Introduction

What more can be left to say about Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments? Surely by now, well over 50 years after Milgram completed his final experimental session in 1962, we know all there is to know about them. Those of us who teach social psychology will continue to be grateful that we have the obedience experiments – grainy black and white footage and all – to draw in our students, but surely we don't actually need to do any more work to understand what they mean because that was done and dusted long ago.

Any psychology student could recite the basic details. In their most well-known variants, the experiments featured a participant arriving at Milgram's laboratory to take part in what they thought was a study of the effects of punishment on learning. This required them to take on the role of 'teacher' alongside a 'learner' who appeared to be just another participant, but who was actually a confederate employed by Milgram. The teacher was to punish the learner, who was apparently seated in an adjoining room, by giving him an electric shock every time he made a mistake on a memory test. The shocks, which were administered via an imposing-looking shock generator, started at 15 volts and rose in 15-volt increments all the way up to 450 volts. The learner made lots of mistakes on the memory test and so the teacher had to give him increasingly severe shocks. As the shocks got stronger, the learner began to protest, with his yelps of pain being played back on tape from the next room. Ultimately, he demanded to be released, before refusing to answer any more questions. Subsequently, he fell silent, with participants being left to wonder if he had lost consciousness, or worse.

Unbeknownst to the participants, the electric shocks were, of course, not real. Understandably, many participants hesitated or refused to continue, and Milgram's aim was to see if participants would obey orders to keep giving the shocks. The experimenter could use a series of four 'prods' to try and keep the participants administering the shocks. These were the *orders* that Milgram was interested in seeing whether participants would *obey*. Beginning with 'Please continue', the culmination of these prods was

1

'You have no other choice, you must go on', and if participants still refused to obey after hearing this then the experiment was ended. Under these conditions, around 65 per cent of participants obeyed fully and administered shocks all the way up to 450 volts. These results are typically held to show that people are much more susceptible to the commands of authority than we might have expected, or hoped, they would be.

The obedience experiments have always been controversial and the subject of much debate and commentary (e.g. Baumrind, 1964; Miller, 1986; Orne & Holland, 1968). This shows no sign of abating as recent years have, if anything, seen an exponential increase in the amount of scholarly work devoted to them (for summaries see Burger, 2017; Miller, 2016; and see Chapter 2). They are a staple of undergraduate education in psychology (Griggs, 2017; Griggs & Whitehead, 2015a, b), and are influential in disciplines ranging from law to history, business to sociology and nursing to criminology (Miller, 2016). Moreover, the experiments continue to be cited in discussions of abuses and atrocities ranging from the Holocaust to the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuses (e.g. Fiske, Harris & Cuddy, 2004; Lankford, 2009; Miller, 2004; Zimbardo, 2007), in which they chime with the well-worn (but now largely refuted) idea that the Holocaust was the result of ordinary people 'just following orders' (Mandel, 1998). Unusually for an academic study, the obedience experiments have also had a considerable cultural impact, ranging from a 1970s miniseries starring William Shatner, to the recent Hollywood film *Experimenter*. The experiments have been covered and discussed in documentaries and news items too numerous to mention (a simple YouTube search should suffice for any readers who need convincing), and continue to provide fodder for textual media of both the more traditional (e.g. newspapers) and the 'new' (e.g. blogs) variety.

Given all this coverage and commentary, you would indeed be forgiven for thinking that there is little to learn about the obedience experiments that isn't already known. In this book, however, I will suggest that we have barely even begun to scratch the surface of the obedience experiments, and will propose a new way of thinking about them that foregrounds the role of argumentation. In doing so, I will suggest that our view of Milgram's experiments has, in some important respects, become rather one-sided, and that we can reorient our understanding of the experiments by conceiving of them as occasions for rhetoric.

Arguing and Thinking

Any attempt to highlight the extent to which a debate has become too one-sided, or even that one side of the argument has been silenced

altogether, will be strengthened by the recognition that there are two sides to every argument. As Billig (1996) has highlighted in his rhetorical approach to social psychology, there is always the possibility of recovering counterarguments, however dominant one side of the debate has become. Indeed, in some circumstances we not only need to appreciate the theoretical possibility of recovering absent arguments, but we should actively seek to do so.

Billig (1996) highlights the one-sidedness of many psychological theories. Categorisation is highlighted at the expense of particularisation; tolerance is neglected in theories that foreground the human capacity for prejudice; a preference for consistency suggests that contradiction cannot be tolerated. Drawing on the classical tradition of rhetorical scholarship, and in particular on Protagoras's maxim that there are always two sides to every argument, Billig emphasises the value of noticing this one-sidedness and of seeking to balance the traditional focus of such theories with a counterweight. Rather than focussing on categorisation, psychologists should pay just as much attention to particularisation; if we wish to avoid slipping into the unpromising position of implying that prejudice is inevitable, we should also concern ourselves with the capacity for tolerance, and so on. It is my contention that we have got used to thinking of Milgram's obedience experiments in a rather one-sided way. We think of them as showing how easily people can be led into doing something that they really ought not to; how dangerous the commands of an authority figure can be; of how alarmingly simple it might be for another Holocaust to be perpetrated at any time, in any place. These are important lessons, and it would be foolish to argue that people are *never* easily led by the demands of authority, just as it would be dangerously complacent to argue that another Holocaust was beyond the realms of possibility. But if we focus on this side of the argument to the neglect of the alternative, then something equally dangerous occurs: we create the impression that resistance is impossible, that orders will automatically be obeyed, and that atrocity and genocide are inevitable. Clearly, that is not the case either.

Of course, one of the reasons for this one-sided impression of Milgram's work is that Milgram himself saw his experiments as addressing obedience. He saw the nature of the problem to which he applied himself as one of unthinking obedience, with an individual being subsumed under the authority figure via a psychological process he called *the agentic shift*. Indeed, the very name used to refer to Milgram's experiments tells us how we should see them: the *obedience* experiments. It is thus necessary to highlight defiance, resistance and disobedience as much as obedience. Milgram's experiments not only show us people

obeying and going along with the orders of an authority figure, they show us people challenging and resisting. In doing so, they are also frequently *arguing*. Participants in Milgram's experiments often argued their way out of the experiment, and in those conditions in which the majority of participants did complete the procedure, the defiance of the significant minority who were able to argue their way out of the situation should be foregrounded more greatly than it has been. Moreover, as we will see, the experimenter didn't simply issue orders in any straightforward fashion, but also argued with participants that they really should continue with the experiment. The experiment was as much about persuasion as it was about coercion.

We might therefore want to consider whether 'the obedience experiments' is any longer an appropriate shorthand term for the studies (Gibson, 2015a), perhaps suggesting an alternative such as 'the resistance experiments' (Kaposi, 2017). But to do this might also risk moving things too far in the other direction. As Billig (1996, p. 161) notes of Protagoras's maxim, 'the reversal does not replace the original but complements it'. Any attempt to highlight defiance at the expense of obedience would risk missing the still puzzling and troubling finding that many people did indeed continue with Milgram's experiments. Some of these people did – albeit unsuccessfully – challenge the experimenter. Many others did not. Many participants kept going with minimal attempts at protest or resistance. If the defiance of those who extricated themselves from the experiment in conditions featuring high obedience rates is all the more impressive for being the actions of a minority, so the obedience of those who went on without dissent may be all the more troubling in conditions where most were able to defy.

Rhetoric in the Obedience Experiments

The only reason that the analytic project proposed here is possible is because Milgram made audio recordings of his experimental sessions, most of which are held in the Stanley Milgram Papers collection at Yale University's Manuscripts and Archives Service (Kaplan, 1996). A few years ago I was fortunate enough to be able to purchase copies of some of these recordings, and I began to develop an analysis of the experiments based on Billig's (1996) rhetorical perspective (Gibson, 2013a, b, 2014, 2017; Gibson, Blenkinsopp, Johnstone & Marshall, 2018). My analysis built on some scattered observations of the importance of interaction in the obedience experiments (e.g. Darley, 1995; Lunt, 2009), and a single previous empirical study that sought to unpack what might be going on in these interactions (Modigliani & Rochat, 1995). In turn, this rhetorical

perspective has itself been built on in recent years by Matthew Hollander (2015; Hollander & Maynard, 2016) who has applied the even more fine-grained analytic lens of conversation analysis (Sacks, 1995; Schegloff, 2007) to the interactions that took place in Milgam's lab.

Indeed, it is worth noting that Milgram (1974) himself made some initial moves towards grasping the importance of interaction in the experiments. He discusses the role of politeness and impression management, citing Goffman's (1959) then relatively recent work that has subsequently been influential in the development of what has been termed the 'turn to discourse' in the social sciences. Hidden away in a footnote, Milgram (1974, p. 209) even refers to Garfinkel's (1964) breaching experiments, which are direct antecedents of the ethnomethodologically oriented conversation analytic tradition. We should be wary of trying to make too much of these connections – any attempt to project back onto Milgram some hesitant and ill-formed concern with the rhetorical and interactional nature of the experiments is likely to come to grief once it encounters his preferred approach to summarising his empirical findings (obedience rates and mean shock levels) and his theoretical explanation of these findings (the agentic state). Trying to warrant the analytic project undertaken here with reference to Milgram's own concerns would thus be tenuous at best. Yet over the course of his career, Milgram's eclecticism was notable (Blass, 2004), and in some important respects his work did not follow the narrow confines of the experimental approach that has come to dominate social psychology. A sense of Lewinian exemplification can be identified in Milgram's work (Gibson, 2013b), and the obedience experiments are good examples of this. He did not set out to test specific hypotheses derived from theory, but rather used the experimental method to dramatise and illustrate particular conceptual issues that he saw as being of social importance. In outlining a rhetorical perspective, therefore, I have not been concerned to position my analysis as following directly from Milgram's own concerns, but rather as a different way of exploring the experiments based on conceptual and analytic perspectives that were simply not available to Milgram during his lifetime.

In this book, I develop this account by providing an extended conceptual foundation for the rhetorical perspective, as well as a more extensive empirical analysis. However, the development of the rhetorical perspective on Milgram's experiments is not simply a matter of outlining in greater detail arguments that have been made elsewhere. As noted above, the recovery of defiance and dissent in Milgram's experiments has been an important endeavour, but it risks becoming too one-sided itself. I therefore want to consider something that analysts – myself included – who have

recently sought to highlight the defiance typically obscured in accounts of
Milgram's experiments have not thus far confronted: the nature of *obedi-
ence* in Milgram's experiments. Specifically, this is not only a matter of
reminding ourselves of the bare statistical fact that in many of the most
well-known conditions obedience was the most common outcome; it also
requires a confrontation with the observation that, as we will see in
Chapter 7, many of those participants who proceeded all the way to the
end of the shock scale in fact did so with little attempt at defiance.

In seeking to highlight resistance in Milgram's experiments, it has
often been remarked that defiance – even amongst obedient participants –
has been hidden in plain sight all along. Milgram's (1965c) film of his
experiments features a particularly well-known example in the form of a
participant – later given the pseudonym Fred Prozi (Milgram, 1974) –
who, despite repeatedly remonstrating with the experimenter, nevethe-
less goes on with the procedure and administers the 450-volt shock. Prozi
stands as an apparent refutation of the idea of obedient participants
simply going along passively with the experimenter's instructions. He
argues, queries and challenges; he is visibly agitated and tense; and yet he
goes on. Defiance was there all the time, even when the ultimate outcome
was obedience. And yet, as I will show, Prozi was in some important
respects atypical. Most obedient participants appear not to have engaged
the experimenter directly in argument and confrontation, and as a result
the experimenter often did *not* need to use any of the prods other than
'please continue'. These prods have typically been seen as fundamental
to the obedience observed in Milgram's experiments, and yet we can now
see that whatever it was that was keeping those participants shocking the
learner, it wasn't the prods. As a result, we need to radically reconsider
how we understand both the experiments and the nature of rhetoric.
Indeed, the absence of explicit verbal argumentation appears to cause
problems for any attempt to conceptualise the experiments in terms of
argumentation. I will suggest, however, that this does not, in fact, illus-
trate the limited reach of a rhetorical perspective, but that it highlights the
need for an expansion of that perspective. Part of this expansion is
grounded on the notion of metaphor, and indeed the theme of metaphor
will crop up time and again throughout the book.

Rhetoric as Metaphor

The role of metaphor in thought has been appreciated for some time (e.g.
Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and indeed there is a fascinating literature on
the metaphorical nature of psychology itself (e.g. Leary, 1990a; Richards,
1989; Soyland, 1994):

Different psychological approaches suggest different images of the person. In cognitive psychology the person seems to be a rather unimaginative bureaucrat, whereas in the field of artificial intelligence, the human mind has become a complexly programmed computer. Old fashioned behaviourists continue to see us all as poor laboratory rats, chasing after the rewards of life. Game theorists view our activities as just so many games, whilst role theorists note the theatrical side of our endeavours. By contrast, a rhetorical approach argues for the oratorical image of the person. (Billig, 1996, p. 186)

In some important respects we can understand Billig's model of the person-as-rhetorician in metaphorical terms; as yet another model of human thought that proceeds through analogy with some other domain. The aim is thus not to set up the rhetorical perspective as *the* way of doing social psychology, or as *the* single route to absolute truth. Rather, having identified the assumptions of other, more firmly entrenched perspectives, and highlighting what is missed in viewing the world from these perspectives, Billig is essentially alerting us to the alternative view afforded to us by taking a different perspective. Although he has generally avoided framing his work in explicitly postmodern terms,[1] there is nevertheless an identifiably postmodern orientation to this way of conceiving of the purpose and scope of enquiry. Gergen (2001, pp. 807–808) has outlined the implications of postmodernism for what he describes as 'the dominant tradition' within psychology of 'empirical research devoted to testing hypotheses typically of universal scope.' Gergen argues that,

it is essential to point out that although they are highly critical – on both conceptual and ideological grounds – there is nothing within the postmodern critiques that is lethal to this tradition. ... the postmodern critiques are themselves without foundations; they constitute important voices but not final voices. Empirical psychology represents a tradition of discourse, practice, and politics that has as much right to sustain its existence as any other tradition. The point of postmodern critique, in my view, is not to annihilate tradition but to give all traditions the right to participate within the unfolding dialogues. (Gergen, 2001, p. 808)

In another sense, however, Billig (1996) *does* indicate that he offers the image of the person-as-rhetorician in a more than merely metaphorical sense. He argues that 'the image of the orator is slightly different from some of those other images to be found in psychological theory. ... In our everyday lives we do not merely resemble orators, but, quite literally, we are orators, as we offer up our daily excuses and send forth our

---

[1] Although see the introduction to the 2nd edition of *Arguing and Thinking* for Billig's (1996, pp. 11–12) subsequent identification of the themes of postmodernism in his own work.

accusations' (Billig, 1996, pp. 188–189). Nevertheless, as Billig has remarked elsewhere, the danger in asserting that something is *the* truth is that it inevitably misses something, and as such 'any orthodoxy in academic life should become the target for critique' (Billig, with Locke, 2008, p. 23). Thus, in typically contrarian fashion, Billig suggests that 'if everyone in social psychology became a qualitative practitioner, then I'd start doing experiments again' (Billig, with Locke, 2008; see also Billig, 2000, 2012, 2013).

This contrarian impetus is important and clearly follows from an appreciation of rhetoric. The argument is never over; anything can, at least in principle, be opened up for debate. This applies as much to the arguments of scholarly life as to the arguments of everyday life and politics. And yet Billig (1995, 1999) has also been concerned with how arguments are closed down or are avoided altogether. These observations provide a point of departure to explore how we might need to think about things as rhetorical that are not typically understood in this way. In this respect I will seek to extend the rhetorical metaphor to encompass objects, institutions and procedures. But in so doing I am perhaps a little more content than Billig to settle for the idea that the rhetorical model is only a metaphor, although the idea that anything is 'only' a metaphor is in fact problematic. Given the centrality of metaphor both to human thought and psychological knowledge, we can frame this move not as a resigned settling, as if it will do in the absence of a 'proper' theory, but as a positive and self-conscious commitment. I will not be suggesting that objects that are incapable of using language are rhetorical in the sense that they weave arguments from the building blocks of words and phrases. Rather, emphasising the rhetorical nature of that which at first appears nonrhetorical enables us better to sustain the rhetorical image of the person.

To do this, however, is to argue against a different metaphorical way of seeing the world, which is the physical metaphor used by many of the 'situationist' social psychologists of the 'classical' tradition of social psychology that reigned supreme from the 1950s to the 1970s (Branni-gan, 2004). Milgram's experiments, which were in many respects the zenith of this tradition – and certainly the most influential and (in)famous example of experimental social psychology from this (or any other) period in the discipline's history – stand as prime examples of the physical metaphor. Individuals in Milgram's laboratory are typically seen as having been buffeted by forces beyond their control. Milgram himself talked of the 'binding factors' which *pressed* people into remaining in the experiment, and of the 'sources of strain' which *weighed* on them, making their *resistance* more likely.

The individual is thus essentially the passive victim of these forces. Agency – even in those participants who manage to extricate themselves from the experiment – is merely a function of the quasi-physical relations that obtain in the immediate situation. Such accounts have potentially troubling political and moral implications insofar as they suggest that, in certain situations, we are helpless in the face of social pressures, and if those pressures tend in a certain direction, then atrocities and abuses of all kinds will be the outcome (Reicher & Haslam, 2006). It is here that the rhetorical metaphor has some unique advantages in enabling us to see obedience and defiance in a quite different way in Milgram's experiment. Rather than the passive body on which forces weigh, the individual-as-arguer is persuaded to a greater or lesser degree by the arguments presented, whether or not these arguments are explicitly articulated. Participants can thus argue back, though sometimes of course they will not.

It is in this sense that the approach outlined here can ensure that the focus on rhetoric and argumentation does not lead to a one-sided neglect of obedience. It is quite true that a dominant view of Milgram's experiments as being demonstrations of overwhelming, passive obedience has crystallised over the decades and is now well-established in social psychology textbooks (Griggs, 2017; Griggs & Whitehead, 2015a, b). In seeking to challenge this orthodoxy, a great deal of exciting, creative and scholarly work has been undertaken. Much of this work has drawn attention to defiance and disobedience in Milgram's experiments as a way of seeking to overturn the orthodoxy. This is a vital task, and one to which the present volume also seeks to contribute. But there is a danger in seeking to set up a new orthodoxy that simply takes the place of the previous one. In foregrounding defiance and disobedience, the danger is that we miss something. And what we miss is essentially that with which Milgram was most concerned – that which, at first glance, appears to be passive obedience – those participants who do not resist; those who continue without trying to challenge or argue with the experimenter. How do we account for such participants in a perspective that emphasises rhetoric?

My solution is to apply the rhetorical perspective to those experimental sessions where argumentative discourse appears to be conspicuous by its absence; where things run smoothly and the participant administers shocks without needing to be ordered to do so. In so doing, we will not only need to rethink the obedience experiments, but we will also have to consider what, precisely, we understand as rhetorical. I will suggest that not only does a focus on argumentation necessitate a focus on what is not argued (Billig, 1999), but that we can extend the rhetorical metaphor to

identify how arguments are embedded in that which at first appears to be
nonrhetorical: in the fabric of the experimental apparatus, in the experi-
mental procedure; in the bodily movements of those in the laboratory. In
this sense, rhetoric is not only to be found in the words used in the
obedience experiments, but in the walls of the laboratory.

Overview

Chapter 1 summarises Milgram's original programme of research on
obedience, some of the classic lines of critique that it provoked, and
some of the early extensions and replications. In providing an overview
of the most well-known findings from Milgram's studies, I also highlight
some of the frequently neglected aspects, such as the high rates of
*dis*obedience across the series of experiments as a whole. The chapter
then considers issues concerning the ethics of Milgram's experiments,
early methodological critiques (e.g. around demand characteristics) and
theoretical issues, noting that even many of Milgram's most enthusiastic
supporters are not convinced by his theoretical explanation concerning
the 'agentic state'. Drawing on the oft-noted observation that empirical
work inspired by Milgram ceased in the mid-1980s (Blass, 2004, 2012;
Burger, 2009) and didn't really get going again until the middle years of
the 2000s, Chapter 1 reviews what we might call the 'first wave' of
extensions and replications of Milgram's studies.

If Chapter 1 dealt with the 'first wave' of work inspired by Milgram's
studies, Chapter 2 considers the more recent work on obedience. Along-
side attempts at partial replication, there have been a number of novel
experimental paradigms and conceptual replications, and renewed
attempts at theorising the phenomena captured in Milgram's lab.
A novel strand to this 'new wave' of critical engagement with the obedi-
ence experiments has come from researchers drawing on the materials
available in Milgram's archive held at Yale University. This has led to
new insights regarding the ethical, methodological and theoretical issues
raised by the experiments, and has generated new lines of enquiry and
debate. In particular, I will highlight the fascinating insights into the
experiments that can be gleaned from paying attention to the audio
recordings of the experiments. With considerable foresight, Milgram
recorded his experimental sessions, the majority of which survive in the
archives. These provide a rich resource for researchers, and it is these
recordings that form the data for the analyses outlined in Chapters 4–7.

Before getting to the analytic chapters, however, Chapter 3 provides a
detailed overview of the analytic perspective from which I view these
data. Drawing on Michael Billig's rhetorical approach to social