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## Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments by Gina Perry

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**Perry, Gina. *Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments*. New York: The New Press, 2013. x + 339 pages. Paper, \$27.95.**

Many social scientists assume that we know the basic plot and findings of Milgram's infamous obedience experiment study. Milgram, a Yale University psychologist, found that when influenced by an authority figure, approximately sixty-five percent of study volunteers, or "teachers," ultimately delivered maximum voltage electric shocks to "learners" after incorrect responses to a series of word recall questions. In the experiment, the teacher, though out of sight, is able to hear the learner's complaints of a heart condition, outbursts of pain, then silence. However, unbeknownst to the teacher, the learner is a confederate, who received no actual shocks because the machine, memory tests, and punishment were a carefully scripted hoax. These obedience findings, we have been told and re-told, demonstrate our flawed human nature in respects to blind obedience and, ultimately, explain the behavior of Nazis like Adolf Eichmann.

In *Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments*, psychologist Gina Perry argues that this popular narrative about our obedience to authority has been foregrounded and reproduced by the media. Perry details an exhaustive list of popular representations of this scientific narrative across numerous films, plays, and even television shows such as *Law and Order* and *The Simpsons*. However, by piecing together many of Milgram's archival study materials, she reveals a more complicated and contradictory story that casts doubt over Milgram's research. First, she notes that Milgram and his team conducted some twenty-four variations of the above scenario between 1961 and 1962. From one condition to the next, Milgram altered the ways in which the authority figure, or "experimenter," influenced the teacher. He also varied the number of other learners or teachers (who were also confederates), the sequencing of the shock machine's thirty switches, the sex of the teacher, and the subject recruitment catchment area. For example, Milgram recruited all his study participants from New Haven, Connecticut, except for two groups from Bridgeport, Connecticut. Here, Perry unearths another experimental condition conducted with Bridgeport participants, which Milgram kept secret because this group contradicted his aforementioned results. For this condition, twenty pairs of men—fathers and sons, friends, and neighbors—stepped into the teacher and learner roles, but only three subjects reached the maximum voltage.

Perry's re-evaluation of Milgram's methods and conclusions represents the strongest contribution of her book. It is widely understood, of course, that such an experiment would not receive approval from today's institutional review boards. According to Perry, Milgram developed a standard set of responses to the ethical concerns about his experiments. First, in regards to claims surrounding cruelty, he argued that subjects "overwhelmingly endorsed" the study; Second, follow-up interviews performed by a psychiatrist indicated that the experiment was "safe." Yet, Perry's archival research shows that both these statements reflect significant overestimations. Perry was able to track down and interview several study subjects who expressed great distress, anger, and conflicted feelings because many were not debriefed after their participation. From the first publication of his findings in 1963, Milgram reported that a systematic "de-hoaxing" procedure was employed, yet Perry estimates that approximately six hundred participants left Yale's campus believing they actually shocked and, possibly harmed, the learner. Indeed, one subject reported checking the death notices in New Haven's paper for two weeks following the experiment! Perry writes that Milgram most likely permitted such continued deception in subjects because he did not want word of his hoax to contaminate his

recruitment pool. Further, Perry finds a number of inconsistencies in Milgram's experimental conditions. For instance, Milgram asserted that the experiment was halted if the subject refused to continue after four verbal prods. Yet, recordings indicate that the experimenter, especially in later conditions, likely coerced subjects by using these prods in a continuous sequence. In condition twenty, one female subject was prompted fourteen times. Moreover, a surprising number of participants doubted the so-called 'experimental realism.' A key data table in Milgram's book reveals that Milgram included in his conclusions those who had some doubts. "It's more truthful to say that only half of the people who undertook the experiment fully believed it was real, and of those two-thirds disobeyed the experimenter," observes Perry (p. 139). Indeed, in study records, Milgram's research assistant's analysis found those subjects most likely to disobey and deliver lower-voltage shocks were subjects who believed the learner was really being shocked. This suggests that Milgram's findings suffer from what researchers call confirmation bias.

Overall, there are only a few drawbacks to Perry's work. While Perry compares and contrasts some scholarly work addressing Milgram's findings, this discussion was not broad or deep enough. The penultimate chapter addressing representations of Milgram's obedience experiment seems to fit chronologically, but its contents could be whittled down and integrated into other chapters. Omitting these descriptive details might have opened more space for such additional theoretical discussion.

Perry's evidence is culled from thorough archival research including 140 recordings, each about fifty minutes in length which Perry spent over two hundred hours transcribing onto paper. In addition, she integrates reports, research documents such as Milgram's research notebooks, and face-to-face interviews with research subjects, along with former research assistants and students. Readers of this book will find that Perry relates her discoveries as if she were conducting a forensic investigation of Milgram's infamous experiment. Furthermore, these sources are referenced in a way that brings the voices and reflections of research participants alive with an engaging level of realism. In sum, Perry's work offers a critical re-evaluation of one of the most notorious experiments in social psychology. Students in the fields of psychology and sociology, senior seminar courses, social science researchers, and research ethics will benefit from Perry's incisive and engaging examination.

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