

The

# Sociologist

October 2018



On the Cover: Kooskia Internment Camp, Idaho, 1942. Facility that housed interned Japanese men who were U.S. residents during World War II. Source: United States Citizenship and Immigration Services History Office and Library.

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# The Other Story about Unaccompanied Immigrant Minors

Hansel A. Aguilar

In the past few months, major U.S. media networks have (rightfully) expended considerable coverage to the unaccompanied immigrant minors (UIMs) crisis at the southwest border. The recent focus concerned the implementation of the Department of Justice's short-lived "zero-tolerance policy."<sup>1</sup> In short, the policy required the absolute criminalization of migrants attempting to enter the U.S. at the southwest border without requisite travel documents or for not crossing the border at a designated port of entry (POE). Additionally, it allowed for state sanctioned family separations of migrants entering the U.S. with their children.

The parents were taken to immigration detention centers while the children were classified as "unaccompanied" and taken into custody of the federal government through the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), specifically the Office of Refugee Resettlement<sup>2</sup> (ORR). After considerable outrage and pressure from civil society, lawmakers (Democrats<sup>3</sup> and Republicans<sup>4</sup>), celebrities<sup>5</sup>, medical and mental health professionals (American Medical Association<sup>6</sup>, American Psychological Association<sup>7</sup>, American Psychiatric Association<sup>8</sup>, American College of Physicians<sup>9</sup> and American Academy of Pediatrics<sup>10</sup>) and international actors<sup>11</sup>, President Trump reversed the policy through an executive order.<sup>12</sup> Although the recent policy changes resulted in the creation of a new category of international migrants (under the typology of UIMs), the existence of this sub-group of international migrants is not new.

Albeit infrequently, UIMs have been arriving at the southwest border for decades ([IRC, 2014](#)). The historical and current reasons minors have sought entry into the U.S. include: family reunifications; asylum; labor opportunities; academic opportunities. It is also important to note that there have been

considerable numbers of UIMs who have been the victims of human trafficking and have exercised limited social agency in the process of their own international migration.

As the dust is settling from the media frenzy regarding the family separations, it is of utmost importance to remember the UIM phenomenon has not and will not go away anytime soon. This means that well intentioned onlookers and elected officials should not lose interest in advocating for sound policies regarding the care and well-being of these vulnerable children. Moving forward, there should be a more concerted and conscientious effort by the media, policy makers, and scholars to provide a more thorough understanding of this labyrinthine issue.

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## The 'missing children' were never missing...

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This article is an attempt to provide some clarity and important distinctions when approaching sensible, evidence-based solutions for this phenomenon. I will provide three important points that the public needs to understand about this occurrence and two recommendations for improving our responsibility concerning this susceptible group and alleviating the trauma and angst being experienced by the children.

*If She looks like an Unaccompanied Immigrant Child*

The Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer for Getty Images, John Moore, had the world over discussing the 'zero-tolerance policy' with his viral photograph of an infant crying while a border agent pats down her mother. In an edited version, the photograph even made it to the July 2, 2018 (Vol 192 No 1) cover of *Time* magazine. The photograph and the magazine cover, however, represent a key problem with the current coverage of UIMs: there is a huge misunderstanding about who they are. The two-year-old Honduran child, from my hometown (Puerto Cortes), was not<sup>13</sup> an UIM. Not even under the Trump Administration's manufactured

version of the term can Yanela be classified as an unaccompanied minor. She was momentarily placed on the ground as the Border Patrol agent conducted a person search of the mother, Sandra Sanchez.

The photograph and its erroneous usage demonstrate how, through the since-reversed policy, members of the public can be (mis)led to believe that unaccompanied minors are (only) the children that have been separated at the border from their parents. It is of utmost importance to remember that separated children at the border is a new phenomenon under the Trump administration and by best estimates<sup>14</sup>, this category of UIMs accounts for under 20% of the children in ORR care.

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At best, these calls were comparable to a customer service feedback survey and at worst they were superficial documentation of the child's safety and well-being. How much can one learn about the safety and well-being of child in one phone call?

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This is not meant to diminish the traumatic experiences of these children, but rather to show that the vast majority of UIMs (approximately 82%) obtained their status as a UIM from one of two equally problematic ways: (1) while attempting to enter the U.S., the child (under 18 years of age), without an adult parent or legal caretaker, is apprehended by Border Patrol, or (2) an undocumented child (one who may or may not have been a former UIM) who does not have a legal caretaker is taken into the custody of a law enforcement agency and subsequently turned over to ORR.

These two pathways account for most of the children in ORR care, with the former pathway accounting for the vast majority<sup>15</sup> of UIMs. The important takeaway is that there is a spectrum of

experiences in the ORR system and we need to be more informed of how terms, classifications and categories are being used legally and sociologically or anthropologically.

#### *Missing Children*

The 'missing children' were never missing, but the lack of follow-through is still a concern. The fact that the ORR was unable to contact 1,475 (former) UIMs for safety and well-being follow-up calls is absolutely problematic. In my previous experience as a case manager for unaccompanied minors during the Obama administration, these calls were an important aspect of the holistic approach to safe reunification. Even under the Obama administration, these calls were not always effective. ORR grantees were required to "attempt" to conduct a follow-up call within 45 days to ensure the children were well protected and still with their sponsors.

The attempts consisted of a case manager or another designee of the shelter making at least three phone calls to the child and the sponsor. If after three attempts the child or sponsor could not be reached, the program would just document the failed attempts and not be required to take additional action. This is the scenario that happened with the 'missing children.' Later reports and investigation into the issue revealed that part of the reason the children and sponsors were not answering the calls was because of a climate of fear being experienced by migrants under the Trump administration.



South Texas Border; U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers and unaccompanied migrant children. June 29, 2014. Source: commons.wikimedia.org. Photographer: Barry Bahler.

The calls themselves, whether under Obama or under Trump, still deserve more scrutiny. At best, these calls were comparable to a customer service feedback survey and at worst they were superficial documentation of the child's safety and well-being. How much can one learn about the safety and well-being of a child in one phone call? The limited follow-through to check on the children, however, is not unintentional.

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This is absolutely a local issue  
since many minors have and are  
continuing to seek reunification  
with family members in our area.

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The reported missing children demonstrated why the ORR needs to be further challenged against their 2016 Congressional testimony<sup>16</sup> that, once a child is reunited with a sponsor they are no longer ORR's responsibility. This declaration made by ORR officials in the aftermath of the Marion, Ohio egg farm trafficking case (where several Guatemalan unaccompanied minors were placed in the hands of labor traffickers through the ORR's reunification process) is emblematic of what sociologist Marc Jacobs has called the *no-fault society*.

#### *Not Just a Border-State Issue*

While it may be easy to lose interest and concern regarding issues that may not affect us directly, it is important to note that issues concerning unaccompanied minors are not just confined to border states. This is absolutely a local issue since many minors have and are continuing to seek reunification with family members in our area. As reported in ORR data<sup>17</sup>, there were approximately 3,000 minors reunified in Fairfax alone and approximately 6,000 minors in the Northern Virginia area from 2015 to 2017. The experiences of immigrant minors in our area should become part of our agenda for human rights, women's rights, children's rights, neoliberalism, and transnationalism.

#### *A Couple of Recommendations*

Susan J. Terrio, an anthropologist, has explored the unaccompanied minors

phenomenon in her book titled *Whose Child Am I?* (2015) by gaining unprecedented access and visiting children in various shelters throughout the country. In her ethnography, Terrio chronicles the lived experience of minors in the ORR grantee shelters and demonstrates that the unaccompanied minors phenomenon is a significant social issue which requires the interdisciplinary attention of many more scholars and our public gaze.



Unaccompanied minors walk in a Homestead, Florida facility supervised by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, on June 20, 2018. Source: Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement.

My two recommendations are: we should all aim to become more familiar with the publicly available quantitative and qualitative data about unaccompanied minors as it pertains to our specific geographic location; and let us challenge ourselves to situate the minors' experiences within our public interests and academic studies (i.e. feminist theory, critical approach, conflict theory, critical ethnography).

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[announces-zero-tolerance-policy-criminal-illegal-entry](#)

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<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/programs/ucs>

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/18/world/europe/rump-migrant-children-un.html>

12. Exec. Order No. 13841, 3 C.F.R. page 29435 (2018).

13. In a fact-checker article by Politifact, it was reported that the girl from the viral photograph was not actually separated from her mother, but rather momentarily placed on the floor while the border patrol agent searched the mother. Sherman, Amy. 2018. "Immigrant Girl on TIME Cover Not Separated from Mom." @Politifact. Accessed via: <https://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2018/jun/25/gateway-pundit/immigrant-girl-time-cover-wasnt-separated-mother/>

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17. See:

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/unaccompanied-alien-children-released-to-sponsors-by-county>

# Experiencing the Other at CARNE y ARENA

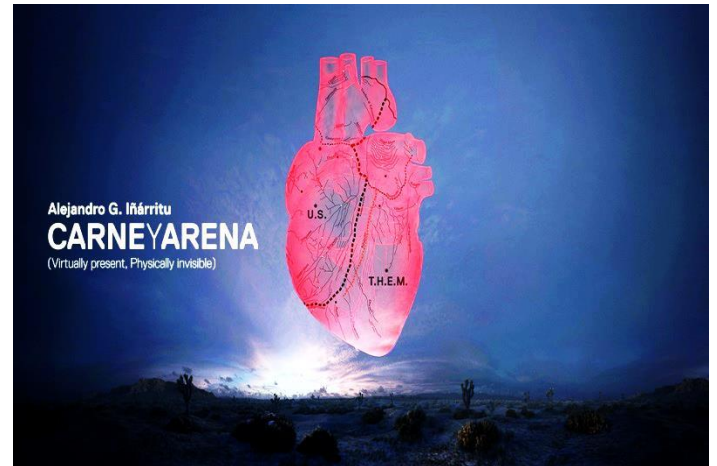
Margaret Zeddies

An art installation in the H Street NE corridor is giving District of Columbia area residents a virtual reality experience of the treacherous journey that refugees and migrants embark upon when entering the U.S. Housed in a former church, *CARNE y ARENA* (*Virtually present, Physically invisible*) “explores the human condition of immigrants and refugees,” according to creator and Academy Award winning-director, Alejandro G. Iñárritu.

Based on true accounts of Central American and Mexican refugees and migrants, *CARNE y ARENA* uses virtual reality technology to “break the dictatorship of the frame—within which things are just observed—and claim the space to allow the visitor to go through a direct experience walking in the immigrants’ feet, under their skin, and into their hearts,” says Iñárritu. The topic of the installation couldn’t be more prescient: the number of forcibly displaced persons increased by 2.9 million in 2017 to a record high of 68.5 million. This steep increase was met with an equally strong rebuff by the Trump administration. The administration’s yearly determination of the number of refugees to be admitted into the United States in fiscal year 2018 was dropped to a record low of 25,000.

The question of how we engage with and are engaged by global inequality is an important sociological question that has been examined through concepts such as the *Other* (Said 1978) and distant suffering (Boltanski 1999). Engaging with the distant Other is explored through concepts such as pity and empathy. As a discursive mechanism, pity creates a sense of caring for the Other (Chouliaraki 2006). Modern media has further intensified the immediacy of distant suffering. Through modern media such as television and the Internet, the suffering of populations like refugees and migrants have an even greater chance of generating an immediate, emotional reaction by the viewer.

Virtual reality technology, then, would seem to take this experience one step further; it has been recently used with great enthusiasm by Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) for fundraising, as seen with Amnesty International and their #360Syria campaign, which generated an uptick in donations.



Source: Carne y Arena DC Press Release, March 26, 2018

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...the experience “blurs and binds together the superficial lines between subject and bystander...allowing individuals to walk in a vast space and live a fragment of a refugee’s personal journey.”

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Mediation is lauded by some as overcoming distance in communications, geography, and morality. While media technology may have the capacity to bridge these gaps, it can also create a sense for the viewer that they are privy to reality, when it in fact is always a replication. Iñárritu maintains that the *CARNE y ARENA* experience “blurs and binds together the superficial lines between subject and bystander...allowing individuals to walk in a vast space and live a fragment of a refugee’s personal journey.”

Charity fundraisers have found that mediated representations were effective in


motivating viewers to donate money to their aid campaigns. However, the inundation of images of people suffering from starvation, war, etc., has been criticized for victimization and creating ‘compassion fatigue.’ As a guide for ethical judgment and moral practice, empathy can thus decrease viewers’ sensitivity to people’s suffering when it occurs in larger numbers (Bloom 2017). Mediated representation also raises the question as to how easily virtual reality can dissipate the lines between tourists and vagabonds, as Bauman describes them (1998). Bauman’s tourist is not bounded by nation-state borders and is able to travel more freely by choice.

Vagabonds, on the other hand, do not travel by choice and may only stay in one place as long as they are wanted there. While sociologists like Bauman advocate for shared humanity and connection between distant sufferers and spectators, what are the effects of tourism and art being the main conduits for these experiences? When tourists are seeking novel experiences, will the refugee become a spectacle as one of Bauman’s vagabonds, who must market their ‘otherness’ to tourists (1998)?

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## What’s next?




DC Sociological Society and  
George Washington University Sociology Department  
invite you to an

### Evening with New Faculty

Wednesday, October 24, 2018  
6-7 p.m. Reception  
7-8 p.m. Faculty Introductions and Q&A  
at George Washington University,  
Phillips Hall Room 411, 801 22nd St NW (between I & H)  
Metro: Foggy Bottom

We're pleased to welcome faculty from  
American, Catholic, George Mason,  
George Washington, Georgetown, and  
the University of Maryland.

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# The Challenge of Reentry in a Free Society: Prospects for a New Crime Commission

Maria Valdovinos

On the heels of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, and the publication of the report, *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*, we are once again revisiting the need for a new crime commission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, this commission is also known as the Johnson Crime Commission and the goal of its work in 1965 was to "examine every facet of crime and law enforcement in America" (U.S. President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice 1967). In response to what was perceived to be the Nation's rapidly escalating crime problem at the time, this two-year undertaking, staffed by 19 commissioners, 63 staff members, and 175 consultants, yielded an impressive 300+ page report with over 200 specific recommendations on improving public safety and the administration of justice.

The report indeed reflects a comprehensive effort and deep dive into the causes of various forms of crime and criminality perceived to be afflicting the country at the time, such as juvenile delinquency, youth crime, and organized crime. It is also in large part due to this report that our understanding of the administration of justice in America as a "system" became solidified in our minds. The commission also set the stage for the creation of a federal research arm tasked with widening our scientific understanding of how this system and its system components (i.e. the police, courts, corrections etc.) work. As such, this national effort has been widely credited with improving our understanding of crime and the American criminal justice system and "creating [justice] institutions and practices that are still in place today" (Lum and Gest 2018). Some of these

institutions and practices have subsequently been heavily criticized as having set the stage for the era of mass incarceration that soon followed. Regardless of its positives or negatives, the legacy of this report in shaping criminal justice policy in the subsequent five decades cannot be overstated.

In 2017, the call for the creation of a new crime commission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century began to ring loud. Introduced by Senators Gary Peters, Lindsey Graham and John Cornyn, the National Criminal Justice Commission Act of 2017<sup>1</sup> is backed by a bi-partisan group of senators, civil rights and law enforcement groups (Jackman 2017). Its core goals include the reduction of crime and improvement of public safety, as well as the administration of justice. Its proposed methodology, an 18-month comprehensive review, overseen by over a dozen commissioners with the goal of yielding recommendations, is also strikingly similar to the goals and methods of the Johnson crime commission.

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Reversing the era of mass incarceration, which is routinely traced back to the 1970s and the War on Drugs, is a key agenda item informing much of the 21<sup>st</sup> century criminal justice reform work.

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In response to this prospect for the first comprehensive review of the American criminal justice system in over 50 years, the Center for Evidence Based Crime Policy at George Mason University set out to address the following question: What would a new crime commission accomplish? What could it add? In April 2018, over a dozen scholars gathered to address these questions at the Center's congressional briefing on criminal justice in the United States entitled *Lessons from the Past, Prospects for a New Crime Commission*.<sup>2</sup> Among the contributors to this discussion were Senator Gary Peters, who sponsored the bill, and scholars such as Alfred

Blumstein who participated in the 1965 commission. These scholars would like to lay the groundwork for what a new commission should address through their contributions to the journal *Criminology & Public Policy* (*Special Issue on the 1967 Crime Commission Report*).<sup>3</sup> The areas identified included science and technology, juvenile crime, the courts, prosecutorial discretion, sentencing, correctional rehabilitation, the police, race, crime and criminal justice, narcotics and drug abuse, firearms, domestic violence and criminal justice statistics.



Senator Gary Peters speaks at Congressional Briefing, April 24, 2018. Photo by Maria Valdovinos.

Many of these topics were covered in the 1967 report and while there is always a need to update the body of knowledge, the congressional briefing left me wondering why another aspect of the criminal justice system, which is *prisoner reentry*, did not seem more of a focal concern. Although prisoner reentry within the purview of corrections is addressed by some of the scholars (MacKenzie and Lattimore 2018), the dynamics of reentry seem to be overlooked. Indisputably, the institution of

mass incarceration presents a crucial difference between societal conditions of 50 years ago and those of today.

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...as the movement for 21<sup>st</sup> century criminal justice reform grows...we have the opportunity to ask critical questions about the normative structure of the American criminal justice system.

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Reversing the era of mass incarceration, which is routinely traced back to the 1970s and the War on Drugs, is a key agenda item informing much of the 21<sup>st</sup> century criminal justice reform work. Whereas the challenge of crime in a free society was the problem that led to the appointment of the original crime commission, it would seem that the *challenge of reentry in a free society* should really be driving the agenda for the new crime commission.

While the 1967 President's Crime Commission is considered a landmark in the history of reform, it is far from the starting point. As we look toward reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a real risk of re-inventing the wheel, so to speak, and of recreating conditions that work to maintain the system of crime and incarceration that characterizes America rather than transforming it. In looking toward the future of reform, it is important to recognize that there is a much longer history of criminal justice reform efforts whose relationship to crime and incarceration we know little about. Over the summer, I had the opportunity to conduct an archival review of some of these earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts in criminal justice reform as part of a summer research fellowship. My aim was to understand how the reform efforts of the past 100 years (and not just the past 50 years) have contributed to the design and construction of the American criminal justice system that is the target of reform today.

The reform efforts I reviewed encompass both small and large scale undertakings by early 20<sup>th</sup> century reformers to

create a system for administering justice in America and its improvement over time. These efforts arguably begin with the Cleveland study (1920s) credited with creating a blue print for reform and include at least a dozen more leading up to the Johnson Crime Commission and Brown Commission in the 1960s.

However, as the movement for 21<sup>st</sup> century criminal justice reform grows (a movement that at the moment seems to be squarely focused on de-incarceration), we have the opportunity to ask critical questions about the normative structure of the American criminal justice system and to challenge the politics that led to its design. However, in order to do so, the agenda for a new commission on criminal justice reform will need to expand beyond study of the system itself. A new commission should also consider the societal conditions that maintain this system.

#### Notes

1. The bill was introduced into Congress on March 8, 2017. As of October 2018, it has not progressed to the next step in the legislative process. For bill text see: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/573/actions>

2. For the congressional briefing agenda see: <https://cebcp.org/outreach-symposia-and-briefings/crime-commission/>

3. Criminology and Public Policy, special issue table of contents: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/17459133/17/2>

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*What's next?*

## The Wide World of Sociology

Thursday,  
November 15, 2018

6-9 p.m.

Speakers:

Sally Hillsman  
Johanna Bockman  
Lynda Laughlin  
Gloria Gonzalez  
Wendy Naus  
George Wimberly

Sudhouse  
1340 U Street NW



# Building an Age-Inclusive District

Emily Morrison  
Emily McDonald

*Over the past year and a half, we have participated in an ongoing, community-based research project to understand the experience of aging in the District of Columbia with a particular focus on older adults. This experience has introduced us to many community members, leaders and activists who are working to strengthen our community, foster systemic change, and help the District become a more age-inclusive city. Here we offer a brief overview of how one organization is using findings from this inquiry to advance a city-wide initiative aimed at making the District an easier place for all to grow older.*

The United States continues to witness a significant demographic shift: the number of people age 65 and older is on the rise and is projected to double by the year 2060 (Mather, Jacobsen, and Pollard 2015). This shift raises questions as to how the fabric of communities may change and how communities can best prepare. The District of Columbia, in particular, raised this question around how to better support citizens as we all grow older. In 2012, the District government began laying the foundation for building an age-friendly city and continues to take a multifaceted, collaborative approach by inviting academicians and researchers interested in community-based work to join community members and leaders in this effort.

Given the ongoing dialogue around aging globally, the World Health Organization (WHO) established the “Age-Friendly” initiative to evaluate cities’ “structures and services” for their accessibility and inclusivity for “older people with varying needs and capacities” (WHO 2007). Locally, in 2012, then Councilmember Muriel Bowser led the City Council to approve plans for the city to participate in the WHO Age-Friendly initiative (AFDC 2017). The initial steps established Age-Friendly DC (AFDC) as a 5-year mayoral task

force. The task force began a city-wide inquiry to assess the experiences of older adults in the District, how citizens are already organizing themselves in formal ways (e.g., belonging to a recognized organization) and informal ways (e.g., checking on a neighbor) to provide the structure and support they need, as well as what programs and services may be needed. The task force employed direct interviews, focus groups, and meetings with community members throughout all eight wards.

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## Villages help foster social connections among neighbors through events and services...

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Several issues emerged through the task force’s inquiry. One of the biggest concerns is a lack of affordable residential facilities that support individuals as they grow older and as their needs and capacities shift over time. Many adults of all ages wish to remain in their current communities as they grow older.



However, doing so is complicated by ongoing neighborhood gentrification and limited resources for expanding access to services like transportation and wellness centers. Thus, AFDC established a collaborative relationship with Villages, which are grassroots organizations focused on creating intentional communities where older adults can support one another in aging in place for as long as it is safe and feasible to do so.



Villages are founded as emergent organizations. Neighbors essentially establish a Village for themselves, and then continuously create their organizational structures and services based on their needs over time.

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## The Villages also challenge models that oversimplify or fail to see the complexity of aging.

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The first DC Village, Capitol Hill Village, was established in 2006. The movement continues to grow, with 12 active Villages in the District as of 2017 (AFDC 2017). Villages help foster social connections among neighbors through events and services (e.g., educational programs, tai chi classes, ride-sharing, and book clubs). More generally, Villages provide a space where neighbors can ask for help with whatever they may need (e.g., help cleaning one's home after surgery), and provide assistance and support to fellow members in whichever ways they can (e.g., checking the mail while someone is away).

However, Villages also face significant challenges. First, Villages are not evenly distributed throughout the city. Most are concentrated in higher income areas with less racial diversity than the city's overall population. Further, some Villages require membership fees.

While many Village leaders work to establish reduced cost programs, fees may potentially exclude interested neighbors with more limited incomes. Overall, Villages currently provide significant and much-needed services and opportunities for community-building. At the same time, there remains the need for model adaptation to support older adults in different parts of the city and with varying levels of resources.

Understanding the Villages' overall strengths and current limitations provides opportunities for further growth, which exemplify how AFDC continues their work. In 2017, Mayor Bowser signed AFDC's 5-year renewal. Over the next 5 years, spanning until

2023, AFDC will continually develop age-inclusive programs for the city, and continually collaborate with, and support organizations like the Villages. AFDC's efforts and the self-organized and emerging Villages offer ways to add perspectives to existing theories of researchers like us.

The Villages also challenge models that oversimplify or fail to see the complexity of aging. Dillaway and Byrnes (2009) argue that aging studies frequently undertake "crises" frameworks that focus on how retiring baby boomer cohorts are producing structural strains for social services and younger generations.



Source: Age-Friendly DC.

These frameworks reduce the complexity of what it means to grow older by misapprehending lived experiences, replacing individual agency to affect change with assumptions of inevitable disengagement in later years, and disregarding how communities can better organize their systems in more age-inclusive ways. We have found that issues such as accessible housing and healthcare (which are important to many researchers and sociologists in particular), intersect *with* aging in important and consequential ways that vary greatly in context.

Through our ongoing, community-based research which engages community members as essential knowledge co-creators, we continue to

find opportunities to support grassroots organizing through the research process itself (e.g., training community members to assess their own needs and practices) and through legitimation from rigorous study of Age-Friendly programs in the District (e.g., funders or city leaders seeing Villages as formal and feasible organizations they should support).

Many more opportunities remain for collaborative work throughout the District to promote an age-inclusive community where all are supported as we grow older.

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## *What's next?*

ASA President-Elect

Christine Williams

DCSS Address

Thursday,  
January 24, 2019

7p.m.

ASA Headquarters  
430 K Street, NW  
Suite 600

Hosted by ASA and DCSS



# *Ask the Sociologist*

## Authority and Obedience

Briana Pocratsky

*Dear Sociologist,*

Using the Milgram experiment, can you analyze group members' compliance to authority?

Sincerely,

Concerned about Compliance\*

*Dear Concerned about Compliance,*

While Stanley Milgram's experiments do not definitively explain all of the complexities of obedience to authority, especially in a group setting, his research does offer insight into how power dynamics may influence a person's actions. Milgram, a social psychologist, discovered that the presence of an authority figure could, in some cases, cause individuals to act in contrast to their own morals. To get a better understanding of how authority can influence people's actions, it is important to take a closer look at the different variations and conclusions of Milgram's obedience experiments.

In his article "Behavioral Study of Obedience," Milgram (1963) asserts that obedience is a "ubiquitous and indispensable feature of social life" and the "dispositional cement that binds" people "to systems of authority" (pp. 371-72). Milgram explains that the study of obedience is crucial:

Obedience...is of particular relevance to our time. It has been reliably established that from 1933-45 millions of innocent persons were systematically slaughtered on command. Gas chambers were built, death camps were guarded, daily quotas of corpses were produced with the same efficiency as the manufacturer of appliances. These inhumane policies may have originated in the mind of a single person, but they could only be carried out on a massive scale if a very large number of persons obeyed orders (p. 371).

In order to better understand why individuals and large groups of people would commit such

atrocities, Milgram, while an assistant professor at Yale University, completed a series of experiments. He explored the conditions of (dis)obedience; he questioned to what extent would a participant in a study comply with orders from an experimenter to hurt another individual, even if the instructions may conflict with the participant's morality? Under what conditions will the participant not carry out the orders and disobey authority?

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If the learner answered incorrectly, the teacher would shock the learner. The experimenter instructed the teacher to administer incrementally more severe shocks using lever switches...

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### *Milgram's Obedience Studies*

Milgram conducted a series of experiments to better understand the conditions of obedience (Milgram 1963, 1965, 1974). In his first publication on the series, his experiment included 40 male participants between the ages of 20-50 years old with differing educational and occupational backgrounds who resided in the New Haven area and who were recruited for a study of "memory and learning at Yale University" (1963: 372).

This experiment consisted of the following procedures: When the participant arrived to the laboratory for the study, the experimenter, a white male in a gray lab coat, informed the participant and an actor, who appeared to be a participant, that they were taking part in a memory study that focused on punishment and learning (a topic that lacked scientific research). The experimenter explained that one participant would act as the "teacher" and the other as the "learner" for the exercise. The experimenter instructed both the participant and the actor to draw a slip of paper from a rigged drawing whereby the participant was always the teacher and the actor was always the

learner. The teacher watched as the learner was “strapped into an ‘electric chair’ apparatus” (that administered shocks on the learner’s wrist) (p. 373). The experimenter stated that the shocks can be “extremely painful” but will cause “no permanent tissue damage” (ibid.).

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While the situation was constructed to seem authentic to the participant-teacher, the actor-learner did not receive any shocks.

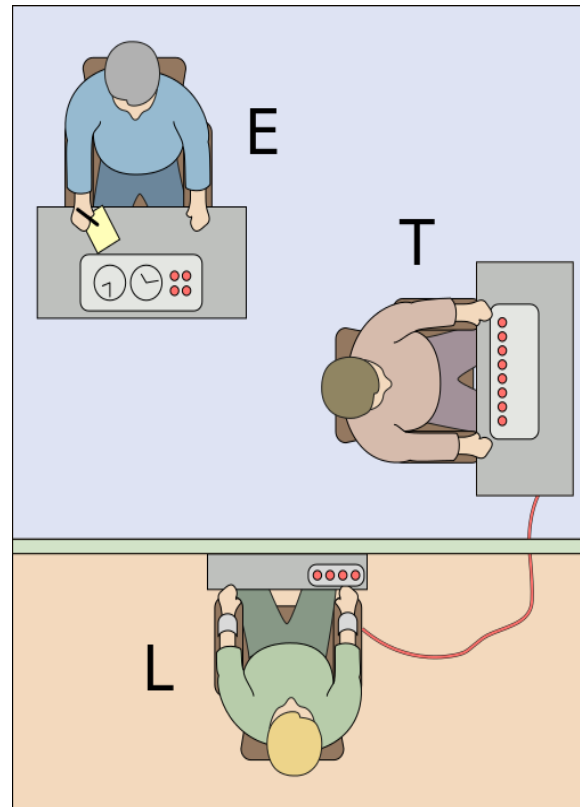
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The teacher would read a list of word pairs to the learner from the adjoining room. In this room, the teacher had access to a shock generator, which appeared to be connected to the learner’s wrist. The teacher would read the first word from the pair, and the learner was expected to recall the second word in the pair. If the learner answered correctly, they moved on to the next word pair. If the learner answered incorrectly, the teacher would shock the learner. The experimenter instructed the teacher to administer incrementally more severe shocks using lever switches if the learner answered incorrectly. The simulated shock generator used “30 clearly marked voltage levels that range[d] from 15 to 450 volts” with coinciding “verbal designations that range[d] from Slight Shock to Danger: Severe Shock” to “XXX” (p. 372). While the situation was constructed to seem authentic to the participant-teacher, the actor-learner did not receive any shocks.

According to Milgram, the experiment was standardized, and the responses of the learner and the experimenter were standardized as well. For example, in this variation of the study, if the participant administered a 300 volt shock, the learner acted as if they were in pain by kicking the wall and no longer provided answers to the teacher. The pounding occurred again at the 315 volt shock, and the learner provided no further responses.

In another condition,<sup>1</sup> the verbal responses of the learner were taped, and “each

protest [was] coordinated to a particular voltage level on the shock generator” in which at 75 volts the learner “beg[an] to grunt and moan,” at 150 volts the learner demanded to quit the experiment, at 180 volts “he crie[d] out that he can no longer stand the pain” and at 300 volts “he refuse[d] to provide any more answers to the memory test, insisting that he [was] no longer a participant” and must be let out (Milgram 1965: 60).



Source: Wikimedia Commons.

When the participant-teacher exhibited an unwillingness to continue with the experiment, the experimenter responded with a sequence of prods such as “[t]he experiment requires that you continue” (Milgram 1963: 374).

#### *Results*

In the variation of the study detailed above, “[n]o subject stopped prior to administering Shock Level 20,” or 300 volts, and “[o]f the 40 subjects, 26 obeyed the orders of the experimenter to the end, proceeding to punish the victim until they reached the most potent shock available on the shock generator”



(Milgram 1963: 375-76). In this case, and in other variations of the study, many participants exhibited what Milgram (1963: 375) termed “signs of extreme tension” in which they would “sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan, and dig their fingernails into their flesh” in addition to having nervous laughing fits. A few participants even had seizures. Milgram reflects on the general findings of the experiments in the following quote:

“[The results] raise the possibility that human nature, or --more specifically-- the kind of character produced in American democratic society, cannot be counted on to insulate its citizens from brutality and inhumane treatment at the direction of malevolent authority. A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority” (Milgram 1965: 75).

As part of the series, Milgram also considered (dis)obedience in relationship to group situations. For example, in one study, Milgram had three teachers in the room with the simulated shock generator. Two of them were actors and one of them was a participant. When the actors quit in the middle of the learning exercise, “90 per cent of the subjects followed suit and defied the experimenter” (p. 71). In another variation, an actor administered the shocks to the learner as the participant observed.

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## What are authority’s forms, signifiers, and spaces of operation, and how is its power individually and systemically implemented?

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With this variation, only three participants out of forty defied the experimenter. In yet another condition, the participant and actors were tasked with deciding the shock level they would use to punish the learner for a wrong answer. Actors recommended increasingly

higher shock levels. Some participants challenged the increase in shock levels while others went along with the actors.

### *Replications and Alternative Interpretations*

Variations of Milgram’s obedience experiments have been replicated. For example, Jerry Burger (2009) partially replicated one of Milgram’s studies with similar findings. In Burger’s (2009) base condition, “[t]he percentage of participants who continued the procedure after pressing the 150-volt switch was examined,” and “70% of the base condition participants continued with the next item on the test and had to be stopped by the experimenter” (compared to Milgram’s 82.5% of participants) (p. 8).

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**Milgram’s studies, at the very least, remind us that we should be ever vigilant in the presence of authority: what it looks like, the power it wields, and how this power may be used to harm groups of people in society.**

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In another variation of Burger’s study, called the “modeled refusal condition,” two actors (one teacher and one learner) and a participant were involved in the experiment. In this situation, the actor-teacher administers the shocks and stops after pressing the 90 volt switch. The participant is then asked to take-over and administer the shocks because the actor-teacher refuses to continue. In most cases, the participant continued with the shocks past the 150 volt point (63.3%).

In addition to their popularity, Milgram’s obedience experiments unsurprisingly have a number of ethical and methodological concerns, making it a “contentious classic” (Tavris 2014).

Milgram’s experiments have been criticized recently for misrepresentations of the debriefing process (some participants were not fully debriefed), the experimenter’s off-script

improvisation of prods, and Milgram's selective reporting of results. Richard A. Griggs (2017) explains that some social psychologists have reinterpreted Milgram's findings. Essentially, "this reinterpretation argues that the experiments were not about obedience to authority but rather engaged followership based on identification with the experimenter and his scientific project" (p. 33).<sup>2</sup>



Stanley Milgram. Source: Harvard University Department of Psychology.

#### *Are the Obedience Studies Still Relevant?*

As the merit of Milgram's obedience studies is continually revisited and questioned, and reinterpretations of his findings evolve, it will be interesting to see how Milgram's experiments are framed and taught in the future. However, larger questions regarding the construction, operation, and maintenance of authority (and individual choice and resistance) in society remain pertinent.

What are authority's forms, signifiers, and spaces of operation, and how is its power individually and systemically implemented?<sup>3</sup> Whether in a lab coat, military uniform, or cassock, Milgram's studies, at the very least, remind us that we should be ever vigilant in the presence of authority: what it looks like, the power it wields, and how this power may be used to harm groups of people in society.

#### *Additional Resources*

Asch conformity experiments; Stanford Prison Experiment: Studies related to the obedience

experiments ▪ *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963): A book by political theorist Hannah Arendt concerning the trial of Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann ▪ *Obedience* (1965): Stanley Milgram's documentary film on the obedience experiments ▪ *Experimenter* (2015): An entertainment film about Stanley Milgram and the obedience studies ▪ *Shock Room* (2015): A documentary film about Stanley Milgram's obedience studies.

\*Question was edited for clarity.

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#### *Notes*

1. Some other variations in the series of experiments include the participant's proximity to the learner, the participant's closeness to authority, the setting of the laboratory experiment, and the gender of participants. In an unreported experiment, pairs of participants who knew one another in some capacity were included in a condition. One participant was the teacher and the other participant was the learner (see Griggs 2017). The different conditions in the experiments had varying results.
2. For an overview of old and new criticisms and reinterpretations of the obedience studies' findings, please see Griggs (2017).
3. Sociologist Max Weber ([1925] 2008) considered forms of domination that bring about the belief of legitimacy, or authority in society. Weber classifies "the types of domination according to the kind of claim to legitimacy typically made by each" and its relationship to obedience (p.179). Weber states that legitimate domination in society generally adheres to three ideal types or pure forms: traditional authority, charismatic authority, and rational-legal authority.



### ***Ask Us!***

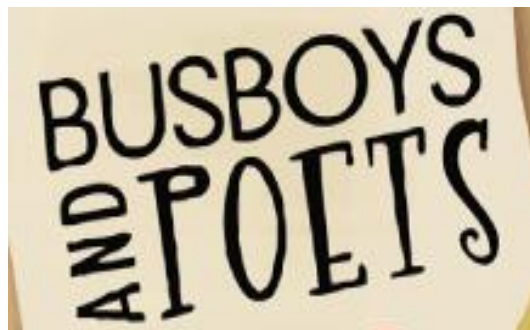
Do you have a question about sociology as it relates to everyday life? Submit your inquiry to “Ask *the Sociologist*,” and we will try to find a sociologist to reply to your question. All submissions will remain anonymous, but the questions and responses will be made public so that individuals with similar inquiries can use them as a resource. Please anonymously submit your sociology-related question today!



# Annual Banquet & Award Ceremony

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Thursday, May 23, 2019



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