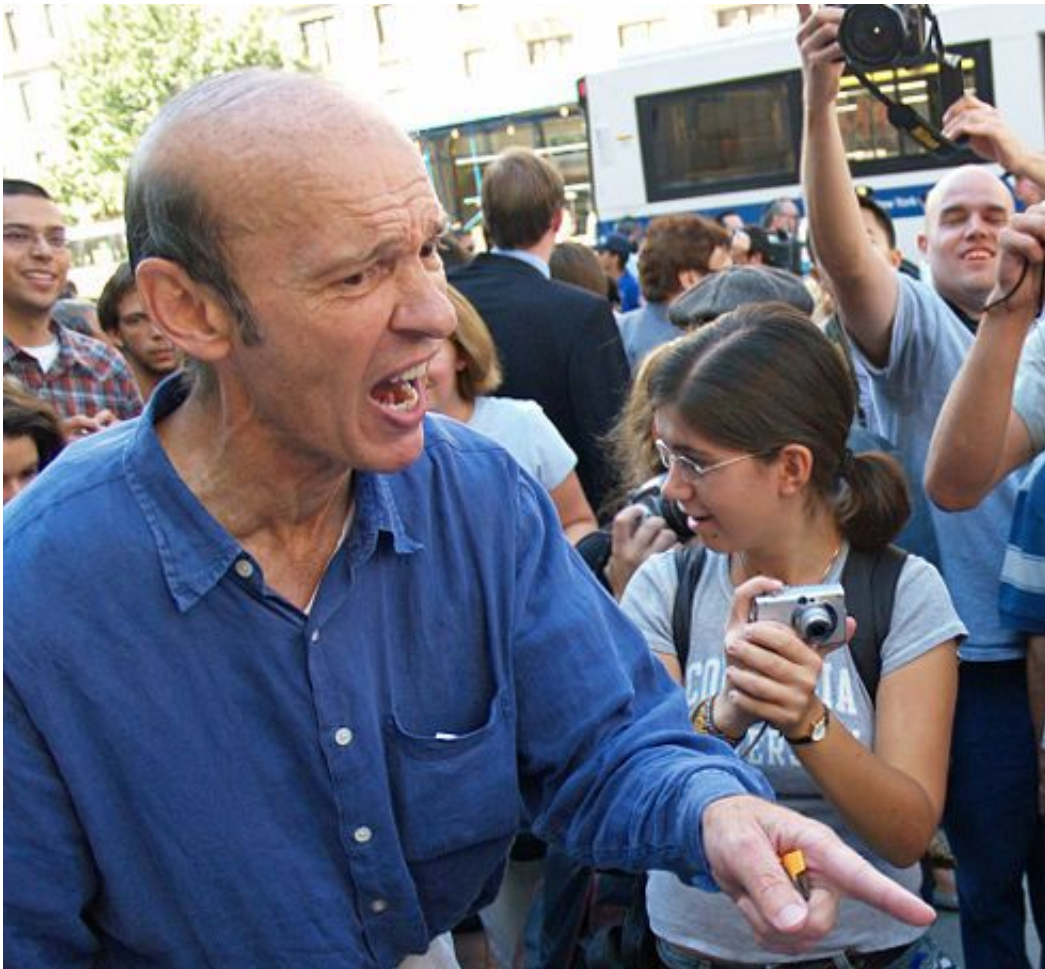


# It's easy to get people to do bad things—this might be why

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Credit: David Shankbone/Wikipedia

In the 1960s, psychologist Stanley Milgram famously conducted experiments in a Yale University basement showing that people will

apparently inflict pain on another person simply because someone in a position of authority told them to. Now, researchers reporting in the Cell Press journal *Current Biology* on Feb. 18, 2016 have taken those classic experiments one step further, providing new evidence that might help to explain why people are so easily coerced.

According to the new work by researchers at University College London and Université Libre de Bruxelles in Belgium, when someone gives us an order, we actually feel less responsible for our actions and their painful consequences.

"Maybe some basic feeling of responsibility really is reduced when we are coerced into doing something," says Patrick Haggard of University College London. "People often claim reduced responsibility because they were 'only obeying orders.' But are they just saying that to avoid punishment, or do orders really change the basic experience of responsibility?"

Haggard and his colleagues sought to answer this question by measuring a phenomenon called "sense of agency." This is the feeling that one's actions have caused some external event. For instance, Haggard has explained, if you flip a light switch and a light comes on, you often experience those events as being nearly simultaneous, even if there's a lag.

Haggard's team has [already shown](#) that people feel reduced sense of agency when their actions produce a negative versus a positive outcome. In other words, people literally perceive a longer lapse in time between an action (in this case, presses of a computer key) and its outcome when the end result is negative compared to when it is positive.

In the new study, the researchers measured sense of agency in the same way to explore changes in perception when someone delivered a mild

electric shock to another person, either on orders or by their own choice. In other experiments, the harm inflicted on the other person was a financial penalty instead of a minor pain.

When the participants chose freely, they were encouraged along with the promise of a small financial gain. They also knew exactly what kind of harm they were inflicting because pairs of participants traded places with each other. Those who delivered shocks or suffered financial losses in some trial sessions received the same treatment in others.

The researchers report that [coercion](#) led to a small but significant increase in the perceived time interval between action and outcome in comparison to situations in which participants freely chose to inflict the same harms. Interestingly, coercion also reduced the neural processing of the outcomes of one's own action. The researchers concluded that claims of reduced responsibility under coercion could indeed correspond to a change in basic feelings of responsibility—not just attempts to avoid social punishment.

"When you feel a sense of agency—you feel responsible for an outcome—you get changes in experience of time where what you do and the outcome you produce seem closer together," Haggard says.

Haggard says it would now be interesting to find out whether some people more readily experience a reduced sense of agency under coercion than others. "Fortunately for society, there have always been some [people](#) who stand up to coercion," he says.

**More information:** *Current Biology*, Caspar et al.: "Coercion Changes the Sense of Agency in the Human Brain"

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