

## BOOK REVIEWS

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# The outsider

## *The Man Who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram*

THOMAS B. BLASS

NEW YORK: BASIC BOOKS; 2004; Hb £19.99 (ISBN 0 738 20399 8)

REVIEWED BY Steve Reicher & Alex Haslam

**G**ERTRUDE Stein, the avant-garde American writer, was a student of William James. When it came to her final exams, it is said that she wrote on her paper 'I don't want to take this exam; it's too nice out' and then got up and left. James is supposed to have responded: 'Miss Stein, you truly understand the meaning of philosophy. "A".'

This is but one of many stories that enliven Blass's narrative – and if the connection between Stein and Milgram is tangential, it is one which he, as a proponent of the 'small world' theory, would probably have appreciated. Certainly, there is much to appreciate in this welcome and compelling account of Milgram's life.

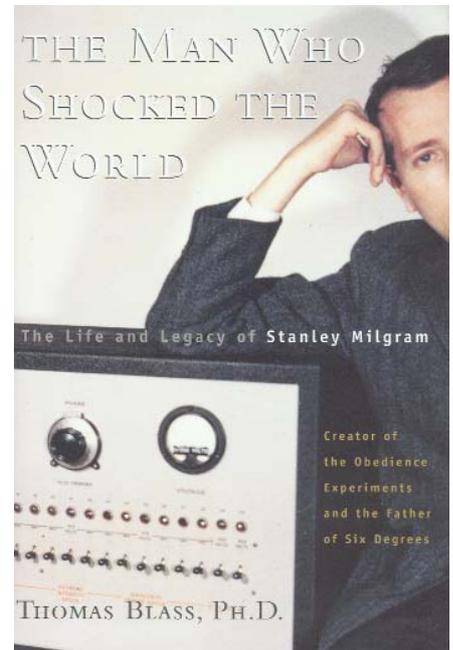
Beyond the format of the academic Festschrift, biographies of psychologists are rare commodities. We rarely get to see the influences and passions that shape our products. As a result, social psychological theory can often seem a rather abstracted and disembodied enterprise. Books like this tell us something not only about ideas but also about why they mattered to those who developed them. They interest us in the questions rather than just tell us the answers. They provide us with entertainment as well as enlightenment, and above all they generate enthusiasm. Just as narrative history has recently undergone something of a rebirth, perhaps there is a space for a new genre of narrative psychology: psychology as a story. This one is certainly rich, racy and instructive.

The Gertrude Stein anecdote could serve as a metaphor for Milgram's career. To start with, he was always interested in the outside. He felt that psychology spends far too much time on perceptions and cognitions and ignores what people actually do. His greatest early influence was Solomon Asch and his studies on conformity. Milgram's doctoral work at Harvard was a replication of the studies in Norway and France in which he examined

the extent to which different cultures impact upon our willingness to follow others (the Norwegians conform like Americans, but the individualistic French tend to go their own way – as the US administration is currently discovering to its dismay). These studies showed the qualities which fed into the famous obedience studies: the care and attention to detail, the creation of compelling and realistic paradigms, the use as well as the craft of experimentation, the use of meaningful behavioural measures. These qualities also endured after the obedience studies in Milgram's development of the lost letter technique and his studies of compliance to requests on the New York subway.

At one level, these studies may seem rather trivial: Milgram and his students would go up to people on the subway and use various formulations to try and get them to give up their seats. The most effective ploy was a simple unadorned demand: 'Give me your seat'. No justification, no explanation, no incentive. However, perhaps the most interesting aspect of the studies was not so much the behaviour of the targets as that of the experimenters. They found the prospect of violating ordinary standards of conduct very troubling and become highly stressed before conducting trials of the study – another vivid demonstration of the power of social norms. In addition, there were times when the researchers were in physical danger. Blass recounts how on one occasion, John Sabini (then a doctoral student) was picked up and thrown across the train by an angry onlooker.

This illustrates another facet of Milgram's career. Like Gertrude Stein, he was willing to depart from conventions and take risks in going out into the world, sometimes risking the reactions of people he encountered in the world, but more usually (and more seriously) of his colleagues in academia who disapproved of



his endeavours. The most obvious example, of course, concerns the reaction to the obedience studies. They generated a storm of controversy. Some concerns were well justified, for the studies do raise very real ethical issues – although it should be said that Milgram was well ahead of his time in subjecting his work to ethical scrutiny and considering the impact of research on participants. As Blass points out, Milgram pioneered the ethical committees that are commonplace today, hence it is an injustice to view him in terms of ethical misconduct. However, it is hard to escape the conclusion that much of the controversy derived from less laudable motives: professional jealousy, intellectual myopia, professional conservatism. Milgram suffered from all the problems which attend those who challenge a collective consensus. In that wonderfully graphic and dismissive phrase, he was viewed and treated as a 'loose cannon'.

This takes us to the more tragic aspects of Milgram's life. As a result of his concerns with the outside, he became an outsider. He was never fully trusted by his peers and many used their influence to exclude him from the 'club'. When, in 1967 he sought tenure at Harvard – a place he loved dearly and felt most at home – he was turned down and had to move to the City University of New York. When *Obedience to Authority* was published, a writer in *Contemporary Psychology*

(the most influential review journal in the field) opined:

*When I consider that the initial study was a demonstration and not even an experiment, that the research program lacked any initial theory or tests of significance, and that many of its findings are subject to alternative explanations, I am saddened that it is the obedience studies that will go down in history as reflecting the 1960s in social psychological research.*

Such reactions were far from exceptional. Indeed, Blass's own thorough categorisation of reviews reveals a fairly uniform spread across the spectrum from 'all negative' to 'all positive'.

At times Milgram acted in ways that did not exactly endear him to others (and Blass deserves credit for providing a fully rounded portrait of the man that does not try to hide the less attractive aspects of his conduct). He could be irascible and difficult to anybody and everybody – indeed he was once memorably described as 'an equal opportunity insulter'. Not only did he dabble in drug research (to the extent that, when he was first employed at Harvard, which was then reeling from the scandals surrounding Timothy Leary's work with LSD, a clause was put into his contract forbidding him from further work in the area), but he also dabbled in drug taking which did little to improve his moods and his predictability (although, as he claimed when taking the hallucinogenic psilocybin to help him write his crowd chapter for the *Handbook of Social Psychology*, it did get his creative juices flowing). Nonetheless, he was a man of immense energy, passion and generosity, and in many ways his rejection was more a reflection of the threat these positive qualities represented to more timid souls than a consequence of the negatives.

The irony, of course, is that the same establishment which sought to marginalise Milgram's work will use it to justify the discipline to others. When people are asked to provide instances of social psychology's usefulness, almost without fail, they cite 'the Milgram obedience studies' as an example. It is one of those very rare cases of work in social psychology that is known in other disciplines and even outside of academia, which, moreover, has shaped other disciplines and real-world practices. Indeed, the studies have proved fundamental to debate about human capacity for evil and

the psychological processes and states needed to enforce and maintain inhumane regimes. Whereas prior to Milgram's work it had been widely assumed that acts of destructive obedience were the preserve of the exceptional psychopath, his findings gelled more closely with Arendt's 'banality of evil' analysis, suggesting that evil could be promulgated by normal people who have ceded moral responsibility for their behaviour to a higher authority and who are prepared to place trust in that authority's interpretation of the world.

In sum, the story of Milgram's life is not so much a case of 'hate the sin, love the sinner' as of 'hate the worker, love the work'. Milgram may have suffered personally for being a risk taker, but the discipline has benefited immeasurably. There is an important lesson here if we want to produce future Milgrams. It is a measure of this book that this and other lessons are absorbed almost incidentally from the story rather than being imposed upon it. That is not to say that the book is without flaws. In many ways it reflects the strengths and weaknesses of its subject. Just as Milgram was criticised (and was self-critical) for being better at demonstrating phenomena than explaining them theoretically, so there are times in the book when the conceptual analysis is limited. Thus, when Blass seeks to place Asch and then Milgram in the tradition of Lewinian interactionsim, the explanation of this tradition is somewhat misleading. Or again, Blass tells how Milgram came to Paris and, with Moscovici's help, made a study of cognitive maps of the city. However, he fails to develop the point that, in this work, Milgram was looking at collective representations and collective practices. He thereby misses an opportunity to explore the intellectual connections between Milgram's later work and emerging European traditions in social psychology.

Nonetheless, these are relatively minor quibbles and they do not undermine the overall value of the book. No book can provide all the answers but it is a measure of success that it should make one want to find out more for oneself. This book certainly passes that test. And as for the relevance of the Gertrude Stein story to Milgram's life – well you will just have to read the book.

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## INFORMALLY INFORMATIVE

### *Making Good: How Young People Cope with Moral Dilemmas at Work*

WENDY FISCHMAN, BECCA SOLOMON, DEBORAH GREENSPAN & HOWARD GARDNER  
CAMBRIDGE, MA: HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS;  
2004; Hb £18.95 (ISBN 0 674 01194 5)

REVIEWED BY **Mary Ridge**

**T**HIS book investigates how the moral decisions of people starting out in the workforce are affected by the pressure to advance. Diverse fields were selected for study: journalism, genetics and theatre.

Participants were in one of three career stages: high-school students just discovering the field, young people in their first job, and 'veterans'. The data were obtained through interviews in which participants were asked about their goals, strategies, principles, values, fears, and perceptions of changes in the professional field.

Each of the fields is dealt with in a separate section of the book. Each section follows a similar format. An overview of the domain's place in society, currently, in the past, and predictions for it in the future are given. Information from the veterans is presented, followed by information from the younger participants. This enables comparison of the different stages.

A similarity across the three domains was that young people who had chosen the field but had not yet entered the workforce tended to feel more strongly about their ethical principles. Many of the young people with their first job had been in a position where they had to sacrifice their principles to get ahead in the job. Most of them felt that this was a temporary override of their ethical principles, which would no longer be necessary and could be resolved once they had progressed to professional success in their field. Viewing it as transitory, although they experienced some dissonance over deserting their morals, they were able to condone it for themselves.

The book has an informative but informal feel due to the excerpts from interviews used to illustrate points. It highlights some important issues in the development of morality, and does so in an engaging way.

■ *Mary Ridge is a graduate of the National University of Ireland, Galway.*

## GOING FURTHER

### *New Frontiers in Cognitive Aging*

R.A. DIXON, L. BÄCKMAN & L-G. NILSSON  
 OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS; 2004;  
 Hb £49.95 (ISBN 0 19 852569 9)

REVIEWED BY Leigh Riby

**A** CONTINUAL increase in the elderly population, largely due to medical advances, makes it imperative to understand what influences age-related cognitive decline. To explore this, the editors of the present volume gather together experts in the field of cognitive ageing and allied disciplines. The book is well organised into three main sections – theoretical issues, cognitive neuroscience and health influences. The theoretical element of the book provides insightful discussions, including an evaluation of current research designs (e.g. longitudinal). Also, the importances of cultural, social and environmental factors in the development of models of ageing are discussed. For example, the authors consider how culture (e.g. East Asian vs. Western European) could mediate the relationship between ageing and cognition.

Moving on, the role of cognitive neuroscience in our understanding of the ageing process is considered. The authors rightly note that although studies using innovative experimental techniques (e.g. structural MRI) show great promise, to date they are lacking methodological rigour. Other topics in this section include the transition from normal ageing to dementia, and functional imaging techniques. The critical role of the biological approach is further developed in the final chapters. Key topics include genetic, sensory, physiological and hormonal influences on cognition.

Overall, the editors should be commended for their interdisciplinary approach and clear focus on future directions in cognitive ageing. Importantly, the book goes much further than similar volumes available. I highly recommend this book to advanced students and academics with an interest in the overriding issues in cognitive ageing research today.

■ *Dr Leigh M. Riby is a research lecturer in the Department of Psychology, Glasgow Caledonian University.*

# Full of insight and all-encompassing

### *Psychologists on Psychology*

DAVID COHEN (ED)

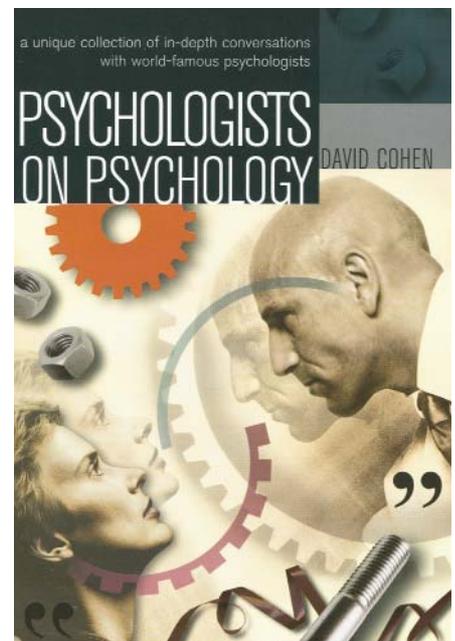
LONDON: HODDER & STOUGHTON; 2004; Pb £14.99 (ISBN 0340810750)

REVIEWED BY Judith Horne

**D**AVID Cohen's latest edition of *Psychologists on Psychology* is a fascinating unravelling of distinguished psychologists' thoughts on what psychology means to them, how they became involved in psychology, their work and where they see psychology going in the future. The diversity of psychologists interviewed ranges from Eysenck to Chomsky, Frankl, Skinner and Zimbardo. Some deceased, some relatively young to the discipline, one thing that impresses upon you the most about these people is the 'accidental coming' many of them have had to psychology.

One of the most striking things about this book is Cohen's dry humour and readable style. Before each interview are brief summaries of each psychologists' work (a useful tool in itself), where Cohen's admiration (or lack of) each figure is clearly made apparent. There are few subtleties here. Honesty and clarity abound. These summaries contain brief descriptions of how each interview panned out, building up images of intellectuals hidden among books in offices and atmospheres of stressed-out octogenarians anxious to complete their life-works before inevitable death. The introduction and 'unfinal' conclusions are written in a similar tone. Cohen, clearly proud of his ironic concluding chapter title emphasises continually throughout the book the emergent qualities of psychology as a discipline and the worries he has about this. By now, he believes, the insistence that psychology can be classed as a 'science' is wearing a bit thin.

The actual interviews themselves vary in quality of response. Some participants appear to throw themselves enthusiastically and wholeheartedly into the process, such as Laing; others appear defensive and almost reluctant to submit to Cohen's



ruthless interrogation. He lets them away with little and is not afraid to push points of contention.

Reading this book, I find that the psychologists who are so prominent in papers, journals and in lectures come alive as real people with their own concerns and issues. They are no longer merely dusty textbook memories of the past, and the reader emerges touched with the humanity of these people. Full of insight and all-encompassing, there is much here to learn about psychology as a discipline and its main figures. This book would be particularly useful to the student just discovering psychology, as it covers a lot of ground in a short space, but is definitely worth a read whatever one's standing for its literary value and humour alone.

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