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Compliance: Film About a Real-Life Milgram Experiment

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Compliance: Film About a Real-Life Milgram Experiment

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Abstract

The film, *Compliance*, tells the story of a real-life Milgram experiment in which strip-search scams were perpetrated in USA fast-food restaurants. A pilot study was carried out to explore the appropriateness of the film for classroom instruction about the psychology of obedience to authority. Participants with more knowledge about Milgram's research were significantly more likely to endorse use of the film than the less knowledgeable participants. Results suggest that substantive instruction on obedience to authority is a prerequisite to using *Compliance* in the classroom.

Introduction

Compliance (Zobel, 2012) is a controversial and compelling film about one of 70 strip-search scams that occurred in fast food restaurants across the USA between 1995 and 2004 (Wolfson, 2005). The film raises questions about our human capacity for evil and how we can be better equipped to do the right thing. In the film, a con man posing as a police officer persuades the restaurant manager to hold a young female employee captive and strip-searched on the pretense that she has stolen money from a customer. Under the orders of the con man, the manager and her associates are shown subjecting the young woman to a series of increasingly degrading and humiliating physical and sexual assaults. There are significant parallels between the strip-search hoax as shown in the film and Milgram's (1964) classic laboratory research on obedience to authority. The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of these parallels and to report the results of a pilot study designed to examine student perceptions of the film and how it may be used for classroom instruction about the psychology of obedience to authority.

Background

In his famous experiments on obedience, Stanley Milgram demonstrated that ordinary people are vulnerable to obeying an authority that tells them to do something harmful to an innocent person (Milgram, 1965; Milgram, 1974). In the original experiments carried out in the early 1960's, participants in a learning experiment were assigned to play the role of a teacher who was then ordered by an experimenter to give increasingly higher shocks to a learner (an experimental confederate) for their mistakes. Participants were led to believe that the shocks were real and painful although they were not. Rates of obedience ranged from very high to very low as a function of situational rather than dispositional factors (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009; Burger, 2014)). To this point, the further away the victim (or learner) was to the teacher, where he could not be seen or heard, the higher were the rates of obedience (Milgram, 1974). In contrast, if the

teacher worked with peers as co-teachers who refused to comply with the experimenter's orders, the rates of obedience were extremely low.

Milgram's results on obedience to authority have been replicated in countries all over the world, including a recent study in the USA that produced comparable rates of obedience (Burger, 2009; Miller, 2009). The findings of Milgram's research have also been used to understand real-life occurrences of people going along with, or not challenging, an authority that tells them to do something that is wrong (Jetten & Mols, 2014). Examples of the destructive consequences of obedience range from airline crashes caused by co-pilots failing to challenge pilots making fatal flying errors (Zimbardo, 2008), corporate illegalities that could have been prevented or stopped by personnel willing to disobey or blow the whistle on corrupt superiors (Miller, 2014; Russell & Gregory, 2011), the massacre of innocent civilian noncombatants in My Lai by infantry soldiers (Kelman, & Hamilton, 1989; Milgram, 1974), and the systematic murder of millions of Jews in the Holocaust (Overy, 2014; Staub, 2014). The strip-search scams perpetrated in the fast-food restaurants are another disturbing example of susceptibility to the harmful demands of authority (Zimbardo, 2008).

Compliance (Zobel, 2012) tells the story of one of the scams that occurred at a McDonald's restaurant in Kentucky (Comstock, 2012; Wolfson, 2005, 2006). In the incident shown in the film (also captured on closed circuit video), a man who identified himself as Officer Daniels orders the Assistant Manager (Sandra) to detain an employee (Becky) accused of stealing in a rear room of the restaurant (called Chickwich in the film). During the ordeal, which goes on over several hours, Becky is stripped and subjected to a series of sexually degrading and humiliating acts, including cavity searches, spanking, and a sexual assault. All the orders are given over the telephone by the con man to Sandra, the employees (Marti and Kevin), Sandra's fiancé (Van), and the restaurant maintenance man (Harold). Early on in the film, Kevin refuses to cooperate with the con man's orders to search Becky's body. Kevin does, however, return to work, cooking and serving Chickwich customers, knowing all the while that Becky is being held naked in the back room. The ordeal is finally ended when Harold's refusal to search Becky spurs Sandra to call her regional manager who informs her that he is unaware of any police investigation. The horrific reality of the hoax is thus exposed. Deflated, afraid, and confused, Sandra, at long last, telephones the police who arrive to rescue Becky from captivity and begin the search for the con man.

There are cogent parallels between the strip-search hoax (Zobel, 2012) and the laboratory research on obedience (Milgram, 1974). From the outset, Milgram's research on obedience stirred considerable controversy, criticism, and debate (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009). Both the results and the procedure were subjected to attack. Some found his research so disturbing that they entirely rejected the results on the grounds that participants did not believe that the shocks were real (Elms, 1995). Reactions to Compliance have been similarly intense, audience members responding with anger, disbelief, outrage, and in some instances leaving the theater in disgust (Comstock, 2012). Despite the disturbing nature of the film, the story of the strip-search scam offers a compelling, contemporary extension of Milgram's research for instruction about the determinants of obedience.

Legitimate Authority

Milgram's research demonstrated the power of a legitimate authority's orders to override an individual's conscience, ethics, sympathy, empathy, guilt, and religious training. The con man posing as a police officer in Compliance certainly had the weight of legitimate authority behind his orders; even more than the laboratory experimenter, the police have the powerful authority of the law behind them. His power to command obedience was demonstrated by the willingness of the employees to perform reprehensible acts against one of their own co-workers. However hesitant they were at the start, the fast food workers complied with the orders to confine and strip Becky – an action they likely would not have done on their own even if they believed Becky had stolen money.

Responsibility

The success of the con man's manipulations rested largely on his clearly stated assumption of responsibility for the investigation of the supposed theft. As the "officer in charge" he invested his authority in Sandra and the other restaurant employees to do his bidding, repeatedly reassuring them that he was responsible for the confinement and strip search. Becky is relatively easily manipulated into compliance by threats of arrest and imprisonment. In Milgram's experiment, the importance of responsibility is seen in the actions of reluctant participants continuing to give increasingly higher shocks once reassured by the experimenter that he held full responsibility for shocking the victim. Acceptance of the experimenter's responsibility is described by Milgram (1974) as an adjustment in thinking that results in participants losing a sense of individual autonomy and control. They view themselves as agents of the authority and orient themselves to carrying out the orders of the authority. Milgram (1974) describes this as the agentic state. Shifting to the agentic state attuned the fast food workers to Officer Daniels and absolved them of responsibility for their own actions.

Moral Concern

The agentic state and the corresponding loss of responsibility for one's own actions resulted in a shift in thinking about personal morality. Milgram (1974) argues that participants following destructive orders do not judge the morality of their behavior in the same way they would if not following orders. Instead, they focus concern on how well they are performing what the authority has asked them to do. Guilt about the morality of their actions is subsumed by pride or shame about successfully carrying out the ordered actions. In Compliance, once divested of responsibility for their actions, the Chickwich employees focus on how well their performance meets the expectations of the con man rather than consideration of whether their actions are good or bad. Bandura refers to this as moral disengagement in ethical decision-making – "Under displaced responsibility, they view their actions as stemming from the dictates of authorities rather than being personally responsible for them. Because they are not the actual agent of their actions, they are spared self-condemning reactions" (Bandura, 2002, p. 106). In the Chickwich restaurant, the brutal treatment of Becky is morally justified by the sense of duty to two systems of authority – the police and the corporation.

Situational Etiquette

Milgram (1974) argues that obedience to the experimenter's orders rested partly on the situational etiquette inherent in the laboratory situation. According to this perspective, the unwritten rules that guide behavior toward authority required participants to be

polite and deferential (Goffman, 1959). Disobedience would be considered disruptive to polite social exchange – a transgression that would cause embarrassment. Avoidance of the social pain of embarrassment served to bind the participant to the experimental situation. In this regard, Milgram says that it was less painful for participants to administer shocks to the victim than to openly defy the experimenter in order to extricate themselves from the experimental situation. The obedience of the Chickwich workers may also be partially explained in terms of the situational etiquette operative in the restaurant. Reiter (1996), the sociologist who spent time as a participant observer working in a Burger King restaurant, argues that fast food workers are especially vulnerable to authority because management values obedience above independent thinking in their employees. References by Sandra to what “corporate” may or not want illustrates the underlying deference accorded to upper management. The employees’ cooperation in the strip search is illustrative of deference toward Sandra as their manager. Sandra in turn behaves consistently politely toward the pseudo police officer.

Sequential Nature of The Action

The actions of participants in the Milgram experiments unfold in a step-by-step fashion, the shock intensity increased incrementally by 15 volts from 15 to 450 volts. As higher and higher shocks are given, participants must seek to justify their actions; one form of justification is to go to the end, for if they stop, it means that all their actions to that point were wrong (Milgram, 1974). Bandura (2002) identifies this as a progressive form of moral disengagement wherein “individuals perform mildly harmful acts they can tolerate . . . through repeated enactments, the level of ruthlessness increases, until eventually acts originally regarded as ruthless can be performed with little anguish or self-censure” (p. 111). The con man’s success in commanding the strip search also depends on the sequential nature of the actions to engender compliance (Burger, 2014). First he asks for Becky’s confinement, then removal of her cell phone, then the checking of her pockets, then a search of her purse, then removal of her clothes, then a body search, and then a series of increasingly sadistic and assaultive acts.

Prods

The experimenter in Milgram’s laboratory encouraged hesitant participants to continue giving the shocks by the use of verbal prods (Burger, Girgis, & Manning, 2011). Simple directives included, “Please continue, or please go on,” and if they continued to resist, the experimenter told them, “It is absolutely essential that you continue,” or “You have no other choice, you must go on” (Milgram, 1974, p. 21). The con man in the film is shown to be a masterful manipulator in the use of prods and rationalizations. Examples of the con man’s manipulations abound throughout the film. He is alternately commanding, cajoling, threatening, and charming in engendering compliance. To begin, he cons Sandra into cooperation with the investigation by claiming that her regional manager told him that he could count on her, and he asks Sandra “can I count on you to assist the authorities . . . it’s your job . . . do you understand?” (Zobel, 2012). He goes on to threaten Becky with arrest, spending the night in jail, and a long trial, unless Sandra cooperates by doing a strip search. When Sandra continues to hesitate, the con man assures her that he is the one who has full responsibility, that she shouldn’t worry, and that doing the strip search will actually be helpful to Becky. Becky in turn is threatened with going to jail unless she submits to being strip-searched, and as Sandra explains to her, she doesn’t “have much of a choice” (Zobel, 2012). Having established his authority and enlisted their cooperation, he continues to manipulate Sandra, her employees, and her fiancé, over the next three and one half hours to engage in increasingly cruel, unethical, and illegal acts.

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Diffusion of Responsibility

In one of the experimental conditions of the obedience research, Milgram (1974) found that 90% of the participants refused to continue administering the shocks when confederates serving as co-teachers were noncompliant – one breaking off at 150 volts and the other at 210 volts. Once the participant was left to carry on alone, the two peers remained in the room observing the teacher. A norm is thus established that it is OK to disobey and the lone teacher can no longer diffuse responsibility for inflicting harm on his two peers. In contrast to this group situation, all the Chickwich workers, with the exception of Kevin, cooperate with one another in the strip search. Responsibility is diffused across Sandra, Marti, Becky, and Van. And although Kevin refuses to search Becky, he returns to work in the front of the restaurant knowing that Becky is being held naked in a back room. His failure to take further action makes him a complicit bystander. As Bandura (2002) says, “where everyone is responsible no one really feels responsible” (p. 107). Given the significant parallels between Milgram’s research and the strip search dramatized in *Compliance*, a pilot study was carried out to explore student perceptions of the film and its value for understanding the psychology of obedience.

Participants

Volunteers (12 females, 8 males) were solicited in 2014 in classrooms of a private northeastern university in the USA for participation in a social psychology investigation. They ranged between 18 and 67 years of age, with a mean of 26.4 years and a median of 21 years.

Procedure

Pre-Video/Lecture Assessment

In order to assess knowledge about the obedience to authority research, participants rated how knowledgeable they were about Milgram’s research and how valuable they thought it was for understanding obedience to authority in everyday life. Ratings were given on 7-point Likert scales ranging from “not at all” to “very”. They also answered five knowledge questions about the obedience to authority research.

Video/Information on Obedience to Authority

The participants viewed a short film clip by Zimbardo (Annenberg Learner, 2001) about Milgram’s research, followed by an extended video clip showing one disobedient and one obedient participant in the film of the original obedience experiment (Milgram, 1965). Next the participants were provided with a brief summary of Milgram’s obedience to authority research.

Post-Video Information Assessment

Participants re-rated how knowledgeable they were about Milgram’s research and how valuable they thought it was for understanding obedience to authority in everyday life. Participants responded a second time to the five knowledge questions about the obedience to authority research.

Pre-Assessment of knowledge about Strip-Search Scam

The participants indicated on a 7-point likert scale how familiar they were with the strip-search scams perpetrated at fast-food restaurants in the USA. Participants answered Yes or No about having seen the *Compliance* film.

Instruction about Viewing Compliance

Prior to viewing the film, the participants received a brief synopsis of the film.

Post Test About Compliance Film

After they viewed the film, participants were asked to: (a) Assign Responsibility/Causes for the Strip-Search Scam; (b) Explain why the fast-food employees complied with the orders of Officer Daniels to confine and strip-search the young woman; (c) Explain why Becky complied with being strip-searched; (d) Rate how much the film enhances understanding of obedience to

authority in real life situations. (e) Rate the appropriateness of Compliance for teaching students about Obedience to Authority.

Results

For this analysis, participants were divided into two groups based on knowledge about the obedience to authority research and whether or not they had previously seen the Compliance film. The 6 participants who had previously seen the complete film comprise the Knowledgeable group, and the 14 participants who had not seen the film are the Naïve group. Results showing participants' Pre and Post Lecture answers to the knowledge questions in Table 1 are consistent with dividing participants this way.

Table 1
Percentage of correct answers on knowledge questions
about obedience to authority research.

Questions	Pre-Lecture Answers		Post-Lecture Answers	
	Naïve Group n = 14	Knowledgeable Group n = 6	Naïve Group n = 14	Knowledgeable Group n = 6
1	57%	100%	93%	100%
2	64%	83%	76%	100%
3	64%	100%	100%	100%
4	71%	100%	86%	100%
5	60%	100%	100%	100%

As shown in the Table, the Knowledgeable group had correct answers to all the questions except for question 2 in the Pre-Lecture (83% correct). In contrast, the results for the Naïve group show a higher rate of Pre and Post-Lecture errors than the

Knowledgeable group. Of note, Table 1 shows that the Naïve group improved performance on the questions after the lecture, video, and informational material. Participants' views on the appropriateness of using Compliance in the classroom are shown in Table 2. There it can be seen that both the Knowledgeable ($M = 5.8$ vs. 6.8) and Naïve group ($M = 4.3$ vs. 5.5) rate the film as more appropriate for college vs. high school students.

Table 2
Mean ratings of the appropriateness of compliance for classroom instructions.

Group	Appropriateness for High School		Appropriateness for College		Enhanced Knowledge	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Knowledgeable	5.8	.98	6.8	0.4	6.6	.51
Naïve	4.3	2.0	5.5	1.4	5.3	1.5
Total	4.8	1.8	5.9	1.3	5.7	1.4

Most importantly, answers to the Yes/No question about recommending using video clips of Compliance to teach students about obedience to authority showed that the Knowledgeable group (100%) was significantly more likely to endorse use of the film than the Naïve group (43%), $p < .04$ (Fisher's Exact Test).

Figure 1 shows how each of the two groups assigned responsibility for the strip-search.

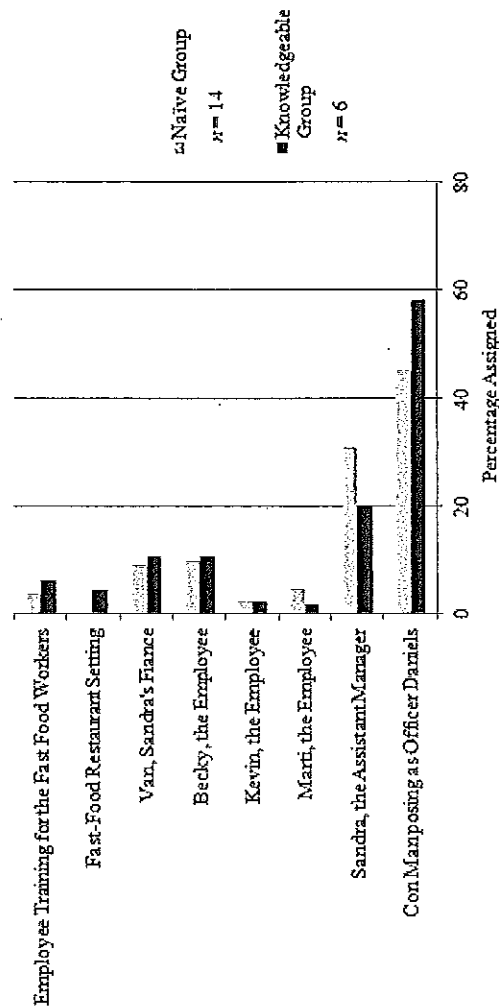


Figure 1. Percentage of assigned responsibility by each group for the strip-search.

The pattern of these results shows that both the Knowledgeable and Naïve groups assigned most of the responsibility to the con man (58.33% and 45%) and to Sandra, the manager (20% and 30.7%), than to all other causes. While the causes for the strip search were dispersed across all of the people involved in the strip search, the Knowledgeable group assigned 10.7% of the responsibility to Employee Training and the Fast-Food restaurant setting compared to the 3.7% assignment given by the Naïve group to these situational causes. As one participant in the knowledgeable group stated:

I believe that the highly cog-in-the-machine like environment caused the people to think of themselves as less responsible. The uniforms they wear make them less individual

and the general environment of work at a fast food place makes employees feel deindividuated. I also feel that the orders of "officer Daniels", along with the promises he made led the employees to feel that the situation was out of their control and not their responsibility.

In this regard, the causes cited by knowledgeable participants appear to reflect a nuanced view of the fast-food industry and the training of its employees. This is in contrast to those less knowledgeable about the social psychology of obedience that focused primarily on the authority holding power and control.

Conclusion

Although limited by the small sample, the findings suggest that substantive instruction on the obedience to authority research is required before using Compliance in the classroom. The film does offer a springboard for enhancing students' understanding of human vulnerability to the demands of authority and the situational determinants of obedience. This is valuable for a variety of courses in the humanities and behavioral sciences.

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