



Presentation 3+: Joint commitments and the Milgram experiment

Herbert H. Clark
Stanford University

1

What is a commitment?

Private self-commitments

I commit myself *to myself*
to doing something

New Years resolutions
To-do lists

If I renege:

I disappoint myself



3

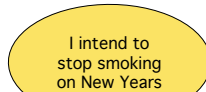
Public self-commitments

I commit myself to myself
but make the commitment
public to certain others

Public pledges (as in AA)

If I renege:

I disappoint myself
I disappoint you



4

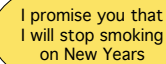
Other-commitments

I commit myself *to you* to do something

Promises, vows to others
Guarantees, warranties

If I renege:

I disappoint myself
I disappoint you
I diminish your trust in me



5

Participatory commitments

I commit myself to you *to*
doing my part of a joint
action *with you*

Contracts, compacts

If I renege:

I disappoint myself
I disappoint you
I diminish your trust in me
I undermine your intentions



6

Joint commitments

You and I *jointly commit* to a joint action if:

(1) I *commit myself to you* to doing my part of the
joint action with you

and

(2) you *commit yourself to me* to doing your part of
the same joint action with me

7

Jointly committed to *what*?

Participants	Who are to take part?
Roles	In what roles?
Content	What actions, what positions?
Timing	When are actions to take place, or positions to be adopted?
Location	And where?

8

Hierarchies of commitment

9

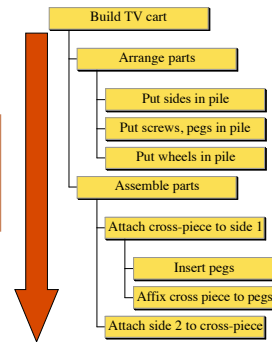
Commitments grow, change, disappear

Commitments are ...

1. hierarchical
2. incremental
3. changeable *within limits*
4. stacked
5. persistent

10

Hierarchies are created in increments

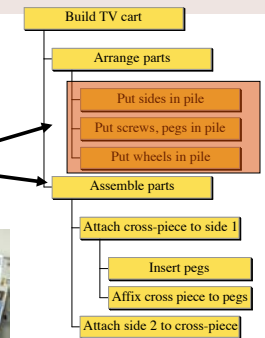


11

Changes

Solo change is *unilateral*
Hierarchy of changes

Changes in lower levels
No effect on higher levels

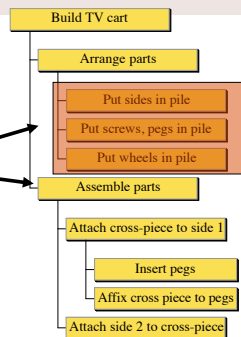
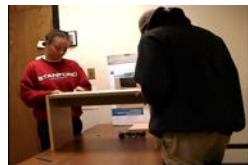


12

Changes

Joint change is *negotiated*
Hierarchy of changes

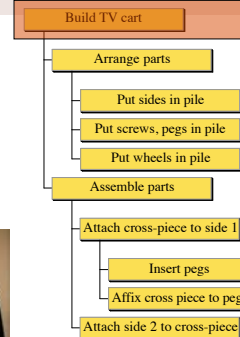
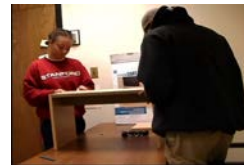
Changes in lower levels
No effect on higher levels



13

Stacking

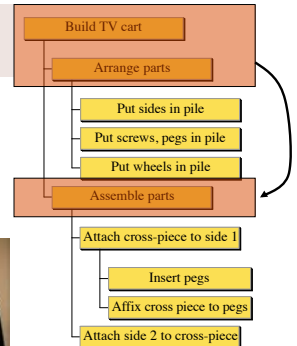
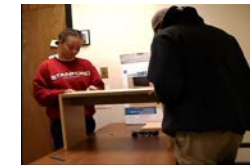
Future commitments *stack up* as participants get into joint activity



14

Stacking

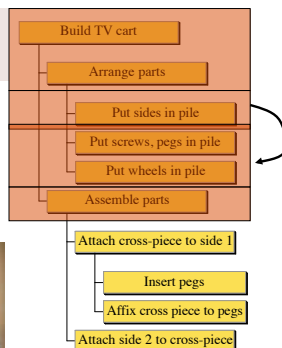
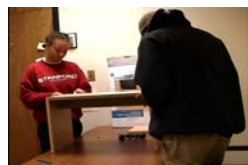
Future commitments *stack up* as participants get into joint activity



15

Stacking

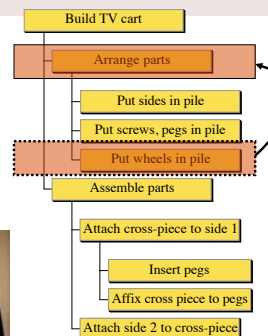
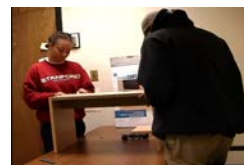
Future commitments *stack up* as participants get into joint activity



16

Persistence

Past commitments *persist* until they are discharged



17

If I fail to fulfill a commitment, ...

Solo activity

I **drop** certain past and future self-commitments

I **abandon** my current activity

Joint activity

I **renege** on certain past and future joint commitments

I **subvert** our joint activity

- disappointment
- stress
- anger
- disruption

18

Exploiting joint commitments for good and evil

19

Why make joint commitments?



Benefits

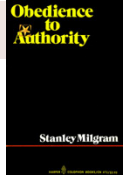
A and B **gain partial control** over each other
A and B can do things they could not do alone

Risks

A and B **cede partial control** to each other
A and B may be drawn into **unwanted, dangerous, unethical actions**
A and B have to **negotiate to opt out**

20

Milgram's "obedience to authority"



"A person comes into the psychological laboratory and is **told to carry out a series of acts** that come increasingly into conflict with conscience"

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

21

Actions framed as *unilateral, autonomous*



"A person ... **is told to carry out** a series of acts"

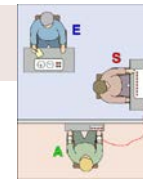
"Good people **knuckle under to the demands of authority**"

"Good people ... **perform actions** that were callous and severe"

"Good people ... **were seduced** by the **uncritical acceptance** of the experimenter's definition of the situation"

22

Ostensible experiment: "study of memory"



Two volunteers go to laboratory
One volunteer is assigned to be "teacher"
The other is assigned to be "learner"

Task

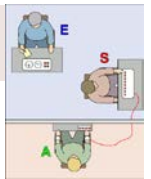
Learner to memorize word pairs
Teacher to shock learner for each wrong answer

Goal

Learner learns all word pairs

23

Actual experiment: "Obedience to authority"



Lone volunteer goes to laboratory
Volunteer is met by "experimenter"
Volunteer is assigned to be "teacher"
Confederate is assigned to be "learner"

Task

Experimenter gets volunteer to carry out memory task

Goal

Volunteer completes memory task

24

Details (Milgram, 1963)

Volunteers

40 paid males per experiment
From factory workers to professors

Laboratory

1. "Interactional Laboratory," Yale University
2. Modest lab in Bridgeport, Connecticut

Three characters

1. *Teacher* played by volunteer
2. *Learner* played by a 47-year-old accountant.
3. *Experimenter* played by a 31-year-old biology teacher
(his manner was impassive and his appearance somewhat stern)



confederate

25



Teacher at shock generator

30 switches labeled 15 to 450 volts

Slight Shock; Moderate Shock, Strong Shock, Very Strong Shock, Intense Shock, Extreme Intensity Shock, Danger: Severe Shock, and XX

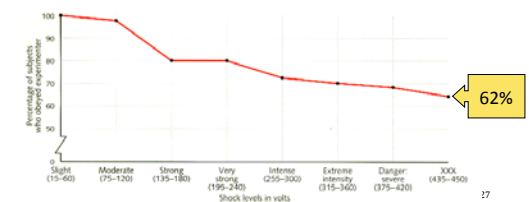


Experimenter prods

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."

26

Typical result



27

What is the “situation”? Two joint activities

Memory task

Participants
Teacher, learner

Basic activity
Teaching word pairs

Coordinating actions
Scripted adjacency pairs:
Teacher says first word
Learner says second word

Feedback adjacency pairs:
Teacher says “correct” or shocks
Learner stays silent or groans

Psychology experiment

Participants
Volunteer, experimenter, confederate

Basic activity
Carrying out psychology experiment

Coordinating actions
Experimenter instructs volunteer
Volunteer and experimenter negotiate what to do

28

Joint commitments created

Memory task

Parties to joint commitments

1. Teacher
2. Learner

Overall joint commitment
Teacher to teach word pairs to learner

Psychology experiment

Parties to joint commitments

1. Volunteer
2. Experimenter

Overall joint commitment
Volunteer to complete memory task for experimenter

Milgram's question:

At what point will volunteer *unilaterally* opt out of, or *renege on*, the joint commitments?

29

Volunteer and experimenter negotiated joint commitments about...

- what to do
- who was responsible
- damage to “learner”
- exiting the memory study
- importance of memory study

30

Negotiating tactics

Tactics stressed by Milgram

1. Commands

Tactics *not* stressed by Milgram

2. Mitigation
3. Disregard of proposals
4. Exploitation of joint commitments

31

1. Commands (noted by Milgram)

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.”

32

2. Mitigation (as described by Milgram)

If the subject asked if the learner was liable to suffer permanent physical injury, the experimenter said: “Although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent tissue damage, so please go on.” (Followed by Prods 2, 3, and 4, if necessary.)

If the subject said that the learner did not want to go on, the experimenter replied: “Whether the learner likes it or not, you must go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly. So please go on.” (Followed by Prods 2, 3, and 4, if necessary.)

33

Actual mitigation was *negotiated*

Subject: I mean who's going to take the responsibility if anything happens to that gentleman?

Experimenter: I'm responsible for anything that happens to him. Continue please.
[36 turns intervening]

Experimenter: Continue. Go on.

Subject: You accept all responsibility?

Experimenter: The responsibility is mine. Correct. Please go on.

34

3. Disregard of proposals

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

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

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

Experimenter: (his voice is patient, matter-of-fact): The experiment requires that you continue, Teacher.

35

Disregard of proposals

Example 1

Subject: You hear him hollering?

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

Example 2

Subject: What's going to happen to him?

Experimenter: The experiment requires that you continue, Teacher.

Example 3

Experimenter ignored all yells and groans from “learner”

36

To disregard a proposal implies that it is ...

- *irrelevant* to current activity
- *too obvious* to deal with
- *misconceived*
- *unimportant* to the current activity
- *pre-empted* by a more important action

37

4. Exploiting *joint* commitments

Joint commitments are difficult to break

Why?

1. They are **hierarchical**
2. They are **created incrementally**
3. They **stack**
4. They **persist**
5. They are normally **ended only by negotiation**
6. They are **costly to renege on**

38

1. Enter experiment with others at Yale laboratory	
1.1 Arrange roles of teacher, learner, experimenter for memory task	
1.2 Establish procedure for memory task	99 past
1.3 Enter memory task proper	joint commitments
1.3.1 Instruction on word pair 1	
1.3.2 Instruction on word pair 2	
1.3.3 Instruction on word pair 3	4 persisting
...	joint commitments
1.3.14 Instruction on word pair 14	
1.3.14.1 Exchange word pair 14	
1.3.14.2 Exchange feedback on word pair 14	
1.3.14.2.1 Teacher gives learner feedback, e.g. a major shock	
1.3.14.2.2 Learner responds to feedback	
[1.3.15 Instruction on word pair 15	many stacked
...	joint commitments
[1.4 Exit memory task	
...	
[2. Exit experiment with others at Yale laboratory	

If Sam is teacher,

What are his options at 1.3.14.2.1?

40

Option 1: Refuse to deliver shock

If Sam *refused* to deliver the shock,

- he would *renege* on all of the joint commitments in the stack below it
- he would *unilaterally* destroy everything he and the experimenter had accomplished together

Few subjects took this option

41

Option 2: Negotiate a joint exit

Many subjects tried this, but the experimenter refused

42

Option 3: Negotiate a reframing

The shocks might be reframed ...

- as not really so harmful
- or as the experimenter's responsibility

Many subjects tried this and succeeded

43

Option 4: Deliver the shock

If Sam delivered the shock, he would ...

- continue their long record of joint achievements
- maintain the stack of joint commitments yet to be acted on

Most subjects took this option to the maximum shock level

44

So what *is* Milgram's experiment?

Is it a study ...

of "obedience to authority"?

of individuals making *autonomous* commitments?

Or is it a study ...

of *negotiating* a joint activity?

of individuals establishing *joint* commitments?

and negotiating who is responsible for what?

45

Social actions lead to social commitments

Joint activities require joint commitments

People establish joint commitments by communication

By speech, gestures, placement, gaze

Joint commitments ...

- are hierarchical
- are created incrementally
- stack, persist
- are changed by negotiation

Joint commitments can be exploited for good or ill