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'Excuse Me. May I Have Your Seat?'

By MICHAEL LUO

Thirty years ago, they were wide-eyed, first-year graduate students, ordered by their iconoclastic professor, Dr. Stanley Milgram, to venture into the New York City subway to conduct an unusual experiment.

Their assignment: to board a crowded train and ask someone for a seat. Then do it again. And again.

"As a Bronxite, I knew, you don't do this," said Dr. Jacqueline Williams, now an assistant dean at Brooklyn College. Students jokingly asked their professor if he wanted to get them killed.

But Dr. Milgram was interested in exploring the web of unwritten rules that govern behavior underground, including the universally understood and seldom challenged first-come-first-served equity of subway seating. As it turned out, an astonishing percentage of riders - 68 percent when they were asked directly - got up willingly.

Quickly, however, the focus turned to the experimenters themselves. The seemingly simple assignment proved to be extremely difficult, even traumatic, for the students to carry out.

"It's something you can't really understand unless you've been there," said Dr. David Carraher, 55, now a senior scientist at a nonprofit group in Cambridge, Mass.

Dr. Kathryn Krogh, 58, a clinical psychologist in Arlington, Va., was more blunt: "I was afraid I was going to throw up."

More than three decades later, the memories are still surprisingly vivid, testimony perhaps to the trauma of their experience and an unintended postscript to a rare study on the delicate subway order.

Two weeks ago, a pair of reporters who set out to replicate the experiment struggled with similar inhibitions. The incredulous reactions they got from riders were the same as well. But they also stumbled upon convincing proof that New Yorkers have mellowed with time. The results were far from scientific, but, remarkably, 13 out of 15 people gave up their seats.

"Uh, O.K.," said one man, holding hands with his girlfriend, before getting up. "I've never heard that one before."

A construction worker sneered to a male reporter, "If you were a woman, then. . . ." He got up anyway.

Another woman, who sprang up from her seat, twice asked the reporter, who kept her eyes fixed on the ground, if she was O.K.

Dr. Milgram, who died in 1984 at age 51, got the idea for the experiment from a conversation with his mother-in-law, who complained to him one day that no one had offered her a seat on the subway. "It occurred to me: What would have happened had she asked for a seat?" he said in a 1974 interview in the magazine *Psychology Today*.

He suggested the experiment to one of his graduate student classes, but the students recoiled. Finally, one student, Ira Goodman, volunteered to try it with a partner. But instead of coming back after 20 trials as he had promised, he returned with only 14. When Dr. Milgram asked him what had happened, he said that it was just too difficult.

Dismissing his students' fears, Dr. Milgram set out to try it himself. But when he approached his first seated passenger, he found himself frozen.

"The words seemed lodged in my trachea and would simply not emerge," he said in the interview.

Retreating, he berated himself: "What kind of craven coward are you?"

A few unsuccessful tries later, he managed to choke out a request.

"Taking the man's seat, I was overwhelmed by the need to behave in a way that would justify my request," he said. "My head sank between my knees, and I could feel my face blanching. I was not role-playing. I actually felt as if I were going to perish."

From his own discomfort, Dr. Milgram sensed import. He had garnered notoriety several years earlier for a series of experiments in which test subjects were asked to administer what they thought were powerful electric shocks to fellow students. A stunning number did, a revelation in the power of authority. But Dr. Milgram had developed a new interest in the psychology of urban life, especially in invisible social dictates that help maintain order but go largely unnoticed until they are violated.

The following semester, he asked 10 members of his class on experimental social psychology to complete the experiment. The students descended into the subway in teams of two for support, polling an even number of men and women, and within those groups, an even number of people who were under 40 years old and over 40 years old. While one person asked, the other acted as an observer. They were responsible for 14 trials each, and the questions were phrased in four different ways.

In the first version, the experimenter said simply: "Excuse me. May I have your seat?" Here, 41 riders were asked, and 68 percent of the time people gave up their seats or sidled over.

In one variation, the experimenter pretended his or her partner was a stranger and asked loudly: "Excuse me. Do you think it would be all right if I asked someone for a seat?" The partner was to feign confusion. After repeating the question, the experimenter turned to ask the subject. The percentage who agreed dropped to 42 percent.

In another variation, the experimenter, holding a paperback mystery novel, asked: "Excuse me. May I

have your seat? I can't read my book standing up." With this request, the percentage fell to 38 percent.

The final method involved the experimenter handing a note with the seat request written on it to the rider. With this approach, the percentage held at about 50 percent.

Those tension-filled subway rides in the spring of 1972 are still easily recalled by many of Dr. Milgram's former students scattered across the country.

"I really did feel sick to my stomach," said Dr. Krogh, remembering her first attempt. "Afterwards, I thought, 'I wonder if that wasn't helpful because the person must have thought: "This person looks sick. She needs the seat." ' "

Dr. Carraher remembered leaning over and asking an elderly woman for her seat. The woman snapped: "If I were standing and you were sitting, I think it'd be very reasonable to ask you for your seat, but I'm not going to give you my seat."

The woman's neighbor, a man, was so embarrassed for Dr. Carraher that he immediately offered him his seat instead. Another man lectured him on his manners.

Dr. Maury Silver, 59, now a visiting professor at Yeshiva University, was only auditing the class at the time, so he refused to take part in the experiment. Later, he and another student of Dr. Milgram's, Dr. John Sabini, who went on to become the co-author of a paper on the experiment, were teaching a class together and asked their students to try the subway experiment themselves. Dr. Sabini, however, reminded his partner that he had skipped the experiment the first time around. Dr. Silver, who described himself as "one of the more embarrassable people on earth," resolved to try it at least once.

"I start to ask for the man's seat," he said. "Unfortunately, I turned so white and so faint, he jumps up and puts me in the seat."

Dr. Harold Takooshian, another former student, said he kept feeling there was something unethical in what he was doing, almost deceiving riders, so he developed a card that he would slip to them afterward that explained they had just participated in a psychology experiment. It also made the task slightly easier.

Now a professor at Fordham University, he said the experiment showed him how potentially explosive the cramped confines can be.

"Milgram's idea exposed the extremely strong emotions that lie beneath the surface," he said. "You have all these strangers together. That study showed how much the rules are saving us from chaos."

As for why door blockers, pole huggers and other egregious violators of subway etiquette do not experience the same opprobrium, perhaps another study is in order.