

Disconcerting Insights: Milgram's Obedience Experiments, Elias's Civilizing Process, and the Perpetration of the Holocaust

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Abstract

Social psychologist Milgram (1963, 1974) and sociologist Elias ([1939] 2000) are undisputed social science heavyweights whose scholarly contributions delve into the shared topic of violence. Despite this similarity, near nothing has been written on any insights one might offer the other. With the aim of bucking this trend, this exploratory article illustrates how certain connections shared between both magna operas are mutually beneficial: Elias's thesis can shed new light into otherwise mysterious obedient subject behavior and Milgram's experiments can be used to bolster a central yet weak pillar in Elias's thesis. The strengthening of this weak pillar is of particular importance because it likely reinvigorates the ability of the Civilizing Process to offer unique and counterintuitive insights into German perpetrator behavior during the Holocaust. It is through these Milgram-Elias linkages that the author's paradoxical concept of *civilized killers* emerges.

Keywords

Milgram, Elias, Holocaust, Violence, Behind the Scenes, Avoidance

...in Rumania even the S.S. were taken aback, and occasionally frightened, by the horrors of old-fashioned, spontaneous pogroms on a gigantic scale; they often intervened to save Jews from sheer butchery, so that the killing could be done in what, according to them, was a civilized way.

—Arendt (1984: p. 190).

1. Introduction

In 1961-1962 Stanley Milgram ran the Obedience to Authority (OTA) experi-

ments. The “New Baseline” demonstrated that 65 percent of “ordinary” Americans willingly followed orders to inflict potentially lethal shocks on an innocent person (1974: p. 6). Earlier in 1939, Norbert Elias published *The Civilizing Process* (TCP). The book’s main purpose was:

...to understand how, over roughly five centuries of development, Europeans came to the view that they were “civilized” while others were “barbaric” or languishing in a “savage” past. The analysis did not condone these self-images; the point was not to share in European self-congratulation, but to understand the processes that led to a sense of cultural superiority. (Linklater & Mennell, 2010: p. 385)

Elias also attempted to explain, among other things, how and why the personality structure of Western Europeans across the Early Modern Period transformed from being uncontrolled and volatile to, by the modern era, relatively restrained and even-tempered. Angry and frustrated modern Europeans are, compared to their medieval predecessors, less likely to lash out in a violent rage. Although TCP—written on the eve of the most destructive war in history—was initially met with skepticism, some European scholars sensed its enormous potential.

Milgram (1963) and Elias ([1939] 2000) share some commonalities: both were scholars of Jewish heritage whose respective families were adversely affected by the Holocaust (relatives of the former narrowly escaped Europe alive and the latter’s mother was murdered in Auschwitz). Consequently, as reflected in their scholarly output, the Holocaust (understandably) haunted both scholars. Another commonality is that to this date, both Milgram’s and Elias’s scholarly reputations remain revered and reviled. Ongoing intrigue and controversy over their respective contributions have, as Google Scholar illustrates, proved themselves veritable lightning rods for scholarly citations: Milgram (1963) has been cited nearly 9000 and Elias (2000 [1939]) more than 9000 times¹.

But as Google Scholar also reveals, although both delved into the topic of violence, near nothing has previously been written on any theoretical insights one might offer the other². Perhaps this is because no such connection exists. However, this exploratory article argues that there are certain linkages between their most cited contributions: Elias’s thesis can shed new insights on Milgram’s otherwise baffling subject behavior, and Milgram’s results can—with a slight modification—strengthen one of the weaker pillars in Elias’s thesis. The latter connection is likely substantive because a strengthened Civilizing Process may—through the

¹There are some major differences between the two scholars. Milgram achieved fame early in his career and Elias achieved it late. Milgram was geographically distant from Nazi persecution, however Elias’s life, as a German Jew, was—in a variety of ways—turned upside down by the National Socialists. Milgram was an experimental social psychologist and Elias was theoretical sociologist (the former struggled to produce theory, the latter did not). Milgram studied under and to some degree looked up to Talcott Parsons at Harvard University; a scholar Elias actively critiqued at every opportunity.

²One of the few exceptions being Alford (1998: pp. 75-81).

above epigraphical paradox of *civilized killers* (that is, rational, emotionally controlled, yet typically squeamish executioners)—equip it to offer unique insights into German perpetrator behavior during the Holocaust.

This article sets out by providing brief overviews of Milgram's Obedience studies and Elias's theory. It then presents various connections between both projects. That is, it firstly shows how Elias's theory can help better understand Milgram's otherwise perplexing subject behavior. Secondly, it shows how, with one eye on the Holocaust, Milgram's results can strengthen Elias's theory.

2. OTA Experiments: An Overview

During the Nazi war crimes trials, many ordinary Germans justified their harmful actions by arguing that they were just following higher orders (Szejnmann, 2008: pp. 28-29). Milgram therefore wondered what would happen if he ran an experiment where an authority figure instructed ordinary people to follow orders to hurt another person. For this experiment to garner scholarly attention, Milgram knew it needed to obtain eye-catching results (nobody would be surprised by an experiment that generated a low rate of harmful obedience). He began with a preconceived goal: run an experiment that would "maximize obedience" (Milgram cited in Russell, 2018: p. 8). Because Milgram did not have an experimental procedure capable of producing this result, he had to invent one.

Milgram's first attempt at inventing a procedure capable of maximising obedience was rudimentary. Because many Nazi war criminals mentioned they had pledged to obey Hitler, Milgram's initial idea was to hire an actor to play an authority figure who required subjects accept a pledge to obey his orders (Ibid., p. 48). The authority would then reveal those orders: subjects were to physically assault another person. As Milgram said: "We can then start out by giving the subject commands from the lower end. (Tap him.) And gradually proceed to more intensive commands. (Slug him.)" (Ibid., p. 48). Inherent in this idea is the manipulative "foot-in-the-door" technique: persons are more likely to agree to a significant request if it is preceded by a comparatively insignificant request. Milgram later termed his inclusion of manipulative techniques like this Binding Factors (BFs). BFs are powerful bonds that can entrap a person into doing something they would prefer not to do (Milgram, 1974: p. 148). With time, Milgram added more BFs to the basic procedure.

But was a "pledge to obey" a command to (eventually) "[s]lug" another person likely to maximise obedience? Two problems appeared. First, the Nazi-sounding pledge to obey might alert subjects to the study's actual research question. Second, putting aside the ethical difficulties of running an experiment where innocent people were physically beaten(!), surely subjects would feel too closely connected to the order's harmful end results. Milgram therefore required an opaquer justification for hurting another person, along with a more disconnected means of harm infliction. Subsequent procedural changes indicate Milgram likely sensed both problems.

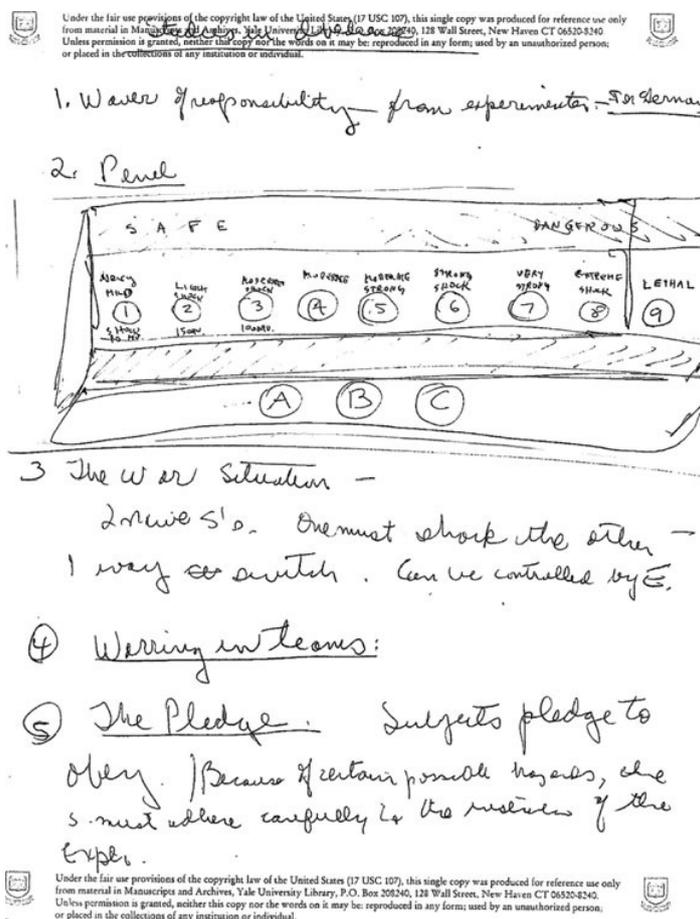


Figure 1. Milgram's archival document titled "Studies in Obedience", circa 1960 (Russell, 2018: p. 49).

In **Figure 1** Milgram reveals his idea to incorporate a shock generator. This device was an example of what he termed a Strain Resolving Mechanism (SRM). SRMs help reduce the stress people normally experience when inflicting harm (Milgram, 1974: pp. 153-164). That is, a person who presses switches that harm another person will likely experience less stress than had they physically beaten them with their fists. Another SRM mentioned in this document was "1. Wa[i]ver of responsibility", where subjects would be informed all shocks could be inflicted with impunity. Although here Milgram maintained his Nazi-like "pledge to obey", by October 1960 he discarded it in favour of a new justification for harm infliction: the subject in the role of a "teacher" was to inflict shocks on a "learner" to help determine if *punishment improved learning* (Russell, 2018: pp. 56-59). Thus, to help advance scientific knowledge, subjects would be pressured into inflicting the shocks (BF). With his shock machine and a less transparent justification for shock infliction, Milgram envisioned two essential components that moved him closer to preconceived goal achievement.

To see if these ideas worked, in November 1960 Milgram tasked his students with running the first Obedience study pilot. First, they constructed a shock generator (see **Figure 2**).



Figure 2. The Students' 12-switch prototype shock generator (Russell, 2018: p. 62).

Figure 3 (below) captures how Milgram envisaged the first pilot.

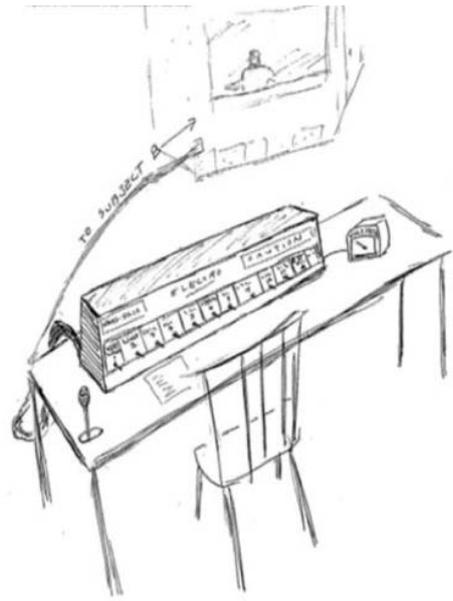


Figure 3. How Milgram envisaged the first pilot, dated 1960 (Russell, 2018: p. 58).

The student-run pilot saw about “60 percent” of subjects—who could see the “shocked” learner through a translucent screen—inflict every shock (Milgram, 1973: p. 64). The first pilot generated an unexpected behavior: because obedient subjects found harming upsetting, they “frequently averted their eyes from the person they were shocking...” (Milgram cited in Russell, 2018: pp. 63-64). This observation made Milgram wonder: if, in a subsequent pilot, he substituted the translucent screen with a solid wall, would doing so make it even easier—relatively less stressful—for subjects to inflict every shock? That is, would adding a potentially strain-resolving wall increase the completion rate, thereby moving Milgram even closer to his preconceived goal to “maximize obedience”?

By August 1961, Milgram had hired a professional research team and had en-

gineers construct a more credible-looking shock generator. The new shock generator had 30 rather than 12 switches. And instead of increasing in 30-volt increments ending in a 330-volt shock, the new device increased in 15-volt increments that ended in a 450-volt shock (see **Figure 6**). These modifications extended on his early inclusion of the foot-in-the-door logic. That is, compared to the students' shock generator (**Figure 2**), Milgram's machine had more smaller steps that ended in a more powerful final shock. All this insured for a more powerful BF that Dolinski and Grzyb (2016: p. 277) term the "multiple feet-in-the-door" effect.

Milgram then embarked on a second series of pilot studies. The final variation of this series—termed the "Truly Remote Pilot study"—incorporated a solid wall, thereby ensuring subjects could neither see nor hear the learner's "shock" reactions. Milgram's (1965: p. 61) hypothesis about the strain-resolving effect of a wall proved correct because in this pilot "virtually all" subjects inflicted every shock. The leap from the student pilot's 60 per cent completion rate to the *Truly Remote Pilot's* near 100 per cent completion rate saw Milgram achieve his pre-conceived goal of maximising obedience. Milgram now had a procedure that, should he use it as his first official experiment, he knew would likely generate the high rate of obedience he desired.

However, an official baseline experiment where nearly all subjects completed raised a problem: Milgram (Ibid., p. 61) would be deprived "of an adequate basis for scaling obedient tendencies." He therefore decided to marginally reduce the first official baseline experiment's completion rate by, in conflict with all earlier innovations, slightly *increasing* subject stress. He did so by instructing the learner (an actor) at the 300 and 315-volt shocks to kick the adjoining wall (thereby stimulating the subjects' auditory perceptual senses) then fall silent. On 7 August 1961 Milgram ran the first official baseline experiment. What follows describes what this first baseline procedure entailed.

3. Milgram's First Official Baseline

An actor posing as a Yale-based experimenter introduced another actor posing as a potential subject to an awaiting naïve and actual subject. The experimenter then explained his experiment's intention: test the effects of punishment on learning, with one subject assigned the role of "teacher" and the other "learner". The selection, however, was rigged: the actor always became the learner, and the actual subject the teacher. The actual subject (now teacher) watched as the experimenter strapped the learner into an electric chair. The experimenter informed the learner that the teacher would, from the adjoining room, ask the learner word-pair questions which he was to correctly answer. The experimenter then took the teacher into the adjoining room with the shock generator and instructed them to give the learner a "shock" for each incorrect answer proffered. The learner's subsequent incorrect answers warranted a "shock" one level higher than its predecessor.

The learner frequently provided incorrect answers, thus ensuring compliant teachers quickly advanced up the switchboard. The experimenter responded to all signs of teacher hesitation with one or several of the following prods:

Please continue, or, Please go on.

The experiment requires that you continue.

It is absolutely essential that you continue.

You have no other choice, you *must* go on.

If a teacher reached the 300 and 315-volt switch, the learner, as mentioned, kicked the wall several times then failed to answer further questions, thus implying something had gone terribly wrong. The experimenter instructed the teacher to treat all subsequent unanswered questions as incorrect and to inflict further intensifying shocks. If a teacher expressed concerns about the learner's wellbeing the experimenter responded, "Whether the learner likes it or not, you must go on until he has learned the word pairs correctly. So please go on" (followed by the second, third, and fourth prods, if necessary). If a teacher tried to clarify the lines of responsibility, the experimenter asserted, "I'm responsible for anything that happens to him. Continue please." (Russell, 2018: p. 21). In the absence of any categorical acts of defiance, the experiment was deemed complete upon the teacher administering three successive 450-volt shocks. This baseline—termed the *Remote-Feedback* condition—produced a 65 per cent completion rate. This result became Milgram's (1963) first Obedience-study publication, an article that garnered much media attention and thus had its intended effect.

Because, over time, Milgram gained greater control over increasing (then slightly decreasing) the completion rate until he obtained the results he desired, Milgram's actions support Edward E. Jones conclusion that the baseline was essentially a "triumph of social engineering" (cited in Parker, 2000: p 112). Milgram's (1974: p. 7) own words support this assessment: "moral factors can be shunted aside with relative ease by a calculated restructuring of the informational and social field."

4. The Proximity Series, the New Baseline, Subsequent Variations, and the Theoretical Dead-end

The Remote-Feedback baseline was also the first of four experiments collectively termed the *Proximity Series*. The *Proximity Series* was inspired by the head-turning behaviors Milgram observed during the student-run pilot where, it seemed, subjects did not want to see the consequences of their actions. Milgram therefore hypothesized that the more subjects were exposed to the perceptual consequences of their "shocking" the learner, the lower the completion rate. The *Proximity Series* (Table 1) supported this hypothesis.

After the *Proximity Series* Milgram became confident that he could run a new more disturbing (more eye-catching) baseline than the *Remote-Feedback*. This

Table 1. The proximity series.

Condition	Description	Completion Rate
Remote-Feedback	Subject <i>indirectly hears</i> the learner (wall banging)	65 percent
Voice-Feedback	Subject <i>directly hears</i> the learner's verbal reactions to being "shocked"	62.5 percent
Proximity	Subject and learner, in the same room, can <i>directly see</i> and <i>hear</i> each other	40 percent
Touch-Proximity	Subject and learner are in the same room and can <i>directly see</i> and <i>hear</i> each other. At the 150-volt switch the learner refuses to participate so the experimenter instructs the subject to force the learner's hand on the shock plate (thus, the subject must also <i>touch</i> the learner)	30 percent

New Baseline (or Cardiac) condition was like the *Remote-Feedback* baseline except when the learner was being strapped into the chair, he mentioned having a mild heart condition. Also different was that the learner's "pain" from being "shocked" was now conveyed by way of intensifying verbal protests. For example, by the 150-volt switch, a panicked learner mentioned his heart was bothering him. By the 300-volt switch, the learner—now screaming—mentioned, for the third and final time, that he was having heart difficulties. After the 345-volt switch, the learner went silent, implying he had, at least, been rendered unconscious. To all this, the experimenter urged the teacher to continue inflicting further shocks. This *New Baseline*—which became the centerpiece of Milgram's documentary *Obedience (a filmed experiment)*—also obtained a 65 percent completion rate (Russell, 2018: pp. 21-22).

Using the *New Baseline* as his model procedure, Milgram thereafter undertook nearly a score of slight experimental variations. He did so in anticipation that these variations would, through a process of elimination, isolate the variable that caused most subjects to complete the *New Baseline*, thereby generating a theory of obedience.

Although all of Milgram's post-*New Baseline* variations included a solid wall (ensuring subjects could not see the learner), a different manifestation of the *Truly Remote Pilot* study's head-turning behavior emerged. Moreover, some subjects started anticipating the learner's intensifying screams, then purposefully talked over them as if—like during the student-run pilot—to circumvent experiencing them (Milgram, 1974: p. 158). Milgram termed all such reactions—whether auditorily or visually stimulated—*avoidance*. Avoidance is where a subject purposefully "screens himself from the sensory consequences of his actions" (Ibid., p. 158). Milgram believed *avoidance* was a SRM because subjects who engaged in it did "not permit the stimuli associated with the victim's suffering to impinge on them... In this way, the victim is psychologically eliminated as a source of discomfort" (Ibid., p. 158). Although subjects' reliance on avoidance-

type behaviors seemed to reduce their strain when inflicting harm, intriguingly Milgram did not introduce them. Thus, they were *self-invented* SRMs. Avoidance behavior revealed something self-centered about these subjects: in the pilot, for example, they looked away because “it caused them discomfort to see the victim in agony” (Ibid., p. 34).

Milgram’s plan to undertake an array of slight baseline variations that would lead to a theory of obedience failed. The problem was that he introduced so many different techniques of social engineering—all those BFs and SRMs—into the basic procedure, his score of variations proved incapable of isolating all their independent influences. Consequently, Milgram became confused by his many variations’ occasionally conflicting results (Russell, 2018: pp. 91-110). Although Milgram’s (1974) book *Obedience to Authority* attempted to explain his subjects’ behavior, his so-called “agentic state” theory has widely been rejected (see Russell, 2018: p. 132). Other theoretical interpretations of the Obedience studies have since emerged (Erdos, 2013; Eckman, 1977; Reicher et al., 2012; Russell, 2018), however the Obedience studies scholarly community have failed to converge in collective support of any one of these theories. And these more contemporary accounts typically say nothing about the intriguing avoidance-type behavior.

However, Elias’s Civilizing Process—particularly as it pertains to his history of European manners—may be capable of providing theoretical insights into avoidance-type behavior; insights that are likely important because they may help isolate the key variable generating Milgram’s 65 per cent baseline completion rate. To this, one might rejoin: what do manners have to do with the Obedience study’s (ostensible) infliction of harm? To this: is it not a little unsettling that as subjects inflicted intense “shocks”, their exchanges with the experimenter typically stimulated what Obedience studies scholar Gibson (2019: p. 164) terms “polite’ resistance”? For example, as subject Fred Prozi said to the experimenter after inflicting the 345-volt switch: “What if he is dead in there? [...] I mean, he told me he can’t stand the shock, sir. I don’t mean to be rude, but I think you should look in on him” (Milgram, 1974: p. 76). As Milgram (Ibid., p. 77) adds, “He thinks he is killing someone, yet he uses the language of the tea table.” Subject politeness was so common that Milgram (Ibid., p. 149) termed it Goffman-esque “situational etiquette...” The contrasting presence of good manners and ostensible torture surely merits closer attention. But before proceeding in this direction, what exactly did Elias argue? Limited by space, the following overview of Elias’s theory will only focus on the gradual decline in violence in Europe and the social history of civilité manners that he, in part, associated with this change.

5. The Civilizing Process: An Overview

Elias’s general thesis is that increasing societal interdependence promotes greater inter-personal control over emotional volatility and violent tendencies. Thus,

people feel less pressure to control their tempers when interdependencies are low and greater pressure to control their tempers when interdependencies are high. The comparative historical examples Elias used to bolster his theory was medieval Europe (low interdependence) and early modern Western Europe (rapidly increasing interdependence).

In support of his thesis, Elias sets out by describing medieval life. For much of the Middle Ages, Western Europe was ruled by largely self-sufficient—independent—territorial warlords. As Dyer (1985: p. 47) argues: “...the real power base in feudal times was not the state (which scarcely existed) but the few dozen or hundreds of square miles that had been nailed down by some local warrior.” These warlords augmented their wealth by marshalling bands of subordinate knights, and together they raided the territories of neighboring warlords. The temptation among the most successful warlords to continue conquering adjacent territories was immense—the more land and human (peasantry) resources they acquired, the greater their wealth, power, and eminence (Elias, 2000: p. 219). The temptation to pursue further conquest was only increased by the Hobbesian threat of imminent war—destroy one’s warrior neighbour before they destroyed you. Whether it was for competition, glory, or fear, throughout the medieval period, Western Europe’s warrior caste underwent on-going “elimination contests” that saw the landholdings of the shrinking pool of survivors expand (Ibid., p. 263).

Although the threat of war was, as a result, perpetually on the horizon, for the medieval secular ruling class, killing enemies apparently “...formed part of the pleasures of life” (Ibid., p. 162). The Hobbesian momentum driving the elimination contests only encouraged the warrior class’s hunting, torturing, and killing of other human beings—it was “practically advantageous to behave... this way” (Ibid., p. 163). All these men knew and pursued was violence (Ibid., p. 164). That said, the subjugated peasantry, within their own circles, were also “quick to draw their knives” (Ibid., p. 168, 180). Indeed, most people in medieval society “...gave way to...feelings incomparably more...spontaneously and openly than today” whereby “emotions were less restrained and...more liable to oscillate more violently between extremes” (Ibid., p. 180). Thus, the secular ruling class and peasantry typically shared a similar impulsively violent *personality structure*—what Elias termed *habitus*.

Elias’s account of medieval times presumes rates of homicide and non-lethal assaults were, as Gurr (1981) later confirmed, far higher than in contemporary Europe. Specifically, although the mid-twentieth century homicide rate in many major European cities was often below 1 per 100,000, during the late medieval period it ranged from about 20 - 50 per 100,000 (Eisner, 2014: p. 67).

Even well into the Early Modern Era (1500-1800 approximately), in some contexts the killing of other humans remained pleasurable. Consider, for example, England’s hanged, drawn, and quartering of treasonous men. Although across much of this period the condemned underwent live disembowelment (Gatrell,

1994: pp. 315-316), the reaction of those watching, at least according to Samuel Pepys 1660 diary entry, is perhaps surprising: “Maj.-Gen. Harrison [...] was... cut down and his head and his heart shown to the people, at which there was great shouts of joy...” (cited in Gatrell, 1994: p. 244).

Certainly, other acts of killing across much of the Early Modern Period remained pleasurable: “In Paris during the sixteenth century it was one of the festive pleasures of Midsummer Day to burn alive one or two dozen cats. [...] Usually the king and queen were present” (Elias, 2000: p. 171). Throughout Europe, bear baiting, cock fighting, bull baiting, and dog fighting remained popular. And when the slaughterhouse was full, before the early eighteenth century the street remained “a place where animals could be seen having their throats cut” (Agulhon, 1981: p. 85, cited in Vialles, 1994: p. 75).

Thus, up until the seventeenth century, it is fair to argue that, based on the above evidence, various forms of violence were, relative to the modern period, salient, public, and ever-present. But increasingly after this period, aspects of Western Europe’s inherently violent culture either disappeared, rapidly declined, or underwent substantive structural change. For example, across the seventeenth century, execution rates—although already in decline—suddenly plummeted (see Figure 4), as did other indicators of societal cruelty: animal (and human) blood sports declined in popularity (Radzinowicz, 1948: p. 171). And from the early eighteenth century, the slaughter of cattle disappeared from public view.

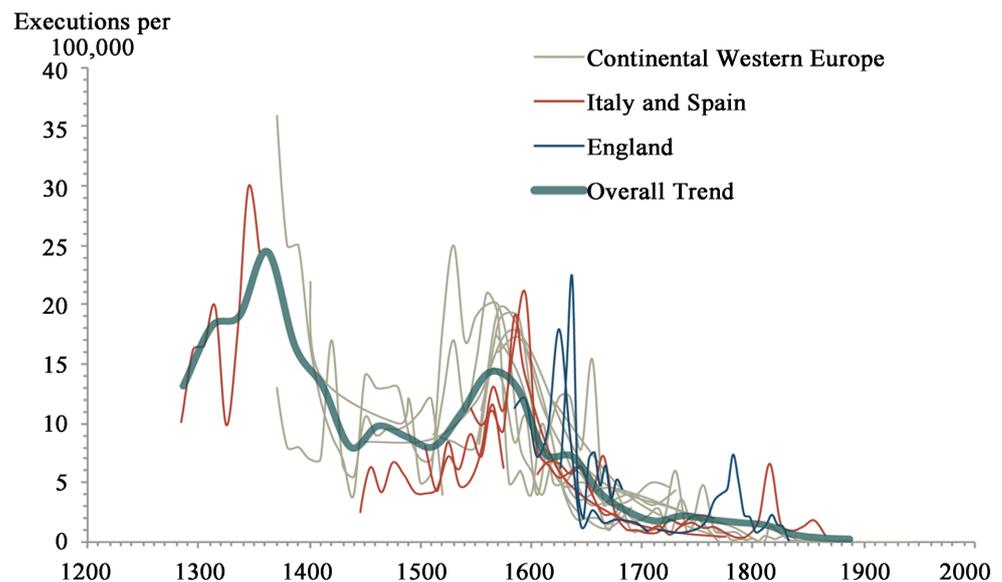


Figure 4. “Executions in 18 European cities and joint long-term trend, 1200-1900” (Eisner, 2014: p. 104).

And although Europe’s homicide rate between 1200 and 1600 was often over 20 per 100,000, from the 1700s onward it was under 5 per 100,000 (see Figure 5). Since the medieval period there has been “a drop in lethal male-to-male fighting by about 99 percent” (Ibid., pp. 125-126).

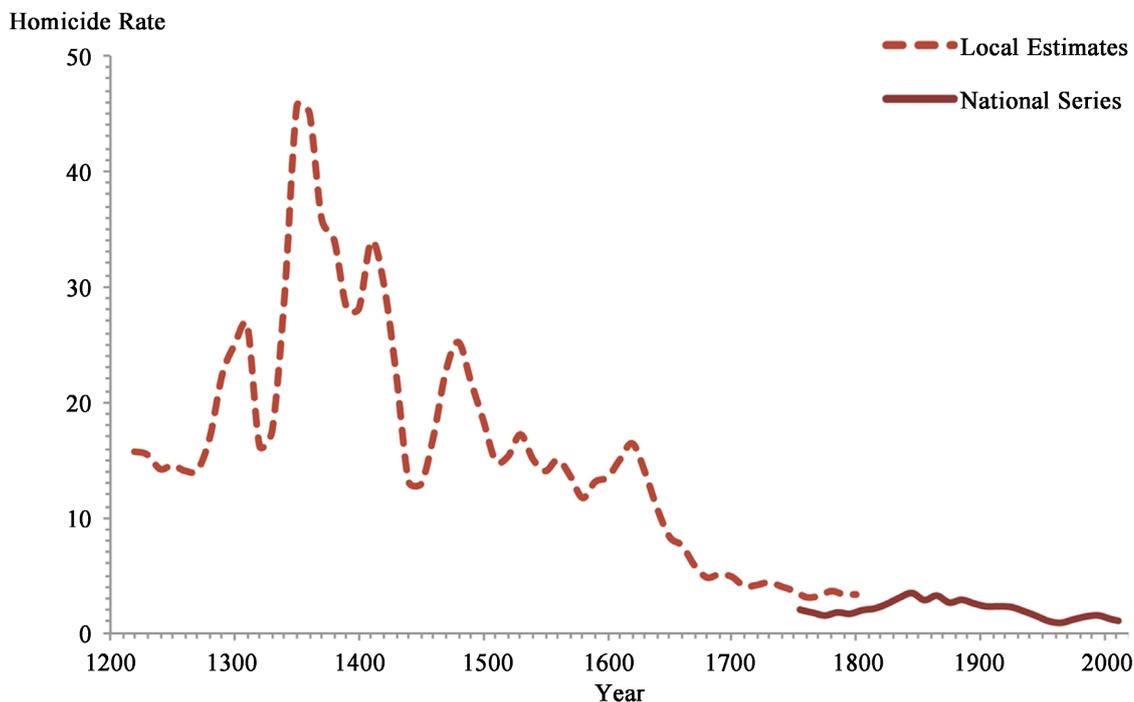


Figure 5. “European homicide trend, 1200-2010. Source: History of Homicide Database” (Ibid., p. 88).

Clearly, something substantive in this inherently violent culture changed. To be sure, wars between Western European (and other) nations, along with the slave trade and horrific colonial violence elsewhere continued after the 1700s. But *within* these Western European countries, various indicators hint at rapid and increasing *intra-state* pacification. Western Europe certainly changed, and the obvious question is why?

Elias ([1939] 2000) provides a detailed answer to this question. His thesis centres around an array of closely related factors, particularly the rise of absolute monarchies (the “elimination contest” winners), the most successful of whom established tax revenue-funded monopolies on violence. These monopolies on violence forced all citizens “to live in peace with each other...” (Ibid., p. 169), ensuring the monarchs’ emerging nation states became, relative to medieval times, internally pacified. Greatly enhancing this internal stability was the gradual integration of the violent warrior nobility into the absolute monarchs’ affect-subduing court societies. Thereafter, this particularly violent group transformed from aggressive warmongers into, by the mid-seventeenth century, “quiet estate-dwellers” whose participation in murder—excluding the duel—became “a sensational rarity” (Spierenburg, 2013a: pp. 80-81). Greater internal stability allowed for Western Europe’s reintroduction of coined money, which proved a boon for commerce, innovation, and trade (all of which enabled a proportion of the lower classes to rise into a financially more secure mercantile bourgeoisie “middle class”). The ensuing economic growth, in turn, benefited the most successful monarchs: more trade and commerce meant, for them, increased tax revenues, monies the wisest of them reinvested into strengthening their monopolies on violence

(Elias, 2000: pp. 192, 238). The general rise in prosperity and personal security saw most citizens of these emerging nation states—whether upper, middle, or working class—benefit. And their collective desire to ensure those benefits continued saw the levels of inter-class interdependence greatly increase. People became “so dependent on each other that...strong imperatives to learn how to co-exist” emerged (Linklater & Mennell, 2010: p. 394). Thus, in support of Elias’s general thesis: increased interdependence promoted intra-state pacification. Although providing a more detailed overview of Elias’s theory is beyond this article’s scope, it is necessary to delve further into the courtization of the warrior nobility, particularly as it relates to Europe’s code of increasingly complex manners.

6. Courtization and Manners

During the nobility’s elimination contests, the surviving losers—landless knights—had little choice but to offer their services as employees (advisors, strategists, military leaders, and such) to Western Europe’s most successful liege lords and (later) absolute monarchs (Elias, 2000: p. 182). This movement, which gradually took place between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries, saw throughout Europe the emergence of many different court societies (Ibid., pp. 241-242, 245, 392-393).

Initially the landless knights struggled to fit into court life. This was because lashing out in anger, as was their emotionally volatile way, had no place in court society (which emerged as measured environments where rational discussions aimed largely at furthering sovereign interests). As Pinker (2011: p. 75) notes “The court, basically a government bureaucracy, had no use for hotheads and loose cannons...”. For these ex-warriors, the measures of success in court society differed greatly from their old lives: “Social advancement became less dependent upon one’s ability to wield arms, and more dependent upon one’s ability to compete with words and planned strategies with which to win the favour of social superiors” (Fletcher, 1997: p. 35). Social survival, let alone career success, in the court hierarchy necessitated these knights impose greater self-control over their volatility because “The king required...restraint as a ‘mark of respect’ from his courtiers” (Elias, 2000: p. 134). For the most successful courtly knights, acts of deference were used largely in the hope they might stimulate social advancement.

During the medieval era, these acts of respect were termed courtesy manners. One example of courtesy manners literature from this period suggests an aspiring nobleman “...not spit over or on the table” (Ibid., p. 129). Another example, more precisely from the thirteenth century, instructs that one not “pick your nose while eating” (Ibid., p. 75). Also from the thirteenth-century, one should not “...fall upon the dishes like swine while eating, snorting disgustingly and smacking their lips...”, adding that those who did “belong with other farmyard beasts” (Ibid., p. 73).

Much of this manners code was driven by a courtly desire to withdraw “the most ‘private’, ‘intimate’, unsuppressibly ‘animal’ aspects of human existence

from the sight of others” (Ibid., p. 138). Consequently, established courtiers—“the example-setting circle”—came to be, as the thirteenth century’s *Quisquis es in mensa* notes, offended by all those who behaved “like an animal” (Ibid., p. 86, 74). For these “secular upper class” influencers, doing so “gave expression to their self-image, to what, in their own estimation, made them”, relative to the lower classes, “exceptional” (Ibid., pp. 54-55).

This manners literature aimed to correct the bad habits of those new to court society (Ibid., p. 86, 120). To better fit in with and impress superiors, subordinate courtiers thus felt some pressure in the competitive courtly environment to comply with courtesy manners, which, during the medieval period, underwent little significant change. However, from the sixteenth century onwards, social forces saw a new, more dynamic, and restrictive style of manners emerge: *Civilité* manners.

7. *Civilité* Manners

Commercialisation and the increased circulation of money caused inflation to rise. Increased inflation—which accelerated between 1200 and 1600 (Ibid., p. 193)—saw the wealth of the nobility on fixed incomes decline. Simultaneously, the financial success of the entrepreneurial middle class saw some become wealthy. The social and economic fortunes of the upper-bourgeoisie and the nobility slowly reversed. Through various means—inter-marriage and loans—the nobility became increasingly dependent on bourgeois wealth for economic succor (Ibid., p. 19, 93). In return, the bourgeoisie gained greater access to upper-class social circles. The nobility, however, became irritated by the circulation of these *nouveau riche*—peasant stock(!)—in their social circles. Increasingly, the *nouveau riche* acted, dressed, and lived like they were members of the upper class. The nobility struggled to distinguish the imposters among them. Demands for a new means of class distinction (beyond wealth) emerged.

Then, according to Elias, around 1500 and 1525, influential French courtiers engaged in what was essentially a spurt in the medieval era’s largely static *courtesy* manners code: so-called “*civilité*” manners emerged. When the *nouveau riche* detected these changes, they simply imitated them, once again rendering the two groups indistinguishable. To re-establish class distinction, influential courtiers changed slightly the imitated mannerisms. When the *nouveau riche* again copied the new mannerisms, the upper class once again changed (slightly) their *civilité* manners code (Ibid., pp. 86, 134, 422, 424-425). Literature outlining the latest trends in manners became popular in upper- and (later) middle-class circles. Across several centuries, Elias analyzed this literature, tracking how manners slowly changed. He identified a pattern traceable to medieval times: subtle changes in *civilité* manners often involved imposing greater impulse control over animalistic-like bodily functions (Ibid., p. 102).

That is, from the early sixteenth century onwards, court society became even more sensitive to their long-held perception that the lower classes behaved like

animals: the lower classes imposed little impulse control over their bodily functions, whereby they unashamedly spat, belched, yawned, sneezed, flatulated, defecated, and fornicated whenever and wherever the need arose. To maintain class distinction, court society's "standard setting circles" (Ibid., p. 108) imposed greater pressure on their strata to stop engaging in such behaviors³. But this was not always desirable nor possible. The upper class, for example, enjoyed fornicating and physiologically they could not simply stop farting. Consequently, for the upper class, liked or necessary animalistic-type behaviors could still occur in polite society, but—as Elias famously phrased it—only if sufficiently "*removed behind the scenes of social life*" (Ibid., p. 103, italics original).

To grasp what Elias meant by this phrase, consider the following example on nose-blowing. During the late Middle Ages all Western Europeans tended to blow their nose into their fingers (Ibid., pp. 121-122). However, by the early-to-mid sixteenth century the rules over nose-blowing underwent substantive change, with Erasmus stating in his 1530 book *On Civility in Children*: "To blow your nose on your hat or clothing is rustic, and to do so with the arm or elbow befits a tradesman; nor is it much more polite to use the hand, if you immediately smear the snot on your garment" (Ibid., p. 122). Also during the sixteenth century, Monteil notes that the bourgeoisie consider it "accepted practice to use the sleeve" (Ibid., p. 123). To avoid this, Erasmus recommended one use two fingers when blowing their nose, then treading on any remnants landing on the ground (thereby taking the act of nose-blowing sufficiently "behind the scenes" of social life). That said, Erasmus also mentions a preferred and most refined means of clearing the nostrils: using a "handkerchief, and to do this while turning away" (Ibid., p. 122). Erasmus likely mentioned the sufficiently acceptable two-finger technique because at the time handkerchiefs were, even in upper-class circles, not widely available (Ibid., p. 126). Nonetheless, across the sixteenth century members of the upper class—as a means of distinction—started turning away when blowing their nose and, aided by the increasing availability of the handkerchief, they arguably removed this animalistic-like act (relative to the two-finger technique) a little further "behind the scenes..." As the middle class increasingly purchased then complied with subsequent editions of Erasmus's manners book, by 1729 civilité rules underwent further change: one "should always" use a handkerchief, and "in doing so usually hide your face with your hat" (Ibid., p. 125). Also, one should take the act even further "behind the scenes" by using the handkerchief so "quickly" that "you are scarcely noticed by others" (Ibid., p. 125).

Then, when the upper class were, from about the seventeenth century, unexpectedly exposed to a lower-class person sneezing without covering their mouth then wiping all remnants off their face and onto their clothing, some reacted with embarrassment. With time, subsequent generations of the upper class reacted to such spectacles with intense feelings of disgust and revulsion. Thus, as

³A likely related process to this is detectable a century or two earlier whereby the nobility distinguished themselves from the rising burghers (Elias, 2000: p. 54).

Elias (2000: p. 71) put it, the elite’s “threshold of repugnance” was “expanding”. This change suggests that relative to their medieval predecessors, the nobility’s habitus—their personality structure—was changing (Ibid., pp. 76-142). So, what caused this change in habitus?

Elias does not present the exact cause of this change, but by connecting several of his dots of insight (see Elias, 2000: pp. 79, 98, 103, 118-119, 121, 159-160, 419-420), the following scenario emerges. As the civilité code changed, upper-class encounters with animalistic-type behaviors declined. They decreased so much that the socially insular upper class were, after a few centuries, starved of regular exposure to what they exclusively came to perceive as “lower class”-type behaviors. This lack of exposure eventually rendered the nobility highly sensitized to the rare occasion when they did experience a person engaging in animalistic-type behaviors. Thus, upper class people’s circumvention of exposure to animalistic-type behaviors saw them gradually undergo a *process of sensitization*, thereby rendering them more easily repulsed, revolted, and eventually squeamish.

According to Elias (2000: p. 365), other liked or needed “animalic human activities...progressively thrust behind the scenes” and invested with intensifying feelings of revulsion (and shame), included fornication (restricted to the bedroom), belching (mouth covered), defecation (confined to the bathroom), spitting (eventually restricted to the spittoon), and eating (hidden with a closed mouth).

When the middle class imitated civilité manners, this sensitisation process—with a slight time lag—affected them too (with similar delayed outcomes for the ambitious sector of the working class who followed them). Thus, the expanding repugnance threshold spread from the top-down of the social hierarchy, until by the twentieth century most Europeans became relatively more sensitive⁴. This sensitization process likely explains why in England, for example, historian Gatrell (1994: p. 268) observes, “protests from squeamishness before 1800 are difficult to find”. Implied here is that after 1800, such protests became increasingly common.

Being world leaders in fashion, soon after civilité manners emerged in France, upper-class circles throughout (and beyond) Western Europe—England, Germany and even settler colonies like the United States—conformed (Linklater & Mennell, 2010: p. 395). Europe’s upper then middle class passed the latest rules in civilité manners onto their children (Elias, 2000: p. xi). Parents did so by thwarting their children’s innate “animalistic” urges: *Don’t pick your nose, close your mouth when chewing, and please stop scratching yourself!* For these children, total compliance offered the only escape from unyielding parental correction. With time, subsequent generations of upper then middle-class children across the West became deprived of exposure to their predecessors’ earlier “animalic” ways, with sudden encounters with such behaviors generating—as the

⁴Elias does account for the rising repugnance threshold in several other ways (see Elias, 2000: pp. 172, 420-421).

repugnance threshold advanced—intensified feelings of embarrassment, shame, disgust, and repugnance.

That said, this top-down imitation game likely oversimplifies what took place. Firstly, the driving structural force behind this change was not French upper-class courtiers (it was increasing interdependence, which stimulated an over-arching desire not to harm or offend peers). Secondly, it is possible that the upper class's desire to distinguish themselves and the imitation game it inspired likely stimulated other different mechanisms promoting habitus change. For example, as sheltered upper and middle-class children's compliance with more restrictive civilité mannerisms rendered them more and more sensitive, their increased sensitivity (and *not* the desire to differentiate one's group or imitate others) may have motivated them throughout their lives into hiding various animalic-type behaviours "behind the scenes." Nonetheless, from the top of European society down, an increasingly more emotionally controlled, delicate, albeit haughty habitus emerged; one that differed from their relatively unrestrained, impulsive, and emotionally volatile medieval ancestors.

So how does Elias's history on European manners relate to the Milgram-like topic of harm infliction? Animals are frequently violent creatures; many regularly kill (harm) other animals (sometimes even members of their own species). What, then, can be said about Elias's thesis and the "animalic" act of harm infliction? One could argue that after the sixteenth century as both Western European rulers imposed increasingly more effective monopolies on violence and the nobility's emotional control and sensitivities increased, the upper class encountered greater pressure to stop engaging in what influential circles deemed *unnecessary* acts of violence. For example, the French royalty's sixteenth century delight in watching cats being burnt alive was, along with many other forms of entertainment-based animal torture, deemed unnecessary violence and soon after labelled distasteful. As Linklater and Mennell (2010: p. 390) observe: "Previous outlets for pleasurable killing were gradually closed..."

But what about animalic-like violence the ruling class deemed "necessary," like, for example, capital punishment (which, across the Early Modern Era, they believed secured their place at the top of the social hierarchy)? According to the tenets of Elias's theory, such "necessary" violence could continue in a "civilized" society but, in lockstep with rising sensitivities, it would have to move sufficiently "behind the scenes of social life". As sensitivities rose, Spierenburg (1984) has argued that after the sixteenth century Dutch executions moved increasingly further behind the scenes. He more specifically argues that across the seventeenth century, permanent stone scaffolds in Dutch cities were replaced with erectable (removable) wooden ones (Ibid., p. 186). Then, by the end of the seventeenth century, Spierenburg detected in upper-class discourse "a slight increase in sensitivity toward [public] executions" (Ibid., p. 187). By the early nineteenth century much of the Dutch upper-class were so repulsed by public executions that they refused to attend such events. Then, in 1860, public execu-

tions in Holland were abolished in favour of those undertaken behind prison walls (Spierenburg, 2013b: p. 118). In fact, across a two-decade period—1850 to 1870—most European nations abolished public in favour of concealed prison yard executions (Ibid., p. 76). Based on Spierenburg’s research, one can argue that as sensitivities from the top-down of Dutch—and more broadly, European society—increased, capital punishment moved further and further “behind the scenes” of social life.

Also consider, for example, the slaughter of cattle. The upper class enjoyed eating meat. But meat consumption necessitated the animalic-like act of killing. Again, necessary animalic acts can continue in a “civilized” society but, in lock-step with rising sensitivities, only if moved sufficiently “behind the scenes of social life”. There is evidence that supports this argument. As mentioned, although before the early eighteenth-century cattle could be slaughtered in the street, after this period this violence was more invariably hidden away from increasingly sensitive eyes behind slaughterhouse walls (Vialles, 1994). So, what does all this have to do with Milgram’s Obedience experiments?

8. Connecting the Civilizing Process to the Obedience Experiments

In two main ways, Elias’s theory sheds new light on better understanding subject behavior during the Obedience experiments. The first relates to the issue of confrontation avoidance and the second being the central role of the shock generator in making Milgram’s high completion rates possible.

1) *Confrontation Avoidance*

Among laypersons and scholars alike, the Obedience experiments stimulate the same question: why did most New Baseline subjects agree to (ostensibly) harm an innocent person? Russell (2018: pp. 200-201) provides an answer to this question: the New Baseline experiment is effectively about the resolution of a pressing moral dilemma. That is, every time the learner provided an incorrect answer, the subject must choose between siding with the experimenter (who demands they continue harming) or the learner (who demands they stop). Both parties cannot be simultaneously appeased: the subject must *choose* whether it is more important to assist the experimenter obtain his results or help an innocent person avoid harm-infliction. Milgram (1974: p. 6) believed this dilemma has a moral dimension: if observers of the experiment are asked “what constitutes appropriate behavior in this situation, they unfailingly see disobedience as proper.” Disobedience was proper because of the experimenter’s “fundamental breach of moral conduct to hurt another person against his will” (Ibid., p. 41). The Obedience studies have stimulated intrigue for decades precisely because although refusing to harm an innocent person appears to be the morally correct action, most New Baseline subjects rejected it. So why did most subjects pursue what was so obviously an immoral path? Milgram (Ibid., pp. 42-43) concludes,

If sympathetic concern for the victim were the exclusive force, all subjects would have calmly defied the experimenter. Instead, there were both obedient and defiant outcomes, frequently accompanied by extreme tension. [...] Therefore there must be a competing...inhibition that precludes activation of the disobedient response.

Identifying this competing inhibition would thus reveal why most completed the New Baseline experiment. In his book, Milgram mentioned the following competing inhibition:

The teacher cannot break off and at the same time protect the authority's definitions of his own competence. Thus, the subject fears that if he breaks off, he will appear arrogant, untoward, and rude. Such emotions [...] suffuse the mind and feelings of the subject, who is miserable at the prospect of having to repudiate the authority to his face (Ibid., p. 150).

Milgram's archival notes more confidently elevate the importance of this competing inhibition or potential motive for completing:

I don't mean to be rude, Sir. The word provokes laughter, but it is key. For a certain impropriety must be committed by the subject in order to break out of the experiment, and the burden of impoliteness is one many individuals are unable to bear (Stanley Milgram Papers, Box 46, Folder 168).

The suggestion that many subjects willingly inflicted potentially fatal shocks on an innocent person because they feared engaging in a socially awkward confrontation with the experimenter sounds preposterous. However, [Miller et al. \(1995: p. 9\)](#) add, "in the actual context of the situation" concerns about "being 'impolite'" to the experimenter "are influential." [Russell \(2018: p. 201\)](#) goes further: subjects' fear of engaging in a socially awkward confrontation with the experimenter was the most common—although not only—inhibition to their feelings of learner sympathy. In other words, subjects' fear of being rude was *the most common motivational force behind the New Baseline experiment's high completion rate*. In support of this claim, Russell provides, among other sources of evidence (Ibid., pp. 199-208), a step-by-step unfolding of the experiment which, in abridged form, was touched on at the start of this paper (Ibid., pp. 208-227). That is, the cumulative force of Milgram's techniques of social engineering—his bombardment of subjects with numerous BFs and SRMs—gradually persuaded, coerced, and eventually tempted subjects into prioritising their self-interested desire to avoid an awkward confrontation with the experimenter over what was ostensibly an innocent person's well-being. More specifically, Russell argues Milgram's basic experimental procedure *firstly* appealed to the subjects' self-interests: they were subtly encouraged into accepting the belief that if they inflicted further shocks, they could avoid having to engage in a direct confrontation with the experimenter. Then, *secondly*, for each shock inflicted, [Milgram's \(1974: p. 74\)](#) basic procedure attempted to alleviate subjects of all responsibility

should they agree to continue; most explicitly by the experimenter stating, “I’m responsible for anything that happens to him.” Such rhetoric encouraged subjects to conclude that they could inflict further shocks and, should anyone ever enquire, they could displace responsibility for having done so elsewhere: I was just following *his* orders. “Obedient” subjects therefore chose this immoral path because they sensed they could do so with probable impunity. As one subject later sheepishly admitted: “I thought the ‘shocks’ might harm the other ‘subject’ however, I mentally ‘passed the buck’ feeling the one running the experiment would take all responsibility” (cited in Russell, 2018: p. 221).

Thus, Russell argues that most obedient subjects were opportunistically aware of—but later adamantly deny—their choice to engage in wrongdoing. As one of the few honest obedient subjects later admitted: “I was surprised to learn that I did a thing even though I knew it was wrong to do it” (Ibid., p. 207). Again, the key motivational force behind most subjects who chose to complete was the allure of confrontation avoidance. As Milgram put it: “The experimental set up relies...on *seduction*, the systematic ensarement [*sic*] of the subject into a web of obligation and uncritically from which he is unable to escape” (Ibid., p. 220). Only a minority of subjects resisted the pressure and temptation to do as they were told. As one later said: “I was glad... I had the ‘guts’ to refuse to continue” (Stanley Milgram Papers, Box 44, Divider “14”, #0837).

Elias’s theory likely has relevance to Russell’s above argument because the former delved into the kinds of historical forces that, through increasing interdependence, likely heightened this fear. That is, Elias (2000: p. 52, 107) explains how and why conflict avoidance became a central component at the heart of Western and other influential (like East Asian) systems of manners. As Elias (2000: p. 69) argued in relation to habitus change across the Early Modern Era, gradually:

...the degree of consideration expected of others became greater. The sense of what to do and what not to do in order not to offend or shock others became subtler, and...the social imperative not to offend others became more binding, as compared to the preceding phase. The [earlier medieval] rules of *courtoisie* also prescribed, “Say nothing that can arouse conflict, or anger others”...

Thus, Elias’s theory may provide a general lens through which Obedience-study theorists can view most *New Baseline* subjects’—likely affected by European and other respect-based systems of manners—fears of confrontation avoidance. Further research, however, is required to test both the veracity of Russell’s assertion that confrontation avoidance was the main motivating force behind Milgram’s high completion rates and if Elias’s thesis really does provide the wider historical context from which this fear emerged. So, what is the second way TCP sheds new light on better understanding subject behavior during the Obedience experiments?

2) *The Shock Generator*

Unbeknown to Milgram, the single most important variable in the Obedience studies is the shock generator (Russell, 2018: pp. 239-262). Had Milgram tested the influence of this single variable, which he did not, he would have had to run a No Shock Generator (NSG) control experiment. This control experiment would likely have resembled Milgram's previously mentioned first Obedience-study idea where subjects were to "Tap" then eventually "Slug" another person. Because a NSG control would have necessitated subjects' presence in the same room as the learner, much like the Touch-Proximity condition (30 percent complete), they would have to see, hear, and feel the implications of their actions. But unlike the Touch-Proximity condition, subjects in a NSG control would—to ensure consistency with the baseline/s—have been faced with inflicting, with the force of their own hands, a beating of sufficient intensity to render the learner at least unconscious. Even if a subject was willing to follow such orders, because of the unity of cause with effect—a fist forcefully connecting with the learner's body—they could not avoid the consequences of what would undeniably be *their* personally generated harmful actions. Thus, they could not escape personally feeling or appearing to others present as the person most responsible for harming the learner. This meant that the NSG control subjects could not in earnestness rely on the usual justifications Milgram's obedient baseline subjects later offered for completing. As Russell (Ibid., p. 243) argues:

Participants who physically struck the learner with immense force and then later claimed responsibility lay elsewhere..., that science required they do it, that the experimenter said they had "no other choice," or that the experimenter assured them that the punishment would not cause permanent damage, would all be revealed as lying to themselves and to others.

With blood on their hands (literally), in a NSG control the lines of personal responsibility would, from an early stage of the experiment, be manifestly clear to everyone: the subject was most responsible for harm infliction. And unlike with the baseline experiments, for subjects in a NSG control, the easier choice—relative to deciding to beat the learner at least to a point of unconsciousness—would have been to prematurely stop the experiment by engaging in an awkward confrontation with the experimenter. It therefore seems fair to predict that nearly all subjects would interpret a NSG control experiment to be—alluding to the importance of Elias's theory to better understanding subjects' "obedient" behavior—an outrageously illegitimate, brutal, inhumane, and *uncivilized* experiment, which virtually all subjects would quickly and adamantly refuse to partake. This is why, in large part, Milgram—whose goal was to maximize obedience—dropped his initial "Tap" then "Slug" experiment in favour of one utilising a shock generator: he anticipated few ordinary people—most certainly not 65 percent—would agree to complete such an experiment (see Milgram, 1974: p. 157).

The reader might argue that of course a NSG control would fail to generate a high completion rate—next to nobody, except perhaps an opportunist psychopath, would agree to complete such an experiment. But this is exactly the point:

as soon as Milgram introduced—as he did during *all* post-New Baseline variations—the “impersonal” (Ibid., p. 157) and thus, from the subjects’ perspective, *relatively ‘civilized’* means of inflicting harm, suddenly large proportions of ordinary people could be coerced, persuaded, and eventually tempted into following an authority’s instructions to potentially kill an innocent person⁵.

It is for the above reason that Russell (2018: pp. 239-245) argues that although during his experimental programme Milgram incorporated a variety of different manipulative strategies into his basic procedure, the single most powerful of all was his insertion of the shock generator. In support of this point, consider that even the foot-in-the-door phenomenon—praised by many as an omnipotent force during the Obedience studies (Dolinski & Grzyb, 2016)—would likely have come to nothing *without* the shock generator (as Milgram sensed himself when considering his graduated “Tap” proceeding to “Slug” assault experiment). The key point being, no matter what other singular or combined manipulative techniques of social engineering Milgram deployed: *no shock generator, no 65 percent New Baseline completion rate*. In reference to Figure 6, Russell (2018: p. 240) thus concludes:

...whenever the shock generator is paid the slightest attention, the insights offered are revelatory. The shock generator is undoubtedly the hot air in the Obedience-study balloon. That it has, for over half a century, evaded attention in what is perhaps the most well-known of psychology experiments is testament to the aphorism that sometimes what one is looking for can be found right under one’s nose.

So how does Elias’s theory more specifically relate to the above discussion on the shock generator? As mentioned, Elias argued that as sensitivities increased



Figure 6. Milgram and his shock generator (Russell, 2018: p. 69).

⁵Milgram (1974: p. 31) described his basic procedure minus the results to thirty-nine psychiatrists. They incorrectly predicted that one teacher in a thousand—a “pathological fringe”—would complete the experiment. Their inaccurate prediction was probably due to their failure to consider the shock generator’s immense strain-resolving power. Perhaps their prediction would have proven more accurate if applied to a NSG control, which surely only individuals with psychopathic tendencies would agree to complete.

over time, all violence considered “necessary” had to, in order to render it palatable, move sufficiently “behind the scenes”. Conversely, if this violence was not moved sufficiently “behind the scenes”, harm inflictors’ heightened sensitivities would stimulate resistance to—threaten the continuation of—that apparently “necessary” violence.

The results from a set of Milgram’s experiments are consistent with Elias’s assertions. For example, during the *Truly Remote Pilot*, the apparently necessary infliction of harm (“It is absolutely essential that you continue”) was maximally veiled, thereby rendering it the most “behind the scenes” of all Milgram’s variations. Here “virtually” 100 per cent of subjects completed. Then across the *Proximity Series* as subjects became more exposed to the perceptual consequences (more hearing, seeing, and feeling) of their ostensible infliction of harm (thus rendering the violence less and less “behind the scenes”), the completion rate consistently declined: Remote-Feedback: 65 per cent; Voice-Feedback: 62.5 per cent; Proximity: 40 per cent; Touch-Proximity: 30 per cent. Finally, the NSG control experiment—had it been run—would easily have been the least veiled of all Milgram’s variations, thereby rendering it the least “behind the scenes.” Russell (2018: p. 244) asserts virtually 0 per cent of subjects would have completed this experiment. So, across all these variations, the more perceptually vivid (or less “behind the scenes”) the apparently essential violence became, the lower Milgram’s completion rates.

Also related to Elias’s “behind the scenes” phrase, one can argue that for some of Milgram’s “obedient” subjects, the violence was insufficiently veiled enough (too unpalatable) for their liking. And herein lies an interesting Eliasian-based explanation for their previously mentioned and otherwise mysterious self-initiated *avoidance* behavior. That is, for these more sensitive subjects to remain compliant, they personally deemed it necessary to move the apparently “essential” violence a little further “behind the scenes” by looking away from the visible learner or talking over the top of and neutralising their screams, thereby rendering harm-infliction, for themselves, more palatable. In Eliasian terms, they did so to ensure the apparently “essential” violence did not exceed their repugnance threshold.

If there is merit to the above arguments, Elias’s thesis helps better understand subject behavior during Milgram’s Obedience studies. But the reverse also applies: Milgram’s initial results may be capable of strengthening Elias’s thesis, particularly regarding its failure to account for Nazi violence during the Holocaust. To clarify, an important criticism of Elias’s theory is that his phrase “behind the scenes” collapses when applied to the Holocaust: modern and presumably “civilized” Germans and their collaborators shot approximately 1,400,000 Jews (Hilberg, 1980: p. 93), often *from point-blank range to the head*. How can these mass shootings be explained away as apparently having occurred “behind the scenes”?

9. How Milgram's Results Can Strengthen TCP and Enable Elias's Theory to Better Account for Nazi Violence

Elias's (2000: pp. 60, 103, 115, 128, 138-139, 415) phrase "behind the scenes" has an exclusively visual connotation. As he said himself, there emerges a "...strong tendency to remove the distasteful from the sight of society...". Such statements influenced other Eliasian scholars like Spierenburg whose research focused on the "...emergence of an aversion to the sight of physical punishment..." (1984: p. 204). But is it possible that non-visual sources of perceptual information (sound, touch, smell, and perhaps even taste) also affected the previously discussed expanding repugnance threshold? With respect to auditory perceptual information, certainly some of Elias's (2000: p. 110) own evidence suggests so: Erasmus in the sixteenth century recommended that when farting, one should "...let a cough hide the sound." And advice from La Salle's 1729 etiquette book implies that the smell of flatulence could offend: "It is very impolite to emit wind from your body...even if it is done without noise..." (Ibid., p. 112). Thus, both the sound *and* smell of flatulence could stimulate feelings of revulsion among polite company.

In support of all this but with a focus on the animalistic act of violence, Milgram's *Proximity Series* clearly illustrates that beyond the subjects' visual experience, *other* sources of perceptual information—for example, auditory and tactile sources—could also curb their violent capabilities. Thus, seeing harm inflicted was only one of several sources of perceptual aversion. This small technical detail can strengthen Elias's original theory.

To clarify, although it is correct that, for example, completion rates across the *Proximity Series* increased as the subjects' infliction of harm was moved further and further "behind the scenes", it is technically more accurate to argue that completion rates increased as the subjects' were increasingly screened from the multi-sensory *perceptual* consequences of their harm-inflicting actions. That is, the less subjects heard, saw, and felt of the learner's fate the higher the completion rate. The point being: subjects' circumvention of non-visual sources of perceptual information also helped increase Milgram's completion rates.

Beyond greater technical accuracy, a new focus on multi-sensory screening over Elias's "behind the scenes" phrase holds a few advantages. For example, Elias's phrase is ambiguous, imprecise, and subjective; yet a focus on the wider sources of perceptual information is more observable, measurable, and thus objective.

To illustrate the potential of this clarification—and focusing on governmental forms of harm infliction—consider European methods of capital punishment. Executions in Europe since the sixteenth century have, for proximate officials and observers alike, changed from protracted and perceptually intense multi-sensory spectacles of suffering to, by the mid-twentieth century, events that were relatively quick and perceptually benign.

Compare, for example, England's early modern hanged, drawn, and quartered

execution technique with that of the mid-twentieth century trapdoor, lever-initiated, long-drop execution technique. When the former execution technique was deployed during the seventeenth century, a treasonous felon left their prison cell and was paraded through busy streets on a hurdle for two or so hours. Following a religious ceremony on the scaffold, a noose was then placed around their neck, and they were hung in the air until slowly rendered unconscious. Then the felon was released to the ground and encouraged to return to consciousness, only to observe their own disembowelment and dismemberment (Gatrell, 1994: pp. 315-316). Taking several hours in total, this killing technique was, for all proximate observers, a prolonged and intense visual and auditory spectacle of horror (and for the executioners, a highly tactile one too).

But by the mid-twentieth century the condemned person (treasonous or not) was ushered from their cell to an adjoining scaffold and then had a noose and cap rapidly placed over their head. The executioner then pulled a detached lever that opened a trapdoor under the condemned person's feet, sending them through the scaffold floor to an enclosed (veiled) lower-level chamber. When the rope reached full extension, the condemned person's neck was (typically) snapped (Ibid., p. 54; Seal, 2016: p. 89). This entire killing process—from cell to death—had been whittled down to a mere eight seconds (Ibid., p. 89). Also, when killing, all officials and observers need not directly touch, see, and—muffled by the “customary boom” of the snapping rope—barely hear of the condemned person's fate (Rumbelow, 1982: p. 200).

In sum, the hanged, drawn, and quartered execution technique was, for all proximate observers, a protracted and perceptually intense affair. For those with more modern sensitivities, such violence is widely perceived to be “cruel”, “inhumane”, and “barbaric”. However, England's modern hanging technique was, for all proximate observers, relatively quick and perceptually benign. Comparatively, many perceived it to be a “gentle”, “humane” and “civilized” technique of execution.

What, however, does execution justice have to do with killing civilians on mass (something like the Holocaust)? Influential Nazis like Reinhard Heydrich believed them synonymous. For example, in 1938 Heydrich argued that the German government should deal with the inherently “criminal” Jews much as it did all other dangerous criminals: they too should receive capital sentences and then be executed (Breitman, 1991: p. 58). But in 1938 through until 1941, the Nazi regime had neither the strategy, nor infrastructure, nor the technology—no procedure—to render them capable of exterminating such massive numbers of mostly women and children. Extermination was simply unrealistic. During this period Hitler genuinely supported forced emigration as the key strategy to resolving the then growing so-called “Jewish problem”; particularly favouring a plan to ship all Jews to the Island of Madagascar (Browning, 2000: p. 70).

But between the end of 1939 and mid-1941—as English naval dominance stalled the Madagascar Plan—something curious occurred: ordinary Germans demon-

strated an uncanny ability to kill fairly large numbers of defenseless civilians using what became, by the war's end, the three most common methods of killing Jews: shooting (of Polish resisters/leaders), starvation (of Jews awaiting transportation in the Polish ghettos), and gassing (of those with disabilities during the T4 Euthanasia campaign). These killings signaled to some influential Nazis that perhaps—with more refinement—exterminating much larger numbers of Jews might be technically possible. For example, on 16 July 1941 Nazi administrator Rolf-Heinz Höppner informed Adolf Eichmann that instead of starving non-working Jews in the ghettos, the “most humane solution” might be to “exterminate” them using “some fast-working method” (cited in [Krakowski, 1993: p. 74](#)). This idea sounded “somewhat fantastic” but Höppner thought doing so was “definitely feasible” (cited in [Browning, 1985: p. 4](#)).

What could Nazis from all ranks—from Höppner, Rudolf Höss, Wilhelm Kube, Karl Brandt, Heinrich Himmler, all the way up to Adolf Hitler—have possibly meant by what emerged as their collective desire after mid-1941 for a “humane” method of extermination ([Russell, 2019: pp. 241, 247](#))? Russell (*Ibid.*, pp. 241-276) argues that, from their own self-centered perspective, for many Nazis the most “humane” method of killing performed highly on four main measures:

- 1) Perpetrators need not touch, see, or hear their victims as they die (according to [Toland \(1976: p. 703\)](#), Hitler believed killing “impersonally” equated to doing so “without cruelty”).
- 2) The death blow should be instantaneous.
- 3) Victims should remain unaware that they are about to die.
- 4) The death blow should avoid leaving any visual indications of harm on the victims' bodies.

At the start of the Holocaust, the Nazis did not have a cheap and efficient method of killing civilians that came remotely close to meeting all four of these conditions. That is, between late 1939 and mid-1941 [Russell \(2019, pp. 65-99\)](#) argues starvation performed effectively on 1 but poorly on 2, 3, and 4. Shooting often performed effectively on 2, moderate to poorly on 1 (shooters seeing the victims die seemed unavoidable), and poorly on 3 and 4. Gassing performed effectively on 1, moderately to effectively on 3 and 4, and poorly on 2. After mid-1941, however, certain Nazi innovators experimented with the then shooting and gassing techniques, ensuring they moved ever closer to the above four-point ideal.

For example, when shooting civilians, the German armed forces initially relied on a military style execution (from about 10 metres, a row of shooters shot—face-to-face—a row of victims). For many executioners, seeing the facial expressions of defenseless civilians about to die proved stressful (as did later having to drag—touch and proximately see—their bloodied bodies into a grave). Eventually an innovation emerged: ensure a proportion of the victims first dug a mass grave, then instruct the victims to stand on the grave's edge facing (later kneeling) away from the shooters. Doing so enabled the shooters to avoid seeing the victims faces when shooting them and, because their bodies fell into the grave on

their own momentum, the perpetrators no longer had to touch them.

However, these innovations produced problems of their own. Shooting victims in the head with high-caliber rifles occasionally cause their skulls to explode, resulting in some shooters being besmirched (touched) with blood, bone, and brain matter. Also, some victims fell into the graves wounded, only later to be buried alive; with one SS-Commissioner-General referring to such deaths as “filthy” (cited in [Musmanno, 1961: p. 82](#)). The former problem encouraged the shooters to insert more distance between themselves and their victims, but the latter problem demanded, in order to improve shooting accuracy, greater proximity. The eventual solution to both problems was the emergence of the so-called neck shot: moving closer to near point-blank range, executioners were instructed to shoot the victims in the back of the neck (just below the skull), severing the spinal cord (causing death instantly), and producing a (relatively) small entry wound. The relatively quick, clean, and faceless neck shot relieved the shooters of much stress, although it did not circumvent their *seeing* the lethal consequences of their actions. [Steiner \(1967: p. 73\)](#) elaborates on this issue in that when the perpetrators had to look at the back of their victims’ necks as they took aim with their guns, this relatively less stressful (faceless) shooting technique could still prove distressing: “Like blind faces, these necks came to haunt their dreams.”

That said, in October 1941 staff at Mauthausen concentration camp experimented with a shooting device that successfully eliminated the visual connection with shooting. That is, prisoners were deceived into thinking they were to have their photograph taken. After being instructed to stand opposite a camera-like device and pressing their back up against a wall vertically lined with small holes, an SS man in an adjoining room would then surreptitiously shoot the inmate in the back of the neck. The limitation with this invention and its Milgram-esque wall, however, was it could only kill “30 inmates per hour” ([Horwitz, 1990: p. 17](#)).

On 4 December 1941, Himmler informed Friedrich Jeckeln (the most efficient shooting technique innovator): “shooting is too complicated an operation... For shooting, he [Himmler] said, one needs people who can shoot, and...this affects [our] people poorly...” ([Angrick & Klein, 2009: p. 152](#)). Although the shootings continued, Himmler saw greater potential in the then rapidly advancing gassing techniques as *the* solution to the “Jewish problem.”

With increasingly deadly results, between mid-1941 and 1944, gassings underwent much experimentation ([Russell, 2019: pp. 167-240](#)). The destructive zenith of this trial-and-error discovery process was undoubtedly Auschwitz-Birkenau’s Crematorium II gas chamber.

As illustrated in [Figure 7](#), roughly two thousand victims would, under the guise of obtaining a shower, line up outside the undressing chamber (Step 1). This deception was designed to ensure the victims remained unaware that they were about to die. On entering the undressing chamber (Step 2) and taking off their clothes, the victims were instructed to enter an adjacent chamber aligned with fake shower heads (Step 3). On the door being locked, a German technician

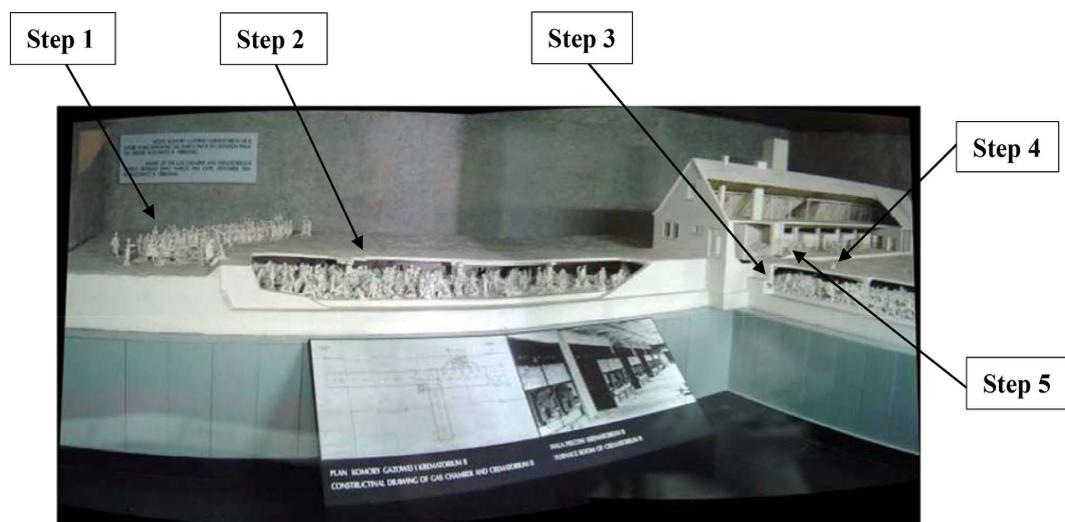


Figure 7. Model of Auschwitz-Birkenau’s Crematorium II (Berenbaum, 2006: pp. 140-141).

would climb on top of the chamber’s roof and pour Zyklon-B crystals into the ceiling vents (Step 4), which turned into a deadly gas, killing everybody inside within minutes. As they died, little of their fate was detectable by those outside the chamber. As political prisoner Karl Lil put it: “A few seconds later a cry, muffled, stifled by the concrete walls. And then, a few minutes afterward, [an extraction fan ensured] a brownish-yellow vapor poured out of the chimney” (cited in Naumann, 1966: p. 249). According to Hoess (2001: p. 198), Zyklon-B—unlike diesel fumes—left few marks or discolorations on the victims’ bodies (thus promoting the false yet strain-resolving belief that the victims probably fell asleep and died gently). For Germans, the accuracy of this belief need never be challenged because a Jewish work commando (under the threat of death) transferred all the victims’ bodies to the crematorium. Because this extermination process enabled the few Germans involved to avoid touching, seeing, or (barely) hearing the killing of their many victims—providing enormous opportunities of Milgram-like perceptual avoidance—they experienced little psychological stress, thus rendering them even more susceptible to being coerced, persuaded, or tempted into remaining perpetrators. In sum, it is in the above way that it is believed TCP can be slightly modified to better account for the perpetration of the Holocaust by Germany’s “civilized” (rational and squeamish) killers⁶.

⁶Russell (2019) illustrates that most German perpetrators went to enormous lengths to avoid touching their victims when killing them. In support of this point that most German perpetrators were effectively squeamish, even Goldhagen’s (1996: pp. 301-302; 307; 351; 358-359; 401) *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, a 600-page book detailing the Nazi’s murderous cruelties, provides only six examples of violence where a German perpetrator, when killing, was physically connected to their victims’ bodies. Of these six examples, one perpetrator was described by a survivor as “absolutely abnormal”, one “sickened” their fellow German perpetrators, and another was criticized by a co-perpetrator for being “brutal” and not killing “in a more decent way” (see Goldhagen, 1996: p. 302; 307; 401). If one wants to better understand how a mostly “moderately” antisemitic nation like Nazi Germany (Bauer, 2001: p. 31) so rapidly became mass murderers of European Jews, Russell (2019) argues one must closely review the invention and evolution of the most relied upon extermination techniques.

10. Conclusion

Milgram's actions indicate he sensed his first obedience research idea where subjects severely beat another person would fail to maximize his first official baseline completion rate. This was an illegitimate, brutal, inhumane, and quite clearly *uncivilized* experiment, which virtually all subjects would refuse to partake. His then introduction of the "impersonal" and thus relatively *civilized* shock generator changed all that⁷. The unviable suddenly became viable, the impossible possible. The small substitution provided Milgram with the ability to expose, for the world to see in all its ugliness, the frightfully violent capabilities of whom Elias (1991: pp. 146-147) would have termed modern barbarians. It is the centrality of this singular and abrupt change on Milgram's thereafter high baseline completion rates that most convincingly cements the central importance of Elias's theory as a conduit to better understanding Milgram's otherwise mysterious experiments.

Although near nothing has been written on links between Milgram's Obedience studies and Elias's Civilizing Process, this exploratory article on the concept of civilized killers more specifically argues the self-reinforcing connections between these scholarly projects are many and varied. Of most significance is that Milgram's *Proximity Series* provides empirical support in favour of Elias's claim that violence deemed necessary can exist—even thrive—in modern "civilized" society if it is undertaken away from sensitive eyes "behind the scenes" of social life. And although Milgram's *Proximity Series* highlights weaknesses with this famous Eliasian phrase, it can also be used to provide convincing evidence in favour of a new, objectively stronger, and technically more accurate focus on *multi-sensory screening*. Unlike Elias's phrase, this terminology may reinvigorate new strength into his wider thesis, particularly regarding Elias's (1996) otherwise problematic attempt to better account for Germany's perpetration of the Holocaust.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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⁷When writing about "[t]he system" he constructed—the setting at Yale University, the "mystique of science", and the "impressive laboratory equipment"—Milgram (1974: p. 143) points out how such "broad institutional accords... permit[ed] such activities" like his experiment "to go on—that is, the diffuse societal support that is implied by the very fact that the experiment is being run and tolerated in a civilized city."

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