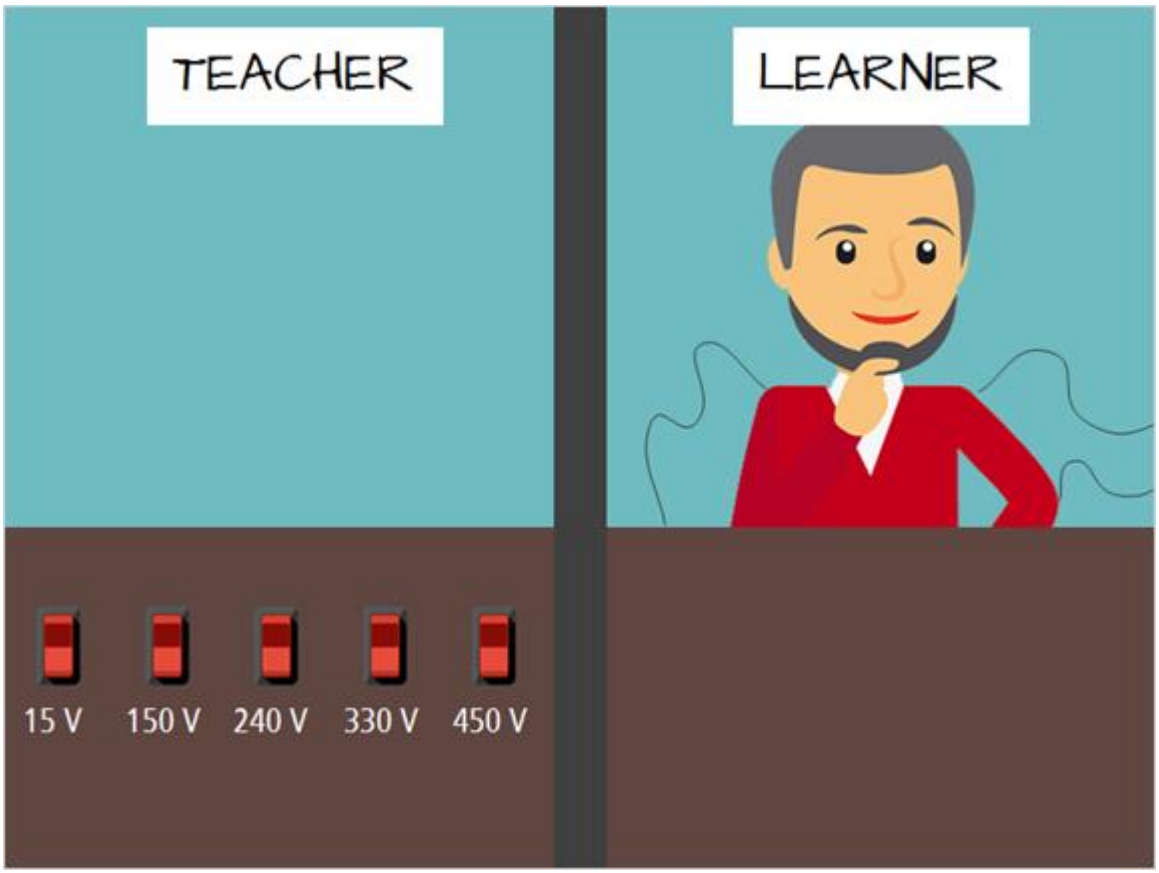
Module 10: Social Psychology
Topic 2 Content: Obedience and the Milgram Experiments Notes

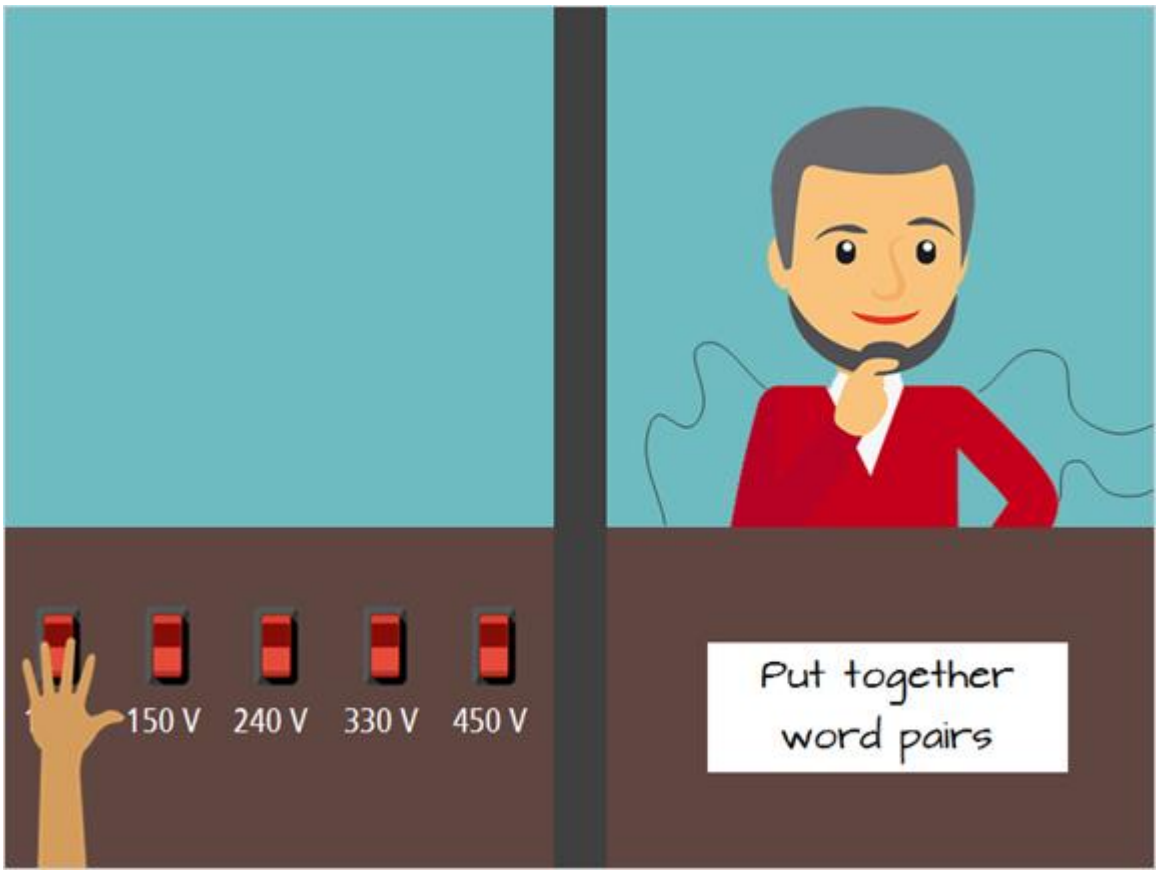
Click the ***NEXT*** button to delve into what Stanley Milgram's experiments revealed about obedience.

If you were a participant in Milgram's study, you would have gone through each of the following steps:

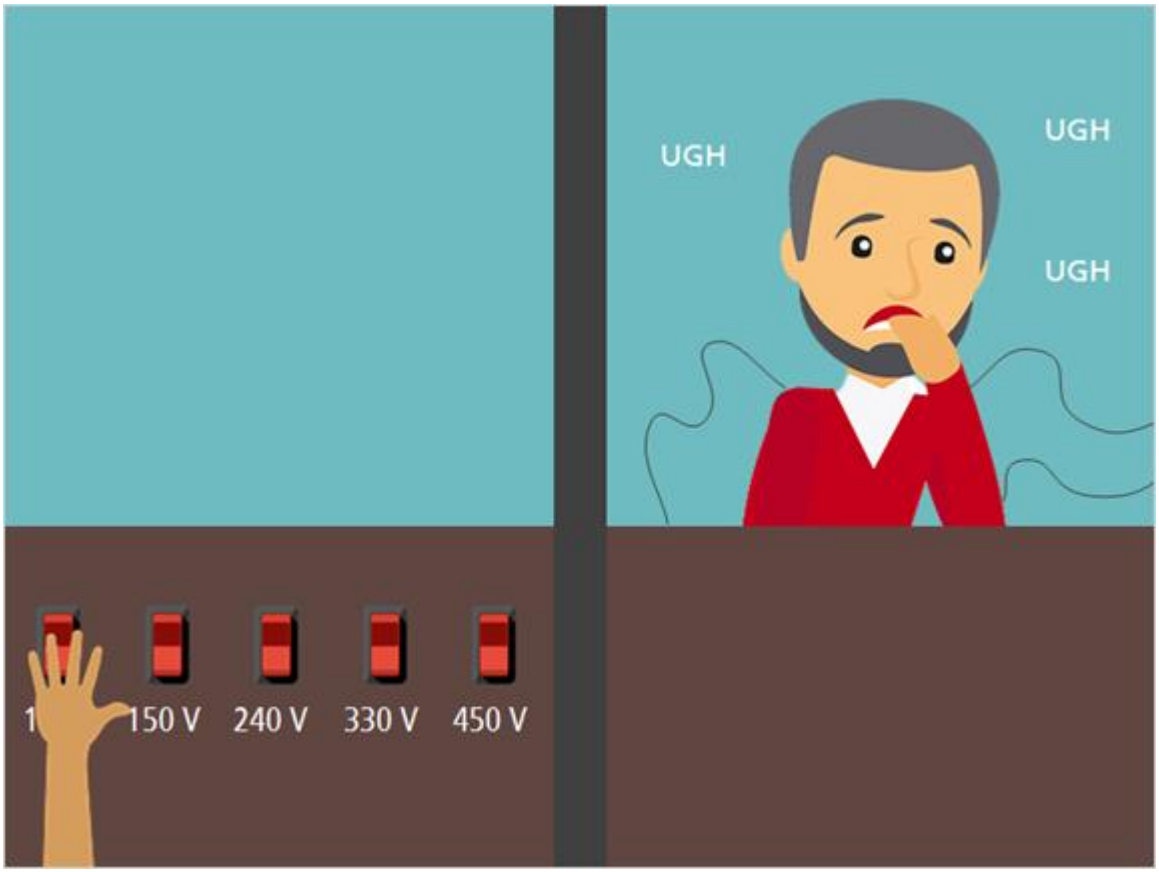
Upon entering the lab, Milgram's assistant asks you and another participant to draw slips and determine who will be the "learner" and who will be "teacher."



You draw the slip for the “teacher” role, and are seated at a station with several labeled switches. The person who draws the learner slip is led to a different room, and connected to a series of wires that connect to the machine at your station.

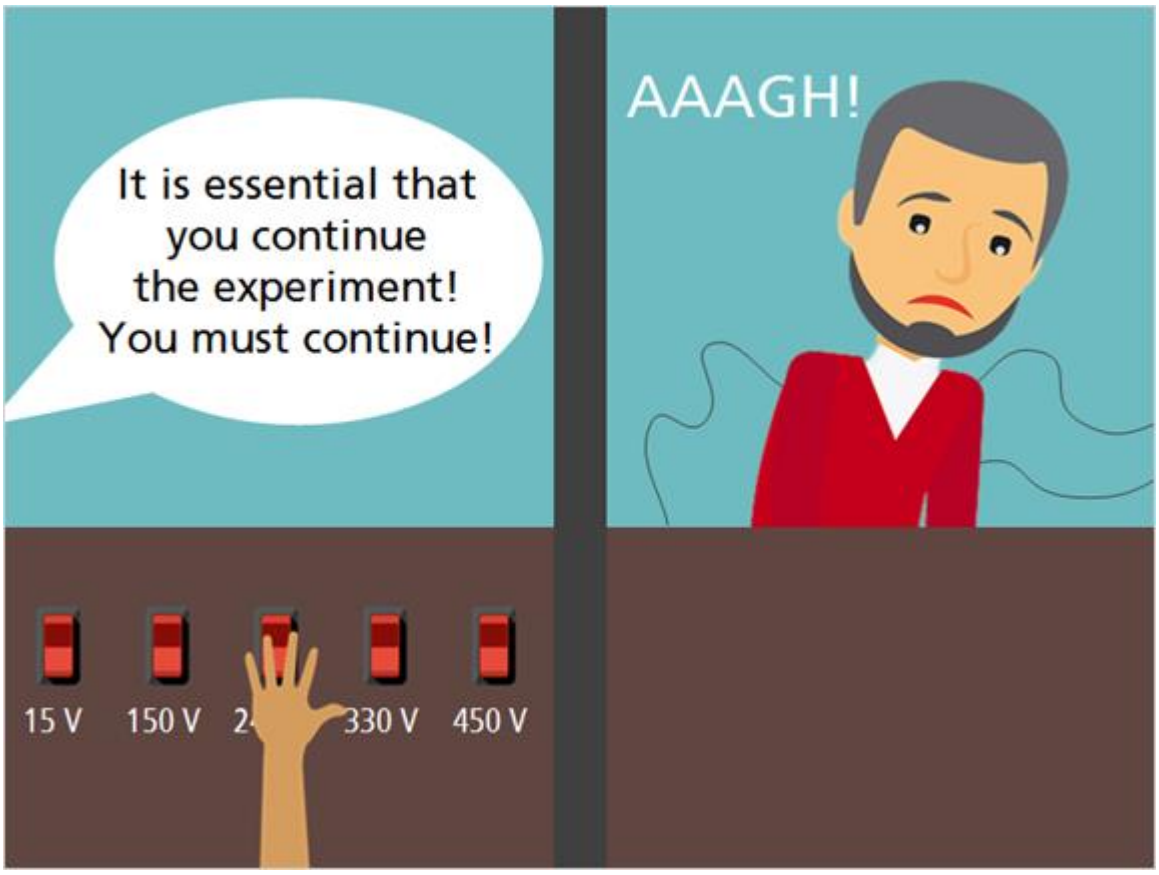


You listen to a description of the procedure, which reveals that the "learner" will be tested on his ability to remember sets of word pairs you are to teach him. If the learner makes a mistake, you will deliver a shock to the "learner," using the first switch, labeled "15 Volts-Slight Shock."

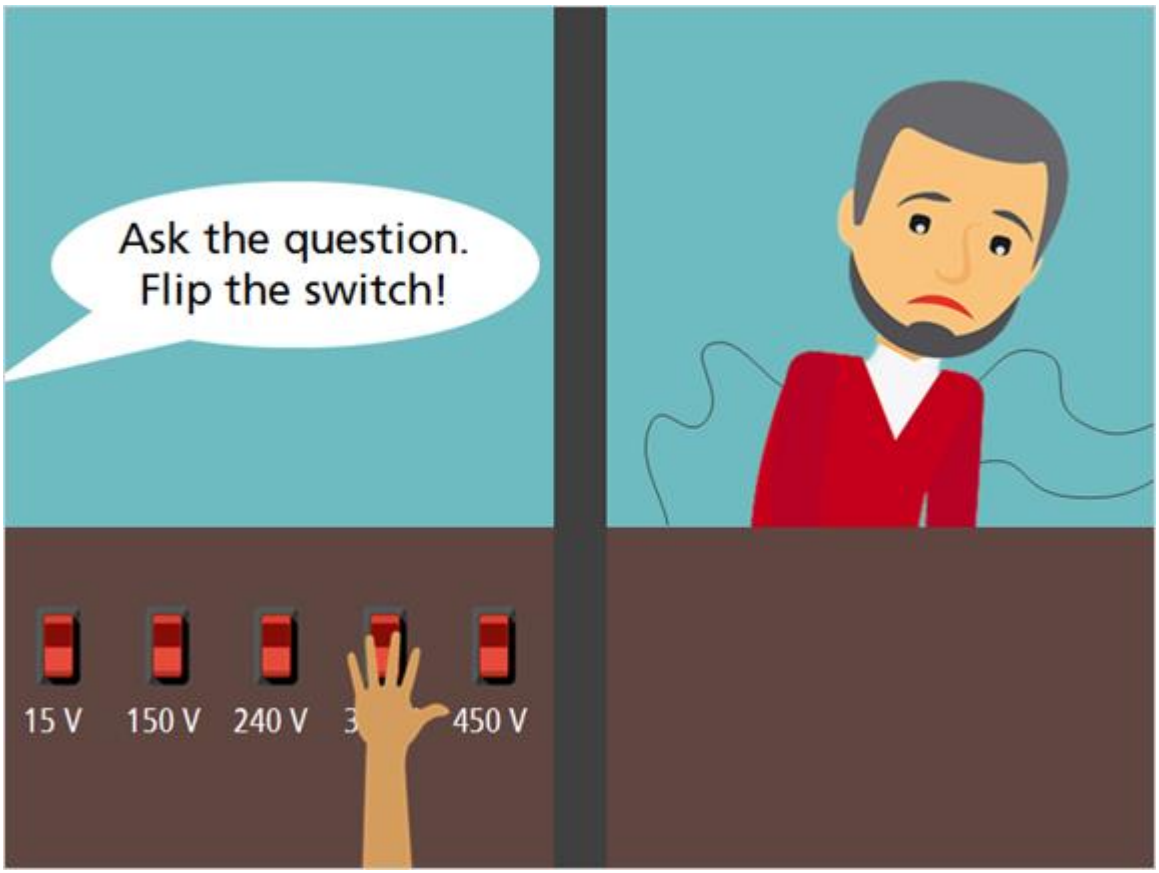


After a short time, the “learner” makes the first mistake. You flip the first switch. As the “learner” makes more mistakes, you are told to flip switches corresponding to increasingly large levels of shock.

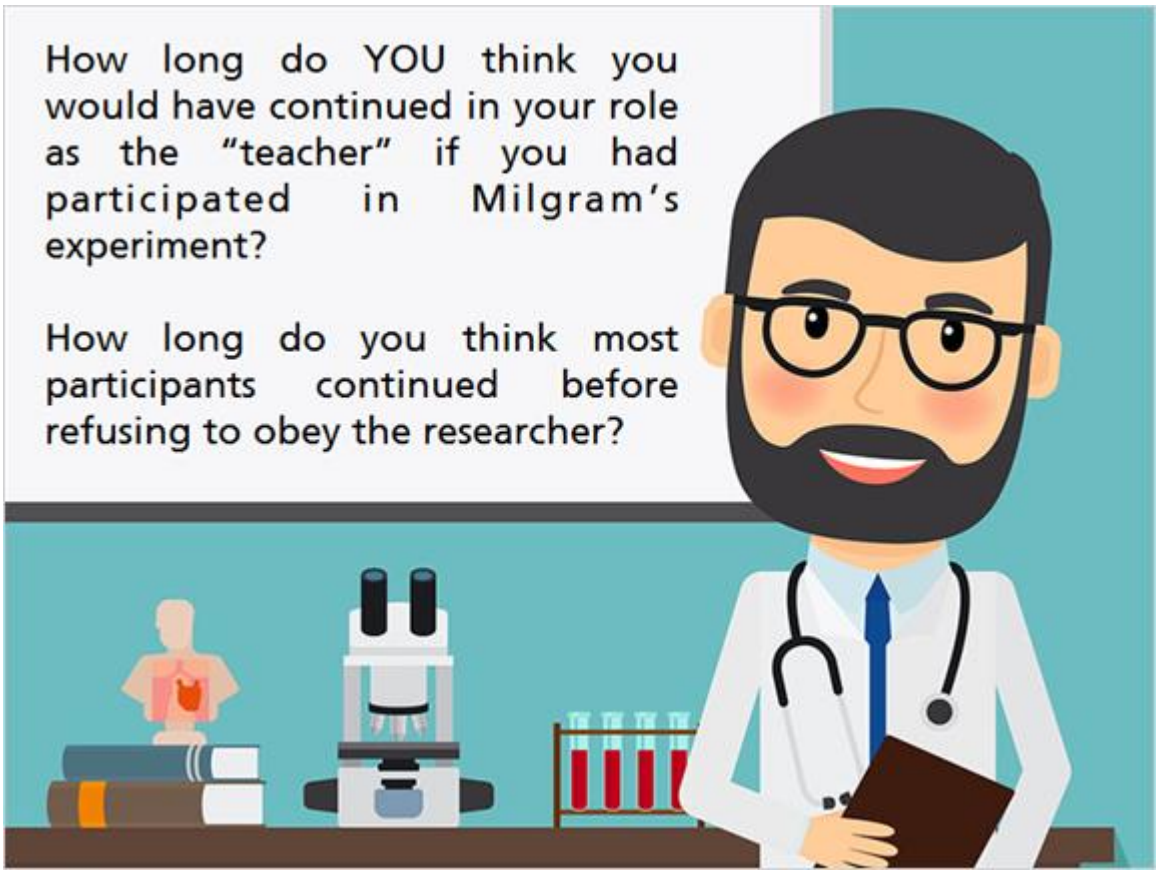
By the level marked “150 Volts-Strong Shock,” the “learner” begins to shout and protest. “I want to get out of here!” he screams. If you hesitate to perform an additional shock, the experimenter pushes you to continue. “It is essential that you continue the experiment-you must continue.”



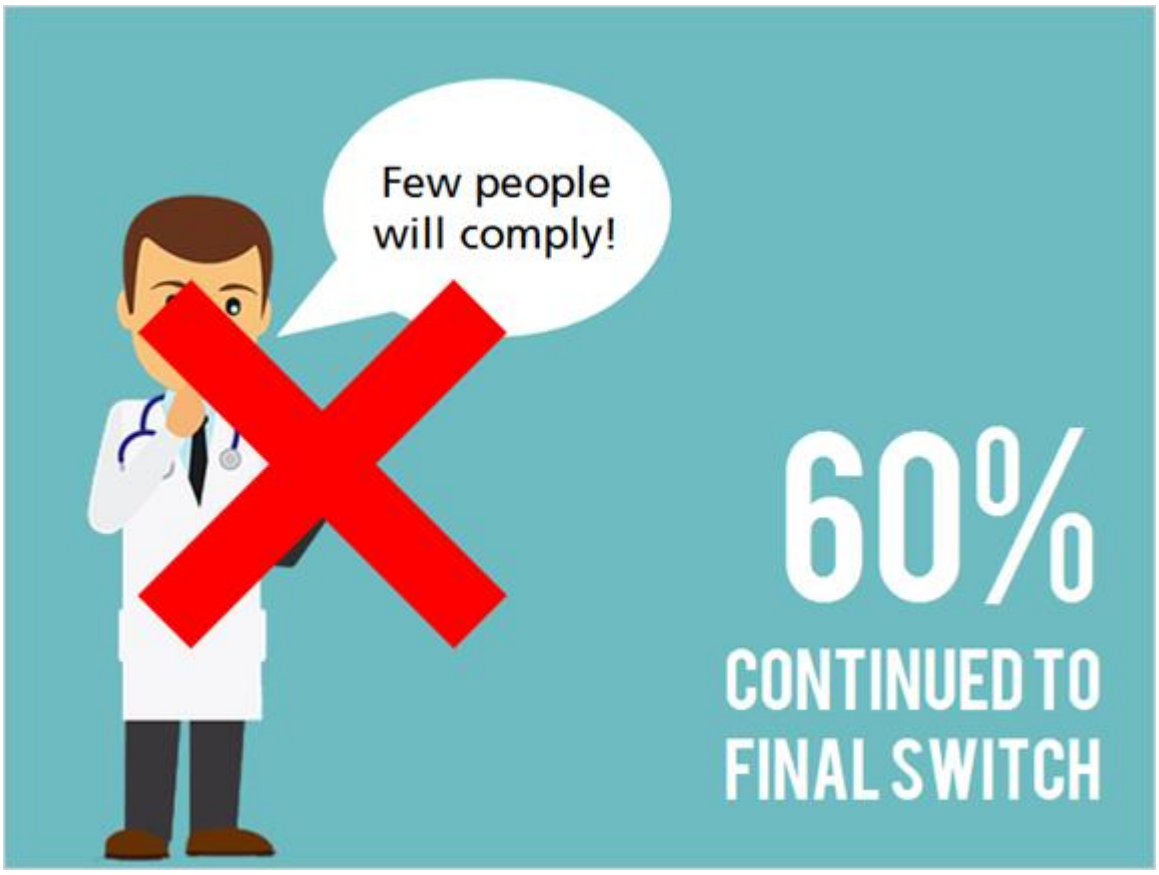
If you hesitate to perform an additional shock, the experimenter pushes you to continue. "It is essential that you continue the experiment-you must continue." You obey, and the "learner" begins to scream in great pain as the voltage levels now exceed 240.



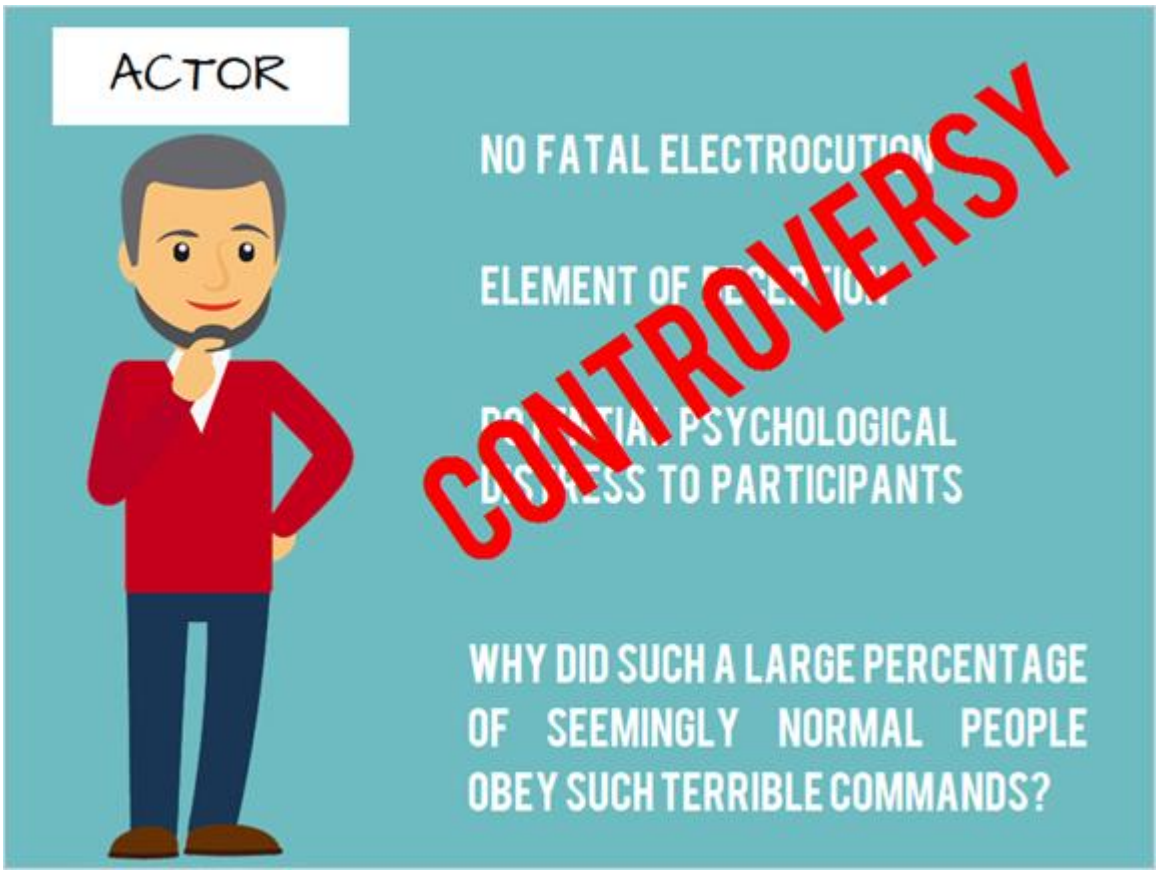
After 330 Volts, the learner no longer answers. The experimenter urges you forward, and you deliver the shock. He directs you to ask the question for the final level marked “450 Volts-XXX” and if no response is given, you are told to flip the final switch.



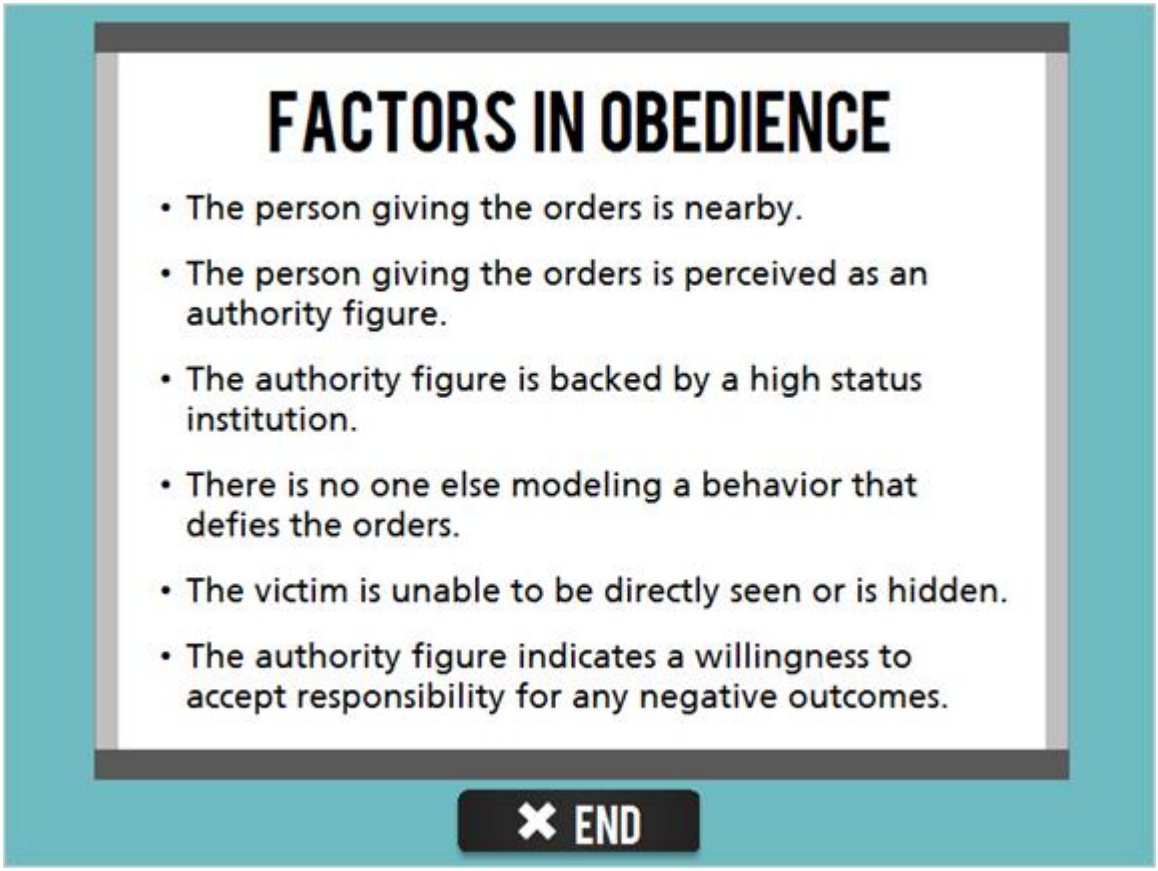
How long do you think you would have continued in your role as the "teacher" if you had participated in Milgram's experiment? How long do you think most participants continued before refusing to obey the researcher?



Milgram's results shocked psychologists and others who had predicted that relatively few participants would comply with the demands of the researcher, particularly at the end of the experiment. In fact, more than sixty percent of the participants continued to the final switch of four hundred fifty volts.



No one in the Milgram experiments actually delivered or received any shocks. The "learner" was an actor. Although Milgram reported debriefing participants after the experiment to let them know they had not fatally electrocuted someone, the element of deception, and the potential psychological distress to participants, made this one of the most controversial experiments in all of psychology. However, despite the ethical concerns of the study, the results were surprising. Why did such a large percentage of seemingly normal people obey such terrible commands?



A variety of factors contribute to whether someone will obey commands. The following items increase the likelihood of obedience:

- The person giving the orders is nearby;
- The person giving the orders is perceived as an authority figure;
- The authority figure is backed by a high status institution;
- There is no one else modeling a behavior that defies the orders;
- The victim is unable to be directly seen or is hidden; and
- The authority figure indicates a willingness to accept responsibility for any negative outcomes.