

The Milgram Experiment, Submission to Authority, Your Life, and Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

The world is, quite simply, a jungle.

You have your strong species and your weak species.

You have your strong people and your weak people.

Strong people impose their will on the weak and make the weak act in ways that benefit the strong. In the animal kingdom, for example, the strong apes have access to the best mates, the most food, and the best lifestyle. The weaker apes fear them. The stronger apes are strong based on their ability to intimidate and impose their will on the weaker apes, their size, and other indicators of strength and authority.

People are no different from apes. People are controlled by, intimidated by, and fear other people. Peoples' lives are also shaped by the people around them whom they fear. Your career and life are likely being manipulated and controlled by others. How much of your life and career is being held back by the people who have power over you and whom you fear?



On the corner of the street I grew up on, there was a man who was in his 50s and worked for the city mowing lawns in the summers and plowing snow in the winter. I spent one summer working for the city and got to know this man and his situation during my time there.

The man lived with his mother. He was not unintelligent and had attended college. He did not use drugs, or have anything in particular wrong with him. He did not have any romantic interests that I knew of. His home had a large window in the living room that faced the street. Every evening the mother and son sat in the living room watching television.

In the grand scheme of things, there is nothing wrong with a man living with his mother. However, this situation was different. When the man would be outside during yard work, the mother would often come out and yell at him and tell him he was stupid. The mother called him at work several times a day. The mother prohibited the man from going out at night. The man constantly talked about how his mother needed this or needed that. When we would be at lunch the man would say things like "my mother does not let me eat this", for example.

The man was over six feet tall and two hundred pounds. He was a large man and physically somewhat imposing. Nevertheless, his entire life was controlled by his small, feeble and mean mother. Since he had grown up on my street, I also knew about his mother. She was not a nice woman and did not have any friends. She was constantly making her son take her to the doctor, run errands, and so forth. As far as I knew, the mother had been controlling the son like this his entire life.

In most of the jobs I have had, I have seen very powerful bosses with underlings whose happiness and sense of worth is largely controlled by others. There is this dynamic in many work places. In fact, many people are so much under the control of others in their workplaces that they are willing to stuff that is illegal and more to please their bosses. They are willing to sacrifice their life and careers for people who are more powerful.

Many people sacrifice their lives and careers by either following, or being intimidated by people who are (or whom they perceive as) more powerful than them. In fact, most people are followers and their emotions, career path, and so forth is largely controlled by their perceptions of what other people think about them and whether "the boss throws them a bone" now and then. In fact, it is often frightening when we start to realize how many of our actions, perceptions, and more are actually being controlled by others.

One of the most disturbing experiments I ever heard about was conducted in the July of 1961 by Stanley Milgram, a psychologist at Yale University. In these experiments, Milgram recruited all sorts of people (attorneys, sales people, construction workers, and others) to participate for \$4.50 an hour in an experiment that dealt with learning and punishment.

A doctor in a white lab coat told the study participants that they were to act as "teachers" and read a list of associations to a "learner" who was in the next room. The teacher was instructed to give the learner a shock every time the learner got an

incorrect answer and to also increase the intensity of shock after each wrong answer. The shock values were labeled "slight shock-15 volts" all the way to "danger: severe shock-450 volts."

(While the teachers did not know it), the real experiment was to see how much punishment the teachers would give the learners. The learners were actually actors who were trained to react to each shock the teacher thought they were giving (none of the shocks were actually real). When the shock got to 180-volts, the learner would scream out that the pain was far too much to bear and would bang on the wall separating them from the teacher. The learner would also scream and complain about a heart condition. At 330 volts, there was complete silence when the shocks were given.

May of the teachers asked to stop the experiment and check on the learner. Whenever the teacher indicated they wanted to stop the experiment, they were given a succession of statements to continue in the following order:

1. Please *continue*.
2. The experiment requires that you *continue*.
3. It is absolutely essential that you *continue*.
4. You have no other choice, you *must* go on.

After these statements, most of them continued giving shocks after they were told they would not be responsible for the harm they were causing the learner. The experiment showed how ordinary people can be induced to perform harmful acts towards others simply by the presence of authority. In a 1974 article, "The Perils of Obedience", Milgram summarized his findings:

The legal and philosophic aspects of obedience are of enormous importance, but they say very little about how most people behave in concrete up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much paid an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist. Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' [participants'] strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' [participants'] ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation.

Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.

In 1969, during the Vietnam War, one of the experimenters who was planning on avoiding the draft wrote to Milgram:

While I was a subject in 1964, though I believed that I was hurting someone, I was totally unaware of why I was doing so.

Few people ever realize when they are acting according to their own beliefs and when they are meekly submitting to authority... To permit myself to be drafted with the understanding that I am submitting to authority's demand to do something very wrong would make me frightened of myself... I am fully prepared to go to jail if I am not granted Conscientious Objector status. Indeed, it is the only course I could take to be faithful to what I believe. My only hope is that members of my board act equally according to their conscience...

The Milgram Experiment demonstrates that most people act in accordance with others wishes and not their own. Many of us are submitting to authority in our jobs and careers when we should, instead, be acting of our own volition. The Milgram Study has been cited to explain some of the worst and most significant atrocities that have occurred such as the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide.

When I started practicing law I started to see attorneys who were working for powerful and charismatic bosses. These attorneys would do anything for their bosses. They would lie to others. They would stay up all night. They would ruin their marriages to satisfy their bosses. In fact, these attorneys were controlled psychologically and even physically by the authority of another. They allowed themselves to be controlled to their own detriment.

The man who lived with his mother on the street I grew up on.

The attorneys I have met who were controlled so completely by bosses.

The people I have known whom have based their lives around others completely.

All of these people are, in essence, being controlled by others in a way that harms them. Instead of acting in their own interest, the control another has over them actually harms them and is against their self-interest.

Conclusions

In your life and career, the odds are very, very good that someone may have a certain degree of control over you and you may be acting in ways that are against your self-interest out of fear of the other person. The man who lived with his mother was not allowed to live as a man with a family, have outside friends, and more, because her control over him was so complete.

While there is nothing wrong with having bosses or being controlled by others (everyone really is), there is a huge danger in this when someone is making you act in ways that are not in your best interest. You should question the wisdom of following the people you are and realize how much you may be under someone else's thumb.

You should question your career and life and whether or not you are where you could be. Is your career a product of your fear of another—or submission to authority? How much of your life is shaped by the fears others have instilled in you, or how much you fear someone else? You should look at where you are and how much of this is based on your fear and submission to authority.

THE LESSON

There is probably someone in your life and career who exerts a degree of control over you, and you may act against your own self-interest for fear of that person. While there is nothing wrong with being controlled by others – it is usually inevitable – you must at all costs avoid acting against your own best interests because of external control. Examine your position in life, and determine how much of it is based on your fears and submission to authority.