

STANLEY MILGRAM

The Individual in a Social World



ESSAYS AND EXPERIMENTS

EDITED BY THOMAS BLASS

3rd expanded
edition

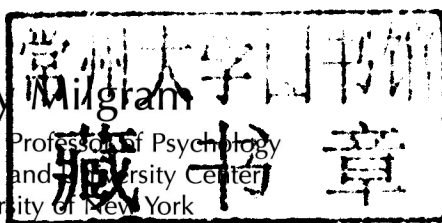
The Individual in a Social World

ESSAYS AND EXPERIMENTS

Third, expanded, edition

Stanley Milgram

Late Distinguished Professor of Psychology
Graduate School and University Center
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The Individual in a Social World
Essays and Experiments

First edition published by Addison-Wesley Publishing Company 1977

Second edition published by McGraw-Hill 1992

This third edition first published by Pinter & Martin 2010

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Preface to the third edition © 2010 Thomas Blass

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ISBN 978-1-905177-12-7

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

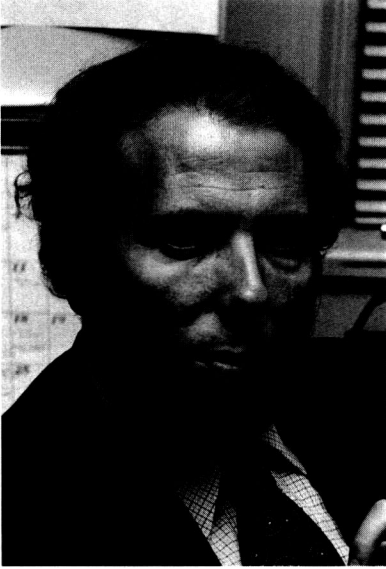
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6 Effra Parade
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The Individual in a Social World

ESSAYS AND EXPERIMENTS

To Sasha, Michèle, and Marc



Bill Binzen 1974

Stanley Milgram was born in 1933 in New York City. He took a bachelor's degree from Queens College in political science and received his Ph.D. in the social relations program of Harvard University in 1960 under the direction of Gordon Allport.

Milgram spent from 1960 to 1963 at Yale University conducting the obedience experiments for which he quickly became internationally famous, and for which he received many honors including the American Association for the Advancement of Science prize in sociopsychology. The first reports of this work appeared in 1963, but the full series of experiments was first published in his 1974 book *Obedience to Authority*, which was a finalist for a National Book Award.

Milgram returned to Harvard in 1963 and remained there until 1967, when he moved to the Graduate Center of the City University of New York as head of the social psychology graduate program. In 1980 Milgram was named a distinguished professor of psychology by the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York. Milgram passed away in December of 1984.

At the City University of New York, Milgram conducted a seminal series of experiments on the psychology of urban living, and he wrote and produced an award-winning movie, *The City and the Self*, as a further expression of his insights into urban life.

Milgram was a fellow of the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1972 he won a Guggenheim Fellowship to spend a year in Paris developing his work on mental maps of Paris and New York. He was, in addition to all of this, an amateur songwriter, photographer, and inventor of games and gadgets.

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

In September 1976, Stanley Milgram wrote a childhood friend:

“I started work on obedience in 1960, a long time ago, and it would be nice to move on to other things. . . . But professional life turns you into a kind of snail, in which everything you do becomes another curl of your ever enlarging carapace.”

Milgram’s obedience research is generally regarded as one of the most important set of psychological experiments of our times, and continues to have an impact on our contemporary culture and thought. Yet, during his own lifetime, as his career was evolving, Milgram was having mixed feelings about the obedience studies. As one of his former students, Judith Waters, put it, those experiments turned out to be “both the boon and the bane” of his career. On the one hand, it brought him fame and, with it, the financial rewards provided by speaking engagements, which increased in frequency after the publication of his book, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. He gave about 140 invited talks during his lifetime and over one-third of them dealt directly or indirectly with his obedience experiments.

On the other hand, he had a wide range of interests – he considered himself a neo-Renaissance man – and possessed a relentless curiosity about the hidden workings of our social world, which he tried to make visible through experiments and “think” pieces on a wide array of topics.

Yet, well into the 1970s, these other works were not well known, being overshadowed – as suggested by the letter to his childhood friend – by the obedience experiments. He once told his brother, Joel, that he felt like the actor James Arness, who was known only for his starring role in a TV series, *Gunsmoke*, but not for any of his other acting roles. And he would be perturbed if he overheard someone mentioning “the Milgram experiments” when referring to the obedience experiments. “Which of my experiments are you talking about?” he would ask.

In 1977, in order to correct the situation and inform readers about the diversity of his accomplishments, Milgram published the first edition of this anthology. It contained almost all of his writings up to that point.

Milgram died on December 20, 1984; he was only 51 years old. The year 1992 saw the publication of a second, posthumous, edition of this collection, edited by two of his former students, John Sabini and Maury Silver. It contained an additional seven

articles Milgram had written after the publication of the first edition. Three articles from the first edition did not reappear in the second edition.

This, the third, expanded, edition of *Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* combines the articles that appeared in both of the earlier editions and adds six articles that had not appeared in either of them. As in the previous editions, in this anthology readers will find an improbable potpourri of experiments and essays capturing the variety and breadth of Milgram's interests. However, beneath their diversity, the readings have an important, unifying characteristic. Between the covers of this book there are articles that originally appeared in both professional journals and general circulation magazines. But, regardless of the intended audience, I believe the reader will find them invariably lucid, readable and remarkably jargon-free. One of the most admired social psychologists, Roger Brown, considered Milgram to be "one of the best expository writers in psychology." Given the quality of Milgram's writing, I was surprised to hear from his widow, Alexandra, when I interviewed her for my biography of Milgram, *The Man Who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram*, that writing did not come easily to him. The sweat is well hidden beneath the fluidity and effortless quality of most of his writings.

Over the years, I have assigned previous editions of this book to my students. Typically, they have told me that they not only gained new insights about social behavior, but also that the experience was a thoroughly enjoyable one. I hope – and believe – that you will come away from this book with similar feelings.

The following is a listing of the articles that are new to this edition, in order of their appearance. Each is followed by a brief comment or explanation.

Ruminations on Rudeness (p. 111). This article appeared in a newsletter that aims to provide practical advice from experts on everyday matters. While empirical research was Milgram's primary tool for studying a phenomenon, sometimes his contributions to understanding a phenomenon was purely analytic, yielding a description of it in terms of its essential defining properties. This article, although largely analytic, does briefly mention a couple of relevant experiments. There are, however, a number of articles in this anthology that are based solely on conceptual analysis without involving empirical research at all. A noteworthy feature of this article is Milgram's ability to bring a rational and balanced approach to a subject that lends itself almost reflexively to condemnation.

A Patient's View of the Hospital Strike (p. 114). Over a span of five years, beginning in May 1980, Milgram had a series of heart attacks. Two of them – the third and the fourth – occurred during the summer of 1984. He was hospitalized for the second one amidst a strike by the non-medical staff of the hospital. He felt that many of their grievances were reasonable, and so he didn't blame the workers for going on strike. What he did blame them for – and this is the gist of the article – was their behavior, which was mindless and cruel to the patients: day after day from early morning to late at night, they would picket outside the patients' windows, making a racket by continuously banging on drums. Sadly, Milgram died several months later on December 20, 1984, when his heart muscles gave way.

On the Jonestown Mass Tragedy and the Power of Situational Forces (p. 178). This article first appeared in 1979, as the preface to the second edition of the French translation of Milgram's book, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. This edition was published about a year after more than 900 members of the People's Temple went to their deaths in their colony in Jonestown, Guyana, at the behest of their leader Reverend Jim Jones. Milgram provides a perspective on the Jonestown tragedy and then uses it as a stepping stone to a ringing affirmation of social psychology's dominant "situationist" orientation. As he expresses it in the article, "Social psychology has clearly established that often it is not so much the kind of person one is, but the kind of situation one is in, that determines our actions."

Who Joins the Unions (p. 306). This article was written in response to a request by the editor of the *Clarion*, the newspaper of the teachers' union Milgram belonged to when he was on the faculty of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The newspaper was planning a series of scholarly articles on the labor movement, and the editor was requesting faculty from various disciplines within the University for contributions. This article presents a survey of the research, identifying personal characteristics of workers who were in favor of unions and those who opposed them.

The Social Meaning of Fanaticism (p. 311). According to social psychologist Carol Tavris, who interviewed Milgram in 1974, one of Milgram's favorite phrases to describe himself was "prescient ability" – the ability to anticipate or foreshadow future ideas or events. For example, he wrote a musical based on the stories of Sholom Aleichem ten years before *Fiddler on the Roof* made its appearance. Given the relevance of the topic of fanaticism to our contemporary, post-9/11, world, this article, written in 1977, presenting a fine-tuned analysis of the concept and phenomenon of fanaticism, certainly merits designation as another example of Milgram's "prescient ability."

Network Love (p. 410). This article appeared in the October 1984 issue of *OMNI* magazine, a glossy, mass-circulation science and science fiction magazine aimed at the educated reader. The same issue contained articles by Ronald Reagan and Ray Bradbury, and Milgram's name was displayed on the cover with the same degree of prominence as theirs – a sign that he was becoming increasingly familiar to the broader public. This was his last article to appear in print before his death. Milgram's original title for the article was the straightforward "A Psychologist Looks at Networking," but apparently the magazine's editors felt it needed a catchier title. Milgram became an early devotee of the personal computer, and in this article he explores its potential for communication and social networking.

Thomas Blass
Baltimore, Maryland

FOREWORD

During the many decades when American psychology was held captive by a limited scientific doctrine of behaviorism, the pathfinders who dared to venture beyond these intellectually limited boundaries and explore new horizons were largely social psychologists. They valued the personal perspectives of the human actor in life's dramas, honored the alternative interpretations of reality held by different observers, and defended the subtle interplay of dynamic forces between and within cultures, social situations, and individual psyches.

Long relegated to a subordinate position within psychology's status hierarchy for these points of view, social psychology has steadily moved to the center of contemporary psychology. It did so by establishing a cognitively flavored brand of psychology, which, in recent years, has become the banner flown by mainstream psychology. Social psychology was the home of generalists within psychology, a haven for scholars interested in understanding the depth and breadth of the nature of human nature. It was neither too shy to ask the big questions that have intrigued social philosophers for centuries, nor too orthodox to venture into alien territories with new methodologies that have provided empirically grounded answers to the more vital questions of our time. Finally, social psychologists have become the vanguard of the movement to extend the boundaries of traditional psychology into realms vital to contributing solutions for real-world problems, the areas of health, ecology, education, law, peace and conflict resolution, and much more. Indeed, it is not immodest to declare that nothing of human nature is too alien to social psychological inquiry and concern.

Among contemporary social psychologists, few have attained the international recognition accorded to Stanley Milgram. The core of that acclaim surely is his powerful laboratory demonstration of the phenomenon known as "blind obedience to authority." This uniquely original research disturbed the sensibilities of many people by revealing the power of social situations to induce the majority of ordinary people to behave in ways that were thought to be the province only of those with pathologies of mind or spirit. It is never comforting to be exposed to the truth of the "banality of evil," the knowledge that any wrong which any human being has ever done to another person, we too could do – under the wrong circumstances. Even though that research was conducted in the early 1960s, their universal appeal and controversy surrounding them continues unabated even to this day.

But that is the genius which formed Milgram's approach to social psychology:

asking fundamental questions about human nature, about the resourcefulness and vulnerabilities of the individual ever buffeted by a complex array of social forces from groups, institutions, culture, and environment. Milgram's dedication to social psychology came from an insatiable curiosity about why people behave as they do when confronted with an assortment of social pressures from everyday life situations – from group norms to conform, to compliance pressures from authority figures, to the adaptations necessitated by living in urban centers, and to the forces of electronic communications media.

Milgram was a keen observer of the human landscape, with an eye ever open for a new paradigm that might expose old truths or raise awareness of hidden operating principles. Not only did he ask the big questions that most other psychologists shun, he found ways to answer them using an always creative mix of methods, observation, introspection, interview, and of course, the laboratory experiment. His answers never depended solely on paper-and-pencil antiseptic questionnaire or survey research.

Paradoxically, Milgram's popular success came from his phenomenological approach to social psychology, starting always with vital phenomena to be understood, but his approach also limited the appeal Milgram's work held for his peers. Milgram's disdain for theory and reliance on his personal insights and observational abilities is not the stuff from which new Ph.D. dissertations are built. In that sense, Milgram is more like a Picasso than a Freud. To some extent, we can trace the influence here of his mentor, Solomon Asch, whose classic study of group conformity and independence is similarly nontheoretical.

The reader who is new to social psychology will find in this book of essays by a master researcher and gifted writer a treasury of creative views on different slices of the human experience. One cut is on the many ways in which individuals adapt to the physical, social, and cognitive aspects of life in the city. Another considers the dynamic interplay of individuals and social groups. A third focuses on the aspects of the communicative web that is so much a part of our daily lives. Finally, of course, is the section on the confrontation between individuals and authority. Many readers will be pleased to discover here a fuller context in which to better appreciate the basic study of obedience to authority, including Milgram's concerns for the ethics of this sensitive research.

Before the reader embarks on this journey of seeing the social world through the vision of one of the most important social psychologists of our times, I must take you back in time. It is 1949 and seated next to me in senior class at James Monroe High School in the Bronx, New York, is my classmate, Stanley Milgram. We were both skinny kids full of ambition and desire to make something of ourselves so that we might escape life in the confines of our ghetto experience. Stanley was the smart one, who read *The New York Times* (which I never could fold properly to read on the subway so I stuck to the *Daily News*). We went to him for authoritative answers. I was the popular one, the smiling guy other kids would go to for advice, even though many of my friends ended up in prison.

When we met years later at Yale University (in what my mother would forever call an "Ivory League" school), it turned out that Stanley really wanted to be popular, and I wanted to be smart. So much for unfulfilled desires. Now I have the bittersweet task

of sending you, our reader, to enjoy the wisdom of my old friend, smart Stanley, sadly deceased long before his time. This book is a lasting legacy to his creative scholarship, that will ensure his popularity among a new generation of readers, just as his peers can rediscover the depth of his smarts.

Philip G. Zimbardo
Professor Emeritus
Stanford University

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The late Gordon W. Allport taught that social psychology examined how the thought, action, and feelings of the individual were affected by the implied, actual, or imagined presence of others. At the center of his definition was the individual; the individual remains at the center of my own conception of the field. Thus, I have loosely structured this volume in terms of four domains of social facts confronted by the individual: the city, authority, groups, and media.

The volume describes research I have carried out over a period of twenty years, and it is impossible to thank here all those who helped me in carrying out particular studies. But I wish to indicate a general intellectual debt to a few people who have been especially important to my professional development: first, to the late Gordon W. Allport, who always encouraged me to think I could contribute something useful to social psychology, and to three inspiring teachers: Solomon E. Asch, Roger Brown, and Jerome S. Bruner.

Many of the experiments reported here were carried out in the context of my courses in social psychology at Harvard, Yale, and The City University of New York. The many students who participated in these projects were true partners in research, and I wish to express my appreciation to each of them.

Alice B. Kornblith and Alexandra Milgram provided helpful editorial and secretarial assistance in the preparation of this volume and Joan Gerver prepared the index.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my appreciation to the several publishers who allowed me to reprint my articles, which first appeared in their journals and books.

Stanley Milgram

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Bubble chambers are devices physicists use to make powerful, but normally invisible, forces visible. Photographs of the tracks are permanent records of these evanescent events. Such photos have been sold as art because there is an elegance about them, an elegance derived from their simplicity. Had Milgram been a physicist, he would have invented the bubble chamber; instead as a social psychologist his genius expressed itself in finding powerful, covert social forces and making them tangible in a direct, simple, elegant way. The passion for elegance and simplicity drove Milgram's prose as much as it did his design of experiments.

In a graduate seminar a student once asked Milgram about the style the student should use in writing his paper. Milgram replied that there was but one way to write – for the intelligent layman. Milgram believed that if one had something to say, one could say it simply – so that your grandparent could understand it. Jargon, he believed, announced that one had nothing to say. The essays here all have something to say.

Some psychologists are driven by the urge to create theories. Others are driven to understand phenomena which are compelling in their own right. Milgram's work was clearly of the latter sort. Indeed Milgram had little use for theories, at least theories in social psychology.

Milgram saw experimental social psychology as a way of finding out what was really true, and he saw theories as a kind of speculation, no better, and often worse, than commonsense theories. Theory-driven research seemed to him to swell, rather than resolve, speculation. Now, this way of putting the matter is naive – and Milgram knew it was naive, which is why he never put it this way. It is naive because we all know, or so modern philosophy tells us, that all knowledge is theoretical. But still, Stanley Milgram was distrustful of social psychological theories and indeed believed that commonsense “theories” were less speculative grounds for raising questions and doing experiments.

He had a particular antipathy to theories that explained everything and illuminated nothing – for instance, learning theory circa 1960 (when Milgram went to Yale). Milgram did not waste his time, at least as he saw it, elaborating “grand theory.” Milgram's aim in conducting research was always to provide insight into concrete phenomena, rather than to articulate an abstract theory.

His eschewing theory had a certain cost. For one thing, the original report of the obedience experiments was *rejected* by the *Journal of Abnormal and Social*

Psychology; perhaps the experiments were thought not theoretically important enough. Other articles in this collection met a similar fate. One we know of was rejected by the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* with a reviewer's comment that it should be resubmitted to *Parade Magazine*.

The same insightfulness that erupts from the articles collected here was easy to enjoy in conversations with Milgram. Conversations with Milgram were wide-ranging (even more wide-ranging than the scope of the articles collected here), intense, and exhilarating. But they were also a bit scary; we once reported to Milgram that we were no longer going to do an experiment he had encouraged us to do (for our theses) because we were afraid – from experience – of being beaten up and arrested on the subway. Milgram sat back in his chair, thought about the matter for a moment, and then remarked that anthropology graduate students might have to do field work in cultures where eating foreigners was common, so he didn't see why we should stop the experiment on the subway just out of fear of being beaten up. He was kidding, of course; well, maybe he was kidding. One often didn't know with Stanley just when he was serious about an idea and when he was playing with it. One didn't know because Stanley didn't know; playfulness was a part of thinking about things for Stanley, an intrinsic part.

Stanley Milgram died on December 20, 1984; he was 51 years old. His genius is now frozen as his published work. In 1977 he collected much of this work as *The Individual in a Social World*. This edition is a revision of that collection and includes most of the articles he had selected for the 1977 edition. This edition also includes additional articles written since the publication of the first collection. The final chapter is a transcript of an address Milgram gave to the American Psychological Association in August of 1984 on his work with what he called "Cyranoids." A report of this work was never published by Milgram, so this transcript is as close as we can come to his thinking about this unfinished project.

John Sabini
Maury Silver

INTRODUCTION

As a social psychologist, I look at the world not to master it in any practical sense, but to understand it and to communicate that understanding to others. Social psychologists are part of the very social matrix they have chosen to analyze, and thus they can use their own experience as a source of insight. The difficulty is to do this in a way that does not drain life of its spontaneity and pleasure.

A wish to understand social behavior is not, of course, unique to psychologists; it is part of normal human curiosity. But for social psychologists, this need is more central, more compelling, and thus they go a step further and make it their life's work.

The studies in this collection, carried out over a period of twenty years, examine the way in which the social world impinges on individual action and experience. The implicit model for the experimental work is that of the person influenced by social forces while often believing in his or her own independence of them. It is thus a social psychology of the reactive individual, the recipient of forces and pressures emanating from outside oneself. This represents, of course, only one side of the coin of social life, for we as individuals also initiate action out of internal needs and actively construct the social world we inhabit. But I have left to other investigators the task of examining the complementary side of our social natures.

The social world does not impinge on us as a set of discrete variables, but as a vibrant, continuous stream of events whose constituent parts can be dissected only through analysis, and whose effects can be most compellingly demonstrated through the logic of experiments. Indeed, the creative claim of social psychology lies in its capacity to reconstruct varied types of social experience in an experimental format, to clarify and make visible the operation of obscure social forces so that they may be explored in terms of the language of cause and effect.

The source for the experiments in this volume is neither textbooks nor abstract theory, but the texture of everyday life. They are imbued with a phenomenological outlook. Even so apparently technical a study as "The Lost Letter Technique" begins with the imagined experience of encountering such a missive, the consciousness of choice which the letter stimulates, and the ultimate resolution of conflicting tendencies in a decisive and measurable act.

Every experiment is a situation in which the end is unknown; it is tentative, indeterminate, something that may fail. An experiment may produce only a restatement of the obvious or yield unexpected insights. The indeterminacy of its

outcome is part of its excitement.

Although experiments may be objective, they are rarely entirely neutral. There is a certain viewpoint that is implicit in the experiments that were carried out. Thus, in my studies of conformity and obedience, the moral value always rests with the person who rejects the group or authority. Going it alone seems to be the preferred value. But of course the experimenter himself set up the situation in a way in which only such rejection could constitute a morally adequate choice. The pervasive effects of such implicit values do not in themselves undermine the validity of the experiments; they do, however, give them a specific coloration that is not scientifically derived.

I do not mean thereby to reduce experimental social psychology to an emotional catharsis in which the feelings and needs of the investigator are paramount. Far from it! Even if a study originates in a personal interest, problem, or bias, it cannot long remain at this level. Emotional factors are severely disciplined by the experimental method and the ideal of scientific objectivity.

The most interesting experiments in social psychology are produced by the interplay of naivete and skepticism. The experimenter must be sufficiently naive to question what everyone thinks is a certainty. Yet he must be skeptical at every point – in his interpretation of data, and in the too hasty assimilation of a discovery to a preexisting framework of thought.

Although most of the papers in this volume deal with the presentation of experimental ideas, several represent attempts to justify or defend those ideas in the face of criticisms. Or they apply the experimental conclusions to issues of larger scope. Thus, in the section on “The Individual and Authority,” I include a defense of the ethics of the obedience experiment. Another paper defends its methodological suppositions. Papers such as these, however necessary a part of the social psychologist’s work, have always seemed to me a deflection from the more pleasurable activity of experimental invention.

The following interview, conducted by Carol Tavris for *Psychology Today*,* expands on the remarks in this introduction and touches on a broad range of my substantive and methodological concerns.

CAROL TAVRIS: Much of your work is directed toward the experience of living in cities, isolating the intangibles that make Oslo different from Paris, Topeka different from Denver, and New York different from anything. How do you go about defining those intangibles?

STANLEY MILGRAM: First, you keep your eyes open; you generalize on the basis of numerous specific incidents; you try to determine whether particular incidents lead up to a definable pattern; you attempt to find an underlying coherence beneath the myriad surface phenomena in a particular city. You generalize from your own experience and formulate a hypothesis.

Then you become systematic about it. You ask people what specific incidents seem to them to characterize a particular urban setting, and you see whether any patterns

* This interview was first published under the title “The Frozen World of the Familiar Stranger” in *Psychology Today* magazine, Vol. 8 (June 1974), pp. 71–73, 76–78, 80. Copyright ©1974, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company. Permission granted by Alexandra Milgram.