

There is a quote from a Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard which says "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards" and this is a fitting quote for a film like *The Experimenter*. Released in 2015, directed by Michael Almereyda and starring Peter Sarsgaard and Winona Ryder, the film is a biopic of Stanley Milgram, an American professor, best known for his controversial obedience experiment undertaken in the 1960s, examining his life and the ethics of the experiment.

Milgram was born in New York in 1933. First introduced to psychology through a PhD, his main focus was on authority and obedience. He was largely influenced and affected by the Holocaust (and Adolf Eichmann, one of the main Holocaust organisers) and he wanted to understand how people were influenced to and participate in such atrocities (such as the Holocaust) asking "Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders?".

So he set up his experiment to discover the willingness of participants to do certain tasks under the guidance of what they believe is a serious authoritative figure (in this experiment, a "teacher") in a white coat (but really the figure was just a colleague of Milgram's), even if it went against their beliefs. In this, he was particularly looking to see if they would deliver electric shocks powerful enough to kill someone if they were instructed to.

Held in Yale University in America, participants were recruited via a newspaper advert and they were told they were taking part in scientific memory research. Separated only by a screen, the participants would ask the "learner" (really a confederate of Milgram's) a series of questions in a word game and send an electric shock through if they gave the wrong answer, increasing the shock voltage for each wrong answer, starting at 15 volts (labelled "slight shock") and continuing all the way to 450 volts (labelled "danger shock"). What the participants didn't know is, the learners weren't actually getting shocked but due to the screen between them, all they could hear was cries of pain (these were actually pre-recorded by they didn't know that) and the voice of the teacher instructing them to continue on.

This experiment is shown at the beginning of the film (and can be seen in further depth during the extended opening of the film). It's also interesting to note how Milgram breaks the fourth wall quite a lot throughout the film, often talking to the audience about his family and his goals, giving the viewer a glimpse into his life and giving the film a more personal touch (although he speaks like he's giving a lecture rather than narrating and the fact he speaks about his daughter as if she's a real person before she is even born is slightly strange).

They say the eyes are the window to the soul but if that's the case, I would not want to look at Milgram's soul, as his eyes looked black and vacant throughout. Peter Sarsgaard (who plays Milgram in the film) captures his presence and tone in an elusive, sombre, emotionless (barely smiling once throughout the whole film) way, perhaps a take on the real Milgram and Winona Ryder (who plays Milgram's wife Sasha) captures her wild-eyed essence in the way only Ryder can do. It's also interesting to comment on how Milgram's relationship is portrayed throughout the film, it's not a typical romance, it's dangerous and quite chilling to watch as Sasha decides she wants to see what it's like to sit in the learners chair and is soon

on board with Milgram's ideas. Their dynamic changes throughout the film, they become almost like colleagues with no real romance at all.

I think the main thing to take away from this film (and overall) is the ethics of the experiment. Milgram's experiment had many ethical issues, the first being the degree of deception involved. The participants involved in the experiment weren't given a clear explanation of any possible risks involved before they took part in the study, meaning they were genuinely led to believe they were causing another individual serious harm and therefore, causing themselves psychological pain. It was reported after the experiment that many of the participants were visibly distressed and three even had seizures during the study (although this only came out later).

The second ethical issue is the right to withdraw consent. Many of the participants expressed they were uncomfortable with what was occurring and wanted to stop, however they were urged not to by the authoritative figure. Due to this, an incredible 65% (that's almost 2/3's) of participants continued the experiment, "shocking" the learners to the maximum 450 volts, definitely enough to kill someone if genuinely administered. 35% of participants made it to administering 300 volts before insisting they pull out.

When the findings from the original study were published in 1963, there was a backlash. There is a scene during the film where Milgram is working as a professor at Harvard University when the findings from his obedience experiment are published in The New York Times newspaper and all of a sudden, his reputation begins to decrease. He is accused of being deceptive, a "manipulative monster" and people begin to turn against him. When questioned by one of his students about the article, he snaps, the pressure evidently getting to him. He loses his job (something which also happened to the real Milgram which he never got over) and Yale University was criticised for treating participants badly (something which also happened in real life).

Also Dina Baumrind, a child psychologist published a criticism of the ethics of Milgram's study in 1964, claiming Milgram had "ignored the health of the participants for the sake of psychology" and should've stopped the experiment or informed the authoritative figure to stop the experiment as soon as the participants started to display "signs of evident distress".

Another interesting thing to note is the portrayal of the "elephant in the room". In one of the earlier scenes in the film, "Milgram" is shown walking down a corridor, explaining to the camera how he wants to understand how "ordinary people can be coerced into unthinkable acts". As he mentions the Holocaust, an actual elephant follows him into the office he walks into, very clever! Based on this, I personally don't believe the elephant symbolises the underlying ethics issue (however many people do and as highlighted previously, that is important) but instead, the Holocaust. As Milgram said himself, the whole reason he undertook this experiment is he wanted to find out if people willingly committed atrocious acts under authority and as mentioned previously, he was heavily influenced by the Holocaust and Eichmann. Not only that but Stanley Milgram's parents were two immigrants who escaped the Holocaust just in time and I also think that's important to remember.

However, the exclusivity of the participants could also be considered the elephant in the room. 40 volunteers took part in the experiment altogether and they were all men, aged between 20 and 40. If the participants had been a wider range of ages and genders, perhaps that would have had an affect on the outcome of the experiment, perhaps people would've dropped out earlier and the results would not have been the same.

However, despite the sombre, factual vibe taken from the film, there are some small humorous moments and these come in the form of different scenes. For example, there is a scene where Milgram breaks out into song whilst walking down a street in New York. Whether it's meant to be funny is another question but it certainly brings a smile to the face of the viewer.

Tragically, Milgram died after suffering a series of heart attacks in 1984 (it's sad to think that after all the backlash from his experiment, the only person truly harmed was Milgram himself). But it's evident The Experimenter seeks to understand the inner workings of the brain of Stanley Milgram, whose work has left a long lasting legacy on the psychology community today and shows what happens if you become the thing you fear the most in your life.