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Jerry M. Burger¹, Zackary M. Girgis¹, and Caroline C. Manning¹

Abstract

The authors examined data generated during a replication of Milgram's obedience studies to address some lingering questions about those studies. In Study 1, judges coded comments participants made during experimental and debriefing sessions. Participants who refused to follow the experimenter's instructions were significantly more likely to express a sense of personal responsibility than those who followed the instructions. Participants who expressed concern for the well-being of the learner exhibited a greater reluctance to continue the procedure than did those not expressing this concern. However, whether participants expressed concern for the learner was not related to whether they ultimately continued the procedure. Study 2 looked at participants' reactions to each of the experimenter's four prods. The further along the prod sequence the experimenter went, the less likely participants were to continue the procedure. This pattern challenges interpretations of the obedience studies based on the notion that participants were following orders.

Keywords

obedience, Milgram, personal responsibility

Nearly half a century after they were conducted, Milgram's (1963, 1965, 1974) obedience studies remain among psychology's most widely known and most often discussed experiments. Briefly, under the guise of a learning study, an experimenter instructed participants to administer increasingly powerful electric shocks to a "learner" when the learner made mistakes on a memory task. Although in reality no shocks were delivered, participants were instructed to start with a 15-volt shock for the learner's first mistake and to increase the voltage in 15-volt increments for each successive mistake. In the basic procedure (Experiment 5), participants could hear the learner's vocal protests and demands to be set free through the wall that separated the participant and the learner. If the participant expressed reluctance to give a shock, the experimenter verbally prodded the participant to continue. The study continued until either the participant refused to continue or the participant pressed the strongest voltage lever (450 volts) three times. The surprising and disturbing finding was that 65% of the participants in this version of the study continued to administer shocks all the way to the highest level.

Since their publication, Milgram's obedience studies have been the subject of much discussion and debate (e.g., Benjamin & Simpson, 2009; Blass, 2000, 2004; Miller, 2004; Miller, Collins, & Brief, 1995). But Milgram's research also raised concerns about the ethical treatment of participants. Out of concern for the participants' welfare, no one has attempted a full replication of Milgram's procedures for several decades (Blass, 2009). Because a full replication of the studies is not possible,

our ability to test many of the hypothesized causes of obedience has been limited, with researchers often relying on a reexamination of Milgram's original data to support their interpretations (e.g., Gilbert, 1981; Packer, 2008).

However, Burger (2009) recently conducted a partial replication of Milgram's study. Several aspects of the original procedure were changed to address ethical concerns and to ensure the welfare of the participants. Most noteworthy, Burger ended the session after participants pressed the 150-volt switch on the shock generator. This was the point in the procedure when participants first heard the learner complain about the pain and demand to be released. An examination of Milgram's Experiment 5 data indicates that the 150-volt point was the most likely place for participants to refuse to continue. Of the participants who did not stop at this point, 79% continued to press switches all the way to 450 volts. Burger found an obedience rate that was not significantly different from the rate reported by Milgram decades earlier.

In addition to demonstrating that Milgram's findings could be replicated today, the partial replication provides us with new data we can examine to better understand obedience. We used

¹Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Jerry M. Burger, Santa Clara University, Department of Psychology, Santa Clara, CA 95053
Email: jburger@scu.edu

some of these new data to address two lingering questions about Milgram's studies. In Study 1, we examined comments participants made during the study to test some explanations for why so many participants continued to press the shock levers. In Study 2, we looked at how participants responded to each of the experimenter's prods. These data address the question of whether Milgram's participants were really obeying orders.

Study 1

Why did so many of Milgram's participants go along with the experimenter's instructions and administer what they must have perceived as painful if not dangerous electric shocks? Most explanations for the findings point to aspects of the situation that made it difficult for participants to refuse the experimenter's requests to continue (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009). For example, researchers have pointed to the relationship between the authority figure and the participant, the incremental nature of the experimenter's requests, and the experimenter's expertise (Burger, 2009). In this study, we examined two other explanations researchers have proposed to account for the high rates of obedience. Specifically, we looked at the extent to which participants took personal responsibility for the learner's suffering and the extent to which participants were concerned about the learner's well-being.

First, some observers have argued that many obedience participants continued with the procedure because they felt little or no responsibility for the harm they might be doing to the learner. Researchers find that absent or diffused responsibility is often a key factor in antisocial behavior, particularly acts that involve hurting another individual (Jaffe, Shapir, & Yinon, 1981; Jaffe & Yinon, 1979; Pornari & Wood, 2010). When individuals perceive that they will not be held accountable and thus are unlikely to face consequences for their actions, an important inhibition may be removed. Bandura (1999) specifically identifies displacement of responsibility and diffusion of responsibility as key contributors to a sense of moral disengagement, a situation that often leads to "reprehensible conduct" and "the perpetuation of inhumanities" (p. 194).

The laboratory situation Milgram created may have made it easy for participants to convince themselves that they were not responsible for the consequences of their actions. Participants could have attributed responsibility to the experimenter who urged them to continue, to the principal investigator who designed the study, or to the university that approved the procedure. Indeed, if participants in either Milgram's study or Burger's replication asked about responsibility for harm to the learner, the experimenter explained that he (the experimenter) was responsible. Milgram (1974) also invoked the notion of diffused responsibility to explain the high rates of obedience in his studies. He attributed the participants' behavior to an "agentic state" in which "a man feels responsible to the authority directing him but feels no responsibility for the content of the actions that the authority prescribes" (pp. 145-146).

Second, observers sometime attribute the high rates of obedience in Milgram's experiments to a widespread disregard

for the learner's well-being. Indeed, on hearing about the obedience studies, people often wonder what these findings say about human nature. Some researchers have speculated that teaching citizens to use higher levels of moral and ethical judgment could reduce obedience rates in future studies (Sprinthall, 2009). Consistent with this reasoning, Burger (2009) found that participants who scored high on a measure of dispositional empathy expressed reluctance to continue earlier in the procedure than did participants who scored low in empathy. However, this empathic concern for the learner did not translate into less obedience. Empathy scores for participants who stopped the procedure early were not significantly different from the scores of participants who continued past the 150-volt point. Blass (2000) makes a similar observation when examining gender differences in obedience studies that used the Milgram procedure. Although women in these studies reported higher levels of nervousness and tension, these reactions did not lead to lower levels of obedience.

To assess the extent to which participants felt responsible for their actions and were concerned about the welfare of the learner, we examined spontaneous comments participants made during the experimental sessions of Burger's (2009) replication. Because the spontaneous comments came without prompting and because participants were unlikely to have anticipated that these comments would be analyzed by the investigators, the comments provide a unique and relatively uncensored glimpse into what participants were thinking as they moved through the experimental procedures. We also examined comments participants made during the debriefing interviews. Although participants at that time understood the true purpose of the study, these debriefing comments nonetheless provide potential insights into participants' thoughts shortly after their participation in the session.

If an absence of responsibility contributed to the high obedience rates, then participants who refused to follow the experimenter's instructions should have been more likely to express a sense of personal responsibility than participants who followed the instructions. We also would expect participants who expressed a concern for the learner's well-being to have been more reluctant to continue than those who did not express this concern. However, it is not clear whether this greater concern for the learner would translate into higher rates of refusing the experimenter's instructions.

Method

Materials. ABC News videotaped the experimental sessions and the debriefing sessions of Burger's (2009) study and used the videotapes to produce a *Primetime* program about the research. Transcripts of the sessions compiled by ABC News during the production process were made available to the first author. Transcripts were available for 62 (88.6%) of the 70 participants in the experiment. In all but 1 of the 8 missing cases, participants did not give their permission for ABC News to use their image during the broadcast. The remaining participants' transcript was lost because of a technical problem with the

videotape.¹ The transcripts contained virtually all the phrases and sentences uttered by participants during the videotaping. Although it is likely that the transcribers left out some words, there is no reason to believe that these were systematic omissions. Thus, any discrepancies between the transcripts and the actual videotapes are probably inconsequential.

Participants did not know they were being videotaped during the experimental sessions, although they were told on the consent form that they might be videotaped. Participants knew they were being videotaped during the debriefing sessions. They also learned before the debriefing began that the learner had received no shocks. Moreover, the principal investigator, who conducted all the debriefing sessions, explained the true purpose of the study early in the debriefing. Thus, all participants understood at that point that how far they went on the shock generator was the real focus of the investigation.

Procedure. We developed definitions and examples for coding the frequency with which participants expressed comments related to personal responsibility and the learner's well-being.² The coding scheme was refined during several practice trials with undergraduates. We began by counting the number of times participants made coded comments. However, we soon found that obtaining good interjudge agreement for these measures was difficult (e.g., participants often repeated themselves). We therefore settled on a nominal scheme in which judges assessed whether the participant made a statement reflecting one of the coded categories at any time during the session.

For both experimental sessions and debriefing sessions, we coded whether participants made a statement indicating that they took personal responsibility for what happened to the learner. We also coded in both experimental and debriefing sessions whether participants indicated a concern about the learner's welfare. Finally, for the debriefing session only, we coded whether participants made a comment that indicated that they attributed responsibility for what happened to the learner to a source other than themselves.³

Two undergraduate judges were trained to use the coding scheme. Each judge was given a copy of the transcripts and independently coded each participant's experimental session and debriefing session for the presence or absence of a statement from each category. The judges knew about the Burger (2009) replication and in most cases could probably tell from the transcripts whether a participant had followed or resisted the experimenter's instructions. Nonetheless, the judges were unaware of the hypotheses. Interjudge agreement rates for the five categories ranged between 88% and 97%. Where disagreements occurred, the two judges and the principal investigator resolved the disagreement through a discussion. During these discussions, the principal investigator was presented with only relevant statements from the transcript and therefore did not know whether the participant had continued or discontinued the procedure.

One additional variable was coded for each debriefing session. We coded whether participants referred to the

learner's responses as a "scream" or "screaming." Because the replication ended after the learner's first verbal protest, what participants heard was, in fact, nothing at all like a scream. Participants heard the learner say "Ow" several times and, at the 150-volt point, say loudly that he wanted to end the experiment. Nonetheless, we observed that a large number of participants described the learner's responses as screaming. We saw this description as an expression of worry about the learner's suffering and therefore as another measure of the participant's concern for the learner's well-being. To code this variable, we used the Word find function to locate instances of participants using the words *scream*, *screamed*, or *screaming* in the transcripts.

Results

We examined participants' coded comments three ways. First, we looked at whether participants obeyed or refused at some point to go along with the experimenter's instructions. Second, we looked at when participants received their first prod from the experimenter. This is the point in the procedure at which the learner first expressed a reluctance to continue. Participants were assigned a value from 1 to 12, depending on the last switch they pressed before receiving a prod, with 1 = *pressed no switches*, 2 = *after pressing the 15-volt switch*, and so on. Participants who received no prods were assigned a value of 12. Third, we examined the total number of prods participants received during the session. A participant had to resist each of four prods before the experimenter ended the session. If the participant continued the procedure after being prodded, the experimenter returned to the first prod the next time the participant expressed a reluctance to continue. Thus, the higher the number, the more often the participant indicated a reluctance to administer the shocks.⁴

Experimental session comments. As shown in Table 1, very few participants who continued the procedure to the end expressed a sense of personal responsibility for what happened to the learner. In contrast, most of the participants who resisted the experimenter's instructions did express a sense of personal responsibility. The difference is statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 16.91, p < .001, \phi = .54$. However, participants who continued and those who resisted did not differ significantly in the extent to which they expressed concern about the well-being of the learner, $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 0.28, p = .60$.

As shown in Table 2, participants who expressed a sense of personal responsibility received their first prod significantly earlier than participants who did not express personal responsibility, $t(60) = 2.77, p = .007, d = 0.72$. Those expressing personal responsibility also received significantly more prods from the experimenter than those not expressing responsibility, $t(60) = 5.91, p < .001, d = 1.32$. Participants who expressed a concern for the well-being of the participant received their first prod significantly earlier than those not expressing this concern, $t(60) = 2.71, p = .009, d = 0.66$. Finally, participants who expressed concern for the learner also received significantly

Table 1. Percentage Making Comments During Experimental Sessions

	Participants who continued	Participants who stopped
Personal responsibility	12.2	66.7
Concern for learner well-being	51.2	61.9

Table 2. Mean Scores of Participants Making Comments During Experimental Sessions

	First prod	Total prods
Personal responsibility		
Yes	6.95	4.39
No	9.12	2.16
Concern for learner well-being		
Yes	7.56	3.41
No	9.54	2.14

Table 3. Percentage Making Comments During Debriefing

	Participants who continued	Participants who stopped
Personal responsibility	40.5	81.3
Responsibility attributed to others	48.6	50.0
Concern for learner well-being	75.7	81.2
Described learner reaction as scream	37.8	37.5

more prods than those not expressing concern, $t(60) = 3.15, p = .003, d = 0.75$.

Debriefing session comments. As shown in Table 3, participants who continued the procedure to the end were significantly less likely to express a sense of personal responsibility than participants who resisted the experimenter's instructions, $\chi^2(1, N = 53) = 5.89, p = .02, \phi = .33$. However, the two groups did not differ in the percentage who made a statement attributing responsibility to someone other than themselves, $\chi^2(1, N = 53) = 0.00$. Participants who continued also did not differ from participants who resisted when looking at the percentage who expressed a concern for the well-being of the learner, $\chi^2(1, N = 53) = 0.01, p = .93$, or the percentage who described the learner's reaction as a scream, $\chi^2(1, N = 53) = 0.00$.

As shown in Table 4, participants who expressed a sense of personal responsibility during the debriefing did not receive their first prod earlier than those not expressing personal responsibility, $t(51) = 0.33, p = .74$. However, participants who expressed a sense of personal responsibility did receive significantly more prods than those not expressing responsibility, $t(51) = 2.24, p = .03, d = 0.59$. Whether participants made comments assigning personal responsibility to someone other than themselves was not related to either first prod scores, $t(51) = 0.70, p = .48$, or the total number of prods, $t(51) = 1.01, p = .32$. Participants who expressed a concern for the

Table 4. Mean Scores of Participants Making Comments During Debriefing

	First prod	total prods
Personal responsibility		
Yes	8.64	3.32
No	8.88	2.28
Responsibility attributed to others		
Yes	8.50	3.08
No	9.00	2.59
Concern for learner well-being		
Yes	8.51	3.00
No	9.58	2.25
Described learner response as scream		
Yes	9.00	2.80
No	8.61	2.85

learner's well-being and those who did not express this concern did not differ on their first prod scores, $t(51) = 1.28, p = .21$, or the total number of prods, $t(51) = 1.31, p = .20$. Finally, those who did and did not describe the learner's reaction as a scream did not differ on either the first prod measure, $t(51) = 0.54, p = .59$, or the total prod measure, $t(51) = 0.10, p = .92$.

Discussion

The results support the notion that a sense of personal responsibility contributed to the participants' decision to continue or end the procedure during Burger's (2009) replication of Milgram's studies. The vast majority of participants who ended the procedure early spontaneously expressed during the experimental session a sense of personal responsibility for harming the learner. In contrast, very few participants who continued the procedure to the end indicated that they felt personally responsible for harming the learner. A similar pattern was found when examining comments participants made during the debriefing.

In contrast, whether participants expressed concern about the learner's well-being in either the experimental or debriefing sessions was not related to their decision to continue or end the experiment. However, participants who expressed a concern for the learner's well-being during the experimental session did demonstrate a greater reluctance to press the shock levers than those not expressing this concern. These participants received their first prod from the experimenter earlier and received more prods. Nonetheless, this higher level of concern did not translate into resisting the experimenter's instructions. This last finding is similar to observations researchers have made when looking at the effect of dispositional empathy (Burger, 2009) and gender (Blass, 2000) on obedience.

Study 2

Milgram's research has remained popular in part because of its implications for understanding the worst of human behavior, that is, massacres, atrocities, and genocide. Indeed, the extent

Table 5. Participants' Reactions to the Four Prods

	Continued with procedure (%)	Continued to resist (%)
Please continue or please go on	64.3	35.7
The experiment requires that you continue	45.7	54.3
It is absolutely essential that you continue	10.5	89.5
You have no other choice, you must go on	0.0	100.0

to which Milgram's work helps us understand the Holocaust and other atrocities has been the subject of much debate (Miller, 2004). But one question that appears to have been overlooked in this discussion is whether Milgram was actually studying obedience. Specifically, how reasonable is it to assume that participants in these studies were in fact obeying orders? This question was the focus of Study 2.

The "orders" delivered by Milgram's experimenter were limited to the four prods shown in Table 5. However, the first prod, "Please continue" or "Please go on," hardly sounds like an order. The second prod, "The experiment requires that you continue," also seems to fall short of what most people would call an order. Rather, it sounds like an argument for why the participant should continue, that is, it is important for the experiment. The third prod, "It is absolutely essential that you continue," is a stronger version of the second. The "absolutely essential" part suggests the study is very important to the experimenter, which might hint at some unpleasant action if the participant continues to resist. However, at no point does the experimenter use words directly associated with obedience. He never says "order," "command," "demand," or "obey." Nonetheless, the third prod does start to resemble what we might call an order. It is only when we get to the last of the four prods that the participant hears what probably sounds like an order to most people: "You have no other choice, you must go on."

To obtain a better idea about whether Milgram's participants were obeying orders, we examined how often participants did what the experimenter requested of them after receiving each of the four prods. If participants were obeying orders, they should have been more obedient the more the experimenter's prod sounded like an order. That is, the further the experimenter went down the list of prods, the more difficult it should have been for participants to resist. Failure to find this pattern would challenge the assumption that participants who continued the procedure were following orders.

Method

The experimenter and the principal investigator each recorded the participants' responses during the Burger (2009) replication. For each of the 70 participants, the experimenter, who sat at a desk behind and slightly to the side of the participant, and the principal investigator, who watched the session on a monitor in a nearby room, noted on record sheets how many prods

each participant required at each shock level and whether the participant continued with the procedure or continued his or her refusal after receiving a prod. The two records agreed 100% of the time.

Results

We calculated the percentage of times participants responded to each of the prods by either continuing with the procedure or continuing to resist. As shown in Table 5, participants responded in exactly the opposite pattern that we would expect if they were following orders. That is, the more the experimenter's statement resembled an order, the less likely participants did what the experimenter wished. Most striking is the fact that when participants heard the only prod that we might reasonably consider an order, not one individual "obeyed."

Discussion

How can we explain the pattern found in Table 5? Two answers can be suggested from the social psychological literature. First, some researchers have argued that the use of small incremental steps contributed to the high rates of obedience in Milgram's studies (Gilbert, 1981). By starting with a mild 15-volt shock and proceeding at 15-volt increments, participants were placed in a kind of "foot-in-the-door" situation (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). That is, pressing the first switch increased the chances of pressing the second switch, and so on. Researchers find that the foot-in-the-door effect can be explained in part by changes in self-perception (Burger, 1999; Burger & Caldwell, 2003). After completing the initial task, participants come to think of themselves as the kind of person who agrees with these kinds of tasks. In a similar way, Milgram's obedient participants may have come to see themselves as the kind of person who presses the shock switches or who does what the experimenter says. However, the same process suggests that resisting the first prod should make it easier for participants to resist the second prod, which makes it easier to resist the next prod, and so on. Each statement of resistance allows the participant to see himself or herself as the kind of person who says no to these kinds of instructions.

Second, the participants' resistance to the final prod also may have been enhanced by a reactance effect. Briefly, reactance theory posits that individuals are motivated to maintain a sense of personal freedom and that perceived efforts to reduce that freedom lead people to reassert their sense of control (Brehm, 1966). A speaker who tells audience members that they have no choice but to agree with the speaker is likely to see a movement away from the advocated position (Worchel & Brehm, 1970). If Milgram had wanted to induce a reactance effect and thereby reduce the likelihood that participants would press the switch, he could not have come up with a more effective prod than "You have no other choice, you must go on."

Although additional research is needed to test these two explanations, the findings question the assumption that participants in the obedience studies continued with the procedure

because they were obeying orders. This challenge to the traditional presentation of Milgram's studies is more than an academic debate over operational definitions. If the participants were not obeying orders, then alternate interpretations of Milgram's findings should be explored (e.g., Haslam & Reicher, 2007). Moreover, the way the research is portrayed to students, scholars, and the public may need to be reassessed.

General Discussion

The spontaneous comments participants made during a replication of Milgram's obedience studies support the notion that how participants attribute responsibility played a role in their decision to continue or discontinue administering shocks. Consistent with research in other areas, accepting personal responsibility for the consequences of one's action appears to reduce the likelihood of engaging in disturbing and sometimes egregious actions. On the other hand, we found no support for the idea that increasing concern for the victim might reduce destructive obedience. This is not to say that concern for the learner plays no role in the decision to continue. Indeed, Milgram (1974) found lower rates of obedience when the learner was seated in the same room as the participant, a situation that made the learner's suffering more salient. However, it may be that emotional reactions to the victim's suffering are less important in this situation than other more powerful variables.

Although provocative, the data generated in the two studies also have their limitations. First, although participants' comments provide insight into what they were thinking and experiencing during the sessions, we do not know about thoughts left unexpressed. On the other hand, the comments we examined have the advantage of being spontaneous and therefore may be better indicators of what participants were thinking than comments obtained other ways (e.g., prompted by an experimenter's question). Second, it is possible that participants' comments during the debriefing were affected by their awareness of the true purpose of the experiment. Participants may have been concerned to not appear unkind or uncaring or may have felt a need to justify their actions. Nonetheless, the results from the debriefing session data are very similar to the results from the experimental session data. Third, in many cases the Study 1 judges probably could tell from the transcripts whether participants continued or refused to continue the procedure. However, the judges were blind to specific hypotheses, and it is difficult to know how awareness of whether participants continued might have influenced the judges' assessments. Fourth, the data do not allow us to test some of the hypothesized reasons for the pattern of results uncovered in Study 2. In particular, the order in which participants received the prods is hopelessly confounded with the wording of the prods. Thus, for example, we cannot say how participants would have responded if the experimenter had delivered the fourth prod first.

Finally, Milgram's obedience studies are no less startling nor less important if we stop thinking of his participants' behavior in terms of following orders. On the contrary, we might

consider Milgram's studies a dramatic demonstration of a much larger concept, that is, that under certain circumstances people sometimes act in uncharacteristic ways. This acting out of character can be surprising, embarrassing, or, as Milgram's studies demonstrate, unsettling. The point is that these uncharacteristic behaviors may not be limited to circumstances in which an authority figure gives orders. Few of us will ever find ourselves in a situation like My Lai or Abu Ghraib. But each of us may well encounter settings that lead us to act in surprising and perhaps disturbing ways.

Notes

1. We compared the participants for whom we had transcripts to the eight participants for whom we had no transcript. The groups did not differ significantly in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, education, scores on two personality scales, or whether they went along with the experimenter's instructions.
2. Criteria for several other variables were created, but instances were found so infrequently in the transcripts ($N < 6$) that we could not conduct meaningful analyses.
3. The coding scheme is available from the first author.
4. How early participants received their first prod and their total number of prods were negatively correlated, $r(70) = -.53$. That is, expressing an early reluctance to continue the procedure predicted fewer total prods. This correlation may reflect the fact that participants who refused to continue the procedure had fewer opportunities to receive prods than participants who continued the procedure. Participants who refused to continue tended to receive their first prod earlier than continuing participants.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Bios

Jerry M. Burger is a professor of psychology at Santa Clara University.

Zackary M. Girgis received a bachelor's degree in psychology from Santa Clara University.

Caroline C. Manning received a bachelor's degree in psychology from Santa Clara University.