

ABSTRACT

The urban psychology of Stanley Milgram

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Although his obedience research will always remain Stanley Milgram's most important work, his involvement with the social psychology of the city occupied a much larger portion of his professional career. This article traces the evolution and intensification of Milgram's interest in cities, starting with his pre-professional years, through his early research at Harvard, culminating in his multifaceted engagement with urban psychology at the Graduate Center of CUNY. There, as head of the social psychology program, he was able to infuse it with an urban emphasis. He created and taught a variety of courses on urban psychology and got his students involved in a potpourri of experiments comparing behavior in cities and towns. Those experiments provided much of the substance for Milgram's seminal article in *Science*, "The experience of living in cities," in which he also introduced the theoretical concept of stimulus overload to help account for the city-small town differences he and his students found. This article evaluates the overload concept and concludes with Milgram's overarching legacy for the study of city life.

The urban psychology of Stanley Milgram¹

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While Milgram's experiments on obedience to authority will always remain his most important and well-known research, his work on the social psychology of urban life—though less familiar—spanned a much longer stretch of time.

Actually, Milgram's fascination with cities began in his pre-professorial years. Milgram attended Queen's College as an undergraduate, and in the summer of 1953, following his junior year, he took a trip to Europe. Although he toured France, Spain and Italy on a motorbike, he spent most of the summer taking a French course at the Sorbonne in Paris. He clearly benefited from the course: While he earned a D, C, and B, respectively, in three French literature courses he had taken at Queens in the years prior to his trip, he received an A in a French course he took in his senior year after his trip. While in Paris he fell in love with the city—as well as a local girl.

Milgram's fascination with cities, their distinctive character, and their effects on their inhabitants grew during a two-year period between 1957 and 1959, which he spent mainly in Oslo and Paris conducting his research for his PhD at Harvard under the supervision of Gordon Allport. It was a comparison of conformity levels in Norway and France, using a variation of Solomon Asch's classic paradigm (Milgram, 1960).

¹ Quotes from letters and most information given without citations are either from the Stanley Milgram Papers at the Yale University Library, Harvard University Archives, or Stanley Milgram's family, colleagues and students.

Thomas Blass has recently authored a biography of Stanley Milgram, "The man who shocked the world: The life and legacy of Stanley Milgram" (Basic Books, 2004). He also maintains an informational website on Milgram: www.stanleymilgram.com currently used by as many as 13,000 visitors a month.

While in Oslo and Paris, he became so attuned to their ambiance almost every letter to his family and friends contained observations about those cities and their people (Blass, 2004).

For example, a few days after arriving in Oslo, he wrote a friend back in the USA that Oslo was very much like an American city, with big cars plying its streets and its citizens dressing much like in Minneapolis or Podunk. He also observed that Oslo “clearly lacks the charm of Copenhagen. In fact, it more or less lacks charm.” And somewhat later he wrote another friend, recalling the damp season in Oslo “when the skies pour down their waters on the urine colored walls of the older parts of town. It is the season for pneumonia, sinusitis and despondency. The season of mud. But when the sun does shine, it has an agreeably thick quality to it, and the sunlight washes everything in its amber fluidity.”

Over the course of his year’s stay in Oslo Milgram developed a more nuanced perspective that included a feeling of warmth and respect for its people and greater fondness for the city, but nothing could compare to Paris. In a letter from Paris when he was conducting the French portion of his conformity experiments, he wrote:

Paris is the city I like best in the world. It is especially beautiful...in the autumn, when the tan and gold maple leaves float by the classical marble statuary in the Jardin du Luxembourg, when the air is fragrant with autumn smoke, and the Seine captures the tan, crimson, and orange colors of the season. Oslo is a town, Copenhagen a city, New York a metropolis, and Paris a civilization....”

It took several years, however—when he was an Assistant Professor in the Social Relations Department at Harvard from 1963 to 1967—that his acute observations about cities began to take on a more systematic guise, and the topic began evolving into what would eventually become an important focus of his

research. In the fall of 1966 he gave a tutorial to a small group of undergraduates from Harvard and Radcliffe. In an attempt to identify the qualities that make up the distinctive atmospheres of three cities—London, Paris and New York—ads were placed in the *New York Times* and the *Harvard Crimson* inviting readers to send descriptions of experiences they had had living in or visiting any of those cities (Milgram, 1977, 1992; Greenhouse, 1966). While they did receive some recollections from people, the study resulted in what Milgram considered a modest yield. Generally, as he wrote a correspondent, “the responses repeated clichés about [those] cities.” Although the results were not all that informative, the experience whet his appetite for further studies on cities. That opportunity arrived quickly, perhaps more quickly than expected.

That same year (1966-67), he came up for promotion and tenure. Much to his surprise and dismay, the P & T committee, after lengthy deliberations, turned him down. Milgram was devastated. His gloom worsened when no job offers materialized from prestigious universities that he hoped to go to if he ever left Harvard; such as Berkeley, Columbia, the University of Chicago. He did get definite offers from the University of California at Santa Cruz, Cornell, and as head of a newly developing PhD program in social psychology at the Graduate Center of CUNY. He opted for the latter, and one of the main reasons was because he loved city life and had been planning on continuing and expanding his research on it. CUNY, though not very prestigious, would enable him to do that, while the other two schools, situated in small geographic locations, could not.

At CUNY his interest in the psychology of urban life intensified in a number of ways. First, under his leadership the PhD program in social psychology took on an

urban emphasis which was incorporated into the program's description in the University catalog and aided by a grant from NIMH for a predoctoral program in urban psychology. Second, beginning with his very first semester when he offered an "Urban Research Seminar," Milgram created a number of courses on urban psychology. In fact, one of the courses he taught in the fall of 1984, the semester before he died, was titled "Urban Psychology." Third, he quickly got his students involved in innovative experiments demonstrating how aspects of behavior in the city—such as helpfulness—differed from behavior in small towns.

For example, in one experiment, his students knocked on apartment doors, asking if they could use the telephone to call a friend nearby whose address they lost. They did this in some middle-income housing developments located in Manhattan and in similar buildings in some small towns near the city. The results: The students were at least twice as likely to gain entry in the small towns than in the city. In another clever study, involving a simple—but meaningful—measurable act, Milgram's students extended their hands to strangers in midtown Manhattan and in small towns in New Jersey and Long Island. About 67% of the small-town residents reciprocated with a handshake, but only 39% of the New Yorkers did so (Milgram, 1977, 1992).

Milgram also chaired two doctoral dissertations involving urban research. One was by Harold Takooshian. Across 20 New York City neighborhoods, he found a significant correlation between strangers' willingness to help a lost child in a staged incident and the neighborhood's score on a sociological index of child welfare. The other dissertation, by Arthur Weinberger, examined whether or not New Yorkers discriminated against the elderly in their willingness to help a stranger in midtown Manhattan.

Over the first two years at CUNY Milgram and his students had conducted enough studies involving city vs. small-town comparisons to warrant an invitation to speak at the annual convention of APA in September 1969. A slightly shortened version of that talk appeared the following year in *Science* magazine under the title "The experience of living in cities" (Milgram, 1970). According to John Sabini (1986), a former student, that article was "seminal to the growing field of urban psychology." Within a few months it appeared in translation in the German psychology journal, *Zeitschrift für Sozialpsychologie*, and was reprinted in *Ekistics*, a journal aimed at a readership of city planners and architects. By 1977 it had been reprinted in about 50 anthologies and, due to the frequency with which it had been cited, it became a Citation Classic in 1981.

Milgram's approach was grounded in sociologist Louis Wirth's definition of a city as "a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals (Wirth, 1938, p. 8). An important contribution of Milgram's article in *Science* was his introduction of the concept of stimulus overload. It was to serve as the subjective, experiential counterpart of Wirth's purely demographic criteria for a city.

Here is how he explained the concept in "The City and the Self," an award-winning film co-produced with his student, Harry From as a visual companion-piece to his article in *Science*. As the camera picks him out amidst a fast-moving throng of pedestrians in mid-Manhattan, we hear him in voiceover:

My name is Stanley Milgram. I live in this city, New York, and I don't always find it friendly, or hospitable, or courteous. Often I find myself and others behaving in a way that I deplore. So the question I ask is: How do we explain the behavior we see all around us? Behavior that contrasts so unfavorably with people at their best. Social scientists, in

trying to explain city behavior, point first to the fact that there are large numbers of people, and second, that there is great density. People are crowded in upon each other. And finally, they are not the same kind of people. There is great diversity....

[But] these facts of life...they are outside the person. They are in the street. They're around him, but they are not yet part of his experience. What we need is some kind of concept that will link these facts of density, population and heterogeneity...to the sentiments, the feelings, the thoughts, the perceptions of the individual. And science has come up with a concept, with an idea that provides the linkage. It is the concept of overload. By overload, I mean a situation in which there are too many inputs for a person to deal with adequately. There are too many things coming at him. He has to make an adjustment in order to survive in an environment which is overly rich in the stimulation...and the demands that it makes on him.

Milgram was no theoretician, so the overload concept was, by his own admission, post hoc—meant to bring the “grab bag of experimental studies on city vs. small-town behavior” conducted by him and his students “under a more rigorous theoretical discipline” (Milgram, 1981).

The overload concept caught on quickly and achieved widespread acceptance. A possible reason, which I believe has a good deal of merit, was articulated by Brian Little (1987, p. 222):

There is a general thesis of considerable popularity within environmental psychology to the effect that humans have limited capacity for processing information, that contemporary environments, particularly urban ones, provide a surfeit of such information, and that this situation in part created much of the malaise of current living. Certainly the most influential statement of this thesis was Milgram's (1970) elegant formulation of the insidious effects of information input overload in generating urban pathology....Milgram's ability to relate urban indifference and hostility to the vagaries of information processing struck a responsive chord in social psychologists who, no doubt, valued the blend of cognitivism, contextualism, and social relevance in Milgram's perspective.

“The Experience of Living in Cities” has been influential both in theory development and in stimulating research. The overload concept is one of the

underpinnings of Altman's (1975) theory of crowding. According to Altman, crowding takes place when various privacy-regulation mechanisms fail to attain our desired level of privacy. And Cohen's (1978) approach to the study of urban and environmental stressors extended Milgram's model to encompass physical as well as social sources of overload. In an assessment of the overload concept, Charles Korte (1990), a Milgram student, stated that the 1970s marked a significant increase in research conducted on urban-nonurban differences in social behavior and expressed the belief that many of the researchers involved had been inspired by Milgram's work, often as a result of studying with him as his graduate students.

An extension of Milgram's overload concept beyond the urban environment was recently suggested in a book by David Shenk (1997) titled *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*. The author argued that the overload of unwanted information resulting from advances in information technology has led to a deterioration in the quality of life. He wrote that "Milgram's...analysis of overload [is] just as applicable to victims of data smog in 1997 as it was to urban residents of 1970."

A particular application of the overload concept by Milgram deserves special mention. Milgram noted that a pervasive characteristic of urban life is that, while we may become familiar with the faces of a number of people, we never in fact interact with them. He dubbed such urban creatures "familiar strangers." In the spring semester of 1971, students in his Experimental Social Psychology class conducted a study to learn more about them. Early one morning, his students gathered at a commuter train station in Riverdale and took photographs of clusters of commuters who were waiting for one of three trains that would take them to their offices in Manhattan. A few weeks later, the students returned to the station and distributed

manila envelopes to commuters as they waited for their train. Each envelope contained a photograph of commuters traveling on their train and a questionnaire. The commuters were asked to work on the questionnaire during their train ride. The students collected all the completed questionnaires when the train arrived at Grand Central Station.

Milgram and his students found that 89.5 percent of the subjects identified at least one pictured familiar stranger. On average, they reported seeing four familiar strangers in the photograph, while the average number of passengers they had spoken to was 1.5.

Milgram felt that the tendency not to interact with familiar strangers was a form of adaptation to the stimulus overload one experienced in the urban environment. These individuals are depersonalized and treated as part of the scenery, rather than as people with whom to engage.

In the film, "The City and the Self," Milgram makes some observations about the familiar stranger that are powerfully evocative and possess a ring of truth, especially in light of the events of September 11, 2001.

The film is narrated by Milgram. Most of the time his narration is sparse and understated, letting the unfolding scenes speak for themselves. But in the segment about the familiar stranger, his voiceover becomes a lyrical prose poem, which he recites with an ache in his voice that is almost palpable.

*We studied the familiar strangers.
We spoke to them in station after station,
and this is what they told us.
As the years go by, familiar strangers
become harder to talk to.
The barrier hardens.
And we know—*

*if we were to meet one of these
strangers far from the station,
say, when we were abroad,
we would stop, shake hands, and
acknowledge for the first time that
we know each other.
But not here.
And we know—
if there was a great calamity,
a flood, a fire, a storm,
the barriers would crumble.
We would talk to each other.
But the problem for those of us
Who live in the city is this:
How can we come closer—
without the fire,
without the flood,
without the storm.*

We have looked at the specifics of Milgram's contributions to urban psychology. But let me conclude with the broader, overarching legacy for the study of city life, which can be distilled from those specific contributions, that Milgram left us with. At a time when others were constricting the relevance of social psychology through claims of bias and artifact, Milgram created a major expansion of its proper domain by showing that the city was a manageable topic for scientific study by the experimental social psychologist (Blass, 1992; Milgram, 1981). And he did so via his distinctive style of experimentation. Just like in the other domains of behavior he had studied earlier, in most of his urban research the outcome measure was discrete and dichotomous. It was essentially a *yes* or *no* answer to the question of whether or not a given behavior occurred: Did apartment dwellers let individuals in to use their phone? (Milgram, 1977, 1992). Did people waiting in line express their objections to someone cutting in front of them? (Milgram et al., 1986). Did subway riders give up

their seats when requested to? (Milgram & Sabini, 1978). Would strangers approached in the street reciprocate an extended hand with a handshake? (Milgram, 1977, 1992).

This undoubtedly was a major factor accounting for the compelling quality of much of Milgram's research. In contrast to the relativism and ambiguity inherent in many continuous measures (e.g., a point on a numerical scale), the discrete, observable acts comprising most of Milgram's findings lent them a quality of absoluteness, clarity, and finality that made their implications directly discernible to both lay and professional readers (Blass, 1992)

For many years now the study and teaching of urban psychology has been in decline. But this may be changing. There is some evidence of a reawakening of interest in the topic. I was surprised to learn from one of my colleagues at UMBC, Ken Maton, that the APA has recently created a Task Force on Urban Psychology. Hopefully, a rediscovery of Milgram's contributions will be part of this reawakening.

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