



## Contra Milgram

A Review of

*Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments*

by Gina Perry

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Reviewed by

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The half century since Stanley Milgram conducted his experiments on obedience to authority has seen publication of more than a half dozen books, plus hundreds of book chapters, journal articles, and audiovisual presentations describing, analyzing, or debating Milgram and his work. Why has another author now seen fit to write yet another book on the topic?

For *Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments*, Gina Perry, an Australian journalist and educator, has closely examined an assortment of archival materials concerning the Milgram obedience studies and has interviewed various individuals who were involved with those studies. She has also developed a distinctive slant on Milgram and his research, as indicated in her chosen subtitle by the word *notorious*. The Milgram studies and their author can fairly be described as famous or familiar or controversial—but “notorious”?

Milgram himself wrote a lengthy book (1974) and several articles on obedience, and he made a widely shown film about his research. He was also conscientious in keeping detailed records of his research subjects’ behavior (including tape recordings of every experimental session), as well as his own informal but extensive notes about the research. After his death from a heart attack at age 51, his widow deposited all his research files in the Yale University Archives. Perry should be grateful that he left behind so much unpublished data—enough for her to write a whole book without running any experiments herself. She would have performed a greater service to social psychology, and to all of us who want to understand obedience better, if she had carefully analyzed Milgram’s leftover data and perhaps collected some behavioral data herself. Instead she uses his previously unpublished data mainly to engage in Milgram bashing.

Freud bashing, which established the meaning of the word *bashing* as it is used here, has been going on for a century or so. It involves not just critiques of Freud’s data and ideas, but finding fault with nearly every item of Freudiana a writer chooses to discuss—as well as

attacks on Freud himself, personally and speculatively. Perry does likewise with Milgram through much of her book.

The result is a sensational treatment of her topic, evidently aimed mainly at a nonscholarly audience, rather than a scholarly and reasonably even-handed treatment either of Milgram personally or of his work. Throughout the book Perry seldom misses an opportunity to characterize Milgram negatively or to condemn various aspects of his research. Perry often speculates about Milgram's inner state at one time or another during his research. Sometimes she is able to quote from his private but archived notes; much more often she appears to be just guessing or substantially overstating what he wrote about his thinking. For instance, she asserts, "Milgram seems never to have doubted the meaning of his results; he knew early on that he had found Nazis in New Haven" (p. 208). Moreover, she says, he displayed a "desire to portray his subjects as Nazis in his writings" (p. 226). Milgram did, indeed, compare the behavior of some of his subjects with the behavior of some German Nazis, such as Adolf Eichmann. But as far as I know, he never came close to the conclusion that there were Nazis in New Haven.

Much of the book is devoted to a discussion of experimental ethics. At times Perry's critique of Milgram's ethics may be valid. But her tone is usually very personal and highly speculative, and she gives little consideration to the other side of the ethical balance: that is, what does Milgram teach us about how to understand the evil in the world? Perry raises ethical issues mainly to condemn Milgram's treatment of his research participants. She never truly engages in a serious discussion of the ethical complexities that Milgram himself addressed on several occasions in print (e.g., Milgram, 1964) or that have been discussed extensively by other researchers and ethicists ever since (see, e.g., Elms, 1982). She tends to view such issues mainly as a matter of empathy toward the suffering participants in the research—empathy that she sees Milgram and his supporters as lacking—and gives little if any weight to all the sufferers who have historically been injured or killed by individuals who obeyed malevolent authority figures.

Sophisticated discussion of research ethics generally weighs the conflicting values in a given situation. Perry seems to see one set of values, her own, as so obviously superior that she makes little reference to other possibilities. At times she appears to frame her values mainly in terms of women's spontaneous emotional responses, as when she notes that Diana Baumrind (1964), the most prominent critic of Milgram's research ethics, was inspired by her (female) typist's distress at serving as a participant in another psychological experiment. Perry does not directly address her apparent assumption that women react negatively to the Milgram research because they are more empathic or more caring than is an ambitious and hard-nosed male researcher such as Milgram. She also gives him little credit for exhibiting more care about his participants' well-being than most other experimental social psychologists appeared to display at the time.

Most significantly, Perry displays a misunderstanding of Milgram's intent with regard to certain central aspects of his research design. She often depicts him as seeking ways to increase the levels of obedience in various research conditions, whereas in fact many of his variations in scripts and procedures were introduced to reduce levels of obedience: the learner's claims to have a heart condition, the increasing physical closeness of learner to teacher from one condition to the next in the "proximity" series, the replication in a Bridgeport storefront office building rather than on the Yale campus, and so forth. In so doing, Perry largely fails to discuss (or misleadingly discusses) Milgram's emphasis on

situational variables rather than on absolute levels of obedience. She may disagree with that emphasis, but by largely ignoring it, she also ignores many of the findings that, according to Milgram and others, may help us to understand truly notorious behavior during the Nazi Holocaust, the My Lai massacre, Abu Ghraib, and more recent acts of destructive obedience.

Perry has not only delved into Milgram's archives at Yale University but also has interviewed a small number of the participants in the experiments, as well as various people who worked for Milgram or who knew him personally in other contexts. Perry places a lot of weight on the recollections of the several research subjects she managed to find, concerning the feelings and experiences they recalled from more than 40 years earlier. She discounts or ignores the likelihood of their misremembering over time, especially the likelihood that they may have made defensive errors in recall as a way to protect their self-esteem.

For most of the participants she interviewed, Perry also does not indicate how she located them. One might wonder whether those who remained especially angry about their treatment in the obedience situation also remained "noisier" about having participated than those who were comfortable about their participation—and were thus easier to locate, through their letters to newspaper editors or by other means. (Perry also seems more confident than I would be that all the "participants" she interviewed had actually participated in the Milgram studies. In certain instances their "memories" were mainly of details already widely publicized and thus perhaps borrowed from the public records, whereas certain other aspects of their "memories" were wrong in ways that simple memory degradation or defensive misremembering would appear unlikely to explain. Claiming the status of being one of the original Milgram participants could be very tempting for some people—rather like claiming to have been a war hero.)

Perry makes a number of factual errors, some smaller and some larger, about Milgram or about how his research was conducted. For instance, in her accounts of when and to what degree participants were "debriefed" or "dehoaxed" about various aspects of the deceptions involved in the research, she occasionally is confused about the timing of limited versus substantial disclosure, as well as about the information offered to participants during various stages of disclosure. Her discussion of how Milgram's colleagues at Yale and later at Harvard reacted to his obedience research considerably exaggerates the incidence of their negative responses and says very little about their positive responses.

As with many other sections of her book, Perry speculates or exaggerates when she does not have sufficient information on other faculty members' feelings about Milgram and his research, and she consistently takes a negative position toward Milgram even when she appears to have little or no factual basis for doing so. Apparently only one of Milgram's Yale colleagues, most likely a rival assistant professor, actively disapproved of his research to the extent of complaining to the American Psychological Association (APA). That complaint led to the postponement of Milgram's application for membership in APA, but after an investigation, the issue was eventually resolved in his favor and his membership was approved. (See Blass, 2004, pp. 112–113.) Several of Yale's most distinguished psychologists at that time went on record as supporting Milgram and his ethical procedures. After Milgram moved to Harvard, Harvard denied him tenure, but the tenure process was in part politicized for reasons other than Milgram's own qualities, and again several distinguished faculty members were largely supportive of Milgram. (See Blass, 2004, pp. 152–154.)

Perry devotes considerable space to Steven Marcus's negative *New York Times* review of Milgram's obedience book, although Marcus was not a psychologist but an English professor who used the occasion to express his hostility toward the social sciences in general. Perry barely mentions a response to that review by Roger Brown, perhaps Harvard's most respected social psychologist at the time, that was very supportive of Milgram's work. Numerous colleagues went on record as agreeing with Brown about Milgram. Throughout the research and writing for her book, Perry appears to have made considerable efforts to locate and describe the views of Milgram's critics, while giving limited attention to the views of Milgram's advocates (and then mainly to those whose views would most obviously be missing if she failed to report them).

Perry has displayed considerable initiative in her efforts to locate and interview a few surviving participants from the obedience research after a lapse of a half century, and some of these interviews are well worth preserving. Likewise her interviews with Milgram's coworkers, research staff, and students may be of general interest and are unlikely to be duplicated by others, given the passage of time since the obedience research was completed. She has identified some interesting material in Milgram's archives that was given little attention by Milgram himself or later by others. But her discussion of this material would have been stronger had she reduced or omitted speculations about why Milgram did not include this supposedly "secret" material in his own publications. And her account of the history of experimental social psychology depends too heavily on a few secondary accounts by radical or postmodernist critics of the field.

Full disclosure: I was Stanley Milgram's graduate research assistant for the first three months of the obedience studies. Several months later, I interviewed 40 of the original subjects about their reactions to the research and gave them various personality questionnaires (Elms & Milgram, 1966). Gina Perry later interviewed me on two occasions about my involvement in the obedience research (pp. 74–77, 83–84). Our interactions during these interviews were pleasant; she described me reasonably accurately in her book as having "become the spokesperson for the obedience experiments" since Milgram's death (p. 74). However, as she also noted, I did not fully identify with that role: "Alan told me that one reason he got out of social psychology [to do psychobiography instead] was because he 'didn't like having to mislead people in order to do an experiment.' I liked him for that" (p. 84).

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