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‘The last possible resort’: A forgotten prod and the *in situ* standardization of Stanley Milgram’s voice-feedback condition.

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### Abstract

The present paper uses previously unpublished data from Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments in order to draw attention to a hitherto neglected procedural innovation of the voice-feedback condition. In three experimental sessions in this condition, the experimenter responded to a participant's attempted defiance by leaving the room, apparently to speak to the learner, before returning to assure the participant that the learner was willing and/or able to continue. This paper documents the usage of this tactic during the voice-feedback condition, and highlights the negotiation surrounding the use of the tactic between Milgram and his confederate, John Williams, who played the role of the experimenter. It is shown that the subsequent use of this tactic did not conform to the conditions for its use agreed by Milgram and Williams. Moreover, the tactic seems to have been dropped both from subsequent experimental conditions and Milgram's published accounts of his work. These observations are discussed in relation to historical work on experimentation in social psychology, research on standardization in the sociology of scientific knowledge, and in terms of their implications for theory and research on dis/obedience.

*Keywords:* discourse, experimentation, Milgram, obedience, rhetoric, standardization

‘The last possible resort’: A forgotten prod and the *in situ* standardization of Stanley Milgram’s voice-feedback condition.

There can scarcely be a more influential set of studies in psychology than Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiments (Milgram, 1963, 1965a, 1974). Fifty years since the experiments, debate surrounding the ethical, theoretical and empirical issues they raise shows no signs of abating (e.g. Burger, 2009; Dambrune & Vatiné, 2010; McArthur, 2009; Perry, 2012; Reicher & Haslam, 2011a). Although there is consensus that Milgram’s (1974) own theoretical account of the studies is unsatisfactory (see e.g. Blass, 2004; Reicher & Haslam, 2011b), attempts to understand what happened in the experiments have only rarely sought to engage with the primary data from the studies held in the Stanley Milgram Papers archive at Yale University. Furthermore, despite the existence of some fascinating historical scholarship on the experiments (e.g. Nicholson, 2011a, b; Russell, 2009, 2011; Russell & Gregory, 2011), little research has systematically explored the wealth of audio recordings from the experiments held in the archive (for exceptions, see Modigliani & Rochat, 1995; Rochat & Modigliani, 1997). The present article draws on some of these audio recordings in order to suggest that the received view of Milgram’s studies which has become crystallized over the fifty years since they were conducted may be in need of some revision. Specifically, my focus here is on the issue of standardization, and the way in which Milgram and his confederates appear to have developed and then discarded a significant modification to the experimental procedure during the course of the experiments. The discarding of this modification extends to its omission from Milgram’s published work on the obedience experiments. This specific example can be seen as indicative of a more general tendency to underestimate the importance of negotiation and interaction in the experiments. More generally, my aim is to highlight the value of returning to the recordings of the Milgram

experiments in the course of our continued attempts to understand their meaning and significance.

The analysis reported in this paper stems from a broader project concerned with applying insights derived from qualitative approaches in social psychology – particularly the discourse analytic and rhetorical psychological traditions (Billig, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) – to the Milgram experiments. The resultant analyses draw attention to the rhetorical nature of the experimental encounters, stressing the rhetorical aspects of the experimenter's interjections as much as the participants' attempts at resistance (see Gibson, in press). The present paper does not report discursive and rhetorical analysis per se, but my concern is instead with the development and use of a particular rhetorical strategy on the part of the experimental team. This strategy is particularly noteworthy given that it is not simply a variation in the deployment of the standardized script developed for the experiments, but that it actually appears to have been a part of the procedure that was developed and then abandoned *as the experiments were being conducted*. To the best of my knowledge this aspect of the procedure has not been reported elsewhere, either by Milgram himself in his reporting of his work, or by subsequent scholars of the experiments. Moreover, through an examination of some of the 'back-stage' discussion captured on the audio recordings, we can see how the conditions under which this rhetorical strategy was to be used were themselves negotiated by Milgram and his experimenter, John Williams. This analysis thus constitutes a case study in the contingency of standardization in experimental procedure, but adds the key observation that, unlike much of the literature on standardization which emphasises how a standardized instrument (e.g. a structured survey) breaks down when confronted with the 'messiness' of interaction, in this case it is possible to demonstrate also that standardization occurred during the experiments themselves, with modifications being made to the official procedure, as well as post-hoc, as part of the process of writing up. Using a combination of

the initial script developed prior to and during the experiments, and the ad hoc variations used in the experiments themselves, certain elements of the ‘standardized’ script were incorporated into the final official account of the experimental procedure, whereas others were discarded. The primary focus of this analysis is on the voice-feedback condition, reported as condition 2 in Milgram’s (1974) *Obedience to Authority*, and initially reported in an earlier paper in the journal *Human Relations* (Milgram, 1965a).<sup>1</sup>

### **The voice-feedback condition**

Milgram’s (1974) condition 2, the voice-feedback condition, was part of the proximity series in which the psychological distance between teacher and learner was varied. The procedure involved a participant arriving at a laboratory, ostensibly to participate in an experiment on the effects of punishment on learning. On arrival, the participant was informed by a grey-coated experimenter that another participant was expected but was yet to arrive. This second participant arrived shortly thereafter, but – unbeknownst to the first participant – was in fact a confederate of Milgram’s. The experimental procedure was outlined to the two men, and it was explained that one of them would need to assume the role of a ‘teacher’ and the other would take the role of ‘learner’. A rigged drawing of lots took place in which the naive participant always became the teacher. The experimenter then set up the learner in an adjacent room, with the participant looking on. The participant saw the learner being strapped into a chair and connected to equipment intended to deliver electric shocks. The experimenter then beckoned the participant back to the first room where he was instructed on his role as teacher. He was asked to sit in front of a shock generator machine which featured 30 levers each labelled with different voltage levels ranging in 15v increments from 15v to 450v.

The experimenter explained the purpose of the shock generator and asked the participant to take a sample shock and estimate its voltage level, which was in fact 45v. The experimenter then explained the nature of the memory task. The participant was to read out a series of word pairs for the learner to memorize. Following this, the test section of the experiment would commence, during which the first word of each pair was read out, followed by a series of candidate words. The learner would then press a switch to indicate which of the four words was originally paired with the target word. If the learner's response was correct then the participant was to move onto the next target word. However, if the learner's response was incorrect then the participant was to administer an electric shock. The first incorrect answer was to be punished with a shock of 15v, with subsequent incorrect answers being punished with shocks increasing by 15v each time. The learner's answers followed a pre-determined order, and it quickly became clear to the participant that they were going to be using the higher end of the voltage scale. Moreover, the learner responded to the shocks in a predetermined fashion, and these responses were recorded on tape and played back to the room in which the participant and experimenter were sitting. Beginning at 75v with a 'little grunt' (Milgram, 1974, p. 23), these escalated to a demand to be released at 150v. The exclamations became an 'agonised scream' (*ibid.*) by 270v, and at 300v the learner refused to provide any further answers. Following the 330v shock, no further screams or protests were heard from the learner. The memory test was, of course, a cover for Milgram's real purpose, which was to see how far along the incremental voltage scale participants would go in punishing the learner. In this condition, 62.5% of participants (25 out of 40) proceeded to the highest point on the shock generator.

Of particular importance for the present paper are the prods which were used by the experimenter whenever the participant hesitated or attempted to bring about the cessation of the experimental session. From his earliest published work on the obedience experiments,

Milgram (1963, p. 374) emphasized that, 'It was important to standardize the experimenter's responses' to participants queries and attempts to extricate themselves from the experimental situation. The experimenter's responses took the form of a series of four prods:

Prod 1: Please continue, *or* Please go on.

Prod 2: The experiment requires that you continue.

Prod 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.

Prod 4: You have no other choice, you *must* go on.

(Milgram, 1963, p. 374, italics in original)

According to Milgram (*ibid.*), 'the prods were always made in sequence... [and] The sequence was begun anew on each occasion that the subject balked or showed reluctance to follow orders.' In addition, the experimenter had two 'special prods' available to him which could be used in response to queries from the participant:

Although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent tissue damage, so please go on.

Whether the learner likes it or not, you must go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly. So please go on.

(Milgram, 1963, p. 374)

These prods are also presented in Milgram's (1974) extended account of the obedience experiments. However, in the paper in which condition 2 was first reported (Milgram, 1965a), the account of the prods is less straightforward:



The responses of the victim are standardized on tape, and each protest is co-ordinated to a particular voltage level on the shock generator. Starting with 75 volts the learner begins to grunt and moan. At 150 volts he demands to be let out of the experiment. At 180 volts he cries out that he can no longer stand the pain. At 300 volts he refuses to provide any more answers to the memory test, insisting that he is no longer a participant in the experiment and must be freed. In response to this last tactic, the experimenter instructs the naïve subject to treat the absence of an answer as equivalent to a wrong answer, and to follow the usual shock procedure. The experimenter reinforces his demand with the statement: ‘You have no other choice, you must go on!’ (This imperative is used whenever the naïve subject tries to break off the experiment).

(Milgram, 1965a, p. 60)

Only prod four is mentioned here, and moreover it is not specifically described as the culmination of a series of prods, but as a statement to be used at a specific point in the experimental procedure – after the learner has refused to continue providing answers following the 300v shock, as well as each time the participant tries to end the experiment. This inconsistency between Milgram’s (1965a) description of this aspect of his procedure, and those presented in his 1963 and 1974 publications, is compounded by a footnote in the 1965 *Human Relations* paper which informs readers that ‘A more detailed account of the laboratory procedure can be found in Milgram (1963)’ (Milgram, 1965a, p. 59).

Nevertheless, the description of the experimenter’s prods provided in the 1963 and 1974 publications has come to form the received view of this aspect of Milgram’s procedure. Despite the initial report of condition 2 seeming to suggest that a slightly different procedure

might have been used, it is reasonable to treat the more extended description of the prods provided by Milgram (1963) as the official account of the procedure, and the fact that by the time of *Obedience to Authority* Milgram (1974) had settled on this account and offered it as the basic experimental procedure which underpinned all his conditions, is sufficient for this to be treated as the final ‘official’ version of the procedure. Certainly, textbook accounts of the experiments typically report this version, and most scholars of the Milgram studies also take this to be the official and final account of the prods. Indeed, Miller, Collins and Brief (1995, p. 3) have argued that ‘These prods are, in an important sense, the most important methodological feature in Milgram’s paradigm. Prods 3 and 4, in particular, distinguish this type of experiment from all other studies of social influence, for *these are literally commands or orders* that, if obeyed, ultimately resulted in the learner appearing to receive intolerable pain’ (italics in original).

However, Darley (1995) has noted in passing that the transcribed excerpts from Milgram’s experimental sessions in the proximity series highlight some departures from the official standardized prods:

the experimenter was given six and only six prearranged responses to make in response to any question raised by the teacher. But the transcripts published in Milgram’s book ... revealed that the experimenter did not follow this instruction, and instead directly responded to what he took to be the implied question raised by the teacher. What I suggest is that, given the experimenter’s understanding of linguistic pragmatics, he could not have responded in any other way. After a repeated examination of the transcripts, I have come to another conclusion. The experimenter’s answers to the teacher’s queries reveal that *the experimenter had*

*defined his role as doing whatever was necessary to get the teacher to continue giving the shocks.*

(Darley, 1995, pp. 130-1, italics in original)

In a similar vein, Russell (2009) has noted that the proximity series (Milgram, 1965a), of which the voice-feedback condition was a part, should perhaps have been considered part of Milgram's pilot studies as 'Milgram was still refining the experimental procedure' (Russell, 2009, p. 74) during these conditions. As neither Darley nor Russell present any empirical demonstration of these arguments, the present paper is intended to draw attention to one striking way in which consideration of actual experimental practice in Milgram's voice-feedback condition complicates the received view of the standardized procedure. However, before fleshing out the empirical material, it is first necessary to draw attention to some important themes in the history of experimentation in social psychology, and indeed in psychology more broadly. The importance attached to standardization in experimental work should not be understood as some ahistorical matter of sound scientific procedure, but instead as the product of a particular set of institutional scientific practices which are themselves bound up with the changing nature of governance in industrialized liberal societies. This not only allows an appreciation of the contingency of standardization as a methodological benchmark, but also provides a sense of the immediate historical context of the discipline at the time when Milgram was designing, conducting and writing up the obedience experiments.

### **Standardization and experimentation in social psychology**

The rise of standardization can be understood as being intimately connected with the changing nature of governance in the twentieth century which followed from rapid industrialization in the nineteenth century (Coon, 1993; Dehue, 2001; Logan, 1999). The

increasing bureaucratization of governmentality, tied as it was to the need to administer, manage and to *know* individuals in a variety of institutional contexts (e.g. the school, the factory, the army, the asylum), required technologies that enabled the description and inscription of subjectivity (Rose, 1996, 1999). Dehue (2001) traces the origins of the notion of ‘social experimentation’ and argues that it reflected an ‘aspiration of ruling by technique rather than tradition, of replacing the individuality of both the governors and the governed by impersonality’ (p. 296). Crucial to this were the tensions created when the desire to alleviate the harsh living conditions experienced by many in the USA and elsewhere in the early twentieth century met with concerns that state intervention would lead to an abdication of responsibility on the part of individuals themselves. To resolve these tensions, Dehue argues that as liberal welfare regimes developed, individual behaviour came to be seen as the appropriate site of intervention. This led to calls for evidence to be collected for the efficacy of such interventions to ensure that funds were being used judiciously.

In this context, a ‘fear of arbitrariness’ (Dehue, 2001, p. 289) led bureaucrats in charge of spending decisions to turn to the emerging social sciences for evidence. In turn, social scientists,

rapidly adapted to the new demands and began to focus on knowledge that was instrumental rather than reflexive, standardized rather than discretionary. In social science, too, free reasoning became increasingly associated with unconstrained judgement and unconstrained judgment with arbitrariness and whim.

(Dehue, 2001, pp. 288-9)

Psychology was in a relatively advantageous position to take advantage of these trends.

Unlike some other social sciences, such as sociology and economics, psychology already had

an established tradition of experimental work, and whilst attempts to standardize some forms of experimental practice – notably introspection (Coon, 1993) – were not always successful, the individualization of social psychology in the US in the inter-war years accorded well with the requirements of this new form of administrative governance (Danziger, 1992; Dehue, 2001; Farr, 1996). Social psychologists were thus able to set about demonstrating their worth in areas such as attitudes, leadership and group dynamics, and this culminated in the wide-ranging involvement of social psychologists in the administration of the US military in World War II (Danziger, 1992; Rose, 1999).

Against this background, ‘variable-oriented research’ (Danziger, 1992, p. 324) in social psychology, with its ideal of control through statistical randomization and procedural standardization, can be seen to have become dominant because of its reflection and perpetuation of emergent bureaucratic conceptions of society. As Danziger (1992, p. 325, *italics in original*) notes, ‘In many ways the model is reminiscent of a state of social *anomie*, in which isolated individuals without historical ties drift from one brief encounter to another.’ He continues:

More generally, a population of anomic individuals provides a kind of idealized object for administrative intervention even where real populations do not quite correspond to the model. Social psychological experimentation came to resemble administrative intervention both in its conception of knowledge as pertaining to specific possibilities of manipulation and in its implicit model of human populations.

(Danziger, 1992, p. 325)

As a result, alternative conceptions of the social psychological experiment as fulfilling an altogether different kind of function were always likely to struggle to achieve the same level

of prestige and influence. In particular, the Lewinian version of experimentation as having ‘an illustrative function’ (Danziger, 2000, p. 341) swiftly fell out of favour, despite the general admiration for Lewin’s work amongst US social psychologists. As Danziger points out, for Lewin:

Experiments ... revealed the existence of general patterns and relationships that were also present, though confounded and obscured, in everyday situations. Ultimately the function of experiments was not empirical but theoretical: The empirical relationships established by experiments were significant insofar as they provided instantiations of theoretical concepts.

(Danziger, 2000, p. 341)

In contrast, the ‘administrative’ approach to experimentation in social psychology, best exemplified by Leon Festinger, emphasised the decomposition of the object of study into independent and dependent variables, with the aim of any experiment being to assess the effects of the former on the latter (Danziger, 1992, 2000). For Festinger, Lewin’s version of experimentation was inadequate because ‘rather than isolating and precisely manipulating a single variable or small set of variables, the experimenters attempted a large and complex manipulation. There was also little attempt at control’ (Festinger, cited in Danziger, 2000, p. 343). This, of course, depended upon a view of the world as being composed of an array of discrete but potentially interacting variables. Such a view entailed the use of the concept of ‘variable’ in a theoretical as well as statistical sense (Danziger & Dzinas, 1997), and was shaped in no small part by the then relatively novel statistical technique of analysis of variance (Rucci & Tweney, 1980).

By the time Milgram conducted the obedience experiments, the variable-oriented approach was firmly in the ascendancy as the dominant tradition of experimentation in social psychology. However, as will be suggested below, there are reasons for suggesting that Milgram conceived of the role of experiments rather differently, and in a way that bore traces of the Lewinian ‘illustrative’ approach. Before fleshing this out, however, it is necessary to turn to the archival material itself.

### **The forgotten ‘prod’: Leaving the room to check on the learner**

Audio recordings held in the Stanley Milgram Papers archive at Yale University point to numerous departures from the standardized experimenter’s script. One major departure, used by the experimenter in the voice-feedback condition, appears to involve the use of a previously undocumented tactic for ensuring continuing participation in the experiments. There are three participants for whom this additional ‘prod’ is used. In fact, it may not be entirely appropriate to term this a ‘prod’ as it consisted not of a straightforward verbal statement or command, but instead involved a more elaborate attempt to elicit a participant’s continuation. On these three occasions, the experimenter left the room where the experiment was taking place, ostensibly to ascertain whether the learner wished to continue with the experiment. This does not appear to have been mentioned in any of Milgram’s published work on the experiments, nor in any of the commentary and discussion of the experiments generated over the years. Moreover, there is further evidence in the archives of the experimental procedure being adapted by Milgram and his confederates to incorporate this tactic during the running of condition 2. This makes it possible to partially reconstruct the development of this forgotten ‘prod’ during the course of condition 2.

The first use of the tactic comes during experimental session 0208, and follows an attempt to bring about the cessation of the experimental session by the participant. Elsewhere

I have used this extract to demonstrate the rhetorical nature of the experimental encounters, and specifically the way in which participants could draw the experimenter into negotiation around the continuation of the experiment through the use of creative rhetorical strategies (Gibson, in press). For present purposes, however, I want to use this as the point of departure for an examination of what happened to this ‘prod’ subsequently during condition 2:

*Extract 1 (Participant 0208 – 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1961, 6pm session<sup>2</sup>)<sup>3</sup>*

- 1      T:      I’m going to administer a hundred and twenty  
2                volts.  
3                ((SHOCK))  
4      L:      URGH! Hey these really hurt.  
5                (3)  
6      T:      I don’t think I wanna, be a part of this anymore.  
7                (2)  
8      E:      Please continue.  
9      T:      No.  
10              (11)  
11     E:      It’s absolutely essential that you go on.  
12              (2)  
13     T:      Well if he says it’s all right it’s all right with me  
14              will you ask him if he wants to go on?  
15              (3)  
16     E:      Whether the learner likes it or not er, we must  
17              continue.  
18     T:      I wouldn’t contin-



- 19 E: ((inaudible))-
- 20 T: I wouldn't continue without asking him.
- 21 (2)
- 22 E: As I explained to both er, er to him when you were
- 23 there, er although the shocks may be extremely
- 24 painful there is no permanent tissue damage.
- 25 T: Well I still th- I still don't want to go on unless he
- 26 says all right.
- 27 (52) ((During this time period movement can be
- 28 heard, and what sounds like a door shutting.
- 29 From what follows it seems reasonable to
- 30 presume that E went out of the room, ostensibly
- 31 to ask L if he wished to continue))
- 32 E: He seems willing enough to go on so please
- 33 continue.
- 34 (8)
- 35 T: Wet, night, grass, duck, cloth.

This extract is notable for the way in which the experimenter leaves the room following the participant's assertion that he will not continue with the experiment unless the learner also wishes to continue (ll. 13-14; l. 20). This exchange occurs before the learner's demand to be released, and thus when he subsequently demands to be released following the 150v shock, the learner appears not simply to have withdrawn his consent to participate in the experiment, but to have changed his mind about being willing to continue since the conversation with the experimenter only a minute or so previously.

It is not immediately apparent from the recordings how this ‘leaving the room’ strategy has arisen. It may be that Milgram had introduced it as an option for Williams, in his role as experimenter, to employ, and that Williams was thus simply following the protocol. In contrast, it may be that Williams had improvised the strategy on the spot. Given the flexibility with which the prods appear to have been employed, the possibility that Milgram took a relatively relaxed approach to standardization cannot be discounted. The recorded materials do not provide any indication as to which of these may be more likely, however they do include further procedural comments from Williams, and a discussion between Williams and Milgram on the precise circumstances in which the tactic should be employed.

### **Behind the scenes: Negotiating the ‘leaving the room’ tactic**

After many of the experimental sessions at which Milgram was not personally present, Williams made brief comments at the end of the recording. These comments sometimes concern technical issues with the experimental equipment, or remarks on any noteworthy features of the experimental sessions. Following experimental session 0210, conducted later the same evening as 0208, Williams made a comment on the recording in which he raised the desirability or otherwise of using the ‘line about going in and seeing the learner’, stating that ‘I will check with you [Milgram], this evening, before I leave, and find out if you want me to use that line ... when these people say they want to know how he is’. Later that evening, following experimental session 0211, a conversation between Williams and Milgram was recorded in which they discussed participant 0210, and the use of the ‘leaving the room’ tactic:

*Extract 2 (discussion following 0211 – 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1961, 9pm session)*

1        SM:    What about the man at eight o’clock, who broke

2 off?

3 E: Yes er, I made a comment on that I didn't know if  
4 you wanted to er, you wanted me to use that line he  
5 said I d- I won't go on unless er, er I know that this  
6 guy is all right and wants to go on all night. I gave  
7 him all the commands on here and there's some I  
8 gave him a couple of times. And I was, I- I  
9 thought quite firm about the whole thing.

10 SM: Well-

11 E: But he er, he wouldn't go on.

12 SM: Uhuh.

13 E: And he broke off rather early. He broke off, er,  
14 down in here somewhere around a hundred and  
15 thirty five.

16 SM: Oh I s- and the first guy broke off very early too.

17 E: Yeah well this guy was er, a little bit more than  
18 that first guy.

19 SM: Uhuh.

20 E: The, the voice, seemed to shake him up  
21 considerably.

22 L: Yeah.

23 E: And then I di- so I figured I'd ask you, I put it all  
24 on tape I told you I broke off and I didn't know  
25 whether you wanted me-

26 SM: Well I think, you keep going unless, he makes it

- 27           explicit that he will go on only if you check the  
28           man outside. And at that-
- 29    E:     He said that two or three or four times.
- 30    SM:   Well at that point ((cough)) you can take a look,  
31           very quickly, and then come back and tell him at  
32           whatever level we're supposed to be on, now for  
33           example if er, er, Wallace is saying at that time oh  
34           it hurts, you just say, h- he's apparently willing to  
35           c- he- he's willing to go on although he did  
36           indicate that it hurts. If he says I refuse to go on,  
37           you come out and s- if that's what the, er, er,  
38           comment is, then you come out and say well the  
39           subject er, does not see- er wish to go on but, we  
40           must continue.
- 41    E:     Right.
- 42    SM:   In other words you come out with whatever level,  
43           he is at.
- 44    E:     Uhuh. Well, the thing was with er, er, with  
45           ((deletion)) he took the command I guess to  
46           please continue, until this one said er, I refuse to  
47           go any further.
- 48    SM:   Yeah.
- 49    E:     Er I don't wish to continue the experiment.
- 50    SM:   Yeah.
- 51    E:     And he said er, er I'm not gonna go any further he

52           said, er unless we go in and look at this guy and  
53           make sure that er, he wants to go on he- he just  
54           said that he doesn't want to go any further. He  
55           said and this is what he kept saying to me and I  
56           kept er, I gave him all of the different commands.  
57    SM:    Yeah well I'd give him the business at that time  
58           and if he still refuses, after the business, then you  
59           go in, check, and you can say well he's, he l- er,  
60           he's-  
61    E:     I gave him the business I told him he had no choice.  
62           I said you have no choice, you must continue.  
63    SM:    Uhuh.  
64    E:     Or whatever it says on, and er, no ((inaudible))  
65    SM:    Uhuh.  
66    E:     And then he claimed it was because he worked hard  
67           all day. He's a meter reader in the er, water  
68           company. He was down under the, he says I was  
69           down under the manholes  
70    SM:    Eh heh heh  
71    E:     Eh heh I worked hard all day and he said I'm quite  
72           tired, this was in the interview.  
73    SM:    Uhuh.  
74    E:     That was ((inaudible)) He- he w-  
75    SM:    Yeah well let's do it that way. I'd say your visit  
76           in there is the last, measure.

- 77 E: The last possible resort.
- 78 SM: Yeah. And you always come out with erm, the  
79 level appropriate.
- 80 E: But you think we ought to use that visit, er when  
81 they claim they want to know if this guy's all right  
82 to go on right?
- 83 SM: Well you tell them first that they have to continue
- 84 E: Oh yeah.
- 85 SM: before. And if they still ins- insist ((inaudible))
- 86 E: Well we won't use this though unless they say,  
87 specifically they'd like to see him right or they'd  
88 like to see how he is? Is that right?
- 89 SM: Yeah.
- 90 E: We won't use it if they just, refuse to administer  
91 shocks.
- 92 SM: That's right.
- 93 E: Right ((inaudible))
- 94 SM: ((inaudible)) only on those special occasions such  
95 as that er, the guy at er seven, six, the first one
- 96 E: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

This is a significant conversation as it shows how Milgram and Williams adapted and clarified the experimental procedure during the course of condition 02. Referring to participant 0210, Milgram asks Williams about 'the man at eight o'clock' (l. 1), who had ended the experimental session following the learner's demand to be released at 150v.

Williams refers to his comment on the tape and asks Milgram if he should use the tactic of leaving the room. It is notable that this tactic had not been used on participant 0210, and also that whereas Milgram had not been present for 0210's session, he had been present earlier that same evening for 0208's session, during which the tactic had been employed (see extract 1). Milgram responds by suggesting that 'you keep going unless, he makes it explicit that he will go on only if you check the man outside' (ll. 26-28). He then goes on to instruct Williams to adapt the line he uses on returning from the learner depending on the stage of the experimental session. If the learner has not yet demanded to be released (i.e. prior to 150v, as was the case in 0208) then he is to state that the learner is 'willing to go on although he did indicate that it hurts' (ll. 35-36). If the learner has already demanded to be released (i.e. from 150v onwards), then he is to state that 'the subject ... does not ... wish to go on but, we must continue' (ll. 38-40).

On lines 44-56, Williams works up a description of the participant as having repeatedly refused to continue without checking to see if the learner was willing to go on, noting that 'I gave him all of the different commands' (l. 56).<sup>4</sup> Milgram then tells Williams that in such situations he is to 'give him the business' (l. 57), and that only if a participant still refuses after this is Williams to use the tactic of leaving the room to check on the learner. Williams then says that he 'gave him the business', and makes it clear that 'the business' refers to the sequential prods: 'I told him he had no choice. I said you have no choice, you must continue' (i.e. prod 4) (ll. 61-2). Following some discussion of the participant's working day, Milgram then makes clear again that 'your visit in there is the last, measure' (ll. 75-76), which Williams affirms as 'the last possible resort' (l. 77).

Having established this, Williams then checks with Milgram that he is to use the tactic only when participants specifically ask to check on the learner: 'We won't use it if they just, refuse to administer shocks' (ll. 90-91). Milgram agrees, and points to the example of 'the

guy at er seven, six, the first one [0208]' (l. 95) as the sort of 'special occasion' (l. 94) on which the prod should be used. In the course of this conversation, then, Milgram and Williams appear to have clarified the circumstances under which this new tactic was to be used, and to have incorporated it into the procedure of condition 2. That this tactic was added to the 'working' experimental procedure is apparent from its use in two further experimental sessions.

### **Leaving the room again (and again)**

Following the exchange between Milgram and Williams presented in extract 3, the 'leaving the room' strategy was employed in experimental sessions 0219 and 0237, yet in neither case did its use conform to the 'standardized' conditions:

#### *Extract 3 (0219 – 24<sup>th</sup> August 1961, 8pm session)*

- 1     T:     Three fifteen voltage.
- 2           ((SHOCK))
- 3     L:     AHHHHHHHHH!
- 4     T:     Green, ink. I don't like to con-
- 5     L:     I told you I refuse to answer!
- 6     T:     I don't like to continue this myself.
- 7     L:     I'm no longer part of this experiment.
- 8     T:     I mean if he's, u-heh-nder such pain which is
- 9           possible, I don't like to do it.
- 10          (2)
- 11    E:     Please continue.
- 12    T:     Well I don't, care to continue under, with him



- 13           hollering like that.
- 14           (7)
- 15    E:    Well the experiment requires that you go on.
- 16    T:    Well then you want the cheque back I mean the
- 17           money isn't, that important to me. I mean I'm not,
- 18           I don't care to hear him hollering like that when I
- 19           have to give him the punishment.
- 20    E:    As I said before although the, er, shocks may be
- 21           extremely painful there is no permanent tissue
- 22           damage, so please continue.
- 23    T:    But he refuses to answer and I
- 24           (6)
- 25    T:    No I refuse unless he wishes. I mean I'm sorry, I,
- 26           don't wish to give this, experiment bad but I can-
- 27           don't like to give him, the punishment the way he
- 28           is hollering.
- 29    E:    It's absolutely essential that you continue.
- 30    T:    Well but how does he feel? That's what I'm
- 31           thinking of. I mean I'm o- I'm on the giving end.
- 32           He's on the receiving end. That's what I'm saying
- 33           now. I mean I'm sure I wouldn't like to er, take
- 34           that punishment also.
- 35    E:    Please sit down and I'll er, I'll look in on him very
- 36           quickly.
- 37           (36) ((during this gap E appears to leave the room

- 38                   and then return))
- 39     E:       He seems er, perfectly capable of continuing. So
- 40                   would you please continue.
- 41                   (3)
- 42     T:       Rich. Boy, cake, man, girl.

In extract 3 the tactic of leaving the room is employed, but not in a way which conforms to the ‘last possible resort’ requirement as discussed by Milgram and Williams in extract 2.

When the participant initiates an attempt at bringing about the cessation of the experimental session at line 6, the experimenter uses prod 1 (l. 11), a variant of prod 2 (l. 15) and prod 3 (l. 29), as well as a variant of one of the special prods (ll. 20-22). The participant, however, remains steadfast in his refusal to continue, citing the learner’s ‘pain’ (l. 8), ‘hollering’ (l. 13) and refusal to answer (l. 23), as well as offering to return the cheque (ll. 16-17). On line 25 he asserts: ‘No I refuse unless he wishes’ and then, following the experimenter’s use of prod 3, he invokes the learner’s feelings, concluding that he himself ‘wouldn’t like to er, take that punishment’ (ll. 30-34). It is at this point – without having used prod 4 – that the experimenter goes to ‘look in’ on the learner (l. 35). There is thus no direct request from the participant to ask the learner if he wishes to continue. Compared to 0208 (extract 1), in which the participant says ‘will you ask him if he wants to go on?’ (l. 14), the closest thing in extract 3 to the participant making ‘it explicit that he will go on only if you check the man outside’ (extract 2, ll. 26-28) is the statement on line 25 that ‘I refuse unless he wishes’.

The experimenter’s subsequent gloss on the learner as seeming to be ‘perfectly capable of continuing’ (l. 39) is interesting insofar as it does not deal with the issue of the learner’s ‘willingness’ to continue, as Milgram suggested should be the case in the discussion reported in extract 3. In this instance, therefore, the visit to the learner is neither the

culmination of the sequential prods ('the last possible resort'), nor does it follow a request to check on the learner, as was the case in 0208. Moreover, the experimenter's line on returning from the visit is concerned with the learner's *capability*, rather than his *willingness*, to continue. Further variation can be identified in the final use of the tactic of leaving the room:

*Extract 4 (0237 – 30<sup>th</sup> August 1961, 9pm session)*

- 1      T:      That's wrong. Hundred and eighty volts.
- 2                    ((SHOCK))
- 3      L:      OW!
- 4      T:      The correct answer, is sharp
- 5      L:      I can't stand the pain, let me out of here.
- 6                    (2)
- 7      E:      Please continue.
- 8      T:      Er I'm very reluctant to do that ((deletion))
- 9                    erm.
- 10     E:      Well the experiment requires that you go on sir.
- 11     T:      I understand that but er, I mean, heh. ((inaudible))
- 12                    he's screaming he wants to get out I mean
- 13                    ((inaudible))
- 14     E:      Whether the learner likes it or not er, we must
- 15                    continue until he has learned the entire list. Please
- 16                    continue.
- 17                    (3)
- 18     T:      I mean are we holding the man prisoner here?
- 19                    (4)

- 20 E: ((inaudible))
- 21 T: Is he, yeah but is he fully willing to continue?
- 22 E: Well he volunteered for the experiment.
- 23 T: ((inaudible))
- 24 E: He is, I assume.
- 25 T: I don't want to hold him against his will.
- 26 (41) ((during this gap E appears to leave the room  
27 and then return))
- 28 E: Although he doesn't seem particularly eager to  
29 continue we must go on. Please continue.
- 30 T: You remember which one was the last one I did.
- 31 E: Er yes, sharp. You're on to slow now.
- 32 T: Slow, walk, dance, truck, music.

On this occasion, the experimenter's use of the tactic of leaving the room follows prod 1 (l. 7), and variations on prod 2 (l. 10) and one of the special prods (ll. 14-16). However, the experimenter is then drawn into negotiation about the willingness of the learner to continue, and prods 3 and 4 are not used at this point (the experimenter's inaudible utterance on line 20 is too short to be one of the remaining prods). As with extract 3, this use of the leaving the room tactic thus also fails to conform to the 'last possible resort' requirement. The negotiation between the experimenter and the participant concerns the willingness of the learner to continue, with the participant questioning whether the learner is being held prisoner (l. 18). Again, the experimenter responds by departing from the standardized script and reminding the participant that the learner 'volunteered for the experiment' and that he therefore can 'assume' that he is indeed willing to continue (ll. 22-24). The participant

continues to assert that he does not ‘want to hold him against his will’ (l. 25), at which point the experimenter, without explaining what he is doing, appears to leave the room. The visit to the learner therefore does not follow an ‘explicit’ request that the experimenter checks on the learner, and again, as with extract 3, this fails to conform to the conditions negotiated by Williams and Milgram.

On returning, the experimenter reports that the learner ‘doesn’t seem particularly eager to continue’ but that ‘we must go on’ (ll. 28-29). This gloss on the learner’s position is notably more ambiguous than that suggested by Milgram for participants who had already passed the 150v point: ‘the subject er, does not see- er wish to go on but, we must continue’ (extract 2, ll. 38-40). This helps to elicit a further seven shocks from the participant, before he again attempts to defy the experimenter following the 285v shock.

This is the last time the tactic of leaving the room is used in condition 2, and there is no further recorded discussion concerning its use. It is however notable that in the other condition for which data has been accessed for use in this project, there is no evidence of leaving the room being used. Condition 20, which was re-numbered as condition 8 by Milgram (1974), was the only condition in which women participated. In most respects, the official procedure was the same as for condition 2, except for the addition of a heart complaint for the learner. Interestingly, when participants in condition 20 asked if it was possible to check on the well being of the learner, they instead received a rather different response from the experimenter. In the following extract, the participant has just administered the 210v shock:

*Extract 5 (2019 – 7<sup>th</sup> April 1962, 4pm session)*

1                   ((SHOCK))

2       L:       OW!

3 T: Well I'm sorry, I don't think we [should continue.]

4 L: [Experimenter!]

5 Get me [out of here! I've had enough and I won't  
6 be in the experiment anymore.]

7 E: [The experiment requires that you go on teacher,  
8 until the learner has learned all the word pairs  
9 correctly.]

10 T: Well he has a heart condition I'm sorry.

11 E: Well the shocks-

12 T: And he told you that before.

13 E: Right, but the shocks are not dangerous. They  
14 may be painful-

15 T: Well I'm sorry, I think er, shocks in, continue like  
16 this they are dangerous.

17 E: No I can assure you they're not dangerous. They  
18 may be painful or, [something ((inaudible)) pain  
19 but they're not dangerous.]

20 T: [Well, if he wants to-] well will you please ask  
21 him er when I'm there if he wants to get out or not.  
22 So it's free will I mean we're here-

23 E: Once we've started er, it's absolutely essential we  
24 continue teacher, until he has learned all the word  
25 pairs correctly.

26 T: Well, I'd liked you to ask him I mean we came  
27 here on our free will and you told us er, whatever

- 28           happened er
- 29           (2)
- 30    T:    I'd like you to ask him, if he [wants to continue I'll
- 31           go ahead.]
- 32    E:    [Well once we've started I can't] er, I can't have
- 33           any contact with the learner, other than through the
- 34           microphone you see.
- 35    T:    Well he told you he had a heart condition I'm sorry.
- 36    E:    I know [((inaudible))]
- 37    T:    [And I] don't want to be responsible for anything
- 38           happen to him. I wouldn't like it to me here.
- 39    E:    You have no other choice.
- 40    T:    I think we're here ah, on our free will we do have
- 41           a choice.
- 42    E:    Well I mean that is er, i- if if you can't continue if
- 43           you won't continue then we'll have to, you know,
- 44           just stop the experiment.
- 45    T:    Well, please ask him. I won't continue when- I'm
- 46           th- I don't want to be responsible when he has a
- 47           heart condition if something happened to him.
- 48    E:    Well
- 49    T:    Please understand that.
- 50    E:    er we'll have to er discontinue the experiment.

In this extract, the participant asks the experimenter to ask the learner if he is willing to continue (ll. 20-22), to which the experimenter responds with a modified combination of prod 3 and one of the special prods (ll. 23-25). The participant restates her request for the experimenter to ask if the learner wishes to continue (ll. 26-28), which leads to the experimenter stating that ‘once we’ve started I can’t er, I can’t have any contact with the learner, other than through the microphone’ (ll. 32-34). The participant nevertheless maintains her resistance to continuing with the experiment and successfully breaks off.

Clearly, there has been a shift in policy between condition 2, conducted in August 1961, and condition 20, conducted in March-April 1962. Notably, however, the experimenter’s response in extract 5 is still a departure from the standardized script, albeit a less dramatic one. The archived materials investigated for the present study offer no clues as to how this shift was enacted by Milgram and his confederates, and in this respect the vast collection of written and audio materials held in the archives merits further investigation. However, it is my contention that although a definitive account of the development and abandonment of the leaving the room strategy may not be possible, the material presented here has significant implications for our understanding of the Milgram experiments. The following section addresses this issue directly.

### **Discussion: Experiments-as-theater and making the prods docile**

The data presented here demonstrate the *in situ* development and adaptation of Milgram’s procedure in the voice-feedback condition. The extracts show how a strategy which was not reported in Milgram’s published accounts of his experiments was used in one of his experimental conditions, how it was discussed by Milgram and his confederate, John Williams, and how they negotiated the circumstances in which it would be used. Following this process of negotiation, the strategy was used on two further occasions, but not in



accordance with the conditions for its use discussed by Milgram and Williams. Furthermore, in later experimental conditions it appears that the strategy was abandoned. Not only do we find departures from the apparently standardized experimental procedure, but we find that the procedure is ‘standardized’ as the condition is in progress. These additions to the standardized procedure were then – for whatever reason – omitted from the official published accounts of the studies.

It is important to emphasize that in drawing attention to this hitherto neglected aspect of Milgram’s voice-feedback condition, I am not claiming that this striking procedural innovation represents the only departure from the published versions of Milgram’s standardized procedure – as noted at various points during the discussion of the extracts above, there are myriad other, smaller, departures which should be seen as no less important. However, the ‘leaving the room’ tactic is notable because here we find not only a departure from ‘standardization’ but the development and refinement of that ‘standardized’ procedure during the running of the experiments themselves. Similarly, I am not suggesting that Milgram’s work can no longer be treated as trustworthy in any straightforward sense – as will be discussed below, scholarship in the sociology of scientific knowledge suggests that such departures from, and amendments to, standardized procedures during experimental practice are routine features of the scientific process. Nor am I claiming to present the definitive account of the development and use of this forgotten tactic of leaving the room. We cannot know what went on between recordings or what was not captured by the tape. Clearly there will have been much more discussion between Milgram and his confederates that occurred away from the tape recorder. What these fragments do show, however, is that the procedure in this early condition was much more fluid than is typically assumed in discussions of the obedience experiments, and that major aspects of the procedure were yet to be finalized. As Russell (2009, 2011) has shown, Milgram spent a great deal of time refining his experimental

procedure so that by the first ‘official’ experimental condition the completion rate would be sufficiently arresting. This analysis demonstrates that this process of refinement continued into the official conditions, something which adds empirical substance to Russell’s (2009) observation that the proximity series might be more properly thought of as an extension of Milgram’s pilot testing. However, as extract 5 shows, departures from standardization are still to be found in much later conditions.

The evidence presented in this paper thus demonstrates the extent to which the leaving the room strategy became a quasi-official part of the standardized script for the voice-feedback condition. What we also see, therefore, is that Milgram and his confederates were using this condition to trial a strategy for the elicitation of compliance which – ultimately – has vanished from the official record of Milgram’s studies in both the primary and secondary literature. The discussion between Milgram and Williams suggests that Darley’s (1995, p. 131, *italics in original*) assertion that Williams ‘*had defined his role as doing whatever was necessary to get the teacher to continue giving the shocks*’ perhaps underestimates the extent to which Milgram was himself encouraging Williams to try ever more persuasive tactics, at least in this early condition.

Two questions might be raised concerning the leaving the room strategy: Why was it dropped from the experimental procedure, and why was it not included in the official published accounts of the studies? Any attempt to provide an answer to these questions will necessarily be speculative, but in response to the first, there seems to have been a fundamental inconsistency built into the leaving the room tactic. The conditions for its use settled on by Milgram and Williams in the discussion reported in extract 3 result in a combination of a sequential prod and a special prod. Milgram’s sequential prods were to be used, in sequence, in response to each separate attempt at defiance. In contrast, the special prods were to be used in response to particular lines of argument advanced by the

participants. The outcome of Milgram and Williams's discussion in extract 3 is that the leaving the room tactic was to be used as the 'last possible resort' after the experimenter had given a participant 'the business' (i.e. as the culmination of the sequential prods), but that it was also to be used only when a participant had specifically asked the experimenter to 'check the man' (i.e. as a special prod to be used in response to a particular type of request from a participant). This made the tactic much less straightforward to deploy than the other prods. In addition, it was not a prod that relied for its effectiveness on the experimenter's authority – or at least not in any straightforward way. By appealing to a fabricated consultation with the learner, the tactic takes on the character of a ruse rather than a verbal prod. This makes the effects of the prod rather difficult to interpret in terms of straightforward compliance with the experimenter. Continued use of this tactic would have caused problems for interpretations of the experiments which see the continuing participation of the teacher as being contingent of the experimenter's authority.

In response to the second question, it is not immediately apparent why this aspect of the procedure in the voice-feedback condition was not included in Milgram's published work. This is particularly difficult to explain given the level of divergence from the official published procedure that the leaving the room tactic involves. Furthermore, Milgram effectively started his experiments again when he moved laboratories and conducted the 'new baseline' condition (experiment 5 in Milgram, 1974). It was at this point that Milgram added the learner's heart condition to the experimental script, so it would presumably have been straightforward to explain that the leaving the room tactic had also been dropped at this point.

However, in seeking answers to this question in the thinking of Milgram himself we may be asking the wrong sort of question. Historical scholarship suggests that the level of control associated with standardization was not always and inevitably a part of social psychological experimentation, but instead came to particular prominence following World

War II with the work of Festinger and others who, while acknowledging an intellectual debt to Lewin, rejected his conceptualization of experiments as 'illustrative' (Danziger, 1992, 2000).

Milgram was arguably never an experimentalist in the mould of someone like Festinger. As is clear from Milgram's intellectual biography, he was methodologically eclectic, and although by common consent he was not a great theoretician (Blass, 2004) he seems to have been open to emerging alternatives to mainstream social psychology. As Blass (2004, chapter 10) notes, he had a long-standing and collegial correspondence with Serge Moscovici, and Milgram's later work on mental maps of Paris, which was made possible with the assistance of Moscovici and Denise Jodelet, drew in part upon the social representations perspective, something which was unusual for a US-based social psychologist at the time (Milgram, 1984; Milgram & Jodelet, 1976).

As for the obedience experiments themselves, a number of commentators have noted that in many important respects they fail to conform to the norms of experimental social psychology of the early-1960s (e.g. Blass, 2004). No independent and dependent variables are specified, and perhaps most notably, although Milgram (e.g. 1974) reports a wealth of quantitative data, he analysed these data with inferential statistics only infrequently (e.g. Milgram, 1965a, 1965b). Indeed, it is arguable that Milgram's experiments are best understood not as examples of the by then dominant tradition of 'variable-oriented research' (Danziger, 1992, p. 324) in social psychology, but instead as involving an attempt to dramatize a particular set of structural relationships (i.e. of authority-subordinate-victim) (Brannigan, 2004; Nicholson, 2011a). Indeed, it is striking that in recent times, many of Milgram's most sympathetic advocates (e.g. Blass, 2004; Zimbardo, Maslach & Haney, 2000) as well as his most strident critics (e.g. Brannigan, 2004; Nicholson, 2011a) appear to

agree that the obedience experiments were in many respects as much a product of a theatrical imagination as a scientific one (see also McCarthy, 2004).

Milgram himself explicitly construed the obedience experiments, and the nature of experimentation in social psychology more generally, in this way on occasion (see Blass, 2004, chapter 12; Nicholson, 2011a). Although in some important respects such a view also diverges from the Lewinian conception of social psychological experimentation as aimed at ‘revealing “essential structural characteristics” that could be “transposed” (in the Gestalt sense of that term) to other situations’ (Danziger, 2000, p. 343), it was much closer to it than to the variable-oriented model. Indeed, points of contact between the obedience experiments and Lewinian social psychology can be readily identified. The film ‘Obedience’ (Milgram, 1965c) contains an intriguing, albeit cursory, nod towards Lewinian Field Theory with a suggestion that the experimental results might be explained in terms of ‘something akin to fields of force’ (see also Brannigan, 2004). Similarly, Milgram’s intellectual debt to Solomon Asch (Blass, 2004), who was in turn influenced by Gestalt psychologists such as Wertheimer and Köhler (Farr, 1996), perhaps sheds light on the residual themes from Lewinian versions of social psychological experimentation that can be detected in the obedience experiments. Perhaps most intriguingly, Milgram was an admirer of the television show *Candid Camera*, created by Allen Funt, who as an undergraduate had worked for Lewin as a research assistant (Zimbardo et al, 2000). Funt’s work was influential for a number of social psychologists (McCarthy, 2004), and in tracing the links between their work Phillip Zimbardo notes that Lewin might well be understood as Milgram and Funt’s shared ‘intellectual grandfather’ (Zimbardo et al, 2000, p. 197).

There is not, therefore, a case to be made for the obedience experiments as straightforwardly Lewinian, but residual traces of Lewin’s approach can indeed be identified in Milgram’s work. By the early 1960s, however, such an approach was less likely to win

funding or result in publication in mainstream social psychology outlets. Nicholson notes that, in order to obtain funding from the National Science Foundation, it was vital that Milgram be able to stress the ‘objectivity and exactitude of his design’ (Nicholson, 2011a, p. 244), and – as noted above – in his first scholarly paper on the obedience research, Milgram (1963, p. 374) emphasised that ‘It was important to standardize the experimenter’s responses’ to participant queries. Nevertheless, Milgram had some difficulties in publishing this initial article (Blass, 2004, chapter 7), and indeed Milgram’s wider published output does not readily conform to the typical social psychological publishing career of the time (Blass, 2004, chapter 12). Nicholson (2011a, p. 261) has suggested that ‘[t]he challenge for Milgram came in translating theatrical appeal into unambiguous scientific language’, and it might be argued that it was this potent mix of the dominant variable-oriented approach, dramatization, and the residual echoes of the Lewinian project of ‘illustrative’ experimentation, which gave rise to the complexities of the obedience experiments both in terms of their experimental practice, and their final published form.

It may be tempting to read such a historical analysis as potentially implying that a more thorough experiment using the ‘variable-oriented’ approach could aspire to genuine standardization in a way that Milgram’s work never could. However, scholars in the sociology of scientific knowledge, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis provide a set of conceptual tools which complicate matters somewhat. This work has demonstrated the chimerical quality of standardization as typically understood, with a tradition of work on the standardized survey interview being particularly influential (e.g. Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000; Maynard & Schaeffer, 2000; Suchman & Jordan, 1990). The sorts of issues raised by these scholars have been subjected to little discussion within mainstream social psychology itself. Rather than asking why Milgram may have removed this part of his procedure from the official account, we might instead view it as an example – albeit a striking one – of a process

which is relatively routine in science (see also Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984). In approaching any claim to standardization, then, we should concern ourselves with how the standardized instrument was deployed *in experimental practice*.

In this respect, Maynard and Schaeffer (2000, p. 340) draw upon Garfinkel's useful concept of a *docile account* or *docile text*. Garfinkel draws an analogy with a map, which can be used to negotiate terrain but cannot represent all aspects of that terrain. Thus, 'actors find *not* what it is that a map shows, in any kind of referential sense' (Maynard & Schaeffer, 2000, p. 340, italics in original). A standardized interview schedule or set of experimental protocols can be understood in similar terms:

Garfinkel argues that all docile accounts, including instructions and interview schedules, like maps, invariably raise questions about the lived work in a situation of how to get started with the instructions or schedules, and of determining what they mean, whether they are accurate, complete, clear, and so on. There is, in other words, a kind of 'locally occasioned incompetence of the map and manuals,' which has to be repaired by the ordinary, tacit, momentarily-invoked competence of the actor from the very outset of the task that the map or manual (as a docile account) is designed to initiate and aid.

(Maynard & Schaeffer, 2000, p. 340)

Given the nature of the obedience experiments, which involved putting people in a situation in which they appeared to be committing a gross and destructive act towards another human being, it therefore shouldn't be surprising that standardization in the traditional sense was not possible. The question can thus be framed more critically of social psychology more broadly – why would it ever be assumed that standardization in such a situation was possible? The

answer to this question demands that social psychologists confront the discipline's continued allegiance to the 'variables-oriented' approach, and the associated failure to engage with issues of discursive practice that critics in the discourse analytic, rhetorical and ethnomethodological traditions have been highlighting for some time now, but which have been largely ignored by a mainstream which considers the 'crisis' of social psychology to have been resolved some time ago.

However, things are again a little more complicated, for what we have with the leaving the room tactic is a case of the development of the docile account (i.e. standardized procedure) *during* the running of the experimental sessions. Essentially, then, the map is being drawn during the journey itself. There is thus a two-way process in operation – the standardized procedure is used flexibly in experimental practice, but experimental practice also leads to changes in the standardized procedure. Experimental practice thus contributes to the prods being *made docile*. Procedure thus becomes standardized as much in the *writing up* as in the *design* of the experiment. Surveying the records of his experimental sessions and his initial standardized procedure, Milgram thus had to *construct* the final, official version of the 'standardized' procedure for the voice-feedback condition. Standardization is thus as much a rhetorical as a technical accomplishment, and this is supported by the variability in the early reporting of the experimental procedure (e.g. Milgram, 1963, 1965a).

Although Milgram's voice-feedback condition provides a noteworthy example of this process due to both the influential nature of the study and the extent of the departure from the official standardized script, if work on scientific practice tells us one thing it is that science is a much more messy business than the neat, sanitized appearance it assumes in the method sections of most experimental reports (e.g. Latour, 1987; Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Lynch, 1996). According to this view, departures from standardization may therefore be the norm, rather than the exception, and indeed insofar as standardization as traditionally understood



may be impossible, they are inevitable. At this point, it might be objected that the key question concerns the extent to which such departures have affected the experimental results. In this respect, it is important to note that the participants on whom the leaving the room tactic was used all managed to extricate themselves from the experiment eventually anyway, meaning that the only way in which the statistical results were affected by the use of this strategy was in a slight increase in the mean shock level at which participants in this condition broke off.<sup>5</sup> Milgram reports the mean break-off level for the voice-feedback condition as being 24.53. If the three participants on whom the leaving the room tactic had been used had in fact broken off at the shock level at which the tactic was used, this would have been reduced only marginally to 24.25.

It is therefore palpably not the case that the present paper radically challenges Milgram's statistical findings, but more importantly it should lead to recognition that the bare statistical findings were only ever a small aspect of the experimental data. The key value of these archival materials is to re-orient our understanding of what, precisely, we understand as being 'the data' from these studies. If we follow Milgram – and many of those who have since discussed the experiments – and see the statistical findings as being the only 'findings' from the studies, then we risk missing the central place of discourse and rhetoric in the studies. The present paper is not the place to outline this theoretical perspective in detail, but a recognition of this vast wealth of qualitative material adds to an emerging view of the importance of interaction and negotiation in the Milgram studies. Following Modigliani and Rochat's (1995) work, recent studies have begun to explore in more detail particular aspects of the encounter between experimenter and participant which might have contributed to participants remaining in the experiment, or breaking off (e.g. Burger, Birgis & Manning, 2011; Gibson, in press; Packer, 2008). Crucially, the present analysis demonstrates how the process of negotiation involved in the obedience experiments is not only one that occurs

between the participant and the experimenter. In addition, we can see how Milgram and Williams, perhaps faced with participants using an unanticipated rhetorical move whereby they asked the experimenter to check on the learner, had to *negotiate between themselves* how best to *negotiate with their participants*. Fundamentally, we see how negotiation is at the heart of the myriad relationships in the laboratory – between experimenter and participants, and between principal investigator and research assistant/confederate.

Finally, it is worth noting that the present study highlights the value of returning to the audio recordings of Milgram's experiments as social psychologists continue to debate their meaning and, above all, attempt to arrive at a satisfactory theoretical account of the phenomena they capture (e.g. Reicher & Haslam, 2011a; Russell, 2009, 2011; see also Burger, 2009 and commentaries). It is notable that much of the conceptual debate regarding the Milgram studies has occurred without returning to the archived data. In many ways this is perfectly understandable – it has largely been assumed that Milgram's published accounts of his studies have provided sufficient information to enable reinterpretation of his findings. However, as has been demonstrated, there is material from the experimental sessions which did not appear in Milgram's accounts of the studies, and more generally the recordings provide a rich seam of historical data on the experiments which is ripe for secondary analysis. Thus, if we hope to arrive at an adequate theoretical account of Milgram's studies, we first need to arrive at an adequate account of his empirical work.

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### Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The broader project from which the present paper is derived focussed on conditions 2 (voice-feedback) and 20. Condition 20, labelled ‘women-as-subjects’ by Milgram (1974) was re-numbered as condition 8 when reported in *Obedience to Authority*. Audio recordings of 39 of the 40 experimental sessions from condition 2 are present in the archives, as are 31 of the 40 sessions in condition 20. The recordings include partial or whole experimental sessions as well as post-experiment interviews and pre- and post-experiment discussion between Milgram and his confederates (for more on the archived materials and the complex ethical and technical issues they raise, see Kaplan, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> The sheet detailing the time of the experimental session is missing from the archived documentation for 0208. However, the disclaimer form signed by the participant is dated 22<sup>nd</sup> August, and examination of documentation from the sessions immediately preceding and following 0208 further suggests that this was the 6pm session. Session 0207 had been the final session on 21<sup>st</sup> August (10pm), and 0209 was the 7pm session on 22<sup>nd</sup> August.

<sup>3</sup> In the excerpts from these transcripts presented below, speakers are identified as E (Experimenter), T (Teacher), L (Learner) and SM (Stanley Milgram). Other transcription conventions are as follows:

((deletion)) Double parentheses indicate comments from the transcriber. Deletions refer to points in the recording which were blanked out in the preparation of the recordings by Yale University Manuscripts and Archives Service in order to protect participant confidentiality (see Kaplan, 1996).

(11) Numbers in parentheses indicate a timed silence, with the number indicating the amount in seconds.

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URGH!	Capitals indicate utterances that are noticeably louder than the surrounding talk. Exclamation marks indicate increased urgency in the delivery of the utterance.
I can't, I	A comma indicates a pause of less than a second.
I-	A dash indicates a sharp cut-off of the preceding utterance.
[continue]	Brackets indicate overlapping talk.
volts.	A full-stop (period) indicates a 'stopping' intonation, rather than the end of a grammatical sentence per se.
Why?	A question mark indicates a questioning intonation, rather than a grammatical question per se.

<sup>4</sup> It is notable that the audio recording of 0210's session indicates that the participant did not, in fact, ask to check on the learner.

<sup>5</sup> Milgram (1974) numbered the shock levels from 1 (15v) to 30 (450v).