ORIGINAL PAPER

Disobeying Orders' as Responsible Leadership: Revisiting Churchill, Percival and the Fall of Singapore

Amy L. Fraher[1]

Abstract

In many organizations, subsidiary performance goals are developed remotely by optimistic leaders back at headquarters, leaving deployed managers vulnerable to unrealistic operational expectations on the frontline, unable to follow orders. Most management research categorizes employees' failure to follow workplace directives as deviant behavior. In contrast, I argue that in some circumstances 'disobeying orders' should be considered a virtuous, responsible leadership strategy when facing unachievable tasks. Through a historical analysis of the surrender of the British colony Singapore to Japan during World War II, this paper links *pro-social rule breaking* (PSRB), productive resistance, and responsible leadership literatures, developing a process model that explains how some deployed leaders cope with ethical dilemmas in virtuous ways by 'disobeying orders'.

Keywords Responsible leadership · Pro-social rule breaking (PSRB) · Organizational deviance

Introduction

Globalization presents significant organizing challenges for frontline managers (Voegtlin et al. 2012). This paper investigates one challenging aspect of organizing in our globalized world today: Determining how to accomplish the organization's vision in real-time on the frontline. Frontline managers play a pivotal role in carrying out an organization's strategy by supervising people and managing resources on a daily basis in real-time, serving as a liaison between upper management and employees. Frontline managers' tasks include training, job assignments, performance feedback, monitoring targets and modifying tasks as required, and providing status reports by communicating up, down and across the organization. This job can be particularly challenging in *multinational organizations* (MNOs), defined as having assets in one or more countries around the world outside of their home nation (Doz and Prahalad 1991). In MNOs, subsidiary performance goals are often developed by remote leaders, leaving managers overseas vulnerable to unrealistic—and perhaps even unattainable—performance expectations set by optimistic leaders back at headquarters (Gupta and

Govindarajan 1991; Kostova et al. 2008). Most management research categorizes employees' failure to follow directives in the workplace as deviant (Robinson and Bennett 1995). In contrast, this paper argues that in some circumstances 'disobeying orders' could be considered a responsible leadership strategy when facing unachievable tasks.

The clash between frontline realities and back home fantasies can create ethical quandaries for deployed personnel that lack elegant resolution (Johnson 1995; Johnson et al. 2005). Broadening the traditional view of the leader–follower relationship, Maak and Pless (2006, p. 103) define "responsible leadership" as ''a relational and ethical phenomenon, which occurs in social processes of interaction with those who affect or are affected by leadership and have a stake in the purpose and vision of the leadership relationship.'' Cameron (2011, p. 30) adds that "responsible leadership" involves "virtuousness" which requires leaders to proactively seek the best outcome for all stakeholders: "Avoiding the bad is not the same as pursuing the good". Highlighting virtuousness is helpful in this discussion because it refocuses the level of leadership analysis, prompting the question: to whom are leaders ultimately responsible (Freeman and Auster 2011; Pless and Maak 2011; Waldman and Galvin 2008)? Examining the multilevel aspects of responsible leadership remains a relatively underdeveloped area (Voegtlin et al. 2012; Wang and Hackett 2016).

✉ Amy L. Fraher
  amy@amyfraher.com
  http://www.amyfraher.com

1 Connecticut, USA

Although responsibility is a fundamental concept in the study of business ethics (Cameron 2011; Seeger and Ulmer 2003; Waldman 2011), there is little research about the ethical challenge's frontline managers encounter following—or *not following*—remote leaders' orders in real-time. To address this shortcoming, this paper draws upon Morrison's (2006) concept of *pro-social rule breaking* (PSRB) to theorize about the process of 'disobeying orders'. Morrison (2006, pp. 7–8) defines PSRB as the:

> Intentional violation of a formal organizational policy, regulation, or prohibition with the primary intention of promoting the welfare of the organization or one of its stakeholders. Such behavior reflects a desire to do things better or to 'do good' in the context of one's organizational role.

I argue here that, in some contexts, 'disobeying an order' is evidence of the virtuousness of a responsible leader, or what Cameron (2011, p. 26) defines as "leadership oriented toward being and doing good".

Vardaman et al. (2014) note, although there is a growing interest in PSRB in management research, the drivers of the complex decision-making processes underpinning employee's rule breaking remains largely unexplored. These authors argue, rather than involving a clear choice between right and wrong, the PSRB processes often involve embedded ethical dilemmas which pit one bad option against another equally onerous alternative. "The lacuna in our understanding of PSRB suggests theorizing on these issues (and others) is much-needed" (Vardaman et al. 2014, p. 109).

To address this shortcoming, advancing both PSRB and responsible leadership theory, I explore the research question: How do frontline managers in remote locations cope with unachievable tasks? I investigate this question by adopting Weick's (1989, p. 516) "disciplined imagination" approach while conducting an historical analysis of the fall of Singapore—a British colony since 1819—to Japan during World War II (WWII). Clark and Rowlinson (2004, p. 331) observe that there has been "an increasing call for an historical perspective in organisation studies" in the last decade or so. This 'historic turn' enables researchers to reflexively assess organizational structures, behaviors, and narratives, not as fixed and predetermined, but rather as the result of specific decisions made at key points in the past (Kieser 1994). If researchers do not challenge previous interpretations of history, we are in danger of overlooking alternative and perhaps more uncomfortable influences such as scapegoating, racism, misogyny, colonialism, and other examples of power dynamics and exploitation. Therefore, an historical analysis such as the one conducted here allows researchers to challenge narratives, causalities and ideologies previously held as incontrovertible, offering insightful reinterpretations of historical events that produce new theories about organizations and organizing.

The Fall of Singapore

In 1941, Britain struggled to cope with battles in Europe, North Africa and East Asia, suffering devastating losses along the Malaya peninsula, later called Malaysia. Prime Minister Winston Churchill sent a dire telegram to his Army Generals in Singapore:

> There must at this stage be no thought of saving troops or sparing the population. The battle must be fought to the bitter end at all costs…Officers should die with their troops. The honour of the British Empire and of the British Army is at stake.
> (Churchill Archives)

Nevertheless, 5 days later Churchill's Generals surrendered Singapore to the Japanese.

Back in London, Churchill (1951, p. 81) was livid, calling the surrender "the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history". After the war, Churchill vowed to launch a full investigation. Yet, none was ever conducted. And, with Churchill's assistance, much of the blame for the fall of Singapore conveniently fell onto one man: British Army Lieutenant General Arthur E. Percival, the commanding officer. Percival was often maligned by his critics for being weak, inexperienced and cowardly, and many military historians agree with Churchill's characterization describing the surrender as a "pusillanimous British failure" (Hack and Blackburn 2003, p. 8) and "the greatest national humiliation ever suffered by Britain" (Kirby 1971, p. xiii).

However, other historians disagree providing ample evidence that Percival was an avid sportsman, experienced in warfare, brave in battle and composed under pressure (Kinvig 1996; Smyth 1971). These authors describe the battle of Singapore as "hopeless from the beginning" because Churchill and his London War Office never developed a viable defense plan for protection of its Far East territories and, in the heat of battle, diverted critically important resources to other battlefronts closer to home (Callahan 1977, p. 9). They characterize Percival as a convenient scapegoat who was unable to meet improbable performance goals and unrealistic expectations which were developed remotely by uninformed, optimistic leaders back in Britain (Hack and Blackburn 2003; Kinvig 1996; Smyth 1971). Expanding this critique, I propose the fall of Singapore as a form of PSRB in which Percival, as a responsible leader, intentionally disregarded a formal organizational directive from Churchill not to surrender, in order to ensure the survival of the city of Singapore and the lives of millions of civilians and military personnel. My aim in the ensuing discussion is to provide a novel framework with which to analyze and

explain modalities of resistance such as these that have not yet been extensively explored in management and organization studies.

Rule Breaking

For over twenty five years, management scholars have studied workplace rule breaking, typically considering these employee behaviors as 'deviant', defined as "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both" (Robinson and Bennett 1995, p. 556). Studies often suggest ways to reduce employee rule breaking in the workplace assuming that following managers' orders is critical for organizations to function effectively (Bennett and Robinson 2000; Derfler-Rozin et al. 2016; Tyler and Blader 2005). However, labelling rule breaking as deviant is problematic because it infers that any employee behaviors that violate organizational norms and expectations—no matter how impractical or unethical those expectations might be—constitutes deviance. This shortcoming led scholars to offer new perspectives on workplace deviance.

For example, Warren (2003, p. 622) theorizes "Just as the behavior of one individual can destroy a firm, the behavior of another may save it…Individuals who deviate from norms of silence by voicing concerns may not only rescue an organization from failure but also save human lives". In addition, scholars note, as work becomes more dynamic and decentralized, employee voice, initiative and proactive decision making becomes even more critical to organizational success particularly during periods of uncertainty when employees can spontaneously and voluntarily take an active role in shaping favorable outcomes (Brief and Motowidlo 1986; Crant 2000). Other studies emphasize the importance of speaking-up, empowerment and encouraging employee initiative (Morrison et al. 2003), particularly in risky professions such as medicine (Edmondson 2003), the military and aviation (Fraher 2011, 2020). Yet, few scholars have investigated the process by which rule-breaking might unfold in real time. In this paper, I challenge the assumption that rule breakers are deviants proposing that, under certain circumstances, intentionally disobeying orders is not bad behavior but rather a productive form of 'counter-role behavior' (Staw and Boettger 1990); what Morrison (2006) defines as PSRB. However, there are shortcomings in PSRB's theoretical development (see Table 1).

First, most PSRB studies use either hypothetical cases from everyday life such as retail employees or restaurant workers violating management policies or controlled laboratory experiments with volunteers (Dahling et al. 2012; Morrison 2006). Examples include a waiter attempting to console an irate customer by offering free food, a manager paying a worker early so she has money for vacation, or an office employee buying products from an unapproved vendor in an effort to save the company money.

Second, many PSRB papers involve extended literature reviews without offering any empirical material from the study of real organizations (Bryant et al. 2010; Vadera et al. 2013; Vardaman et al. 2014). Admittedly, studying the dynamics of PSRB in real time is challenging and studies that do involve fieldwork typically collect empirical materials from students, alumni or university environments (Dahling et al. 2012; Morrison 2006).

Third, "despite recent interest in PSRB, research on its antecedents has been fairly limited" (Vardaman et al. 2014, p. 109). Studies document certain conditions that may increase an individual's propensity to engage in PSRB such as preexisting personality traits, an ethical workplace climate, or high levels if employee job autonomy (Baskin et al. 2015; Dahling et al. 2012; Morrison 2006; Parks et al. 2010; Vardaman et al. 2014). Yet, aside from survey studies of workers in restaurants (Curtis 2014)

Table 1 Pro-social rule breaking (PSRB) literature

References	Contribution to pro-social rule breaking (PSRB)
Morrison (2006)	Hypothetical scenarios; interviews about rule-breaking behavior; MBA student survey of PSRB
Bryant et al. (2010)	Hypothetical scenarios; extended literature review; discussion of unintended side-effects of PSRB
Parks et al. (2010)	Hypothetical scenarios; develops form of PSRB 'organisational expedience'; employees ignore rules in pursuit of desired objectives [e.g. ends justify means]
Dahling et al. (2012)	Hypothetical scenarios; university employee survey and undergraduate business student survey of PSRB
Vadera et al. (2013)	Literature review of umbrella term 'constructive derivative' which includes PSRB
Vardaman et al. (2014)	Hypothetical scenarios; extended literature review; discussion of antecedents of PSRB
Youli et al. (2014)	Hypothetical scenarios; survey of variety of Chinese Organisations and PSRB
Curtis (2014)	Survey of restaurant workers and PSRB
Baskin et al. (2015)	Influence of 'ethical work climate' on PSRB as rule-breaking without deviant intentions. Survey of public and private sector HR professionals
Chen et al. (2019)	Examines interrelatedness of PSRB in leader–follower dyads in survey of graduate students and their supervisor in Chinese University

and Chinese companies (Youli et al. 2014), few scholars attempt to investigate PSRB behaviors of real employees working on the frontline in actual organizations.

Finally, few PSRB studies examine the process by which rule breaking occurs or how it could be proactively addressed within organizations. Rather, studies seem to just observe that rule-breaking exists as a purportedly natural by-product of organizational life.

In this paper I develop a model that attempts to explain the PSRB process, hypothesizing that there are often ample opportunities for virtuous leaders to address the motivating forces before a PSRB incident occurs, removing the need for employees to break rules. This perspective is not often addressed in PSRB or responsible leadership literature. Thus, although we know that PSRB exists in organizations, we do not know much about the underlying processes such as what leads employees to violate rules in real time on the frontline or what leaders might do about it (Bolino and Grant 2016).

Productive Resistance

Although PSRB scholars do not typically link rule-breaking and ethics, *Critical Management Studies* (CMS) scholars note employee rule breaking can be a form of productive resistance to managerial control and are often manifestations of the ethical dilemmas people struggle to reconcile in their everyday work experiences (Courpasson et al. 2012; Fleming and Spicer 2003, 2007). Zoller and Fairhurst (2007, p. 1355) note productive resistance should be conceptualized as a unique form of leadership: "resistance leadership emerges from dynamic and evolving relationships *among resistors* as well as *between resistors and their targets*, yet always in particular social and historical contexts". For example, employee resistance such as work-to-rules slowdowns, strikes, and whistle-blowing can be interpreted as leadership interventions designed to foster workplace change. And micro-forms of workplace resistance such as jokes, cynicism, gossip, and horseplay can serve as employee coping mechanisms, empowering employees to take back control (Collinson 1988; Fleming 2005; Prasad and Prasad 2000). Numerous CMS authors note that the pervasive expansion of workplace control mechanisms in increasingly insidious ways has made resistance an inherent part of everyday organizational life and therefore a fruitful area of management research (Casey 1999; Fleming and Sewell 2002; Gabriel 1999). This ubiquity led scholars to identify subtle (Ybema and Horvers 2017), informal and routine (Prasad and Prasad 2000), and 'decaffeinated' (Contu 2008) forms of employee resistance in the workplace.

Risky Work Settings

Yet, aside from studies conducted by Ashcraft (2005) and Fraher and Gabriel (2016) in aviation and McMurray et al. (2011) and Harding et al. (2017) in the UK National Health Service, few CMS scholars explore the unique nature of workplace resistance—along with the associated life or death implications—in risky fields of work. Ashcraft (2005) was perhaps the first CMS scholar to document the unique nature of resistance in risky workplaces by examining how airline pilots resisted feelings of emasculation by embracing, rather than rejecting, organizational efforts to broaden crew empowerment that might have threaten captains' authority, identity and air safety. Similarly, Fraher and Gabriel (2016) reported that commercial pilots actively participated in panoptic organizational discourses aimed at creating loyal airline employees, initially engaging in their own subjectivation. Yet, after experiencing company restructuring and layoffs, pilots modified their thinking and behavior to maintain a sense of power, agency and identity. Thus, contrary to previous organization studies that often reported employees complicit rather than resistant to managerial control efforts (Casey 1999; Gabriel 1999), both of these aviation studies found unique examples of resistance in which airline employees took back control, reframing power dynamics, and resisting further subjugation as a safety bottom line. Consistent with Kondo (1990) and Fraher and Gabriel (2014), studies note that a majority of employees' resistance occurred within established mechanisms of power—for example, pilots continued to safely fly airplanes according to regulations while wearing proper uniforms—rather than seeking more radical and potentially life threatening means of resistance.

McMurray et al. (2011) studied healthcare emphasizing the connection between employees' acts of resistance and their sense of ethical responsibility to one another in real life engagements at work. The ethical subject, these authors note, is one who is willing to engage in action and resistance on behalf of the collective in response to an experience of injustice without retreating to self-importance or ethical righteousness. Similarly, Harding et al. (2017) offered a performative theory that details how workplace resistance emerges moment-to-moment in co-constitutive ways, hypothesizing resisters retain the power to 'say no' to organizational requirements. Both of these NHS studies emphasize that there is never a pure ethical place when confronting organizational challenges, therefore compromise is inevitable, requiring people to work through the conflicts between their different ethical paradigms. Thus, managers and employees co-produce the organization's future together through ongoing engagement and resistance.

In summary, all four studies of risky work environments note employees develop a sense of ethical responsibility

to one another, recognizing their professional obligation to the collective, and the need to strike a balance between action and resistance in order to avoid danger. Scholars have recently called for further research examining the interrelatedness of ethics and resistance in organizations (Alakavuklar and Alamgir 2018) as well as theorizing ethics as a form of practice, thereby moving beyond philosophical and morally relative debates (Clegg et al. 2007; Velthouse and Kandogan 2007). Yet, Mumby (2005) observes most resistance research misses the mark by focusing on dualistic control–resistance relationships, creating artificial binaries that either a) justify the importance of managerial control or b) glorify employee resistance to managerial domination. Similarly, Courpasson et al. (2012) contend recent studies do not typically go far enough examining the diverse forms of workplace resistance, in particular, investigating 'productive' forms of resistance coproduced in organizations. Reframing resistance from a deviant behavior to a constructive one aimed at seeking positive solutions to organizational problems, highlights the virtuous leadership processes embedded within these dynamics. Yet few papers explain how, exactly, resistance can create changes that significantly challenge top management decisions, thereby influencing organizational outcomes. In this paper, I address this shortcoming in the literature by offering a diagram of how resistance in the form of disobeying an order was coproduced in real time.

Sources and Methods

Weick (1989, p. 529) advises: "Organizations are complex, dynamic, and difficult to observe, which means that whenever we think about them, the thinking will be guided by indirect evidence and visualizations of what they may be like", often captured in images, narratives, stories and metaphors. I embrace Weick's "disciplined imagination" approach in this historical analysis in an effort to be more innovative and imaginative about management research, deliberately challenging assumptions underlying existing theories and interpretations (Alvesson and Sandberg 2013). To accomplish this, I predominantly focused on empirical materials in the Churchill Archives Centre at Churchill College in Cambridge, Lieutenant-General Percival's personal papers in the Imperial War Museum (IWM) archives in London, and the extensive published materials about WWII in books, newspapers, and documentaries. Memoirs authored by Churchill (1950, 1951), Percival (1949) and people who served with them, such as Churchill's personal physician Lord Charles Moran (1966) and Percival's fellow servicemen such as General Kirby (1971) and General Wainwright (1945), proved particularly informative.

My research process began by familiarizing myself with WWII history, particularly the war in East Asia, and I visited several war museums and memorials in Singapore and the UK. After establishing a solid level of foundational knowledge, I was able to narrow the focus of the vast archival collections in Cambridge and the IWM by searching for communications between Churchill and Percival, communications between Churchill and others about General Percival, and all references to the fall of Singapore. This process enabled me to identify and review twenty-seven references at the Churchill Archives and fourteen boxes of documents at the IWM; in total several hundred pages of documents and photographs, many of which were original wartime correspondence previously classified as Top Secret. I organized this extensive amount of material by creating a chronology of events and communications, synthesizing findings to create Table 2. My aim was to understand the choices and motivations of historical actors by analyzing their experiences as they unfolded in real time.

Archival Research

Historical archives provide a rich, detailed, contextualized understanding of a particular human experience in a specific time and place. This research approach is helpful because some issues can only be studied in retrospect. For example, it is difficult for researchers to analyze the thoughts, behaviors and motivations underpinning leadership challenges and ethical dilemmas as they unfold in real-time, especially in risky work settings. Conducting a historical analysis provides the time and distance to gather reliable information, consider its relevance and thoughtfully interpret its meaning, with the benefit of hindsight.

By definition, archives consist of empirical materials specifically assembled and retained in a distinct location for the purpose of preserving a history (Mills and Mills 2017). Archives are a valuable resource for management researchers, offering a unique window into the past often unavailable via any other means. However, by selectively retaining and displaying some historical artifacts for researcher interpretation and not others, archival materials do not present unbiased interpretations of past events. Liu and Grey (2018, p. 647) note, "what is recorded and kept is a social construction". Thus museums, memorials and archives do not offer a neutral interpretation of the past. Rather, they convey a particular set of values and priorities that reflect the power "of the present to control what the future will know of the past" (Schwartz and Cook 2002, p. 13). In addition, because archives often offer potentially overwhelming amounts of empirical materials, individual researchers must use catalogue listings and document descriptions to narrow their search, naturally selecting some materials to review while disregarding others. Moreover, some voices, stories

Table 2 Timeline and communications

Approx. dates	Communication between	Comments[a]
1941		
Dec 2	*HMS Prince of Wales* and *HMS Repulse* arrive in Singapore to exert Royal Navy presence	
Dec 7–8	Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor Hawaii, and land troops in North Malaya, Thailand and Philippines	
Dec 10	Japanese sink *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* demonstrating air superiority; Royal Navy incapacitated	
Dec 17	Duff Cooper, Cabinet Minister, cautions Churchill	Cooper: "We cannot hope to hold the greater part of Malaya" with "our small resources"
Dec 18	British attempt to engage enemy to buy time for reinforcements to arrive	
Dec 23	British forces suffer heavy losses, retreat from North Malaya	
Dec 29	Japanese intent capturing Kuala Lumpur as Emperor's New Year's gift; British aim to slow advancement until reinforcements arrive	
1942		
Jan 3	First British reinforcements arrive in Singapore; troops are young, untrained, inexperienced in warfighting	
Jan 4	British General Archibald Wavell appointed Supreme Allied Commander, South-West Pacific, newly created command for all American British Dutch Australian (ABDA) forces	
Jan 8	British forces retreat South toward Johore	
Jan 11	British forces retreat from Kuala Lumpur	
Jan 13	Substantive reinforcements arrive: 53rd British Infantry Brigade, 51 Hurricane Fighter airplanes and pilots, 2 anti-aircraft regiments, 1 anti-tank regiment	
Jan 14	Churchill to John Curtin, Australia Prime Minister:	Churchill: "It is clearly our duty to give all support to decisions [in Malaya]. We cannot judge from our distance" [emphasis in original]
Jan 15	Churchill to Wavell:	Churchill: "What would happen in event of your being forced to withdraw" to Singapore
Jan 18	Wavell moves his headquarters from Singapore to Java; Sends discouraging signals to troops	
Jan 19	Wavell to Churchill	Wavell: "I have ordered Percival to fight…I must warn you however that I doubt whether island [ie Singapore] can be held…sorry to give you depressing picture"
Jan 20	Churchill to Wavell	Churchill: "I was greatly distressed by your [telegram]…I expect every inch of ground to be defended…and no question of surrender"
	Curtin to Churchill	Curtin: Evacuation of Singapore would be "inexcusable betrayal"
Jan 25	Wavell to Percival	Wavell: "Recent reports of heavy fighting on the Muar front show what determined resistance your troops area making against odds….no doubt that troops have inflicted severe casualties on enemy. Well done"
Jan 26	Percival to Wavell	Percival: "With our depleted strength it is difficult to withstand the enemy's ground pressure combined with continuous and practically unopposed air activity. We are fighting all the way but may be driven back into the island within a week"
Jan 30–31	British retreat from Malaya; War in Malaya ends; Battle of Singapore begins	
Feb 1–10	Japanese attack Singapore island from north and northwest	
Feb 5	Last reinforcements arrive; Australian division heading east, now reroute to Burma	
Feb 9	Wavell's last visit to Singapore; Falls and breaks his back returning to Java	
Feb 10	Churchill to Wavell	Churchill: "There must at this stage be no thought of saving troops or sparing the population. The battle must be fought to the bitter end at all costs…Officers should die with their troops. The honour of the British Empire and of the British Army is at stake"

Table 2 (continued)

Approx. dates	Communication between	Comments[a]
Feb 11	Wavell to Churchill	Wavell: "Battle for Singapore is not going well…I ordered Percival to stage counter attack…Everything possible is being done…but I cannot pretend that these efforts have been entirely successful…I have given the most categorical orders that there is to be no thought of surrender"
Feb 12	British retreat to inside Singapore city perimeter	
Feb 12	Naval vessels attempt final evacuation; many sunk	
Feb 13	Japanese advance towards city center and harbor	
Feb 13	Wavell to Percival	Wavell: "You must all fight it out to the end as you are doing"
Feb 13	Percival meets with his Generals	Generals advise Percival: "You have already tried counter-attack and it was a complete failure. You have no fresh troops available for a counterattack…The only possible course is to surrender immediately"; Percival refuses to surrender
Feb 13	Percival to Wavell	Percival: "Enemy now within 5,000 yards of seafront which brings whole of Singapore town within field artillery range…In these conditions it is unlikely that resistance can last more than a day or two. My subordinate commanders are unanimously of the opinion that the gain of time will not (repeat not) compensate for extensive damage and heavy casualties which will occur in Singapore town…There must come a stage when in the interests of the troops and civil population further bloodshed will serve no useful purpose. Your instructions are being carried out but in above circumstances would you consider giving me wider discretionary powers"
Feb 13	Wavell to Percival	Wavell: "You must continue to inflict maximum damage on enemy for as long as possible…Fully appreciate your situation but continued action essential"
Feb 13	Pulford to Percival	Pulford: "I suppose you and I will be held responsible for this. But God knows we did our best with what little we had been given"
Feb 14	Percival to Wavell	Percival: "As a result of extensive damage to mains our water supply now limited to maximum 48 or possibly only 24 h…Am watching developments and fighting on but may find it necessary to take immediate decision"
Feb 14	Wavell to Percival	Wavell: "In all places where sufficiency of water exists for troops they must go on fighting"
Feb 14	Percival to Wavell	Percival: "We are fighting on…Both petrol and food supplies are also short…Morale of Asiatic civil population is low under bombing and shelling from which they have no protection. Will continue to comply with your intention but feel must represent situation as it exists to-day"
Feb 14	Wavell to Percival	Wavell: "Your gallant stand is serving purpose and must be continued to limit of endurance"
Feb 14	Wavell to Churchill	Wavell: "Have received telegram from Percival that enemy are close to town and that his troops are incapable of further attack. Have ordered him to continue…Fear however that resistance not likely to be prolonged"
Feb 14	Churchill to Wavell	Churchill: "You are of course sole judge of the moment when no further result can be gained at Singapore and should further instruct Percival accordingly"
Feb 15	Percival meets with his team in Singapore; He agrees to surrender	

Table 2 (continued)

Approx. dates	Communication between	Comments[a]
2 pm Feb 15	Wavell to Percival	"So long as you are in position to inflict losses and damage to enemy… You must fight on.…When you are fully satisfied that this is no longer possible I give you discretion to cease resistance…Whatever happens I thank you and all your troops for your gallant efforts"
Feb 15	Percival to Wavell	Percival: "Owing to losses from enemy action water, petrol, food and ammunition practically finished. Unable therefore to continue to fight any longer. All ranks have done their best and grateful for your help"
Feb 15	Percival signs surrender at 6:10 pm; Cease fire officially begins at 8:30 pm	

[a] All quotes from copies of 'most secret' telegrams available in archives or autobiographies

and interpretations of history are more clearly articulated in archives than others. Therefore, scholars urge researchers to consider "the silence of the archives" or what is missing or not being said, as well as what does appear in archival collections (Decker 2013, p. 155; Trouillot 1995).

Nevertheless, all efforts to reconstruct the past include uneven, complex, and confusing elements, offering evidence with multiple explanations. Scholars are forced to make choices about interpretations thereby prioritizing the plausibility of one account over another, just like all forms of research. However, that inherent bias does not diminish the value of historical research and triangulating findings by comparing accounts of events with published studies and different archival sources can address this issue, as I have done in this study (Decker 2013). In addition, there has been debate about the use of archival research and historical analysis as a rigorous method of organizational research, with some scholars discounting this approach as obvious, anecdotal, and common sense without theoretical value (Strati 2000).

In response, management scholars identified a turn away from history in management research as the field embraced more 'scientific' research methods. Yet, more recently, authors argue for a need to return to historically informed management and organization studies (Clark and Rowlinson 2004; Grey 2014; Liu and Grey 2018; Üsdiken and Kieser 2004; Wadhwani 2018; Zald 1996). Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker (2014) note archives are particularly underutilized in management research and offer an often-overlooked opportunity to access evidence that provides a unique interpretation of events, representing a snapshot of thought at the time which often reveals dynamics unexplained by contemporary organization theory.

Problematization

To frame my historical analysis, I adopt Alvesson and Sandberg's (2011) use of *problematization* as a research strategy for identifying and challenging assumptions in order to build theory in management studies. An advantage of the problematization methodology is that it generates novel research questions through a dialectical interrogation of one's own familiar position and commonly accepted interpretations to scrutinize assumptions and identify a domain to target for analysis. This approach encourages researchers to draw upon a range of different interpretations to question unchallenged assumptions and interpretations, including problematizing the problematizer herself, as a way to develop generative research questions (Alvesson and Sandberg 2011). Thus, identifying and unpacking the assumptions that underlie and bound existing interpretations of history can be used to develop new theories about organizational behaviors (Alvesson and Sandberg 2013). Following Rowlinson et al. (2014,

p. 267), I consciously attempted to read the historical material "against the grain" in an effort to avoid imposing linear causalities or accepting commonly held interpretations of events and metanarratives (McKinlay 2013). Through this problematization process, I discovered that I was less interested in weighing into the debate about whether the fall of Singapore was a 'pusillanimous failure' and Britain's 'greatest national humiliation' or a hopelessly fraught under resourced debacle from the beginning in a dangerously remote and undefendable location. Rather, I became more interested in the co-existence of these two narratives in WWII history. In particular, I wondered what these competing narratives might reveal about how frontline managers cope with unachievable tasks in real-time.

The Organizing Failures

My findings suggest that the fall of Singapore resulted from five interrelated organizing failures that, in my experience, commonly occur in MNOs. Organizational leaders at headquarters optimistically develop unrealistic performance expectations leaving frontline managers to cope with ethical quandaries overseas because they: (1) fail to understand the overseas operating environment; (2) inadequately identify strengths of regional competition; (3) under resource overseas operations; and (4) insufficiently develop local partnerships. Fifth, as their self-made crisis unfolds, MNOs often become distracted by challenges in their home country and lose sight of the unique demands on the frontline in overseas locations. In the following analysis, I demonstrate that Churchill and the London War Office did not adequately grasp the challenges of fighting in the Singapore environment or the effectiveness of the Japanese military. In addition, Britain did not provide adequate resources in the battle of Singapore, failed to develop strong partnerships with the local community and, as the crisis escalated, became distracted by challenges closer to home, leaving the overseas location under-supported and vulnerable.

Inadequate Understanding of Overseas Operating Environment

Percival enlisted in the British Army in WWI, fighting in the trenches in France until he was wounded in action. By war's end, he had been promoted from Private to Major, earning the Military Cross and Distinguished Service Order medals. Between the world wars, Percival led British Army operations in Russia, Ireland and Nigeria, earning an Order of the British Empire (OBE) award, and attended Staff Colleges for military leaders, lecturing on military tactics. In 1935, Percival was sent to Malaya to bolster British interests in the region and assess vulnerabilities in light of the deteriorating Anglo-Japanese relationship in East Asia.

Tensions between Western countries and Japan had been brewing in the post-WWI era, particularly over sea power in the Pacific (Murfett 1993). Recognizing Singapore's strategic military value protecting UK interests in East Asia, Britain began development of a naval base on the north side of the island in 1921. Construction proceeded slowly at first. As long as London, Washington and Tokyo remained reasonably friendly, there seemed little urgency to expedite funding to finish building. However, dynamics changed in 1933 when Japan left the League of Nations in disgust after being pressured by Western countries to withdraw troops from Manchuria and return it to Chinese sovereignty (Brown 1933). When Germany also withdrew from the League of Nations later that same year, the fantasy of a two-front war in Europe and Asia was becoming a reality.

Concerned by Japan's aggression, Britain accelerated construction of Singapore's naval base and several aerodromes along the Malaya peninsula assuming that an enemy invasion would come from the south because dense jungle north of Singapore would serve as a natural barrier. Britain's defense strategy was designed to only hold off the enemy for seventy days; by then the Royal Navy could arrive with reinforcements from home waters (Churchill 1951). It was further assumed that fear generated by "the arrival of the fleet in the Far East would automatically put an end to any danger of the capture of Singapore" (Percival 1946, p. 9).

However, for some people, there were concerns from the outset about the viability of this strategy. War historians questioned the defensibility of the locations of the naval base and aerodromes, the logic of deploying a Royal Navy fleet so far from home for extended periods, and whether the small Singapore naval base could even meet the needs of a full battlegroup, if war came. Nevertheless, "the 'Singapore Strategy' went ahead almost as a blind article of faith" serving as "a classic example of wishful thinking of a dangerously impractical kind" (Murfett 1993, pp. 81–82). British leaders ignored the shortcomings of the plan as if "mesmerised by the romantic fiction of this policy so that the thought of abandoning it was not ever seriously entertained" (Murfett 1993, p. 89). Meanwhile, neither Japan nor Germany suffered from the same romantic impracticability. In December 1941 Japan attacked Western nations in the Pacific, invading Thailand, Malaya and the Philippines and bombing the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii (Kinvig 1996, p. 157).

Underestimation of Competition

Critics claim the British were overly optimistic about their own capacities and underestimating of the Japanese in the buildup to WWII (Kinvig 1996). In 1940, Japan joined Germany and Italy in the 'Axis Alliance' which served mutually

reinforcing purposes for all three nations. Japan was unlikely to succeed alone in East Asia unless Western countries were confronted by conflicting demands closer to home. Germany and Italy proved to be the distraction required and Japan opportunistically achieved a quick succession of victories in East Asia, striking a psychological blow to British confidence and Western troops in the region (Callahan 1977).

As war broke out, General Archibald Wavell was appointed Supreme Allied Commander in the South-West Pacific. Wavell was a courageous and unflappable British Army officer with significant battle experience in WWI and the Boer War, and recent victories in North Africa. Yet, Wavell had limited knowledge of East Asia, the enemy's fighting characteristics, and the intricacies of the battle he was tasked to lead (Connell 1969). Rigid and taciturn, Wavell was often unwilling to accept, or even consider, "opinions that differed from his own" (Smyth 1971, p. 154). In Singapore, "Wavell was completely out of step with all expert and informed military opinion" about East Asia and "so complacent about the Japanese menace" he refused to take any "urgent preventative action" (Smyth 1971, p. 154). Like many British, Wavell contemptuously underestimated Japanese soldiers' abilities and assumed Japan's weaponry was antiquated and unsophisticated, particularly their aircraft. Meanwhile, Japan was already demonstrating impressive tactics with advanced weaponry in their offensive against China; evidence that should have generated significant Western concern. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the Japanese Zero airplane and their kamikaze pilots came as a shocking surprise in the battle of Malaya, further exposing Britain's flawed thinking (Callahan 1977).

Inadequate Resources

In 1937, Percival's tour of duty ended in Malaya and he compiled a report that challenged British assumptions about a seaward attack in Singapore. Rather, Percival predicted Japan would likely seize airfields in Thailand and attack from the north, allowing Japan to launch aircraft within easy striking distance of Malaya and Singapore. Japan's aggressions would come quickly and effectively, Percival concluded, and the British fleet would be unable to arrive in time to help. The defense of the Malaya peninsula would therefore prove critical to the safety of Singapore and the region immediately needed fortification: more troops, aircraft and ships to prevent Japanese landing craft from reaching the vast vulnerable coastline.

Percival (1949, p. 23) observed, far from being an "impregnable fortress", Singapore "would be in imminent danger if war broke out in the Far East unless there was an early realization in high places" that "relying on the arrival of the British fleet to make them secure, was already out of date". Percival's report was circulated in London. However,

the consensus was that he had overestimated Japan's capabilities, was "too pessimistic" about British preparedness, and the military would be accused of 'scaremongering' if this information was released to the public (Kinvig 1996, p. 108).

In 1941, Percival was selected to return to Malaya as commanding officer, bypassing more senior officers on the army command list based, in part, on his intimate knowledge of Singapore. When Percival arrived in Malaya, he immediately set about training and professionalizing his young, inexperienced troops. Percival grew increasingly concerned about the likelihood of a northern attack and, in another memo back to London, requested seasoned troops and modern equipment in Malaya "before, not after, the crisis develops" (Kinvig 1996, p. 107). However, with Britain now engaged in war in Europe, the Soviet Union and Middle East, minimal reinforcements arrived in Malaya.

Instead Churchill sent a British politician, Cabinet Minister Duff Cooper, to assess the Singapore situation and make recommendations to London. In December 1941, Cooper telegrammed Churchill: "We cannot hope to hold the greater part of Malaya" with "our small resources" (Churchill Archives). It was widely known that "defence of the back door" (Kinvig 1996, p. 103) on Singapore's north side remained particularly vulnerable and the jungle, once considered a reliable natural defense barrier especially during monsoon season, was not as impenetrable as the London War Office assumed. In fact, monsoon conditions proved to help Japan's odds of successful beach landings because inclement weather prevented detection and grounded any aerial attack.

The hot and humid Asian climate also took its toll on the health and fighting effectiveness of Western service members. One military officer reflected, "When I reached Singapore in June 1941, I was shocked to find so many tired people. Longing for a change, working long hours, and out of touch with the war. I got the impression that some of them were already drawing on reserves of moral and nervous energy" (Callahan 1977, p. 108). It was widely known that unit commanders in England "chose officers and men they were happy to lose" when asked to provide volunteers for East Asia. "The Far East was regarded as a place to which tired officers could be sent", "unwanted aircraft" disposed of, and troublesome soldiers hidden (Callahan, 1977, p. 108).

Underdevelopment of Community Relationships

Tensions also existed within the East Asia community as decades of piecemeal imperial expansion created a complicated relationship between the British civilian service and a variety of local leaders, tribal chiefs and other regional entities. The growing military presence collided with commercial business interests making it financially beneficial for civilians to ignore warnings about the increasing likelihood

of war. Past experience proved particularly influential. During WWI, East Asians felt the fighting was far away and did not concern them. Twenty years later, they similarly could not—or would not—acknowledge the urgency of the growing Japanese threat. There were also territorial disagreements within the British services—Royal Army, Navy and Air Force competed and quarreled—and many local Asians as well as British colonial officials resented the large influx of military personnel. Thus, civil-military relations were already tenuous even before the Japanese invaded: "Singapore had seen peace for over a hundred years and their view was that nothing should interfere with its commerce activities" (Kinvig 1996, p. 104). In addition, the ample commercial opportunities in Malaya and Singapore meant many different nationalities continued to have freedom of movement throughout the area including Japanese spies. Japanese intelligence often boldly undermined Western military activities undeterred.

Another unpopular directive from London that challenged local leaders was an unrestricted 'scorched earth' policy, which required that British troops destroy all resources as they withdrew, leaving nothing for enemy use. The directive included destroying bridges, roads, plantations, machinery, mines, medicine, food and water supplies, as well as stockpiles of petrol, rubber and tin—all resources integral to the local economy. A similar tactic had been successfully adopted in Russia, denying Germans usable resources. However, in that case, Russian soldiers destroyed Russian resources. In East Asia, the policy involved Western militaries destroying Malaysian civilian's resources.

Percival (1949, p. 260) was reluctant to engage in the scorched earth strategy because he did not feel it was appropriate behavior for a benevolent colonial power treaty bound to protect the community, noting: "The fact is that you cannot fight and destroy simultaneously with 100 percent efficiency in both". The scorched earth policy also demoralized British troops, signifying that their leaders had lost confidence and were committing to retreat with no intention to counterattack. And as Percival expected, the destruction infuriated locals further eroding community relations, turning them against the British, and bolstering Japan's strategy to recruit residents to their 'Asia for Asiatics' plan (Kinvig 1996, p. 182).

Distracted by Crisis Back Home

By mid-1941 Britain faced an escalating situation: trying to fight battles in the air over the UK; on the ground in Russia, Turkey and the Middle East; and on the seas of the Atlantic. Problems in East Asia seemed insignificant and far away when considering fifty-one British ships were lost in September 1941 alone (Callahan 1977). After the capitulation of France, it was impossible to contain both the German and

Italian Fleets and send a British battlegroup to the Far East as planned. The Royal Navy could only spare two ships, *HMS Prince of Wales* and *HMS Repulse*, and they arrived in Singapore to much fanfare on December 2, 1941. Eager to engage the enemy, *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* left Singapore to fight in Malaya but the ships were no match for Japan's air superiority and both were quickly sunk along with the loss of over 800 crew. The London War Office never sent another warship to Singapore.

Although Thailand initially declared neutrality, it allowed Japan to stage equipment and launch invasions into nearby Malaya, just as Percival had predicted. The superiority of Japan's aircraft, ships, submarines and tanks quickly dominated. Far from being weak and incompetent, as the London War Office presumed, Japanese forces fought day and night with impressive determination, stamina and cunning, undeterred by the lack of food or challenges of the jungle environment. Soldiers proved masterful at seizing existing infrastructures for their own use, indenturing local civilians for labor, and commandeering their food, bicycles and whatever else they needed. For example, after taking over a local radio station, the Japanese transmitted demoralizing messages in English such as "Hello Singapore, this is Penang calling; how do you like our bombings?" (Kinvig 1996, p. 168). Japanese adopted other propaganda spreading strategies such as dropping leaflets in various languages urging "Asiatics take up the torch of liberty against the white devil and drive him out of your country" (Kinvig 1996, p. 157).

The Surrender

By the end of 1941, British troops had steadily withdrawn south along the Malaya peninsula, unable to match the superiority of the Japanese forces. After nearly two months of continuous fighting and retreat, the war in Malaya unceremoniously ended and the battle over the island of Singapore began. Ever hopeful that resources would soon arrive, Percival urged patience and cooperation between military and civilians. In a press release he stated: Our task is to "impose loses on the enemy" in order to gain time, and "hold this fortress until help can come—as assuredly it will come. This we are determined to do" (Percival 1949, p. 259). However, the term 'fortress' was a popular misnomer, another fiction of British propaganda adopted to instill public confidence in the impregnability of Singapore and the certainty of British success, if Japan dared to attack.

Similar to other flawed assumptions back in London—such as the inferiority of Japanese soldiers, superiority of Western weaponry, and the Royal Navy's ability to quickly arrive from Europe—the fantasy that Singapore was impregnable proved to be a considerable problem for Percival. Few leaders back home in London seemed to understand the real

situation: "Singapore was not a fortress in the accepted meaning of the word" Percival (1949, p. 259) explained. "It was a large area of land and water with strong anti-ship defences [to the south], reasonably strong anti-aircraft defences, but weak land defences" to the north and over a million civilians to protect.

By February 1941, the situation in Singapore was bleak as water, food and ammunition supplies dwindled. On February 14th, Percival called his generals together. Several were particularly pessimistic and vocal: "You have already tried counter-attack and it was a complete failure. You have no fresh troops available for a counterattack…The only possible course is to surrender immediately" (IWM archives). The others seemed to agree. However, Percival resisted: "I cannot accept your proposal that we should surrender. We will go on fighting as long as we can. But I will report the full situation to the Commander in Chief by telegram without delay". On February 15th, Percival once again met with his generals and once again they recommended surrender. It was only then, Percival says, he "reluctantly decided to accept the advice of the senior officers present and capitulate". Percival and his troops spent the remainder of WWII enduring the hardship of prisoner of war camps until the Japanese surrendered in 1945.

The Aftermath

The fall of Singapore "stupefied the Prime Minister," Churchill's private physician Lord Moran (1966, p. 27) recalled. It "stunned him. He felt it was a disgrace. It left a scar on his mind". Moran explained: "It never entered his head, he complained, that the rear of the fortress was quite unprotected against an attack from the land. 'Why didn't they tell me about this? … Did no one realize the position?'".

Yet, there is ample evidence that many people at home and abroad were aware of the vulnerability of the 'backdoor' and had misgivings about Churchill's Singapore Strategy from the start (Hack and Blackburn 2003; Smyth 1971). In the London War Office, several generals observed that Percival and his troops were facing impossible odds and were unlikely to ever hold out for more than a month. Yet, Churchill made a deliberate decision in 1941 to under-resource East Asia against the advice of his military advisers (Kinvig 1996). Some historians claim that just a few hundred more Air Force planes, squandered in battles in Russia and the Middle East, would have made a significant difference in Singapore (Chung 2011). Yet, Churchill chose bravado as a form of defensive fantasy to avoid acknowledging these variables and, ultimately, the vulnerability of the Singapore strategy (Hack and Blackburn 2003, p. 8). Perhaps it is shattering this imagine of British invincibility that troubled

Churchill most after the fall of Singapore, leading to the scapegoating of Percival.

The Model

In this section, I explore the complex process that led Percival and his Generals in Singapore to engage in PSRB, violating Churchill's order 'not to surrender'. Underpinning this model are theories of consequentialism which hold that an act can be deemed morally right if—and only if—that act maximizes the amount of good for the most people (Bentham 1843; Mill 1861). Thus, consequentialism allows us to consider how the ethics of a decision, such as surrendering, can be measured solely by the consequences not the motives or intentions. Through this theorization, I provide a process model that illustrates one-way responsible leaders cope with unachievable tasks in remote locations. This analysis demonstrates how ongoing tensions and contradictions in real-time constitute a decision-making process through which an organizational actor attempts to shape power dynamics and influence workplace practices (Mumby 2005). Ethical resistance is therefore less of a covert practice aimed at undermining managerial control and more of a dynamic process by which frontline personnel, as active creative participants with agency, attempt to engage collectively (Alakavuklar and Alamgir 2018; Harding et al. 2017; McMurray et al. 2011).

Rather than labeling Percival as deviant, as most management theories would, findings here identify five common interrelated, coproduced organizing failures that led to the fall of Singapore: an inadequate understanding of the overseas operating environment; an underestimation of competitors; an insufficient allocation of resources; an underdevelopment of community relations; and a prioritization of home-based requirements. As Vardaman et al. (2014) notes, dilemmas such as operations in Singapore involve embedded ethical quandaries without clear solutions, often forcing leaders to tussle with several overlapping and equally unappealing alternatives. Courpasson et al. (2012, p. 801) note "whether or not resistance becomes productive depends on the skillful work of resisters" and their ability to temporarily modify the organization's power configuration and convince top management to listen to their claims and accommodate their vision. Figure 1 resists efforts to dichotomize the control–resistance relationship by illustrating how organization members can create 'resistant spaces' that simultaneously engage with managerial discourse while also maintaining potential for ethical resistance (Gabriel 1999).

First, in my model, I propose that in most cases of PSRB frontline managers do not initially intend to disobey orders received from leaders back home. Rather, like Percival, they initially attempt to accomplish the tasks assign and
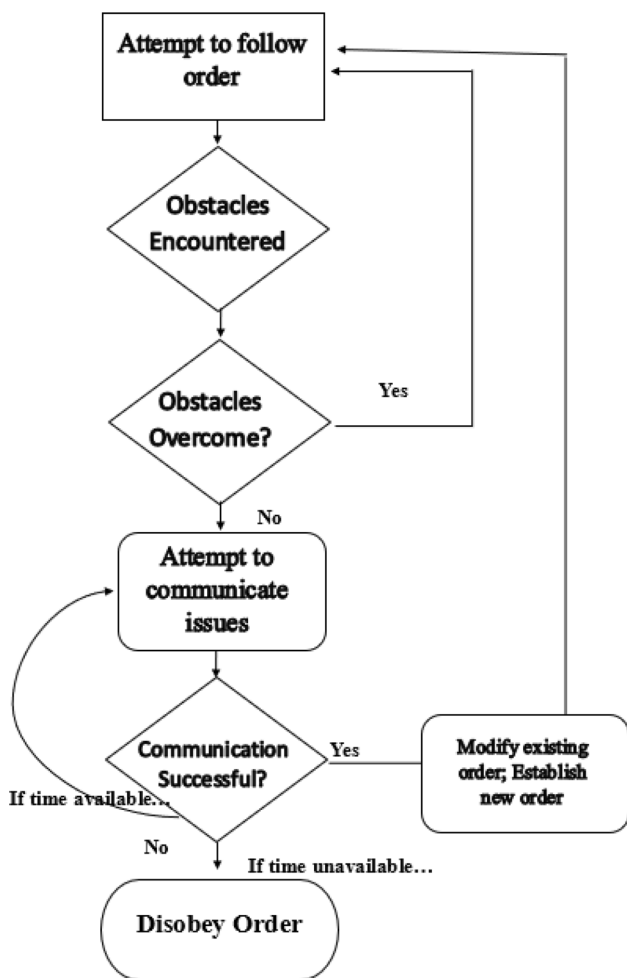
Fig. 1 PSRB process of 'disobeying an order'

achieve the organization's goals with courage and sincerity. However, when goals are unrealistically set by remote leaders back at headquarters, frontline managers can become confronted in real time by potentially debilitating obstacles that challenge their ability to follow through. At this point, managers often collect information and attempt to address the problem themselves which, if successful allows them to continue to attempt to achieve the original aims. However, as Percival experienced in Singapore, it may become clear that the problem is insurmountable at their level of the organization and they must then communicate the issues up their chain of command.

Percival and his Generals as well as several civilian leaders attempted to communicate the challenges they were struggling with back to Churchill and other British leaders in London. However, the response Percival received remained clear: do not surrender, win at all costs. Thus, Percival was unable to modify the existing orders and develop a more viable way to cope with the unachievable tasks he confronted. As the war escalated, remote leaders in London failed to

grasp the severity of the situation in time to prevent disaster. Percival was forced to engage in PSRB as a virtuous leadership strategy (Cameron 2011; Wang and Hackett 2016), saving the lives of millions of civilians and military service members, and what was left of the city of Singapore.

Through this example, it becomes clear that following orders is not always the linear process described in some literature in which the organizational leader considers the available variables and develops an organizational strategy, which then drives tactics and generates 'orders' for frontline managers to carry out. Rather, it becomes clear that more often remote leaders back home are only minimally aware of frontline variables in MNOs' overseas locations, and they develop strategies based on this limited knowledge. Yet, as in the Churchill examples, these strategies may have inherent flaws and when they are used to drive tactics, result in compounded problems that can create uncertainty about the feasibility of following orders. Frontline managers in overseas locations may develop temporary solutions while seeking further guidance from home. Ideally, feedback loops between overseas locations and home base allow leaders to become aware of the challenges and variables, and collaboratively develop solutions in real time. If this communication fails, frontline managers may be forced to seek alternative solutions and PSRB becomes a likely option, particularly when lives may be at risk.

Admittedly, most organizations outside of military, aviation or law enforcement do not issue employees with 'orders', per se. Therefore, PSRB studies typically investigate less risky contexts and employees' disregard for management policies or violation of workplace rules and procedures. In addition, there is a wide assumption that within high risk contexts soldiers, pilots and police simply do what they are told: They follow orders. However, my personal experience as a retired military officer and former commercial airline pilot, and my research experience shadowing a variety of police officers in action, proves that this is not what happens. Responsible leaders working in risky contexts are often expected to exercise their own discretion when carrying out their orders. For example, an air traffic controller can assign a particular altitude or flight path for pilots to fly. However, the aircraft commander must determine if these orders can be safely accomplished. Therefore, there is a need to better understand the interrelatedness between responsible leadership and PSRB, particularly in risky fields of work, which may have life or death consequences.

Discussion and Conclusion

Much social science research has investigated the ethics of 'obedience' and the dynamics of 'following orders', ranging from Stanley Milgram's (1965) psychological studies

of authority and obedience at Yale University to Hannah Arendt's (1977) analysis of the post-WWII Nuremburg trails and hypothesis of the 'banality of evil'. Obedience studies, such as these, typically report how quickly and easily ordinary people can become caught up in authority dynamics and simply 'follow orders' without question, reservation or thought (Gibson et al. 2018). Historians have called Singapore a "strategic illusion—an imperial symbol that owed more to fantasy and wishful thinking than to objective reality" (Murfett 1993, p. 97). Kinvig (1996, p. 209) notes: Churchill's demands that Percival fight to the death and never surrender were "militarily unrealistic," and it was "grossly immoral" to expect a million Indians, Australians and Singapore citizens sacrifice their lives on behalf of the British Empire. Yet, if previous obedience studies are predictive, we should have expected Percival to follow Churchill's orders to the death. But, he did not. Why?

Findings here suggest that by engaging in the PSRB cycle described in Fig. 1, Percival was able to satisfy himself that he had investigated all viable solutions and attempted to communicate the core issues back to London without success. Therefore, as a responsible leader, he could disobey the order because he possessed knowledge that allowed him to make a virtuous decision in real time; information that remote leaders in London could not—or would not—comprehend. The PSRB process by which Percival developed this mindset allowed him to intentionally violate a formal organizational directive in order to promote the welfare of civilian and military stakeholders, and 'do good' in his organizational role as commanding officer. The process model introduced demonstrates how real-time decision-making challenges provide opportunities for frontline personnel to create 'resistant spaces' that simultaneously engage with managerial discourse while also maintaining potential for ethical resistance (Gabriel 1999). In this example, social actors are neither glorified as covert disrupters nor cynically categorized as managerial dupes because, as Mumby (2005, p. 38) cautions, "research that focuses predominantly on either resistance or control runs the risk of reifying one or the other." The process model offered here may help scholars avoid such dualistic interpretations by demonstrating how frontline personnel can be seen as an agentic force, actively cocreating the organizational environment by shaping power dynamics and influencing workplace practices (Courpasson et al. 2012; Harding et al. 2017; Zoller and Fairhurst 2007). Although similar studies of 'productive resistance' have been conducted in banking (Courpasson et al. 2012), consulting (Kärreman and Alvesson 2009), and manufacturing (Erkama 2010), few have investigated productive resistance in risky work settings; an area warranting further research.

Some historians labelled Percival a coward and an incompetent, claiming he surrendered to save his own life after mismanaging the defense of Singapore. In this paper, I demonstrate that Percival repeatedly attempted in multiple ways, months before the capitulation, to obtain desperately needed resources, to train his inexperienced personnel, and to communicate the increasingly dire situation to London. But to no avail. I argue Percival's surrender is an example of consequentialism and virtuousness because he sought the best outcome for all stakeholders, to protect their lives, thereby demonstrating that effective leaders recognize they are ultimately responsible to the people in their charge.

Understanding the dynamics surrounding people's decision to disobey orders is particularly timely and relevant today. In this era, political leaders such US President Donald Trump dictate government policy via Twitter leaving others to determine whether to follow, or not follow, the Commander in Chief's 280-character techno-orders (Shear et al. 2019). And Britain's House of Commons leader, Jacob Rees-Mogg, criticizes citizens for following firefighters' orders to stay inside their apartments in the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire instead of exercising "common-sense" and "leave the burning building" (Mueller 2019). This paper demonstrates one PSRB process responsible leaders may use to evaluate whether to disobey an order in real time. There are undoubtedly other virtuous decision-making processes responsible leaders can embrace. Therefore, further studies offering a deeper understanding of the organizing processes underpinning following—or *not following*—orders in management and organization studies is warranted.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author certifies that she has no conflict of interest and no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

References

Alakavuklar, O. N., & Alamgir, F. (2018). Ethics of resistance in organisations: A conceptual proposal. *Journal of Business Ethics, 149*(1), 31–43.

Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2011). Generating research questions through problematization. *Academy of Management Review, 36*(2), 247–271.

Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2013). Has management studies lost its way? Ideas for more imaginative and innovative research. *Journal of Management Studies, 50*(1), 128–152.

Arendt, H. (1977). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. London: Penguin.

Ashcraft, K. L. (2005). Resistence through consent? occupational identity, organizational form, and the maintenance of masculinity among commercial airline pilots. *Management Communication Quarterly, 19*(1), 67–90.

Baskin, M. E. B., Vardaman, J. M., & Hancock, J. I. (2015). The role of ethical climate and moral disengagement in well-intended employee rule breaking. *Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management, 16*(2), 71–90.

Bennett, R. J., & Robinson, S. L. (2000). Development of a measure of workplace deviance. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 85*(3), 349–360.

Bentham, J. (1843). *Rationale of reward*. Edinburgh: William Tait.

Bolino, M. C., & Grant, A. M. (2016). The bright side of being prosocial at work, and the dark side, too: A review and agenda for research on other-oriented motives, behavior, and impact in organizations. *Academy of Management Annals, 10*(1), 599–670.

Brief, A. P., & Motowidlo, S. J. (1986). Prosocial organizational behaviors. *Academy of Management Review, 11*(4), 710–725.

Brown, S. (1933). Japan stuns world, withdraws from league. *UPI Archives*. Retrieved from https://www.upi.com/Archives/1933/02/24/Japan-stuns-world-withdraws-from-league/2231840119817/.

Bryant, P. C., Davis, C. A., Hancock, J. I., & Vardaman, J. M. (2010). When rule makers become rule breakers: Employee level outcomes of managerial pro-social rule breaking. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal, 22*(2), 101–112.

Callahan, R. (1977). *The worst disaster: The fall of Singapore*. London: Associated University Press.

Cameron, K. (2011). Responsible leadership as virtuous leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics, 98*, 25–35.

Casey, C. (1999). "Come, join our family": Discipline and integration in corporate organizational culture. *Human Relations, 52*(2), 155–178.

Chen, Y., Wang, L., Liu, X., Chen, H., Hu, Y., & Yang, H. (2019). The trickle-down effect of leaders' pro-social rule breaking: Joint moderating role of empowering leadership and courage. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1–9.

Chung, O. C. (2011). *Operation Matador: World War II—Britain's attempt to foil the Japanese invasion of Malaya and Singapore*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International.

Churchill, W. S. (1950). *The grand alliance*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Churchill, W. S. (1951). *The hinge of fate*. London: Penguin Books.

Clark, P., & Rowlinson, M. (2004). The treatment of history in organisation studies: towards an 'historic turn'? *Business History, 46*(3), 331–352.

Clegg, S., Kornberger, M., & Rhodes, C. (2007). Business ethics as practice. *British Journal of Management, 18*(2), 107–122.

Collinson, D. L. (1988). 'Engineering humour': masculinity, joking and conflict in shop-floor relations. *Organization Studies, 9*(2), 181–199.

Connell, J. (1969). *Wavell: Supreme commander*. London: Collins.

Contu, A. (2008). Decaf resistance: On misbehavior, cynicism, and desire in liberal workplaces. *Management Communication Quarterly, 21*(3), 364–379.

Courpasson, D., Dany, F., & Clegg, S. (2012). Resisters at work: Generating productive resistance in the workplace. *Organization Science, 23*(3), 801–819.

Crant, J. M. (2000). Proactive behavior in organizations. *Journal of Management, 26*(3), 435–462.

Curtis, C. R. (2014). Restaurant industry perspectives on pro-social rule breaking: Intent versus action. *Hospitality Review, 31*(1), 1–23.

Dahling, J. J., Chau, S. L., Mayer, D. M., & Gregory, J. B. (2012). Breaking rules for the right reasons? An investigation of pro-social rule breaking. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 33*(1), 21–42.

Decker, S. (2013). The silence of the archives: Business history, post-colonialism and archival ethnography. *Management & Organizational History, 8*(2), 155–173.

Derfler-Rozin, R., Moore, C., & Staats, B. R. (2016). Reducing organizational rule breaking through task variety: How task design supports deliberative thinking. *Organization Science, 27*(6), 1361–1379.

Doz, Y. L., & Prahalad, C. K. (1991). Managing DMNCs: A search for a new paradigm. *Strategic Management Journal, 12*(S1), 145–164.

Edmondson, A. C. (2003). Speaking up in the operating room: How team leaders promote learning in interdisciplinary action teams. *Journal of Management Studies, 40*(6), 1419–1452.

Erkama, N. (2010). Power and resistance in a multinational organization: Discursive struggles over organizational restructuring. *Scandinavian Journal of Management, 26*(2), 151–165.

Fleming, P. (2005). Metaphors of Resistance. *Management Communication Quarterly, 19*(1), 45–66.

Fleming, P., & Sewell, G. (2002). Looking for the good soldier, Švejk: Alternative modalities of resistance in the contemporary workplace. *Sociology, 36*(4), 857–873.

Fleming, P., & Spicer, A. (2003). Working at a cynical distance: Implications for power, subjectivity and resistance. *Organization, 10*, 157–179.

Fleming, P., & Spicer, A. (2007). *Contesting the Corporation: Struggle, power and resistence in organizations*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Fraher, A. L. (2011). *Thinking through crisis: improving teamwork and leadership in high-risk fields*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Fraher, A. L. (2020). *Leading contemporary organizations: Psychodynamic perspectives on change and crisis*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Fraher, A. L., & Gabriel, Y. (2014). Dreaming of flying when grounded: Occupational identity and occupational fantasies of furloughed airline pilots. *Journal of Management Studies, 51*(6), 926–951.

Fraher, A. L., & Gabriel, Y. (2016). Meeting and resisting the corporate body-snatchers: The US piloting profession in times of downsizing and restructuring. *Tamara Journal for Critical Organization Inquiry, 14*(1), 37–53.

Freeman, R. E., & Auster, E. R. (2011). Values, authenticity, and responsible leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics, 98*, 15–23.

Gabriel, Y. (1999). Beyond happy families: A critical reevaluation of the control-resistance-identity triangle. *Human Relations, 52*(2), 179–203.

Gibson, S., Blenkinsopp, G., Johnstone, E., & Marshall, A. (2018). Just following orders? The rhetorical invocation of 'obedience' in Stanley Milgram's post-experiment interviews. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 48*, 585–599.

Grey, C. (2014). An organizational culture of secrecy: The case of Bletchley Park. *Management & Organizational History, 9*(1), 107–122.

Gupta, A. K., & Govindarajan, V. (1991). Knowledge flows and the structure of control within multinational corporations. *Academy of Management Review, 16*(4), 768–792.

Hack, K., & Blackburn, K. (2003). *Did Singapore have to fall? Churchill and the impregnable fortress*. London: Routledge.

Harding, N. H., Ford, J., & Lee, H. (2017). Towards a performative theory of resistance: Senior managers and revolting subject (ivitie) s. *Organization Studies, 38*(9), 1209–1232.

Johnson, W. B. (1995). Perennial ethical quandaries in military psychology: Toward American Psychological Association-Department of Defense collaboration. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 26*(3), 281.

Johnson, W. B., Ralph, J., & Johnson, S. J. (2005). Managing multiple roles in embedded environments: The case of aircraft carrier psychology. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 36*(1), 73.

Kärreman, D., & Alvesson, M. (2009). Resisting resistance: Counter-resistance, consent and compliance in a consultancy firm. *Human relations, 62*(8), 1115–1144.

Kieser, A. (1994). Why organization theory needs historical analyses—And how this should be performed. *Organization science, 5*(4), 608–620.

Kinvig, C. (1996). *Scapegoat: General percival of Singapore*. London: Brassey's.

Kirby, S. W. (1971). *Singapore: The chain of disaster*. London: Cassell.

Kondo, D. K. (1990). *Crafting selves: Power, gender and discourse of identity in a Japanese workplace*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Kostova, T., Roth, K., & Dacin, M. T. (2008). Institutional theory in the study of multinational corporations: A critique and new directions. *Academy of Management Review, 33*(4), 994–1006.

Liu, Y., & Grey, C. (2018). History, gendered space and organizational identity: An archival study of a university building. *Human Relations, 71*(5), 640–667.

Maak, T., & Pless, N. M. (2006). Responsible leadership in a stakeholder society–A relational perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics, 66*(1), 99–115.

McKinlay, A. (2013). Following Foucault into the archives: Clerks, careers and cartoons. *Management & Organizational History, 8*(2), 137–154.

McMurray, R., Pullen, A., & Rhodes, C. (2011). Ethical subjectivity and politics in organizations: A case of health care tendering. *Organization, 18*(4), 541–561.

Milgram, S. (1965). Some conditions of obedience and disobedience to authority. *Human Relations, 18*, 57–76.

Mill, J. S. (1861). *Utilitarianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mills, A. J., & Mills, J. C. H. (2017). Digging archeology: Postpositivist theory and archival research in case study development. *Insights and research on the study of gender and intersectionality in international airline cultures* (pp. 93–109). Emerald Publishing Limited: Bingley.

Moran, C. M. W. (1966). *Winston Churchill: The struggle for survival (1940–1965)*. London: Constable.

Morrison, E. W. (2006). Doing the job well: An investigation of prosocial rule breaking. *Journal of Management, 32*(1), 5–28.

Morrison, E. W., Milliken, F. J., Dyne, L. V., Ang, S., Botero, I. C., Bowen, F., …, Bedeian, A. G. (2003). Speaking up, remaining silent: The dynamics of voice and silence in organizations. *Journal of Management Studies, 40*(6), 1353–1568.

Mueller, B. (2019). Jacob Rees-Mogg Suggests Grenfell Victims Lacked 'Common Sense'. *New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/world/europe/grenfell-tower-jacob-rees-mogg.html?te=1&nl=morning-briefing&emc=edit_MBE_p_20191106&section=whatElse?campaign_id=51&instance_id=13646&segment_id=18553&user_id=33485a0b29459b1c7d4efcc7379505ef&regi_id=77073766ion=whatElse.

Mumby, D. K. (2005). Theorizing resistance in organization studies: A dialectical approach. *Management communication quarterly, 19*(1), 19–44.

Murfett, M. H. (1993). Living in the Past: A critical re-examination of the Singapore naval strategy, 1918–1941. *War & Society, 11*(1), 73–103.

Parks, J. M., Ma, L., & Gallagher, D. G. (2010). Elasticity in the 'rules' of the game: Exploring organizational expedience. *Human Relations, 63*(5), 701–730.

Percival, A. E. (1946). *Despatch: Operations of Malaya command*. War Office, London: Churchill Archives [CHAR 20/250B/79-81].

Percival, A. E. (1949). *The war in Malaya*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.

Pless, N. M., & Maak, T. (2011). Responsible leadership: Pathways to the future. *Journal of Business Ethics, 98*, 3–13.

Prasad, P., & Prasad, A. (2000). Stretching the iron cage: The constitution and implications of routine workplace resistance. *Organization Science, 11*(4), 387–403.

Robinson, S. L., & Bennett, R. J. (1995). A typology of deviant workplace behaviors: A multidimensional scaling study. *Academy of Management Journal, 38*(2), 555–572.

Rowlinson, M., Hassard, J., & Decker, S. (2014). Research strategies for organizational history: A dialogue between historical theory and organization theory. *Academy of Management Review, 39*(3), 250–274.

Schwartz, J. M., & Cook, T. (2002). Archives, records, and power: The making of modern memory. *Archival Science, 2*(1–2), 1–19.

Seeger, M. W., & Ulmer, R. R. (2003). Explaining Enron: Communication and responsible leadership. *Management Communication Quarterly, 17*(1), 58–84.

Shear, M. D., Haberman, M., Confessore, N., Yourish, K., Buchanan, L., & Collins, K. (2019). How trump reshaped the presidency in over 11,000 tweets. *New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/02/us/politics/trump-twitter-presidency.html.

Smyth, J. (1971). *Percival and the tragedy of Singapore*. London: Macdonald & Co.

Staw, B. M., & Boettger, R. D. (1990). Task revision: A neglected form of work performance. *Academy of Management Journal, 33*(3), 534–559.

Strati, A. (2000). *Theory and method in organization studies*. London: Sage.

Trouillot, M.-R. (1995). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Tyler, T. R., & Blader, S. L. (2005). Can businesses effectively regulate employee conduct? The antecedents of rule following in work settings. *Academy of Management Journal, 48*(6), 1143–1158.

Üsdiken, B., & Kieser, A. (2004). Introduction: History in organisation studies. *Business History, 46*(3), 321–330.

Vadera, A. K., Pratt, M. G., & Mishra, P. (2013). Constructive deviance in organizations: Integrating and moving forward. *Journal of Management, 39*(5), 1221–1276.

Vardaman, J. M., Gondo, M. B., & Allen, D. G. (2014). Ethical climate and pro-social rule breaking in the workplace. *Human Resource Management Review, 24*(1), 108–118.

Velthouse, B., & Kandogan, Y. (2007). Ethics in practice: What are managers really doing? *Journal of Business Ethics, 70*(2), 151–163.

Voegtlin, C., Patzer, M., & Scherer, A. G. (2012). Responsible leadership in global business: A new approach to leadership and its multi-level outcomes. *Journal of Business Ethics, 105*(1), 1–16.

Wadhwani, R. D. (2018). Poverty's monument: Social problems and organizational field emergence in historical perspective. *Journal of Management Studies, 55*(3), 545–577.

Wainwright, J. M. (1945). *General Wainwright's Story: The account of four years of humiliating defeat, surrender, and captivity*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Waldman, D. A. (2011). Moving forward with the concept of responsible leadership: Three caveats to guide theory and research. *Journal of Business Ethics, 98*, 75–83.

Waldman, D. A., & Galvin, B. M. (2008). Alternative perspectives of responsible leadership. *Organizational Dynamics, 37*(4), 327–341.

Wang, G., & Hackett, R. D. (2016). Conceptualization and measurement of virtuous leadership: Doing well by doing good. *Journal of Business Ethics, 137*(2), 321–345.

Warren, D. E. (2003). Constructive and destructive deviance in organizations. *Academy of Management Review, 28*(4), 622–632.

Weick, K. E. (1989). Theory construction as disciplined imagination. *Academy of Management Review, 14*(4), 516–516.

Ybema, S., & Horvers, M. (2017). Resistance through compliance: The strategic and subversive potential of frontstage and backstage resistance. *Organization Studies, 38*(9), 1233–1251.

Youli, H., Xixi, L., & Xi, W. (2014). The effects of transformational leadership on employee's pro-social rule breaking. *Canadian Social Science, 10*(1), 128.

Zald, M. N. (1996). More fragmentation? Unfinished business in linking the social sciences and the humanities. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 41*, 251–261.

Zoller, H. M., & Fairhurst, G. T. (2007). Resistance leadership: The overlooked potential in critical organization and leadership studies. *Human Relations, 60*(9), 1331–1360.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.