

Stanley Milgram, PhD

Your Biography

You are Stanley Milgram, social psychologist. You were born August 15, 1933 to a family of Jewish immigrants from Germany who had settled in the Bronx and opened a bakery. By all accounts, you had a warm and untroubled childhood.

Your intelligence was spotted early in life and encouraged by your parents. In one legendary event, your experiments with your chemistry set brought the local fire department. You are most famous for your 'obedience' experiments starting in 1961 at Yale. These experiments sought to understand how normal people could do horrible things to others in the presence of an authority figure. Many people have drawn parallels between your experiments and the behavior of Nazi soldiers in the Holocaust, or even the actions of academics during the McCarthy era in the US. One biographer (Blass, 2004) has noted that your Bar Mitzvah speech was on the plight on European Jews under Hitler, and the McCarthy purges at Queens College occurred when you were enrolled.

After completing your undergraduate study in 1954, you applied to Harvard's Department of Social Relations, an interdisciplinary program that included social psychology, sociology, anthropology and clinical psychology. You were rejected. You persisted, however, taking summer classes in psychology. Eventually, they let you in provisionally. You were admitted to the full program after a year.

There you worked with Solomon Asch, who was investigating conformity to group thinking by testing whether a subject would give the wrong answer to a question if it agreed with the group of experimental confederates. For your dissertation, you extended this research by comparing Norwegians and French.

You moved to Yale in 1960, where you began designing your famous experiment. You submitted proposals to the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH) and the Office of Naval Research.

You moved back to Harvard to direct the Department of Social Relations in 1963, but left for CUNY in 1966. Your famous 'obedience' studies were conducted while you were at Yale. They have been the subject of great controversy, both from a scientific and ethical perspective. As a student, make sure you are confident in the experimental protocol as well as the results. See Milgram 1963 and 1965 for the primary source report.

You now chair the graduate program in social psychology at CUNY.

In 1967, you published the famous 'small world' study, in which you randomly selected individuals in Omaha, Nebraska and Wichita, Kansas, and asked them to try to deliver a packet of information to a target person in Boston, Mass. If they did not know the target personally, they should give the letter to someone who might be able to pass it on. Milgram then counted the number of contacts handled the packet in transit – the average was 5.5, giving us the common myth of 'six degrees of separation.'

Game Objectives

Get onto the research committee. While you have always had an interest in research ethics, the criticism of your experiments have made you develop something of an expertise in the APA standards (that means, of course, that you, as the student, need to develop an expertise with both Milgram's experimental design and the APA standards that are included in the gamebook).

You are neutral on **the issue of the definition of mental illness**.

Specific Assignments

If your class is larger than 16, you'll start as board-member-at-large for 1971.

Propose an experiment on campus testing the 'small world' problem in the campus environment in 1974. Present your results (or, if the experiment is not completed in time, or denied by the research committee, the results of Milgram's original 1967 experiment) to the conference.

Oppose the proposal (from Clark, 1975) to create an affirmative action plan for psychology and psychiatry, on the grounds that it is an unwarranted authoritarian intervention in personal matters. Milgram is quoted in Blass, 2004 (p. 201) as saying (in 1971):

“There is some sense of progress and movement at the Graduate Center. A big question, however, is whether intellectual standards or political pressures will prevail in the conduct of our program. Already, we have been asked to recruit faculty on a racial basis, and we make exceptions to our usual admission standards in assessing potential black students. If carried too far, this could have disastrous consequences for the quality of the program. Then I'll leave.”

Present a paper summarizing your study of obedience (1963 and 1965) also in 1974, to complement the symposium on the social responsibility of academics.

Must Read

Milgram, S. (1963) “Behavioral study of obedience.” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67, 371–378. Available at http://www.wadsworth.com/psychology_d/templates/student_resources/0155060678_rathus/ps/ps01.html with permission from Alexandra Milgram.

Milgram, S. (1965). “Some conditions of obedience and disobedience to authority” *Human Relations* 1965, 18(1), 57-76

Milgram, S. (1967). "The Small World Problem" *Psychology Today*, 2 p. 60 – 67

Travers, J. & Milgram, S. (1969). “An Experimental Study of the Small World Problem”, *Sociometry*, 32(4), p. 425-443 (available on Jstor)

Milgram, S. (1974), *Obedience to Authority; An Experimental View*

Milgram, S. (1974), "The Perils of Obedience", *Harper's Magazine* available at <http://home.swbell.net/revscat/perilsOfObedience.html>

Milgram, S., Liberty, H. J., Toledo, R. and Blacken J. (1956). Response to intrusion in waiting lines. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 51, 683-9.

Secondary Sources

Blass, T. (2004). *The Man Who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram*. [ISBN 0-7382-0399-8](#)

Raver, D. (2010) "Psychography: Stanley Milgram" available at <http://faculty.frostburg.edu/mbradley/psyography/stanleymilgram.html>