

# Acting otherwise: Resistance, agency, and subjectivities in Milgram's studies of obedience

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## Abstract

In this account of the Obedience to Authority experiments, we offer a richer and more dynamic depiction of the subjects' acts and reactions. To paraphrase Milgram, our account tries to examine the central elements of the situation as perceived by its research subjects. We describe a model of the experimenter–subject system that moves beyond experimentalism and humanism, positing instead a model that considers experimenter–subject relations and extends both spatially and temporally past the experiment's traditionally assumed limits: the walls of the laboratory and its canonical methods. Following Butler and Krause, we propose an approach that attends to quotidian, subtle, and unregistered ways of acting otherwise. Taking the Yale archive's collection of Milgram's subject files, audio recordings, and notes as historical traces of the experimenter–subject system, our analysis introduces a grounded understanding of how Milgram's cut between obedience and disobedience renders invisible all but the most explicit manifestations of resistance or ways of acting otherwise. Investigating Milgram's work through an experimenter–subject systems model illuminates previously undocumented affective and temporal dimensions of laboratory life and serves as a template for assessing other experimental situations.

## Keywords

Stanley Milgram, non-sovereign agency, obedience to authority, resistance, social psychology of experimentation

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Renowned as a brilliant experimenter, Stanley Milgram captured the world's attention with an apparent miniaturized demonstration of the conditions under which individuals yield to authority and behave obediently. With the exception of his co-investigators and scholars who viewed materials at Milgram's archive, it is not widely known that Milgram was a meticulous recorder of experimental activities who documented and preserved subjects' nonverbal and verbal responses, post-experimental correspondence, and even his own interactions with colleagues. His first published report shows this attentiveness; departing from the conventional protocol of experimental reportage, it recounts subjects stuttering, trembling, digging their fingernails, and biting their lips. Milgram explained these actions as tension and indicated their intensity by describing laughter that "seemed entirely out of place, even bizarre," behavior that was "untoward and uncontrollable" (Milgram, 1963a, p. 375). Such observations proved to be parenthetical, however, for Milgram attended principally to responses of obedience and failure to obey. Most reports sideline not only the bodily and paralingual evidence of "exceptional distress" (Milgram, 1963a, p. 371) but also subjects' post-experimental accounts which Milgram otherwise appreciated as "insightful" (1964a, p. 850). The public story, then, fixes on two behaviors—obey and disobey—but provides no template for interpreting the myriad activities that transpired in the laboratory. What, then, can be said of Subject 0113's post-experimental account? The subject stated:

I must confess that I suspected from near the beginning that something was amiss. Being in an electro-mechanical field I suspected that the voltage was not going up as was shown on the control board, but as I sat there at the board I figured out that if anything was being raised it was only the amperage ... As I sat there at the board I could remember getting calmer and calmer with the realization growing in my mind that I was not giving the person on the other side of the wall the shocks shown on the board.

So that by the time the experiment was over I was comparatively calm, until the other man returned to the room then I felt compassion for him and I wished to get out of there as fast as possible. I hope these additional comments will be of some value to you. (Reaction of subjects, 1962a)

Milgram generally interpreted such reports of doubt or disbelief as self-serving defense reactions, arguing that "cognitive processes may seem to rationalize behavior that the subject felt compelled to carry out" (1974, p. 173). However, Subject 0113's reporting cannot be dismissed by the psychoanalytic explanations of defense reaction or "denial" or "tension": his detective work, cognitive logics, self-reflections, and emotional shifts along with continued respect for the experimenter's project indicate more than mere reactivity. Nevertheless, in the experiment's accounting system, Subject 0113 was counted as an obedient subject, one among the majority who in the end complied with authority. Readers of Milgram's publications see a scientific bookkeeping that has no columns for registering oppositional gestures, conniving, misinterpretations, feigned ignorance, lamentation, rebellion, or anything else for that matter. They receive no account of subjects acting otherwise—acting other than dichotomously.

This public balance sheet of the experiments guides a parable that has been sustained for over half a century, enduring experimental replications, reassessments, and historical examinations. When considered in context, the obedience studies illustrate postwar

social scientific aspirations to guide civic reform (McCarthy, 2004) and anxieties about the state of American masculinity (Nicholson, 2011a). Yet the experiments' aspirations are not only a historical matter, for they continue to be showcased in psychology textbooks (Stam, Lubek, & Radtke, 1998) and generalized to contemporary atrocities of military aggression and everyday unethical acts in the financial world (Nicholson, 2011b). Although these generalizations tend toward pessimism, others invoke optimism. The experiments have provided an exemplary case for a philosophy of "situationism," proposing that while human agents are constrained by the power of the situation in which they act they can "counteract harmful situational effects" given certain knowledge (Mele & Shepherd, 2013, p. 1).

Both the dominant moral lesson drawn from Milgram's experiments and the generative one offered by situationists preserve the binary that is obedience and disobedience. In Milgram's and in situationist models of human action, *experimenters'* accounts of subjects and actions take precedence: they alone determine whether or not subjects' reports are accurate or meaningful. While Milgram's methodological precision is lauded, he is attentively inattentive to even his own behavioral category of disobedience and to instances of subjects' dissent, resistance, turning away, refusal, sabotage, and defiance. Yet, not all subjects obeyed in a manner that Milgram defined as obedient and even some of the decisively obedient subjects did more than, or other than, obey. Most appraisers continue to overlook the ways subjects acted otherwise; however some have identified subjects' active involvement, finding subjects frequently were aware of the confected situation and mindful of their participation in it (Nicholson, 2011b; Perry, 2013; Ross & Nisbett, 2011). Ross and Nisbett encouraged a "subject's-eye view" of the experimental events to see how subjects often did "confront the experimenter and refuse to continue, often quite forcefully, just not effectively" (2011, p. 57). Once subjects divergent acts are recognized, we find the experiments "may have less to say about 'destructive obedience' than about ineffective and indecisive disobedience" (p. 57).

Our investigation aims to cast light on these acts and other darkened spaces using Milgram's experimental observations and surviving data archived in the Stanley Milgram Papers (SMP) at Yale University. We are intrigued not by "obedience to authority" as much as by "obedience to experimental method": the material and discursive practices which constitute a frame for experiments, enabling as well as constraining the interaction of experimenters, subjects, and confederates. More specifically, we aim to delineate aspects of experimental experiences that have gone largely unreported yet are lively, productive, and often essential to empirical outcomes. This analysis invites a rethinking of Milgram's belief that subjects' acting otherwise (and the subterfuges they attempt) are largely self-serving and token efforts to appear as "benign" men (1974, pp. 159–160). Attending to these experiences also corroborates other researchers' detection of incongruities and illogical conditions within the experiment (Nicholson, 2011b; Patten, 1977). Seeing the ways that the events "did not make sense or add up from the perspective of the subject" (Ross & Nisbett, 2011, p. 57), in turn, illuminates the ways that subjects undertook their own problem-solving logics of doubt, intervention, curiosity, and mimicry.

Acknowledging that experiments involve more than what is represented in official scientific reports, however, calls for a conceptual framework and nomenclature that better

represent the “experimenter–subject system” constituting human psychology experiments. Our archival analysis employs a framework that views the dynamic relations between institutional norms of the experiment and quotidian performances of its actors as a mutually dependent feedback loop: performances are regulated but not fully determined by institutional norms or actors’ background assumptions and knowledge of psychology writ-large. In practice, these norms and background assumptions are manifested and subject to mutation (Richards, 2002). This feedback loop constitutes the experiment, yet it also harbors the possibility for subjects’ resistance or non-compliance—the mutation of norms and the indeterminacy of performance open a gap where subjects can act otherwise. Our syncretic approach permits the detection of ways of acting otherwise yet does so without discounting the significant ways that power and history shape the performances of experimental subjects and how methodological norms constrain behavioral possibilities.

We begin with a brief review of the extant models of the experimenter–subject system, and introduce our alternative model that attends at once to the bottom-up impact of minute, local performances and the top-down influence of institutional norms and broader patterns of power. Our framework is informed by but departs from re-analyses and historical studies of Milgram’s experimental practices (Nicholson, 2011b; Perry, 2013; Rochat, Maggioni, & Modigliani, 2000; Stam et al., 1998). It also differs by foregrounding how power is dispersed and produced through institutional and interactional arrangements. We then proceed to examine the epistemic conditions under which Milgram made his empirical distinctions or “cuts” between obedience and disobedience. Identifying these epistemic cuts reveals not only what experimental conditions and evidence have been occluded but also how Milgram did not always abide by fixed binaries of subject and experimenter or obedience and disobedience. Additionally, the broader model of the experimenter–subject system is used to appraise Milgram’s notions of agency, including his apparent ambivalence toward subjects’ verbal and nonverbal actions. His concepts of agency and its diminution, the “agentic state,” are replaced by a perspective that has close affinities with situationism yet recognizes the limits to agency and the dispersed dynamics of power. Following a review of the epistemic conditions of the obedience studies, the paper examines archival evidence of subjects’ actions in order to identify the quotidian ways that some of Milgram’s subjects performed, felt, and thought otherwise. The conclusion proposes that an understanding of the obedience studies that is more attuned to subjects’ capacity for resistance will guide both better experimental design and the refinement of situationism.

## **Regarding the actors in experiments**

### *Extant views: Control and quantification, humanism, and Foucault*

Even as presentist histories of the progressive, inevitable march of science have fallen by the wayside, there still remain significant lacunae in the history of the human sciences; notably, the labor of experimental subjects remains largely unexamined. Conventional, experimentalist models in psychology eschew the particularity of subjectivity in favor of a quantitative notion of subjects that understands them as little more than substrata for

stimulus responses. This experimentalist position ontologizes the research subject as subsisting in aggregate data, a reduction that satisfies the parallel epistemic norms of the controlled laboratory environment and the quantitative ideal (Law, 2004; Star, 1983). Rather than attend to idiosyncrasy, this scientific rationality demands that the measures of subjects' behavior and cognitions be stripped of any beliefs, values, affects, and attitudes that were not intentionally elicited by the experimental stimulus. Furthermore, this rationality requires reducing these bare, elicited responses into anonymous and quantitative units. Lost in the space between these two norms of control and quantification are the lively experiences of psychology's primary data producers: the subjects.

The obedience experiments sit in uneasy tension between the experimentalist model, on the one hand, and a humanist vision on the other. This tension is evident in Milgram's treatment of disobedience. Although Milgram dedicated only 12 pages of his 1974 book to a discussion of outright disobedience, he pronounced it "the measure that we sought" and affirmation of "humanistic values" (p. 164), including the "mobilization of inner resources" and "transforming them into action" (p. 163). Although highlighting these "inner resources," Milgram's model of human action cannot be said to be anything other than positivist and experimentalist. Exemplifying this positivist outlook, in a lab note, he wrote that the affection a "young man" feels for a "young lady," if unarticulated in an observable way, does not constitute "a fully social event" (Milgram, 1961b). Similarly, in the case of the obedience experiments, Milgram claimed, "The subject's behavior has a binary quality to it. He may press the lever, or he may abstain" (Milgram, 1962b). Milgram conceptualized disobedient subjects as drawing on some autonomous, particular "inner resource" of their dissent while, nevertheless, insisting that the experiment's validity depends on the homogeneity of stimulus-response reactions across the entire sample.

Humanistic critiques of mainstream research counter this experimentalist model, yet importantly remain in its contours by identifying agency with intentionality and "even with a kind of personal sovereignty understood as self-determination or control" (Krause, 2012, p. 1). The experimental subject thus conceived operates autonomously and independent from the exigencies of the laboratory. Baumrind's (1964) rejoinder to the obedience experiments exemplifies the humanist model. In her call for ethical safeguards and in others' humanist critiques, Enlightenment notions of the autonomous individual come to the fore: these accounts demand preservation of the research subjects' intentional choice and free will. However, both the humanist and positivist models of experimenter–subject relations foreclose on seeing how power constrains subjects' behavior. Emerging out of Foucauldian thought, some contemporary researchers have adopted a sharply contrasting view that understands the experimental subject to be the effect of a system of disciplinary arrangements. Still, this third, loosely termed Foucauldian perspective neglects relational dynamics and prematurely delineates subjects' capacities for action (which are presumed to be merely the effect of power). Thus, such Foucauldian models undervalue the idiosyncratic and minute detail of lived experience reported by subjects.

To construct a representation of the specific experimental world in which the obedience experiments transpired, a representation that neither reduces the subject to an "effect" of power nor naively imagines an autonomous subject, another perspective is needed.

This model must attend to both the power-suffused character of the laboratory and the manners in which this power is realized through imperfect, often improvised performances of experimental roles. Instances of acting otherwise emerge through feedback loops connecting the laboratory's institutional norms and the actual performative dynamics that constantly, if subtly, allow for mutation of these norms. These mutations reside in the performative interval (Butler, 1997), the gap between the injunction to perform in some expected way and the actual performance that is induced. Because solicited performances are never perfect and always subject to *in situ* mutation and reinvention, this gap is never fully closed—there always remains a space between, a space where a subject might fail to perform as instructed, where a subject might act otherwise.

### On agency

The three models of the subject—positivist, humanist, and Foucauldian—described above truncate, albeit in different ways, a full appreciation of the experiment and the experimenter–subject system. Although marking various forms of power and capacities of the subject, they foreclose on mutations and performative possibilities, thus overlooking evidence of subjects' actions. An empirically more robust model requires a reappraisal of agency, a reconsideration that is found in Krause's (2011, 2012) articulation of non-sovereign agency. By “non-sovereign,” Krause means to acknowledge the materially and socially distributed capacities for action shared by each and every individual (in the case of the obedience experiments, the experimenters, confederates, and subjects). Extending her account to the laboratory world, we reject the assumption that the small, shared performances that accrete into a durable experimental situation are exclusively the autonomous, conscious choices of a given actor, independent from all relational externalities. Instead, we see interactions between experimenter and subject as “a function of the communicative exchanges, background meanings, personal intentions, social interpretations, self-understandings, and even bodily encounters” (Krause, 2012, p. 5) that constitute their life in the laboratory. Thus, while these various externalities are certainly negotiated in an intersubjective context delineated partially by the norms of experimental research, they are not stable and not exhaustive.

Inasmuch as the context for an agentic expression can never be determinative or total, it is always open to mutation and improvisation. Yet, if it is the case that, as Krause holds, “agency is non-sovereign in part because our efficacy does not always reflect our will, or conscious control” (2012, p. 4), agency is even less sovereign because there cannot exist a private language through which agentic performances might be executed by the solitary subject. Nevertheless, being registered by the experimenter as efficacious is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for agentic expression. The various performances that fail to be registered as efficacious are still meaningful loci for analysis, if one is able to identify them *ex post facto* in subjects' reports or other archival material.

### Norms and cuts: Experimenter–subject systems and experimental design

In the Milgram experiments, it is apparent that the experimenter had full power over drawing the binary of what was agentic and what was not. More generally, at the outset,

the experimenter is faced with a breadth of methodological, ontological, and epistemological questions about the nature of the subject, the subject's agency, and the boundaries of the experiment. From these presuppositional questions follow normative decisions that constitute the logic of the experiment. There then remains the task of actually enacting these choices—a task that is necessarily executed imperfectly. Indeed, it is precisely the imperfect way that these decisions are put into practice (the mutation between the injunction to perform and the actual performance) that opens up the performative interval: a gap in understanding that the experimenter seeks to close, a gap that may indeed *appear* to be closed, but a gap that nevertheless may never be perfectly filled-in.

These normative decisions take the form of what we—following Devereux (1968), Barad (2007), and others—will call cuts. As these researchers observed, there is nothing that necessitates a determinate Cartesian separation between the observer and the object observed. Rather, material and discursive processes are crucial in enacting these separations or cuts that establish the object observed as distinct from the apparatus that is doing the observing (Barad, 2007, p. 114). Enacted partitions between various, seemingly pre-given objects and observers are of profound importance in understanding the logic of Milgram's laboratory. These separations divide the laboratory from the outside world, subject from experimenter, and obedience from disobedience in a way that is as epistemically exclusionary as it is ontologically necessary. Given the necessity of some system of cuts, the task is to posit a different conception of the experimental situation that opens the door to other interpretations while also appreciating that they are as partial as any other set of partitions.

Although the experimenter–subject system proposed here also involves a series of cuts, they differ from those insisted upon in Milgram's design. Our system attends to the significance and entangled complexity of relations between experimenter and subjects: a wider range of ecological, temporal, and agentic conditions within the *experimental* system; and the non-sovereign and often unacknowledged agency of all actors. Although Milgram's cuts, like any system of enacted distinctions, were assumed in advance, our attention is drawn to how the mutual interactions of subjects and experimenters push back and forth on the different sides of the cut. These *in situ* interactions reconfigure the institutional norms governing the experiment and establish the conditions of possibility for not-yet-given performances. It is the very unsettledness of cuts that gives room for the performative interval or gap in which actors may resist and act otherwise.

Realizing a fuller understanding of the relational dynamics of the laboratory world requires the premise that experimental subjects have not simply been disciplined in a certain manner, but that they also enter into a genuine relation with experimenters who are likewise bound up as co-participants in a complex situation. The normative status of subjects *as participants* is a potential locus of contestation that is never completely settled. Comprehending subjects' experiences requires decentering the designed experimental system, even as it evolves *in situ*, in favor of an expansive and permissive model of agentic entanglements, dynamic and contested cuts, and ever-evolving performances. This does not involve dismissing Milgram's cuts, but rather taking into consideration how performances by subjects and experimenters alike mutate extant cuts and enact new ones.

## Some ways of acting otherwise

### *Attentive inattention*

Our excavation of Milgram's experimenter–subject system starts from the premise that many subjects exceeded the neat bifurcation suggested by Milgram's epistemic cuts. Although relegated into two neatly defined camps—those who obeyed and those who did not—subjects in the obedience experiments felt, thought, and acted in ways that indicate a multiplicity of experiences, a complexity that was sidelined in Milgram's published research (Milgram, 1963a, 1965, 1974).

This is not to say that Milgram was inattentive to the multiplicity of subjects' interactions in—and with—the obedience experiments, or more generally to what Law calls messy processes that “*necessarily exceed our capacity to know them*” (2004, p. 6) even through scientific scrutiny. And while Milgram did explain away or ultimately ignore subjects' reports of suffering caused by the experiment (Nicholson, 2011b), he nevertheless sought out their testimony and puzzled over the diversity of subjects' experiences in the pages of his laboratory logbooks. For instance, he wrote, “There are several explanatory schemes which cover the same findings; none covers all the findings; and then there are certain phenomena for which there seem to be no truly adequate theoretical explanations” (Milgram, 1962c). The search for a common explanatory scheme that accounted for the multiplicity of subjects' experiences was an ongoing project for Milgram, as evidenced by the variety of theoretical approaches he essayed in his laboratory logbooks. These entries alone show his attempts to understand subjects' performance through such diverse theoretical lenses as a gestalt model (Milgram, 1961c), learning theory (Milgram, 1961a), a focus on the triad of relationships between laboratory actors (Milgram, 1962a), and an attunement to the subtle spatial effects of the laboratory environment (Milgram, 1964b).

The thirst for a theoretical grounding for the obedience experiments is evident in more than only Milgram's logbook. His theoretical wanderings also came explicitly to the fore in his conversations with Dr. Paul Errera, a psychiatrist brought in by Yale to interview former subjects about possible harm resulting from the experiments. These interviews occurred in 11 sessions between February and May 1963; all but one was held in group settings. Transcripts of the sessions show Milgram repeatedly probing Errera after the interviews to ascertain if Errera had gleaned any novel interpretation of the experiment (quoted in Errera, 1963a, 1963b). However, Errera (like Milgram) was impressed by the multiplicity of experiences suggested by subjects' comments. He explained to Milgram that across and even within conditions, one “can't necessarily attribute [breaking off] to a common motive that is being activated in a person” (Errera, 1963a, p. 47). Milgram and Errera repeatedly discussed the difficulty of identifying a “common feature” that could explain subjects' obedience or disobedience (cited in Errera, 1963b, p. 33).

Our archival analysis, presented below, centers on these and other self-report data that Milgram collected from subjects particularly, on the questionnaire subjects completed upon receipt of the complete study report, a year after the experiment. The questionnaire asked subjects to complete a brief multiple-choice survey about their experience in the study, along with a prompt for open-ended comments. By and large, subjects complied with this request and returned the questionnaires (86% of subjects in condition 2). Our



archival analysis centers on this free-response data taken from files of those subjects in condition 2, the baseline condition, (SMP, Box 118); the fragments of subject responses from all conditions that Milgram's team coded and typed onto index cards (SMP, Box 44); transcripts of the Errera interviews (SMP, Box 155); audio recordings of condition 20 (the female condition) (SMP, T53, T54, T55); and Milgram's logbooks and notes (SMP, Boxes 45 & 46).

The extensiveness of the data files itself is evidence of Milgram's claim that he was attentive to subjects' experiences. In a note from December 1963 he commented, "I have always taken the subjects' point of view as my starting point, putting myself in the subject's place, and trying to figure out what the critical features of the situation can be as the subject sees them" (Milgram, 1963b). However, in the published record of the obedience experiments, Milgram's qualitative data generally stood as something to be explained away rather than constituting a "starting point." For example, subjects' exhibition of affectual excess (laughing during the course of the experiment) was disregarded as the mere physical conversion of anxiety, a discounting that reinforced claims about subjects' eventual obedience and displaced any strain or latent will to disobey (Milgram, 1974, pp. 152, 161). Similarly, doubts that some subjects expressed about the veracity of Milgram's deception were dismissed as simply a "defense function" and a "post facto explanation" (1974, pp. 172, 174). He wrote that obedient subjects' doubt should not merit the experimenter's trust but instead should be viewed as a face-saving denial of experimental obedience, like laughter, a process that "eases the strain of obeying the experimenter, eliminating the conflict between hurting someone and obeying" (1974, p. 158). Yet subjects understood their laughter to be caused by reasons other than the resolution of strain. Subject 1601, for instance, found himself laughing because "it seemed ridiculous that punishing the learner helped in any way to improve his memory" (Reaction of subjects, 1962a). So too, archival analysis indicates that the many reasons that subjects had for doubting Milgram's deception illustrate the multiplicity and complexity of the laboratory world.

### *Thinking and believing otherwise*

The archival evidence seems to suggest that Milgram's investigation into subjects' self-reported experience was more than just a matter of collecting data—individual index cards were made containing a significant excerpt of each subject's open-response and these cards were in turn sorted into content themes for later analysis. However, a search in the archives yielded only two analyses of these data: the first a brief analysis by Takedo Murata, a research assistant, that investigated subjects' reported belief about whether or not the learner was actually receiving a painful shock (Murata, 1963); and the second by another assistant, James Miller (Miller, n.d.), that examined a small minority of the free-responses. Despite the incompleteness of Milgram's qualitative project, the index cards and debriefing questionnaires reveal a vast assortment of subject experiences that exceeded experimental expectations in unique, creative, and at times subtle ways, evading any singular theoretical explanation. Even if one does not grant credibility to subjects' post-experimental testimony—a testimony that explicitly attests to both believing and acting otherwise—the excess of research participants' subjectivity, as Derksen

(2001) has noted, is both evidenced (and, moreover, negatively defined) by the experimenter's ceaselessly precise attempts to constrain and transform the subject's experience into something that is both standardized and quantifiable.

As suggested above, one form of excess subjectivity that caught the attention of Milgram and his team from a very early date was the possibility that subjects might be suspicious of the experiment's deceptive "memory and learning" cover story. Murata's investigation of condition 2 shows that 64% of the subjects who returned the questionnaires ( $n = 36$ ) did not fully believe that the learner was being shocked (Murata, 1963). We analyzed these same debriefing questionnaire responses, coding any response other than "I fully believed that the learner was getting painful shocks" as general suspicion, and coding any specific reason for that suspicion mentioned in that subject's free-response as concrete doubt. Similar to Murata, we found that of the subjects in condition 2 who returned follow-up questionnaires ( $n = 35$ ), 60% expressed general suspicion about the experiment, while 26% gave a specific reason for doubting the experiment's cover story. Particularly noteworthy was the observation that the percentage of generally doubtful subjects did not differ significantly across obedient subjects (59%) and disobedient subjects (62%) in the baseline condition. While this finding is consistent with Milgram's claim that whether subjects believed the protocol did not affect the overall rates of compliance in any "substantial manner" (Milgram, 1974, p. 173), a re-analysis of the data which excludes those subjects who reported being uncertain indicates that "believers" were more likely to be defiant (Brannigan, 2013).

It is strikingly evident that from the beginning of his experimentation, Milgram was concerned that subjects might not buy into the deception (Russell, 2010). Subjects themselves wondered about this matter. Subject 1605 wrote, "The fact that you have 60% that completed the shocks to the end only shows that most of these people were certain that no shocks were given" (Reaction of subjects, 1962a). Subject suspicion presented a problem not only because it jeopardized face validity, but also because such suspicion implicitly conveyed the possibility that subjects also were being deceptive, in this case, towards the experimenter. Although Milgram wrote that "tension tells us that the situation is real for the subject" (Milgram, 1962d), it is clear that some of the subjects who did not believe were nevertheless obedient. Consequently, how are we to tell an obedient subject who believes in the cover story from one who does not? What if there is tension, in spite of disbelief?

With regards to distinguishing the obedient believers from the obedient non-believers, one subject, Subject 0113 (quoted at the outset of this article), presents an instructive case. He, like many subjects, exhibited a liveliness that ran in excess of what the experimental system was able to capture as intelligible data. Yet what we see in his data file—that is, how he was observed by Milgram and his colleagues—is that he seemed to be a subject like any other: an exemplar, really, of obedience to authority. The data show that he carried through the shocks to the 450-volt maximum, revealing how long he took to administer each shock, and the duration of each shock. They document those aspects of his background that meet the experiments' inclusion criteria (that he is a male between 20 and 50 years old from the New Haven area). Even brief examination of Subject 0113's post-experimental responses reveals considerably more than what is registered in the cut between obedience and disobedience. Informed by his background in "an

electro-mechanical field,” Subject 0113 could not believe the veracity of the learner’s pain; yet, he wrote in his free-response, “By the time the experiment was over I was comparatively calm, until the other man returned to the room then I felt compassion for him and I wished to get out of there as fast as possible” (Reaction of subjects, 1962a). Beyond Subject 0113’s doubt, what is missed in the data as rendered in the published obedience experiments is the reality (his attested knowledge of electrical engineering) that subjects bring their own experiences into the lab. As he grew “calmer and calmer” while delivering shocks, his file demonstrates that subjects are anything but fungible substrates for universal responses to stimuli or situations.

Even the seeming inconsistency between belief, performance, and affect is not the totality of the laboratory’s messiness; one might consider as well Subject 0113’s reaction (quoted previously) after having “shocked” the learner all the way to the end. He reported that he was still very upset when he saw the learner afterward and wanted to leave immediately—in spite of his knowledge that the machine could not be doing what the experimenter claimed it did. Subject 0113’s discomfort is illustrative of how laboratory life is relational in nature, influenced by the subtleties of experimental interactions, material conditions, and by the larger power structures in which the laboratory is nested (Latour & Woolgar, 1985). Although subjects bring their own experiences to the experimental situation, these prior experiences are not deterministic of the totality of their engagements with the laboratory. Subject 0113’s affective response to seeing the learner’s face, even after correctly concluding that the experiment was not what it seemed, shows the multiplicity of subjects’ experiences. Subject 0113 demonstrates the indeterminate, sometimes strange series of partial, incomplete causations that co-function in subjects’ performances.

Much like Subject 0113’s background understanding of electrical machinery, subjects’ grasp of institutional norms (specifically notions of what ethical limits Yale University would place on experimentation) also factored into subjects’ self-reported reasons for responding to the experimental situation as they did. Subject 0202, like many others (Subjects 0223, 0231, 0408, 0507, 0508, 0701, 0825, 0841, 0902, 1012, 1411, 1801) wrote assuredly that Yale or Milgram “would not allow anyone to suffer as much as [the] actor pretended” (Reaction of subjects, 1962a). Just as subjects enter the laboratory with certain assumptions about what it means to be a subject and what kinds of obligations that position entails, they also carry with them an image of psychological experimentation writ-large, including ideas about what research can and cannot be carried out ethically. And although Milgram attempted to control for this effect of “institutional context” with his Bridgeport conditions, as Milgram himself noted, the overall structure of laboratory relations remained effectively unchanged across the 24 experimental conditions (Milgram, 1974, p. 70).

While doubt and suspicion pervade subjects’ post-experimental accounts, they are by no means the only kinds of subjectivity that exceeded the cut between obedience and disobedience. Some subjects found themselves questioning the reality of the situation as a result not only of background knowledge (e.g., about Yale, or about electrical engineering, in the case of Subjects 0113, 0432, 1003, and 1331) but also due to *in situ* observations. For example, Subject 0929 watched the experimenter handing the learner a dog-eared check, leading him to reason that the check was being reused and that the

learner was not really so naïve (Reaction of subjects, 1962a). Similarly, Subject 1615 observed a dog-eared word-list for the learning and memory task, and Subject 0237 became suspicious when he, but not the learner, was asked to sign a release waiver. Both Subject 0517 and 1809 noted the one-way mirror and supposed it indicated that they were being observed. Likewise, Subject 1810 surmised that the learner's screams were not coming from below the door but was, instead, "quite sure" that the "'grunts & screams' were electrically reproduced from a speaker mounted in students room." Still another, Subject 0209, was left feeling confused and doubtful because the "learner seemed to make an extremely indifferent effort to recall correct associations." Other times, aberrations in the experimental protocol and the inevitable mutability of performances led subjects out of the naïveté necessitated by Milgram's design—the failure to give the learner a check, or a third party tinkering with the shock generator being but a few examples of what triggered Subject 0208's suspicions and problem-solving behavior (Reaction of subjects, 1962b).

Across the board, subjects' inevitable performances as either "obedient" or "disobedient" were achieved through a complex mess of discourse, action, and gesture. Subjects are categorized dichotomously, despite their disparate understandings of the experiment-proper and psychology writ-large, and their embodiment of varied, idiosyncratic affect. For some subjects, the central question of the experiment was *Should I keep shocking?*, for others it was *What is going on here?*, *Is the learner really being shocked?*, *Would Yale do such a thing?*, *Why is the learner performing badly?*, or even *How can I get the learner in the other room to better perform?* Subject 1703 stated the salience of such questions explicitly, writing that the conflict between himself and the learner was overshadowed by "another conflict ... that of 'My role in this experiment and How I Should React'" (Reaction of subjects, 1962a). Statements like this indicate how experimental performance takes on detective work, problem-solving, while other accounts, like Subject 1914's, illustrate just how important solving that problem can be for a subject:

Though I accepted the experiment at face value initially, I had doubts after the learner began to complain about the shocks, and I began to think critically about the entire experimental situation. I felt fairly sure that I was the only subject, and my own reactions were being studied rather than the "student's." Because of this I did continue with the program, almost feeling a gleeful pleasure at having guessed, in some degree, what was actually happening.

At the end of the experiment I did indicate my surprise to the experimenter since I felt that my reaction to the experimental situation might well have been different. (Reaction of subjects, 1962a)

As shown by his "gleeful pleasure," the most salient feature of the experiment for Subject 1914 was its mystery, not its emotional and moral dilemma. He nevertheless remained keenly aware that his laboratory purpose was for the benefit of the experimenter, acknowledging that his problem-solving mindset had produced a different "reaction to the experimental situation" than the experimenter had been looking for. Subject 1914's attention to both the experimenter's and his own problem-solving shows how subjects can sometimes push back on the cut between the subject's presumed vision of obedience as a moral quandary and the experimenter's understanding of obedience as an intellectual puzzle.

### *Performing and feeling otherwise*

As they entered into the lab, many subjects' curiosity compelled them to take active measures when passive observation alone would not shed full light on the true nature of the experiment. While some subjects probed and questioned the experimenter to ascertain what was happening, others directed their "testing" against the learner. Both Subjects 1419 and 1434 found themselves experimenting on the experiment. In his free-response Subject 1419 revealed, "I cheated once during the experiment. I announced that I was giving a high voltage stimulus, & gave a low voltage to see if the subject would say 'ouch' nevertheless" (Reaction of subjects, 1962a). Similarly, in his desire to understand what had just transpired, Subject 1810 wrote that he began to take notes about the experiment once he left the laboratory, scrupulously documenting his experience much like the experimenter had been doing just minutes earlier. Subject 0601, another note-taker, not only mimicked the experimenter's scrupulous recording of the minute goings-on of the laboratory environment, but went so far as to mail these notes to Milgram as an attachment to the free-response questionnaire. Just as the pervasive and subversive doubt evident in the archive marks an excess subjectivity, a scientific curiosity (of the performative sort exhibited by Subject 1419, 1434, 1810, and 0601) also constitutes a way of acting otherwise that runs beyond simplification or reduction into the narrow typology afforded by the cut between obedience and disobedience.

To be sure, many subjects were "taken into" Milgram's experimental narrative without resistance; however, the variegated nature of subjects' background experiences meant that no two subjects would be engaged the same way. For example, Subject 2004 stated several minutes after the experiment that her experience in a mental hospital several years earlier led her to assume that a person getting shocked would "get used to it after a while" (Subject 2004, n.d.). She vividly remembered being strapped to the ECT table, and recounts with a slowing, quieting voice the sight of other patients on her unit and "how pale they became." The experiment triggered powerful memories for Subject 0310 as well, who revealed that his eventual disobedience was influenced by a family trauma. He wrote, "I believe my concern was intensified because the actor greatly resembled and seemed about the same age as my step-father, who had succumbed to a heart attack" (Reaction of subjects, 1962c). Both these cases exemplify the idiosyncratic, messy, and oftentimes affectively charged subjectivity that fills in the gap of the performative interval.

Like the doubtful subjects, those subjects who *did* believe Milgram's narrative expressed their agency through subversive performances that were never registered in the published accounts of the obedience experiments. Much like the diverse degrees of naïveté and the array of curiosity described above, a colorful patchwork of affective exchanges laid the groundwork for ways of acting otherwise. For example, Subject 1801 tried to assuage the learner's pain by covertly delivering a shock of shorter duration to the learner (Reaction of subjects, 1962a), a tactic Milgram noticed among several subjects but one he deemed to be ineffective and in the end to serve merely "as a balm to the subject's conscience" (Milgram, 1974 p. 159). Another subject frustrated with the learner for getting so many answers wrong, attempted to loudly emphasize the correct word pairs. However, the learner "still didn't pick that up either and he was getting the shocks and I

started hesitating around 140 volts as ... I mulled it over quickly in my mind I thought, well, nobody is going to do anything that's going to hurt this man, I still thought he was getting the shock though" (cited in Errera, 1963a, p. 5).

Quite opposite to the subject's reported attempt to help the learner, another subject revealed to Dr. Errera that he had become annoyed at the learner, complaining that "it seemed like the fellow wasn't even trying to help himself" (Errera, 1963b). Some subjects were so frustrated with the learner's seeming incompetence that they offered to exchange roles and let the learner administer the shocks (Subject 0240, 0502); the learner refused such offers, displaying an inflexibility that hinted that all was not as it appeared. Subjects' confusion, frustration, fear, sympathy, annoyance, doubt, and curiosity all (like Subjects 0310 and 2004's traumatic pasts) constitute an excess subjectivity that—while operative and foundationally salient in the heat of the experimental moment—eventually melts away from what is inscribed in Milgram's published data. The archival materials document more than bare behavior: they reveal laboratory liveliness that is never fully beholden to experimenters' cuts.

## Resistance by any other name?

Milgram sought post-experimental data to corroborate subjects' beliefs in the experimental conditions and to ascertain whether individual characteristics (age, occupation, military service, and the like) influenced behaviors. Yet he also turned to these data to understand what constitutes obedience, and his conversations with Errera indicate he was at least temporarily stymied by the multiplicity of subjects' reported dissident beliefs, feelings, and actions. Milgram's concentrated attention to these diverse responses, both the substantial and subtle, yielded new explanatory accounts. Yet his auxiliary, post-experimental interpretations ultimately dimmed rather than clarified defiance. His interpretations made no allowance for the fact that scientists cannot always negotiate the world as they please because "nature" sometimes "resists" scientists' aspirations (Galison, 1987), and it forecloses too on the possibility of intentionality (Patten, 1977). Milgram thus neglected to consider how subjects' agency might be an "emergent property of intersubjective exchanges" (Krause, 2012, p. 8), emerging, in this case, from the impersonal, unequal dynamics of the experimenter–subject system. Put otherwise, one does not need a "Foucauldian conspiracy" account (Ash, 1992) to appreciate the ways experimental designs regulate performances (Spears & Smith, 2001) or notions of sovereign agency (intentionality) to understand individual actions.

To some degree, Milgram was able to eschew this vocabulary because he had made the very relationship between experimenter and subject the center of his obedience studies. He then used the post-experimental interviews and reports to check the reliability of his methods. Despite an experimental design that honed in on the experimenter–subject relationship, and despite pristine behavioral definitions of obedience and disobedience, Milgram apparently still found it necessary to examine the ways that subjects acted otherwise. He went to lengths to reconcile his avowed commitment to the subjects' perspectives with dedication to the experimental hypothesis. This reconciliation ultimately involved elaborate reinterpretation of the subjects' perspectives. Admittedly facing a problem of linguistic representation, he recognized that "there is

probably no word in everyday language that covers the experimental situation exactly, without omissions or irrelevant connotations." He acknowledged that using the words "obey and disobey" to describe the subjects' diverse actions "was partly for convenience" (1977, p. 122).

The dual aim to attend to subjects' perspectives and remedy lacunae of language was accomplished by applying several strategies for interpreting the ways of acting otherwise. First, a variety of restive, even dissident actions were captured with the concepts of "tensions" and "strains." Physical, verbal, gestural, and "nearly defying" actions were interpreted as subjects' means of inhibiting disobedience. In these visible, observed, and recorded tensions and strains, subjects were claimed to "display a curious dissociation between word and action" (Milgram, 1974, p. 77). He reasoned that despite their efforts, subjects struggle to disengage from the experimental situation. The post-hoc introduction of the additional variables of tension and strain involved a second strategy: incorporating psychoanalytic and unconscious cognitive notions such as "dissociation." Subjects' reports of resistant acts and thoughts thus were deemed to indicate non-conscious processes of "self-delusion," "denial," and reaction formation (Milgram, 1974, pp. 158–160). A third interpretive strategy involved distinguishing between apparent versus genuine disobedience, a distinction that required introducing a behavioral category of "dissent" to refer "to a subject's expression of disagreement with the course of action prescribed by the experiment" (1974, pp. 161–162). Although acknowledging that "dissent" may be a "first step" toward defiance of the experimenter, Milgram all but dismissed dissent by claiming it to be ineffective and, perhaps more importantly, to have the "self-serving end" of giving subjects "psychological consolation" and a publically desirable image. Through these interpretive strategies, Milgram not only accounted for resistant actions, but also set a high criterion for disobedience. Disobedience, he wrote, "Is not an act that comes easily." He continued, it "implies not merely the refusal to carry out a particular act of the experimenter but a reformulation of the relationship between subject and authority" (1974, p. 162). Disobedience requires "mobilization of inner resources," carries a considerable "psychic cost," and produces "a gnawing sense that one has been faithless" (pp. 163–164). For an act to count as disobedience it must not only meet the operational definition but also entail suffering. This high standard for disobedience, one set by moral and personal as well as behavioral criteria, was sustained in subsequent writings: in a 1970 article Milgram distinguished the disobedience of war resisters who were "morally inspired but politically ineffective" (1977, p. 149) from those who undertook truly effective resistance through added personal sacrifices and practical counter-actions. In light of these crucial interpretive moves to represent ways that subjects acted otherwise, it is not surprising to find that his 1974 book discusses disobedience on only 12 of the 205 pages and his 1977 volume of collected essays mentions disobedience on only 32 of the 350 pages, including the reprinting of the 1970 article on war resisters.

What is known about resistance (disobedience and related dissenting acts) from the experiments thus depends on what Milgram counted as such. With extensive interpretive accounting and requisite "simplification" of experimental data (Star, 1983), along with relatively minor analytic attention to the approximately 40% who eventually disobeyed according to the operational definitions, the experiments stand primarily as lessons on obedience. Remembered are the approximately 60% of subjects who obeyed authority. In

this regard Milgram's studies are not exceptional, for the difficulties of seeing how individuals act otherwise, how they resist, refuse, or disregard objectionable yet normative conditions, are evident across the human sciences.

Despite the ever-present cultural hopes that individuals will resist injustice and refuse oppression, our human science understanding of resistance is underdeveloped. Definitions are largely rigid and narrow; as Martin observed (and Milgram's work illustrates), the criteria for "what counts as resistance are held at an unreasonably stringent level" (1987, p. 183). Researchers have tended to study manifest, openly declared forms of resistance, neglecting "low profile, undeclared resistances that constitute the domain of infra-politics" (Scott, 1990, p. 198). The study of resistance confronts not only the paucity of analytic tools but also the many forms resistance can take. Defiant actions and speech transgress normative conduct and, therefore, often are socially complex, ambivalent, or ambiguous (not always transparent in intention or outcome; Ortner, 1995). Challenges to authority are commonly labeled uncivilized, mad, or morally bad (Potter, 2011). Resistance can take forms beyond the politically obvious and can emerge as "barely recognizable, less-than-conscious mobilization of bodily potentials" (Hynes, 2013, p. 573). A conceptual reformulation of resistance also needs to recognize the diverse techniques individuals can use to defy oppressive conditions (Fivush, 2010; Hanna, 2013).

Analysis of materials in the Milgram archive, mostly unpublished data, yields a preliminary taxonomy of techniques of resistance. This compilation includes a range of acts of defiance, from modest bodily gestures to grave suspicious and subversive acts. The ways that Milgram's subjects acted otherwise are made visible only with an empirically robust model of the experimenter–subject system that replaces the perfect relationship assumed (or desired) in conventional representations and sustained only by "ignoring complexity" and "subjects' reactions" (Star, 1983, p. 207).

The model adopted here undoes those simplification processes and thus challenges the conventional epistemic cut between observer and object of observation, experimenter and subject. A robust experimenter–subject model likewise interrogates the cut between obedience and disobedience, recognizing instead the ambiguities, ambivalences, messiness, and even ineffectiveness of defying normative conditions. The model acknowledges agency not as autonomous and always efficacious but as non-sovereign, socially distributed, and dependent on social uptake (Krause, 2012). Thus our analysis joins with and affirms the larger claims of situationism, yet suggests how situationist aims to enhance individuals' capacities to oppose injustice and unfreedom need to devote attention to those actions dismissed as either "minute," "external," or "irrelevant," but which actually constitute the potentialities of resistance.

## Conclusion

Examining laboratory life through an extended experimenter–subject system combines both a top-down Foucauldian awareness of power's distributed influence and a bottom-up humanist model attuned to the corporeal, cognitive, and affective dimensions of subjects' experiences. What emerges from this synthesis is not simply the docile, static personhood painted by experimentalists and Foucauldians alike, but a conception of the subject marked simultaneously by distributed, non-sovereign agency and a capacity for



ways of acting otherwise. In fact, it is this very non-sovereign agency that makes resistance possible—resistance which is not visible in Milgram’s articles on the experiments.

While those published accounts define disobedience exclusively by an outright refusal to shock the learner, we found that subjects resisted in layered, multiple ways. Our model provides an understanding of Milgram’s experiments far different from that commonly echoed through popular discourse—such as the claims of Georgetown University business professor, Edward Soule, in a *New York Times* article. Speculating about how mid-level bank managers broke the law to please their superiors, Soule explained, “As human beings, we are predisposed to be obedient to authority, no matter how malevolent it may be” (Stewart, 2013, para. 19). At the very least, there is a danger in such generalizations about human nature. If there is anything our investigation of the Milgram subject files shows, it is the exact opposite: that despite a seemingly totalizing experimental apparatus, subjects can find ways to question, defy, and subvert authority. It is our hope that an understanding of the obedience experiments that is more attuned to the complexity of the laboratory world—from its institutional norms to its *in situ* performances—will both guide a broader vision of experimentation in psychology and inform individuals of their own potential to act otherwise.

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