

# Sketchy and Unethical Experiments

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Entertainment

## Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

### Podcast Transcript

**(Note:  
transcript  
consists of  
episode  
outline)**

This week's episode is  
about some of the most  
famous sketchy

psychological experiments of all time, and to me what really sets them apart is the motivation...these were well-meaning experiments by people who intended to make the world a better place. But they're so obviously misguided.

Let's start with maybe the most famous of unethical psychological experiments...

The Milgram experiment, 1961.

Otherwise known as the "what's the worst thing you would do for 4 dollars" experiment. The fundamental question that Stanley Milgram wanted to answer: How difficult is it to convince ethical people to do unethical things? For instance, why did So many Germans go along with—

and even actively participate in—Nazi war crimes?

So here's the setup: Milgram posted an ad offering \$4 for an hour of "volunteer" work. Which, I hate to quibble but that's not actually volunteer work if you're getting paid, that's just a really low-paying job. I worked at Taco Bell in high school and didn't make much more than 4 bucks an hour and I sure as hell didn't volunteer.

So the way it works is that two volunteers show up at the lab at a specified time and are told that they are going to be participating in a study to help determine the effect of punishment on memory retention. In other words, is it more difficult for a human to

retain information when experiencing pain? And The answer by the way is yeah, no shit. This could have been a simple experiment—you try to do simple math problems, and then you try to do those same problems while I'm punching you in the face. Case closed. So the dumbass premise should have been clue number one that there was something fishy going on here.

The two volunteers were told that they were going to be assigned roles in the study by randomly drawing slips of paper. One would be the teacher, and one would be the learner. But in reality, the roles weren't random at all, and there was only one actual volunteer. The other "volunteer" was an actor.

The two volunteers drew slips of paper, but the drawing was rigged: both of the papers said teacher, so the volunteer believed he had randomly been assigned the role of teacher, and the actor doesn't show his paper but pretends that he drew the "learner" slip.

So now a scientist known as the "experimenter" — these titles are very creative—explains to the actual volunteer that he is going to be administering a series of electric shocks to the other guy. They are both led into a room with an electric chair, where they receive sample shocks to illustrate that the chair is functional and that the researchers aren't fucking around. The volunteer then watches as The other

guy—the actor-slash-learner is strapped into the chair.

The volunteer is then taken to a nearby room, where he can hear the actor but can't see him.

His job now is to read pairs of word to the learner, and see how many of them the guy can remember. For Every incorrect answer, he has to push a button which administers an electric shock. The shocks increase by 15 volts for each wrong answer. Of course, there weren't any actual shocks. The actor was over in the room with the electric chair, pretending to make mistakes and playing a recording of an electrical zapping sound and acting as though he was in pain with every supposed shock.

Now obviously most of the volunteers weren't sadists, so they were pretty unthrilled about having to play torturer. But hey, you gotta earn your four bucks. I'm not electrocuting someone for less than six dollars, just throwing that out there. I guess it WAS the 1960s so four bucks then would be like three hundred dollars today, I don't understand inflation.

So as the shocks became more powerful, the actor would eventually start complaining, then begging and screaming, and when the volunteers—the guys administering the shocks—objected to the experiment, the scientist had a prepared script. He or she was supposed to say these four things, in

this 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.

If the volunteer still complained, the experiment would stop.

I love that you're telling a volunteer he has no choice. "You signed a piece of paper, now murder this dude. Don't be a little bitch. We're not paying you four bucks to be a decent person. Less talk more zap.

Let's talk about predictions, and results.



Before the experiment, Milgram polled a bunch of students and scientists and asked how far they believed the volunteers would be willing to go. Like how much juice would they pump. Of course everyone said that the only a tiny fraction of participants would administer the maximum voltage, because most people naively have faith in humanity. Specifically, they believed that only one tenth of one percent of participants would give full juice. Interestingly, Milgram himself believed that German people would be more susceptible to the lure of authoritarianism, and so he envisioned this experiment as a precursor to the main event. Basically this first experiment with

Americans would provide the baseline, they were the control group, and then he'd bring in the varsity team of Germans to provide a masterclass in sadistic authoritarian fascism. The reason he believed this was Because he was a shitty racist.

But as it turned out, all of the participants delivered shocks of at least 300 volts, and more than half—65%—delivered maximum juice. 450 volts. None of them appeared to be happy about it, so that's something. No one was like, "ride the lightning bitch!" Yee-haw. All of them showed signs of distress, agitation and panic, and some of them told the researchers that they didn't want payment, like you can keep your blood money. All four of

those blood dollars. Pretty easy to take a moral stand when the price of following your conscience is one pumpkin-spice latte.

Again, this was the sixties, so four bucks probably wasn't \$300 but it was probably the exact price of like an ounce of weed and a lava lamp and a pet rock. Some silly putty and a comic book.

But even the volunteers who refused to administer that last extra large shock, they didn't storm out or demand an end to the experiment, they didn't even check on the guy in the next room, they were just like, I gotta be honest I'm not feeling this anymore, so I'm just gonna slip out the back door and forget this ever happened, you have fun torturing this dude, here let turn up the

voltage for you, best of luck with the whole barbaric electrocution scenario. I'll leave my address if you want to send me four bucks.

Here was milgram's summary of the experiment:

"I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much [pain](#) 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"

You can still visit the Simulated Shock Generator and Event

Recorder, aka the *shock box*, in Akron Ohio, at the archives of the history of American psychology. Not a compelling enough reason to visit Ohio, honestly. That's not a good state. We've insulted so many states. We went off on New Jersey, Arizona, Ohio, I want to be clear we don't have anything against any state. Except North Dakota. Fuck the topmost Dakota. Its too far north, I don't think it's committed to America. I feel like it has Canadian tendencies.

So there have been a variety of versions of this experiment staged in different locations, to determine whether people in different geographical regions and from different social strata would react differently. And nope, people are all equally

bastards. Most of us are so ingrained with the idea of respecting authority, even those of us who think we're so individualistic, we're rebels, but ultimately there's this strong impulse to conform, to maintain the status quo, to respect hierarchy. The only aspect that really made a difference, it turned out, was the proximity of the scientist. The closer you are to the authority figure, the more likely you are to comply. If it's some jackass on speakerphone being like "fry him! It goes to 11!!" Nah.

Robbers cave experiment  
It's 1954, two groups of young boys between the ages of 10 and 12 arrive at a summer camp in south eastern Oklahoma. 11 boys per group.

The boys chose names for

their groups...the eagles and the rattlers.

The group members were encouraged to bond and get to know each other, all without any knowledge of the other group.

Over the course of a few days the groups were allowed to glimpse each other, and learned that they were sharing much of the same area. Rivalry sprang up immediately.

Members of each group began judging and disparaging the other group, and undermining each other in subtle ways.

One group attempted to claim the baseball diamond by planting a flag. The boys began challenging the opposing group to competitions. So the experiment moved into phase two, and the counselors created a baseball tournament.



Things got ugly fast. The two groups burned each other's flags, ransacked each other's barracks, and eventually organized a fight. A ten year old rumble. A good old fashioned prepubescent beat down. The counselors broke it up before these kids went full lord of the flies, but the basic premise of the experiment had been confirmed...tribalism is real. I'm not sure why we needed an experiment. They could have just paid attention during the previous decade (WW2). Or waited 70 years, for covid to come along.

So in phase three the idea was to bring the boys together, to see how difficult it would be to heal the divide. There were movie nights, shared

meals, field trips. And the boys bonded immediately, no friction, they all joined hands and sang koom-bye-ah. Nah. It was a disaster. So the counselors devised increasingly elaborate scenarios that required cooperation. The water was shut off and the boys had to work together to get it flowing again. And it worked, they joined forces to overcome the obstacle, so if you want to encourage cooperation, just put a bunch of children's lives in danger. We haven't fed them for 2 1/2 weeks, now they've banded together to stay alive. It's heartwarming, really. They're totally cooperating, look, they're drawing straws. But that night there was another massive food fight in the cafeteria. Over time the barriers between the boys

did slowly come down...somewhat. So there's a happy ending. It turns out that Groups of people can be brought together for a common goal, as long as they're all ten years old.

So that was robbers cave, AKA the entire premise of the Harry Potter novels.

Seriously, eagles and rattlers? Griffendor and slitherin? Dividing up groups of preteens and having them compete against each other. It's all very jk Rowling

So the experiment was considered a shining example of RCT or realistic conflict theory, and honestly it reveals a lot about what's going on in America right now.

Tribalism, us vs them. When you're competing for what you perceive to

be limited resources, whether it's money or power or the ability to set the agenda, It's easy to depict a rival group as the enemy, and once you've decided they're the enemy, your brain feels justified in ascribing the worst possible motives to them, because it feels like they're a threat to everything you hold dear. You can believe that they're Witches, demons, heretics, a bunch of Pedophiles in the basement of a pizza restaurant. Your "enemy" becomes a caricature.

Let's move on to an experiment that's a little less not evil. This one is...ouch. The so-called "monster study from 1939. That was a good year for monsters. Cough Hitler cough. University of Iowa,

the researcher's name was Wendell Johnson, and the actual experiment was supervised by graduate student Mary Tudor. The victims—I mean subjects—of the experiment were 22 orphan children. It was a speech study, focused on stuttering. As usual the group was split in half...in this case, half of the orphans were degraded and belittled for their speech patterns while the other half were praised, and the question that researchers were trying to answer was whether stuttering would be exacerbated or even created via verbal abuse. Basically, Could you browbeat a kid so bad he or she started stuttering and didn't stop. He must've used some really creative technical jargon to make this not seem

absolutely satanic. Like how do you propose this to the University? We're going to utilize negative vocal feedback to determine whether speech pathology can be engendered in a select group of disadvantaged youth. And they're like, hmm. Sounds a lot like you're going to intentionally traumatize orphans. I mean sure, if you say it like that it sounds bad...

So what's often left out of the backstory is that Wendell himself was a stutterer. He was once quoted as saying, "I became a speech pathologist because I needed one." Initially he worked with a large group of graduate students who stuttered, and they used a ton of borderline torturous

experimental methods to try to cure themselves. Electroshock therapy, startling each other and shooting guns next to each other's ears, etc. Kind of sounds like a standard fraternity if I'm honest. Like a jackass episode.

The prevailing theory of the time was that stuttering was a result of misdirected brain signals. Many people believe that if you were using your non-dominant hand for activities that you would normally perform with your dominant hand, that could cross the wires in your brain. So at one point the graduate students put casts on one hand and tried to go about their day using their opposite hand and of course it had no effect. on their speech, anyway. Like it probably

sucked trying to wipe their butt or sign checks or whatever, but it had zero effect on stuttering.

But Wendell Johnson had a completely different theory. He had always been a stutter... He had developed one in middle school and he believed it was due to A teacher who had suggested that he was stuttering when he wasn't. He felt that he had begun to fixate on the idea of stuttering, it was kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy. He believed that he developed a stutter because he was terrified of developing a stutter. Very similar to insomnia, panic attacks, anxiety disorders. The only way to prove this was true, though, was to induce stuttering in non-stuttering children. He had



to re-create this traumatic event from his childhood. As test subjects, he decided to use children living in a veterans orphanage. The children of men and women who died in combat. We talked about this before: If you're going to do something horrible you might as well do the worst version of that horrible thing. might as well go for the most vulnerable populations, really reach for the bottom of that barrel. Of the 22 students, 10 actually suffered from stuttering, and those were broken into two groups. The rest of the non-stuttering children were likewise divided among the groups so each group contained 5 stutterers and 6 children with no discernible speech pathology. After that, the experiment was simple.

Tell one group that they all speak terribly, that every one of them had a stuttering problem, that they were basically incomprehensible and terrible at communicating, while heaping praise on the other group. The graduate student, Mary, spent 45 minutes per day with each child. That's a hell of a job. What do you do for a living? I verbally abuse children. I don't get paid for it, but I get those sweet college credits. Why would you do that? I'm trying to create pathologies in children. I'm sorry, did you say you try to cure pathologies in children? No, I see why you would think that, but no. It's for science.

The children in the abuse group began performing poorly in school, many

became non communicative. I'm shocked, really. From a letter that Mary wrote to Wendell: "I believe that in time they . . . will recover, but we certainly made a definite impression on them." That's one way to put it. "Impression"...that's like "sketchy." You keep using that word, I do not think it means what you think it means. essentially, the children in the abuse group were predictably traumatized.

However, when it came to their actual speech fluency, the experiment was a total flop. two of the non-stutterers in the abuse group actually improved their fluency, none developed a stutter, and the others were only marginally affected, while the praise group saw very

little improvement.

After the results came in, Wendell quickly attempted to bury the study, partly because it completely disproved his theory that stuttering could be created, and partly because he quickly realized that the entire study would be accurately viewed as basically a war crime without a war.

Especially when people on campus began referring to it as the monster study and comparing it to the human experimentation that was going on in Nazi Germany. Lots of references to Nazi Germany in this episode, that's really the gold standard for shitty human experimentation.

These days it's generally accepted that there is a

genetic component to stuttering. children who stutter didn't develop it because of the way they were treated, and while most stuttering in children goes away naturally—with only around 25% persisting into adulthood. — it definitely can be improved by treatment from an early age.

Ironically, that should have been the conclusion of Wendells monster study. Clearly, you can't create a stutterer. But by burying the results he compounded the negative aspects of the study... Not only did he traumatize these children, he also buried results that might have had some scientific significance and possibly caused less suffering. Instead, based on his subsequent publications, in which he stuck to his

guns insisting that stuttering was all nurture and zero nature, the scientific community believed for years that it was best to not treat children who stuttered because if you even acknowledged that they stuttered you would supposedly make the condition worse. so he did a terrible thing and then hid the fact that he did a terrible thing, thereby not even utilizing any positive aspects of the terrible thing. So it was a total waste. Like if you're going to make a lamp out of human skin, at least use the damn lamp. Or give it to charity. give it to orphans.

In 2001 there was an investigative report in the San Jose Mercury news that shed light on the

monster study and turned attention to the surviving victims of the cause group. Seven of the participants eventually sued the University of Iowa, and won the lawsuit in 2007. None of them had become stutterers, but they became withdrawn, shy, reluctant to speak. Because yeah. They were awarded 1.2 million

Stanford prison  
experiment

1971. This is a controversial one, not just because the experiment was unethical, which it was, but also because the results are hotly disputed. Pretty much every aspect of the experiment is considered a travesty in different ways by different people. It's like a rorschach test of horribleness.

Everyone sees what they want to see, everyone hates this experiment in their own special way.

The experiment is unique in that it was funded by the US Navy, and much of it was filmed. The fact that the government funded some shady shit isn't unique, but it's unique in this episode. None of the other experiments were sanctioned by the Feds.

The researcher, Stanford psychology professor Philip zimbardo, had a definite and clear agenda. He wanted to demonstrate scientifically that humans are black hearted trash monsters. The concept was simple and was sort of a cross between the Milgram experiment and robbers cave.

The experiment was



structured like a prison; One group of college students was designated as the jailers, the other group was the guards. And the idea was to determine if people who are randomly put in a position of power will abuse that power. Spoiler alert: they will. Especially if they think that's what you want them to do.

In Zimbardo's own words, "the ease with which ordinary people could be led to engage in anti-social acts by putting them in situations where they felt anonymous, or they could perceive of others in ways that made them less than human, as enemies or objects"

Are you familiar with the term "demand characteristics"? So this is

when the participants of a study figure out—or at least believe they've figured out—the purpose of an experiment, they come to a conclusion as to what the researchers are trying to achieve, and they alter their behavior to deliver those results. This is a big problem in scientific studies. Which is what happened.

24 participants, all middle class white males. Which tracks. We're the worst. The entire experiment took place in a 35-foot basement in the Stanford psych department. So it was on school property, and government funded. Here's an idea, Colleges should exert like a tiny amount of control over their facilities. Maybe don't just be like, here are the keys to the basement. Go

do science. Wait, You're not going to torture anyone right? You wouldn't like completely violate all moral and ethical boundaries?

So The researchers went all collegiate drama club on the "prisoners", they staged "arrests" at their houses and booked them through the Palo Alto police department before transporting them to the "jail." Mug shots and strip searches, all the fun stuff. the prisoners were then confined to fabricated cells, while the guards were free to roam and relax etc. The guards were initially coached by zimbardo, "You can create in the prisoners feelings of boredom, a sense of fear to some degree, you can create a notion of arbitrariness that their life

is totally controlled by us...in this situation we'll have all the power and they'll have none." They gave the guards sticks, like batons, and mirrored sunglasses. The official uniform of fascist douchebags. Guards were told to refer to prisoners by number instead of name. Obviously to dehumanize them. It's not always easy to whack John with a stick, but I can slap around "number six" no problem.

After a while the guards started giving preferential treatment to the most compliant prisoners and sadistically targeting anyone who seemed rebellious. One particular guard became a vicious asshole, and within barely 35 hours one prisoner started "freaking out",

ranting and cursing, and had to be released.

Guards forced prisoners to defecate in buckets, and if they particularly disliked a prisoner they refused to let them empty the buckets. Some prisoners were forced to sleep naked on the cement floor. Reminder: These were college kids. Apparently College was different back in the day. I went to UC Davis, we had science labs, I must have been sick on the day they forced students to get naked and shit in buckets.

Eventually one prisoner protested the treatment via a hunger strike, so the guards locked him in a closet and beat on the door to torment him.

The experiment had been scheduled to last two weeks but was terminated

after six days.

So We've talked about some of the problems with the experiment, specifically the fact that everyone quickly figured out what role they were supposed to play and enthusiastically gave the research is what they wanted. multiple participants from the original experiment have stated that they were just playing along with the very clear expectations and desires of the researchers. If you know what your professor wants you to do, yes going to it.

The other problem was the filming. We've talked about this before, but if you know you're being observed and filmed you're going to behave differently. That's why reality TV isn't.

There have been multiple attempts to re-create this experiment, in a more scientifically sound format, without the intrusive input from the researchers, and none of those subsequent experiments resulted in anything remotely like the sadistic results from the Stanford prison experiment.

So ultimately the results of the Stanford prison experiment are... useless. And we should point out that like many of these "experiments", this technically wasn't actually a scientific experiment in the traditional sense of the word. There was no control group, this was more of a situational observation. And a bad one. A poorly conceived and ineptly executed

“experiment” with a very clear agenda.

Sources:

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