

## Social influence

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### **Introduction**

Traditionally, social influence has been defined as the ‘process whereby attitudes and behaviour are influenced by the real or imagined presence of other people’ (Hogg & Vaughan, 2011, p. 236). Social psychologists have distinguished between three forms of social influence: compliance, conformity and obedience. Compliance has been defined as ‘a particular kind of response – acquiescence – to a particular kind of communication – a request’ (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004, p. 592); conformity as ‘the act of changing one’s behaviour to match the responses of others’ (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004, p. 606); and obedience as ‘[b]ehavior change produced by the commands of an authority’ (Brehm & Kassin, 1996, p. 355). There has been a wealth of work on social influence, and in the present chapter we can do little more than scratch the surface of the variety of research that has sought to address compliance, conformity and obedience. For this reason, we will focus on some of the most influential studies, before moving on to consider critical reactions to this area of research, and alternatives proposed by critical social psychologists. In particular, we will suggest that by looking at how people use language we can re-cast what we understand by social influence.

### **Compliance**

There is a vast literature exploring the effectiveness of various techniques at eliciting compliance. Some of the most influential studies in this area have addressed what are known as the foot-in-the-door technique and the door-in-the-face technique. Freedman and Fraser

(1966) showed that prefacing a request with an initial, more modest request, increases compliance with the subsequent bigger request. In their study, people were more likely to agree to take part in a lengthy consumer survey involving a home visit if they had first taken part in a much shorter telephone survey. As such, the requester can be said to be getting their 'foot in the door'. Theoretical explanations of this effect have suggested that we like to see ourselves as consistent, and having agreed to one request we don't want to disrupt an image of ourselves as being the sort of helpful person who agrees to such requests (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Dolinski, 2000).

In contrast, Cialdini et al (1975) showed that an initial larger request can also function effectively to elicit compliance with a subsequent more modest request. When the initial request is rejected this makes it more likely that participants will perceive a follow-up request as a concession and so agree to it. Cialdini et al. asked if participants would give up two hours of their time for a one-off trip to the zoo with a group of young offenders, and found that fewer than 20% of participants agreed. However, when the request followed a previous, and much more onerous, request to spend two hours a week for two years working with young offenders, compliance with the more modest request rose to 50%.

Classic studies like these have given rise to a tradition of research examining the variables that affect compliance. Findings from these studies have been applied to a range of contexts, from business (e.g. Cialdini, 2009) to the military (e.g. King, 2011).

## **Conformity**

Interest in conformity is often traced to Sherif's (1966/1936) studies of group norm formation, although it is interesting to note that Sherif (1966) himself rejected the tendency to see his studies as having demonstrated conformity, instead suggesting that they tell us something about how people come to a consensus in the face of ambiguous information.

Sherif used a visual illusion called the autokinetic effect, in which a point of light appears to move in a darkened room, despite the fact that the light remains stationary. He asked people to estimate the distance that the light had moved, and found that when people were tested individually their estimates differed quite substantially. However, when subsequently tested in a group, the same individuals' estimates converged around a group norm. Similarly, when people were tested in groups first, their estimate converged from early on in the series of trials, and the consensus remained when they were subsequently tested individually.

In contrast to Sherif, who deliberately set out to create an ambiguous situation to see how people would respond, Asch (1956) created a situation in which it was clear that there was a right and wrong answer. He used simple perceptual stimuli consisting of drawings of three lines of different lengths (see Figure 1).

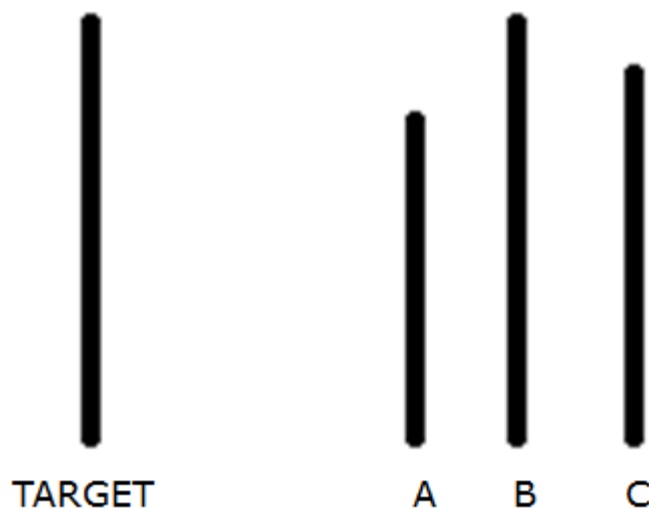


Figure 1: Asch's stimuli (based on Asch, 1956, Fig. 2)

The participants' apparently simple task was to identify which of lines A, B and C was the same length as the target line, and indeed Asch ran control conditions in which people completed the task alone and found that virtually no one ever made a mistake. However,

Asch's experimental conditions featured groups of confederates who were instructed to give the wrong answer. When naïve participants were required to provide their answers after several confederates had given an obviously wrong answer, many conformed and also gave the wrong answer. However, things are a little more complicated than they seem – the standard story of the Asch experiments in which people go along with the group is actually not quite correct. It was certainly the case that a majority of participants conformed at least once *over a series of trials*, but over *all* trials the most frequent response was to remain independent and provide the correct answer. Things are clearly more complex than they are sometimes made to appear, and it has been suggested that giving wrong answers was a way of building up solidarity with the group so that when they did come to disagree, participants were doing so from a base layer of agreement (Hodges & Geyer, 2006). Indeed, Asch himself saw his studies as telling us as much about resistance as they did about conformity: 'It is ... unduly narrowing to emphasize submission, to the neglect of the not inconsiderable powers persons demonstrate on occasion for acting according to conviction and rising above group passion.' (Asch, 1956, p. 2).

## **Obedience**

Obedience is most closely associated with the influential but controversial series of studies conducted by Stanley Milgram in the early 1960s (Milgram, 1963, 1965, 1974). Probably the most well-known variant of Milgram's experiments involved a naïve participant playing the role of 'teacher' to a confederate playing the role of 'learner' in what the participant believed to be a memory experiment. Each time the learner, who was in an adjacent room, answered a question incorrectly, the participant's task was to administer an electric shock. The shocks increased in 15 volt increments with each wrong answer, up to a maximum of 450 volts. As the shocks increased in severity, the learner could be heard

yelping, and then protesting, demanding to be let out, screaming in apparent agony and finally ominously silent. Each time the participant hesitated or refused to continue, the experimenter could use one of four pre-prepared prods (to be used in order, and begun anew for each separate attempt at defiance) designed to elicit obedience:

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)

The experimenter also had two special prods at his disposal that 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.*) and ‘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). In versions of the experiment using this procedure, obedience levels of between 47.5% and 65% were found, where obedience was operationalized as administering the final shock on the scale.

Milgram’s experiments have been subject to continued criticism in relation to the ethical problems inherent in deceiving someone into participating in a potentially very stressful experiment (e.g. Baumrind, 1964, 2013; Mixon, 1989), and their findings have been subject to methodological critique on a number of grounds (e.g. Orne & Holland, 1968; see Miller, 1986, for a summary and review). However, the experiments have been hugely influential – perhaps more so than any other social psychological study – and continue to be cited in discussions concerning phenomena as varied as business ethics (Pina e Cunha, Rego & Clegg, 2010; Sheppard & Young, 2007), the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuses (Fiske et al, 2004; Lankford, 2009) and the Holocaust (Miller, 2004). Recent years have also seen renewed attempts to engage empirically with the phenomena Milgram sought to explore, whether in

the form of replications (Burger, 2009), simulations (Dambrun & Vatiné, 2010; Slater et al., 2006) or variations on Milgram's experimental paradigm (Beauvois, Courbet, & Oberlé, 2012; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2013).

### **Criticisms**

For present purposes, the criticisms of work on social influence can be said to concern three broad issues: conformity bias, individualistic bias, and the limitations of experimentation. It should, however, be noted that these three areas of critique overlap with one another in many respects.

#### **Conformity bias**

One of the earliest critics of social influence research was Serge Moscovici (1976). Moscovici was concerned to explore how minorities can serve as the catalyst for social change, and he challenged previous work on the grounds that it displayed what he termed *conformity bias*. Because of this bias, Moscovici argued, researchers had concentrated on identifying how individuals could be made to conform to social norms at the expense of the study of how social change occurs. This critique can be understood as part of the broader critique of social psychology which emerged in Europe in the 1970s and which sought to re-establish the meaningfulness of social action (e.g. Israel & Tajfel, 1972).

In order to explore minority influence empirically, Moscovici and his colleagues (e.g. Moscovici et al, 1969; Moscovici & Lage, 1976) used an experimental paradigm every bit as elegantly simple as Asch's. Participants were asked to identify the colour of slides projected onto a screen. Whereas Asch had employed confederates to take on the role of a majority who gave incorrect answers on a perceptual task, in Moscovici's studies the confederates

were in the minority. The results suggested that when the minority maintained a consistent position, it was able to have a modest effect on the responses of the majority.

Moscovici's arguments also highlight the extent to which bias can be built into the design of studies. The 'heroes' of many classic experiments are lone individuals who withstand social pressures from a group or an authority figure. In such experiments, the social world is by definition a dangerous source of irrational error and immoral behaviour. In designing such experiments, researchers appear not to have entertained the possibility that groups might conceivably have *positive* effects. In this respect, social influence research can be seen to be biased in favour of individualism.

### **Individualistic bias**

As Reicher and Haslam (2006) have argued, much classic work on groups in social psychology has assumed that individual-level behaviour has the potential to be rational and moral, but that individuals are in danger of being led astray by the irrationality and immorality of the group. This assumption is particularly apparent in the concept of deindividuation, defined by Festinger et al. (1952, p. 382) as a state arising when 'individuals are not seen or paid attention to as individuals. The [group] members do not feel that they stand out as individuals. Others are not singling a person out for attention nor is the person singling out others.' Most famously, the concept was elaborated by Zimbardo (1969, p. 249), who, in something of a rhetorical flourish, explained it thus:

'Mythically, deindividuation is the ageless life force, the cycle of nature, the blood ties, the tribe, the female principle, the irrational, the impulsive, the anonymous chorus, the vengeful furies. To be singular, to stand apart from other men, to aspire to Godhead, to honor social contracts and man-made commitments above family bonds, is to be individuated'

However, the assumption that the individual was by definition more rational and moral than the collective was challenged by the influential work of Henri Tajfel and his colleagues (e.g. Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) who, in developing what became known as social identity theory (SIT), argued that group behaviour should be theorised as meaningful and rational. The implications of the social identity perspective for social influence have been worked out most fully by John Turner (1991). Importantly, for social identity and self-categorization theorists, our identity is not lost in the group, but rather we shift from personal to social identity. In situations where we see ourselves in terms of a social identity, we are more likely to behave in a way that is consonant with the norms of that group. If the norms of the group are antisocial, then our behaviour would be more likely to be antisocial too. If the norms are prosocial, however, then we would be more likely to behave prosocially (Postmes & Spears, 1998). The influence of the group is thus not by definition negative, but can be positive too.

Many studies have demonstrated these processes, but for present purposes a single example must suffice. In many respects, crowd behaviour has for a long time served as a canonical instance of the deleterious effects of the collective on individual behaviour. From Le Bon's (1895) classic treatise on the crowd, to more recent moral panics about violent football crowds and the 'riots' in several English cities in the summer of 2011 (Reicher & Stott, 2011), popular and academic common-sense is replete with scare-stories of the irrationality and danger of the crowd. Indeed, even the liberal *Observer* newspaper sought to explain the 2011 'riots' by inviting an epidemiologist to elucidate how disorderly behaviour spreads like a contagious disease through a crowd (Slutkin, 2011). However, research on crowd behaviour in the social identity tradition has consistently challenged this 'contagion' model of crowd behaviour. In his classic study of a 'riot' in the St Paul's area of Bristol in 1980, Reicher (1984) showed that crowd behaviour in fact involved adherence to social



norms, rather than mindless chaos. For instance, Reicher noted how the targets of the crowd's anger were symbols of financial power and state authority, such as banks and the police. When one crowd member threw a brick at a bus – a public service and symbol of shared resource – other crowd members did *not* follow suit, behaviour which clearly contradicts the idea of behavioural contagion. Reicher argued that crowd behaviour only makes sense as intergroup behaviour, and in relation to the wider social context in which it occurs.

So why the individualistic bias in much of the classic work? Many authors have argued that, in its north American heartlands, social psychology has tended to work with a rather narrow conception of 'the social' (e.g. Moscovici & Markova, 2006). One of the key figures in early 20<sup>th</sup> century social psychology, Floyd Allport, summed this up in his arguments against what he termed *the group fallacy* – a tendency to conceive of groups as having an existence over and above their individual members. Allport argued that 'all theories which partake of the group fallacy have the unfortunate consequence of diverting attention from the true locus of cause and effect, namely the behavior mechanism of the individual' (Allport, 1924, p. 9). As Danziger (1992, p. 316) notes, Allport 'was a man with a distinctly ideological mission; for in pushing the claims for psychology he saw himself as defending the truth of individualism against the dangerous illusions of collectivism.' In this respect, the individualism embodied in early social psychology can be understood in the context of the wider individualistic ethos of US culture. By the 1950s, the advent of the Cold War with the communist Soviet Union led to further implicit pressures to highlight the dangers of 'the social' (Samelson, 1986), and it is against this backdrop that the classic work on social influence from the 1950s to the 1970s needs to be understood. Rather than dispassionately applying experimental methodology to uncover universal truths, researchers were producing findings that were very much in keeping with the tenor of their cultural and

historical location. This leads onto a third and final area of critique concerned with the limitations of experimentation.

### **The limits of experimentation**

From the late 1960s into the early 1970s, social psychology entered a period where many of its leading figures publically questioned the nature of their discipline (see Faye, 2012, for a recent historical overview). In one early critique, Kenneth Ring (1967) criticised what he saw as social psychology's 'fun and games' approach to experimentation, with clever experimental designs seeming to trump theory development and engagement with real-world issues. Milgram's work is a good example of this, with even those who tend to defend his experiments to this day acknowledging that he was no great theorist (e.g. Blass, 2004; Miller, 1986). It might appear to be more problematic to suggest that Milgram was not concerned with real-world issues given that his explicit aim was to understand what had led to the Holocaust. However, the troubling implications of this are only now beginning to be appreciated: in the absence of compelling theory, using experimental findings – however striking they may be – to try and understand something as complex as the Holocaust is extremely difficult. Recent work suggests that an over-reliance on Milgram's experiments may actually have held back our understanding of the Holocaust through the over-simplified suggestion that it was the result of 'ordinary' people either obeying orders, or fulfilling a small and seemingly insignificant role in the administrative machinery of Nazi Germany (Haslam & Reicher, 2007).

In his subsequent highly influential critique, Kenneth Gergen (1973) went even further than Ring (1967), and suggested abandoning the goal of discovering universal laws of social psychology altogether. Gergen argued that social psychology was much more like history than like the natural sciences, and as such should be concerned with the waxing and

waning of social psychological phenomena over time. Other critiques focussed on the neglected social context of experimentation (e.g. Tajfel, 1972), and while many social psychologists continued (and continue) to see experimentation as the gold standard method for knowledge generation, others began to develop alternative methodological approaches (e.g. Gergen, 1985; Harré & Secord, 1972), many of which emphasised, to a greater or lesser extent, the role of language.

Of particular importance were the initial attempts to incorporate the ideas of post-structuralism into social psychology. In emphasising the discursive production of truth, post-structuralism offered both a set of conceptual resources to make sense of how psychology as a discipline functioned as a means of knowledge production (Rose, 1999), and an alternative perspective on how the areas of concern (e.g. prejudice, personality, identity), that had typically constituted the focal points of the discipline, could be re-formulated in non-individualized terms (see the seminal work by Henriques et al., 1984). In relation to social influence, post-structuralism provided a new approach to the operation of power, most clearly exemplified in the way in which the work of Michel Foucault was used within psychology. Gough, McFadden and McDonald (2013) provide a particularly clear outline of the implications of Foucault's work for our understanding of social influence. Gough et al use the example of a university lecture to make the point that the interpersonal and group-based situations which are the focus of so much of the classic work on social influence are only part (and perhaps only a small part) of the way in which influence is exercised. A lecturer hoping to ensure that students attend class may attempt to elicit compliance through requesting that students attend, or may issue more direct instructions to attend in an attempt to elicit obedience. Or perhaps the lecturer will hope to rely on conformity – individual students will be influenced by the behaviour of their fellow students. However, none of this makes sense without the broader institutional context of university life. If students don't attend they may

be sent a letter reminding them of the importance of attendance; if they miss multiple sessions they may be called in for a formal meeting with a tutor and issued with a warning concerning their engagement with the course. Missed lectures may result in fellow students reacting negatively, especially if there is an expectation that students work in groups and there is a perception that some students are not pulling their weight. Ultimately, students may be unable to do well in assessed work if they do not attend lectures, meaning that their participation in higher education itself may be in jeopardy. If this happens to too many students the lecturer will be likely to find her/himself the subject of increased scrutiny from university management; if such a situation continues for too long then ‘capability assessments’ may be undertaken to ascertain if the lecturer is doing a good enough job. Ultimately, if we understand behaviour in such situations purely in terms of processes of individual or group influence, then we miss the arguably more important institutional context in which it takes place.

Other researchers appropriated related ideas and developed them in slightly different ways. Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) landmark text developed a perspective on the analysis of discourse that paid more attention to the empirical study of discourse in action than is the case in many Foucauldian accounts. At around the same time, Billig (1987; Billig et al, 1988) was developing a perspective on ideology which was critical of approaches (including post-structuralism) which seemed to imply that social actors were passive recipients of broad cultural discourses, or in Billig et al’s (1988) memorable term, ‘ideological dupes’. Billig noted that, rather than being a monolithic entity that dictated people’s thought, ideology actually furnishes us with contrary themes which enable us to engage in arguing and thinking. In the rest of this chapter we focus on critical social psychological approaches to social influence that have sought to develop the implications of the discursive and rhetorical critiques.

### **Discourse, rhetoric and social influence**

The research agenda of discursive psychology has been shaped by two broad aims: the exploration of ‘the psychological thesaurus’; and the respecification of core psychological concepts (Edwards, 2005). Exploration of the practical use of ‘the psychological thesaurus’ has involved analysing what speakers achieve through the use of psychological terms. For example, researchers can look for emotional words and consider how terms such as ‘grief’ or ‘jealousy’ are used within interactions (e.g. Edwards, 1999).

Respecification, on the other hand, involves a critical assessment of the traditional meaning of a psychological concept with reference to the way in which it is manifested in discourse. For example, an attitude might traditionally be defined as a singular evaluative position on a particular issue (see McVittie & McKinlay, this volume). A researcher can look for descriptions of evaluative positions in discourse to see whether these are done in talk as they are described in theory – and it appears not, as attitudes are often ‘hedged’ (Strauss 2004; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) which frequently involves an acknowledgement of an alternative position. Even more problematically, the variability of evaluative statements in discourse highlights the difficulty of sustaining the notion of a consistent, enduring attitude (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Indeed, other social actions seem to be more important than consistency in talk, such as saving face (Goffman 1967) or being polite (Brown & Levinson 1987).

However, in terms of social influence, a unique challenge is presented. In contrast to topics such as attitudes, scripts, or emotions, the topic of social influence reflects a process. That is, in traditional social psychology it is conceptualised as a change of state – one person’s beliefs and/or behaviours are somehow changed by an intervention from another person or people. This is further complicated when we attempt to differentiate social

influence from other forms of communication. When we use discourse we are engaged in the creation of meaning, and it is therefore arguable that everything involves social influence. This problem is unique for social influence, and arguably has meant that discursive re-specification of social influence has been less developed than other core psychological concepts. However, some researchers have started to take up this challenge, and we will now explore the progress made in re-specifying social influence from a discursive perspective.

In line with the research agenda of discursive psychology, two main areas of research can be identified. First, some studies have considered how people construct forms of influence in other people, and the functions that such constructions perform. For example, Horton-Salway (2007) examined how people reporting symptoms of myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) have been described as ‘jumping on the bandwagon’ in seeking a diagnosis of ME. Such a description shows how discourses of influence might be used to cast doubt on someone’s account, and how the construction of ‘influenced’ behaviour can be used to bring a person’s identity into question. Thus, the status of a belief or behaviour as being the product of influence is likely to be contentious and subject to contestation (see also Figgou, 2013).

A second group of studies have focused on the actual practices of social influence. For example, Arber (2008) analyses how different questions used in organisational team meetings can be influential in enabling people to ‘get their point over’. However, much of this work does not engage directly with mainstream social psychological research on social influence. A notable exception to this is Hepburn and Potter (2011), who explored how parents used threats in an effort to get their reluctant children to eat during family mealtimes. From their corpus they suggested that a threat follows an ‘if x then y’ structure. For example: “if you carry on whinging and whining during breakfast time I’ll send you to the bottom step” (Hepburn & Potter, 2011, p. 105). Hepburn and Potter suggested that traditional approaches

to social influence research have not explored what researchers actually mean by concepts such as threats (in addition to overlooking the interactional context). They argue that through the study of naturalistic interactions such as family mealtimes it becomes possible to explore these concepts in more detail.

Hepburn and Potter make it clear that their research is not intended as a comprehensive discursive re-specification of social influence, but rather as an attempt to sketch out some of the conceptual and analytic issues with which social influence research will need to engage as it comes into contact with the discursive perspective. In the next section of this chapter, we explore two recent attempts to take this process of re-specification further. First, we consider an attempt to use Billig's rhetorical perspective to reinterpret one of the classics of the social influence literature; second, we outline a study which develops Hepburn and Potter's arguments for exploring social influence in 'real life' settings.

### **A rhetorical approach to Milgram's 'obedience' experiments**

In recent years researchers have begun to make increasing use of the wealth of materials held in the Yale University archives relating to the 'obedience' experiments (e.g. Haslam, Reicher, Millard, & McDonald, 2015; Hollander, 2015; Millard, 2014; Nicholson, 2011; Perry, 2012; Russell, 2011, 2014). Of particular note, the archives hold audio recordings of many of Milgram's experimental sessions. Gibson (2013a, b, 2014, 2015, in press) has used a selection of these recordings in order to explore the way in which the experimental encounters can be analysed as occasions for rhetoric: participants seek to mobilise arguments to try and extricate themselves from the experiment; the experimenter does the same in an attempt to persuade the participant to continue administering electric shocks. Indeed, once we begin to pay attention to the rhetorical aspects of the interactions, other aspects of the received wisdom surrounding the experiments can also be called into

question. As an example, consider the following extract from the ‘voice-feedback’ condition (Milgram, 1965, 1974) which follows the same basic procedure as the best-known variants of Milgram’s experiment described above. The extract begins with the naïve participant, in the role of teacher (T), about to administer a shock to the learner (L), under the watchful eye of the experimenter (E)<sup>1</sup>:

Extract 1

- 1 T: I’m going to administer a hundred and twenty  
 2 volts.  
 3 ((SHOCK))  
 4 L: URGH! Hey these really hurt.  
 5 (3)  
 6 T: I don’t think I wanna, be a part of this anymore.  
 7 (2)  
 8 E: Please continue.  
 9 T: No.  
 10 (11)  
 11 E: It’s absolutely essential that you go on.  
 12 (2)  
 13 T: Well if he says it’s all right it’s all right with me  
 14 will you ask him if he wants to go on?  
 15 (3)  
 16 E: Whether the learner likes it or not er, we must

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<sup>1</sup> In the transcripts of Milgram’s ‘obedience’ experiments, numbers in parentheses indicate time silences; comments in double parentheses are transcribers’ notes.



- 17           continue.
- 18    T:    I wouldn't contin-
- 19    E:    ((inaudible))-
- 20    T:    I wouldn't continue without asking him.
- 21           (2)
- 22    E:    As I explained to both er, er to him when you were
- 23           there, er although the shocks may be extremely
- 24           painful there is no permanent tissue damage.
- 25    T:    Well I still th- I still don't want to go on unless he
- 26           says all right.
- 27           (52) ((During this time period movement can be
- 28           heard, and what sounds like a door shutting.
- 29           From what follows it seems reasonable to
- 30           presume that E went out of the room, ostensibly
- 31           to ask L if he wished to continue))
- 32    E:    He seems willing enough to go on so please
- 33           continue.
- 34           (8)
- 35    T:    Wet, night, grass, duck, cloth.

For present purposes, two things are worthy of note about this exchange. First, it is clear that there is a major departure from standardization here. Nowhere in his published accounts of the experiments does Milgram mention this tactic of leaving the room, ostensibly to speak to the learner, in order to reassure the participant that all is well. Second, the experimenter's leaving the room is occasioned by the participant arguing that his own continued participation

in the experiment is conditional upon establishing that the learner also wishes to continue (line 13: 'if he says it's all right it's all right with me'). The experimenter's actions can thus be understood as produced in the context of a rhetorical struggle over whether the experiment is to continue or not.

The experimenter's strategy of leaving the room is successful in eliciting two further shocks from the participant, but following the 150 volt shock the learner withdraws consent and the participant again begins to defy the experimenter:

#### Extract 2

59 L: Experimenter! Get me out of here! I won't be in  
60 the experiment any more. I refuse to go on, let  
61 me out!

62 E: Please continue.

63 T: Not under those conditions. Not with him  
64 hollering.

65 E: I just checked on him, and he er, seemed pretty  
66 willing to continue so please continue.

67 T: No not unless I think, you see he's hollering in  
68 there it's just er

69 (16)

70 E: It's absolutely essential that you continue.

71 T: Well I'm not gonna continue with the man  
72 hollering that he wants to get out of there I mean  
73 er (2) it might be essential to you but it's not that  
74 essential for me.

- 75 (3)
- 76 E: I was just in there and he seemed willing enough  
77 to continue.
- 78 T: Well, that's what he says but you know it's not  
79 er
- 80 (14)
- 81 E: ((inaudible))
- 82 T: I mean i- I'd be glad to walk in there if he says to  
83 me go on I'll go on but I'm not going to go on  
84 with the man hollering in there to stop.
- 85 E: You have no other choice you must go on.
- 86 T: Well I don't say that I mean I'm just not gonna go on  
87 unless he says to go on.
- 88 E: Well we'll have to discontinue the experiment then.

Here we see further departures from standardization as the experimenter draws on the visit to the learner in order to try and persuade the participant that the learner's apparent withdrawal of consent stands in stark contrast to the fact that 'I was just in there and he seemed willing enough to continue' (lines 76-77). The participant, however, remains steadfast and provides new arguments against continuing, such as the fact that the learner is 'hollering' (lines 63-4), and the relative unimportance of the experiment to him (lines 73-4), before ultimately setting a new condition that he will continue if he can personally receive an assurance from the learner that he is willing to go on (lines 82-84). The experimenter does make use of the scripted prods (e.g. lines 70 & 85), but these are to no avail and the experiment is finally discontinued.

What does this tell us about the experiments? First, it suggests that the experimenter seems to have gone to great lengths to get people to continue administering electric shocks. The received view of a cold, calculating experimenter whose interjections were minimal save for the standardized prods is simply not sustainable in the face of this and similar examples. Second, it highlights the fact that the experimenter did not typically issue orders but rather was engaged in an exercise of persuasion. Indeed, it appears that when the experimenter did issue orders, these were only rarely obeyed (Gibson, 2013a), a finding confirmed by convergent lines of evidence from quite different theoretical perspectives (Burger, Girgis & Manning, 2011; Haslam, Reicher & Birney, 2014). We are thus faced with the possibility that, after more than 50 years of thinking that the obedience experiments show us that humans have a propensity to obey orders, they actually show us precisely the opposite: orders were much less effective than more subtle attempts at persuading participants to remain in the experiment. To the extent that obedience is defined as social influence elicited in response to a direct order, it appears that this is *not* what is going on in these experiments. Perhaps we should think carefully about whether we even continue to refer to them as the ‘obedience’ experiments at all.

### **Social influence in a livery yard**

Smart (2014) explored social influence in a livery yard (a place where people keep their horses). As organizations designed to accomplish a particular form of business (i.e. looking after horses), and featuring people with different institutionally-relevant roles (e.g. those paying to keep their horses at the yard, staffing the yard, and running the yard) they are characterised by processes of negotiation over what is best for particular horses. This setting is a relatively closed community of people and thus provides an ideal opportunity to explore social influence practices within people’s everyday lives.

A detailed ethnographic approach was taken to obtain data from the livery yard in a variety of forms (photographs, observational notes, and 210 hours of audio and visual recordings of interactions). Analysis was informed by a synthetic approach to discursive psychology (Wetherell, 2007). For present purposes, two major findings are worth noting: the problems of identifying ‘influence’, and the temporal context of influence.

### Identifying social influence in talk: The conversational context

The first challenge was to identify episodes of social influence within the recorded conversations. In traditional approaches where influence strategies such as the foot-in-the-door technique have been identified, there is an implicit assumption that influence ‘happens’ at a definable moment after the influence strategy has been used. In the livery yard conversations, however, it was not possible to identify specific occasions where influence could be said to have occurred. In fact, in line with Horton-Salway (2007), influence appeared to be something that was orientated to, rather than being evidenced in talk. As an example, consider the following extract in which Josephine and Karen, in the presence of the researcher (Cordet) are discussing what might be wrong with a particular horse (see Appendix for transcription conventions):

#### Extract 3

- |   |         |                                   |
|---|---------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | Karen:  | we are a bit unsu:re about him at |
| 2 |         | the moment °he sort of° displayed |
| 3 |         | em .hh some discomfort in his .hh |
| 4 |         | side                              |
| 5 | Cordet: | ↑ mmm                             |
| 6 | Karen:  | (um b) swishy tail                |

7                                   (.2)  
 8     Karen                   e[mm  
 9     Josephine:           [I thought he'd been bitten cos  
 10                               he kept sort of s:swinging round  
 11                               tohi ↓ >I dnnow<  
 12     Karen                   ↑ ↑ mnyea ↓

This is a small portion of an extended discussion in which the horse's owner, Karen, raises the possibility that her horse may be suffering from colic. In contrast, Josephine, a deputy manager at the yard, repeatedly suggests that an insect bite may be a better explanation for the horse's symptoms. Ultimately, then, we can understand this exchange as one in which matters of social influence are at stake, with each party seeking to convince the other of the validity of their explanation, and with each position having different implications for the course of action to be taken. In her initial explanation of the situation to Cordet, Karen frames the problem as a shared one marked by collective uncertainty (l. 1: 'we are a bit unsure'). In line 9, Josephine suggests that she had 'thought' that the horse had been bitten. By hedging her position in this way it might be suggested that Josephine is engaging in a relatively weak attempt at influence. Not only does she construct her position as subjectively based in her own 'thought[s]', rather than as a statement of fact, she also presents her position in the past tense, which leaves open the possibility that she no longer thinks this now. Nevertheless, she goes on to provide a basis for her position (i.e. 'cos he kept sort of s:swinging round'), thereby beginning the process of grounding her 'thought' in externally observable information.

Ultimately, Josephine does initiate treatment for colic, but does so in a way which positions her as still not having been persuaded that colic is the most likely explanation for the symptoms:

Extract 4

- 1     Josephine:     where's Zara  
 2     Pat:             indoors  
 3     Josephine:     I wonder if she's got liquid paraffin  
 4     Karen:          so you think  
 5     Josephine:     [I mean that won't harm  
 6     Karen:          [just do do that first  
 7     Josephine:     [If he's playing up even if it's not  
 8                     colicky or anything that won't harm  
 9                     him will him you just got to get  
 10                    it out really

In suggesting that they seek some liquid paraffin (a treatment for colic), Josephine frames this as something ‘that won’t harm ... even if it’s not colicky’ (ll. 5-8). She thus takes up a position in which she is taking the action that has been subtly advocated by Karen, but without conceding that Karen has convinced her that colic is the most likely explanation. In the language of traditional social influence research, we might say that she enables herself to perform compliance (i.e. acceding to a request) but without having been demonstrably persuaded of Karen’s view. However, from Josephine’s actions within this conversation it is very difficult to identify a precise moment of influence.

### The temporal context of influence

Moscovici (1976) showed how minorities can influence majorities if they are consistent over time. However, subsequent work has not necessarily engaged in a systematic fashion with the temporal aspects of social influence. The livery yard study revealed the importance of considering longer time periods in understanding social influence and problem solving within groups. Indeed, the repeated presentation of the same problems became part of the central practices that potentially constituted the group identity of the livery yard. Problems were presented through a particular conversational sequence that included repetition of an assessment of an issue, presentation of a problem, a solution slot and then an acceptance or avoidance of the solution. The trajectory of these repeated conversations could only be altered by key members of the yard, such as the yard owner, and therefore appeared to constitute an ‘influence order’ within the livery yard. For example, consider the ‘Gem puzzle’. Gem was a horse with recurrent lameness over a nine month period, owned by Sandra. In extract 5 we can see how changing the trajectory of the conversation from problematic to unproblematic was resisted when a solution was offered by a fellow horse owner:

#### Extract 5

- |   |         |  |
|---|---------|--|
| 1 | Eliza:  | are you having a lesson tomorrow?                      |
| 2 | Sandra: | I don't know I think (.) he wasn't as uneven as he was |
| 3 |         | in the week,   |
| 4 | Eliza:  | aha  |
| 5 | Sandra: | just a slight slight slight so I don't know.           |
| 6 |         | I don't know whether to give it another couple of days |
| 7 | Eliza:  | aha  |



- 8 Sandra: or whether to push it the trouble is if I if I push it  
 9 and I make it worse then I shall blame myself  
 10 Eliza: put a (boot) on the feet  
 11 or we just do the half private session each cause  
 12 I am worried about Charlie's saddle so if you want it to  
 13 we could both do 20 minutes  
 14 Sandra: let me br let me brood on that and I'll em  
 15 and I'll think about it

Extract 5 illustrates the typical pattern of how the 'Gem puzzle' was presented. The puzzle is initiated in line 1 as an account for why Sandra might not have a lesson the next day. Sandra repeats her assessment of the problem – that he was uneven, in lines 2 and 5. She identifies a problem in line 8: 'the trouble is...'. A solution is offered by Eliza in line 10 ('put a boot on the feet'), but this is not taken up by Sandra in lines 14 and 15 where she states that she will 'think about it'. Eliza, a fellow horse owner, is not privileged to change the trajectory of the puzzle to be unproblematic.

The repetition, or rehearsal, of these problems appears to limit both the solutions that yard members will accept and entitlement to provide solutions. Many other instances were identified where a person might attempt to offer a solution to a problem, but was resisted through statements such as 'but he does have a problem with lameness, doesn't he'. However, the yard owner was given entitlement to revise puzzles into new puzzles, and to offer solutions, as illustrated in Extract 6, a follow up to the Gem Puzzle:

#### Extract 6

- 1 Zara: >we are going to have another one joining us soon<

- 2                           aren't we
- 3     Sandra:           well hopefully yea, hopefully
- 4     Cordet:           another,
- 5     Sandra:           me e:m
- 6     Zara:             [a horse that wants to do what she wants to do
- 7     Cordet:           [you've found one have you
- 8     Sandra:           n:o I haven't found one yet but
- 9     Zara:             >she knows what she wants to do<
- 10    Sandra:          I think we're coming to the decision that,
- 11                      we've got as far as we can with, big man
- 12    Zara:             °Yes°
- 13    Sandra:          cause we just keep hitting all brick walls,
- 14                      unfortunately (.)°which is a shame but you know°°
- 15    Zara:             he's lovely but
- 16    Sandra:          but [yea,
- 17    Zara:             [you you've °got to get another°

Extract 6 is initiated by Zara, the yard owner, who provides an assessment of a new event by stating that a new horse will be arriving soon in line 1. Somewhat less certainly, Sandra acknowledges this in line 3, but as with other puzzles that are other-initiated, she does this in a more hesitant fashion than when introducing her own material. In line 4 the redoing is started by Cordet (the researcher) and expanded by Zara in line 6, who provides a repeated assessment of the new puzzle – ‘a horse that wants to do what she wants to do’. This appears to rhetorically respond to the previous repeated puzzle around Gem’s lameness, where Sandra was unable to take part in lessons, go galloping, etc. In this puzzle we see that Zara’s solution

is allowed and accepted, as opposed to the solutions offered in extract 5, and Zara's final position in line 17 ('you've got to get another') is not contested.

This temporal development of puzzles provides a new insight into understanding social influence. First, it highlights how influence occurs in a complex environment that includes a very particular construction of problems and who is entitled to offer solutions. Second, problems might not always be presented for a solution – they might be accounts for other behaviours, such as not riding. Third, their repeated nature seems also to constitute a particular yard identity – knowing these problems and discussing them as yard problems with the same language appears to be a demonstration of yard membership.

This study suggests that within everyday social contexts social influence is very much context dependent – interactionally, longitudinally, and organisationally. Its prominence or meaning becomes interactionally defined as problematic, for example, when people appear to be attempting to influence others and this is out of line with the social order of a situation, but might be made less problematic through simultaneous social actions of face saving or politeness.

### **Conclusion**

Current trends in critical work on social influence point to a fundamental re-evaluation of key concepts. For example, work on Milgram's experiments has suggested that they are *not* demonstrations of obedience as typically understood – i.e. as behavioural change elicited in response to a direct order. This inevitably raises questions regarding what, exactly, we mean by obedience. When we talk about, for example, 'obeying' the law, we generally don't assume that direct orders are needed. Rather, we are referring to a set of social rules, formalised in the institutions of law and order, that people orient their conduct around.

Even more fundamentally, the very concept of social influence itself can be shown to be problematic. The idea of one agent influencing another involves what has been described as *the conduit metaphor* (Reddy, 1979), in which individual thought influences individual action, and this action is directed towards getting another individual to ‘receive’ that thought and act accordingly. Such a view of language and communication is unsustainable when we are faced with the subtle complexities of everyday interactions, in which it is often difficult – if not impossible – to pin down exactly where and when ‘influence’ occurs. To the extent that influence involves the assumption of thoughts and actions as being the property of discrete individuals, the concept itself presupposes a set of *a priori* individualistic assumptions of the kind that have been challenged by critical approaches. Instead, future research on the area traditionally known as ‘social influence’ might be well-advised to adopt the term ‘joint action’ (e.g. Shotter, 1993), which highlights the extent to which any social practice will always and inevitably be the outcome of shared activity. The topic of influence thus becomes more interesting to the extent that social actors can be seen to *orient to* influence insofar as the conduit metaphor is itself something that is woven into the fabric of contemporary (western) assumptions about proper personhood and communication.

Indeed, in this respect, we are able to extend the critique of psychology’s individualism by highlighting the problematic status of ‘social influence’ per se. This also enables discursively-oriented researchers to respond to critiques from within critical social psychology that discursive psychology is insufficiently critical in a political sense (e.g. Hayter & Hegarty, 2015; and see some of the responses to the survey of UK critical psychologists reported in Cromby & Willis, 2011). As should be clear from the above discussion of individualistic bias within traditional social influence research, social psychology’s foundational assumptions about the nature of its subject matter are bound up with deeply political assumptions about the nature of morality (i.e. moral individuals versus

corrupting collectives). In seeking to work through an epistemological, methodological and analytic warrant for a fundamentally anti-individualistic psychology, DP is an inherently critical project. To date, direct engagement with the respecification of social influence has been minimal, but we would suggest that further developments in this respect will be at the heart of the critical project of DP in years to come.

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## Appendix

The transcripts from the livery yard study are presented in an abbreviated form of Gail Jefferson's conventions, which are widely used in conversation analysis and discursive psychology. The conventions described below are amalgamated and adapted from descriptions provided in Atkinson and Heritage (1984), Hutchby and Wooffitt (2008, pp. x-xi) and Wooffitt (2005, pp. 211-212):

(.2)	Number in brackets indicates a time gap in tenths of a second.
(.)	A dot enclosed in brackets indicates a pause in the talk of less than two-tenths of a second.
I [see] [see]	Square brackets are used to show where talk overlaps, these are aligned to show where overlap starts and finishes.
.hhh	In-breath.
:	Colons indicate that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound or letter.
(boot)	Indicates speech that is difficult to make out.
,	A comma indicates a slight fall in tone.
↑↓	Pointed arrows indicate a marked falling or rising intonational shift. They are placed immediately before the onset of the shift.
° °	Degree signs are used to indicate that the talk they encompass is spoken noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk.
< >	'Less than' and 'more than' signs are used to



enclose talk that is slower than the surrounding talk. Where these face the other way, they denote faster talk.