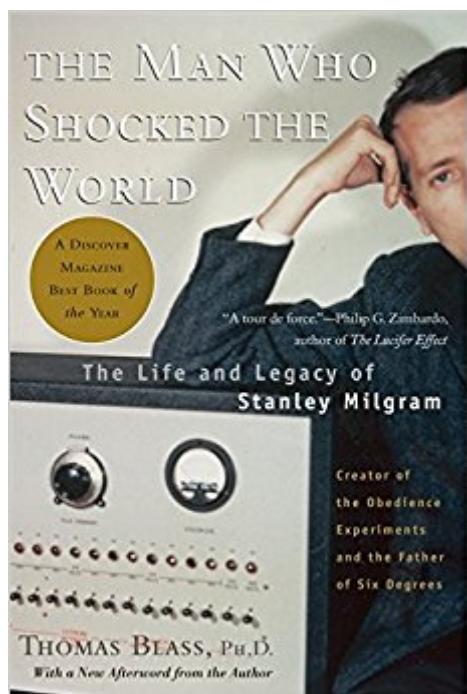


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The Man Who Shocked The World: The Life And Legacy Of Stanley Milgram



Synopsis

Creator of the famous Obedience Experiments and originator of the "six degrees of separation" theory, Stanley Milgram transformed our understanding of human nature and continues to be one of the most important figures in psychology and beyond. In this sparkling biography, Thomas Blass captures the colorful personality and pioneering work of a visionary scientist who revealed the hidden workings of our social world. In this new paperback edition, he includes an afterword connecting Milgram's theories to torture, war crimes, and Abu Ghraib.

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Customer Reviews

In the early 1960s, Stanley Milgram conducted a series of famous experiments proving that average citizens would readily inflict painful electric shocks on strangers if they were instructed or encouraged to do so by an authority figure. This biography by University of Maryland professor Blass provides a valuable examination of Milgram's work and his contributions to the field of social psychology. Blass discusses Milgram's education and career choices from the mid-1950s to the 1970s. He talks at length about the scientist's training and experiences at Queens College and at Harvard, and about his teaching and research appointments at universities such as Princeton, Yale and the City University of New York. He describes in great detail the controversial experiments Milgram devised and conducted over the years. And he considers how Milgram's research changed the way "we think about the role of moral principles in social life." Milgram's personal life, however, gets the short shrift in

thisnarration. References to the psychologist's use of cocaine, marijuanaand mescaline are brief and undeveloped; mentions of his wife, Sasha, and their children, Michele and Marc, seem somewhat perfunctory. Thisinattention to matters of personality may limit the book'saudience. But, as the first comprehensive biography of Milgram,Blass's study nonetheless remains an important contribution to thefield of science history. 8 pages of b&w photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

BBC Focus magazine "Milgram's notorious study forms the centrepiece of this outstanding biography" and rightly so, given its continued importance in understanding such horrors as the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. But as author Thomas Blass makes clear, Milgram pioneered other major areas of research, including the famous "Small World" effect. Blass does a fine job of weaving together Milgram's life and science, revealing a portrait of a genius who, ironically enough, had real problems with authority.

Students still read Milgram's famous obedience study with shock and denial. Each semester, my Introduction to Sociology students almost unanimously deny that they would be among the majority who obeyed to the point of killing someone. Their reactions are worth a study in themselves. Milgram's contribution to understanding human frailty cannot be overestimated. He shows us that we are not superior to those who torture and those who commit atrocities. As Hannah Arendt reminded us, evil is truly banal. This is a good book for what it shows us about the wizard behind the curtain and what it shows about ourselves.

So, here's a biography of one academic social psychologist by another one, and guess what? It's fascinating! Most of the credit has to go to the subject of this book, Stanley Milgram, who was without question the most famous social psychologist who ever trod the halls of academe. You may never have heard Milgram's name, but you've surely heard about at least two of his most famous experiments. One was the fiendishly clever experiment he devised to study the small-world phenomenon, more popularly known as "Six Degrees of Separation." His experiments yielded empirical evidence for the validity of that theory. However, the other, best known as Milgram's "obedience experiments," gets the lion's share of the attention in this biography. It was these experiments that were the primary sources of Milgram's fame -- and his notoriety. Milgram set out in

the early 1960s, barely out of graduate school, to determine the extent to which people picked at random would inflict pain on others simply because they were urged to do so by a credible authority figure. He subjected hundreds of New Haven residents to a laboratory protocol in which a man presented as a professor asked them to administer more and more powerful electric shocks to a person in an adjoining room, ostensibly in order to correct his "errors" in answering questions that were part of a learning regimen. To the astonishment of Milgram, his research assistants and staff, and virtually everyone he later shared his findings with, a staggeringly large proportion of otherwise seemingly sane, stable, even "nice" people followed instructions up to a level clearly labeled as dangerous. Less than 20 years after the end of World War II and the madness of the Nazi era, this revelation was beyond shocking. To most, it was mortifying, because it cast such an unfavorable light on human behavior in every country, not just Germany. And it helped make Stanley Milgram so controversial in his field that he was denied the chance to secure a permanent faculty post at Harvard or Yale, where he trained, or at any other of the country's most prestigious schools. The emphasis Blass places on the obedience experiments may well be justified from the perspective of a social psychologist, since Milgram's work in that area remains controversial to this day, alternately vilified and extolled as brilliant, and is still described in virtually every standard text in the field. Unfortunately, the author gives short shrift to Milgram's exploration of the small-world phenomenon, which may yet prove to have been far more significant from a broader perspective. The concept of "Six Degrees of Separation" has come to be understood as a fundamental property of all complex networks, from the Internet to atoms in a lattice to human society. Blass mentions this significance it what seems to be an afterthought, and his highly abbreviated description of Milgram's experimental design is far too cryptic to make much sense. In fact, Blass (or perhaps his publisher) betrays a fundamental lack of understanding of Milgram's role in the history of the small-world phenomenon by referring to Milgram in the book's subtitle as "the Father of Six Degrees." In fact, the obscure Hungarian playwright who first advanced the hypothesis on the stage in the late 1920s is no doubt restlessly turning over in his grave at the insult. The Man Who Shocked the World is fascinating not just because of the profound implications of Stanley Milgram's work but also because he was such a complex, colorful, and often brilliantly funny man. Interspersed among the descriptions of Milgram's relationships with his teachers and fellow faculty members, and the lengthy descriptions of so many of his experiments, are excerpts from his extensive correspondence with family and friends. Milgram was an endlessly good-humored writer with an exceedingly non-academic way with words, and Thomas Blass shares just enough of the man's writerly talents to make this book an outstanding read. (From Mal Warwick's Blog on Books)

I downloaded the book for my psychology class and received a lot of insights. It probably is today's standard on Milgram and his experiments. You will find todays textbooks reference this book. Good-luck with your endeavors.

Great book and awesome seller! Recommend!

I admire those who ask the hard questions. I admire those who don't fall into line with easy answers. I'm glad Stanley Milgram existed and did his groundbreaking work. I'm sorry he's not still alive to be doing more of it. I'd love to see his take on the current state of affairs in our country. I first learned of Milgram as a college student who was one of a group duplicating his experiment. I didn't shock anybody and argued with the "experimenter" as the task was being explained to me. And having read this book I still proudly wear my "Question Authority" button in honor of Milgram. The Blass book is an excellent read if you're willing to entertain some uncomfortable thoughts.

Great information

This book does start off well, and has some very interesting parts, especially in the first half, but starts to dry up a bit in the second half. If you really like psychology or history of science, it's still worth a read.

This is a thought-provoking and interesting biography; accessible to the lay reader. Although Thomas Blass the author admires Milgram's work, he discusses it and its critics even-handedly. He tries to present Milgram the man sympathetically, but is candid about his faults. I began reading this book with a very skeptical attitude toward Milgram and his famous experiments. Nowadays we are bombarded with the results of experimental research on human behavior conducted by psychologists, sociologists, economists, physiologists, anthropologists, and scholars from probably several other fields that I can't think of at the moment. Their results are fed to us by publicity-hungry professors, journalists, bloggers, political commentators, managers, HR directors, and motivational speakers. And all of them seem to cite Milgram--the grandaddy of them all. Occasionally Milgram himself even introduced his results first in popular magazines such as Scientific American and Psychology Today. The only difference is that now he might have run his subjects through an MRI to see which parts of their brains lit up as they pushed the buttons on the shock generator. If you

look at the mish-mash of brain research and behavioral experiments reported almost daily, you get the sense that there is no clear sense of what the overall picture looks like. It's all a giant jigsaw puzzle whose pieces are scattered on the floor. Some have assembled five or ten pieces and declared that the picture is of a born killer--or altruist--who may or may not be monogamous. Milgram's work suffered from a similar problem. Blass admits that Milgram was a weak theorist, and that the lack of a supporting theoretical model weakened his legacy. According to Blass it left his students no where to go. Still Milgram's work has inspired pop artists (Peter Gabriel) and influenced military training--which is more impact than much of current research has had.

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