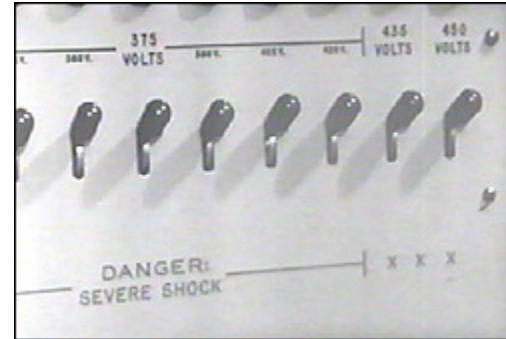


## READING: A Matter of Obedience

This activity involves the following reading that describes Stanley Milgram's experiments, and then a video about the experiment. Please complete the reading *before* you watch the video in class.

In her study of totalitarian regimes, Hannah Arendt wondered, “How do average, even admirable, people become dehumanized by the critical circumstances pressing in on them?” In the 1960s, Stanley Milgram, a professor at Yale University, decided to find out by recruiting subjects to take part in what he called “a study of the effects of punishment on learning.” In Milgram’s words, “The point of the experiment is to see how far a person will proceed in a concrete and measurable situation in which he is ordered to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim... At what point will the subject refuse to obey the experimenter?”<sup>1</sup>



Working with pairs, Milgram designated one volunteer as “teacher” and the other as “learner.” As the “teacher” watched, the “learner” was strapped into a chair with an electrode attached to each wrist. The “learner” was then told to memorize word pairs for a test and warned that wrong answers would result in electric shocks. The “learner” was, in fact, a member of Milgram’s team. The real focus of the experiment was the “teacher.” Each was taken to a separate room and seated before a “shock generator” with switches ranging from 15 volts labeled “slight shock” to 450 volts labeled “danger – severe shock.” Each “teacher” was told to administer a “shock” for each wrong answer. The

shock was to increase by fifteen volts every time the “learner” responded incorrectly. The volunteer received a practice shock before the test began to get an idea of the pain involved.

Before the experiment began, Milgram hypothesized that most volunteers would refuse to give electric shocks of more than 150 volts. A group of psychologists and psychiatrists predicted that less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the volunteers would administer all 450 volts. To everyone’s amazement, 65 percent gave the full 450 volts!

Please think carefully as you watch the video about the social and psychological revelations of this experiment on the participants. Consider such an experiment performed today.

---

\*Reading is from *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*

(Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, Brookline, Massachusetts) 1994, pp. 210-213.

---

### CONNECTIONS...Questions for Discussion

- Milgram has defined obedience as “the psychological mechanism that links individual action to political purpose.” How do you define the word? What is *blind obedience*? How does it differ from other forms of obedience? What is the difference between *obedience* and *conformity*?
- What encourages obedience? Is it fear of punishment? A desire to please? A need to go along with the group? A belief in authority? Record your ideas in your journal so that you can refer to them later.
- Sociologists Herbert Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton related Milgram’s experiments to events during the Vietnam War. They characterized incidents like the My Lai massacre in which an American armed forces unit destroyed a hamlet and killed hundreds of women and children as a “crime of obedience.” What does that phrase mean to you? Can obedience be a crime? If so, give an example you have seen or read about. If not, explain why obedience can never be a crime.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Obedience to Authority* by Stanley Milgram (Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> "Obedience" (c) 1969 Stanley Milgram (Pennsylvania State University).