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Uri Geller and Parapsychology
by Dr. Andrew Weil

Psychotherapy Boom—
Trend away from Cure toward Self-fulfillment

Sex for Senior Citizens

Stanley Milgram Talks about Obedience to Authority, TV Violence and Cognitive Maps

Is Women's Speech Weaker Than Men's?

Genetics Control— A Disturbing Progress Report

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A conversation with Stanley Milgram about familiar strangers, inhibitory anxiety on the subway, Kitty Genovese, obedience to authority, cognitive maps, TV violence, and a lost child.

THE FROZEN WORLD OF THE FAMILIAR STRANGER: "We are all fragile creatures entwined in a cobweb of social constraints."

by Carol Tavris

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 or dimensions emerge. When you ask Americans to cite specific incidents they think typical of London, for example, they often center on the civility of the Londoner. Typical comments about New York focus on its pace of activity, and diversity. The psychologist differs from the novelist or travel writer in that he tries to measure whether these features—pace, friendliness, diversity—actually correspond to what is out there, and differ from one urban setting to the next. *Measurement* of ambiance, then, is the special contribution that social psychology makes to centuries of travelogues.

Tavris: What features of urban life have interested you most recently?

Milgram: For years I've taken a commuter train to work. I noticed that there were people at my station whom I had seen for many years but never spoken to, people I came to think of as *familiar strangers.* I found a peculiar tension in this situation, when people treat each other as properties of the environment rather than as individuals to deal with. It happens frequently. Yet there remains a poignancy and discomfort, particularly when there are only two of you at the station: you and someone you have seen daily but never met. A barrier has developed that is not readily broken.

Tavris: How can you study the phenomenon of the familiar stranger?

Milgram: Students in my research seminar took pictures of the waiting passengers at one station. They made duplicates of the photographs, numbered each of the faces, then distributed the group photographs the following week to all the passengers at the station. We asked the commuters to indicate those people whom they knew and spoke to, those whom they did not recognize, and those whom they recognized but had never spoken to. The commuters filled out the questionnaires on the train and turned them in at Grand Central Station.

Well, we found that the commuters knew an average of 4.5 familiar strangers, and the commuters often had many fantasies about these people. Moreover, there are sociometric stars among familiar strangers. Eighty percent of the commuters recognized one person, although very few had ever spoken to her. She was the visual high point of the station crowd, perhaps because she wore a miniskirt constantly, even in the coldest months.

Tavris: How do our dealings with familiar strangers differ from those with total strangers?

Milgram: The familiar-stranger phenomenon is not the absence of a relationship but a special kind of frozen relationship. For example, if you wanted to make a trivial request or get the time of day, you are more likely to ask a total stranger, rather than a person you had seen for many years but had never spoken to. Each of you is aware that a history of noncommunication exists between you, and you both have accepted this as the normal state.

But the relationship between familiar strangers has a latent quality to it that becomes overt on specific occasions. I heard of a case in which a woman fainted in front of her apartment building. Her neighbor, who had seen her for 17 years and never spoken to her, immediately went into action. She felt a special responsibility; she called the ambulance, even went to the hospital with her. The likelihood of speaking to a familiar stranger also increases as you are removed from the scene of routine meeting. If I were out strolling in Paris and ran into one of my commuter strangers from Riverdale, we would undoubtedly greet each other for the first time.

And the fact that familiar strangers often talk to each other in times of crisis or emergency raises an interesting question: is there any way to promote solidarity without having to rely on emergencies and crises?

Tavris: To study the familiar stranger, your students directly confronted commuters for information. Is this typical of your experimental style?

Milgram: Methods of inquiry must always be adapted to the problem at hand, and not all of life's phenomena can be assembled in a laboratory. You must often go out to meet the problem, and it doesn't require a license to ask someone a question. My experimental style aims to make visible the social pressures that operate on us unnoticed.

And an experiment has a tangible quality to it; you see people really behaving in front of you, which stimulates insight. It is a matter of bringing issues down to a level where you can see them clearly, rendering processes visible. Social life is highly complex. We are all fragile creatures entwined in a cobweb of social constraints. Experiments often serve as a beam that helps clarify the murky aspects of experience. And I do believe that a Pandora's box lies just beneath the surface of everyday life, so it is often worthwhile to challenge what you most take for granted. You are often surprised at what you find.

Tavris: For example?

Milgram: We've recently looked at the subway experience which is so characteristic of New York life. If you consider that

at rush hour total strangers are pressed against each other in a noisy hot car, surrounded by poking elbows, it is astonishing how little aggression this produces. It is a remarkably regulated situation, and we tried to probe the norms that keep it manageable. The best way to start was to be simple-minded and not too sophisticated, since sophistication assumes too much about the structure you wish to illuminate.

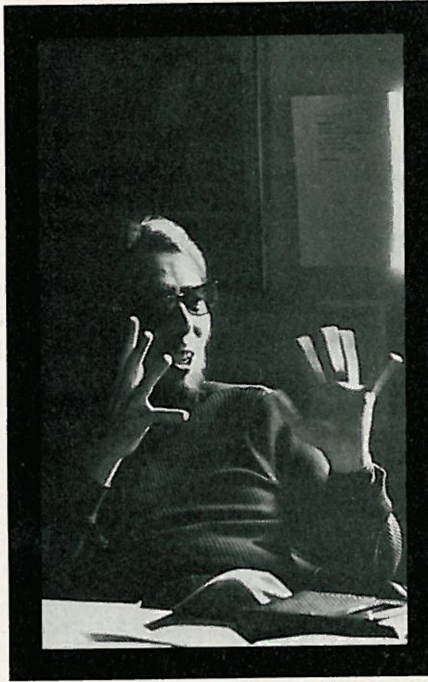
Tavris: What did you do?

Milgram: I suggested to the class that we each go up to someone on the subway and simply ask for his seat. The immediate reaction of the class was exactly the same as yours—laughter. But anxious laughter is often a sign that you are on to something important. Many members of the class felt that no one in New York would give up his seat simply because a stranger asked him to. My students did a second thing that uncovered their prejudices. They said that the person would have to justify his request by asserting illness, nausea, dizziness; they assumed that the request itself would not gain the seat. A third clue: I asked for volunteers from a class of graduate students, but they recoiled *en masse*. That's very revealing. After all, they merely had to make a trivial request. Why was it so frightening a project? In other words, the very formulation of the research question began to generate emotional clues to its answer. Finally, one brave soul, Ira Goodman, took on the heroic assignment, accompanied by a student observer. Goodman was asked to make the request courteously, and without initial justification, to 20 passengers.

Tavris: What happened?

Milgram: Within a week, rumors started to circulate at the graduate center. "They're getting up! They're getting up!" The news provoked astonishment, delight, wonder. Students made pilgrimages to Goodman as if he had uncovered a profound secret of survival in the New York subway, and at the next session of the seminar, he announced that about half of those he had asked had gotten up. He didn't even have to give a reason.

But one discrepancy struck me in Goodman's report. He had only approached 14 people instead of the hoped-for 20. Since he was normally quite conscientious, I asked why. He said: "I just couldn't go on. It was one of the most difficult things I ever did in my life." Was there something idiosyncratic about Goodman, or was he telling us something profoundly revealing about social behavior generally? There was only one way to find out. Each of us would repeat the experiment, and neither I nor my colleague, Professor Irwin Katz, would be exempted.



"The words seemed lodged in my trachea and would simply not emerge. I stood there frozen."

Frankly, despite Goodman's initial experience, I assumed it would be easy. I approached a seated passenger and was about to utter the magical phrase. But the words seemed lodged in my trachea and would simply not emerge. I stood there frozen, then retreated, the mission unfulfilled. My student observer urged me to try again, but I was overwhelmed by paralyzing inhibition. I argued to myself: "What kind of craven coward are you? You told your class to do it. How can you go back to them without carrying out your own assignment?" Finally, after several unsuccessful tries, I went up to a passenger and choked out the request, "Excuse me sir, may I have your seat?" A moment of stark anomic panic overcame me. But the man got right up and gave me the seat. A second blow was yet to come. Taking the man's seat, I was overwhelmed by the need to behave in a way that would justify my request. My head sank between my knees, and I could feel my face blanching. I was not role-playing. I actually felt as if I were going to perish. Then the third discovery: as soon as I got off the train, at the next station, all of the tension disappeared.

Tavris: What underlying social principles does such an experiment reveal?

Milgram: First, it points up the enormous inhibitory anxiety that ordinarily prevents us from breaching social norms. Asking a person for his seat is a trivial matter, yet it was extremely difficult to make the request. Second, it highlights the powerful need to justify one's request by appearing sick or exhausted. I must stress that this is not acting, but a compelled playing out of the logic of social relations. Finally, the fact that all of these intense feelings were synthesized in, and were limited to the particular situation, shows the power of immediate circumstances on feelings and behavior. I was relieved and back to normal the instant I was off the train.

Tavris: Your reaction sounds typical of the subjects in the obedience experiment [see page 76]. Many of them felt obliged to follow the experimenter's orders to shock an innocent victim, even though they felt great anxiety.

Milgram: Yes. The subway experience gave me a better understanding of why some subjects obeyed. I experienced the anxiety they felt as they considered repudiating the experimenter. That anxiety forms a powerful barrier that must be surmounted, whether one's action is consequential—disobeying an authority—or trivial—asking for a seat on the subway.

Do you know there are people who choose to die in a burning building rather than run outside with their pants off? Embarrassment and the fear of violating apparently trivial norms often lock us into intolerable predicaments. And these are not minor regulatory forces in social life, but basic ones.

Tavris: Can you recommend a similar experiment for those of us in cities without subways?

Milgram: If you think it is easy to violate social constraints, get onto a bus and sing out loud. Full-throated song now, no humming. Many people will say it is easy to carry out this act, but not one in a hundred will be able to do it.

The point is not to *think* about singing, but to try to *do* it. Only in action can you fully realize the forces operative in social behavior. That is why I am an experimentalist.

Tavris: It seems to me, though, that many experiments, while entertaining, do not take one beyond what sensitive perception and feeling would. Some people criticized the obedience work by saying, "I knew that." After all, centuries of human history amply document the excesses of following orders. What advan-

tage derives from an experiment that confirms history?

Milgram: The purpose of the obedience experiment was neither to confirm nor disconfirm history, but to study the psychological function of obedience; the conditions under which it occurs, the defense mechanisms it entails, the emotional forces that keep the person obeying. The criticism you cite is akin to saying that we know people die of cancer, so why study it?

Further, it is difficult for people to sort out what they know from what they only think they know. The clearest indication of ignorance about obedience is that when psychiatrists, psychologists and others were asked to predict the performance of subjects in the experiment, they failed totally. The psychiatrists said, for example, that only one person in a thousand would administer the highest shock on the board, and they were off by a factor of 500.

Moreover, we must ask whether people really do learn the lessons of history. Isn't it always the "other guy" who shamelessly submits to authority, even in violation of elementary morality? I think it is hard for many people to accept that they themselves have the potential to yield without limit to authority. All the pedagogic means at our disposal, whether in the form of history, literature, or experiments, need to be called into service to heighten awareness of this issue.

Finally, if one group criticizes the experiments because they merely confirm history, an equally vociferous group vehemently denies that Americans are capable of the degree of obedience demonstrated in my experiment, and they consequently repudiate me and the experiment. I suggest people read my book and draw their own conclusions.

Tavris: Your obedience work and city work both consider the network of social rules that constrain us. In the galaxy of factors that make up a city's atmosphere, for example, which do you think are the most important?

Milgram: Clearly, the degree of moral and social involvement people have with each other, and the way this is limited by the objective circumstances of city life. There are so many people and events to cope with that you must simply disregard many possible inputs, just to get on. If you live on a country road you can say hello to each of the occasional persons who passes by; but obviously you can't do this on Fifth Avenue.

As a measure of social involvement for instance, we are now studying the response to a lost child in big city and small town. A child of nine asks people to help him call his home. The graduate students report a strong difference between city and town dwellers; in the city, many more people refused to extend help to the nine-year-old. I like the problem because there is no more meaningful measure of the quality of a culture than the manner in which it treats its children.

"We are now studying the response to a lost child in a big city and small town."

Tavris: But is it inevitable that big cities breed impersonal treatment of others? You don't find drunks or beggars on the streets in Chinese cities, but if you did it would be everyone's responsibility to help. The moral norms are to aid the other guy, so no one person must play lone Samaritan.

Milgram: I would be reluctant to compare a city such as Peking, in which the atmosphere is permeated with political doctrines and imperatives, to Western cities. Beyond that, it is true that not all large cities are alike. But the most general movement is toward an adaptation common to all cities. Paris today seems more like New York than it did 20 years ago, and 50 years from now they will be even more alike, as adaptive needs come to dominate local color. There will be some cultural differences, but these will fade, and I regard this as most unfortunate.

Tavris: You have just spent a year in Paris studying mental maps of the city. What are they?

Milgram: A mental map is the picture of the city that a person carries in his mind: the streets, neighborhoods, squares that are important to him, the way they are linked together, and the emotional charge attached to each element. The initial idea came from Kevin Lynch's book *The Image of the City*. The external city is encoded in the brain: you could say there is a city inside the mind. Even if the external city were destroyed, it could be reconstructed by reference to the mind's model of the city.

Tavris: What did you find out about Paris?

Milgram: First, that reality and mental maps are imperfectly linked. For example, the Seine may course a great arc through Paris, almost forming a half circle, but Parisians imagine it a much gentler curve, and some think the river a straight line as it flows through the city. And the pattern of known to unknown parts of the city is fascinating: there are large areas of eastern Paris that are not known to anyone but the residents of those particular neighborhoods. Old people tend to retain the map of an earlier Paris and find it hard to include newer elements, however monumental.

Tavris: Don't people have different maps, depending on their experience and economic status?

Milgram: There is both a universal mental map of Paris which all Parisians share, and there are specialized maps depending on one's personal biography and social class. We interviewed more than 200 Parisians, workers and professionals, and there were striking differences along class lines. For example, 63 percent of the professionals recognized a slide of the Place Furstenberg, an unexceptional square that professionals infuse with a kind of bourgeois sentimentality; only 15 percent of the workers could recognize it. And 84 percent of the professionals could identify the UNESCO complex at Place de Fontenoy; only 24 percent of the workers did. So there is an important class basis to the mental map.

On the other hand, as many workers as professionals recognized the Place St. Martin. And Notre Dame still represents the psychological core of the city to everyone, as it did a thousand years ago. So the maps have both universal and idiosyncratic components to them.

Tavris: What are mental maps good for?

Milgram: People make many impor-

(Continued on page 76.)

Conversation *(Continued from page 73.)*

tant decisions based on their conception of a city, rather than the reality of it. That's been well demonstrated. So it is important for planners to know how the city sits in the mind. And wouldn't it be enlightening to have such mental maps for Periclean Athens, for Dickensian London? Unfortunately, there were no social psychologists to construct such maps systematically at the time, but we know better and will do our duty.

Tavris: I'd like to turn to another of your real-world explorations, the effects of TV violence. In eight elaborate studies you found no differences between the people who watched the antisocial show and the controls. Has the effect of television on behavior been overrated?

Milgram: I don't know if it's overrated, but neither I nor my colleagues were able to establish a causal relationship. My ideal experiment would have been to divide the country in half, remove all violence on television west of the Mississippi and include it east of the Mississippi, enforce laws so that no one could move from one part of the country to the other, and then see what happens over a five or 10-year period. It turned out not to be practical, so I had to work with what I had.

The approach was to take an antisocial act, write it into a real TV program (*Medical Center*), show some cities the program containing it and others the same program without it, then give everyone an opportunity to imitate the antisocial act. I thought we would detect imitation, but we didn't. You can control everything about an experiment but the outcome.

Tavris: But why didn't you find the link?

Milgram: Perhaps the antisocial act—breaking into charity boxes and stealing money—was not dramatic enough. Perhaps people have been so sated with violence in the media that one show doesn't make a difference. Perhaps there is no such link. This experiment, like most, is a chip in a complex mosaic. No one study can tell the whole story. We have not established that the portrayal of violence leads to violence, but we cannot discard that hypothesis either.

Tavris: Do you plan to do more research on the effects of television?

Milgram: I don't know. Actually, it occurs to me that perhaps it is not the content of TV but its form that constitutes the real affront to human sensibilities: I mean the constant interruption of cognitive processes every 12 minutes by irrelevant material—commercials. I wonder what decrement in appreciation and understanding comes about when children watch a show with such interruptions. I think this will be an important problem.

THE FORCE OF AUTHORITY

"Ordinary people can become agents in a terrible, destructive process."

You walk into an elegant laboratory at Yale University to take part in an experiment on memory and learning. You draw lots with a mild-mannered fellow who will also be in the study, and find that you are to play "teacher" and he the "learner." The experimenter, a somewhat stern man in a gray lab coat, takes the learner to a nearby room, straps him into a chair, attaches an electrode to his wrist, and tells him that when he makes an error on the test, he'll get a shock from the teacher.

The experimenter takes you to a larger room and seats you in front of a shock generator, with 30 switches marked from 15 volts (*slight shock*) to 450 volts (*danger—severe shock*). He tells you to pull a switch, increasing the intensity of shock each time, for every wrong answer the learner gives. If you demur, he tells you firmly that the experiment requires that you continue. How far would you go?

Would you back out of the experiment when the learner groans?

Would you stop when the learner screams in pain and implores you to quit?

Would you stop when the learner lets out a final anguished cry, followed by unbroken silence?

Stanley Milgram's 1963 experiment was not, of course, a test of memory but of obedience to authority. Milgram wanted to find out what happens when the demands of authority conflict with conscience. Most of his students and colleagues thought that conscience would win easily. Instead, Milgram found that most people agonize, suffer, rationalize—and obey the authority all the way. Almost two thirds of Milgram's subjects administered the highest levels of shock, even when they thought the victim might be injured or dead.

"I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident," wrote Milgram. "Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse . . . And yet he obeyed to the end."

Psychologists and the public greeted Milgram's experiment with uproar and outrage. "Of course everyone would obey a scientist at Yale," they said. "Yaleness is next to Godliness in respectability." So Milgram and Co. set up shop as the Research Associates of Bridgeport, in a run-down commercial building. This time, a mere 48 percent of the subject-teachers obeyed to the bloody end.

Other critics argued that the experiment was unforgivably unethical. Diana Baumrind harshly criticized it in *The American Psychologist* (1964), maintaining that Milgram had treated his subjects coldly and cruelly, risking their emotional health and causing them a loss of dignity, self-esteem, and trust in rational authority. She doubted that any debriefing procedure could reassure that shattered businessman. She questioned whether that obedience could be studied meaningfully in a laboratory; even if it could, no experiment, for whatever lofty reasons, was worth jeopardizing the well-being of its subjects.

Martin T. Orne and Charles H. Holland argued that far from being upset, the subjects simply were not taken in by the elaborate deception. The subjects, they said, trusted that no scientist would risk hurting a participant in his own study. Ergo, the victim was not hurt. Ergo, there was no harm in obeying. To study this problem realistically, wrote Orne and Holland, the subjects would have to be in an experiment that they did not recognize as such.

Milgram responded quickly. Every precaution was taken, he said, in debriefing the subjects, who had a "friendly reconciliation" with the victim and who saw that he had actually not been shocked. The experimenter discussed the study with defiant subjects so as to support their decision to disobey; he assured obedient subjects that their behavior was entirely normal and that other participants had shared their conflicts. Milgram later sent a follow-up questionnaire to all subjects to pick up afterthoughts and adjustment problems. Almost everyone said that the experiment had been worthwhile; only one percent were sorry that they had participated. Whether they felt this way or were rationalizing, Milgram won't guess.

To Orne and Holland, Milgram supplied data from direct observation, interviews, and questionnaires to argue that subjects

Tavris: Let's back up a moment if we may. How did you get into the field of psychology?

Milgram: My boyhood interests were scientific. I edited the high-school science magazine, and my first article in 1949 was on the effects of radiation on the incidence of leukemia in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors. I was always doing experiments; it was as natural as breathing, and I tried to understand how everything worked.

I fell away from science in college to pursue courses in political philosophy, music and art. But I finally came to the realization that although I was interested in the questions raised by Plato, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, I was unwilling to accept their mode of arriving at answers. I was interested in human questions that could be answered by objective methods. In the '50s the Ford Foundation had a program to move people into the behavioral sciences. It seemed like a perfect opportunity, and I shifted into social psychology at the Department of Social Relations at Harvard. Men of uncommon wisdom ran things at the time, and created a climate in which ideas and excellence found ready support and encouragement.

Tavris: Who were your most important influences at Harvard?

Milgram: Gordon Allport was my long-time mentor and friend. He was a modest man with a pink face; you felt an intense loving quality about him. Since I wasn't interested in personality theory, he did not provide a specific intellectual input, but he gave me a strong sense of my own potential. Allport was my spiritual and emotional support. He cared for people deeply.

Tavris: If Gordon Allport was your spiritual adviser, who was your most important intellectual influence as a student?

Milgram: Solomon Asch, a brilliant, creative man, who possessed great philosophic depth. He is certainly the most impressive social psychologist I have known. I was his teaching assistant when he visited Harvard, and later worked for him at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. He was always very independent. I recall the day when the U.S. launched a successful space probe, after some early failures. The scientists at the Institute were visibly excited—as I was—at the prospects for space exploration. But Asch was uniquely calm, pointing out that we had enough problems on earth to solve, and he questioned the wisdom of deflecting attention to space. Of course there was enormous prescience in that view, but it wasn't recognized at the time.

Tavris: What about Henry Murray?

Milgram: A highly original man who

did indeed accept the experiment at face value. Not one person suspected the deception.

Baumrind and other critics, Milgram believes, were simply uncomfortable with the fact that so many subjects obeyed; they assumed that the experimenter *made* the subjects obey. "This conception is alien to my view. A concern with human dignity is based on a respect for a man's potential to act morally. I started with the belief that every person who came to the laboratory was free to accept or to reject the dictates of authority."

The scientific establishment was ambivalent about the value of Milgram's work. In the same year, 1965, that Milgram was defending his experiment to his critics in The American Psychological Association, he was awarded the annual sociopsychological prize of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Milgram's recent book, *Obedience to Authority* (Harper & Row), puts together 10 years of research on the basic theme, exploring the conditions that elicit the greatest degree of obedience and the least. For example:

- Obedience decreases when the victim is in the same room as the teacher, and decreases further when the teacher must touch the victim directly to administer the shock. The modern state, of course, is designed for impersonality, where switches can be pulled and bombs dropped without anyone ever seeing the victim.
- Obedience drops sharply when the experimenter is absent. To commit acts they would otherwise consider immoral, people must have authority beside them.
- Obedience drops when the subject is in a group of rebellious peers. Rebels awaken the subject to the possibility of disobedience and, in this case, to its benign results. The group offers social support for the decision to disobey.
- By contrast, obedience increases when the subject is merely an accessory to the crime, when he does not have to pull the shock lever himself. In this case, 37 subjects out of 40 stay in the experiment to the end.

Milgram's research sharply contradicts the view that only sadistic or aggressive individuals will inflict pain on innocent others. He has studied over 1,000 people from all walks of life: skilled and unskilled workers, white-collar workers, professionals, housewives. "The most fundamental lesson of this study," he concludes, "is that ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible, destructive process."

To rule out the sadism hypothesis, Milgram gave his subjects the opportunity to select the shock level themselves. Only two out of 40 inflicted shock at the danger level; almost all of the rest went no further than the victim's first indication of discomfort. Nor would people obey anyone but the authority.

Milgram explains obedience as a consequence of the hierarchical structure of authority. A person continues to obey for two reasons. First, a set of "binding factors" locks him into the situation: politeness, his promise to help the experimenter, the awkwardness of getting out. Second, the person undergoes adjustments in his thinking that reduce conflict in favor of obedience. He may become so absorbed in the minutiae of the experiment that he loses sight of its overall significance; he concentrates so closely on the switches that he does not hear the screams. He divests himself of all responsibility and places it on the experimenter. Others justify their behavior by criticizing the victim: "He was so stupid and stubborn he deserved to be shocked."

The obedience experiment has been replicated all over the world, including Australia, Germany, South Africa, Italy. Many variations remain untested. No one has yet put women in the role of experimenter-authority, for example, although female *subjects* are as likely to obey as males. "I hate to make these predictions," says Milgram, "but I am not sure it would make much difference to put women in authority. Women bosses are just bosses like everyone else."

Nor has anyone varied the nature of the authority; in all cases the experimenter has represented science. Whether people would be as likely to obey religious, military, political, or academic authorities as they used to is unclear.

Milgram himself, I gathered, is tired of the obedience work. He is bored with defending its ethics and explaining its implications. He leaves further exploration to other researchers. He has contributed a brilliant, controversial paradigm to his field and now seeks another that will set social psychology on its ear. He's sure he will find it.

—Carol Tavris

Obedience to Authority is a selection of the Psychology Today Book Club.

abhorred unnecessary academic rules and regulations. But my most indelible memory of him concerns a song. In my early 20s I wrote songs as a hobby. I wrote a song for Murray that he claims got him a psychology building. They had torn down the historic old psychological clinic on Plimpton Street, and naturally everyone connected with it was very sad. Murray wanted me to write a song about it for a big dinner with President Nathan M. Pusey. At first I said no, since I was up to my ears in work. But the song more or less spontaneously materialized. After I gave Murray the song, I went off to Europe to collect data for my thesis. I didn't even turn in the paper I owed him for his course. So it was two years before I knew what had happened with the song.

Tavris: Which was . . .

Milgram: I went to find Murray to give him that long overdue paper. I was feeling enormously contrite, but the first thing he said to me was: "Stanley Milgram! You should have seen how well it went over! It was because of your song that we got this building, you know!" My song was more important to him than the late paper.

Harvard was full of lively souls like Henry Murray; some are still there. Roger Brown was a brilliant assistant professor 20 years ago and remains an inspiring scholar; Jerome Bruner was a vital and dynamic force, though he's now settled at Oxford.

Tavris: What would you say are the ingredients that make for a creative social psychologist?

Milgram: It's complicated. On the one hand, he needs to be detached and objective. On the other hand, he will never discover anything if he lacks feeling for the pulse and emotionality of social life. You know, social life is a nexus of emotional attachments that constrain, guide and support the individual. To understand why people behave as they do you have to be aware of the feelings aroused in everyday social situations.

Tavris: And beyond that?

Milgram: Out of your perception of such feelings, insights may arise. They may take the form of explicit principles of social behavior. But, more often, they express themselves in symbolic form, and the experiment is the symbol. I mean, just as a playwright's understanding of the human situation reveals itself in his own mind in dramaturgical form, so for the creative investigator, intuition translates directly into an experimental format that permits him both to express his intuition and critically examine it.

Tavris: Are there any ideas you had

"Despite the extreme emotion in the encounter, onlookers conspicuously avoided involvement."

that you now especially wish you had carried out?

Milgram: Only one, really. The idea started in the summer of 1960, when some friends and I decided to improvise some street-theater scenes. We stopped at restaurants along the Massachusetts Turnpike, and enacted common human situations: irate wife discovers her husband with another woman and rages at him in an incomprehensible mock-foreign language. What impressed me was that despite the extreme emotion in the encounter, onlookers conspicuously avoided involvement, even when the husband shook and slapped his "wife" in retaliation.

When I returned to my room at Harvard, I reviewed the reaction of the patrons, and wrote out a set of experiments in which the subjects were to be exposed to people who needed help. Subjects would sit in a waiting room; through a closed door they overhear an argument between a man and a woman; the man would become increasingly aggressive, in gradual steps, and finally the woman would cry out for help. I planned to study when people would intervene, and under what conditions. I designed a timer into the connecting door, so I'd know exactly how long people delayed before helping.

Tavris: The bystander problem.

Milgram: Yes, although then I called it the problem of "social intrusion." A month after sketching out those experiments, I began to teach at Yale and work on the obedience experiments. I didn't have time to study social intrusion too, but once a year I issued to each class a solemn prophesy that if they worked on the bystander problem they would be making an important contribution to social psychology. Every year highly intelligent graduate students would listen with interest, and every year they would go off and study attitude change, which was fashionable at Yale then.

Tavris: When did they begin to see the error of their ways?

Milgram: With the Kitty Genovese murder, and the 38 silent witnesses. The matter attracted nationwide interest and finally social scientists attempted experimental formulations of the problem. My graduate students carried out an unpublished field study in which a supposed drunk abused a woman in a laundromat. She called for help, and the question was how long it would be before she got it. The class found the experiment fascinating. But the *Zietgeist* was about to catch up with us. Soon many other studies of this sort were being carried out. The best work was done by Bibb Latané and John M. Darley, then at Columbia and New York University. They chose the right variables, related them to the Genovese case, applied technical ingenuity, and reported their work in clear English. Appropriately, they won the AAAS prize [see "When Will People Help in a Crisis?" PT, December 1968]. And the field of bystander research is still blooming.

Tavris: How did that make you feel?

Milgram: The only satisfactions I derived from all this were of two sorts: first, what I regarded as a highly important sociopsychological question was now coming under examination; and second, a kind of prophetic function was fulfilled by my own experimental analysis of this type of situation, an analysis that preceded the Kitty Genovese case by three years, yet prophesied it in many ways.

The common view is that social psychologists derive their experiments from life, and there is an important measure of truth in this. But it's also true that events, such as the Genovese case, are the inevitable unfolding of forces that experimental analysis will frequently pinpoint first. Underlying the silly incident in the restaurant was an important principle of social behavior; by focusing on that latent

principle, and extending it through to a concrete dramatized experiment, one could foresee certain inevitable results of such a principle. The Genovese case was merely one publicized expression of that principle. So analysis, combined with a certain imagined dramatic extension, will often prefigure events by years and decades.

Tavris: You generate a lot of ideas. What happens to them?

Milgram: Some of these ideas are realized; others filter into the atmosphere and they stimulate others to carry them out. Some are expressed through students. Some just fade. But Leo Szilard was certainly right when he said it is not the ideas you have, but those you act on that determine your character as a scientist. Every imaginative scientist dies with a host of good ideas that never make it into print.

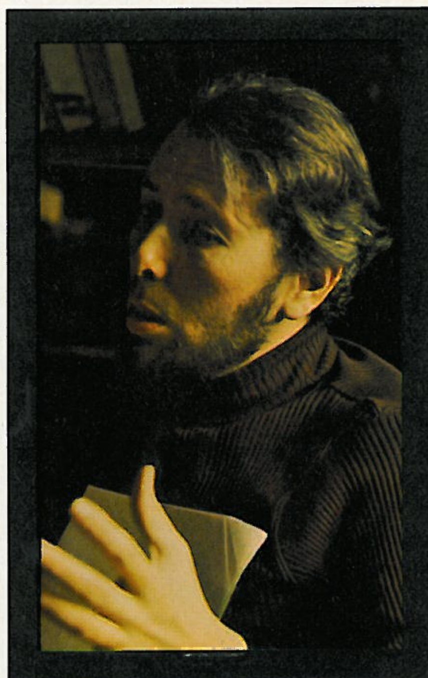
Tavris: How did you come up with the idea for the obedience experiment?

Milgram: I was trying to think of a way to make Asch's conformity experiment more humanly significant. I was dissatisfied that the test of conformity was judgments about *lines*. I wondered whether groups could pressure a person into performing an act whose human import was more readily apparent, perhaps behaving aggressively toward another person, say by administering increasingly severe shocks to him. But to study the group effect you would also need an experimental control; you'd have to know how the subject performed without any group pressure. At that instant, my thought shifted, zeroing in on this experimental control. Just how far *would* a person go under the experimenter's orders? It was an incandescent moment, the fusion of a general idea on obedience with a specific technical procedure. Within a few minutes, dozens of ideas on relevant variables emerged, and the only problem was to get them all down on paper.

But many years after I had completed the obedience experiments, I realized that my concerns about submission to authority had been incubating since I was a first-year graduate student.

Tavris: How so?

Milgram: For one, the central issues were symbolically expressed in a story I had concocted. Briefly, the story was about two men who agreed to accompany a clerk into an old shabby office. One of the men was informed by the clerk that his death had been scheduled for that day, and that he had a choice of two possible methods of execution. The man immediately objected that neither method was suitable in his case, and after a lot of bickering, persuaded the clerk to execute him more humanely. And he was done in.



"American democracy also has instituted policies that were severe and inhumane."

The second person, however, who was also brought into this bizarre situation, had quietly left the room. Nothing happened to him. When the clerk noticed he had gone, he simply closed the office, glad he could quit work early that day.

The story was quite macabre, but gave me insight into certain extraordinary features of social behavior. And it contains many of the elements that later appear in the obedience experiment, in particular the way the man accepted the alternatives that were presented to him. He failed to question the legitimacy of the entire context; he became preoccupied with choices as defined by the clerk and not with the larger issue of whether he should be there at all. He forgot that he could simply leave, as his friend did.

In just this way, our experimental subjects would temporize or get too technical or worry about details, trying to find the formula that would end their conflict. They did not see the larger framework of the situation, and consequently they couldn't see how to break out of it. The ability to see the larger context is precisely what we need to liberate ourselves.

Tavris: What then is the solution to the problem of the good man who is "only following orders?"

Milgram: The first thing to realize is that there are no easy solutions. In order to have civilization you must have some degree of authority. Once that authority is established, it doesn't matter much whether the system is called a democracy or a dictatorship: the common man responds to governmental policies with expected obedience, whether in Nazi Germany or democratic America.

Tavris: Then you do not think there is much variation in the extent of obedience that governments demand, or rather in the extent of disobedience they tolerate?

Milgram: Every society must have a structure of authority but this doesn't mean that the range of freedom is the same in every country. And of course it is true that Germany's destruction of millions of innocent men, women and children in concentration camps demonstrated the worst excess of obedience we've seen. But American democracy also has instituted policies that were severe and inhumane: the destruction of American Indians, the enslavement of blacks, the incarceration of the Japanese during the Second World War, Vietnam. There are always people who obey, who carry out the policies. When authority goes awry, individuals do not seem to have enough resources to put on the brakes.

But the problem is complicated. Individual standards of conscience are themselves generated from a matrix of authority relationships. Morality, as well as blind obedience, comes from authority. For every person who performs an immoral act on account of authority there is another who is restrained from doing so.

Tavris: Then how do we guard against authority's excesses?

Milgram: First, we need to be aware of the problem of indiscriminate submission to authority. And I have tried to foster that awareness with my work. It is a first step. Second, since we know men will comply, even with the most malevolent authorities, we have a special obligation to place in positions of authority those most likely to be humane and wise. But there is a long-range source of hope, too. People are inventive, and the variety of political forms we have seen in the last 5,000 years does not exhaust all possibilities. Perhaps the challenge is to invent the political structure that will give conscience a better chance against errant authority. ■

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