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Deception and Illusion in Milgram's Accounts of the Obedience Experiments

Milgram's obedience research is as renowned for its elaborate deception as it is for its startling results and subsequent ethical controversy. This paper argues that deception and illusion were used not just in the conduct of Milgram's obedience experiments but in accounts of the research itself. It will demonstrate that the story of the obedience research presented by Milgram was constructed, crafted, shaped, and edited to portray a particular view of Milgram himself and his ethical practices. Through a comparison of published accounts, interviews with former subjects, and unpublished archival materials, significant discrepancies will be shown between Milgram's accounts of his ethical practices in debriefing and follow-up of experimental subjects.

I first became aware of inconsistencies in accounts of Milgram's debriefing of his subjects in an interview I conducted with one of Milgram's former subjects. Bill Menold took part in either condition 5 or 6 of Milgram's twenty-four variations of the experiment, conducted in October 1961.[1] Menold went to maximum voltage on the shock machine. He told me that on the night of the experiment he had gone straight to the home of his neighbor, an electrician, for reassurance about what harm he might have caused the learner. This detail troubled me, since it contradicted Milgram's account of post-experimental debriefing, but I was inclined to dismiss it as evidence of faulty recall, automatically privileging Milgram's account over those of people who took part.

But when a second subject, Herb Winer, told me that he had left the lab "furious" about what he'd been asked to do and very concerned for the health of the learner, and a third, Bob Lee, told me that he still did not fully

understand what the experiment was about, I had to acknowledge that Milgram's version of what transpired after the experiment was over needed checking. It was something that until then I had no reason to question. In fact, I started my research into the story of the obedience experiments with no intention of reexamining the story of the science or the results. My intention was to tell the human story of the research, to find and interview people who had taken part—Milgram's staff and subjects—to find out what impact the experiment had had on them back then, and ever since.

In the process of fact-checking and comparing Milgram's accounts of his research and, in particular, what subjects were told when the experiment was over, I uncovered a number of instances where Milgram's use of deception and illusion extended beyond the experimental set-up to include the written accounts of the experiments and his presentation of his findings. My focus here is on the issue of debriefing and how Milgram's account of this evolved over time. So, back to those subjects I interviewed and the troubling mismatch between their accounts of what happened when the experiment ended, and Milgram's.

First, I went back to the Stanley Milgram Papers in the Manuscripts and Archives section of Yale's Sterling Memorial Library and began comparing the accounts of subjects I interviewed with audiotapes of the experiment. Milgram recorded almost all of the 720 experiments conducted between August 1961 and May 1962. The tape recorder was switched on just before the subject entered the lab and was left running until each subject had left. The recordings captured three kinds of exchanges: those between John Williams (who played the role of the experimenter) and the subjects before, during, and after the experiment; three-way conversations when Milgram joined Williams and the subject after the experiment was over; and conversations between Williams and Milgram after the subject had gone.

Second, I reviewed the report that Milgram sent out to all subjects in the summer of 1962. Third, I checked comments subjects wrote on the questionnaires that had accompanied Milgram's report. Finally, I checked with Alan Elms, who had been Milgram's research assistant during the first three of the twenty-four experimental conditions. All sources confirmed the same version of events both in terms of what the debriefing involved and when it occurred. The version of events provided by recordings, questionnaires, and

interviews presented a picture of the debriefing offered to subjects that was very much at odds with Milgram's published version of events.

What Did Debriefing Involve?

Let's go back to Milgram's descriptions, both published and unpublished, about the measures he took to protect his subjects from harm and to ensure their well-being. First, a debriefing was conducted in the lab when the experiment was terminated—either because subjects refused to continue or after they had gone to maximum voltage. Second, a detailed questionnaire was distributed to all subjects in August 1962, three months after the experiments ended, and a year after the experiments began. And finally, follow-up interviews were conducted with those subjects who had indicated in their questionnaire that they had been particularly bothered by taking part. All of these measures were instituted, Milgram argued, to ensure that no subjects were harmed as a result of their participation in his experiments.

In his first journal article about his obedience experiments (Milgram, 1963a), which presented results of the first of his twenty-four variations, Milgram described what subjects were told at the end of the experiment under the heading "Dehoax." This term implies a truth-telling in which the hoax is revealed and the true purpose of the experiment is explained. But in fact, his dehoax involved substituting one untruth for another. Here is a more accurate description of what was involved in Milgram's dehoax provided by Milgram in a letter to the National Science Foundation (NSF) just eight days after the experiments began:

> We have given a lot of thought to ways of ensuring the subject's well-being during the experiment, and after he leaves. We arrange for a friendly meeting between the victim and the subject. The victim spontaneously announces that the pain was not very severe, but that he became unnecessarily nervous because he saw the "Danger" designation on the generator. The experimenter then interjects the remark that the shock generator is designed for use with very small animals and that the designation "Danger: severe shock" is totally inapplicable to humans. The victim apologises for his unnecessary display of histrionics, and shakes hands with the subject. All sessions have ended amicably. (Milgram, 1961a)

Milgram argued that he instituted these practices "after much thought" and that his intention was to make sure that people left the lab with their well-being restored. But these practices did not involve dehoaxing. First, as this letter indicates and audiotapes reveal, subjects were told the machine had been developed for use on small animals, that the learner had overreacted, and that the shocks were not nearly as dangerous as the labels may have indicated. Second, they were reassured that their behavior, whether they had broken off early or continued to maximum voltage, was entirely normal and understandable. Lastly, Jim McDonough, the learner, came into the lab and joked with the subject to show no harm was done. While the replacement cover story that was given to subjects changed over time, Milgram's apparent intention was the same: to defuse their distress by telling them that things were not as bad as they might have seemed while withholding the truth of the experimental setup. My research in the archives, which included comparing audio recordings of the debriefing offered to subjects under a range of conditions, noting subject responses to questionnaires, and analyzing follow-up interviews, reveals that three quarters of Milgram's subjects, those in conditions 1 to 20 out of a total of twenty-four conditions, or 600 of 720 people, left the lab believing they had shocked a man. The evidence indicates that most of Milgram's subjects were not told at the end of the experiment that the machine was a prop, that the pain was faked, or that McDonough and Williams were actors.

Technically, Milgram was still complying with what were then the current ethical guidelines for debriefing. In his history of the use of the term *debriefing* in psychological research, Harris (1988) points out that at the time of Milgram's research, the American Psychological Association's 1953 Ethical Standards for Psychologists defined debriefing as the reduction of distress. While researchers were required to alleviate subject distress by the end of the experiment, the guidelines made no reference to telling subjects the true purpose of the experiment or interviewing them for their reactions. Milgram had complied with the professional guidelines for debriefing at that time. But his use of the term *dehoax* in describing what occurred at the end of the experiment, as well his use of the phrase "careful post-experimental treatment" implied that Milgram had informed subjects of the deception. From now on I will refer to what Milgram actually told subjects as "deceptive debrief."

Who Conducted the Debriefing?

Alan Elms described to me (Perry, 2012) how, in the summer of 1961, Milgram observed each experiment behind the one-way mirror, joining experimenter John Williams in the lab when the experiment was over if a subject seemed particularly distressed or upset. But probably because of the impracticality of Milgram being present at every experiment once the academic year resumed, Williams, a high school biology teacher who played the role of experimenter, was delegated the role of conducting the deceptive debrief as well as overseeing the experiment itself. As Milgram told one subject in a group meeting with Dr. Paul Errera, "I watched many of the experiments, perhaps a third of them, but about two thirds I did not see" (Milgram, 1963b). Williams, recruited for his stern and authoritative demeanor, played two roles: the role of the experimenter conducting the experiment and the role of psychologist attempting to defuse people's distress and anger once the experiment was over. Across almost all conditions, and with about seven hundred subjects, Williams was left to handle whatever version of the debriefing Milgram had specified was to be delivered.[2]

When Did Dehoaxing Occur?

Recordings of the experiments and comments from subject questionnaires show that it was in conditions 20, 23, and 24, in the last two months of the research (April and May 1962), that subjects were told the true nature of the experiment at the end of the lab session. Why Milgram decided to substitute the deceptive debrief with the full dehoax at this point is not clear. It was not as if he had recruited enough subjects and therefore did not have to worry about keeping the purpose of the experiment secret to ensure a naive subject pool. Milgram can be heard on tape in condition 24 asking subjects to give him the phone numbers of their friends so he could phone and ask them along to participate in his research (Milgram, 1962e).[3] Keeping the experiments secret was still critical to the success of the project. So why did Milgram institute full dehoaxing at this late stage? A month before he instigated this new practise, Milgram had submitted a second application to the NSF for $36,000, half again as much as he had received in the original grant of $24,700 (Milgram, 1962d). He made particular mention in this second grant application of his success in relieving the stress of his subjects, noting that Yale had received only four complaints, all of which had been

resolved satisfactorily (Milgram, 1962a). This suggests that Milgram sensed that the NSF required additional reassurance about the welfare of people who took part in his research. If so, the NSF was not the only one expressing its concern for the subjects in Milgram's research. Milgram's first journal article about the experiments had just been rejected by a second journal editor, who expressed his distaste for the research (Milgram, 1962c), adding to what was by then a growing chorus of concern about the ethics of his research (Blass, 2004). It is likely that these criticisms and complaints had some bearing on his abandonment of deceptive debriefing and the adoption of full dehoax for the remaining one hundred subjects who took part in the experiments during April and May 1962.

The revised debriefing process, or full dehoax, was once again conducted by Williams. The following exchange is typical of debriefing conducted by Williams at this point in the research:

Williams: Let me tell you this, Mr. Wallace was not really being shocked. In fact his name is McDonough and he's a member of our team here. We are actually observing how people obey orders.

Subject 2316: Hmmm.

Williams: Actually the research here is very important and we feel the results will be very interesting and so we had to set it up this way to make you think you were shocking someone and taking orders.

Subject 2316: Laughs.

Williams: [It's] very similar to a situation a guy finds himself in the army a lot of times. So we're not trying—[calls out to "victim" McDonough] Jim, why don't you come in and say hello to Mr. X now that he's in better spirits. Ah, we don't like to fool people but we have to set it up this way.

McDonough: Hi.

Subject 2316: I thought I was really hurting you.

McDonough: Feel better now, don't you?

Subject 2316: Oh, sure.

Williams: You're going to get a report on the project in a little over two months. We've been running it now for about a year and we've done over 800 men and I think you'll find the report very interesting when you do get it.

Subject 2316: Hmm.

Williams: I think you'll be very happy you participated. I'd like to ask you not to speak about it to anyone—other than your wife of course—because you may unknowingly speak to someone who's going to be in the experiment.

Subject 2316: Oh, I see.

Williams: So if they know ahead of time then they won't be . . . it wouldn't be of any value. So until you get the report don't say anything . . . Of course when you get the report, you can talk to as many as you want.

Subject 2316: Uh huh.

Williams: There is one more thing, could you indicate on this scale how you felt about participating, from very sorry, very glad, and so on.

Subject 2316: Now that I know the circumstances [laughs].

Williams: Let me say one more thing. We're very appreciative of . . . appreciate you giving us your time and it certainly was a pleasure having you here.

Subject 2316: Well, it was a pleasure being here.

Williams: Good. I think you'll enjoy the report when you get it. Thank you again for coming down tonight.

Subject 2316: Thank you for having me. [To McDonough] I'm sorry I didn't hurt you. [Laughter.]

Williams: [Into microphone] That was subject 2316, 2317 next. (Williams, 1962)

What is both typical and striking about this excerpt is that Williams delivers the debriefing very much in role; it is a monologue, and it does not invite questions or discussion with the subject. Subject 2316 was a defiant subject, stopping the experiment at 150 volts when the learner demanded to be set free. But the pattern of debriefing across obedient and disobedient subjects from condition 20 onward is the same. Williams followed a standard script for the debriefing that is independent of subject reactions. Typically it involved a minute and a half of delivery, the introduction of McDonough, and a handshake, before the subject was shown the door.

The full debriefing, when it was finally offered, was perfunctory at best, yet Milgram was sensitive to the potential ethical objections to his research from the outset and had been intent on addressing them, particularly when they were expressed by the organization that funded his research. The original check from the NSF was held up because of their

hesitation about the ethics of Milgram's research. On July 5, 1961, Milgram called the NSF to see why the letter confirming his grant had not yet arrived at Yale. Probably to his dismay, he was told by a Mrs. Rubinstein that the grant approval had hit a snag. The director of the NSF was still undecided over "possible reactions from persons who had been subjects in the experiments . . . (and) whether the NSF would support research of this sort." Milgram wrote in his notebook that the holdup had come out of the blue: "The call of July 5 was the first indication that the grant processing would be anything but routine" (Milgram, 1961b).

During the course of his experiment, from August 1961 until May 1962, Milgram wrote regularly to the NSF to update them on progress, and he regularly returned to the topic of the steps he was taking to protect his subjects from harm. Despite his efforts, and despite their initial funding, the NSF remained unconvinced. In May 1962, after a field visit by three NSF officials who watched the experiments in progress, the NSF refused further funding of the research, on ethical as well as methodological grounds. Instead of approving a grant of $36,000 to continue the experiments, they offered a small amount of money for Milgram to wind up the research and complete his data analysis (Milgram, 1962g).

Milgram's desire to keep news of the experiment's real purpose secret was likely a driving factor in not dehoaxing subjects and conducting a deceptive debrief. And there were times when Milgram clearly felt uncomfortable about it. At the same time that he was confidently reassuring the NSF about subjects' well-being, Milgram was confiding private doubts in his own notebook:

> Several of these experiments, it seems to me, are just about on the borderline of what ethically can and cannot be done with human subjects. Some critics may feel that at times they go beyond acceptable limits. These are matters that only the community can decide on, and if a ballot were held I am not altogether certain which way I would cast my vote. (Milgram, 1962b)

Perhaps Milgram's discomfort was also a result of the mismatch between his public statements about this careful and thorough debriefing and the rather cursory process enacted by Williams. But over time, Milgram seemed to forget that he had had any such doubts when he wrote about the ethics of his research, or that his had been a largely deceptive debrief.

The following description, written in 1977, implies that his subjects were deceived only while the experiment was taking place, that all was revealed at the end, and that this was a regular feature of his research. The implication was that criticism of what he had put his subjects through was unfair and ill-informed.

> Typically, the subject is informed of the experiment's true character immediately after he has participated in it. If for thirty minutes the experimenter holds back on the truth, at the conclusion he reaffirms his confidence in the subject by extending his trust to him by a full revelation of the purpose and procedures of the experiment. It is odd how rarely critics of social psychology experiments mention this characteristic feature of the experimental hour. (Milgram, 1977, p. 184)

In fact, the roughly six hundred people who were deceptively debriefed and not dehoaxed at the end of the experiment had to wait from six months to a year for their "full revelation." And then it was done by letter. Milgram sent out a report on the experiments in August 1962.

> At the time you were in the experiment it was not possible to tell you everything about the study. Many questions probably remain in your mind which we now would like to clear up for you . . . Actually, *the other man did not receive any shocks*. Indeed, he was an actor employed by the project to play the part of the learner. (Milgram, 1962h)

This dehoaxing report was sent to all subjects in the summer of 1962 and was attached to the questionnaire that Milgram asked subjects to fill out and return. Some subjects were critical of the fact that Milgram did not debrief them as the following notes on the returned questionnaires indicate:

> From what I've learned from others who've taken part, it would seem you have been somewhat irresponsible in permitting disturbed subjects to leave without informing them that they didn't half kill the shockee. (Subject 1137, Milgram 1962f)

> I seriously question the wisdom and ethics of not dehoaxing each subject immediately after the session. . . . Allowing subjects to re-

> main deceived is not justified, in my opinion, even if such continued deception was thought necessary "to avoid contamination." (Subject 623, Milgram 1962f)

Others expressed their relief and described their anxiety since the experiment:

> I actually checked the death notices in the New Haven Register for at least two weeks after the experiment to see if I had been involved and a contributing factor in the death of the so-called "learner"—I was very relieved that his name did not appear in such a column. (Subject 716, Milgram 1962f)

> I've been waiting very anxiously for this report to really put my mind at ease and [have my] curiosity satisfied. Many times I wanted to look up a Mr. Wallace who was my student. I was just that curious to know what had happened. Believe me when no response came from Mr. Wallace with the stronger voltage I really believed the man was probably dead. (Subject 1817, Milgram 1962f)

> The experiment left such an effect on me that I spent the night in a cold sweat and nightmares because of the fear that I might have killed that man in the chair. This fear was aroused from the fact that I had to sign papers that I would bring no charges against Yale. (Subject 711, Milgram 1962f)

> About a week after the test, while discussing it with friends, it dawned on me that I was probably the one who was being tested, although I didn't suspect that the "student" was an actor. (Subject 805, Milgram 1962f)

Several subjects had objected to Milgram about their treatment. But one former subject, a New Haven alderman, who "felt responsibility towards my fellow citizens," described how he took his complaint to the university's administration. "I attempted to get information from someone in the Psychology Department as to the legitimacy of the experiment. . . . I wanted to know whether this was authorized by Yale University. Well this caused quite a—from what I understand—quite a bit of—quite a few ramifications and rumblings" (Errera, 1963a). These complaints, in combi-

nation with complaints to the APA, which resulted in their review of Milgram's application for membership and disquiet from some of Milgram's colleagues, is likely what prompted Yale in February 1963 to instigate an independent review of former subjects to establish whether any had been harmed.

Nine months after the experiments ended, Dr. Paul Errera was brought in from Yale's psychiatry department to conduct a series of follow-up group interviews with former subjects. In his description of these meetings, Milgram took credit for this review. In his 1974 book and in an earlier journal article, he described himself as the instigator of these group meetings, and this fact seemed to provide evidence that he was unusually sensitive to the ongoing welfare of his subjects. However, as the letter of invitation to subjects on Yale letterhead made clear, Errera was being brought in over Milgram as an independent assessor who would gather feedback for policy on experimentation. In recorded conversations between Milgram and Errera, Errera describes an important feature of these group meetings as "the public relations aspect" (Errera, 1963b). Errera's son Claude told me that it was Milgram who was under review and that his father's involvement was a result of a "scandal" at Yale (Perry, 2012). Errera was presumably selected by Yale not just for his objectivity and clinical training but perhaps also because his experience in working with traumatized war veterans would be invaluable in talking with subjects distressed by their experience in Milgram's research.

In Milgram's hands, the Errera review was transformed from what must have been a humiliating episode into one that demonstrated his sensitivity to the emotional consequences of the experiment for his subjects. In his summary of Errera's follow-up (Milgram, 1974) with a sample of subjects from the obedience research, Milgram wrote that he had selected the "forty worst cases" for Errera to interview. By this Milgram meant that the forty people most troubled by the experiment, as indicated in their responses to Milgram's questionnaire, had been selected for interview. Errera, Milgram reported, had subsequently given all the subjects he interviewed a clean bill of mental health.

Errera did write a report about the interviews, but he was unhappy with the report's title. Presumably drafted by Milgram, the report was called "A Statement Based on Interviews with 'Forty Worst Cases' in the

Milgram Obedience Experiments." The title implied that Errera had interviewed the 40 people most troubled by the experiment. Papers in the archives throw some light on Errera's uneasiness. Instead of targeting and inviting the 40 most troubled subjects, more than 130 people were randomly selected and invited to group meetings with Errera. Of those, only 40 actually showed up to keep the appointment. Transcripts of the meetings show that these 40 people demonstrated a whole range of reactions to the experiment. Among those who took part in the group meetings were those who were skeptical, curious, and even amused by the research as well as a small number still troubled by the experiment.

Errera distanced himself from this misrepresentation of the report's title in his opening paragraphs, in which he notes that the report does not detail how the forty had been selected, how they compared with the total sample, or why many of those invited did not attend. Errera's report and his disclaimer about the selection process was not published until 1972. In the meantime, Milgram published descriptions of Errera's conclusion that none of the "worst cases" had been psychologically damaged by taking part gained currency and became a powerful rebuttal to accusations of carelessness about the subjects' welfare and of notions of lasting harm.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Stanley Milgram shaped, edited, and constructed a powerful and compelling narrative about his research. By comparing subject accounts, unpublished papers, and recordings of the experiments themselves, I have presented an alternative view of Milgram's debriefing process that sheds new light on the measures he took to protect his subjects. I have concluded that evidence from Milgram's unpublished papers and original recordings and transcripts cast doubt on Milgram's reliability as a narrator of the obedience research and of his role in safeguarding the welfare of his subjects.

Notes

1. My conclusion that Menold took part in condition 5 or 6 is based on his description of the particular experimental scenario. Each of the conditions has a particular script, and Menold's description most closely matches the descriptions of conditions 5 and 6.

2. On occasion, Milgram cast Emil Elgiss in the role of experimenter, most notably in condition 6, where Milgram wanted to test if Elgiss's friendly demeanor in contrast to Williams's stern and authoritative one would influence subjects' obedience. Elgiss also played the experimenter role in conditions10, 12, and 16, all of which required more than one experimenter.

3. Milgram to subject 2432: "We're desperately short of subjects, is there anyone you know? . . We need to finish the experiments by Wednesday. We need nine by Wednesday . . . Just give me a name or two . . ."

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