

Excessive Resistance?

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Like many of my colleagues, I was surprised to learn that Jerry Burger received IRB approval to partially replicate Stanley Milgram's obedience research. Although I was excited to discover if people in today's society would be obedient, I could not understand how the methods would allow the investigators to protect the rights of the participants. In "Replicating Milgram" (*Observer*, Vol. 20, No. 11), Burger did a great job describing how he accomplished this seemingly impossible feat. Most of his methodological adjustments represented reasonable compromises between experimental rigor and basic human safeguards. However, participants in Burger's study met excessive resistance when they tried to discontinue their involvement. In my opinion, this fact renders the revised procedure unacceptable and unethical.

Although the investigators told participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time, their actions during the experiment were inconsistent with that advice. True to Milgram's methodology, the investigators actively prodded participants when they disobeyed. For example, in the research footage shown on ABC's *Primetime* (January 3, 2007), the experimenter prodded a participant to continue the procedure by stating, "You have no other choice. You must continue." In another scene, a participant had to rise from his chair and begin walking to the exit before the experimenter ended the session.

Requests for withdrawal should be honored promptly and without debate. Unfortunately, studies testing the limits of obedience are directly at odds with this basic human safeguard.