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ABSTRACT

An evaluation was made of the methodology and findings presented in "Television and Antisocial Behavior. Field Experiments," by Stanley Milgram and R. Lance Shotland (New York: Academic Press, 1973). In the book, seven experiments were reported, all concerned with antisocial behavior toward a medical charity. Three episodes of Medical Story were prepared. In two, antisocial endings were presented; in a third, a prosocial ending was presented. An entirely different episode created a fourth (control) condition for the three experimental variations: (1) antisocial behavior with punishment, (2) antisocial behavior without punishment, and (3) prosocial behavior. In several experiments, various versions were shown to audiences, and subjects were tested later by their reactions to an experimental situation. Milgram and Shotland concluded that television's influence on antisocial behavior was "not proven." A careful examination of these experiments shows them to be flawed and poorly conceived, largely irrelevant to prior research, and a minor contribution to the large body of scientific evidence relevant to the topic. (HB)

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## MILGRAM'S SCOTCH VERDICT ON TV -- A RETRIAL

George Comstock<sup>\*</sup>

An evaluation of *Television and Antisocial Behavior. Field Experiments* by Stanley Milgram and R. Lance Shotland. New York: Academic Press, 1973.<sup>\*\*</sup>

In 1971, several hundred New Yorkers visited a "gift center" in a midtown building to collect a radio they had been promised for watching an episode of *Medical Center*, a prime-time TV series, at a theater. Later, in Chicago, Detroit, and New York, home viewers encountered an unexceptional 30-second public service spot after seeing a *Medical Center* program. Still later, 619 high school students evaluated a newscast in a hotel room set up as a laboratory where a partially filled see-through plastic charity box was included in the furnishings.

### EXTRAORDINARY STUDY, REMARKABLE BOOK

All were guinea pigs. In each case, exposure to antisocial behavior on television was manipulated, and effects on similar behavior measured in real life. The result is an extraordinary study, and (for different, less salutary reasons) a remarkable book.

The study is extraordinary because network television was not only the independent variable, but the network altered programs to create experimental conditions; viewing occurred in relatively normal circumstances; and, the dependent variable was actual behavior. These are characteristics conventionally specified for the "ideal" television experiment. For this reason, the study merits thorough examination.

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<sup>\*</sup>The author was science adviser and senior research coordinator to the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior which issued its report in 1972, *Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence*.

<sup>\*\*</sup>The review, in slightly shorter form, is scheduled for publication in the *Journal of Communication*, 24:3, Summer, 1974.

The research was sponsored by CBS. The official estimate of its cost is "approximately half a million dollars."<sup>1</sup> It also required the active participation of CBS. This direct involvement is another unusual aspect: this is probably the unique instance of the manipulation of programming by a network in behalf of the study of television's effects on human behavior. Milgram and Shotland report that the network not only honored its commitment not to meddle in any way, but also cooperated completely. Joseph Klapper, CBS's research director, and the others responsible at CBS merit the very highest praise.

### SEVEN EXPERIMENTS

There were seven experiments, all concerned with antisocial behavior towards a medical charity. At the heart was the preparation of a *Medical Center* story with several alternative endings.

The *Medical Center* episode concerns a young father, Tom Desmond, under severe emotional and financial pressure. His wife is ill, unable to work, and facing an operation; he is behind on the payments and faces the loss of the small boat which he hires out; and he has lost his job as an orderly at the hospital. This personal crisis occurs at the same time that the hospital is conducting a charity drive, and Dr. Joe Gannon, whom Tom blames for his job problems, is visibly prominent on television and elsewhere in connection with the drive. The charity drive becomes the focus of Tom's frustration and anger.

Three versions of the episode were prepared. In two (antisocial), he smashes and steals the money from several of the hospital's charity-drive collection boxes, in one case being punished (jail) and the other not (escape to Mexico). In the third (prosocial) version, he hovers over a box with a club but eventually decides to drop in a coin. An entirely different episode, described as "sentimental," created a fourth, control condition for the three experimental variations: (a) antisocial behavior with punishment, (b) antisocial behavior without punishment, and (c) prosocial behavior.

In three experiments, various versions were shown to audiences at a theater. A week or so later, those who chose to pick up a free radio at a downtown "distribution center" found themselves unwitting subjects when they entered an office, and discovered, *one*, a sign that there were no more radios, and *two*, a Project Hope plastic collection box containing coins, a \$10, and four \$1, including one slightly sticking out.

Subsequent behavior was coded using concealed television cameras. When the subject left, he found a sign directing him to another office, where he received the promised radio.

The results (as reported by the authors):

Experiment 1: The four programs were shown to create four experimental conditions. Subjects: 342 males and females recruited by newspaper ads and handbills. Low level of antisocial behavior (stole all money, 5.2 percent; stole protruding dollar, 3.5 percent; unsuccessfully tried to break into box, 6.9 percent; and, stole other items, 10.7 percent). Almost no prosocial behavior (four donations in all). No significant differences in effects among versions, although the neutral program was followed by the lowest box-breaking rate.

Experiment 2: The prosocial version was dropped because of the absence of any evidence of effects. Within each of the remaining three conditions (neutral, and antisocial with and without punishment), frustration was manipulated by presenting half the subjects with directions to a second office in the same building for radio pickup (low frustration), making the original treatment the high frustration condition. Subjects: 488 males and females recruited by mail from lists of high school seniors and lists of persons making installment plan purchases of some sort. Frustration proved to be strongly related to antisocial behavior; there were no significant differences in effects among versions.

Experiment 3: The neutral and antisocial with punishment versions only were used, with a "modeling condition" added: a broken Project Hope box, surrounded by scattered coins, was included in the

office furnishings. Subjects: 238 males and females recruited by mail from a list of installment plan buyers. There were no significant differences in effects among the four conditions (each television version with and without the model).

The other four experiments involved somewhat different circumstances, including viewing at home and the imitative influence of the portrayal of an abusive telephone call on metropolitan television audiences:

Experiment 4: 188 subjects were recruited off the streets around Times Square to watch either the antisocial with punishment or neutral control versions in an empty office where there was also the partially filled Project Hope Box. No significant differences.

Experiment 5: Next, the authors manipulated exposure at home by televising an antisocial version and using the previous week's irrelevant program as a control. Subjects were recruited by advance mailings which drew attention to the program, asked them to watch and evaluate it, and invited them to the gift center. In New York, the antisocial with punishment version was used, and there were no effects (302 subjects). In St. Louis, the antisocial without punishment version was used, and there were no effects (590 subjects).

Experiment 6: Opportunity to imitate an abusive telephone call was manipulated. The dependent measure was response to a 30-second Project Hope pitch seeking telephone pledges which followed the *Medical Center* episode. In the antisocial versions, the frustrated young father twice harangues a telephone solicitor for the hospital; in the prosocial version, there was no telephone sequence although the protagonist did finally contribute to the medical charity. In Chicago, it was prosocial vs. neutral; in Detroit, antisocial with punishment vs. neutral; and in both cases there were too few calls for analysis. In New York, the Detroit test was repeated and response was stimulated by increasing the length of display for the telephone number and by repeating the spot; there were more calls but no significant differences.

Experiment 7: The final "evening news" study involved the recruitment of 619 high school seniors to evaluate a newscast and some commercials on closed-circuit television in a specially-equipped room at New York's Statler-Hilton, whose furnishings included the usual Project Hope box. In one condition, the newscast contained a report of the breaking and pilfering of Project Hope boxes, including the display of a smashed box and a hidden-camera filming of the prying loose of a single dollar from another. In a control condition, this sequence was omitted. Results said to be "conflicting" are reported: significantly more "all the money" thefts in the neutral condition, but more single dollars stolen in the antisocial version.

#### A SCOTCH VERDICT

Conclude the authors: "First, the evidence...generated must be taken seriously, and serve as a constraint on discussion of television's effects. For the results of the present experiment are not that we obtained no findings, but rather that we obtained no differences in those exposed to our different stimulus programs....(I)f television is on trial, the judgment of this investigation must be the Scottish verdict: Not proven."

It's refreshing to find social scientists reporting null results with the appeal, "Take this seriously!" However, when one does take the requested serious look, what one finds is rather puzzling, and a very long way from the "ideal" television study.

#### EVASION OF THEORY

First there is the presentation. The authors write as if the concept "theory" were an import from Mars that arrived after deadline. There is no discussion of the research on observational learning, imitation, or the disinhibition and instigation of anti-social behavior. In their minds, science may not quite be non-cumulative, but the seeking of guidance from the published literature



is apparently viewed as unseemingly academic. As a result, it is impossible to understand how or where their research fits in.

The sole reviews cited (and described as "excellent") are by Singer (1971) and Feshbach and Singer (1971). Where you would expect theory to be treated, there is a long quotation from Hartley's 1964 critique of Bandura and Berkowitz's laboratory research. All of these were sponsored by the industry, and all are skeptical about evidence suggesting that television might contribute to antisocial behavior.<sup>2</sup>

More embarrassingly, they are just the material that a network would have at hand to give to someone seeking background material. It is painful to see that Goranson's equally recent (1970) review, which takes a rather contrary view, is neither cited nor discussed. Also unmentioned are the well-known reviews by Weiss (1969) and by Tannenbaum and Greenberg (1968), and the assortment of materials organized by Baker and Ball (1969) as a staff report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence -- which contains relevant discussions by Goranson, Catton, and Feshbach. Absent, too, is any discussion of the conclusions and interpretation of the evidence of the effects of television violence of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, although its report (1972) was issued almost two years prior to the appearance of Milgram and Shotland. It is as if the two authors were completely unfamiliar with the field.

So, where does this research fit in? Well, it certainly does not bear at all on the scientific literature on learning, since there are only data on behavior and not on the acquisition of behaviors or attitudes. Learning is not measured. Nor does it bear on the literature on disinhibition or instigation, since there are no manipulations hypothesized to invoke them. So it is hard to see why the authors would feel that their research should constrain discussion about television's antisocial effects, since such discussion largely derives from and centers around these two areas of research.

True, Milgram and Shotland do not find any evidence of the performance of antisocial behavior modelled on television, and on the surface this would seem to bear on the issue of whether the findings demonstrating observational learning from television have any implications for real life behavior. However, a close look at the conceptualization and design of the study dispels any early excitement over discovering very meaningful evidence.

The research would seem to represent a rather singular and limited thrust -- the test of the hypothesis that *any* specific antisocial act shown on television will have fairly immediate and quite widespread imitation. Now that's a scary proposition, but if true we'd long be well aware of it with every evening's dramatizations predicting the next few days' newspaper headlines.

Consider the portrayal on television of tire slashing. For research of this design to detect imitation of such a portrayal, an audience of 30 million viewers would have to produce perhaps 4.5 million tire slashers. Yet, probably 1,000 nationwide would be enough to cause public and network anxiety about such portrayals. It is difficult to take the charity bank evidence seriously when it represents such a rough and simple-minded index of the phenomenon.

It's odd that the authors chose this focus. They point out themselves that the limited number of subjects that can be included in an experiment means that effects would have to be sizeable -- perhaps enormous -- to be detected by this methodology, while even a very sparse scattering of antisocial imitation could amount to significant social disruption. Is it possible they did not think about this, or about the issue on which their work would ~~actually~~ bear, when they started?

#### PERVASIVE FUZZINESS

This fuzziness pervades the book. The hypotheses are hardly developed, and are not thought out beyond the "gee whiz -- let's test it" stage of grad student talk. For example, Berkowitz's

experiments would suggest the hypothesis that antisocial portrayals might create anxiety over such behavior and thus be inhibitory, and both Berkowitz's and Bandura's experiments suggest the hypothesis that the no punishment versions would have greater effect than the punishment version. Yet, there is no discussion of these plausible hypotheses, so we have no inkling why the authors chose to ignore them.

This is too bad, for a little thinking along these lines might have altered the design and analysis. The authors subject every comparison to two-tailed tests, and begin with an analysis over *all* conditions which, since no differences are found, precludes looking at selected comparisons. Yet the literature leads to hypotheses open to one-tailed test in the more sensitive circumstance of comparing a relevant single condition against a baseline.

#### HIGH RISK METHODOLOGY

Nevertheless, there is a great deal to be learned here from Milgram and Shotland. For one thing, they demonstrate the extreme difficulty of performing successful experiments outside the laboratory.

Those who are inclined to reject studies on the basis of self-selection will shudder. Only about 5-7 percent of those recruited actually showed up, although of those whose first step was a theater showing about three-fourths made it to the gift center.

Given the great costs of this kind of experimentation, there is clearly a risk of extremely small return. A central problem is the lack of flexibility once work has begun. The basic manipulation remains the same throughout, and this high correlation across the separate studies means that any flaws or undetected biases contaminate all.

In this instance, this may be a truly serious difficulty. The use of a medical charity, a social institution which myth, at least, holds to be sacrosanct even among crooks may have been an error, but

that's just a guess. What is more likely to have flawed the study is the structure of the stimulus episode.

I saw the antisocial stimulus film, and my initial reaction was that, however "exciting" the smashing of the charity boxes may have seemed to the authors, the dramatic component that might have an effect on viewer behavior was not this rather absurd act (performed to "pulsating jazz"). Instead, it is the behavior in which this act is embedded and for which it serves as a symbol -- getting drunk in response to frustration, with the possibility of acting impulsively -- *any* kind of impulsive action. This is the realistic human response that is portrayed and with which a viewer could identify; the charity box rampage is only ritualistic.

There is no science for such issues, and it is perhaps too much to expect social psychologists to have the sensibilities required for the effective use of literary or dramatic materials. Still, the authors are not entirely unaware of this question, for they lament that the drunkenness was inserted in the plot *over their objections* on the grounds that dramatic convention made it necessary.

#### THE TELEPHONE EXPERIMENT

The telephone experiment is especially appealing because it involved the home audience with its large size and freedom from the artifice of the simulated "gift center" or the Statler-Hilton news viewing lab. The null findings are less entrancing than they may at first appear, however.

In Detroit and Chicago, there was a total of 72 calls for all four programs. In New York, where, as Milgram notes, a response of 1/10th of 1 percent of the estimated 1.2 million viewing homes for *Medical Center* would lead to 1,000 calls for the antisocial version alone, there was a total of 193 calls for both versions. What this seems to demonstrate is the failure of the test stimulus -- the Project Hope television appeal -- to generate any emotional involvement. Can one really expect imitation in such a context?

THE STATLER-HILTON NEWS LAB

The news viewing study deserves separate mention because of the crudeness and likely failure of its manipulation. Whether a lab ostensibly set up to test commercial television somehow escapes the taint of artificiality sometimes attributed to the university laboratory is moot, although it would hardly seem an environment where behavior would be especially unsuspecting and "ordinary."

What apparently concretely strained credulity was the presentation of a charity box in the hotel room where the newscasts were to be seen. Hotel rooms with charity boxes are not common, nor is charity collection a usual byproduct of any kind of psychological or commercial experimentation. So it is hardly surprising that Milgram reports a 100 percent increase among those seeing the news about the charity thefts who said they believed the experiment concerned honesty. Given this sensitization of at least some subjects in the crucial experimental condition, the results are properly dismissed.<sup>3</sup>

IN PERSPECTIVE

Given these factors, the immodest tone that occasionally pops up is disconcerting. Perhaps it only reflects the authors' own discomfort. Still, it is irksome to be told that "logically compelling results can be obtained only by using an experimental design..." when the authors are so pinch-penny about the relationship of the research to the rest of the field and, later, explain how the fewness of subjects might well bar meaningful test of antisocial effects.

There is also much that is too familiar, including the now-clichéd deadpan labeling which has helped to make experimental social psychology the glitter rock of science. Those who liked "the Lost Letter Technique" will surely love "the Dangling Dollar" (that protruding bill).

Taken as a whole, however, this is a welcome addition to the research on television's effects. Both CBS and the authors deserve our gratitude. It is simply important that it be seen in perspective -- as a set of very expensive but essentially modest experiments, possibly flawed and poorly conceived, largely irrelevant to prior research, and a minor contribution to the very large body of scientific evidence relevant to the topic.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>John A. Schneider, president, CBS, in a February 20, 1974, letter accompanying distribution of the book.

<sup>2</sup>The Jerome Singer review was financed by NBC. The review by Seymour Feshbach and Robert D. Singer introduces a field experiment financed by the Joint Committee for Research on Television and Children, an industry group. The critique by R. E. Hartley was commissioned by CBS, and Baker (1969) reports that it served as the basis for the testimony of Joseph Klapper, CBS research director, before the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1968.

<sup>3</sup>There is no way to rescue these data, because as a causal factor guessing the purpose of the experiment is entirely different from, say, an increase of inhibition over dishonesty as the result of exposure to a report of its occurrence. In this instance, the subjects' sensitization is contaminatory because it is not separable as a source of behavior.

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