

# The archival turn in classical social psychology: Some recent reports

Theory & Psychology  
1–9

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](http://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0959354320920367

[journals.sagepub.com/home/tap](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/tap)**Augustine Brannigan**

University of Calgary

**Abstract**

Preservation of the research records of classical experiments in university archives has opened a new avenue of investigation for students of social psychology. In many cases, the records afford the observer with access to materials to explain the actual progress of the research as it transpired originally and permit the observer to assess the fidelity as well as the inconsistencies between what was accomplished and what was subsequently published in the scientific literature. This archival turn in psychological research can provide a fresh understanding of the significance of the original research exposing both its value and its apparent weaknesses. In this essay, I explore archival reassessments of the work of Milgram, Zimbardo, and Sherif.

**Keywords**

archives and experimental histories, experimental deception, field studies of group behaviour, in situ experimental behaviour, obedience as rhetoric

Stephen Gibson, *Arguing, obeying and defying: A rhetorical perspective on Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments*. Cambridge University Press, 2019. 232 pp. ISBN 9781421331 (hbk).

Thibault Le Texier, *Histoire d'un mensonge: Enquête sur l'expérience de Stanford* [Story of a lie: An investigation of the Stanford experiment]. Zones, Éditions La Découverte, 2018. 293 pp. ISBN 97823552212006 (pbk).

Gina Perry, *The lost boys: Inside Muzafer Sherif's Robbers Cave experiment*. Scribe, 2018. 375 pp. ISBN 9781911344391 (UK ed., pbk).

This essay reviews three publications that mark the emergence of what I call “the archival turn” in social psychology. These consist of excavations of classical studies based

**Corresponding author:**

Augustine Brannigan, Department of Sociology, University of Calgary, 2500 University Dr. NW, Calgary, Alberta, T2N 1N4, Canada.

Email: [branniga@ucalgary.ca](mailto:branniga@ucalgary.ca)

largely on (mostly) new materials from the archives of the experiments that provoke reassessment of their contributions to the growth of knowledge.

## The rhetorical foundations of obedient and defiant behaviour

Stephen Gibson notes in his book on Milgram's obedience experiments, that despite the decades of both affirmation and criticism of this research, "we have yet to fully get to grips with what happened in Milgram's lab" (p. 42). What appears to have rejuvenated contemporary inquiries into this and other classical studies in social psychology has been access to archival materials that have made it possible to give an assessment of the work independent of the original publications. Gibson presents a compelling examination of Milgram based on his close analysis of the audio recordings from experiment 2 (voice feedback), 4 (touch proximity), 7 (two peers rebel), and 20 (all female). In the first chapter, he provides a detailed and balanced overview of Milgram's primary publications and the initial reactions to them. The second chapter provides a picture of the current conceptual and empirical replications of Milgram's findings, including the attempts to supersede Milgram's explanation of obedience as an agentic state with conceptions more consistent with the evidence, that is, persuasion, personal responsibility, individual differences (personality), and engaged followership. In addition to replications explored through role playing and virtual reality devices, Gibson reviews the provocative replication created as a reality TV program in which contestants in a game show were prepared to administer grave levels of shocks to other contestants despite their vehement objections—not in a psychology lab at a university, but in a broadcasting studio in France (pp. 48–49).

Gibson's own approach is based on a sophisticated understanding of rhetoric. The primary prods that Milgram used to pressure his participants to overcome their reluctance to continue ("please continue," "the experiment requires that you continue," etc.) and the secondary prods ("the shocks are painful but not damaging," "the experimenter is responsible for consequences," etc.) are better understood *in situ* as arguments designed to compel agreement and co-operation. The experiments "can no longer be regarded as straightforward demonstrations of people following orders" (p. 69). Although Milgram identified a hierarchy of prods to be used by the scientist to pressure the participants to continue administering shocks, a close examination of the conversations in the experiments reveals that their use was rather unsystematic and deviated from the rigid protocol which was used both to acknowledge participant resistance, and to identify the point of disobedience that would trigger a termination of the experiment. "Milgram did not employ his experimental procedure in practice as it appears in published reports of his work" (p. 67). Gibson's work builds on Billig's (1996) critical social psychology perspective and Potter's (1996) study of discourse. It conceptualizes persons essentially as orators who are immersed in conversational interactions in which they engage in a play of mutual exchanges to influence one another. They exchange information, opinions, and engage in "witcraft" to steer situations verbally to their advantage. When Gibson focused on the recurrent argumentative strategies employed by participants to justify discontinuation,

this is what he discovered: participants invoked the apparent pain or danger to the learner 43 times; the learner's withdrawal of consent 39 times; and offers to return the cheque as a *quid pro quo* for stopping 28 times. In all, he enumerated 184 cases of recurrent arguments for resistance across his 4 experiments that fell into 7 discrete justifications (p. 149). Obviously, none of this interaction would be evident from the way Milgram and other social psychologists report their results as *fait accompli*.

From Gibson's perspective, the arguments that participants provide cannot be taken as evidence of what they think. What they may be thinking is reflected in the long, tense silences between actions which evade explicit inference—and which are legion in the transcripts. Rhetoric exposes how participants negotiate the situation. It does not explain why they made their choices. Gibson's approach differs from that of Hollander and Turowetz (2017) to make the leap between utterances and their putative underlying cognitions. The latter "have imported a concern for underlying process and the truth-value of accounts that jars with the more typical epistemological position adopted by conversation analysts" (Gibson, 2019, p. 89). Rather than inferring what people "really think" from what they say, Gibson's rhetorical psychology "occupies a middle ground of agnosticism in which we analyze what people say for its function in the context in which it occurs" (p. 91). This methodological outlook may ultimately jeopardize the construction of causal inferences.

The core of Gibson's evidence is contained in samples of transcript that capture how participant resistance and/or compliance unfolded. One of his astonishing findings from one of the first experiments occurred when participants refused to continue until the scientist could confirm that the learner was unhurt and was willing to continue. The transcripts reveal that the scientist appears to leave the room to accede to such requests and reported back that everything was fine. The teacher continued. The evidence suggests that the prods are tailored to the ongoing reactions of the participants and their tagging of developments that might cause them to terminate. The touch proximity condition presented a dramatically different scenario since the learner's prerecorded shouting and hollering were replaced with the actor's performance in the same room. This situation permitted direct communication between the participant, the learner, and the scientist. This appears to have made it easier for the participant to disobey after asking the learner, Mr. Wallace, if he wanted to continue. Obviously not. This condition had one of the lowest levels of completion in the experimental series. The results were not a function of "physical proximity," but of changes in the nature of the social engagement.

Gibson also tackles the situation in which participants appear to comply without any verbal or postural resistance to the scientist. Rhetoric would appear to have little role in such cases. But Gibson suggests that rhetoric may be in "the very walls of the lab" (p. 194). By this he means that the materiality of the entire lab design, its presentation as a legitimate inquiry into learning, its utilization of a sophisticated machine, the incremental nature of the shocks, and the supervision of conduct by a scientist all have a persuasive function designed to compel compliance. However, these features tend to be stable across the various conditions and consequently seem incapable of explaining differences between them. There was also a reluctance to link the strategies of rhetoric to whether the individuals employing them tended to be obedient or defiant. That would prioritize whether the how questions are connected to the why questions.

Despite these points, I found this book to be a hugely important contribution to our understanding of Milgram. It is a work that completely revolutionizes our conception of obedience and at the same time raises profound questions about the standardization of classic works such as Milgram's. This book should be required reading in advanced courses covering Milgram.

## **Damaging revelations of the origins of the Stanford Prison Experiment**

The next volume appeared in French in 2018 and was summarized recently by the author in an article in *American Psychologist* (Le Texier, 2019). Thibault Le Texier investigated the archives of Stanford University that housed the research materials donated by Professor Philip Zimbardo from his Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). The SPE was initially reported in 1971 and was often cited along with Milgram to suggest the ease with which normal behaviour could become aberrant simply due to the circumstances in which people found themselves. The "power of the situation" was a leitmotif of classical social psychology. In the SPE, Zimbardo recruited university students to participate in a simulated prison environment conducted in the basement of the psychology department at Stanford, and randomly assigned them to the roles of inmates and guards. He reported that over the course of their interaction, the guards became abusive towards the inmates and the inmates themselves became traumatized by their depersonalization and loss of autonomy. The research was conducted absent any specific hypothesis testing, without systematic measures of behaviour, and without the benefit of any tests of significance. As Le Texier recounts in Chapter 1, the SPE attracted tremendous attention in the media. It was invoked to explain prison riots after the Attica massacre of inmates by the National Guard and to explain the brutalization of Iraqi prisoners under U.S. care at Abu Ghraib. It was cited by Christopher Browning (1998) and Zygmunt Bauman (1989) to explain the Holocaust. The 1971 experiment gained a new lease on life with the publication of Zimbardo's *Lucifer Effect* (2007), the first full account of how the experiment was actually conducted. Despite questions of its scientific validity raised independently decades earlier by Leon Festinger (1980) and Erich Fromm (1973), Zimbardo was awarded the gold medal in 2012 by the American Psychological Association for producing "one of the most famous demonstrations in psychology that situational factors can powerfully shape human behavior" (Le Texier, p. 21, author's translation).

Le Texier employed archival materials to piece together how the SPE was designed and implemented. He contacted 14 participants from the original experiment for interviews by telephone. He also reviewed all of Zimbardo's audio and video recordings, his publications, and blogs. The audio and video materials have been transcribed, and most printed material has been digitized, permitting research online. Le Texier's resulting account, "the story of a lie," does not mince words. In Chapter 2, Le Texier outlines how Zimbardo produced a standardized account of the experiment in a slide show, which he used for decades to promote the study. The slide show was also presented widely to military groups and may have had a role in training U.S. military interrogators in Iraq and Afghanistan (pp. 45–47). What the standardized account leaves out is that the SPE was

largely based on a project by students in Zimbardo's social psychology class, undertaken in the spring of 1971, 3 months before Zimbardo launched his own study in August. In a term paper titled "A Simulated Prison" (Spring, 1971), which was found in the archive, David Jaffe outlines how he and other students designed a class project to be run over a single weekend on campus in the Toyon Hall residence at Stanford to simulate the harmful psychological effects of imprisonment:

We derived three basic goals, or psychological effects we intended to produce in our prisoners. First, we wanted to create the loss of freedom. For the entire weekend, where prisoners were, what they did, how they did it, etc., were not to be under their control, but rather under the control of the prison staff. . . . Second, we wanted prisoners to feel they depended on the prison staff for the satisfaction of all their needs, even those as basic as food and toilet privileges. Finally, we decided to try to produce a feeling of deindividuation, partly by forcing the guards to deal with the prisoners in groups, and partly by costuming the prisoners in ugly, standard prison gowns. (as cited in Le Texier, 2018, p. 261, note 16)

In Chapter 3, Le Texier documents the extent to which Zimbardo borrowed from the student study. He lays out side by side the rules the students had created in the Toyon Hall study with those that he claims the guards in the SPE came up with on their own. Zimbardo also reported to Leslie Stahl on a *60 Minutes* report (August 30, 1998) that he didn't create the rules himself, that they were set by the guards (as cited in Le Texier, 2018, p. 62). As Le Texier says: "Instead of recognizing the foundational importance of Toyon Hall's experience, Zimbardo completely obscured it for forty years" (pp. 61–62).

Le Texier argues further that the participants recruited as guards were instructed on the day before contact with the inmates how they were expected to act by assuming a domineering and aggressive posture. During the study, Zimbardo, as the prison administrator, also instructed the guards to be sarcastic and to humiliate the prisoners by arbitrarily depriving them of privileges. Zimbardo's student warden encouraged the guards to use their whistles during the 2:30 a.m. cell count to irritate them and awaken them violently. The guards, while paid as experimental participants, were encouraged to think of themselves as research assistants, as helping agents, and not as participants of a study themselves.

As for the evidence of trauma among the prisoners, this was based in part on the necessity of early release of two prisoners. However, in one case the individual reported afterwards that he faked extreme emotional discomfort to get out of the experiment. It turns out that the prisoners were not entitled to watch TV and read as they had been promised and some were bored. Also, post hoc questioning of the guards suggests that the majority of them (p. 131) never completely got into their roles, and were always aware that they were in a simulated environment. The same is reported from interviews with the prisoners. Zimbardo did not collect the sort of thorough conversational exchanges found in Milgram, so it is impossible to examine systematically the actual course of guard–prisoner interaction. However, it is clear that Zimbardo studiously blocked attempts of participants to depart from the experiment when they tried to do so, a breach of ethics at least as questionable as anything in the obedience studies. However, this did not attract the same scrutiny that the National Science Foundation applied to Milgram,

since Zimbardo's funds were provided by the U.S. Office of Naval Research. It is also clear that the critical conclusions about the apparently deleterious nature of prisons was a foregone conclusion. Although several of these points have been in the literature for decades, Le Texier's originality is in tracking down the archival evidence that has forced academics to distance themselves from the scientific value of the SPE. Unfortunately, much of Le Texier's analysis was cherry-picked from the French and published on U.S. blogs with minimal credit before he was able to make his own work available in English. Le Texier's research should be required reading in any course that covers the SPE.

## The realities of Sherif's classical summer camps

Muzafer Sherif's famous field experiments preceded both the obedience studies and the SPE by over a decade but never attracted their enduring levels of attention. Gina Perry, who researched the "Robbers Cave Experiment," is an Australian psychologist, writer, and broadcaster. Her first book, *Behind the Shock Machine* (Perry, 2013), was a riveting account of the obedience experiments based on the Milgram papers at Yale. Her findings are well-known—that the majority of his participants were not debriefed as he had reported, that some participants were deeply traumatized by their experiences while many others were skeptical of the cover story, and that Milgram failed to publish some of his most controversial findings (Brannigan, 2013). Her current book employs the Sherif papers found at the Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron as well as interviews with some of Sherif's research assistants (O. J. Harvey, Herb Kelman), members of Sherif's family, and several of the original participants. They were 11 years old at the time they were recruited for the field experiments but were in their 70s when Perry contacted them. These were "the lost boys" referred to in her title.

Sherif's social psychology originated from his belief that the bloody conflicts that marked the 20th century originated not from the properties of individuals, but from intergroup competition. In his view, it was possible to take well-adjusted individuals, place them into arbitrary groups competing for scarce resources and, as a consequence, produce deep animosity and bitter rivalry between them. In 1949, with \$5,000 funding from the American Jewish Committee, Sherif took 24 underprivileged boys from New Haven to a summer camp at Happy Valley in the Litchfield Hills of Connecticut (p. 27). After several days of summer camp activities undertaken together harmoniously, the boys were divided arbitrarily into two groups and forced to compete for trophies over 3 days. On the final day, they ended up in the mess hall throwing food, cups, and table knives at each other (p. 14). For Sherif, the field experiments were more valid than artificial lab studies since they enervated genuine feelings and actions in real circumstances of everyday life. In Happy Valley, he conjured up animosity in his participants with the ease of a hypnotist. Having produced the conflict his theory predicted, Sherif set out to demonstrate that such combatants could easily be reunited by creating conditions that required them to combine their efforts to achieve a "superordinate" goal. This would validate Sherif's belief that human conflict arose less from human nature than it did from arbitrary social divisions. Consequently, it could be ameliorated by policies based on the identification of common aspirations.



Sherif obtained \$38,000 from the Rockefeller Foundation to extend his 1949 design to incorporate a manipulation in which the warring factions were enticed to overcome their hostilities in the pursuit of common self-interest. The Robbers Cave field experiment, for which Sherif is famous, was actually a retake of a summer camp initiated in 1953 in Middle Grove, New York, which proved to be a disaster that was terminated prematurely with the organizers on the brink of a physical altercation with one another. These developments are captured graphically in the first half of the book.

Recruiting participants for a field experiment designed to last 3 weeks is more involved than getting college students to participate in a short lab study at a university. Sherif wanted individuals who were naïve about the nature of their participation. He chose 24 boys, 11 years of age, from middle-class, two-parent homes involved in Protestant church communities. This would remove variance associated with age, social class, and religion, allowing him to maximize variations arising from group dynamics. In the Middle Grove summer camp, all the boys were transported to the park together on a bus and initially bunked in a common mess hall. After several days, they were arbitrarily assigned to two separate groups with separate tenting and eating facilities, a process that proved very upsetting as the boys had already established friendships and feelings of loyalty (pp. 77–79). They became the Pythons and the Panthers. Meanwhile, Sherif observed their activities in his role as caretaker, while his research assistants acted as camp counsellors. They made copious notes about the boys' behaviours, their friendships, and the emerging status differences. Numerous photographs were taken. The observers watched the boys and notes were recorded after dark. The researchers listened to the boys' conversations in their tents before they fell asleep. Everything was reported to Sherif who typically stayed up until 2:00 a.m. processing the daily developments. Some of the boys were suspicious about the microphones on the ceiling of the kitchen mess (pp. 66, 130). Because Sherif wanted status differences among the boys within the two groups to emerge naturally, the observers did little to abate the bullying between the boys. In the eyes of some of the boys, the counsellors stopped acting as adults (p. 103) or were playing favourites during their competitions (p. 121). One young lad ran away, and, like Zimbardo's reluctant prisoners, had to be manipulated to prevent him from leaving the study (p. 81ff). Another faked illness as a pretext for leaving (pp. 106–107). Rather than coalescing as cohesive units, the groups were homesick and falling apart. Sherif implemented sport competitions between the groups designed to highlight animosities and fuel in-group cohesion. Furthermore, his assistants surreptitiously raided one group's tent, and desecrated its flag to engender intergroup rivalry. This backfired when the suspects swore on a Bible that they had nothing to do with the event. "Ill will between the two groups evaporated . . . any conflict had fizzled" (p. 124). The boys blamed the counsellors. The teams were then pitted against one another in a game of baseball for a prize of stainless steel jack knives where the stakes were winners-take-all. After one team defeated the other, the winners insisted that the losers also had to be honoured. Good sportsmanship trumped feelings of dominance and submission. As Sherif observed how his theory was unravelling before his eyes, he and some of the research assistants became deeply divided and Sherif called off the experiment. The following year, he fielded a second camp experiment. This time he separated the boys from the outset, which resulted in the "official" Robbers Cave conclusions with which we are all familiar: groups that

have been deeply divided can be reunited under the successful achievement of a super-ordinate goal—provided the experiment is orchestrated effectively.

Perry's account raises important questions about this type of research. First of all, there was no informed consent for participants. The boys' parents and the church leaders used to recruit the participants were told that the camps were enticing participants by paying their tuition in order to study leadership and character. They were never debriefed after the experiments were over. When Perry contacted former participants decades later, they were dismayed to have been "used" in this fashion, and never informed of the purpose of the camps (p. 146). In addition, the camps exposed the participants to trauma that would have been less prevalent if the counsellors had acted less as impartial observers, and more as responsible adults (p. 217). The experimenters also purposely engaged in activities both in 1953 and 1954 that were designed to offend the participants (raiding tents and fouling the clothing and other possessions of the participants) in order to provoke aggressive retaliation—not to simulate it. And like Le Texier's account of the SPE, Perry's observations from the archives paint a very unflattering picture of the experimenter. As with the previous two studies, the research was not undertaken to test a theory, but to illustrate it and selectively to provide evidence supportive of it. Perry's book, which is written for a general audience, should be required reading, not for students, but for professors and aspiring professors. *The Lost Boys* reads like a novel, but the chapter notes (pp. 345–362) provide an excellent directory of the sources employed in the narrative.

## Some implications

Several conclusions are suggested by this sampling of the archival turn in studies of classical social psychology. First, these investigations took on questions that were immensely relevant to human experience—genocide, imprisonment, and intergroup violence. As Gibson (p. 208) laments in his capstone paragraph, "at the moment no one is even trying" to tackle such questions. But it is an open question whether social psychology even has the tools to analyze such events effectively. Second, there is a substantial gap between the research processes as revealed in the archives and the published product that requires a charitable reading of what passes for evidence linking the one to the other. Third, studies that are based on ongoing face-to-face social interaction are extremely difficult to standardize. Perry notes that Sherif's assistants who witnessed the same social phenomena turned in often inconsistent and contradictory reports of the same situations (p. 76). Fourth, the humanity of the participants in these experiments seems to get lost in their investigation. People are treated, not as respected individual informants, but as a convenient source of inference. As Perry observed, as they enter the experiment with their own backgrounds, expectations, and family histories, the boys "cease to be children and become stand-ins for countries, ethnicities, ideologies, humankind" (p. 341). This may be due to the next and last point. The nature of the inquiries designated as experiments appear in retrospect more as the production of events designed to dramatize reality, not to discover it. If these conclusions are valid, and when we hold up our own achievements in the mirror, they should assist us in evaluating whether our current publications can be described honestly and accurately as worthwhile and valid contributions to the growth of knowledge.



## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## References

- Bauman, Z. (1989). *Modernity and the holocaust*. Cornell University Press.
- Billig, M. (1996). *Arguing and thinking: A rhetorical approach to social psychology* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Brannigan, A. (2013). Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments: A report card 50 years later. *Society*, 50(12), 623–628. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-013-9724-3>
- Browning, C. (1998). *Ordinary men: Reserve police battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland*. Harper Collins.
- Festinger, L. (1980). Looking backward. In L. Festinger (Ed.), *Retrospections on social psychology* (pp. 236–254). Oxford University Press.
- Fromm, E. (1973). *The anatomy of human destructiveness*. Fawcett Books.
- Hollander, M. M., & Turowetz, J. (2017). Normalizing trust: Participants' immediate post-hoc explanations of behaviour in Milgram's "obedience" experiments. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 56(4), 655–674. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12206>
- Le Texier, T. (2019). Debunking the Stanford Prison Experiment. *American Psychologist*, 24(7), 823–839. <http://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000401>.
- Perry, G. (2013). *Behind the shock machine: The untold story of the notorious Milgram psychology experiment* (rev. ed.). The New Press.
- Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality: Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. SAGE.
- Zimbardo, P. (2007). *The Lucifer effect: Understanding how good people turn evil*. Random House.

## Author biography

Augustine Brannigan is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Calgary where he continues to write and guest lecture on issues as diverse as genocide, prostitution, and social psychology. His paper on "Credibility and Incredulity in Milgram's Obedience Experiments" (Perry, Brannigan, Wanner, & Stam) was published in *Social Psychology Quarterly* in March 2020. He is also preparing a book with Routledge: *On the Use and Misuse of Experiments in Classical Social Psychology* is scheduled to be released in 2020.