

## Arguing, Obeying and Defying

Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments are among the most influential and controversial scientific studies ever conducted. The experiments are commonly understood to have shown how easily people can be led into harming another person, simply as a result of following orders. Recently, however, Milgram's studies have been subjected to a sustained critique and re-evaluation. This book draws on the vast stock of audio recordings from Milgram's experiments to reveal how these experiments can be understood as occasions for argumentation and rhetoric, rather than showing how passive subjects can be led into simply doing as they are told. In doing so, it reconsiders what we understand by 'obedience' and extends how social psychologists have understood rhetoric itself.

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Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-42133-1 — Arguing, Obeying and Defying  
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# Arguing, Obeying and Defying

*A Rhetorical Perspective on Stanley Milgram's  
Obedience Experiments*

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Stephen Gibson  
*York St John University*



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Stephen Gibson  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India  
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108421331](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108421331)  
DOI: 10.1017/9781108367943

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First published 2019

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays, St Ives plc, Elcograf S.p.A.

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Gibson, Stephen, 1980- author.

Title: Arguing, obeying and defying : a rhetorical perspective on Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments / Stephen Gibson.

Description: 1 Edition. | New York : Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018035970 | ISBN 9781108421331 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108431811 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Milgram, Stanley. | Obedience. | Social psychology. | Rhetorical criticism.

Classification: LCC HM1031.M55 G55 2019 | DDC 302–dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018035970>

ISBN 978-1-108-42133-1 Hardback

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To my mother and the memory of my father

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## Acknowledgements

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Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments are a staple of psychology textbooks and introductory courses. Like many students in the English education system, my first encounter with them came during my A-Level studies. Over 20 years ago at Scarborough Sixth Form College, Dave Bell introduced me to the experiments and piqued my interest in psychology more generally. It is easy to forget one's debts to one's teachers, but without Dave's splendidly open-minded teaching back then, I would never have thought about studying psychology at university (I was set on being a historian at the time), let alone developed an interest in Milgram.

When I got to university, I was somehow able to write both of my first two coursework essays on the obedience experiments. Despite this, I almost switched to studying philosophy early on in my studies as the largely cognitive-experimental flavour of psychology didn't really grab me. But then I began to come across a set of ideas that might loosely (and probably rather unsatisfactorily) be described as 'critical social psychology'. As a student at Lancaster University from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, I was fortunate to be taught in a department that emphasised eclecticism and encouraged the questioning of what, following Fran Cherry (1995), might be called the discipline's 'stubborn particulars'. The social psychology group at Lancaster was a vibrant place to undertake one's academic apprenticeship. Susan Condor, John Dixon, Mark Levine and Jackie Abell created a challenging but always supportive intellectual environment. Susan in particular, as my PhD supervisor, taught me what social psychology could be. The late John Shotter spent a year in the department, and to learn from him about social constructionism was a privilege. Beyond the social psychology group, Alan Collins, Charlie Lewis and Mary Smyth also provided a great deal of intellectual nourishment that has helped to shape the way that I think about psychology. At the time I didn't realise how fortunate I was, but as the years have passed and the English university system has come to



resemble a hotchpotch of half-baked marketization and constant revolution that makes the careful nurturing of such intellectual environments increasingly difficult, I have become ever more conscious of my debt to those wonderful scholars. We used to talk about ‘the Lancaster way’ of doing social psychology, and I hope that something of that spirit has made its way into this book.

One of the great pleasures of studying the obedience experiments in such detail over the last decade or so has been the opportunities to discuss Milgram’s work with a group of fellow scholars who have also been questioning, re-evaluating and reawakening the study of obedience. As I will note in Chapter 2, Tom Blass’s excellent biography of Milgram has been a key influence on this work, and my thinking about Milgram has also been shaped through numerous conversations and email exchanges with colleagues such as Megan Birney, Gus Brannigan, Alex Haslam, Matthew Hollander, David Kaposi, Kathryn Millard, Ian Nicholson, Art Miller, Gina Perry, Steve Reicher and Nestar Russell. They won’t all agree with my analysis, but that is precisely the way it should be; the level of constructive critical engagement with competing ideas on obedience is a large part of what has made being involved in the debates around Milgram’s experiments so rewarding and stimulating.

A number of individuals and organisations have directly facilitated the research on which this book is based. I have been fortunate to receive funding from the Leverhulme Trust (grant no. RF-2015–431) and the Nuffield Foundation (grant no. SGS/36502). I have also benefitted from the expertise and helpfulness of Mary Caldera, Cynthia Ostroff and Stephen Ross in the Manuscripts and Archives Service at Yale University. I am particularly grateful to Alexandra Milgram for permission to quote from conditions 02, 04, 07 and 20 of the obedience experiments, and to use images from the experiments; and I am grateful to Michele Marques for organising the permissions. Michael Billig and Graham Hamilton provided some much-needed encouragement in the early stages of the writing process, and Maarten Derksen provided some valuable comments both on the original proposal for this book, and on an earlier version of the full manuscript. Janka Romero of Cambridge University Press has been a valuable source of good-natured prompting – as well as vast reserves of patience – as I have been completing the book over a rather lengthier period of time than would have been ideal. Needless to say, for all that this book could never have been completed without the support of all these others, the responsibility for any errors and omissions is all mine.

x Acknowledgements

Chapters 1 and 4 include modified versions of material first presented in the following journal articles:

- Gibson, S. (2013). Milgram's obedience experiments: A rhetorical analysis. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 52, 290–309.
- (2013). 'The last possible resort': A forgotten prod and the in situ standardization of Stanley Milgram's voice-feedback condition. *History of Psychology*, 16, 177–194.
- (2017). Developing psychology's archival sensibilities: Re-visiting Milgram's 'obedience' experiments. *Qualitative Psychology*, 4, 73–89.

I would like to thank the publishers of these articles (BPS Wiley and the American Psychological Association) for allowing me to reproduce this material.

Finally, but most importantly, I would like to thank Emily, Hannah and especially Aimee, who have had to put up with too many lost evenings and weekends during the writing of this book.