone of voice was at all times firm, but not impolite. The sequence was begun anew on each occasion that the subject balked or showed reluctance to follow orders.
I read this passage over and over. Milgram’s description seems deliberately vague. The common interpretation has always been that if the Teacher resisted after the fourth prod, the experiment was terminated. But clearly in practise, Williams was able to use as many as he needed to ensure maximum obedience.

I couldn’t face another tape. I needed a break. I stood up and went outside for some fresh air. But outside the air was hot and heavy and I felt no cooler. I sat down on a stone bench in a small courtyard contained within the library walls and tried to empty my mind. But the Teacher Jerry’s agitation had followed me outside. Despite Milgram’s assurances, Jerry was left with questions about himself that no one could answer.

I took a break from listening and instead went through the subject files for the people who’d volunteered for condition 24. After the experiment was over, while Williams was explaining its real purpose to the Teacher, Milgram had each Learner write down an explanation of his friend’s behaviour when it came to continuing or stopping to give the shocks. Here’s what Jerry’s friend wrote about him:

Jerry is intelligent, with sufficient insight with [sic] the individuals he knows to realise that he could not continue with an experiment which deliberately inflicts pain – for any reason.
The immediate purpose of the experiment, as far as he was concerned, was certainly not worth inflicting pain on someone whether he knew them personally or not.

He is a mild-mannered person not capable of deliberately inflicting harm.

By the way, he’s a school teacher – probably doesn’t go along with this method of impressing the memory.

I pushed the file away and leaned back in my chair. What struck me, in reading this account, and the accounts of others who played the victim, was their unwavering belief in the friend’s goodness, despite the fact that in every case the friend had given them what they thought were real shocks.

But what about those who’d played the ‘teachers’? Did they feel as generous when they realised that their friend or relative had been in cahoots with the experimenter and that the pain was faked? What was the conversation like in the car on the way home that night? Between Jerry and his friend, between father and son, between the friends who’d written that they’d grown up together, double-dated and been one another’s best man at each other’s weddings?

Someone behind me unrolled a rubber band from a piece of cardboard with a ripping sound, and it was loud in the quiet space. I hoped it was a kind of shame that prevented Milgram from mentioning this experiment, but I’d listened to him on the audiotapes telling people rather proudly, I thought, about the results he’d achieved. No, his hesitation was more likely to have been about self-preservation. He’d always defended the ethics of his research and his treatment
of those people who volunteered. He probably realised that what he’d asked subjects to do in condition 24 would be particularly difficult to defend.
Chapter 5 - Candid camera

The worst thing is how easily people can be led by any kind of authority figure, or even the most minimal signs of authority. Alan Funt, creator of Candid Camera (Zimbardo, 1985, pp 47)

I remember as a child watching Candid Camera on a small black-and-white TV in my parents’ loungeroom, squirming on the bumpy woollen couch at the antics of ordinary people filmed in what they thought were private moments. The grainy footage of New York streets, or the interior of a smalltown diner - images of America dominated our Australian TV screens back then.

We squirmed watching Candid Camera. Squirmed with delight and embarrassment for Funt’s hapless but trusting victims. We watched incredulously as motorists followed nonsensical road signs and took circuitous detours from their planned routes, or a woman typist who stared open mouthed at the desk drawers that flew open each time her boss turned his back. The tension built as we the observers voyeuristically enjoyed their embarrassment and confusion, and laughed at their discomfort. Finally, when it was almost excruciating to watch, or you watched through your fingers, all was revealed.

‘Smile!’ someone always sang gaily. ‘You’re on Candid Camera.’ Even back then I was struck by the good-natured generosity of those who’d been duped. Anger and confusion gave
way to embarrassment, then relief. Then embarrassment again when they realised their reactions
had been secretly filmed to be beamed across America and as far away as Australia to
loungerooms like ours.

We enjoyed it because it seemed harmless, benign. The show’s brief, Funt said, was ‘to
expose basic human weaknesses’ and allow the audience to laugh at them (Zimbardo, 1985, pp
45).

Milgram told us his deception was harmless too. It didn’t hurt. He reported that in his
follow-up questionnaire 83% of his subjects said they were glad or very glad to have taken part
and suffered no harm as a result. They were, like Funt’s victims, good sports about the lies
they’d been told. They went along with the ‘joke’.

Except it wasn’t a joke. Milgram wrote often about their distress and I’d heard them on
the tapes, their voices breaking, shaking, pleading with the experimenter to call a halt.

Milgram argued that this distress was only ‘momentary’, that their anguish was defused
by debriefing.

But when I found the voices of his subjects in the archives, they told a different tale.
Subjects in conditions 3 to 18 were not dehoaxed. Over 600 of Milgram’s subjects left the lab
without being told of the deception.

In condition 3, volunteers were not told the shocks weren’t real. Nor were they told the
victim hadn’t received any shocks or that he had faked the pain. Instead, they were told that the
machine had been developed for use on small animals and therefore the shocks were not as

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strong nor as painful as they may have appeared, that the reason the victim cried out so much was because his ‘nervousness and anticipation’ caused him to exaggerate. (SMP, Subject transcript #301, #331, #332)

Across all conditions, and with all 800-odd subjects, while Milgram sometimes came out from behind the one-way mirror and into the lab, it is John Williams – a high-school biology teacher with no psychological training – who is left to handle whatever version of the debriefing Milgram had specified was to be delivered.

Comments from subject questionnaires show that it was in conditions 20-24, towards the end of the research, that subjects were told the true nature of the experiment. It’s not clear why Milgram decided to inform these subjects rather than all the others, but the following exchange is typical of debriefing at this point in the research and takes just a minute and a half.

WILLIAMS Let me tell you this, Mr Wallace was not really being shocked. In fact his name is McDonough and he’s a member of our team here. We are actually observing how people obey orders.  

2316 Hmmm.  

WILLIAMS Actually the research here is very important and we feel the results will be very interesting and so we had to set it up this way to make you think you were shocking someone and taking orders.  

2316 Laughs.
WILLIAMS Very similar to a situation a guy finds himself in the army a lot of times.
So we’re not trying – [calls out to ‘victim’ McDonough] Jim, why don’t you come in and say hello to Mr X now that he’s in better spirits. Ah, we don’t like to fool people but we have to set it up this way.

MCDONOUGH Hi

2316 I thought I was really hurting you.

MCDONOUGH Feel better now, don’t you?

2316 Oh, sure.

WILLIAMS You’re going to get a report on the project in a little over two months.
We’ve been running it now for about a year and we’ve done over 800 men and I think you’ll find the report very interesting when you do get it.

2316 Hmm

WILLIAMS I think you’ll be very happy you participated. I’d like to ask you not to speak about it to anyone - other than your wife of course - because you may unknowingly speak to someone who’s going to be in the experiment

2316 Oh, I see

WILLIAMS So if they know ahead of time then they won’t be…it wouldn’t be of any value. So until you get the report don’t say anything…Of course when you get the report, you can talk to as many as you want.

2316 Uh huh.

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WILLIAMS There is one more thing, could you indicate on this scale how you felt about participating, from very sorry, very glad, and so on.

2316 Now that I know the circumstances (laughs)

WILLIAMS Let me say one more thing. We’re very appreciative of …appreciate you giving us your time and it certainly was a pleasure having you here.

2316 Well, it was a pleasure being here.

WILLIAMS Good. I think you’ll enjoy the report when you get it. Thank you again for coming down tonight.

2316 Thank you for having me. (To McDonough) I’m sorry I didn’t hurt you.

(Laughter.)

WILLIAMS (into microphone) That was subject 2316, 2317 next.

What’s both typical and striking about this excerpt is that for Williams, who has by now conducted over 800 of these experiments, the experiment itself is purely routine. He delivers the debriefing as a monologue and does not invite questions or discussion with the volunteer.

Subject number 2316 was a defiant subject, stopping the experiment at 150 volts when the Learner demanded to be set free, but the pattern of debriefing across obedient and disobedient subjects in condition 23 is the same. They didn’t get much more than a minute and a half and a handshake before they were shown the door.
The cards in box 44 tell a similar story. This box contains the transcribed comments received from volunteers’ questionnaires. Many subjects who responded to Milgram’s questionnaire indicated in their written responses that it took them some time to work out what had happened in the lab, adding further evidence that Milgram’s debriefing did not involve being truthful with his subjects. Because the full extent of the deception was not explained, many appear to have left the lab under the impression that they had administered electric shocks that had caused another man to suffer.

*I actually checked the death notices in the New Haven Register for at least two weeks after the experiment to see if I had been involved and a contributing factor in the death of the so-called “learner” – I was very relieved that his name did not appear in such a column.* (SMP Box 44, Subject #716)

*I’ve been waiting very anxiously for this report to really put my mind at ease and [have my] curiosity satisfied. Many times I wanted to look up a Mr. Wallace who was my student. I was just that curious to know what had happened. Believe me when no response came from Mr. Wallace with the stronger voltage I really believed the man was probably dead.* (SMP Box 44, Subject #1817)
The experiment left such an effect on me that I spent the night in a cold sweat and nightmares because of the fear that I might have killed that man in the chair. This fear was aroused from the fact that I had to sign papers that I would bring no charges against Yale.

(SMP Box 44, Subject #711)

About a week after the test, while discussing it with friends, it dawned on me that I was probably the one who was being tested, although I didn’t suspect that the ‘student’ was an actor.

(SMP Box 44, Subject #805)

After leaving the experiment, I gave it a great deal of thought for several hours. I came to the conclusion that I was the one that was being studied. Several months later, quite by accident, I found out the truth, and my suspicions were confirmed.

(SMP Box 44, Subject #1013)

Some subjects were critical of the fact that Milgram didn’t debrief them.

From what I’ve learned from others who’ve taken part, it would seem you have been somewhat irresponsible in permitting disturbed subjects to leave without informing them that they didn’t half kill the shockee. (SMP Box 44, Subject #1137)
I seriously question the wisdom and ethics of not dehoaxing each subject immediately after the session...Allowing subjects to remain deceived is not justified, in my opinion, even if such continued deception was thought necessary ‘to avoid contamination’.

(SMP Box 44, Subject # 623)

So what did Milgram mean when he said he debriefed his subjects? He first mentions it in a letter to NSF (Box 43, folder 127) on August 15, just eight days after the experiments began.

We have given a lot of thought to ways of ensuring the subject’s well-being during the experiment, and after he leaves. We arrange for a friendly meeting between the victim and the subject. The victim spontaneously announces that the pain was not very severe, but that he became unnecessarily nervous because he saw the ‘Danger’ designation on the generator. The experimenter then interjects the remark that the shock generator is designed for use with very small animals and that the designation ‘Danger : Severe shock’ is totally inapplicable to humans. The victim apologises for his unnecessary display of histrionics, and shakes hands with the subject. All sessions have ended amicably.

It’s clear from this passage that even in the planning stages, Milgram had no intention of telling subjects that there were no electric shocks, nor that the other man was an actor. However, in his
first journal article, Milgram implied that he had told subjects the purpose of the experiment by placing the description of his debriefing under the heading, *Interview and dehoax*. But the text that followed was vague:

.. procedures were undertaken to assure that the subject would leave the laboratory in a state of well being. A friendly reconciliation was arranged between the subject and the victim, and an effort was made to reduce any tensions that arose as a result of the experiment. (Milgram, 1963)

In his reply to Baumrind, Milgram continued to use the word ‘dehoax’ to describe his debriefing.

*The exact content of the dehoax varied from condition to condition and with increasing experience on our part. At the very least all subjects were told that the victim had not received dangerous electric shocks.*

Milgram repeats the ‘friendly reconciliation’ with the Learner took place, and that he tried to restore subject’s self esteem before they left the lab.

*The experiment was explained [to disobedient subjects] in such a way that supported their decision to disobey the experimenter. Obedient subjects were assured of the fact that their behavior was entirely normal and that their feelings of conflict or tension were shared by other participants.*

Harris (in Morawski, 1988) points out that at the time of Milgram’s research, the definition of debriefing as expressed in the APA’s 1953 *Ethical Standards for Psychologists* was

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the reduction of distress. The APA guidelines made no reference to telling Ss the true purpose of the experiment or of interviewing them for their reactions.

If all Milgram had done was offer a cover story at the end of the experiment to make subjects feel better about what they had just done, he was still, technically speaking, complying with the professional guidelines for debriefing at that time. However, Milgram’s repeated published statements that he offered ‘a careful post experimental treatment’ (Milgram, 1964, p 849), and his increasing use of the word ‘dehoax’ in this context gave the impression that the post experimental interview involved full disclosure. By 1977, Milgram’s account of his procedures had changed considerably from his initial descriptions in the early 60s:

Typically, the subject is informed of the experiment’s true character immediately after he has participated in it. If for thirty minutes the experimenter holds back on the truth, at the conclusion he reaffirms his confidence in the subject by extending his trust to him by a full revelation of the purpose and procedures of the experiment. It is odd how rarely critics of social psychology experiments mention this characteristic feature of the experimental hour. (Milgram, 1977d, p 184)

Box 44 is filled with over one thousand index cards, recording subjects’ feedback, and at first glance I thought it was the sheer volume of the material that probably prevented Milgram from using it. But the more I read, the more I thought it was no wonder he didn’t publish this material. It established clearly that Milgram did not conduct a dehoaxing or explanation of the

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true nature of the experiments until they were completed in May 1962, and then he did it in the form of a written report that he sent to subjects in the mail.

All these boxes and files are filled with information, probably a hundred times more than Milgram could ever use. In fact, some of the data he has gathered and statistical analyses he has done seem absurd. On one sheet, someone has sat and recorded the numbers of times each subject has laughed and smiled during each experiment. Then the numbers are analysed by condition to see if there is an emerging pattern. But no one has seemed to ask the subjects why they were laughing. It’s as if only numbers can give an explanation.

Perhaps it’s because I’m dog tired, because I realise that this research trip has provided me with a mountain of material to take home and sift through rather than providing any straightforward answers, and that I will have to return to Yale for at least another two visits, but I feel suddenly resentful of Milgram. The obsessive data recording, the image of someone (him?) sitting behind the one-way mirror, ticking a box each time a volunteer laughed or smiled, recording the whole thing 800 times on reel-to-reel tape, bringing in groups of students, staff, friends, even his current girlfriend, to sit behind the mirror and watch the show. His continuing deception of subjects, and his deceit in passing himself off as concerned about their welfare when he delayed telling so many of them the truth for so long. The onerous job he assigned to Williams and McDonough in allowing the untrained Williams to deal with the volunteers’ anger and anguish, and McDonough, whose job to appear at the right moment, the jolly Irishman, happily unhurt by the shocks, to defuse tension.

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Section 6 - Being a subject

Dan and I sat in the centre of a room that looked like it had been a library. When I admired the room and asked him what it had been originally – the building seemed more like a stately mansion than a university department - he gave brief replies, directing my attention back to the experiment.

I was confused by Dan’s behaviour. The note I’d seen plastered on lampposts around the campus indicated someone more keen and energetic than Dan seemed to be. *Subjects needed for psychology experiment! Earn from $10 to $20 an hour!!!* I had to remind myself that this was his job. He’d slipped into his role – the disinterested and impartial experimenter - and I had to assume mine.

He mumbled his way through an introduction – clearly bored with the process that for him must be a relentless grind. Or was he bored? I began to wonder if this might be some sort of setup. I was conscious of being conscious of the experimenter, and realised too late that I hadn’t listened closely enough. We were about to begin and I still wasn’t clear what the experiment was about.

Dan didn’t seem much interested in me, I was just a subject who produced data. Dan’s job was simply to guide me through the steps required. It wasn’t always so. Early psychology, in its post-birth days, treated subjects as participants, equals, observers. More often than not it was the psychologist, the trained observer, who was the subject. But over time, as psychology joined

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the ranks of the natural sciences, particularly after the birth of behaviourism, the focus shifted (Danziger, 1990).

I signed a consent form, and after some questions about why I voted (I noticed he was not recording any of my answers, nor did it seem to matter that for me voting was compulsory) Dan gave me a case study to read about a man who grows a rare fruit. The local growers association propose to reduce the price to create demand. Should he agree? I said yes, definitely. Then I worried that I’d given the wrong answer. I felt vulnerable and suspicious. What was really going on here? Why was Dan so disengaged?

Next, he seated me in front of a laptop to play a game where I had to indicate if I would co-operate or compete with another person to win money. Dan said I was playing against someone at another university, but the laptop didn’t seem to be connected to anything other than a power cable and I guessed I was playing against the computer itself.

Once he was satisfied that I knew what to do, he left the room and told me to call out when I had finished.

I glanced around the room after he left. Was I being watched? What was Dan doing while I completed the exercises? The online game was confusing. What was the right answer? To compete? To co-operate? How did this relate to the rare fruit grower? I couldn’t reconcile what I’d been told about the experiment into a coherent whole. It was vague, disjointed, confusing. I worried if I was doing it right, or would I be shown up as some kind of idiot.
Dan seemed to loosen up in the debriefing. He seemed as relieved as I was that it was over. I didn’t mention that I’d guessed the other player was a software program. Instead I let him debrief me, then pay me my fee.

Out on the street, with my twelve dollars fifty in my hand, I still had no real idea what it was that Dan was studying. I had been so busy trying to figure it out that I’d missed it. I left mystified and bemused, despite Dan’s explanations, I wasn’t any wiser about the point of the last hour. Yet Dan would tick all the boxes for a post-experimental debrief. Trouble was, he hadn’t checked with me about what I’d understood.

How many of Milgram’s volunteers found themselves out on the street afterwards, mystified about what had just happened? How many of them were alert to clues, if not downright suspicious during the experiment itself?

When it comes down to it, the power of Milgram’s experiment rests on a belief. The same way we are invited at Yale to believe that the gym is a cathedral, the buildings are medieval rather than newly built, Milgram asks us to believe that his volunteers thought the shock machine, the actors, the pain, the whole situation, was real. Without this, the edifice crumbles, the results are meaningless. But what evidence is there that his subjects believed that his elaborate experimental set-up was real? Milgram simply told us they did, and offered as evidence the distress many of them suffered during the experiment and their belief in the strength of the shocks (Milgram, 1974, pp 172). But in the archives, there’s evidence that many subjects had doubts.

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Some subjects wrote to Milgram afterwards to give their impression of events. On August 29, 1961, Milgram received the following letter from a subject who took part in either Condition 1 or 2.

Dear Sir

I have some “second thoughts” about the experiment of last night and feel that I should express these thoughts for whatever they are worth to your program.

The author goes on to say he had worked out that he was the object of study and the experiment wasn’t about memory and learning. ‘Subconsciously’, he said he noticed details that led him to this conclusion:

Both pieces of paper probably had the word “teacher” on it. While the instructor was speaking the “learner” acted rather disinterested, which is not normal for a person in a strange experiment... When the “learner” was strapped in the chair and the instructor causally remarked that the worst that could happen was skin burns, I did not like that, it somehow does not fit in the picture... Then there were the one way mirrors, I wondered why I was not allowed to see the “learner”. Also a point was made of giving me my check and not the “learner” at the same time.

He went on to say that it’s well known that punishment doesn’t help learning and concluded:

I think the “learner” never received any shock. Hence you were observing my behavior and I would like to know a little more about the reasons for this program. Is this possible?

Ideal and real : illusion and reality in Stanley Milgram's accounts of the OTA experiments
Milgram replied two days later, telling the man that:

This experimental research is being supported by the Federal Government, and officially, I am not supposed to talk about its true purposes.

But Milgram offered to discuss the experiment with him if he could keep ‘the information confidential.’

Six months later, Milgram’s subjects are still picking up on the deception. Here’s a letter from a subject who took part in an experimental variation that involved three teachers, two of whom were confederates, and where the Experimenter was called away during the experiment by a rigged phone call.

FEB 12, 1962

Dear Dr. Milgram:

Thank you for allowing me to participate in your “Memory Project Experiment” last Saturday.

I spent an interesting hour with your coworkers, and believe that I can make several suggestions that may further your work in the future.

I arrived 15 minutes before the appointed time and stared at a vacant parking space until “Mr Wallace” appeared at 5 o’clock. His first comment was, “I thought I was going to be late, I had to park 1 1/2 blocks away.”
The subject goes on to describe the arrival of the third volunteer and how when the group of them got to a doorway, the others stood aside to let him go first. This ‘red carpet’ treatment made him suspicious, as did the drawing of lots for roles. He continued:

*As Mr. Wallace was being secured in the “electric chair”, his remark of having a “bad heart” and a history of hospitalization for it had practically no effect upon the “assistant” in charge. He dismissed the complaint with, “this machine has been tested and does no tissue damage.” This, of course, had nothing to do with the complaint.*

The Learner was strapped in the chair and the three Teachers were given their roles of reading word pairs, giving shocks and reading out correct answers. The subject said he wondered why Yale would pay three people for a job that could be done by one, and that when the Experimenter got an emergency phone call and had to leave, he knew the experiment was a set up.

*All my doubts were now confirmed – I was the one being tested!*  

The Learner began to give wrong answers, and the subject’s job was to administer shocks. At some point he disobeyed, and one of the other Teachers said he would take over:

*When “Mr. Barnaby”, very unconcerned, took over as “executioner” and continued until the “learner” was beyond replying, the experiment ended and the “assistant” showed up at the exact appropriate moment.*
I now was certain that I had “been had”. I gave the “assistant” the expected answers, the “heart victim” emerged smiling, and I was dismissed.

At this point I expected someone to say, “You have been on Candid Camera, and I am Dorothy Collins in disguise.”

The hour was late, I had a previous appointment, so I left feeling that the three remaining conspirators were feeling as pleased with themselves as I was with myself; for having seen through such an obvious test of conformity.

I hope I have been some assistance to you, and thereby earned my $4.50.

Many subjects expressed their suspicions in the questionnaire they returned to Milgram in the summer of 1962. Again, these skeptical volunteers span the full range of conditions, indicating that the authenticity of the experiment didn’t improve over time. Below are a sample from conditions 4 to 18.

I found it hard to believe that Yale would allow a paid subject (the actor) to absorb such punishment. The description on the control board was a bit far fetched (i.e. strong shock etc) ...the learner’s poor answers were not completely believable. He seemed too intelligent to stumble so. (SMP Box 44, Subject #408)

After 7 or 8 shocks my personal thoughts were that the experiment was rigged to test me and not the learner. This was based on the belief that no one associated with the experiment would take it upon himself to create a strong negative
condition to the learner with a bad heart. After the above analysis, I settled down to finish pushing all the levers. (SMP Box 44, card Subject #508)

I offered the shock recipient the opportunity to avenge himself on me by letting him give me the works. His refusal convinced me that he was an experimenter or an unshocked participant. (SMP Box 44, Subject #502)

...I honestly believed that the learner was acting, and at one point I thought his “voice” was a recording. (SMP Box 44, Subject #627)

I was of the opinion that everything was rigged and we were puppets. I did not believe that the learner was being hurt in any way. (SMP Box 44, Subject #722)

I came to the conclusion early in the experiment that the Learner was not getting any shock. (SMP Box 44, Subject #1807)

I became certain midway through the experiment that I was the only one involved. The learner’s protests as to his heart condition normally would have caused the Yale experimenter to halt the proceedings and check the seriousness of the learner’s condition. (SMP Box 44, Subject #701)
I know of several persons who took part in your experiment and were well aware what will happen to them before they went to your laboratory. This in my opinion defeats the purpose of your work. (SMP Box 44, Subject #827)

When (the learner) protested and cried out I realized that the experimenter would not have insisted that I continue if he were getting the shocks and if he was really in danger...I finished the experiment to the end no longer concerned about the learner. (SMP Box 44, Subject # 825)

I felt fairly sure that I was the only subject, and my own reactions were being studied rather than the “students”. Because of this I did continue with the program, almost feeling a gleeful pleasure at having guessed, in some degree, what was actually happening. (SMP Box 44, Subject #1914)

I caught the one way glass right away and also the “dog eared” check handed to one of your actors. I felt I had the whole operation doped out and told your Dr. Williams so. I think I was very observant and pat myself on the back for being so sharp. (SMP Box 44, Subject # 929)
I had my suspicion as to his authenticity when he went along with the experiment in spite of a supposed weak heart…My suspicions were affirmed when I said I was giving him a higher voltage shock when actually I pressed the lowest voltage button and his cries still increased. (SMP Box 44, Subject # 1434)

It was a fairly transparent attempt at charades. (SMP Box 44, Subject # 1517)

What I could see in the cards in box 44 was what critics such as Orne and Holland (1962, 1968) had pointed out. People who volunteer for experiments generally do so because they want to be helpful. They pay attention to the experimenter and invest him with benign intentions and assume the experimenter had good reason to ask them to do what he did.

Milgram’s subjects were put in a situation facing two incongruous pieces of information – the learner’s pain and the experimenter’s lack of concern for his pain. As Parker put it, “a man in apparent danger and another man – a man in a lab coat - whose lack of evident concern suggested there was no danger” (Parker, 2000, pp 118).

So who does the subject believe? If Orne and Holland were right, and the subject naturally believes the experimenter, knowing (unconsciously) that there could be no real danger, then the subject obeyed. If he did believe the learner was in danger, then he disobeyed.

This turns Milgram’s results upside down. Was the obedience a sign that people believed there was no danger involved, that at some level they’d seen through the ruse? How had
subjects’ suspicions affected their behaviour? I went back again to Milgram’s book and found this in the appendix.

Milgram (1974, p 172) argued that three-quarters of his subjects ‘by their own testimony acted under the belief that they were administering painful shocks.’ This is the table from which he drew that conclusion.

**Question 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>During the experiment</th>
<th>Defiant</th>
<th>Obedient</th>
<th>All subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I fully believed the learner was getting painful shocks</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
<td>56.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Although I had some doubts, I believed the learner was <em>probably</em> getting the shocks</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just wasn’t sure whether the learner was getting the shocks or not</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Although I had some doubts, I thought the learner was probably <em>not</em> getting the shocks</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was certain the learner was not getting the shocks</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I looked at the numbers again. Milgram’s three-quarters looked more like half to me.⁹

Late one afternoon, three days before I left Yale, I found an answer to the question that had been bothering me – had they gone to the maximum voltage because they knew it wasn’t real?

Milgram asked Taketo Murata, his research assistant in the summer of 1962, who was responsible for handling the data from his follow-up questionnaires, to compare the degrees of obedience between those subjects who said they were doubtful the learner was getting shocked and those who were certain he was. (See Appendix 4)

If it was true that many subjects would have taken their cue from the experimenter, reading his nonchalance in the face of the learner’s cries as proof that they should not be worried, then we would expect that people who had doubts about the experiment were more likely to obey. People who fully believed, on the other hand, were more likely to disobey.

Murata found that in 18 of 23 conditions, those who fully believed the learner was getting painful shocks gave lower levels of shock than people who thought the experiment might be a fake. Murata’s analysis provided a profound contradiction to Milgram’s claims. Murata found that in 18 of 23 conditions, subjects went to maximum voltage because they said they

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⁹ As Parker (2000, p 118) points out, instead of the 3/4s that Milgram reported, it is in fact more truthful to say that 56% of Milgram’s subject said they were convinced, but that 44% had some doubts as to whether the learner was being shocked.
knew they weren’t torturing anybody. In the same 23 conditions, the people most likely to disobey were those who believed someone really was being shocked. (SMP, Box 45, folder 158)

Milgram never published Murata’s paper. He made passing reference to it in defense of the interpretation of his experiments (Milgram, 1977, pp 166) pointing out that even by subtracting those subjects who did not believe the experimental situation, his results ‘are not altered’ with around 60% of those who did believe in condition 2 or Voice Feedback fully obedient. What he doesn’t mention is that in condition 3, the number of people who fully believed and fully obeyed was 30% and that in five conditions, fewer than a third of subjects said they fully believed the learner was being shocked. The highest number of people fully believing in any one condition was 26 out of 40 subjects in condition 3, the ‘touch proximity’ condition in which the Learner was seated 50-60cm behind the Teacher while the experiment was being conducted. 34% of those who fully believed in this condition went to maximum voltage on the shock machine and 66% resisted.

Milgram made a note on the bottom of Murata’s analysis (See Appendix 4) saying that the results couldn’t really be taken seriously because his subjects were of course more likely to say afterwards that they suspected or knew the experiment wasn’t real. This implies Milgram regarded his subjects as unreliable, that they were justifying their obedience by saying later that they knew experiment wasn’t real. But Milgram himself was quite ready to use the questionnaire data in other ways, to prove, for example, that his subjects were glad to have taken part. When it suited him he used this data; when it didn’t suit him, he ignored it.

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So what had he measured? If what he found was that people were less likely to obey when they thought the man was being hurt, his experiment tells us the opposite of what we’ve been led to believe. It’s not that inside us all there’s an evil Eichmann waiting for the right situation, the commanding authority figure whose destructive orders we will blindly follow. Instead Murata’s analysis suggests the opposite – that we will resist orders that involve hurting someone else.

Milgram made little use of the qualitative data from his subjects, not just because it didn’t fit his positivist, quantitative brand of science. Milgram suppressed the voices of his subjects because what they said was so subversive. The subjects’ feedback established clearly that Milgram did not conduct a dehoaxing or explanation of the true nature of the experiments until they were completed in May 1962, and then he did it in the form of a written report that he sent out in the mail. Secondly, feedback from his subjects showed evidence of people’s distress and anxiety as a result of the experiment, feelings Milgram always maintained he had allayed by the time his subjects left the lab. Thirdly, his subjects raised the frightening possibility that they hadn’t believed Milgram’s elaborate scenario was real after all.

I leave the library on my last day just on closing time. Outside, the trees are casting deep shade over the benches in the quadrangle and I sit on a bench under an elm tree. I look across the quadrangle to Linsley Chittenden Hall, where most of Milgram’s research took place, it was hard to imagine how shocked I’d been on my first day at Yale to discover that there was no plaque on
the building to commemorate Milgram’s work. Now I think I can understand why Yale prefers not to remember.

The 33 boxes are stacked on trolleys waiting to be taken back into storage. My bags are packed and I’m ready to leave. So what have I found? I’ve found that Milgram’s obedience to authority research is not what I thought it was. I’m less certain of his results, less certain of what his research means at all. I’m definitely less admiring of him.

I think about all the people who had passed through this quadrangle on their way home from the experiment. Some people were angry, some were amused, some smiled, some were sceptical, some were suspicious, some swallowed it hook, line and sinker.

The story of Milgram’s obedience research depends very much on the way it’s told. The standard story reproduced in the media, films, books and plays, and handed down to generations of psychologists through lectures and textbooks has been shaped and simplified. The rough edges have been knocked off, uncomfortable questions have been smoothed over. The story of the obedience research has to be told a certain way in order to be believable. It has to be shaped, edited, simplified.

The bells of Harkness Tower ring, resonating through the hot still air. The leaves of the trees move, stirred by a faint breeze that dies again. A cyclist does a lazy figure eight and disappears through a stone archway.

Beyond the thick walls I can hear the faint buzz of traffic. I cross the quadrangle where the heat seems to radiate from the stone walls, glad to escape from the oppressive silence, the

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breathless heat. Milgram’s volunteers must have felt the same way when they came out of the lab, relieved to finally get away from bleakness and cruelty, escaping to home, loved ones and family.

A car toots, a bus roars past, a group of teenagers shouts with laughter on the edge of New Haven green. A breeze picks up. I take a deep breath of fresh air. People flow past on their way home from work, and I join them.
Appendix 1 – New Haven Register advertisement

The advertisement read:

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, city employees, labourers, barbers, businessmen, clerks, professional people, telephone workers, construction workers, salespeople, white collar 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.

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Appendix 2 – Subject recruitment letter

The letter reads:

MEMORY AND LEARNING PROJECT

Yale University

New Haven Connecticut

Dear Sir:

We need your help.

We require five hundred New Haven men to help us complete a scientific study of memory at Yale University.

Each person who participates in this study is paid $4.50 for 1 hour’s time. There are no strings attached. We need you for only one hour. There are no further obligations.

No special training, education, or experience is needed. We want persons of all occupations: factory workers, businessmen, laborers, professional people, and others. We need persons from all over New Haven and the surrounding communities.

You may choose the hour you would like to participate; it may be in the evening, on weekends, or on weekdays. You must be between the ages of 20 and 50. We cannot use high school or college students.

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If you meet these qualifications and would like to take part in this Yale study, fill out the enclosed post card and drop it in the mailbox. The exact time and place of the study will be arranged later, at your convenience. (We reserve the right to decline any application.)

To repeat the facts:

1. You are wanted for a study of memory at Yale University.
2. You will be paid $4.50 for one hour of your time.
3. There are no strings attached. This is a sincere offer.
4. You may choose your own hour: evenings, weekends, or weekdays.
5. If we can count on you, fill out and mail the enclosed card.

Your help is greatly appreciated, and we look forward to hearing from you soon.

Your truly,

Stanley Milgram, Ph.D.

Director
Appendix 3 - Description of conditions 1-24

The following list was generated from the Obedience Notebook (SMP: Box 46, folder 163)

Note: I have marked with an asterisk those percentages which were more difficult to determine due to the complicated nature of that condition eg the experiment was divided into Part A and Part B or because definitions of obedience and defiance changed in some conditions. This was made more complicated by the fact that Milgram changed the titles of some conditions in his book, and only reported on 18 of the 24 conditions he conducted.

Those obedience rates not marked with an asterisk are those I was able to cross check using the Obedience notebook and Milgram’s book, *Obedience to Authority*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>No feedback</td>
<td>Learner in another room. Pounds on wall at 300 volts.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Voice feedback</td>
<td>Learner’s cries are audible</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Proximity</td>
<td>Learner is seated 50 cm behind Teacher</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Touch proximity</td>
<td>Teacher holds Learner’s hand on shock plate</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Coronary tape (Williams-McDonough)</td>
<td>Learner mentions heart trouble at beginning and during cries</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Coronary tape (Elgiss-Tracy)</td>
<td>Learner mentions heart trouble at beginning and during cries</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Groups for disobedience</td>
<td>Three teachers, two are confederates. Two confederates refuse to obey.</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Three teachers two of whom are confederate who disobey)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Qualifying volunteer</td>
<td>Learner agrees to participate only if he can leave when he wants. When he demands to be let out, E tells S to continue.</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Learner qualifies his participation)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Groups for obedience</td>
<td>Same as 7 except two confederate teachers obey and mutter their disapproval if S resists.</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Three teachers, two of whom are confederates and obey)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Benign Experimenter</td>
<td>At level 10, E tells S to stop. But the Learner wants to keep going and implores S to continue.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Experimenter tells S to stop)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Group choice</td>
<td>Shock level to be chosen by three Teachers, two of whom are confederates. Shock given is lowest</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Ideal and real: illusion and reality in Stanley Milgram's accounts of the OTA experiments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Three teachers determine shock level)</th>
<th>suggested by the three, with the S the final one to suggest shock level.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authority as victim</td>
<td>Learner says he will only be the Learner if the Experimenter tries it first. Learner and Experimenter swap roles and Learner urges S to continue with shocks despite protests from E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Experimenter strapped into chair and given shocks)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non trigger position</td>
<td>Identical to condition 7 except that S simply reads the words instead of giving shocks. Shocks given by one of two other confederate teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Naïve S does not have to flick the switch)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carte blanche</td>
<td>S can choose any shock level he wishes. Therefore obedience not requested nor measured.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double authority 1</td>
<td>Two Experimenters, who give the S conflicting orders. One says stop, the other says go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Two experimenters)</td>
<td>Two Experimenters. Victim fails to show so one E volunteers to be the Learner. Second E conducts experiment as usual, urging S to continue shocking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double authority 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Two experimenters)</td>
<td>Two teachers. Experimenter called away and gives one Teacher, the confederate, the role of determining shock levels that naïve S must administer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common man as authority</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Naïve subject required to obey a 'common man')</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimenter departs</td>
<td>E called away. Leaves S alone to conduct experiment. Leaves S a phone number where he can be reached. If S rings E, E gives standard directions over the phone.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Compliance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>No experimenter</td>
<td>All instructions given by tape. A phone is in the room so S can call E if needed.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(All instructions delivered by audiotape)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Same as condition 5 but using women as subjects.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Public opinion</td>
<td>This was not an experiment but a poll of psychiatrists, graduates and undergraduates asked to predict levels of obedience when the experiment described to them.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Common man authority 2</td>
<td>Two teachers, one a confederate. E called away by rigged phone call. Naïve S gives shocks. When he will go no further, confederate teacher takes over giving increasing levels of shock. Note: Experiment ends when S takes physical action – eg switching off machine or physically restraining confederate teacher.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bridgeport</td>
<td>Replication of condition 5 at nearby town of Bridgeport.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Test of influence of Yale as setting)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Pairs of Ss who have a relationship arrive and are allocated role of Teacher or Learner.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 4 - Reported belief in shocks and level of obedience

Reported belief in shocks and level of obedience. (Taketo Murata)

The following is a condition-by-condition analysis to determine whether shock level reached was affected by the extent to which the subject believed that the Learner was actually receiving shock.

In each condition the shock levels reached by those who fully believed (as indicated by response 1 in column 45) were compared with those who did not fully believe (responses 2, 3, 4, or 5 to column 45). A further breakdown is then made for those in the latter category according to the extent of belief, i.e. a separate analysis of shock levels is made for those choosing responses, 2, 3, 4 or 5 in column 45.

It would be hypothesized that those reporting that fully believing that the Learner was being shocked would not reach as high shock levels as those not fully believing. This is found to be so as shown in the following analysis:

Those who fully believed have lower means in 18 conditions

Those not fully believing have lower means in 3 conditions

Equal means in 2 conditions

By the sign test the probability of no difference in means between the two groups is .0001.

T. Murata
Notes by SM: We are dealing of course with the reported beliefs of subjects; not necessarily the actual beliefs at the time the subject was in the experiment. The information is taken from the follow-up questionnaire, and not the post-experimental interview. It may be, of course that changing the belief is a defense mechanisms. Probably some of it is a real relationship, xxxx some of it defensive. Note the detailed way Taketo has done the analysis, for each condition has has given the obedient-defiant split (tens, teens, twenties, thirties, and the mean level. He has done this for the fully believed category only. Then for all other categories combined (labeled not fully believed) then the three lower categories separately, and combined.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition Number</th>
<th>Extent of belief</th>
<th>10 or less</th>
<th>11-19</th>
<th>20’s</th>
<th>30</th>
<th>Mean Level</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Fully believed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26.42</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
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