
The Power of the Situation

The Impact of Milgram's Obedience Studies on Personality and Social Psychology

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Few psychological studies, if any, can claim a legacy as imposing as the obedience studies of Stanley Milgram. Their impact was of notable consequence in the separate spheres of research ethics, research design, and theory in psychology, and they changed the ways that psychologists conceptualize and conduct their research. The authors discuss the legacy of these studies, especially as they effected dramatic changes in the fields of personality and social psychology. The article concludes with a discussion of what psychological science has lost in the aftermath of Milgram—high impact studies—and the salience that such research has in illuminating the most significant problems of our society, studies that could produce great human benefits.

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When you think of the long and gloomy history of man, you will find more hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion. (Snow, 1961, p. 24)

In August of 1961, men from all walks of life in the New Haven, Connecticut, community began showing up, one by one, at Linsly-Chittenden Hall on the Yale University campus. They had come in response to a newspaper ad that offered them \$4.50 for their participation in what was advertised as a study of human learning and memory. They did not know it at the time, nor did the experimenter, Stanley Milgram, but they were about to make history in the most famous, or infamous, study in the annals of scientific psychology. It was a study the results of which would shock the world and the study's designer and would dramatically alter the course of psychology both conceptually and methodologically. The research would prove unsettling on several levels, but arguably its most disturbing feature was that it revealed truths about human nature that most people did not want to acknowledge—that the capacity for evil resided in everyone and awaited only the right circumstances to make its appearance. The study would demonstrate with signal finality the horror manifested when unquestioning obedience to authority prevailed. It provided scientific evidence of the inherent dangers in obedience long acknowledged by philosophers and poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley (1829), who wrote that

obedience was the “bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, [and] truth, [and that it] makes slaves of men” (p. 35).

A History of the Construct of Obedience in Psychology

The construct of obedience has a long history in psychology, and much of the early literature was about the positive benefits of obedience. It began, perhaps, in the writings of French psychologist Theodule Ribot (1891), who discussed obedience in the context of will, noting that “it is only through the will [that] one man gains an irresistible influence over others” and that “it is only a strong will that demands obedience” (p. 95). Boris Sidis (1898), William James's student, wrote about obedience as an outcome of suggestion or hypnosis, what he labeled automatic obedience; it was a source that Milgram (1974) would acknowledge in his book on the obedience experiments. French sociologist Gustave LeBon (1908) echoed the sentiments of his countryman Ribot in his classic work on the psychology of the crowd in calling attention to obedience as part of mob psychology. Thus, obedience has several meanings in psychology, and the work of Ribot and LeBon appears related to obedience as Milgram formulated it. There are still other roots in psychology that are part of this intellectual history.

In the first half of the 20th century, there was considerable discussion of obedience within the context of parent-child relations, in which obedience was often identified as the most desirable personal quality in children and disobedience was ranked as the most serious behavioral problem in children (Stogdill, 1936). If one needs proof of the importance of obedience in children, one need look no further than its inclusion among the Bible's Ten Commandments, in which the command to obey one's parents is the only commandment to offer a promise for faithful adherence—that of long life. Although some psychologists and other child-rearing experts cautioned about the dangers in “blind obedience,” most acknowledged that it was para-

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mount among human qualities, and they offered advice to parents about how to get children to want to obey rather than to be forced to obey (Isaacs, 1930; Norsworthy & Whitley, 1933; Symonds, 1934; Teagarden, 1940). There was therefore general agreement that teaching children obedience, often unquestioning obedience, was a critical responsibility for parents (Hohman, 1939). G. Stanley Hall, the American Psychological Association's founder and the authority on adolescence in his day, was unequivocal on this point; he wrote that "the only duty of young children is implicit obedience" (Hall, 1904, p. 451).

These psychologists were clear that obedience was not an inherent trait of humans but must be taught and that this teaching should occur early in child development. Sigmund Freud's disciple Sándor Ferenczi espoused a different view, which Milgram would have supported in part. Although Ferenczi (1916/1950) agreed that obedience was not inherent, he believed that it occurred as a normal part of human development. He stated that uncritical obedience was present in all young children as a natural part of the child's perception of parental authority and omniscience. Milgram (1974) agreed that obedience to authority was characteristic of very young children: "The initial conditions of total dependency give the child little choice in the matter" (p. 208). But he observed that such obedience gives way quickly as the child "enters a period of unrestrained negativism in which he challenges authority at virtually every turn, rejecting even its most benign demands" (p. 208). Ferenczi (1916/1950) offered a similar description: "The feeling of awe for the parents, and the tendency to obey them, normally disappear as the child grows up" (p. 80). However, he continued his explanation with a pronouncement about transference that Milgram would have found most interesting: "But the need to be subject to

someone remains; only the part of the father is transferred to teachers, superiors, impressive personalities; the submissive loyalty to rulers that is so wide-spread is also a transference of this sort" (Ferenczi, 1916/1950, p. 80).

We have briefly sketched this history of obedience in psychology to illustrate its correspondence with questions that Milgram would raise about obedience to authority. In his earliest article on the subject, he described obedience as the most basic element in human social structure. It was a condition that was necessary for all communal living, a behavior that contributed to both good and bad in society (Milgram, 1963). He was less clear about the causes of obedience but noted that "facts of recent history and observation in daily life suggest that for many persons obedience may be a deeply ingrained behavior tendency, indeed a prepotent impulse overriding training in ethics, sympathy, and moral conduct" (p. 371). In the planning of his initial experiment, he had no idea just how deeply ingrained these destructive tendencies were.

The Origins of Milgram's Obedience Studies

In describing the genesis of his obedience experiments—18 studies in all—Milgram noted that there were multiple points of origin (Evans, 1976). While completing his doctorate at Harvard University, in 1959 Milgram accepted an invitation from Solomon Asch, who was spending two years at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University, to assist him with a book on conformity. Milgram had worked earlier with Asch at Harvard. Like other social psychologists of his generation, Milgram was influenced by Asch's (1956) work on conformity under group pressure. Asch's study had been praised for the inventiveness of its method, and the results—the very high degree of conformity in subjects who offered answers that went against their best perceptual judgments—were particularly surprising. Yet the study had also been criticized in terms of its ecological validity. Yes, subjects could be made to conform at very high rates, but the task—deciding which of a set of comparison lines matched a target line in terms of length—was a trivial one. Milgram asked himself how he could make the experiment "more humanly significant" (Evans, 1976, p. 347). Working within Asch's paradigm, he wondered whether a group could "induce a person to act with severity against another person?" (Evans, 1976, p. 347). He struggled, however, with the issue of a control condition. Asch had used some trials in which there was no group pressure to compare the subject's responses with those made when the group was united in choosing an obviously incorrect line. But in the absence of group pressure, Milgram wondered how he could get the subject to administer higher shocks. The answer soon became obvious.

And then the thought occurred that the experimenter would have to tell him [the subject] to give higher and higher shocks. Just how far will a person go when an experimenter instructs him to give increasingly higher shocks? Immediately I knew that was the problem I would investigate. It was a very excited moment for me. (Evans, 1976, p. 347)



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The other significant determinant for the obedience studies was Milgram's identification as a Jew and his desire to understand the Holocaust, a salient example of destructive obedience in which dozens of Nazi war criminals explained away their responsibility for the deaths of millions of Jews by claiming that they were only obeying orders. Milgram wrote,

[My] laboratory paradigm . . . gave scientific expression to a more general concern about authority, a concern forced upon members of my generation, in particular upon Jews such as myself, by the atrocities of World War II The impact of the Holocaust on my own psyche energized my interest in obedience and shaped the particular form in which it was examined. (cited in Blass, 2004, p. 62)

As Milgram was writing the final chapters of his doctoral dissertation in May 1960, he read about the capture of Adolf Eichmann in Argentina by Israeli agents. Eichmann, often referred to as the architect of the Holocaust, was flown to Israel for trial. Televised high-profile trials are common today, but in the early 1960s, the daily TV coverage of Eichmann's trial offered high drama in which the accused sat stoically in a bullet-proof glass enclosure, listening via headphones and translation to the accounts of horror for which he was responsible. The trial began in August 1961, the very month that Milgram's subjects began reporting to the basement laboratory in Linsly-Chittenden Hall. As Milgram ran his subjects, the three judges considering the evidence against Eichmann found him guilty on all counts. He was hanged on June 1, 1962, five days after Milgram completed the first of his obedience studies. It was an ironic juxtaposition of events that would forever link the obedience studies and the Holocaust.

The Impact of Milgram's Obedience Studies

It can be argued that few studies in the history of psychology have produced, or at least contributed to, so many seminal changes in psychology. Because of Milgram's obedience research, psychologists have become more acutely aware of ethical issues in their research, and the result has been changes in ethics codes and procedures for the review of research proposals in universities, government and military agencies, and federal funding agencies. Moreover, the obedience studies resulted in sweeping changes in the broad fields of personality and social psychology, including a diminution of the importance of person or trait variables accompanied by an exceptionally strong emphasis on the power of situations as behavioral determinants, new models that highlighted person-by-situation interactions, new interpretations of linkages of attitudes and behaviors, and a shift in research from laboratory studies to field studies. We discuss each of these outcomes in the following sections.

The Impact on Ethical Issues

The initial publication of Milgram's work on obedience was in 1963, but it would not be until the appearance of his book in 1974 that the results of all 18 experiments were revealed. The 1963 article began with a lengthy abstract of 205 words that included descriptions of the fact that naive subjects were ordered to administer increasing punishment to a victim, that the punishment delivered was in the form of increasingly severe shocks, and that a shock generator was used in which the 30 switches were anchored by labels of "Slight Shock" and "Danger: Severe Shock." Interestingly, nowhere in that abstract does the reader learn that no shocks actually occurred. The reader is informed that the victim was a confederate of the experimenter; but the text of the abstract, which is so precise and informative in so many ways, does not indicate that the victim was *not* shocked. Surely this was not a chance omission. It is not until the second page of the article that the reader learns that the shocks were simulated. Perhaps Milgram intended this fact to be a surprise to the reader.

Further, the abstract detailed the psychological and physical impact of the procedure on the subjects:

The procedure created extreme levels of nervous tension in some Ss. Profuse sweating, trembling, and stuttering were typical expressions of this emotional disturbance. One unexpected sign of tension—yet to be explained—was the regular occurrence of nervous laughter, which in some Ss developed into uncontrollable seizures. (Milgram, 1963, p. 371)

The exceptional distress experienced by the subjects is made even more apparent in the article. Milgram noted that the initial great surprise of the study was the very high level of compliance, when experts had predicted that no one would be likely to continue to the end, pushing all 30 switches. Yet 65% did! The second great surprise for Milgram (1963), "was the extraordinary tension generated by the procedures" (p. 377). He wrote, "I observed a

mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse” (p. 377). And the extremely disturbing behaviors—trembling, stuttering, biting of lips, groaning, digging fingernails into flesh—were described as “characteristic rather than exceptional responses to the experiment” (p. 375).

In reading this account 45 years after its publication and with full knowledge of the study and its aftermath in social science, one is still struck by the magnitude of the findings concerning obedience and by the level of human suffering endured by the subjects in this study. This was an important study, arguably among the most significant pieces of research ever done in scientific psychology. It should perhaps be no surprise, then, that these profoundly revealing results about the human capacity for inflicting pain on another person came at great human cost (see Blass, 2000; Miller, 1986).

The printer’s ink was barely dry on Milgram’s (1963) article when University of California psychologist Diana Baumrind (1964) took him to task in the very visible pages of the *American Psychologist*. Hers would be the first of many criticisms aimed at the ethics of Milgram’s studies, chiefly on three grounds: the psychological distress caused to the subjects, the use of deception, and the lack of informed consent. Baumrind’s (1964) article focused chiefly on the first of these criticisms. She was disturbed by the detached manner in which Milgram seemed to describe the pain of his subjects. In acknowledging his lengthy debriefing procedures, which were meant to send the subject home in a state of well-being, she wondered “what sort of procedures could dissipate the type of emotional experience . . . described” (Baumrind, 1964, p. 422). She particularly worried about the long-term harm to the subjects in terms of loss of dignity, lowered self-esteem, and loss of trust in authority. She believed those effects to be substantial in Milgram’s subjects and argued that the human costs of the experiment far outweighed the benefits of what was learned.

Milgram (1964) replied to Baumrind in the same journal five months later. He took exception to the criticism of his studies in terms of the stress they produced in the subjects. Milgram noted that such distress was an outcome that had not been anticipated by him or by the many colleagues whose advice and opinions he had sought beforehand. In his reply to Baumrind, he provided data from postexperimental questionnaires that spoke to the subjects’ satisfaction with their participation in the study (e.g., 84% of the obedient subjects said they were glad they had been in the experiment, 80% believed that further experiments of that kind should be conducted, and 74% said they had learned something of personal importance from being in the study). It is interesting that Milgram did not suggest that cognitive dissonance in his subjects might have accounted for such favorable responses.

In discussions of Milgram’s obedience studies today, it is still the high rates of total obedience and the ethics of the research that dominate. Most experts are in agreement

that the studies could not be replicated today under the conditions that Milgram employed given the ethical guidelines now in force. It is important to recognize that Milgram’s procedures probably did not violate the research ethics of the early 1960s. He is on record that he expected most subjects to quit the study after a few shocks and certainly by the time the “learner” began voicing objections. The implication of Baumrind’s (1964) criticism was that Milgram should have considered abandoning the study once he saw the level of distress being caused, and perhaps she was right. But Milgram clearly recognized that his results were nothing short of startling. It is difficult to imagine any researcher abandoning a project with the potential for such impact on knowledge of the human condition, particularly if he or she believed that the debriefing procedure would deal with the personal distress of the subjects.

Because Milgram’s obedience studies are often used as the prototypical example of why strong protection of human subjects in research is needed, some researchers, including many psychologists, assume that it was this research that was responsible for the development of stronger federal guidelines and requirements for local institutional review boards (IRBs). However, not only is such a conclusion wrong, but it suggests an authority and prominence for psychology among the sciences of the 1960s that did not exist. Instead, the federal guidelines on protection of human research subjects that were approved in 1966 came about because of abuses in *medical* research. And it was not until 1971 that those guidelines were amended to add similar requirements for the social and behavioral sciences. It was that policy, issued by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, that also called for the establishment of IRBs. Although Milgram’s studies are not cited in the published materials on the new guidelines, they were certainly visible enough and controversial enough to be part of the discussion (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1971). But the medical abuses were so egregious—especially the studies on radiation that began at the time of the Manhattan Project and later the Tuskegee syphilis studies, which came to public awareness in 1972 (see Jones, 1993)—that the procedures employed by Milgram would not have registered sufficient alarm. As subsequent policies have evolved for human research, especially those set forth in the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (2002), issues of deception, of informed consent, and of assessment of risks and benefits are now paramount in determining the acceptability of research protocols. Milgram’s obedience studies have informed those debates and the ultimate guidelines (see Korn, 1997), and they continue to do so, being used, for example, on Internet sites as training modules for IRBs and for students in ethics courses.

The Impact on Personality Psychology

Besides having a profound impact on ethical issues, Milgram’s pioneering work also had important effects on the trajectory of personality and social psychology. In the 1950s, attention in personality psychology focused on how

the traits and dispositions of people—their scores on particular trait measures—were associated with how they thought, felt, and behaved across time and in different situations. One reason for this focus was the prominence of “internalistic” theories in personality at that time, especially psychodynamic approaches. Moreover, several large-scale research projects (e.g., the work on authoritarian personality; see Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) were seeking to determine whether “personality types” might help us understand and explain why certain people committed some of the atrocities witnessed during World War II. Indeed, Milgram’s absolute refusal to believe in the situation-based excuses made by concentration camp guards at the Nuremberg War Trials (e.g., “I cannot be blamed; I was just following orders”) was the major impetus behind his decision to conduct his obedience studies (Milgram, 1974).

In the 1960s, attention in psychology shifted away from internal explanations of behavior toward environmental and situational ones. This shift was chiefly in response to major social and political changes in society at that time (e.g., the Civil Rights Movement, the War on Poverty, Lyndon Baines Johnson’s vision of the Great Society; see Pervin, 2002), but it may also have been accelerated by Milgram’s powerful demonstration that “strong” situations can and sometimes do overwhelm personality variables, even in well-intentioned and caring people. Although the role that personality traits and trait-by-situation interactions might have played in the Milgram studies was probably underestimated (see Blass, 1991; Ross, 1988), the general implication was that extreme situations that are novel, contain strongly conflicting cues, and invoke powerful norms to comply to the unrelenting requests of an authority figure clearly attenuate the connection between personality traits and social behavior.

This shift away from internal explanations was also accelerated by Walter Mischel’s pivotal 1968 textbook *Personality and Assessment*. In this pathbreaking book, Mischel reviewed extant studies testing relations between various personality trait measures and relevant behavioral outcomes. His review revealed that, except for measures of intelligence, there was relatively weak evidence that trait scores systematically predicted behavioral outcomes; typical correlations rarely exceeded .30. Ironically, Mischel did not cite Milgram in his 1968 book. Virtually all of Mischel’s arguments casting doubt on the strength of trait–behavior connections were based on studies conducted by personality psychologists. Nevertheless, Mischel was clearly aware of Milgram’s work, and he most likely appreciated one of the principal points that emerged from the obedience work—that powerful situations can and do engulf dispositional tendencies.

In the 1970s, the field of personality began to adopt an interactionist perspective toward individuals and situations (see Magnusson & Endler, 1977). Following Kurt Lewin’s dictum that behavior should depend on both who people are (as indexed by their scores on trait measures) and the situations in which they find themselves, personality psychologists started to reconceptualize behavioral outcomes

in terms of person-by-situation interactions. Attempts were also made to identify the strongest moderating variables of trait–behavior links. One excellent moderator proved to be whether individuals act in highly structured, role-governed situations that have clear norms or rules (i.e., strong situations) or whether they act in novel or highly unstructured situations that contain few cues to appropriate behavior (i.e., weak situations). Traits were found to be better predictors of behavior in weaker situations (see Snyder & Ickes, 1985).

In recent years, personality has increasingly come to be viewed in the context of person-by-situation effects (e.g., the cognitive-affective system [CAPS] theory of personality; see Mischel & Shoda, 1995). These models have redefined personality as the study of how people habitually respond to or react in different types of social situations. Most if not all of these trends can be traced back to the implications of Milgram’s obedience research.

The Impact on Social Psychology

The impact of Milgram’s obedience studies was more immediate and direct on social psychology. However, as Lee Ross (1988) observed, “The Milgram experiments ultimately may have less to say about ‘destructive obedience’ than about ineffectual and indecisive *disobedience*” (p. 103), and they shunted many research programs in social psychology toward the study of negative situations and behaviors and perhaps away from more prosocial ones.

Beginning in the 1950s, attention in social psychology started to turn toward the powerful and sometimes counterintuitive effects that social situations could have on how people think, feel, and behave. Although Milgram’s obedience research is the most vivid example of the potential power of situations, the seeds of this trend were rooted in Asch’s (1955) classic research on conformity in small groups and in some of the earliest cognitive dissonance studies (e.g., the doomsday believers; see Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956). After it was conducted, Milgram’s obedience work had a direct effect on several new lines of inquiry in social psychology, most notably Zimbardo’s Stanford prison study, which examined aspects of both obedience and conformity in a simulated prison (see Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973).

Only a year after Mischel (1968) raised questions about the strength of trait–behavior relations, Wicker (1969) launched a similar attack on the robustness of attitude–behavior linkages. Reviewing all published studies testing the degree to which specific attitudes predict relevant behavioral outcomes, Wicker also found modest correlations that rarely exceeded .30. Combined with Milgram’s demonstration of how powerful situations can be, Wicker’s review led many social psychologists to become even more dubious about the extent to which disposition-like variables guide social behavior.

Over the years, Milgram’s obedience research has had a profound and lasting effect on how social psychological research—and, indeed, research in most areas within the social and behavioral sciences—is conducted. Before Milgram, for example, a large amount of research in social

psychology was conducted in the laboratory using rather high-impact experimental manipulations (e.g., electric shocks, strong fear-induction manipulations, staged emergency situations). Most research, in other words, had high experimental realism (i.e., engaging and powerful experimental instructions, manipulations, and measures) and low mundane realism (i.e., procedures, methods, and tasks that bore little resemblance to real-world events). After Milgram—and particularly in response to the enactment of more stringent IRB rules and regulations dictating how studies could and could not be conducted—there was a rapid shift to studies that had lower experimental realism and higher mundane realism, increasingly more of which were conducted outside the laboratory.

New IRB rules and requirements also led most researchers to utilize less strong and impactful experimental manipulations and measures when testing theoretical predictions. This development resulted in investigators being less able to examine and understand the boundary conditions of certain effects. One upshot of these changes, however, was a growing tendency to study people within their natural lives and environments—in the context of their close relationships, their natural social groups, their work settings, and so forth. In order to study the effects of extreme events and situations, researchers had to move into the real world and study how individuals reacted to major or traumatic life events (e.g., pivotal life transitions, life-based stressors, chronic health problems, natural disasters), which increased the external validity of many research findings.

This shift from laboratory studies with higher experimental realism and lower mundane realism to studies with lower experimental realism and higher mundane realism that examined individuals more within their natural environments had an important consequence. Namely, it facilitated the development of myriad new nonexperimental research methods, designs, and data-analytic techniques. These advances, which include new statistical models that now permit researchers to model dyads and larger groups (see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), have significantly altered what social psychologists can and actually do study. They have also allowed investigators to test theories and models in a much more precise and rigorous manner. The rise of research studying people in their natural lives and environments may be one of the most important legacies of the IRB changes informed by Milgram's obedience research.

Conclusion

We began this article with a brief description of the history of the construct of obedience in psychology, and we want to return, briefly, to the subject of history once more. Psychology's national archives are housed at the University of Akron. Founded in 1965, the Archives of the History of American Psychology is a treasure house of items related to psychology's past. Located there are the personal papers of hundreds of influential psychologists, including Abraham Maslow, Leta Stetter Hollingworth, Muzafer Sherif, Kurt Lewin, and Kurt Lewin. There are

thousands of original and rare photographs and thousands of reels of rare movie film, including home movies of Sigmund Freud and Ivan Pavlov. Yet the star attraction of the Archives, the item that is a must-see for every visitor—scholar or voyeur—is a rectangular box whose front contains 30 switches and 30 lights in two long rows. The label on the box reads "Shock Generator, Type ZLB, Dyson Instrument Company, Waltham, Mass." Visitors study it intently, they ask questions about it, and ultimately they ask if they can have their picture taken with it. Yale University has the Stanley Milgram Papers in its archives, but the Psychology Archives at the University of Akron has *the box*, the icon of the most famous study in American psychology.

It is critically important to understand why this study so captivates psychologists and psychology students today as well as ordinary citizens. It has all the elements of an *experimentum crucis*, an experiment designed to answer a question of great importance. It asked a big question, an important question, the ultimate question about blind obedience—how far will a person go in inflicting severe pain on a stranger when instructed to do so by an authority figure? It is not just a psychological question. It is a moral question. Indeed, it is a societal question, and the study had great currency in the aftermath of the Nuremberg Trials and during the Eichmann trial as individuals struggled to make sense of the genocide of an entire people. Milgram's study used a design to match the significance of the question under investigation. It incorporated an imaginative and innovative experimental design, one that bordered on compelling theater (Blass, 2004). However, both the importance of the question and the creativity of the design would have been quickly forgotten had the study not produced such dramatic findings, a level of obedience that no one had predicted, a willingness to administer painful shocks (or so participants believed) to another human being who pleaded for the "teacher" to stop, who complained of heart troubles, and who finally stopped responding completely even though additional shocks continued to be administered. Milgram's 18 studies varied many of the parameters from his original design to explore the conditions under which obedience rates could be made to rise or fall. More than any other investigation of its time, Milgram's work demonstrated the overwhelming power of situational variables, a discovery that had a dramatic impact on psychology, as we have described in the previous sections.

Given the reaction to Milgram's studies on ethical grounds, is it possible for such high-impact studies to be undertaken in today's research climate? And what scientific price is paid for the absence of studies that ask big questions, studies that cannot be easily simulated, and questions that cannot be asked or answered in designs with little realism?

Some of the most famous and widely taught studies in the history of personality/social psychology have been high-impact studies—those that had exceptionally high experimental realism. Examples include classic investigations of stress-resistant personality types (e.g., Office of Strategic Services Staff, 1948), the power of groups to induce

conformity (e.g., Asch, 1955, 1956), how fear affects affiliation with others (e.g., Schachter, 1959), ways in which coerced behavior change can induce attitude change (e.g., Aronson & Mills, 1959; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959), the conditions under which strong emotions are perceived (Schachter & Singer, 1962), the conditions under which bystanders intervene during emergencies (e.g., Darley & Latané, 1968; I. M. Piliavin, Rodin, & Piliavin, 1969), and how quickly and completely individuals assume assigned “roles” in a simulated prison (Haney et al., 1973). Since the 1970s, there have been some high-impact studies (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992; see also Burger, 2009, this issue), but they are increasingly rare.

Why is this so? Increasingly stringent IRB rules and regulations have undoubtedly curtailed some high-impact studies in order to protect research participants from harm, distress, or discomfort. Personal concerns of researchers regarding the well-being of research participants and uncertainty about whether the knowledge that might be gained from a particular study will outweigh any potential risks or discomfort to participants may also have scuttled some high-impact studies. Concerns about the use of deception or incomplete disclosure during the informed consent process may be yet another factor. And some high-impact studies may have fallen by the wayside because investigators believed they could not get IRB approval or were daunted by the amount of time and effort that would have been required to get a study approved. We suspect that most of the recent rules and regulations imposed by IRBs are reasonable, legitimate, and necessary. Moreover, they may have motivated many researchers to more carefully weigh the cost–benefit trade-offs that had to be calculated when deciding whether a study ought to be proposed and eventually conducted.

The dramatic shift away from studies high in experimental realism, however, has had some attendant costs. There are instances in which high-impact studies—especially those that involve well-chosen experimental manipulations designed to address important personal or social problems—can provide invaluable information and insights that lower impact studies simply cannot offer. For example, higher impact experiments can provide stronger causal inferences about how theoretically and practically relevant manipulated variables influence important outcomes that have direct relevance to people’s long-term mental, physical, or subjective well-being. Moreover, such experiments can sometimes unconfound variables that are correlated in natural settings, offering clearer insights as to which antecedent variables may be driving specific outcomes in a particular social context or setting. In addition, well-designed high-impact experiments can also test theoretically and practically relevant combinations of different putative causal variables, which may provide deeper or more nuanced understandings of why certain people experience different outcomes in some social contexts but not others.

There are good examples of research programs that have accomplished these objectives. For example, in a series of bystander intervention experiments staged in the

New York subway system (e.g., I. M. Piliavin, Piliavin, & Rodin, 1975; I. M. Piliavin et al., 1969; J. A. Piliavin & Piliavin, 1972), the Piliavins and their collaborators confirmed that certain characteristics of purported “victims” of emergencies, certain characteristics of potential “helpers,” and certain features of the immediate environment jointly influence whether and how quickly certain victims (e.g., White vs. Black victims, drunk vs. ill victims) receive help from certain bystanders (e.g., White vs. Black bystanders, high vs. low personal costs of helping the victim) in certain social contexts (e.g., the presence of many vs. few potential helpers, the race of potential helpers). These well-designed field experiments allowed the Piliavin team to test a novel and important bystander intervention model in a real-world context.

We want to emphasize that we are *not* advocating a return to an era of extreme situations, manipulations, and measures similar to those used by Milgram and other earlier researchers. We also are not suggesting that researchers venture back into public places (e.g., subway stations) to run studies in which participants cannot provide their informed consent before taking part in a study. However, we are suggesting that a more reasoned balance needs to be struck between studies that contain higher versus lower experimental realism. Burger’s (2009) partial replication of Milgram’s obedience work is one example of how higher impact studies could be done without necessarily compromising the protection, integrity, or well-being of research participants. Simpson et al. (1992) offered another example of how higher impact studies might be conducted—by employing experimental instructions or manipulations that lead participants to believe they might experience some event or procedure that, in the end, never happens.

Every day, distressing, difficult, and disconcerting events happen to tens of thousands of people from all walks of life. To better understand how bad events can be translated into good or better outcomes, we occasionally need to study how individuals manage and cope with negative or adverse situations in well-controlled experiments. The pendulum may have swung too far away from the use of well-designed, thoughtful, carefully developed, and potentially illuminating high-impact studies in social and personality psychology. One implication of Burger’s (2009) article is that it may help reopen this important discussion.

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