The Milgram Trap Revisited

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SYNOPSIS

I argue: 1) contrary to the long held conviction that Milgram’s obedience studies represent a unitary whole consisting of a sequence of steps beginning at 15 volts and ending at 450 volts, all of Milgram’s experiments are actually comprised of two independent phases; and 2) the failure to realize this has been, and still is, responsible for much of the confusions and controversy surrounding his experiments. The phases are: The “Persuasion” phase that consists of all the events up the first objection by the learner at 150 volts; and the “After Capitulation” phase covering all the events of those subjects who succumb. The most prevalent misconception has been that while social forces such as the setting of the experiment and the authority of the experimenter can indeed “persuade” subjects to ignore the learner’s first demands to be released, these same influences have been cited erroneously by legions of experts as being responsible for subjects continuing to shock the learner possibly to death. But once the subjects capitulate, different forces kick in, and those are the ones propelling them onward. In fact once into the transgressions, a legitimate authority is not even needed, as David Mantell (1971) demonstrated in his experiments in Germany, or even an impressive laboratory or a laboratory at all, as seen in the 2012 McDonald hoaxes [there a caller claiming to be a police officer forced managers to commit ever-increasing abuses to an innocent worker claiming she stole from a customer (Wolfson, 2005)].

The primary inducement operating in the After Capitulation phase is the increasing responsibility and blame subjects would bear the later up the line they should decide to stop. If they quit after already inflicting considerable pain, they demonstrate that they had the power to disobey all along. They are then *trapped* into obeying to the end if they are to deflect blame to the authority and persuade themselves that they are not responsible since they were following orders and had little control over the process.

I believe that Jerry Burger’s 2009 replication of Milgram’s variation #5 lends *experimental* *support*, however unintentional, to my two-phase division. Seventy percent of his subjects were persuaded by the experimenter to shock the learner over his first objection at 150 volts when, because of ethical guidelines, Burger called a halt to the trial. He provided an impressive amount of data showing that obedience did not differ across ethnicity, gender, education, or personality variables - demonstrating that the Persuasion phase can stand alone as an independent experiment. Many commentators have praised his bisecting of Milgram’s paradigm as opening the doors for future experiments like this while still meeting IRB approval.

Burger goes on to argue that most of those who capitulated at 150 volts would have continued to the end saying “Consistency needs and self-perception processes make it unlikely that many participants would have suddenly changed their behavior when progressing through each small step.” This foot-in-the-door argument has been cited numerous times as a factor for subjects’ continued obedience. In particular since this and many other inducements such as the pursuit of science, fear of confrontation, etc. play a role in persuading subjects to ignore the learner’s initial demands to be released, they have also been assumed to propel him to the end. Indeed the gradated shock procedure is a *critical strategy* for success in Milgram’s paradigm: for no one would have agreed to shock the learner with the highest voltage at the outset. But this step-by-step escalation worked *not* because it created a momentum that was hard to discontinue - “I did wrong before, therefore I have no excuse to stop now,” demonstrating for many thinkers the obedient subjects’ gradual descent into evil. NOT SO! The shocks subjects were forced to incrementally administer at such a swift pace, leaving them hardly any time to think, drove them, *before they had a chance to realize,* to a point of no return - that is, to a level of inflicted torture for which they felt they could not bear to take the responsibility and blame should they stop.

It is counterintuitive to believe that otherwise moral individuals, who have learned from childhood that harming another against his will is wrong, could lose their moral compass so drastically in the short time span of the experiment. In fact THEY REMAINED INTACT: *For it is subjects’ moral sensibility which renders disobedience a sanction* and is what alerts them to the devastating impact to their self-image as decent and upstanding individuals should they admit to themselves by quitting up the line that they had the power to disobey all along.

The long held conviction that Milgram’s experiments demonstrated that subject’s moral sense has been trampled underfoot is what has prevented so many analysts from recognizing the ever-increasing sanctions for disobedience I outline above that would otherwise obtain. And they grow more and more severe in lock step with each escalating shock subjects administer, as opposed to all other proposed inhibiting factors such as the destruction of the experiment or not following orders, which would hold just as true at shock level 15 as at 450. It follows that: 1) only the ever mounting responsibility and blame otherwise moral subjects would incur by disobeying can coerce them step-by-agonizing-step to the very end; 2) all other reasons for continuing that subjects might convince themselves of, such as "the experimenter must be right;" "I cannot renege on my agreement;" "The learner brought it on himself;" "I am furthering the progress of a scientific experiment;" "I am just following orders;" etc., then amount to nothing more than self serving rationalizations after the fact; 3) These *rationalizations* have mislead scores of analysts into their own Milgram trap – that of employing them as *explanations* for ordinary citizens destructive obedience.

Yet arguably, one can assert that once beyond their “point of no return” in the AC phase, Milgram’s experiments are the most diabolical examples of an escalation game ever conducted, in which the stakes for disobedience rise with furious rapidity to a barbarous and draconian extreme. Such emotional abuse could even be more coercive and long lasting than corporal punishment. Gina Perry (2012) cites subjects’ responses. One example of many: “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.”

If what I maintain is accurate, the obedient subjects in Milgram’s experiments must be considered the true victims. They were trapped in a unique, indeed artificial situation, one in which most ordinary moral individuals are rendered virtually helpless to cope: confronting their own culpability in the *unexpected* *role* they were called on to play in the presumed torture and possible murder of a fellow participant. The paradoxical conclusion is that far from abandoning their humanity, as Milgram famously declared, by obeying to the end these participants were trying desperately to preserve it. Whether or not they succeeded is a subject for debate, yet many were haunted by their compliance for a long time afterward.

The broader problem with the failure to recognize the dual nature of Milgram’s paradigm arises with ecological extensions that have been the subject of countless articles. It forces analysts into a position where influences promoting obedience are believed to obtain uniformly throughout the whole experiment when in actuality they frequently apply to the Persuasion phase and have nothing at all to do with the After Capitulation phase. One prominent example is Poskocil (1977) were students felt persuaded to take absurd quizzes (in order some claimed to get an easy 100.)  But this has nothing to do with succumbing, as Poskocil claimed, to the absurd demands of a Hitler. This same error is being continually made even today by such as Reicher, Haslam, and Smith (2012) who write, “the destructive behavior within the Milgram paradigm is a reflection not of simple obedience, but of active identification with the experimenter and his (scientific) mission;” which is “would the shocks improve the learner’s performance or not?” – true for the Persuasion phase. However, it is nonsensical to believe or claim that the shocks can serve to improve a presumed “learner’s” answers when there are none forthcoming! What further scientific value is there then in continuing to shock him when he is unconscious and even twice more with the maximum 450 volts?

I respectfully request your opinions about whether or not this dichotomy makes sense to you. Let me know. I can be contacted at: erdos4lano@aol.com Please include “Milgram” somewhere in the subject. It would be an added bonus if you could re-examine some familiar Milgram related material through the lens of my proposed two-phase division of his paradigm and to email me (when you can spare the time) about whether it leads you to different conclusions or insights.

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