Laboratory Theater Masquerading as Scientific Truth

A Review of

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

by Gina Perry


$26.95

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0035932

Reviewed by

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Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiment is the most famous study in the history of American psychology. Although the study is 50 years old, it remains an often-cited "explanation" of situations in which seemingly good people do bad things at the behest of an authority figure (e.g., Zimbardo, 2007). With compelling video footage and a detailed book to back up its central claims, the experiment’s status as “the truth” is seldom contested.

In her exhaustively researched and engagingly written book *Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments*, Gina Perry questions whether the obedience experiment is the great “revelation” into human nature that it is claimed to be. She brings a refreshingly critical spirit to a study that is usually treated with reverential deference (e.g., Blass, 2004; Miller, 2009). In daring to question the ethics and intellectual significance of the obedience study, Perry has infuriated many Milgram enthusiasts who point to various “replications” of the obedience study as “proof” of its veracity (e.g., Tavris, 2013). However, this emphasis on defending the apparent reliability of the obedience study misses the broader point of Perry’s book.

The idea that it may still be possible to use the authority of a psychology laboratory to trick people into doing extreme things is not the central issue. The most pressing question that Perry raises is not one of reliability (although she does problematize this, too) but validity: Do Milgram’s carefully staged exhibitions of laboratory manipulation mean anything outside of themselves? Does the manipulation of unsuspecting people confirm anything other than the commonplace observation that authority figures can betray public trust, take advantage of people’s unfamiliarity with a given context, and trick them into doing something they wouldn’t typically do?

We all know that an unscrupulous doctor can trick patients into taking dangerous medications and that a dishonest banker can trick investors into giving away their money. None of this is news, but, as Perry shows, because Milgram carried out his dishonesty and...
manipulation in a psychology laboratory, he was able to convince many people that his elaborate con was something deep and profound.

So what did Milgram actually do? He brought a large number of unsuspecting people into the laboratory, lied to them about the purpose of the study (he told them that the study was benign), and then lied again about what was happening (participants who were reluctant to give shocks were assured that everything was okay and that the “learner” was not being physically harmed). Participants who were foolish enough to take the experimenter at his word and act in good faith were considered by Milgram to be the moral equivalent of Nazis. Apart from the ethical dubiousness of all this, using a psychology laboratory to trick people into doing something extreme is a world away from what Milgram claimed to be explaining—the Holocaust. Nazi killers were not tricked into mass murder; they knew exactly what they were doing and why they were doing it. Many of them were happy to do so (Goldhagen, 1996).

Questioning a study of such cultural and disciplinary prominence is no small task, and Perry clearly grasps the magnitude of the challenge. She tracked down and interviewed many people connected to the study—subjects, colleagues of Milgram, members of Milgram’s research team, and family members of those involved (both participants and researchers). She also undertook a close reading of Milgram’s papers and correspondence in the Yale University Archives, picking up a number of crucial details damaging to the obedience study’s legitimacy that had been missed by Milgram’s “official” biographer (Blass, 2004). Finally, Perry drew effectively on a growing body of critical scholarship that has challenged the ethics and validity of the obedience study (Brannigan, 1997; Cherry, 1995; Fermaglich, 2006; Gibson, 2013; Nicholson, 2011a; Parker, 2000; Stam, Lubek, & Radtke, 1998).

Some aspects of Perry’s critique will be familiar to readers with knowledge of the ethical controversy that has surrounded the obedience study since its initial publication in 1963. Diana Baumrind (1964) famously took Milgram to task in American Psychologist, criticizing the study for its cavalier treatment of participants and its dubious assumption that being victimized by a laboratory con is somehow comparable to willful participation in mass murder. Perry’s work may be read as a kind of book-length version of Baumrind, greatly enhanced by a wealth of archival and interview material previously unavailable. This new material makes for very revealing and at times disquieting reading, essentially confirming that Baumrind had it right all along.

Perry powerfully amplifies Baumrind’s concerns about the abuse that Milgram inflicted on his participants. She does so by allowing participants to speak. In Milgram’s version of the study, participants are seldom heard from and then only to confirm the fundamentally benign gloss that he wanted to place on the study. One of the great strengths of Behind the Shock Machine is that readers get to experience the experiment from the subject’s point of view. What emerges from the many quotes that Perry provides is a clear message of innocent people suffering in the name of psychology and in the service of the career ambitions of a young, untenured assistant professor. Readers see participants being repeatedly lied to and bullied into continuing—an experience that one participant characterized as “the most unpleasant night of my life” (p. 80).

The graphic, first-person accounts are fascinating, and they enhance the understanding of the psychologically brutal nature of the study as characterized by Milgram himself. In the initial presentation of the study, Milgram actually boasted of the torturous character of the
experiment “in the moment,” noting that he had produced stress reactions among his participants that “reached extremes rarely seen in sociopsychological laboratory studies” (Milgram, 1963, p. 375). Perry’s research makes it clear that Milgram was not exaggerating in this respect, but what makes these accounts of experimental anguish surprising is her revelation that—contrary to Milgram’s claim—many participants were not debriefed at the end of the experiment. In point of fact, the majority (approximately 600) of the participants were sent home without being told that the entire proceeding was essentially an elaborate, scientifically sanctioned con (p. 79).

This revelation raises questions about Milgram’s often-cited claim that participants suffered no long-term ill effects as a consequence of their participation. Perry quotes numerous participants who described anxiety, nightmares, inability to sleep, and shaking that left some of them unable to drive in the immediate aftermath of the experiment:

“He was shivering,” reported the wife of one of the participants. “I was parked out in front—it wasn’t cold—and I thought. What in the world are they doing in there? And he came out and I said, ‘Well, what was it like?’ I said, ‘You want me to drive, was it that bad?’” (p. 81)

The numerous quotes from participants describing their postexperimental anguish are at odds with Milgram’s claim that the indiscriminate application of extreme stress techniques was a benign exercise in self-discovery. “I don’t think I had ever felt so upset and disturbed” remarked another subject. “I didn’t know experiments like this actually went on—it seemed like a nightmare or a science-fiction movie” (p. 114).

Perry’s indignation with Milgram’s engineered torment is put on clear display, and it builds over the course of the narrative. Some reviewers, schooled on the “heroic” received version of the study, have taken her to task for this, characterizing Perry as “angry” and concluding that her indignation undermines the validity of her conclusions (Tavris, 2013). Perry does bring much more of herself into the discussion than is customary in works on the history of the human sciences, and in places some readers may find some of the personal details of her journey as a researcher distracting.

That having been said, Perry’s indignation in the face of Milgram’s mistreatment of innocent people is not out of proportion with the archival and interview data that she presents. Indeed, the chronicle of lies, manipulation, and anguish that Perry documents makes one pause at the capacity of any psychologist not to feel anger in the face of such wholesale abuse. There is something very disquieting in the obvious delight that some of Milgram’s defenders take in the study and the calm, almost-casual way that they gloss over the anguish that he deliberately engineered and that Perry exhaustively documents. It may be that the desire for intellectual grandeur and importance that the study speaks to—psychology’s very own “explanation” for the Holocaust and other acts of “evil”—has left many in the field curiously immune to the feelings of moral indignation that usually arise when one is confronted by a sordid display of bullying, dishonesty, and suffering.

Of course, many psychologists have recoiled at the abuse that Milgram subjected his participants to, although concluding that the study still has value and deserves its celebrity. As psychologist Don Mixon has noted, “Most people, even atheists, believe it is good for us to be reminded of our sinful nature” (as quoted by Perry, p. 63). The question that Perry’s research poses is whether Milgram’s scientific theater was a suitable vehicle (ethically or
intellectually) for conveying this lesson. In light of Perry’s research and related critical scholarship, I have come to believe that the study was a poor guide to the dynamics of destructive obedience and that the discipline is ill served by its ongoing lionization of a now-50-year-old experiment (Nicholson, 2011b).

Apart from its cavalier abuse of innocent people, I dislike the “study” because it depended on lies and ambiguity for its effects and because it obfuscated the historical and sociological context that drives torture and mass murder in the real world. Milgram-style trickery individualizes what is a social phenomenon, and it misrepresents “murderous” behavior, turning it into a psychological conflict when in contrast it is often done willingly and sometimes enthusiastically (Kuhne, 2008).

Ironically, Milgram himself was very much aware of these ethical and intellectual shortcomings. As Perry notes, before he became caught up in his own celebrity, Milgram wrote very insightfully about the ethical dubiousness and scientific emptiness of his own research. In one of his early notebooks about the experiments, he admitted that the primary motivation for all the torment he inflicted on others was personal ambition rather than humanitarian concern (see p. 90). He also questioned the intellectual value of the obedience research. Was it “significant science” or merely “effective theater” (p. 282)?

Remarkably, given his subsequent grandiose generalizations to the Holocaust and the Vietnam War, Milgram concluded that he was “inclined to accept” (p. 282) the view of the obedience study as a theatrical performance rather than a scientific finding. “The drawing power of the experiments stems in part from their artistic, non-scientific component” (p. 283), he noted. “This makes them more interesting; it does not necessarily make them more valuable for a developing science of man” (Milgram, 1962, as cited by Perry, p. 283).

References


