

There is a quote from a Danish philosopher, Søren 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 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 "doctor") 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.

This is shown in early beginning scenes of the film (it goes into more depth in the extended opening). Volunteers were recruited via a newspaper advert and they were told they were taking part in scientific memory research. Separated only by a screen, the volunteer 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. What the volunteers 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 and the voice of the doctor instructing them to continue on.

2/3rds of the volunteers were willing to send electric shocks through to the learner.

Milgram breaks the fourth wall quite a lot throughout the film, often talking to the audience, giving the viewer a glimpse into his life and giving the film a more personal touch. Peter Sarsgaard (who plays Milgram in the film) captures his presence and tone in a monosyllabic, sombre way.

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

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.

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 followed by an actual elephant in the room, very clever! Personally, I don't believe the elephant symbolises the underlying ethics issue (although as highlighted previously, that is important) but three other things instead. The first is that Stanley Milgram's parents

The second is the exclusivity of the participants. 40 volunteers took part in the experiment altogether and they were all men, aged between 20 and 40.

instead the exclusivity of the participants and the fact that no matter who you are, whether you be a leader, in a gang, someone with a position of power or anything else, as long as your motives are unquestioned, authority can be gained.

Overall 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.