



# Innocence in an age of Infamy

## **Lesson 8:                   The Big Machine...                                   Passing the Buck...                                   Just Following Orders...**

**Grades 9-12**

### **Objectives:**

- Students will examine a psychological experiment in the nature of obedience and use it to help understand the Holocaust.

### **Materials:**

**Handout 3: The Experiment**

### **Procedure for Classroom Activity:**

1. Begin the lesson by writing the following on the chalkboard:  
**6,000,000 killed. Why?**

Tell students that this is the approximate number of people who were killed on command by the Nazis during World War II — Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, handicapped people, etc. Thousands of people were involved in carrying out Hitler’s “Final Solution” and in keeping it secret. The big questions are always: “How could this have happened? Why didn’t anybody who knew about it speak up and stop this from happening?”

2. Ask students what they think might be some answers to these questions and list them on the board. (These may include following orders, fear of punishment if orders are disobeyed, anti-Semitism in society, scapegoating, etc.)
3. Then discuss quickly with students if they think something similar could ever happen in the U.S. — for example, would Americans obey a political leader or other authority figure that told us to kill or hurt innocent people? Or would we rebel and say no?

4. Distribute **Handout 3: The Experiment** that describes a real psychology experiment conducted during the 1960s by Dr. Stanley Milgram. Dr. Milgram was concerned about the Holocaust during World War II and decided to investigate the topic of obedience. Ask students to read the description of the experiment and answer the question at the end of the handout.
5. Tally on the board at which voltage level the students said they would have stopped. (At this point, accept all answers neutrally, but explore their reasons.)
6. Tell students that this was indeed a real experiment, and when psychiatrists were asked this same question, they predicted that on average the college students would have stopped at 120 volts. College students said they would have stopped at 135 volts (where the “learner” first protested about the pain), they predicted that fewer than 1% of people would obey to the very end, 450 volts, and that those people would have been psychologically disturbed. The most common reason they stated was that they “didn’t want to hurt anyone.” Compare these predictions with your students’ responses.
7. When this experiment was actually conducted by Dr. Milgram, almost two-thirds (65%) of the “teachers” gave shocks right up to 450 volts... and these people were not “psychologically disturbed,” but normal, everyday people. They did show signs of anxiety — like sweating, trembling, stuttering, biting their lips, etc., and said they felt terrible, but felt it was their “moral duty” to follow the instructions of the experimenter. They felt that the experimenter, not they, was responsible for the learner’s suffering.
8. In conclusion, discuss with the students what they think this experiment tells us about personal responsibility and morality. Discuss the phrases “passing the buck” and “system thinking.” How might this relate to what happened during World War II to the six million Holocaust victims? Discuss how the Nuremberg Trials of the Nazi war criminals after World War II dealt with this same topic and ruled that their actions could not be excused by the phrase “just following orders.” They were held to a higher standard that was considered to be more important than following orders and the laws of their nation — the principle of respect for human life and dignity.

9. For reflection, ask students to write one paragraph about each of the following topics:

- What do you think the Milgram experiment tells us about the effects of society and culture on human nature and obedience?
- How do you think this experiment relates to the Holocaust or another violent situation in history such as the My Lai incident during the Vietnam War, the killing of American Indians by infecting blankets with smallpox, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, genocide in Rwanda, the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, etc.?
- What do you think could be done to prevent such things from happening in the future? Although two-thirds of the participants obeyed the experimenter up to the very end, one-third did not. What ideas do you have for increasing this percentage?

**Assessment Suggestions:**

1. Ask students to send their written reflections and conclusions to the school or local newspaper.

**Extension Ideas:**

1. Ask students to find and discuss examples of situations that occur when higher moral standards conflict with society's laws.
2. Interested students might wish to research Professor Lawrence Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development to learn what his research says about how people throughout the world develop their moral reasoning abilities — beginning with Stage 1, avoidance of punishment, and continuing to Stage 5, acting in accordance with higher moral principles (only attained when people are in their twenties, if ever).

**NOTE:** This experiment was “rigged.” No electric shocks were really given to any “learner.” Because the learner was in another room, the “teacher” was only hearing tape recordings of his voice.

When this experiment was repeated, in one version, the “teacher” was required to hold the “learner's” hand on a shock plate. 32% of the “teachers” still gave shocks above 400 volts. Males were just as obedient as females.

## **Handout 3:**

### **The Experiment**

#### **WANTED: Paid volunteers for an experiment in memory. Yale University**

Imagine that you have signed up to participate in this experiment. When you arrive at the laboratory, an experimenter dressed in a white coat greets you and another volunteer you don't know.

You and the other volunteer draw lots to find out your role in the experiment. You are the "teacher" and the other person becomes the "learner."

Next you are taken into another room, where the learner is strapped into a chair, and electrodes are attached to his wrist. You are told that the learner's job is to try to memorize word pairs, like "red" and "book," and that you as the teacher are going to motivate learning by giving an electric shock punishment every time the learner makes a mistake. The experimenter tells you that "although the shocks can be extremely painful, they cause no permanent tissue damage."

Then you are taken to the first room, where you are seated in front of a machine labeled "Shock Generator" with switches for shock levels marked from 15 to 450 volts. Each switch has a rating from "slight shock" up to "danger: severe shock." The last two switches are labeled "XXX." You are given a sample 45 volt shock (which makes your arm jolt) and told that if the learner makes a mistake in memorizing the word pairs, your job is to give him a shock, and increase the voltage by 15 volts (one more switch) for each mistake made.

The experiment begins and the learner makes one mistake after another. Following your instructions, you pull the switches and increase the shocks. When you reach 120 volts, you hear the learner shout that the shocks are painful. At 150 volts, he yells, "Get me out of here! I refuse to go on!"

The experiment goes on. The learner keeps making mistakes and you hear screams of pain. At 300 volts he pounds on the wall and demands to be let out. At 330 volts, he is finally silent. The experimenter tells you that the learner's failure to respond should be considered an incorrect answer and to keep increasing the shock level. If at any time you question whether you should continue giving the shocks, the experimenter says, "You have no other choice; you must go on. The experiment requires that you continue."

The experiment continues until the highest shock level is reached.

**QUESTION: If you were the "teacher" in this experiment, how do you think you would have participated? How high along the voltage meter would you have gone? Explain your answer and reasons.**