

ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

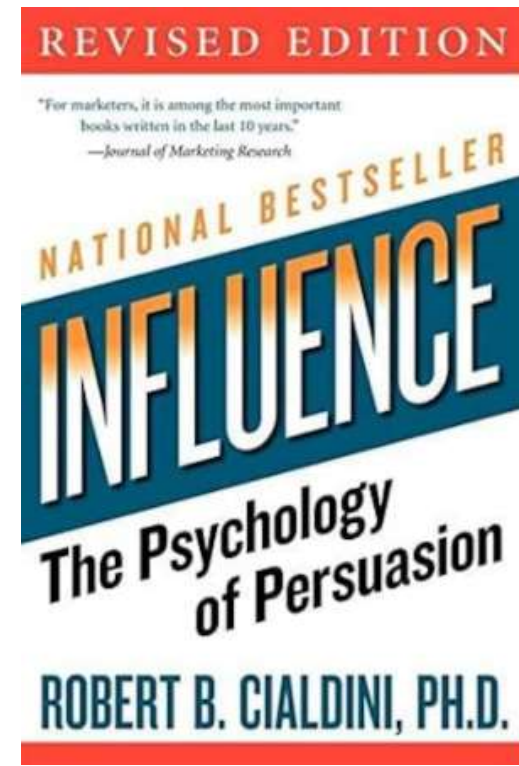
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Lesson 15

social influence and persuasion principles

A few fundamental persuasion processes (Cialdini)

- LIKING
- UNITY
- CONSISTENCY
- SCARCITY
- SOCIAL PROOF (or VALIDATION)
- **AUTHORITY**
- **RECIPROCITY**

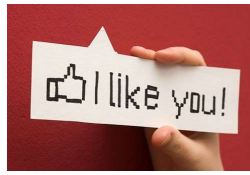


- they are relevant not just as persuasion principles (eg. as selling or negotiating techniques) but also (and mostly) as useful concepts to better understand social influence and human behavior, including organizational behavior
- as we will see, often they can be relevant at the same time in the same situation (they can strengthen each other)
- we will describe each of these, and then we'll see why they are relevant to organizational behavior and HRM

LIKING

*WE ARE MORE EASILY PERSUADED AND
INFLUENCED BY PEOPLE WE LIKE*

LIKING



- *WE ARE MORE EASILY INFLUENCED AND PERSUADED BY PEOPLE WE LIKE*
 - *LIKING can stem from physical attractiveness, similarity, compliments, familiarity, and genuine rapport.*
 - *LIKING can be built both through natural connection and through strategic behaviors (such as finding and emphasizing commonalities)*
- Physical attractiveness in management
 - in management: Fortune 500 CEOs (in 2016):
 - » they are on average 1.83 m tall, approximately 6.4 cm taller than the average American male
 - » about 30% are 1.88 m tall or more; only 3.9 per cent of the overall US population is as tall
 - » less than 3% of CEOs are below 1.70 m
 - » 90% of CEOs are of above average height

LIKING: physical attractiveness



- **Physical attractiveness in politics**
 - available studies show that people could predict election winners just by looking at photos of candidates' faces for only a second
 - the candidates seen as "more competent-looking" (often tied to attractiveness and facial symmetry) were more likely to win.
 - attractiveness not only influences competence perceptions but also **trustworthiness and likability** — both of which can sway undecided voters
 - a famous case: Kennedy vs Nixon in 1960: the different perception of tv viewers and radio listeners (very plausible, but actual data are limited)
- **Physical attractiveness in the justice system**
 - Research shows that more attractive defendants tend to receive lighter sentences than less attractive ones for the same crimes
 - attractive plaintiffs in civil trials are often awarded higher damages than less attractive ones
 - an interesting **exception**: attractive defendants were sometimes penalized more harshly if their attractiveness was seen as having facilitated their crime (e.g., in cases of seduction or swindling).

LIKING: similarity



- Similarity

- creates a sense of connection and in-group belonging, which lowers resistance to persuasion
- this instinct comes from evolutionary roots: trusting those "like us" was historically safer

- EXPLANATIONS:

- Social Identity Theory:

- We partly define ourselves by our **group memberships**. People who seem similar activate a feeling of **shared identity** ("us" versus "them")

- Reduced Uncertainty:

- people that are similar to us **feel more predictable**, because we can project our own intentions and preferences into them, so we trust them more

- Self-Validation:

- when someone similar to us endorses an idea, it feels like **confirming our own choices and values**.

LIKING: subtle cues and counter-cases



- even very «subtle cues» can generate some degree of liking
 - e.g. sharing a birthday, having the same initial, mimicking the mannerisms of the other person («mirroring»), etc
 - some selling techniques are based on the seller's strategic imitation of the potential buyer
- SOME CAUTION: there are circumstances in which similarity **does not work**, or where it can even **backfire**. For example:
 - being inauthentic or forced
 - over-emphasizing trivial similarities
 - assuming that superficial similarities are enough to generate liking
 - ignoring significant differences
 - exaggerating «mirroring»

LIKING: what about difference? (1)



- can the opposite be also true?
- in other words, can a **perceived difference**, instead similarity, induce liking and, by consequence, more probability to be influenced or persuaded?
- Yes, but with some conditions. Typical mechanisms:

1. Admiration-Based Attraction

- If a person is perceived as different in a **positive, admirable** way, that difference can trigger respect, curiosity, and aspiration.
- This emotional engagement can lead to liking, deference, and greater openness to influence
- Key Mechanism: it's not "they're like me," but rather "I admire them for being what I would like to be"

LIKING: what about difference? (2)



2. Complementarity Hypothesis

- people are sometimes attracted to those who are **different** in ways that **complete** or **enhance** their own traits.
- Examples:
 - A highly detail-oriented person may admire a big-picture thinker
 - A risk-averse person may be drawn to a bold innovator
 - in these cases, **difference** can foster admiration and even functional trust, making persuasion and influence more likely

3. Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

- people have two simultaneous needs: to **belong** (fit in, be like others) and to feel **unique** (stand out, be different).
 - People who are **different enough** to be interesting but **similar enough** to be **relatable** can hit a "sweet spot", making them especially persuasive.
 - Example: a charismatic leader who shares **basic values** (similarity) but expresses them in **bold, unusual ways** (difference) may be more compelling than someone who's "just like everyone else."

LIKING: difference and similarity



- MORE RELEVANT CONDITIONS
- Difference must be admired, not threatening
 - We admire what we aspire to be; we resist what feels threatening
- Core values and goals must be shared
 - we tend to resist values and goals that we perceive as undesirable
- Difference must spark curiosity, not alienation
 - Interesting differences invite learning and trust; extreme differences can cause distrust
- Perception of accessibility
 - The admired person must feel reachable, not impossibly "above" us or impossible to follow as an example

MORE GENERALLY, (perceived) SIMILARITY CAN FOSTER LIKING
THROUGH COMFORT, (perceived) DIFFERENCE CAN FOSTER
LIKING THROUGH ASPIRATION

The Tupperware case (and MANY others)

- The huge commercial success of Tupperware was significantly boosted by the “Tupperware party” idea
- Other notable examples:
- AVON, VORWERK, and many others
- **HOW ABOUT INFLUENCERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA?** Do you think they use the «liking principle»?
 - Instagram Stories, TikTok Lives, Affiliate Links etc
 - they also use other principles, as we will see shortly



Tupperware®



AVON

CONSISTENCY

*WE ARE MORE EASILY INFLUENCED AND PERSUADED
TO BEHAVE IN WAYS THAT ARE CONSISTENT WITH
ACTIONS OR SITUATIONS IN WHICH WE ARE ALREADY
COMMITTED*

CONSISTENCY: definition



- *ONCE WE HAVE COMMITTED TO A POSITION OR TO AN ACTION, WE ARE MORE EASILY PERSUADED AND INFLUENCED TO BEHAVE IN A WAY THAT IS CONSISTENT WITH SUCH POSITION OR ACTION*
- Consistency is generally valued because it signals to others **rationality, stability, and integrity**
 - Inconsistency, by contrast, can make people seem confused, unreliable, or even dishonest.
- This principle is often activated through a process of **commitment**. Once we commit (especially actively, voluntarily, and publicly), the desire of appearing consistent pressures us to follow through
- a phenomenon similar, but not identical, to the «sunk cost effect»
 - the consistency principle is significantly based on the «social» aspect (the desire to appear consistent to others)
 - the sunk cost effect is more directly related to past resources expenditures on the same course of action

CONSISTENCY: explanations



- HOW DOES RESEARCH EXPLAIN THIS PHENOMENON?
- Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957): People experience psychological discomfort (dissonance) when their behaviors and attitudes are inconsistent. To reduce discomfort, they adjust either behavior or attitudes to decrease dissonance
- Self-Perception Theory (Bem, 1967): People often infer their attitudes and beliefs from their own past behavior ("I said I support recycling, so I must care about the environment"). It's equivalent to **learning about ourself by observing our past behavior** just like we learn about others by observing them
- Identity-based Motivation: Recent research suggests that consistency is not just about avoiding discomfort, but about **maintaining a coherent self-image**. We want to act in ways that match our self-concept ("I'm the kind of person who keeps promises")

CONSISTENCY: persuasion techniques



— The «foot in the door» technique

- The «seller» asks something extremely small, which almost certainly will be accepted. Then, later, makes a more significant request which appear to be consistent with the first one.
- (Pliner et al): the «pin» example at the mall

• The «lowball» technique

- a very attractive initial offer is made in order to commit a potential customer into it, and then making the offer less favorable (e.g., increase the price of the product or service)

— In meetings:

- In a team meeting, the leader asks participants to say out loud that they support a project. Later, even when difficulties arise, those who voiced their support are more likely to stick with the plan

CONSISTENCY: when it doesn't work



— Forcing Commitment

- If people feel forced or manipulated into making a commitment, it doesn't trigger real consistency pressure — and can even cause **reactance** (resistance to being controlled)

— Making Commitments Too Big Too Soon

- If the first commitment feels too large too quickly, people might refuse it outright or later rationalize abandoning it

— Misaligning Commitment with Identity

- if the commitment doesn't feel **personally meaningful**, it won't have much sticking power. People stick to commitments that align with how they see themselves or want to be seen

CONSISTENCY: when the effect is stronger



- The strongest consistency effect happen when:
 - People actively make a commitment (not passively) that is voluntary (not coerced)
 - The commitment requires effort (writing, signing, publicly stating)
 - It's public (others know about it)
- However, making PUBLIC commitments does not always strengthen the consistency effect
 - When we make our goals public and receive social recognition (e.g., praise, approval), we may feel a premature sense of accomplishment (as if we've already achieved part of the goal just by talking about it)
 - this can reduce our motivation to actually follow up, because our psychological reward circuit has already been partly triggered
 - for example, publicly stating the goal may create a feeling of identity affirmation ("I'm already the kind of person who cares about this goal"), without the actual effort
 - this is called "IDENTITY GOAL SUBSTITUTION"
 - how to avoid it? DO NOT make public statements about general, wide, vague goals, but about specific, tangible, observable target goals and actions
 - remember goal setting theory: goals must be specific in order to have motivational strength

SCARCITY

*WE ARE MORE EASILY INFLUENCED AND PERSUADED TO
MAKE CHOICES ABOUT OPTIONS THAT WE PERCEIVE ARE
(or, WILL BE) SCARCE OR UNAVAILABLE*

SCARCITY: definition



- *we are more easily persuaded to make choices about options that we perceive are (or, will be) scarce or unavailable because scarcity increases perceived value*
- scarcity is often a good proxy for economic value
 - so, it is not irrational to associate scarcity to value; however, notice that «value» is not only about «economic value»; also, notice that «economic value» is not just about scarcity
- so, our sensitivity to scarcity can be more or less rational (or even irrational) depending on contextual elements. It is not rational when:
 - Scarcity is artificially created:
 - a "limited edition" item that is actually mass-produced later. Scarcity is manipulated
 - Scarcity is irrelevant to actual value:
 - a "flash sale" on a mediocre product
 - Emotional urgency supersedes rational evaluation:
 - the urge to buy a lot on Black Fridays: FOMO! (Fear of Missing Out)
 - Loss aversion outweighs actual gain potential:
 - Accepting a scarce offer just to not lose it, even if you didn't originally want it
 - Combination of social proof and scarcity:
 - When we see others desiring the scarce option, that option feels even more valuable, regardless of our own actual needs.

SCARCITY: psychological roots



- in general, this principle is related to:
- **LOSS AVERSION** (Prospect theory, Tversky & Kahnemann)
 - we are more sensitive to potential losses than potential gains
 - scarcity evokes a potential loss of opportunity
- **REACTANCE** (Brehm) and **SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY** (Deci, Ryan)
 - When individuals perceive their freedom to choose is being restricted (e.g., a product may soon be unavailable), they experience a **psychological reactance**—a motivation to reclaim that threatened freedom, often by wanting the item even more
 - in Deci's terms: **autonomy** as a fundamental human need
 - Some studies show that people were willing to pay extra just to have more options, even when the set of already available options are objectively or subjectively better (preferred to) than the extra options
 - what they are really paying for is the sense of having more autonomy, more freedom to choose
- DO YOU THINK THAT CENSORSHIP MAY HAVE A CONNECTION WITH THE PERCEPTION OF SCARCITY?

Examples from advertising



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30% OFF

Regularly ~~\$29.99~~ - Now **ONLY \$20.99**

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Use Code : **COUP30**

Please enjoy this Exclusive, Limited Time Coupon!
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Offer Good for First Time JewelMint Membership Purchases ONLY.
Offer Good for 12 HOURS ONLY.

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UNITY

*WE ARE MORE EASILY INFLUENCED OR PERSUADED BY
OTHERS IN SITUATIONS IN WHICH WE PERCEIVE THAT
WE SHARE A DEEP COMMON IDENTITY*

UNITY: definition



- **WE ARE MORE EASILY INFLUENCED OR PERSUADED BY OTHERS IN SITUATIONS IN WHICH WE SHARE A COMMON IDENTITY**
- It's about more than just "liking" someone. It's about "merging" the self with others in a meaningful way
- different factors that activate a sense of unity:
- **Kinship:**
 - Actual family ties, but also metaphorical family language ("brother," "sister," "our family of customers")
- **Shared groups:**
 - Same hometown, same religion, same sports team, same alma mater, etc
- **Shared experience:**
 - Going through a hardship together, working on a difficult project, surviving an event
- **Shared physicality:**
 - Literal proximity, synchronized movements (e.g., marching, dancing), or wearing the same uniforms or clothes
- **Shared language and symbols:**
 - Using "insider" terms, slang, or group-specific jokes

UNITY: application examples



- **in marketing:** building a "Brand Community"
 - Harley-Davidson doesn't just sell motorcycles; they promote being part of the "Harley family"
 - Through Harley Owners Group (HOG) clubs, customers feel a kinship bond with each other
 - by joining a club, wearing branded jackets, and going to events, customers feel like "insiders"; this deepens loyalty and makes them more resistant to competitors
- **in negotiation:** establishing shared identity before negotiating
 - Skilled negotiators start by finding a shared background: "We're both engineers," "We both grew up in the Midwest," etc.
 - Research shows that, sometimes, even trivial commonalities, when emphasized, increase cooperation and reduce friction
 - negotiators are less adversarial and more willing to make concessions to someone seen as part of their group
- please notice: the "deeper" the sense of unity the stronger the effect. Finding simple similarities can be effective, but not as much as having a deep shared sense of identity



How does UNITY relate to NORMATIVE CONFORMITY?

- a quick reminder: **normative conformity** happens when people change their behavior to fit into a group, because they want to be **liked, accepted, or avoid social punishment** — even if privately they might disagree with the group
- **The Unity principle amplifies normative conformity because:**
 - Unity increases the psychological importance of the group
 - ("This is not just a group I like — this group is part of who I am").
 - When group identity is strong, the need to belong and maintain acceptance becomes even more powerful
 - As a result, people are even more likely to conform normatively (to be accepted by the group and to protect their self-concept and identity)

SOCIAL PROOF (or VALIDATION)

*WE ARE MORE EASILY INFLUENCED OR PERSUADED BY
THE BEHAVIORS OF OTHERS FACING A PROBLEM OR A
SITUATION SIMILAR TO OURS*

SOCIAL VALIDATION: definition



- *WE ARE MORE EASILY INFLUENCED OR PERSUADED BY THE BEHAVIORS OF OTHERS FACING A PROBLEM OR A SITUATION SIMILAR TO OURS*
- this is closely related to social conformity (especially informational conformity), which we have already discussed in previous lessons
 - please refer to that lesson for details. A few additional important points:
- Uncertainty increases reliance on social proof
 - The more unsure we are, the more we look at others to guide our behavior.
- Similarity matters
 - We are especially influenced by the behavior of people we perceive as similar to ourselves (same age, background, interests, situation).
- Consensus matters
 - The more people take a certain action, the more compelling it becomes
- Visibility matters
 - Social proof works best when others' behaviors are obvious or easily observable

SOCIAL VALIDATION: daily life examples



—Online Reviews and Ratings:

- Before buying a product on Amazon, people often check how many stars it has and read customer reviews. High ratings and many positive reviews act as social proof that the product is good.

—Restaurant Queues:

- Seeing a long line outside a restaurant leads you to think the food must be excellent, even if you've never heard of the place before.

—"Best-Selling" Labels:

- When books are marketed as "New York Times Bestseller," it suggests that many people have already judged the book as worth buying.

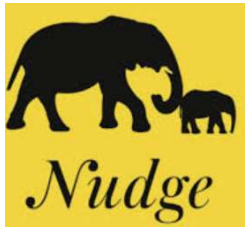
—Laugh Tracks in Sitcoms:

- TV shows often insert canned laughter after jokes to signal to the audience that something is funny — leveraging social proof to enhance the humor

—Charity Campaigns:

- Fundraisers often mention the number of donors who have already contributed ("Join the thousands who have donated!") to encourage others to give.

SOCIAL VALIDATION and «nudging»



- Social validation is one of the most powerful tools to influence behavior within the “Nudging” (choice architecture) approach
 - However, we should be careful because sometimes social validation can function as a way to legitimize undesired behavior. For example:
- The Petrified Forest National Park (in Arizona) had a problem with visitors stealing pieces of petrified wood. They tested two signs:
 - Social proof message ("Many past visitors have removed wood from the park, changing the state of the Petrified Forest")
 - No social proof message ("Please don't remove wood").

WHAT DO YOU THINK THE RESULT WAS?

WHAT MESSAGE WAS MORE EFFECTIVE?

- Ironically, the social proof message increased theft, because it unintentionally normalized stealing ("everyone's doing it")
- Lesson: social proof works, but it needs to show positive, desired behavior, not undesired behavior

AUTHORITY

*WE ARE MORE EASILY PERSUADED or INFLUENCED BY
THE REQUESTS OF PEOPLE APPEARING TO POSSESS
LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY*

AUTHORITY: definition and key elements



- *we tend to be influenced / comply / obey to the requests of people appearing to possess legitimate authority*
- The influence of perceived authority can be very powerful. Why?
 1. Authority as a heuristic for effectiveness
 - Following an authority figure to which we attribute superior expertise allows individuals to become more effective
 2. Evolutionary Adaptive Value
 - In ancestral environments, coordination often depended on deference to leadership, and that may have developed a natural tendency to trust authority
 3. Normative Conformity
 - Following group leaders is a way to signal loyalty and group membership, thus gaining social acceptance, status, and protection
 4. Reduction of Personal Responsibility
 - Following authority allows individuals to offload moral or practical responsibility for outcomes ("I was just following orders")
 5. Moralization of Authority
 - Some theories (like Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory) argue that respect for authority is not just practical but morally encoded in many cultures. Authority is seen as a source of moral order, especially in traditional or collectivist societies.

AUTHORITY: contextual factors



- perceived expertise:
 - expertise must be clearly perceived and accepted as such
- perceived level of expertise
 - the perceived level of expertise must be perceived high enough so that its usefulness (in relation to the task at hand or the problem to be solved) is clear
 - if that's not the case, it makes sense to not follow that authority and look for other sources of expertise or solutions
- trustworthiness and goal alignment:
 - authority must be combined with a perception of honesty and goal alignment. A trusted expert figure is more persuasive than one just recognized as an expert
- signals and symbols of authority
 - titles, clothes or uniforms, prestigious settings etc
- clarity and confidence in communication
- high level of consensus
 - if there is visible disagreement among experts, trust in their authority decreases
- social proof
 - if we see that others follow authority, we are more likely to follow it as well
- cultural factors
 - high power-distance culture vs individualistic cultures

AUTHORITY in marketing and communication: examples

- EXPERT ENDORSEMENTS

- “9 out of 10 dermatologists recommend “Our Creme”

- CERTIFICATION BADGES

- Websites showing badges like "Certified Organic," "Recommended by Doctors," "Endorsed by Professional Associations"

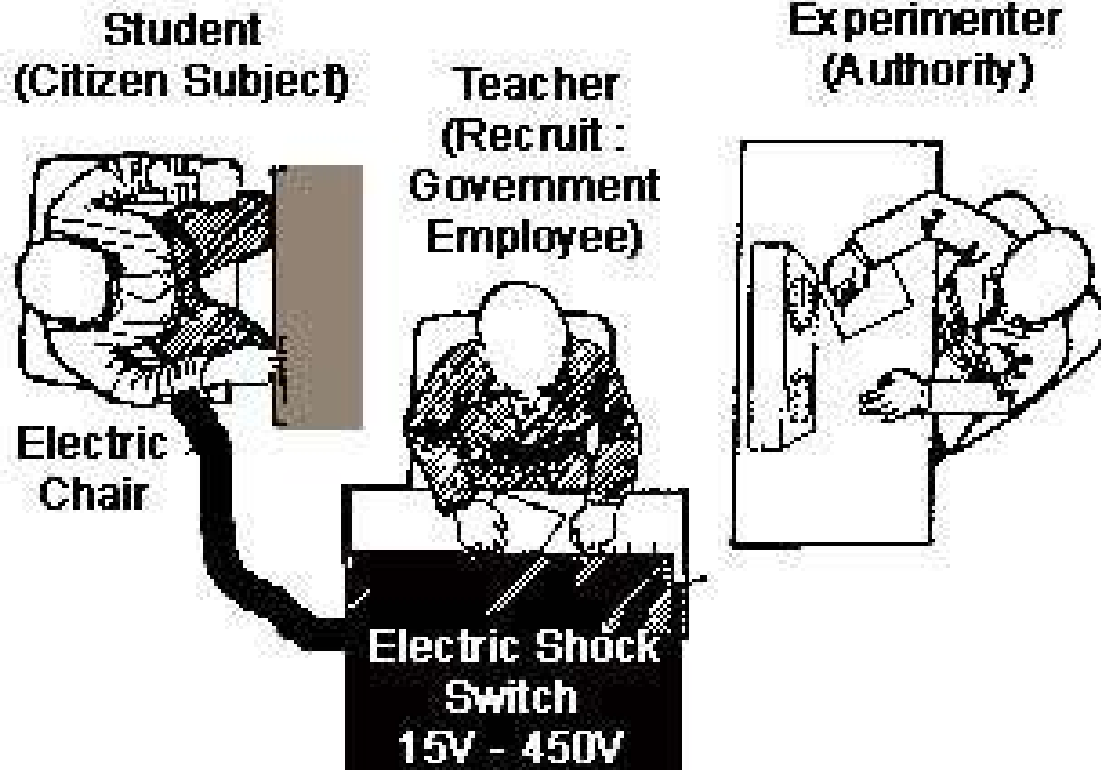
- USE OF UNIFORMS AND TITLES

- a salesperson at a car dealership wearing a business suit with a name tag reading “Senior Automotive Specialist” instead of “Sales Associate”

- EXPLICIT STATEMENTS about BEING “NUMBER ONE”, “LEADERS”, “EXPERTS”



Milgram's Experiments (1961): the «danger» of authority



The experiment

- Participants: Volunteers (mostly male, aged 20–50) recruited from the New Haven area for a "study on learning and memory"
- Participants ("teachers") were instructed to administer electric shocks to a "learner" (actually an actor) whenever the learner made mistakes on a word-pair task
- The "learner" was in a different room, where could not be seen from the "teacher" (but the loud scream could be heard)
- The "learner" starts to make more and more mistakes
- Electrical shocks from 15 to 450 volts
 - Explicit labels: «LIGHT SHOCK», «MEDIUM SHOCK», «INTENSE SHCOK», «DANGER :EXTREME SHOCK», «XXX»

Outcomes

- 65% of people administered 450 v. shocks
- 100% administered shocks labeled as «intense» or «extremely intense»
- Over 80% administered shocks even after hearing screams of pain from the other room
- All of them objected in various ways
- Many participants showed extreme signs of stress: sweating, trembling, nervous laughter, even seizures

—VARIATIONS

- if the researcher (authority figure) exits the room (or gives instructions by phone), obedience is reduced
- with 2 fake «rebel collaborators», extreme obedience is reduced to 10%
- with 2 fake «non rebel collaborators», extreme obedience increases to 92%
- When moved from Yale University to a common office building, obedience decreased
- The study was replicated in the US in 2006 and in other countries (Germany, Australia, Jordan, South Africa) with **very similar results**

How do we interpret these results?

— Situational Power vs. Dispositional Factors:

- Milgram emphasized the power of the **situation** over individual judgment
- In other words: ordinary people could perform extraordinarily harmful acts under authoritative pressure

— Agentic State Theory

- Milgram also proposed that under authority, individuals enter an "agentic state," seeing themselves as **passive agents** merely executing the wishes of the authority, thus **displacing responsibility**

— Incremental Commitment

- Small initial acts of obedience (low-voltage shocks) escalate gradually, making it psychologically easier to continue
- Overall, these experiments show **the significant power (and the danger) of authority as an influence mechanisms even when the requested behavior is extreme**
- Unfortunately, history largely confirms this conclusion

the Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, 1971)

- Participants: 24 male college students, considered psychologically healthy, were recruited through ads offering \$15 per day.
- Roles: Randomly assigned to either "guards" or "prisoners."
- Location: A mock prison was set up in the basement of a university building.
- Procedure:
 - "Prisoners" were arrested at home by real police, fingerprinted, and brought to the "prison"
 - "Guards" were given uniforms, reflective sunglasses (to prevent eye contact), sticks, and instructed to maintain order, but not given detailed rules about how to do so.
 - No formal instructions to abuse were given; guards were told they could manage the prison as they wanted, within certain basic ethical boundaries (no physical violence).
- What Happened:
 - Within a day or two, **guards began to act authoritatively and abusively, enforcing arbitrary punishments, humiliating prisoners, and creating strict hierarchies.**
 - **Prisoners became submissive, depressed, anxious, and passive. Some showed severe emotional breakdowns.**
 - The experiment, planned for two weeks, was terminated after only six days due to ethical concerns

How do we interpret these results?

- Once again, **perceived authority can radically alter behavior**
- Guards **internalized** their authority role surprisingly quickly, behaving in ways consistent with authoritarian figures without needing much explicit guidelines
- Prisoners **internalized** their subordinate roles, displaying compliance and submission even when there was no real physical constraint preventing rebellion
- **PRESSURE VS INTERNALIZATION:**
 - while Milgram focused on the **pressure of authoritative figures**, Zimbardo focused on how the **situation** and the **assigned roles** may induce ordinary people to **internalize authoritarian behavior**
- HOWEVER ... the Stanford experiment has been **criticized for a variety of reasons**. Attempts to replicate the experiment (e.g. the, BBC Prison Study, 2002) produced **different results**
 - Guards did not naturally become brutal
 - Prisoners initially complied but eventually organized collectively to challenge authority
 - Group identity among prisoners became stronger than the guards' authority
 - Breakdown of prison hierarchy led to the emergence of a self-governing commune — and later to a factional power grab by a few individuals
 - it is not just the situation or the given role that influence how authority shapes behavior, but other aspects are also relevant (e.g. group identity, type of leadership, purpose alignment etc)

More generally: advantages and dangers of authority

AUTHORITY AS ...	ADVANTAGES	DANGERS
A way to utilize and share expertise	Improving effectiveness and ability to solve problems	Risk of mindless compliance, decisions made without critical thinking
A way to foster leadership	Providing efficient coordination	Over-centralization and suppression of innovation
A way to achieve normative conformity	Increasing group cohesion and cooperation	Group-think and marginalization of dissenters
A way to offload responsibility	Decreasing anxiety, clarifying accountability	Diffusion of responsibility and unethical behavior
A way to establish moral norms	Building loyalty and commitment to leadership and institutions	Authoritarianism and intolerance for questioning