

SUMMARY

EXPERIMENTS WITH PEOPLE

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Summary of “Experiments With People” by Robert P. Abelson, Kurt P. Frey and Aiden P. Gregg

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Discover the history and insights of experiments in
social psychology.

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Introduction

Are you familiar with the Stanford Prison Experiment? Or the Little Albert Experiment? How about the infamous Milgram Experiment? Although these three experiments differed greatly in their natures and methodology, they have a few core things in common. For starters, they were all famous experiments involving people that were conducted during the twentieth century. Each of these experiments also implemented some ethically questionable research methods and revealed some disturbing truths about human nature.

However, these experiments only scratch the surface of the wide variety of studies that have been conducted using human subjects. And while some, like the aforementioned experiments, have yielded pretty scary results, others simply provide us with some intriguing information about what makes us tick. Ready to take an up-close (and maybe uncomfortable!) look at the deeper recesses of the human psyche? Let's dive in!

What the Milgram Experiment Teaches us About Obedience to Authority

The Milgram Experiment was conducted by a social psychologist named Stanley Milgram who was practicing during the 1960s. If you're familiar with a bit of World War I and World War II history, then you know that the Nuremberg War Criminal trials were in full swing during this time. These trials were conducted to assess the guilt of Nazis who had been captured when the Allies defeated Hitler. Because these individuals had assisted with the Holocaust, working with Hitler to orchestrate a mass genocide and perpetrate multiple crimes against humanity, their guilt was considered almost unquestionable. In their defense, however, the criminals argued that they weren't bad people and that they wouldn't have attempted to kill millions on their own. Rather, they argued, they were simply following orders.

Milgram was shocked and angered by this argument and he wanted to examine its validity by conducting a psychological experiment. He wanted to know if there could possibly be a grain of truth to the Nazis' defense and if it was possible that they really were brainwashed by a sense of obedience to authority. So, in July of 1961-- a year after the trial and execution of Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann-- Milgram decided to construct an experiment that would somewhat simulate the conditions experienced by Nazi officers who were "just following orders" to torture their fellow human beings. Here's how it worked. Milgram started by sending out a call for participants in local newspapers, inviting men to serve as test subjects in a psychological experiment being conducted at Yale University. The experiment was structured in the following fashion:

- One person would be a "learner"
- One person would be a teacher
- Milgram would serve as the experimenter and would be dressed in official clothing that marked him as an authority figure (i.e. a lab coat)

The learner, however, wasn't actually a real test subject, but one of Milgram's colleagues who was pretending to be a volunteer. To give the appearance of being fair, the two volunteers would draw lots to determine who would play the "learner" and who would play the "teacher."

Unbeknownst to the real volunteer, however, the drawing was always rigged so that Milgram's colleague always wound up playing the learner. Even though Milgram cycled through thousands of participants-- all of whom were men ranging in age from 20-50-- the roles of experimenter and learner remained the same and were always filled by Milgram and his colleagues. Here's how the experiment functioned: the teacher and the learner were separated. Although they could not see each other, each was informed of the other's presence and they could hear each other.

The volunteer playing the "teacher" was told that the purpose of the experiment was to teach the "learner" pairs of words. If the learner got it wrong, the experimenter told the teacher to administer an electric shock. The voltage of the electric shock ranged from mild (15 volts) to lethal (at 450 volts). The level of pain each shock would cause was clearly indicated on the shock generator's panel. This meant that no matter what level of shock the teacher chose, they would be unable to avoid the fact that they were intentionally inflicting pain on another human being. However, the teacher was told that even though the shocks would cause significant pain, they would not be held responsible for the suffering they inflicted.

Having been presented with that information, what would you expect the outcome to be? Would you expect the teacher to stop when confronted with the learner's screams of pain? Would you expect them to refuse to continue with the experiment? To call it cruel and barbaric and denounce it as wanton sadism? What would you do in their place? If you cherish the worldview that, at heart, most people are basically good, you might be surprised to learn that the results were the opposite of what you might expect. In fact, when told to continue shocking the learner, almost every participant complied, even when they could hear the learner's agonized screams. Despite the fact that the learner consistently broke down sobbing

and begging for release, the participants continued to shock them on command. And when the experimenter instructed them to continue raising the voltage, more than half of the participants complied-- even when they were instructed to use voltage that was indisputably lethal. Even the half that resisted-- refusing to apply deadly voltage-- still persisted in shocking the victim up to at least 350 volts.

This meant that, as far as the participants knew, 50% of them had willingly killed another human being in the context of the experiment. But why? Why would they obey someone's order to kill? Why didn't they resist? And what did this mean about the morality of these participants? To answer these questions, Milgram interviewed the volunteers after the experiment and asked them about their thought processes. In every single case, just like the Nazis, the participants affirmed that they were simply following orders. Because the experimenter presented as an authority figure, the participants stated that they felt like they were supposed to listen to him-- even at the expense of their own morality and their feelings of discomfort. This confirmed Milgram's theory that the mandate to obey authority is so deeply ingrained in us, we are unlikely to resist it even under extreme pressure.

Our Brains Determine Who we Do and Don't Like

In a recent episode of the popular NBC comedy *Superstore*, a character cheerfully tells his co-worker, "I like almost everybody I meet! I have virtually no standards!" This line gets a chuckle because, for the majority of people, it's not true at all! Most of us don't like everyone we meet. In fact, most of us don't even come close to liking such a large number of people. Rather, we decide that we dislike a significant amount of people for a host of reasons. Maybe their sense of style rubs you the wrong way or they tell a joke that you find offensive. Maybe you're not a fan of their political views or they just have an annoying personality.

Whatever the reason, it's no surprise that human beings like certain people and dislike a lot of others. (Fun fact: dogs and cats also exhibit this type of preferential behavior!) But what about the people you do like? If you can catalogue the list of reasons why you don't like certain people, what about the reasons that you prefer others? For example, you might say that you like your best friend because you have the same sense of humor or because you bring out the best in each other. Maybe you get along because you're opposites and opposites attract. Maybe you admire your friend for their kindness or generosity or some other likable trait. But have you ever found that you like someone simply because you see them a lot or because you share a common experience?

At first glance, this idea seems nonsensical; if simply seeing someone often influenced likeability, then surely you'd be best buds with the co-worker you detest. But that's not necessarily the way it works! In fact, a 1977 study conducted by social psychologist Theodore Mita confirms it. Mita discovered something that's known as "the exposure effect" and it means, quite simply, that if you're repeatedly exposed to a certain person or thing, you will come to like it-- or at least tolerate it!-- more. If you ever struggled to make friends in high school, you probably know just how true this is. If you didn't really fit in anywhere and you bonded with a group of kids that also existed on the fringes of adolescent society, your friendship probably

didn't develop because you had a deep affection with one another. Instead, because you saw each other every day, ate lunch together, and walked together to avoid appearing alone, over time, you might have convinced yourself that you really, really liked these people. But in reality, you might simply have been fringe friends by default!

Groups Can Have a Negative Impact on Our Moral Development

We all know peer pressure is a thing. At some point in our lives, everyone has felt pressured to go along with a group in some capacity, even when it acted against our best interests or made us uncomfortable. But have you ever wondered why peer pressure is so powerful? Social psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latane were curious about this too, and so in 1968, they conducted a study to measure the impact of a group on our personal morality. Their study was motivated by the 1964 murder of a young woman named Kitty Genovese. Kitty was 28 years old when she was stabbed to death outside her apartment building in New York City. Over forty neighbors were present in the apartment building at the time and later reported hearing Kitty's screams as she died. However, because they knew that so many other people were home, none of them stepped up to help her or even to call the police. Why? Because everybody assumed that someone else would help, thereby making it someone else's problem.

Had a neighbor intervened, it is highly likely that Kitty's life might have been saved in time or that her attacker might have been brought to justice. But because everyone passed the buck, Kitty bled to death from her injuries just a few feet away from her own front door. Darley and Latane were, understandably, horrified by the callousness these neighbors displayed and they wondered if this would be true of everyone. In the same position, would we all assume that someone else would help? Is the effect of a group really that powerful? To explore these questions, they recruited a group of college students to participate in an experiment. The students did not know each other and they could not see each other during the course of the experiment; instead, they interacted via microphones and speakers from behind closed doors. The participants were placed into groups of five or more and instructed to chat and get to know each other. Each participant had a couple of minutes to introduce themselves to the group.

But what they didn't know was that one "subject" in the experiment was actually the pre-recorded voice of a researcher being played on a tape. For his introduction, this subject mentioned that he suffered from epilepsy. And shortly after his introduction, a new recording was played: one in which the young man is audibly battling a seizure. The participants heard him saying: "I'm... I'm having a fit... I... I think I'm... help me... I... I can't... Oh my God... err... if someone can just help me out here... I... I... can't breathe p-p-properly... I'm feeling... I'm going to d-d-die if..." Again, keep in mind that none of the participants had any idea they were listening to a recording. As far as they knew, they were hearing a young man suffer and die in real time, just moments after they had been speaking with him.

So, if you had to guess, how do you think the participants would have responded? How would you respond? Would you immediately leap up and call 911? Would you tell your new acquaintance to hang on and reassure him that you've called for help? Unfortunately, however, Kitty Genovese's story repeated itself in this scenario as well. Only 40% of the participants offered to help because they all believed that someone else in their group would do so. Darley and Latane coined a new term based on the results of this study: they called it the "bystander apathy effect" and this term is still widely in use today. The popular psychology publication PsychologyToday summarizes their findings by explaining that "the bystander effect occurs when the presence of others discourages an individual from intervening in an emergency situation, against a bully, or during an assault or other crime. The greater the number of bystanders, the less likely it is for any one of them to provide help to a person in distress. People are more likely to take action in a crisis when there are few or no other witnesses present."

Final Summary

Life is often uncertain, so it's easy for human beings to think that if we know anything for sure, we know ourselves. However, social psychology's experiments with people have shown that this is not necessarily true. In fact, it's entirely possible that sometimes we don't know ourselves at all. When faced with an emergency, a crisis, or a certain type of stimuli, human beings might not respond in the way we would expect or even hope.

But over the course of the twentieth century, researchers conducted a number of experiments in the field of social psychology. And these experiments have taught us a great deal about ourselves and about human behavior in social situations. We also know that human nature is not static or unchangeable; we have the ability to absorb new information and integrate it into our daily lives. So, going forward, we can learn from experiments like Stanley Milgram's and be aware of conditions like the bystander effect and their impact on our lives and minds. We can then apply this information in our own lives to ensure that we make moral and ethical choices in the future.



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