

# The man, his passions and motivations

Stanley Milgram's widow, **Alexandra Milgram**, with her personal take on his life

Stanley Milgram pursued every interest with motivation and great passion. Even interests that began when he was a youngster continued throughout his life. As a result of his intense personality, people reacted strongly to him.

During Stanley's boyhood growing up in the Bronx, he was very aware of his Jewish parents listening to the horrors of the news on the radio during World War II. Stanley's great interest in the news was born at this time and persisted for the rest of his life. In fact, in middle age he described himself as a 'news addict'.

Stanley had an interest in opera: he enjoyed listening with his father to the famous soprano Jeanette McDonald. At James Monroe High School Stanley belonged to the drama club and took part in preparing sets for school productions. I recall Stanley mentioning how he particularly enjoyed working on the set of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Rudigore*. The skills he developed while working on

the sets served Stanley well in later years when he designed and set up his experiments.

At 19 Stanley spent the summer improving his French in Paris at the Sorbonne University. He also claimed that having a French girlfriend was a fun way to greatly improve his spoken French. This first time in Europe turned out to be a wonderful experience for Stanley, culminating in travelling on a motorbike from Paris to Spain, and then on to Italy. His love of travel, and especially in France, was born at this time, and remained with him for his entire life.

Continuing with his interest in the news, Stanley majored in political science at Queens College. Originally planning to enter the Foreign Service, he applied to the School of International Affairs at Columbia University – and was accepted. Then during his last semester at Queens College, a dean listened to a speech Stanley gave. Afterwards the dean asked Stanley if he had considered attending the Social

Relations Department at Harvard University. Since Stanley had never heard of the Department, he sent for their catalogue.

After reading about the Department, which included courses in social psychology, social anthropology, sociology, etc., Stanley decided to change his plans and apply to the Social Relations Department at Harvard to obtain a PhD in social psychology. He was rejected. During an interview at Harvard, Stanley was informed that the Social Relations Department could not accept him because he had never taken a single psychology course. Stanley could not accept 'no'. He was then told that if he took psychology courses during the summer, Harvard would accept him as a non-matriculating student in September. That summer he worked very diligently taking nine psychology courses at three different colleges – Hunter, Brooklyn and NYU. He did well enough in the fall semester at Harvard to be able to continue as a matriculating student.

During his years at Harvard, Stanley became interested in cross-cultural research. He did his thesis on conformity in Oslo and Paris, based on research he conducted in both cities. The research was complicated – being conducted in foreign countries, using foreign languages, with various regulations. However Stanley's enthusiasm to do this difficult cross-cultural research motivated him to persist with it until it was completed.

Besides being very involved in his psychology courses at Harvard, Stanley was also interested in musicals. After he became friendly with Victor Ziskind, another Harvard student, they both decided to collaborate on a musical based on the O. Henry short story 'The Gift of the Magi'. Victor wrote the music and Stanley the libretto. After finishing work on the musical, they prepared a demo and made an appointment with producers in New York. While they were waiting to see the producers, Stanley and Victor were taken aback when the producers rushed in and exclaimed with great excitement that they just heard a marvellous musical by Leonard Bernstein – *West Side Story!* Needless to say, Stanley and Victor's musical never was produced.

Later in life Stanley collaborated with another musician on a musical based on the famous story 'The Man Without a Country'. Sadly, it had the same fate as 'The Gift of the Magi'.

After graduating from Harvard, Stanley accepted a position as Assistant Professor at Yale University. He was aware that it was important for him to do research and to publish the results. He wanted to do something important. Before he even started at Yale, he conceived of and developed his ideas to do his experiments on obedience to authority. This was an outgrowth of his early interest in the Holocaust. He wondered, in a civilised country like Germany that had produced great scientists and artists, how the German government could find all the people needed to press the levers in all of the concentration camps during World War II to exterminate thousands of people. It was not just one 'crazy' man.

After the obedience experiments were described to 40 psychiatrists at Yale, they uniformly stated that only a small number of participants would continue to the end – most would break off early. Stanley first conducted a pilot study using Yale students. He was surprised to see most of the students continue shocking the victims until they reached the end of the shock generator – 450 volts, beyond 'DANGER: SEVERE SHOCK'. He thought that it was simply the Yale students who behaved this way.



Stanley applied for and received a grant from the National Science Foundation. This permitted him to carry out the obedience experiments with men 20–50 years old who were not students. Stanley noted that 65 per cent of participants continued until they reached the end of the shock generator, 450 volts, in the first

condition. He then performed the experiment varying the conditions. Stanley found it difficult to design conditions that led to the majority of the participants stopping before they reached the end. The condition that had most of the participants breaking off was the one in which the teacher had to hold the learner's hand down on a plate to receive a shock. Stanley concluded that if the results of an experiment are different than what was anticipated, we have learned something new. This was certainly the case with the obedience experiments.

Although Stanley originally conceived of doing the obedience experiments in Germany after they were conducted in America, as a cross-cultural experiment, he never did. As most of the American participants continued pressing down the levers until they reached the end, this was the result he expected if the obedience experiments were carried out in Germany.

Fortunately, there was some grant money available to film one of the conditions of the obedience experiment so that others could observe the behaviour of the participants. Stanley was involved in the filmmaking and looked forward to doing more filming in the future. He took some courses in filmmaking, as well as reading extensively on it, and actually purchased a 16 mm camera. His student Harry From had been a filmmaker in Romania and suggested to Stanley that they collaborate on a film based on his article 'The experience of living in cities'. Stanley entered into this project with great enthusiasm. The resulting film, *The City and the Self*, won prizes.

Stanley's interest in politics was an influence in his Lost Letter Studies done in New Haven to determine the sentiment of the residents towards communism in the 1960s, and in Asia to find out how the overseas Chinese felt about mainland China.

Stanley was a family man. He was very fond of my mother, his mother-in-law. Once when she visited us, my mother

asked Stanley why young people do not get up in a bus or subway to give their seat to a white-haired lady. He asked her if she ever requested a seat. My mother looked at Stanley in shock – that he could ask such a question. The next week when Stanley returned to his course in experimental social psychology, he designed the Subway Study in which the students were divided into pairs. They would then enter a subway car and one of the students of each pair would ask a seated person, 'Excuse me, may I have your seat?' The other student recorded what happened. Stanley was surprised that most of the seated people got up for the student who requested the seat. Stanley also tried to ask for a seat in the New York subway. He found it difficult to bring himself to request a seated person to get up and give him their seat. He found it easier if he feigned illness.

Stanley's passion for travel continued, and the two of us travelled around South America for our honeymoon. Often we spent summers with our children exploring some area of France or the Caribbean in the winter. Eventually Stanley conducted studies on psychological maps of Paris and New York. These were his favourite cities. He received a Guggenheim grant to conduct his research in Paris. He also received assistance from his colleague Serge Moscovici to obtain an office and assistants in Paris. After many months there, Stanley noted that the French assistants were often taking vacations, so he engaged his two children, six and eight years old, to come to his rescue. They stuffed, sealed and stamped envelopes inviting people to participate in the Paris study. In this experiment Stanley asked the participants to draw their city, indicate where the rich live, where it is most frightening to go, to indicate their favourite walk, etc. Eventually the psychological map of Paris study was conducted.

As I have described, Stanley's motivations and passions led him to conduct his varied and unique experiments in social psychology as well as to produce psychology films. He was often bubbling with ideas. I also think of Stanley as a loving, caring family man. He is greatly missed by those who knew him.



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