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Developing psychology's archival sensibilities: Re-visiting Milgram's 'obedience'  
experiments.

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Developing psychology's archival sensibilities: Re-visiting Milgram's 'obedience' experiments.

## Abstract

In this paper, I consider recent work which has drawn on the wealth of material in the Stanley Milgram Papers archive at Yale University to generate new insights into Milgram's 'obedience' experiments. I will suggest that this work has begun to re-shape how we understand these experiments, and in particular will draw attention to the way in which audio recordings of the experiments point to the role of rhetoric in the experiments, and highlight hitherto unacknowledged procedural flexibilities in the standardized experimental protocols. These points are illustrated using a revised transcription of one of Milgram's case examples to further highlight the extent to which Milgram appears to have 'smoothed over' his transcript. But I will also suggest that the capacity for qualitative analysis to be enriched by engagement with archival material should also ensure that the insights of poststructuralist and constructionist approaches are brought to bear on the archives themselves. Drawing on Derrida's *Archive Fever*, and on the literature on transcription practices in qualitative research, it is argued that as a source of data, we should apply the same cautious scepticism to archival material as we would with any other data. When faced with a resource as rich and compelling as the Stanley Milgram Papers, the temptation may be to reify the materials held there as offering new and unvarnished 'truths' about what 'really' happened in the experiments. By contrast, it will be suggested that as well as a *resource*, archives should be a *topic* for analysis.

*Keywords:* archives, discourse, Milgram, obedience, transcription

Developing psychology's archival sensibilities: Re-visiting Milgram's 'obedience' experiments.

In the last five years or so, a burgeoning literature has arisen which uses the wealth of material held in the Stanley Milgram Papers archive at Yale University to shed light on what are usually referred to as the 'obedience' experiments<sup>1</sup> (e.g. Gibson, 2013a, b, 2014; Haslam, Reicher, Millard & McDonald, 2015; Hollander, 2015; Millard, 2014; Nicholson, 2011; Perry, 2012, 2013; Russell, 2011, 2014a, b). This sits alongside a smattering of earlier work (e.g. Modigliani & Rochat, 1995; Rochat & Modigliani, 1997) as an example of the way in which archival data can support research from a range of methodological and theoretical perspectives. The present paper draws on my own research on Milgram's archived data in order to highlight the value of using this particular archive to re-visit the conventional narrative that has crystallized around Milgram's work, and by extension the virtues of archival data more broadly; but also to highlight a number of conceptual issues that are raised by the use of such data. To do this, I will focus in particular on the way in which audio recordings of the 'obedience' experiments have been – and might be – transcribed; and I will also argue that a number of more general issues raised by the use of archival data have already been debated in relation to transcription. Indeed, to the extent that the creation of a transcript can itself be understood as the creation of an archive, a number of conceptual issues raised by the use of archives can usefully be addressed by consideration of the literature on transcription.

The starting point for my research was the observation that, despite the existence in the archives of hundreds of audio recordings of Milgram's experimental sessions, there had been relatively few attempts to use these materials as the basis for qualitative analysis of what actually went on in the experiments (for an exception see Modigliani & Rochat, 1995). My

aim was thus to use the methodological tools of rhetorical and discursive approaches to social psychology (Billig, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) to explore the nature of the experimental encounter (for fuller details of these analyses, see Gibson, 2013a, b, 2014; for a recent analysis using the related technique of conversation analysis, see Hollander, 2015). In the present paper, I will outline an illustrative case analysis which highlights two of the key findings of my analyses: (1) The rhetorical nature of the experimental encounters, and (2) the extent to which the experimenter in Milgram's studies had to depart from the standardized procedure in his attempt to elicit 'obedience'. In doing so, the present paper will consider a number of issues raised by the use of archival data, as well as reflecting upon exactly what we might mean by 'archival' in the context of qualitative research. My aim is thus to contribute to ongoing attempts to develop the historical sensibilities of psychology, with a focus on the fostering of what might be called a specifically *archival sensibility*. In this respect, it is worth briefly noting some previous ways in which the term 'archival data' has been understood in qualitative research.

When qualitative researchers speak of 'archival data' they are most likely to be referring to data, collected by another researcher as part of a previous project, which has been stored in a physical or (more likely these days) an electronic archive, such as the UK Data Service (<http://ukdataservice.ac.uk/>), to which researchers funded by the UK Research Councils are expected to deposit their data on completion of their projects. There is a fairly well-developed literature on the methodological and ethical issues associated with such data (e.g. Corti & Thompson, 2004; Fielding, 2004; Parry & Mauthner, 2004; Slavnic, 2013; Yardley, Watts, Pearson & Richardson, 2014), although it is fair to say that psychologists have not generally been at the forefront of these debates.

However, it could also be argued that qualitative research is by its very nature archival. In transcribing an audio recording of, for example, an interview, a researcher is

creating an archive of the interview; an artifact that can be returned to time and again for repeated reading and re-analysis. This alerts us to a distinction between archival data as something which is marked by the location of the data in a designated physical or electronic space, and a broader sense in which a recording and a transcription allows a conversation to be replayed in a different place at a later time. To extend the meaning of archive this far may be too much for some; it might be suggested that the meaning of archive loses its specificity if we use it in such a way that it could conceivably be applied to all data. However, this does alert us to some important conceptual issues concerning archival data, and these can be usefully outlined in relation to some much-discussed problems in the literature on transcription.

### **Transcripts, archives and history**

Qualitative researchers have long highlighted the theory-laden nature of transcription (e.g. Ashmore & Reed, 2000; Bucholtz, 2000, 2007; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Ochs, 1979), and while there remains a debate about the extent to which notions of transcription accuracy can be retained in light of the constructed nature of transcripts (Hammersley, 2010), it is clear that for many researchers what was once perhaps seen as a mundane technical issue is accorded greater significance given the ways in which the decisions one makes about transcription can reflect one's pre-conceptions about the phenomena under investigation. As a result, questions concerning what gets transcribed and how it is represented (Bucholtz, 2000) are central to the production of a transcript. Appeals to transcripts are thus never appeals to unmediated reality. However, some authors have noted a distinction between transcripts and the audio or video records from which they are produced. Of particular note, Ashmore, MacMillan and Brown (2004) identified what they termed *tape fetishism*. They suggested that, in contrast to the widely-recognised nature of transcription as theory-laden,

there is little equivalent attention to recording practices. Tape fetishism, they argue, involves the minimization or outright denial of the mediated nature of the relationship between recording and analysis. Ashmore et al (2004, p. 351) suggest that the tape thus assumes the ‘role of “found object” ... to which the analyst can always return to settle analytic disputes’, and Ashmore and Reed (2000) argue that in conversation analysis, the distinction between transcript and tape can be summarized as the distinction between that-which-is-constructed (the transcript) and that-which-is-real (the tape). It is in this sense that we can begin to see the way to a consideration of how this might be extended to a related fetishism for archives. There may be a temptation to see artifacts – whether recordings or documents – held in archives as existing independently of the process of analysis, and as such standing outside of the researcher’s engagement with the materials. However, this would risk treating the archive as a straightforward reflection of some slice of reality, and would neglect important questions concerning the researcher’s engagement with it (what was selected for analysis? what was seen as less important? How did theoretical concerns influence these decisions?) as well as questions concerning the nature of the archive itself (what is included in the archive? what is left out?). Instead, we should ensure that we see the archive-as-constructed, just as Ashmore and Reed argue that recordings should be seen as constructed.

Given the relative scarcity of archival research in psychology, these points are worth emphasising. However, it should be noted that there is nothing new in such observations for archival scholars. Of particular note are Derrida’s influential reflections:

the archive ... is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content *of the past* which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming



into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.

(Derrida, 1995, p. 17, *italics in original*)

To develop this point, it is worth turning to history, the discipline which has the most extensive experience with using archival data. Within psychology, there have been a few attempts to explore the connections between qualitative methods and history, specifically in relation to the history of psychology itself (e.g. Bunn, 2011; Lamont, 2007), and more broadly the advocacy of a historical sensibility has formed a key part of the development of social constructionist and related approaches within the discipline (Gergen, 1973; Graumann & Gergen, 1996). Nevertheless, in their recent work on the relationship between psychology and history, Tileagă and Byford (2014a; Byford & Tileagă, 2014) have pointed to the continuing difficulties presented by any attempt to work across these two disciplines. Whereas psychologists have tended to neglect context and specificity in pursuit of their aim of developing general explanations, historians typically foreground the specific; and insofar as they do not aim to produce general facts, their claims do not meet the epistemological threshold of mainstream psychology.

At the core of this disjuncture between the two disciplines lies their differing methodological practices. Whereas experimental psychologists are able to exercise control in the design of the contexts in which their data are generated, ‘Historians do not have that luxury: they deal with “data” that, because its locus is in the past, is always imperfect, incomplete, contingent on interpretation, mediated through sources’ (Byford & Tileagă, 2014b, p. 353). Thus, ‘the same historical material can produce multiple, competing interpretations and explanations, and there are no means of adjudicating between them, beyond the good old-fashioned scholarly debate’ (Byford & Tileagă, 2014, p. 350). This may be unsatisfactory for many psychologists, for whom, assuming a particular model of the

natural sciences, the *sine qua non* of epistemological warrants is the experimentally-testable hypothesis. However, it is notable that experimental practice in the natural sciences has itself consistently been shown to be much messier, more contingent and open to interpretation than is the case according to what Potter (1996) has termed the ‘storybook’ view of scientific practice, involving the discovery of neutral, objective truth through the application of impersonal methods. Sociologists of scientific knowledge have highlighted the extent to which scientific practice can be understood as a fundamentally *social* practice (e.g. Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Latour, 1987; Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Lynch, 1993). However, there have been relatively few attempts to apply these insights specifically to social scientific practice (although a healthy literature on standardized survey interviewing stands as a notable exception to this; see e.g. Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000; Maynard & Schaeffer, 2000), and virtually nothing which has focussed on psychology itself. Wooffitt’s (2007; Wooffitt & Allistone, 2005, 2008) studies of parapsychology experiments are an exception in this respect, but the fact that these studies focus on a sub-discipline that would be considered by many psychologists as a fringe pursuit arguably makes it less likely that their insights will be considered more generally by experimentalists. Indeed, it is notable that in the only major collection of work which is dedicated to exploring how social scientific research methods function interactionally (Drew, Raymond & Weinberg, 2006), not only is there no chapter on experimentation, but the topic does not even feature in the index.

As ever we should be wary of conflating issues of method with issues or epistemology, but in contrast to many experimentalists (though not all, see Reicher, 1997), qualitative approaches informed by interpretative or constructionist perspectives arguably have greater potential to engage with the historical sensibility – with its concern for context, particularity, and interpretation – outlined by Tileagă and Byford. One way in which this can be achieved is by using archival data – where they are available – to explore the practices of

psychology itself. As Tileagă and Byford (2014b, p. 287) have argued, ‘It is perhaps time for psychologists to enter the archive, to learn more from the history of their own discipline’ (p. 287). The present analysis aims to do precisely that by reflecting on one such attempt to draw on archival material relating to one of the ‘classics’ of the discipline.

### **The ‘obedience’ experiments and the Stanley Milgram Papers archive**

Milgram’s (1963, 1965a, 1974) experiments in ‘obedience’ to authority continue to exert influence and excite interest amongst students and the general public alike. They are regularly cited in discussions of issues such as abuse, terrorism and the Holocaust (e.g. Fiske, Harris & Cuddy, 2004; Lankford, 2009; Overy, 2014; Staub, 2014), and the recent 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Milgram’s (1963) first publication on the experiments was marked by a major conference (see <http://www.obediencetoauthority.com>) and a special edition of the *Journal of Social Issues* (Haslam, Miller & Reicher, 2014) dedicated to debating the experiments. The official story of the experiments is well known. Briefly, as reported by Milgram, the version of the experiment which is the focus of the present paper involved a naïve participant arriving at a laboratory, ostensibly to take part in a study of the effects of punishment on learning, and being greeted by an experimenter. A second person arrived soon after, and while this person appeared to the first participant to be another naïve participant, he was in fact a confederate. The experimenter explained to both ‘participants’ that the study involved two roles – teacher and learner – and these roles were allocated using a rigged procedure so that the naïve participant always took the role of teacher, and the confederate was always the learner.

The procedure required the ‘learner’ to answer questions on a memory test, which was to be delivered by the teacher. Each time the learner made a mistake, the teacher was to administer what he thought was an electric shock as punishment. These ‘shocks’ were administered using a machine which featured an array of switches ranging from 15 volts to

450 volts in 15 volt increments, and the punishments were to increase by one shock level with each incorrect answer. The learner was strapped into a seat in an adjoining room, and had electrodes attached to his arm. The teacher and experimenter then returned to the original room and the experiment began.

Once the experiment was under way, it quickly became apparent that the learner – whose responses were provided according to a pre-determined schedule – was going to require electric shocks of an increasingly severe nature, and his pre-recorded protests became more vehement, including (at 150 volts) a demand to be released from the experiment. When participants hesitated, or indicated that they did not wish to continue, the experimenter responded with a set of pre-scripted prods:

Prod 1: Please continue, *or*, Please go on.

Prod 2: The experiment requires that you continue.

Prod 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.

Prod 4: You have no other choice, you *must* go on.

(Milgram, 1974, p. 21, italics in original)

These prods were to be used in order, and begun afresh for each new attempt at defiance.

The experimenter also had two special prods available. These could be used as required by the situation:

Although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent tissue damage, so please go on' (*ibid.*)

'Whether the learner likes it or not, you must go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly. So please go on' (*ibid.*, p. 22).

Various aspects of Milgram's account of his experiments have been challenged in recent years by scholars using the archived materials. For example, Perry (2012, 2013) and

Nicholson (2011) have argued that archival evidence suggests that the ethical problems associated with Milgram's work were even greater than is typically assumed; Russell (2011) has shown how, contrary to suggestions that he was surprised by his initial findings, Milgram carefully crafted his experiment to produce a sufficiently arresting set of findings; Millard (2014) has explored the way in which Milgram (1965b) constructed his film of the experiments in such a way as to represent a particular narrative of the studies; and in my own work (Gibson, 2013a, b, 2014, 2015) I have drawn attention to a number of issues around rhetoric and standardization in the experiments that are not readily foregrounded in the conventional narrative.

The archives feature a wealth of material from the 'obedience' experiments<sup>2</sup>, including questionnaires completed by participants, Milgram's notebooks, and audio recordings of the experimental sessions themselves (see Kaplan, 1996, for an account of the acquisition and preparation of the materials). For my purposes, it is the audio recordings that have been of most interest, for they allow us to hear the sessions unfolding, in many (though certainly not all) cases from before the arrival of the naïve participant to after they have left the laboratory. Milgram (1974) himself made use of transcriptions of these recordings in his book *Obedience to Authority*, presenting them as part of short case study vignettes focussing on particular participants in two chapters entitled 'Individuals confront authority'. Despite the fact that they provide only a fleeting glimpse of the interaction between experimenter and participants, these transcripts are of particular interest as they have been used, albeit only in passing, to suggest that more appears to have been going on in the experiments than is typically assumed. For example, Darley (1995, p. 130) noted that 'the transcripts ... revealed that the experimenter did not follow this instruction [to use only the six scripted] prods, and instead directly responded to what he took to be the implied question raised by the teacher.' In a slightly different vein, Reicher, Haslam and Rath (2008, p. 1321; see also Haslam &

Reicher, 2007) argue that ‘Film and transcript of the studies ... show that, far from becoming morally disengaged and passive, participants were profoundly troubled by what they were doing and initiated long debates about the justification for continuing the study.’ Rather like the discussion around ethical issues, which has been reinvigorated now that archival researchers have drawn attention to additional ethical problems over and above those that were already apparent from Milgram’s own writings (Nicholson, 2011; Perry, 2012, 2013), I will suggest that transcribing the audio recordings anew suggests that things are even more complex than appears to be the case based on a reliance on Milgram’s (1974) transcripts alone. As I have been able to re-transcribe a number of Milgram’s recordings as part of my research, it is worth exploring the relationship between the 1974 transcripts and the newer versions. To do this, I will focus on one participant in particular, pseudonymized by Milgram as Gretchen Brandt.

### **Gretchen Brandt**

Gretchen Brandt’s case study is presented on pages 84-85 of Milgram’s (1974) book. Milgram described her as ‘an attractive thirty-one-year-old medical technician who works at the University Medical School. She had emigrated from Germany five years before and speaks with a thick German accent’ (p. 84).<sup>3</sup> Brandt took part in condition 20 (re-labelled experiment 8 in Milgram’s [1974] book), which is the only condition in which women participated. In this condition, 65% (N = 26) of the 40 women who participated went all the way to the 450 volt switch, and were thus classified as fully obedient. Brandt defied the experimenter, with the experiment being terminated after the 210 volt shock.

Milgram presents the following excerpt from the transcript of Gretchen Brandt’s session:

- 1      EXPERIMENTER: The experiment requires that  
2      you go on until he has learned all the word pairs  
3      correctly.
- 4      GRETCHEN: He has a heart condition, I'm sorry.  
5      He told you that before.
- 6      EXPERIMENTER: The shocks may be painful but  
7      they are not dangerous.
- 8      GRETCHEN: Well, I'm sorry, I think when shocks  
9      continue like this, they *are* dangerous. You ask him  
10     if he wants to get out. It's his free will.
- 11     EXPERIMENTER: It is absolutely essential that  
12     we continue. ...
- 13     GRETCHEN: I like you to ask him. We came here  
14     of our free will. If he wants to continue I'll go ahead.  
15     He told you he had a heart condition. I'm sorry. I  
16     don't want to be responsible for anything happening  
17     to him. I wouldn't like it for me either.
- 18     EXPERIMENTER: You have no other choice.
- 19     GRETCHEN: I think we here are on our own free  
20     will. I don't want to be responsible if he has a heart  
21     condition if anything happens to him. Please  
22     understand that.

(Milgram, 1974, p. 85; ellipsis in original; line numbers added)

Using the archived audio recording of this session, it has been possible to produce an alternative transcription of this section of the experimental session (see also Gibson, 2013b,

for a different use of this same transcript). The extract below is presented together with some of the interaction leading up to the start of the transcript presented in *Obedience to Authority*, with the beginning of the section of interaction which formed the basis of Milgram's transcription beginning on line 8. In this revised transcription, passages which appear in Milgram's (1974) version are highlighted in order to facilitate comparison between the two versions. This is necessarily somewhat approximate given that – as will be discussed below – some passages are re-structured in the 1974 version, meaning that while the words may be present in Milgram's transcript, there are not necessarily in the right order. As an aside, it is worth noting that the use of ellipsis on line 12 of Milgram's transcript appears to indicate that the exchange has been edited at one specific point. However, as the following revised transcript makes clear, the editorial work involved was much more extensive (for transcription conventions, see Appendix):

- 1 T: It's wrong. One, two ten.  
2 ((SHOCK))  
3 L: OW!  
4 T: Well I'm sorry, I don't think we [should continue.]  
5 L: [Experimenter!]  
6 Get me [out of here! I've had enough and I won't  
7 be in the experiment anymore.]  
8 E: [The experiment requires that you go on  
9 teacher, until the learner has learned all the word  
10 pairs correctly.]  
11 T: Well he has a heart condition I'm sorry.  
12 E: Well the shocks-  
13 T: And he told you that before.



- 14 E: Right, but the shocks are not dangerous. They  
15 may be painful-
- 16 T: Well I'm sorry, I think er, shocks in, continue like  
17 this they are dangerous.
- 18 E: No I can assure you they're not dangerous. They  
19 may be painful or, [something ((inaudible)) pain  
20 but they're not dangerous.]
- 21 T: [Well, if he wants to-] well  
22 will you please ask him er when I'm there if he  
23 wants to get out or not. So it's free will I mean  
24 we're here-
- 25 E: Once we've started er, it's absolutely essential we  
26 continue teacher, until he has learned all the word  
27 pairs correctly.
- 28 T: Well, I'd liked you to ask him I mean we came  
29 here on our free will and you told us er, whatever  
30 happened er  
31 (2)
- 32 T: I'd like you to ask him, if he [wants to continue  
33 I'll go ahead.]
- 34 E: [Well once we've  
35 started I can't] er, I can't have any contact with  
36 the learner, other than through the microphone  
37 you see.
- 38 T: Well he told you he had a heart condition I'm

- 39            **sorry.**
- 40    E:    I know [((inaudible))]
- 41    T:            [And I] don't want to be responsible for
- 42            anything happen to him. I wouldn't like it to me
- 43            here.
- 44    E:    **You have no other choice.**
- 45    T:    **I think we're here ah, on our free will** we do have
- 46            a choice.
- 47    E:    Well I mean that is er, i- if if you can't continue
- 48            if you won't continue then we'll have to, you know,
- 49            just stop the experiment.
- 50    T:    Well, please ask him. I won't continue when- I'm
- 51            th- **I don't want to be responsible when he has a**
- 52            heart condition if something happened to him.
- 53    E:    Well
- 54    T:    **Please understand that.**
- 55    E:    er we'll have to er discontinue the experiment.

For present purposes, I want to draw attention to two features of this revised transcription:

(1) The extent to which it suggests that Milgram's (1974) transcript under-represents argumentation; (2) The presence of multiple departures from standardization. These are related because the under-representation of argumentation in the 1974 transcript is achieved in part through the 'smoothing over' of departures from standardization, and in turn these departures can themselves be understood as important features of the experimenter's rhetorical toolkit.

As an example of the smoothing over of argumentation, consider the relatively straightforward exchange in lines 4-9 of the 1974 transcript, in which each speaker produces complete sentences. In contrast, lines 11-17 of the revised transcript show the back-and-forth nature of the interaction as the experimenter tries to quickly counter the objections of Brandt. Notably, both Brandt and the experimenter begin their utterances on lines 11, 12, 14 and 16 with appositional words (*well, right, but*) which, as Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) noted, are common devices for beginning a speaking turn. These are omitted from Milgram's (1974) transcript, but their presence in the revised transcript is worth dwelling on for their role in the back-and-forth of argumentation here.

The appositionals in this stretch of talk can be understood as devices for seizing the floor of the debate. Importantly they perform a demonstration that what has just been heard from the other party has been acknowledged, but that it is not satisfactory or persuasive (Schiffrin, 1985). These openings thus function in such a way as to attempt to neutralize the rhetorical force of the preceding turn. For example, when Brandt responds on line 11 to the experimenter's prod on lines 8-10, she does not say 'He has a heart condition' as indicated in the 1974 transcript, but 'Well he has a heart condition'. The addition of what may seem to be an insignificant word, 'well', in fact points to some of the complexities of argumentative discourse. It can be understood as a variant on the 'yes, but' formulation (Pomerantz, 1984), whereby speakers disagree politely in such a way that doesn't involve overt rejection of an initial proposition. In using 'well' the politeness element of the framing of the counter-argument is perhaps minimized in comparison to 'yes, but', but the function is broadly comparable: It serves to acknowledge receipt of the proposition, but to enable its rejection. The speaker is able to demonstrate that they have taken on board what their opponent in debate has said, but assert that their objection nevertheless still stands. Understood in these

terms, ‘well’ is performing the work of a longer formulation such as ‘That’s all very well but...’.

If the omission of appositionals from the 1974 transcript constitutes one way in which the rhetorical nature of the encounter was obscured, it is also notable that the revised transcript shows numerous departures from the standard form of the prods as they appear in Milgram’s published accounts of his method.<sup>4</sup> Not only does this contrast with Milgram’s (1963, p. 374) assertion that ‘It was important to standardize the experimenter’s responses’, but it also highlights the fact that the non-standardized prods have been rendered in something more closely resembling the standard form in their presentation in Milgram’s (1974) transcript, although it is apparent that, even so, they are not the same as the prods as scripted (Darley, 1995). It is notable that not only are prods not delivered in the standard form, but that the experimenter also makes attempts to respond to Brandt that are entirely unrelated to the content of the prods. For example, the experimenter’s prod delivered on lines 8-10 departs from the standardized form in three ways:

First, as this is the experimenter’s first prod following Brandt’s attempt to draw the experiment to a close on line 4, the procedure dictates that he should use prod 1 (‘Please continue, *or*, Please go on’; Milgram, 1974, p. 21). According to Milgram’s account, the only conditions under which the experimenter should omit prod 1 are (a) if the participant ‘asked if the learner was liable to suffer permanent physical injury’ (Milgram, 1974, p. 21) and (b) if the participant ‘said that the *learner* did not want to go on’ (Milgram. 1974, p. 21, italics in original). In both cases, the procedure as described by Milgram allowed for prod 1 to be replaced by one of the special prods. However, Brandt’s attempt to stop the experiment at line 4 of the revised transcript (‘Well I’m sorry, I don’t think we should continue’) fails to satisfy either of these conditions. Prod 1 should therefore have been used, but was not.

Second, the prod that is used appears to be a composite of two prods: the second sequential prod ('The experiment requires that you continue'; Milgram, 1974, p. 21), and one of the special prods ('Whether the learner likes it or not, you must go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly. So please go on'; Milgram, 1974, p. 22).

Third, it is notable that in the prod as delivered, the experimenter makes explicit the institutionally-relevant identities 'teacher' and 'learner'. Had the second prod been delivered in isolation it would have included neither of these terms, and instead referred more generally to the teacher as 'you' ('The experiment requires that you continue'). Had the special prod been delivered in isolation, only the learner would have been specified by name. In contrast, by specifying the relevance of the teacher-learner relationship here ('go on teacher, until the learner has learned all the word pairs'), the experimenter reminds Brandt of her institutionally-relevant identity, and of the obligations that come with it. Given recent work on the role of identity within the experiments (Haslam, Reicher & Birney, 2014; Haslam et al., 2015; Reicher & Haslam, 2011; Reicher, Haslam & Smith, 2012), this can be understood as an attempt to avoid framing the situation in terms of personal identity (as would be implied had she been addressed as 'you') and instead to frame it in terms of a social identity provided by the experimenter, and more generally by the internal logic of the experiment itself. This can thus be understood in terms of a rhetorical struggle over the definition of the situation, and of the various participants' roles in it.

It is also notable that whereas in the 1974 transcript the experimenter's modified version of the other special prod (lines 6-7: 'The shocks may be painful but they are not dangerous') appears on just one occasion, the revised transcript demonstrates a more complex attempt to convince Brandt that the punishment she is meting out does not pose a danger to the learner; an attempt that is made necessary by Brandt's repeated counter-arguments. After Brandt has invoked the learner's heart condition on line 11, the experimenter responds by

adapting one of the special prods. In its initiation, as noted above, the turn at lines 14-15 is marked as a dispreferred response ('Right, but'). Subsequently, the structure of the prod is reversed, and the phrasing is also noticeably different from that used in the published version. Specifically, in describing the shocks as 'not dangerous' rather than as leading to 'no permanent tissue damage', the experimenter avoids the implication in the latter that there may be some *temporary* tissue damage. Simply asserting that they are not dangerous is thus a firmer assertion of the harmlessness of the shocks. In reversing the order of the prod, so that danger is denied first and then the possibility of pain is acknowledged, the experimenter appears to be in the process of constructing what Antaki and Wetherell (1999) have termed a *show concession*, a rhetorically effective manoeuvre in which an assertion is followed by a concession, which is in turn followed by a reiteration of the original assertion. However, the experimenter does not get to complete the turn and reassert the original statement as he is interrupted by Brandt who counters that the shocks are indeed dangerous. Two things are of note here: First, she predicates her objection on her own thoughts (line 16: 'I think'). In one sense, this move into the subjective might seem like a weaker argument, shying away as it does from making a straightforward factual claim. However, insofar as one's own subjective realm is beyond the reach of others, her claim to the reality of her own thoughts is much more difficult to challenge. People can challenge a factual claim about the world, but a claim to *think* something or to hold a particular opinion, is much more difficult for opponents to refute on ontological grounds. Second, Brandt introduces a temporal dimension to her objection – it is not simply the shocks that she objects to, but when 'shocks ... continue' (line 16). This upgrades the previous complaint to make relevant the *ongoing* nature of the shocks.

The experimenter, however, does not move on to another prod. Indeed, he attempts to reiterate the message of the same special prod again on lines 18-20. On this occasion, the experimenter does complete his turn, and it does now conform to the three-part structure of a

show concession: assertion ('they're not dangerous'); concession ('They may be painful'); reassertion ('but they're not dangerous'). Not only is the dual use of this prod not apparent in the published version, but its structure as a show concession is rendered invisible.

From line 21, Brandt then switches strategy and makes her continued participation contingent on the willingness of the learner to continue. It is notable that in the 1974 transcript this strategy is part of a series of complaints and assertions advanced by Brandt on lines 13-17, which also include constructions of solidarity with the learner and her own personal responsibility for any harm that may be caused. In response to this, it appears that the experimenter simply issues a modified version of prod 4 (line 18). However, in the revised transcript, the structure of the argument is much more extended and takes a rather different form, with Brandt only using the personal responsibility argument once her argument based on solidarity with the learner has been rejected by the experimenter. First, it is notable that on lines 22-23 Brandt makes a direct request to the experimenter that he ask the learner if he wishes to continue, and that this request be made in Brandt's presence ('when I'm there'). This request, which is not present in the 1974 transcript, is followed by an assertion of free will, and the experimenter responds to this with a modified combination of prod 3 and one of the special prods (lines 25-27). As with the earlier modified prod on lines 8-10, this features a direct invocation of Brandt's institutionally-relevant identity ('teacher'), thus serving as a reminder of her role in the experiment.

In her response, it is notable (again) that Brandt uses an appositional (line 26: 'well') to initiate her turn, followed by an assertion of free will which is presented in solidarity with the learner: Brandt asserts that '*we* came here on *our* free-will' rather than the possible alternative '*I* came here on *my* free-will'. Thus Brandt constructs a group identity for herself and the learner in (implied) opposition to the experimenter. She then trails off, and a two second silence ensues (line 31). As the experimenter fails to fill this silence, Brandt reasserts

her request that the experimenter ask the learner ‘if he wants to continue’, and makes her own continued participation conditional on the learner’s. The experimenter’s response on lines 34-37 is not self-evidently related to any of the scripted prods, and instead is specifically tailored to provide a reason why he cannot act on Brandt’s request. It is formulated as a general rule prohibiting him from going to speak to the learner (‘I can’t’). The final ‘you see’ marks this turn as having imparted new information that explains his unwillingness to take the course of action requested by Brandt, in effect displaying the turn as one which reveals an institutional rule of which Brandt had hitherto been unaware. In other words, ‘you see’ implies that previously, you *didn’t* see.<sup>5</sup> It is only following this that Brandt moves on to an argument based around her own personal responsibility (lines 41-42), predicated on the fact that ‘he told you he had a heart condition’ (line 38). She also explicitly refers to how she would not like to be in the learner’s position. So, what appears to be a list-like succession of arguments on lines 13-17 of the 1974 transcript appears quite differently in the revised transcript. In contrast, they are made in response to (and in anticipation) of various counter-claims made by the experimenter. In the 1974 transcript, the back-and-forth nature of the way in which these arguments are advanced is neglected, and in the removal of the Experimenter’s turns there is no evidence of him having responded specifically to the request to ask the learner if he wishes to continue. The smoothing over of argumentation thus also goes hand-in-hand with the obscuring of a departure from standardization involving the use of a ‘prod’ that does not appear in the published accounts of Milgram’s methodology.

Subsequently, the experimenter issues a version of the fourth prod. In the 1974 transcript, this occurs on line 18 (‘You have no other choice.’) Brandt then responds to this on lines 19-22 by asserting that ‘we here are on our own free will’ and that she does not wish to be responsible for any negative consequences for the learner given that he has a heart condition. This is all reproduced without any intervention from the experimenter. In



contrast, the revised transcript includes a substantial turn from the experimenter (lines 47-49) as well as a brief attempt to initiate a turn on line 53. In his extended turn, the experimenter departs from the script in such a way as to back-track from the stark assertion of the absence of choice. Rather than calling the experiment to a halt as soon as Brandt has maintained her defiance on lines 45-46, the experimenter clarifies that lack of choice in practice means simply that the experiment will have to be stopped. This can be seen as a final attempt to remind the participant of the importance of the experiment, and of her role in it, although ultimately it fails (as it did on other occasions on which it was used; see Gibson, 2013a). Ultimately, this highlights (a) the extent to which questioning of the experimenter could lead to the withdrawal of prod 4, and (b) the further removal of a notable departure from standardization in the 1974 transcript.

## Discussion

In undertaking a detailed analysis of a single extract, the aim of the present paper has been twofold: First, to illustrate the key findings concerning the rhetorical nature of the experimental encounter, and the extent to which the experimenter departed from the standardized script; and second to draw attention to the utility of the archived audio recordings for changing how we might understand the Milgram experiments. In particular, the difference between Milgram's (1974) transcript and my revised version highlights both the potential and, as I will argue in this concluding section, the ambiguities of archival data.

As Derrida (1995) reminds us, the origin of the word 'archive' comes from the Greek *arkhē*, and *arkheion*:

Initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law. On

account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that *place* which is their house ... that official documents are filed. The archons are first of all the documents' guardians. ... They have the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect state the law.

(Derrida, 1995, pp. 9-10, italics in original)

This highlights the extent to which the nature of archives has always been bound up with the exercise – and location – of power. This raises many issues, but I want to focus here on just one: the archive itself can be used as a powerful warranting device. At their most trivial, debates over interpretation can become debates about who has spent longest *in* the archives, who has sifted through the most documents, or listened to the most recordings. Less superficially, all research which self-consciously addresses itself to archival data can – often with good reason – find itself in the position of using the archives to *reveal* what was previously *hidden*. The analysis outlined in the present paper can be seen as just such an exercise, and while readers will be the judge of the utility or otherwise of the exercise, there is a wider issue here of treating archives as simply showing in an unmediated way that which was previously obscured. It is precisely this tendency which Byford and Tileagă (2014) criticise in their discussion of interdisciplinary 'borrowing' when they highlight the way in which Neitzel and Welzer (cited in Byford & Tileagă, 2014) use recently discovered recordings of German prisoners of war during World War II. Neitzel and Welzer treat these as straightforward insights into what the speakers 'really thought', in contrast to other forms of communication (e.g. letters) which are treated as inevitably compromised insofar as they are constructed for a particular purpose. The recorded conversations are thus seen as offering an unmediated window onto how speakers really experienced the war.

When one comes across an archive as rich as the PoW transcripts or the Milgram recordings, the initial reaction may be 'Aha! Now we can see what *really* happened, what

they *really* thought'. But this involves a problematic suspension of critical judgement. As noted above, making sense of archival data will always be an interpretative process. That is not to say that all interpretations will be equally valid – as Byford and Tileagă (2014, p. 350) note, we have at our disposal the powerful tools of 'good old-fashioned scholarly debate' – but it does mean that if we treat archival data as the naked truth, we risk repeating the scholarly errors of the past. And by errors, I mean not the 'inaccurate' rendering of 'bad' transcription, but rather the over-confident presentation of a particular version of something as *the* definitive and ultimately real version. In this respect, it is not so much that Milgram produced inaccurate transcripts, but that given the dominant psychological assumptions about language at the time Milgram was working – in which language itself was conceived as a fairly transparent medium for the communication of thoughts from one mind to another – there is no reason why Milgram should really have been concerned with capturing anything more than the gist of the conversation. Milgram was working at a time when the mass availability of audio recording technology was in its infancy, and despite the fact that during the period when Milgram was writing *Obedience to Authority*, on the other side of North America Harvey Sacks was in the early stages of using audio records to develop what became known as conversation analysis, much qualitative research still relied on field notes – written records capturing summaries of what participants had said. Rather, for Milgram's illustrative purposes, his transcripts were *good enough*, just as for Sacks – despite the partial nature of audio recording – his tapes were 'good enough' (Sacks, 1984, p. 26) for his purposes.

However, suggesting that no single representation of what happened can provide the ultimate truth on the matter is not to suggest that all interpretations are equally valid. One of the features of 'good old-fashioned scholarly debate' is that scholars argue for things to be apprehended and made sense of in particular ways, and these arguments are informed by conceptual frameworks and philosophical assumptions. The argument that my rendering of

the Brandt transcript allows us to apprehend what went on in Milgram's experiments in a new and interesting way is part of a broader set of arguments concerning the best way to conceptualize the role of language within the social psychology laboratory, and ultimately concerning the best way of conceptualizing language itself within the discipline. It is thus part of a broader movement away from the idea that language is a simple reflection of thought towards a position which sees language as active, constructive and functional. Such arguments are still live concerns within the discipline, with the majority of experimental research continuing to adopt what Reddy (1979) termed the 'conduit' metaphor of language as providing a relatively straightforward insight into thought. One particularly pertinent recent example of such an assumption can be found in Burger, Girgis and Manning's (2011) analysis of participants' comments in Burger's (2009) partial replication of Milgram's paradigm. Burger et al (2011, p. 461) argue that '[b]ecause the spontaneous comments came without prompting and because participants were unlikely to have anticipated that these comments would be analyzed by the investigators, the comments provide a unique and relatively uncensored glimpse into what participants were thinking as they moved through the experimental procedures'. Such assumptions are difficult to sustain once we take seriously the insights of discursive and rhetorical approaches which highlight that people are never simply *reporting their thoughts* when they speak, but are always *actively engaged in doing something*. For present purposes, it is important to note that it is this conceptual framework, as much as the archives themselves, which acts as the warrant for the claims concerning Milgram's experiments. Essentially, the archives do not simply 'show' us that rhetoric is under-represented in Milgram's transcripts and interpretations, they have to be *made to show* this.

For this reason, I want to return to the issue of the relationship between transcripts and archives. Part of my argument here has indeed been to use a new transcription, based on the

archived audio recording, of the Gretchen Brandt extract presented by Milgram (1974), to ‘show’ things that were previously hidden from view: both the rhetorical nature of the experimental interaction, and the experimenter’s departures from the standardized script are under-represented in Milgram’s transcript. Such an exercise is, I have argued, useful and illuminating. But we might be wise to be cautious of extending the visual metaphor here. Being able to *show things that were previously hidden from view*, or to *illuminate* such that we might *see more clearly*, is problematic if it is taken to imply that we now see things as *they really are*, unmediated, unrepresented, unconstructed. Milgram’s transcripts served his purpose, my transcripts serve mine; my theoretical perspective on language necessitates one sort of transcript, his necessitated another. Rather than simply enabling us to see what was previously obscured, we might instead say that we see *differently*. Rather than bringing light where once there was darkness, it is simply that such a transcription allows us to see things *in a different light*, or, for those who may be less convinced of the utility of my approach, *in a different darkness*. The idea that my revised transcription represents the ‘real’ nature of the interaction, or the ‘best’ way of representing it, is problematic. Conversation analysts would undoubtedly point to my use of a very simplified form of Jeffersonian transcription. The use of commas to represent pauses, instead of the conventional (.) symbol; the absence of markers of rising intonation, in-breaths and so on, might be taken to indicate a lack of interest in the rigours of transcription required for interactional analysis. Others may go further and produce transcripts which more closely abide by such conventions in order to offer novel insights on the nature of the experiments at an even finer-grained level of detail (Hollander, 2015). Transcribing at this level of detail would be well-suited to conversation analytic purposes, and might appear to be a ‘better’ or more ‘real’ representation of what went on, but it wouldn’t be long before arguments were advanced that in transcribing to this level of detail, we focus our analytic attention at the *wrong* level: the detail of interaction rather than the

content of what was said (for a relevant debate, see Potter & Hepburn, 2005a, b; Smith, Hollway & Mishler, 2005). In arguing that we should pay closer attention to the archived recordings, then, someone else can always come along and suggest that we should pay *even closer* attention (or, in the spirit of tape fetishism, that we could if only we had more complete recordings); or indeed they might contest what it means to pay ‘close’ attention by suggesting that we are attending to the wrong thing. If such debates get bogged down in who has captured the recordings most faithfully, then we are heading down an epistemological blind alley. The key questions are, rather, ones of function: what framework and assumptions is one bringing to the data, and what form of transcription is suitable for one’s purposes? This is a fairly familiar line of argument from the literature on transcription, and as such I won’t labor the point further. However, I would argue that the same essential point applies to our engagement with archives. Indeed, given the extent to which transcription forms a central part of much qualitative research, it is likely to be closely bound up with how we use archives; nevertheless, when applied to archives, the point concerns broader issues than transcription alone. In using archival data, we have to make decisions about what materials to use, how to represent those materials for the purposes of analysis and dissemination, and how to treat the ontological status of those materials.

Indeed, any suggestion that the materials themselves are static is problematic. Though Stanley Milgram died in 1984, his archive is alive and well in its continuing transformation. Derrida (1995) speculated on how new technologies might have transformed archives had they been available at the time the materials were being produced (his example concerns what might have been the case if Freud had had access to email technology). But technological shifts not only change what can be archived, they are constantly changing the nature of extant archives. In digitising textual material and making it searchable online, archives are not only making this usable in new ways but they are transforming the nature of

the materials themselves. In Milgram's case, the archive is transformed from a place which a researcher has to visit, to one containing materials that can be copied and delivered to researchers (myself included) who may never set foot in the physical archives themselves. In this respect, while the reasons for the growth of interest in the Milgram archives in recent years are undoubtedly complex, it is arguable that a key issue concerns the comparatively recent development of technologies which allow researchers to make use of the materials. An archival sensibility is, thus, a two-sided affair balancing a curiosity for what archives can tell us about the questions that drive our research, with a curiosity for the nature of archives themselves.

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### Appendix

In the revised transcript, speakers are identified as E (Experimenter), T (Teacher) and L (Learner). Other transcription conventions are as follows:

- OW!                      Capitals indicate utterances that are noticeably louder than the surrounding talk. Exclamation marks indicate increased urgency in the delivery of the utterance.
- (2)                        Numbers in parentheses indicate a timed silence, with the number indicating the amount in seconds.
- I can't, I                A comma indicates a pause of less than a second.
- I-                         A dash indicates a sharp cut-off of the preceding utterance.
- [continue]              Brackets indicate overlapping talk.
- volts.                    A full-stop (period) indicates a 'stopping' intonation, rather than the end of a grammatical sentence per se.
- Why?                     A question mark indicates a questioning intonation, rather than a grammatical question per se.
- ((inaudible))          Double parentheses indicate comments from the transcriber.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> There is good reason to be cautious of this seemingly innocent characterization of the experiments as being concerned with ‘obedience’. Recent research has suggested that, whatever the experiments do show, they are not examples of people obeying direct orders (Burger, Girgis & Manning, 2011; Gibson, 2013a; Reicher & Haslam, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The full catalogue of material held in the archives can be found at <http://drs.library.yale.edu/HLTransformer/HLTransServlet?style=yul.ead2002.xhtml.xsl&pid=mssa.ms.1406&clear-stylesheet-cache=yes>

<sup>3</sup> It is notable that none of the male participants are described in terms of their level of attractiveness.

<sup>4</sup> In fact there are inconsistencies in Milgram’s published descriptions of the prods, with the account in his 1965 *Human Relations* article diverging in some important respects from that presented in his 1963 article in *Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology* and his 1974 book (see Gibson, 2013b, pp. 179-180 for a fuller comparison).

<sup>5</sup> This is a somewhat different approach to dealing with similar requests to that adopted by the experimenter in an earlier experimental condition (see Gibson, 2013b).