aps ASSOCIATION FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

Perspectives on Psychological Science
7(4) 315–324
© The Author(s) 2012
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1745691612448482
http://pps.sagepub.com
SAGE

Working Toward the Experimenter: Reconceptualizing Obedience Within the Milgram Paradigm as Identification-Based Followership

Stephen D. Reicher[1], S. Alexander Haslam[2], and Joanne R. Smith[2]
[1]University of St. Andrews, and [2]University of Exeter

Abstract

The behavior of participants within Milgram's obedience paradigm is commonly understood to arise from the propensity to cede responsibility to those in authority and hence to obey them. This parallels a belief that brutality in general arises from passive conformity to roles. However, recent historical and social psychological research suggests that agents of tyranny actively identify with their leaders and are motivated to display creative followership in working toward goals that they believe those leaders wish to see fulfilled. Such analysis provides the basis for reinterpreting the behavior of Milgram's participants. It is supported by a range of material, including evidence that the willingness of participants to administer 450-volt shocks within the Milgram paradigm changes dramatically, but predictably, as a function of experimental variations that condition participants' identification with either the experimenter and the scientific community that he represents or the learner and the general community that he represents. This reinterpretation also encourages us to see Milgram's studies not as demonstrations of conformity or obedience, but as explorations of the power of social identity-based leadership to induce active and committed followership.

Keywords

social identity, obedience, disobedience, Milgram

Just over 50 years ago, in July 1961, Stanley Milgram embarked on what were to become the most famous studies in social psychology, if not the discipline of psychology as a whole. In these studies, men who were members of the general public came to Yale University's Department of Psychology to take part in what they thought was a scientific study of the effects of punishment on learning. More specifically, participants played the role of "teacher" in a study where a "learner" had to learn a list of word pairs and then perform a memory task in which he was given the first word from each pair and asked to identify the correct match from a list of four. If the learner gave an incorrect answer, the teacher had to give him an electric shock, and the strength of the shock increased every time an error was made. These were delivered by means of an impressive shock machine on which there was an array of 30 switches—starting at 15 volts (labeled "slight shock") and increasing in 15-volt intervals to a maximum of 450 volts (ominously labeled "XXX"; see Table 1).

The ostensible goal of the study was to investigate the impact of punishment on learning: Would the shocks improve the learners' performance or not? As the instructions to the study emphasized, this was an important research question because "actually, we know very little about the effect of punishment on learning, because almost no truly scientific studies have been made of it in human beings" (Milgram, 1963, p. 373).

In fact, though, Milgram's real purpose was not to study learning. Indeed, the shock machine did not deliver shocks, and the learner—like the experimenter who oversaw proceedings and who gave the teacher verbal "prods" if he was reluctant to continue—was a confederate who had been carefully trained to play his part in the unfolding drama. Instead, Milgram wanted to investigate participants' willingness to go along with the experimenter's instructions. Would they deliver what appeared to be lethal shocks to a stranger, simply because this was what another stranger required them to do in the context of a mundane science experiment?

As every psychology student knows, the short answer to this question is "yes." In the baseline study that Milgram (1963) first formally reported, all 40 of his participants administered shocks up to 315 volts ("extreme intensity shock") and

Corresponding Author:
Alex Haslam, School of Psychology, University of Exeter, Exeter, Devon, EX4 4QG, UK
E-mail: A.Haslam@exeter.ac.uk

Table 1. Shock Labels, Associated Learner Responses, and Experimenter Prods in the Milgram Paradigm

Switch	Volts	Label	Learner response
1	15	Slight shock	
2	30		
3	45		
4	60		
5	75	Moderate shock	Ugh!
6	90		Ugh!
7	105		Ugh! (*louder*)
8	120		Ugh! Hey, *this* really hurts.
9	135	Strong shock	Ugh!!
10	150		Ugh!!! Experimenter! That's all. Get me out of here, please. My heart's starting to bother me. I refuse to go on. Let me out.
11	165		Ugh! Let me out! *(shouting)*
12	180		Ugh! I can't stand the pain. Let me out of here! (*shouting*)
13	195	Very strong shock	Ugh! Let me out of here. Let me out of here. My heart's bothering me. Let me out of here! You have no right to keep me here! Let me out! Let me out of here! Let me out! Let me out of here! My heart's bothering me. Let me out! Let me out!
14	210		Ugh!! Experimenter! *Get* me out of here. I've had enough. I *won't* be in the experiment any more.
15	225		Ugh!
16	240		Ugh!
17	255	Intense shock	Ugh! Get me *out* of here
18	270		(*Agonized scream.*) Let me out of here. Let me out of here. Let me out of here. Let me out. Do you hear? Let me out of here.
19	285		(*Agonized scream.*)
20	300		(*Agonized scream.*) I absolutely refuse to answer any more. Get me out of here. You can't hold me here. Get me out. Get me out of here.
21	315	Extreme intensity shock	(*Intensely agonized scream.*) *I told you I refuse to answer.* I'm no longer part of this experiment.
22	330		*(Intense and prolonged scream.)* Let me out of here. Let me out of here. My heart's bothering me. Let me out, I tell you. (*Hysterically*) Let me out of here. Let me out of here. You have no right to hold me here. Let me out! Let me out! Let me out! Let me out of here! Let me out! Let me out!
23	345		[Silence]
24	360		[Silence]
25	375	Danger severe shock	[Silence]
26	390		[Silence]
27	405		[Silence]
28	420		[Silence]
29	435		[Silence]
30	450	XXX	[Silence]

Note. Experimenter prods were as follows: 1. Please continue (or) Please go on; 2. The experiment requires that you continue; 3. It is absolutely essential that you continue; 4. You have no other choice, you must go on.

26 of them (65%) went along with the experimenter all the way to the end of the study—being prepared to deliver the maximum shock of 450 volts.

So why are people prepared to deliver such lethal shocks? The answer to this question is far less clear. Over the years, different authors have offered many suggestions. Some have to do with the structure of Milgram's paradigm (Darley, 1992) and the way that this might create obligations to the experimenter (Gilbert, 1981), provide legitimacy to the experimenter's demands (Passini & Morselli, 2009), or else signal social norms of obedience (Navarick, 2009). Others have to do with cultural factors such as people's attitudes to institutions and their distant relationships with fellow citizens (Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1986, 1995). And others relate to individual-level

factors such as authoritarianism (Passini & Morselli, 2009) or else possession of the rhetorical skills needed to challenge the experimenter (Rochat & Modigliani, 1995).

Many of these suggestions and more were prefigured in Milgram's own writing. In the 1963 paper in which he first reported his findings, Milgram lists 13 factors that may have been of importance in producing obedience. He stresses how participants are torn between "the competing demands of two persons: the experimenter and the victim" (p. 378) and then considers a range of factors that might pull them toward the one as opposed to the other. These include the prestige of the scientist, the prestige and worth of the research (ostensibly to advance knowledge of learning and memory), the fact that people voluntarily enter into a contractual relationship with the experimenter, and the temporal structure of the study that gradually binds participants into what they are doing.

In a later paper (Milgram, 1965), Milgram suggests a further set of factors, including the spatial structure of the study. Of particular interest to our argument in this article, he proposes that physical proximity may be related to psychological group formation. Thus, the more that the participant is isolated from the learner and the more that he is kept close to the experimenter, then the more the participant is likely to see himself as part of a group with the experimenter and hence go along with the experimenter's wishes.

These suggestions are repeated by Milgram (1974) in his seminal book *Obedience to Authority*. But over time they have become overshadowed by another account. The *agentic state* explanation grew out of the links between Milgram's work on obedience and his concern with the Nazi Holocaust. On the one hand, it was the willingness of Nazi functionaries to carry out the mass murder of Jews that had originally engaged his interest in obedience. On the other hand, he looked to research on the Holocaust to make sense of the findings that emerged from his studies (see Miller, 1995, 2004).

In particular, Milgram's interpretation of his data drew increasingly closer to Hannah Arendt's (1963) "banality of evil" account (see in particular Milgram, 1974, pp. 5-6, where the debt to Arendt is explicitly acknowledged). According to Arendt, the behavior of Nazi bureaucrats like Adolf Eichmann arose from a tendency for those who are placed in administrative roles to become more concerned with fulfilling their bureaucratic duty than with the consequences of their actions. For Milgram, this was due to the fact that these bureaucrats had entered into an agentic state—a state in which people cede moral responsibility to those in authority and focus solely on how well they do their bidding. The subjects in his own obedience studies, he argued, had entered a similar state. They, like Nazi functionaries before them, were more concerned with being good subjects than with being good people.

Over time, it is this agentic state explanation that has come to dominate textbook accounts of Milgram's work. Moreover, although Milgram himself never used such terms, his findings are commonly seen to indicate that obedience to authority is blind and automatic (see Lutsky, 2005; Miller, 1995). In ordinary language, the lesson that has been drawn (as from Arendt's writings) is that people cannot help but obey the orders of those in authority, even when those orders are to do something quite extreme. By way of illustration, in studies with high-school students who are studying psychology, we have found that when asked to summarize the take-home message of Milgram's work in a sentence or two, around 90% of students indicate that it shows that "people obey those in authority" (see Reicher & Haslam, 2011a). So stark and shocking is this message that it has spread well beyond psychology, or indeed the academic world, to inform discussion of a wide range of phenomena in the world at large (see Novick, 2000).

Recent Reassessments of Obedience and Conformity Accounts

In recent years, a number of scholars have challenged the claim that those who act brutally do so simply as a result of a natural tendency to conform and to obey the orders of those in authority. For instance, it has been argued that those who sanction extreme harm against outgroups are those who identify with and glorify the ingroup (Castano, 2008; Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). More specifically, we have argued that, in contrast to traditional explanations, the Guards in Zimbardo's famous Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, 1989, 2004) did not helplessly and "naturally" slip into an oppressive role. Rather, their oppressive behavior depended upon active identification with the guard group and a knowing embrace of its oppressive ideology (Haslam & Reicher, 2007a, 2007b, 2012; Reicher & Haslam, 2006).

But can an analysis in terms of group identification be applied to Milgram's "obedience" studies? The fact that, aside from the participant, there are usually only two other actors (both of whom are confederates) certainly makes the group-based dimensions of the paradigm nonobvious. Yet, as self-categorization theorists have pointed out (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994) people can think of themselves and act as group members even when not physically surrounded by multiple others. Moreover, as we have noted above, Milgram himself recognized that group formation between participant and experimenter may be a basis for obedience. Similarly, Rochat and Modigliani (1997) examined how identification between the participant and the learner may inhibit obedience. They went so far as to state that participants tended to "comply with the experimenter only when they did not identify with the learner" (p. 242).

More important perhaps, three features of empirical work within Milgram's paradigm point to the relevance of group identity and social identification. The first can be seen in Burger's (2009a, 2009b) recent work replicating Milgram's baseline study (but minimized the ethical challenges of doing so by requiring participants to administer shocks only up to 150 volts). Amongst other things, Burger examined how participants respond to the various prods provided by the experimenter if they expressed doubt about continuing in their

role (see Table 1). Within the standard paradigm, there are four of these, but, as Burger (2009a) observed, only the fourth ("You have no other choice, you must go on") takes the form of a direct order.

Burger's data show that every time the experimenter has to resort to Prod 4, the participant refuses to continue. This matches available film and transcripts from Milgram's original studies (e.g. as provided in Milgram, 1974), which also show that people told that they must go on never do so. There is an obvious confound here—the prod that constitutes an order is always the last prod. It is possible that participants have simply reached the stage where nothing, not even an order, can make them continue. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in the one example that is documented in Milgram's *Obedience to Authority*, the participant reacts to being told that he has no choice other than to continue by terminating the study with the riposte, "If this were Russia, maybe, but not in America" (Milgram, 1974, p. 65). This suggests that the order induces reactance but not obedience (Brehm, 1966). In part, this is because, by issuing the order, the authority no longer seems to be "one of us"—acting in terms of interests (and identity) shared with the participant (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011).

The second body of evidence relevant to this reassessment emerges from consideration of the point at which participants choose to withdraw from the task of administering shocks to the learner. As noted above, the first point at which this is likely to occur is 150 volts (37% of participants halt at this point; Packer, 2008). A second key point is 315 volts (where 11% of participants halt). The significance of these two points is that in the majority of Milgram's studies (from v5 onwards; see Table 2) these are points at which the learner voices clear objections to his treatment. In particular, when he appears to have been given a shock of 150 volts, he complains about his heart problem and asks for the first time to be let out of the study, and then at the 315-volt mark, he says that he refuses to answer any more and that he is no longer part of the study (see Table 1 for details).

It seems plausible to argue, as does Packer (2008), that a key reason why participants withdraw at these particular junctures is that these are points at which their engagement with the experimenter and the task he has set them is disrupted by sensitivity to an alternative set of obligations and responsibilities. In the language of social identity theorizing, we can suggest that although participants are likely to be attuned only to the requirements of an identity that they share with the experimenter at the start of the study (as collaborators in a legitimate scientific enterprise), at the 150-volt point they become aware of a competing social identity (as moral citizens in the world) with requirements that lead them in a different direction and therefore present them with a difficult choice (Reicher & Haslam, 2011a). In effect, they become torn between two competing voices that are vying for their attention and making contradictory demands upon them. The key question then becomes when and why they heed one voice rather than the other.

Table 2. Variants of the Milgram Paradigm in Which Participants Are Instructed to Administer Designated Shock Levels by the Experimenter

v1. L Remote Feedback. No vocal complaint is heard from L who is in another room where he cannot be seen. But at 300v, he pounds on the walls in protest.
v2. L Voice Feedback. Identical to v1, but L's complaints can be heard clearly through the walls of the laboratory.
v3. L Proximal. Similar to v2, except that L is in the same room as T, a few feet away. L is thus visible as well as audible.
v4. L Touching. Identical to v3, but L receives a shock only when his hand is on a shock plate. At 350v, L refuses to place his hand on the shock plate. E orders T to force L's hand onto the plate.
v5. New Baseline. Study moved from elegant Yale Interaction Lab to more modest basement. L responds not only with cries of anguish, but remarks about a heart problem (at 150v, 195v, & 310v). This is standard in all subsequent variants.
v6. New Es. To speed up running studies, new E and L introduced. Previously, E was hard faced and L soft; now E soft, L hard-faced.
v7. E absent. After giving initial instructions, E leaves lab and gives instructions by telephone.
v8. Women. In v1 to v7, Ts are all male. Here Ts are women (but E and L are still male).
v9. Limited contract. In v5, T and L sign a release stating: "In participating in this experimental research of my own free will, I release Yale University and its employees from any legal claims arising from my participation." When signing this, L says he has a heart condition and that "I'll agree to be in it, but only on condition that you let me out when I say."
v10. Nonuniversity site. Lab moved to an office building in Bridgeport, a nearby industrial city. Study involves no visible tie to the university.
v13. Ordinary man as E. E is called away, and an ordinary man, who appears to be a participant (but is a confederate), takes over his role and comes up with the idea of increasing shocks each time L makes a mistake.
v15. Contradictory Es. When T arrives at the lab, he is confronted with two Es (E1 & E2) who give instructions alternately. At 150v, E1 gives the usual command, but E2 gives T the opposite instruction.
v16. E as L. As in v15, T confronts two Es. However, at the outset, while the two Es are waiting for L, he phones to cancel. Es then flip a coin to decide who will be new L. Study proceeds as in v5.
v17. 2 Peers rebel. T is placed in the midst of two peers (acting as fellow Ts) who defy E and refuse to punish L against his will.
v18. Peer shocks. The act of shocking the victim is removed from T and placed in the hands of another participant (a confederate). T performs subsidiary acts that contribute to progress of the study but remove him from the act of pressing the switch on the shock generator.

Note. Variant numbers and descriptions are from Milgram (1974). L = Learner (a confederate), T = Teacher (the participant), E = Experimenter (a confederate).

The fact that there are competing voices in the studies is a point of critical importance, as it points to one of the most fundamental problems with the agentic state explanation and its inconsistency with much of what Milgram himself has to say about the obedience paradigm. One of the most

fundamental features of this paradigm—what gives it such drama—is the tension that derives from dealing with contradictory voices and contradictory obligations. Listening to any of the sessions, one is struck by the ways in which participants struggle to reconcile the unreconcilable, the ways in which they shift from one position to another, and their deep ambivalence about what to do. However, the agentic state account neglects this tension that derives from the multivocal reality of the context by suggesting that, for participants, the experimental paradigm is experienced as monovocal. It implies that they only attend to and only hear the voice of the experimenter. The learner, by this account, all but disappears. But any adequate account of Milgram's findings must do justice to the tension between voices and to the ways in which this is resolved.

The foregoing point can be elaborated upon in relation to a third body of evidence, associated with the different pattern of responses across the great many variants of Milgram's basic experimental paradigm. The first thing to note here is that although researchers and commentators tend to focus their discussion on just one of these studies (either the baseline study, v1, or the "new baseline," v5, in which 65% of participants were totally compliant), Milgram in fact conducted around 30 studies that involved modifications to this. Indeed, as summarized in Table 2, *Obedience to Authority* (Milgram, 1974) describes 15 variants in which the experimenter asked teachers to administer a designated shock level to the learner (in addition, he describes three others with different structures: for example, studies in which there is no authority or the authority does not determine the level of shock).

In these studies, full obedience is displayed by between 0% and 92.5% of participants, and hence, as Milgram (1965) acknowledged in the title of an early *Human Relations* article, they are as much studies of disobedience as they are of obedience. These shifts are associated with a range of factors including changes to the physical proximity of experimenter and learner. So, for example, when the experimenter is in the same room and the learner in a different one, 65% of participants are prepared to go all the way to 450 volts (v1, v5), but when the experimenter gives his instructions by phone (v7) only 20.5% go this far. As a number of commentators have noted (e.g., Blass, 2004; Mantell & Panzarella, 1976), such variation is inconsistent with Milgram's own agentic state model, which suggests that obedience is simply a natural response to the presence and instruction of an authority. Instead, as Milgram himself recognized, at least in passing, this variation appears to reflect "a potentially shifting set of alliances over the several experimental conditions" (1965, p. 64). Or, as we have already noted, they could relate to different levels of "incipient group formation between the experimenter and the subject" (1974, p. 39).

The Importance of Social Identification

Building on the above evidence and insights, Reicher and Haslam (2011a, see also Turner, 1991) argue that variation in participants' willingness to administer shocks across variants of the Milgram paradigm can be explained by differing patterns of social identification with the two key parties in the experiment: on the one hand, the experimenter and the scientific community he represents and, on the other hand, the learner and the general community that he represents. In these terms, willingness to accede to the experimenter's requests is enhanced by factors that make salient participants' identification with the experimenter and his science (e.g., conducting the study at Yale, v1, v5) and/or reduce the salience of their identification with the learner and the general community (e.g., not having to administer shocks to him oneself, v18). At the same time, the likelihood of resisting the experimenter's requests is enhanced by factors that make salient participants' identification with the learner and the general community (e.g., being exposed to the resistance of two fellow teachers, v17) and/or reduce the salience of their identification with the experimenter and his science (e.g., conducting the study in downtown Bridgeport, v10; being confronted with two experimenters who disagree with each other, v15). The study in Bridgeport is particularly informative because the experimenter has not changed; however, as an employee of a low-status commercial enterprise rather than a researcher in a prestigious institution, he is now less prototypical of scientists in general. The fact that obedience falls in Bridgeport therefore supports the contention that what is important is social identification with science more than a personal relationship with another individual.

In short, being torn between two insistent voices—the one representing science, the other representing the community of ordinary people—the question of which one the participant heeds ultimately depends on which category he identifies with most. Indeed, one can argue that much of the considerable dramatic tension within this paradigm (especially for those who watch it on film; Millward, 2011) flows from the pains that Milgram went to in order to create a balance between these two competing sets of identity-based interests (Russell, 2011).

To the extent that this analysis is correct, it suggests that participants' willingness to engage in the destructive behavior within the Milgram paradigm is a reflection not of simple obedience, but of active identification with the experimenter and his mission. Indeed, as in the Stanford Prison Study, the experimenter is effectively acting as a leader, and participants' behavior involves not so much obeying orders as engaging in acts of *followership* that involve discerning the experimenter's wishes and "working toward" the goals he has outlined (i.e., testing a theory about the effects of punishment on learning), however stressful this may be. In addition, this analysis is consistent with a social identity model of leadership that sees this as an influence process centering on a sense of group identity that is embodied by the leader and shared by the followers (Haslam & Platow, 2001; Haslam et al., 2011; Hogg, 2001; Turner, 1991).

Going further, we would observe not only that Milgram's work can be assimilated into the leadership literature, but also

that his paradigm provides a more powerful and realistic methodology for addressing leadership than most other work in the field—for in the world at large (as in Milgram's paradigm), we are not normally addressed by just one leadership figure but by multiple would-be leaders all clamoring for our attention, our support, and/or our vote. The key question, then, is not how we respond to a single voice in isolation, but how, from a field of many voices, we select one to listen to and follow. Indeed, from this perspective, we see not only that the Milgram paradigm offers an ideal tool for developing the study of leadership, but also that a focus on leadership provides a powerful lens through which to appreciate anew the significance of Milgram's work.

Testing the Social Identity Account

Although a social identity analysis is consistent with data that relates both to participants' responses to the injunctive fourth prod (Burger, 2009b) and to their decisions about when to withdraw (Packer, 2008), no formal attempt has been made to see how well it accounts for variation in behavior across the range of studies that Milgram conducted. Accordingly, we were interested in establishing whether participants' willingness to administer shocks of up to 450 volts across variants of the Milgram paradigm could be predicted by the extent to which any given variant makes salient the participants' shared identification with the experimenter and the scientific community and the participants' shared identification with the learner and the general community.

To examine this question, we conducted a study in which we asked two different groups of participants—experts and nonexperts—to make judgments about the extent to which they felt the variant in question would lead participants to both identify with the experimenter and the scientific community of which he was representative and identify with the learner and the general community of which he was representative. Having collected this data we then sought to establish the extent to which mean levels of identification predicted the percentage of participants who were prepared to administer 450-volt shocks in Milgram's own research.

Participant groups

The expert group was comprised of 32 academic social psychologists (postgraduate students and lecturers) working at two British universities and one Australian university (18 women, 14 men; mean age = 32). Our decision to include this group was based on an assumption that they would have a good understanding both of Milgram's work and of the theoretical construct of social identification. These participants indicated that they had "good" to "very good" knowledge of Milgram's research (on a 1–3 scale in which 1= limited, 2 = good, and 3 = very good; $M = 2.2$, $SD = 0.6$).

It is possible however, that these experts' judgments of identification within the Milgram paradigm would be inferred from their knowledge of how much obedience was shown in each variant. That is, these raters might use their own knowledge of social psychology as a basis for developing a theory resembling our own, such that the responses they provided were predicated upon knowledge of the outcomes we were trying to predict. For this reason we also included a nonexpert sample comprised of 96 first-year psychology students enrolled in a course on Classic Studies in Psychology at a British university where they had yet to cover the work of Milgram (77 women, 19 men; mean age = 20). These participants indicated that they had "limited" to "good" knowledge of Milgram's research ($M = 1.6$, $SD = 0.6$), a level of knowledge significantly lower than that of our expert sample, $t(126) = 4.5$; $p < .001$.

Procedure

Participants were read a short (half-page) description of Milgram's baseline study (v1).[1] They were then told that they would hear details of 15 variants of this study and that their task was to indicate, for each variant, the extent to which the set up would incline participants to (a) identify with the experimenter as a scientist and with the perspective of the scientific community that he represents and (b) identify with the learner as a member of the general public and with the perspective of the general community that he represents. As an initial anchor for these judgments, they were told to imagine that, in the baseline experiment, identification with the experimenter as a scientist was high and had a value of 80 on a scale from 0 to 100 and that identification with the learner as a member of the general public was moderate and had a value of 50 on a scale from 0 to 100.[2]

Following this, each variant was described in turn (using abbreviated descriptions taken from Milgram, 1974, and in the order presented in Table 2), and participants were asked to complete a response sheet in which they estimated these two identification levels by reporting a number from 0 to 100 in each case. Once they had done this for every variant, they were asked to provide basic demographic information and to indicate the extent of their knowledge about the Milgram study and its variants (as described above). After this, the purpose of the study was explained and discussed openly.

Estimated identification as a predictor of obedience

For each of the 15 variants, we computed mean levels of estimated identification with the experimenter and the learner, as well as mean levels of the relative identification (i.e., mean levels of identification with the experimenter minus the levels of identification with the learner). Figure 1 plots these for experts (Fig. 1a) and nonexperts (Fig. 1b), together with the proportion of participants administering 450-volt shocks in Milgram's original studies (as reported in Milgram, 1974). Correlations between these three measures and this level of obedience were then computed.

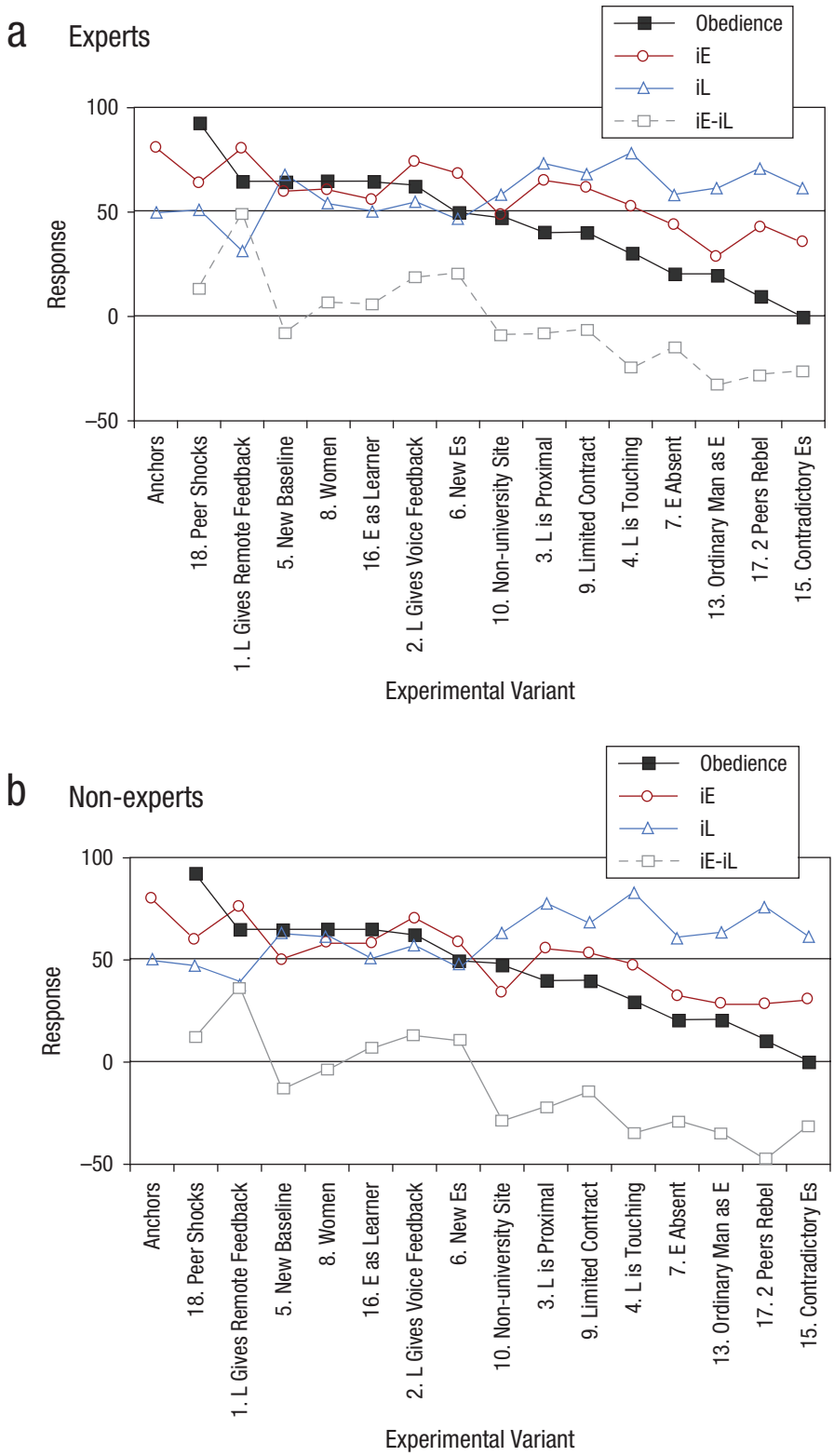

Fig. 1. Identification with the experimenter and the learner (and the proportion of participants administering 450-volt shocks) across variants of Milgram's obedience paradigm: (a) responses of academic social psychologists, (b) responses of students.
Note: Obedience = percentage of participants going to 450v reported in Milgram (1974); iE = identification with experimenter and the scientific community he represents; iL = identification with learner and the general community he represents.

Identification with the experimenter was a strong and significant positive predictor of the level of obedience displayed in each variant (experts, $r = .75$, $p < .001$; nonexperts, $r = .78$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, identification with the learner was a strong and significant negative predictor of the level of obedience (experts, $r = -.51$, $p < .05$, nonexperts, $r = -.58$, $p < .02$).[3] Finally, relative identification with the experimenter versus the learner was a strong and significant positive predictor of the level of obedience (experts, $r = .75$, $p < .001$; nonexperts, $r = .79$, $p < .001$). The nature of these relationships can be seen clearly in Figure 1 where, for both experts and nonexperts, both identification and relative identification with the experimenter closely track the willingness of participants to administer 450-volt shocks across different variants, and where identification with the learner is inversely related to this willingness.

Conclusion: Not Obedience But Followership

The evidence summarized above provides support for the suggestion that participants' behavior within the Milgram paradigm reflects the extent to which they identify with the parties that confront them on the empirical stage that is set before them: on the one hand, an experimenter who asks them to help advance scientific understanding, and on the other, a learner who appeals to their sense of civic morality.

These findings build upon a number of recent studies that have reinvigorated discussion surrounding Milgram's classic obedience experiments (Reicher & Haslam, 2011b). In the first instance, the findings build on observations by Packer (2008) that participants' decisions to stop administering shocks are made at points at which it becomes clear that they have a choice to make because they are exposed to opposing voices (those of the experimenter and the learner) that urge them to take different courses of action. In addition, they also develop insights that emerge from Burger's (2009a) partial replications of Milgram's research, which suggest that participants disobey when they are presented with a direct order to continue administering shocks.

Together, these various observations suggest to us that there is a case for reconceptualizing the behavior of participants within Milgram's studies. Despite the rich array of explanations in the literature, the dominant view remains that the destructiveness of Milgram's participants is a product of blind obedience to authority. However, we suggest that it can instead be understood as an act of engaged followership that flows from social identification with those in positions of leadership—leadership that is a source of "shared comprehension, consonance and synchronization" (Hilberg, 1985, p. 55; see Haslam et al., 2011; Reicher & Haslam, 2011b). In Milgram's research, participants act as they do to the extent that they believe in, and hence are committed to, the scientific enterprise that the experimenter is leading more than they are committed to the well-being of ordinary members of the community as represented by the learner. Note, too, that Milgram went to great lengths to engender and promote this identification by emphasizing the scientific credentials and importance of the research (not least through careful design of apparatus and procedures; Russell, 2010, 2011).

This reconceptualization has the advantage of mirroring recent reassessments by historians suggesting that functionaries in brutalizing regimes—like the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann—do much more than merely follow orders (e.g., Cesarani, 2004; Lutsky, 2005; Vetlesen, 2005). As Lozowick (2002, p. 279) observed:

> Eichmann and his ilk did not come to murder Jews by accident or in a fit of absent-mindedness, nor by blindly obeying orders or by being small cogs in a big machine. They worked hard, thought hard, took the lead over many years. They were the alpinists of evil.

More fundamentally, Kershaw (1993) argued that the whole nature of the Nazi state was based on avoiding the use of formal orders. That meant that bureaucrats were required to show initiative and energy in discerning and then fulfilling the wishes of their superiors and, ultimately, Hitler. As put by Kershaw in his evocative article title, they were not simply obeying, they were "working towards the Führer" (Kershaw, 1993).

Our reconceptualization also has the advantage of invoking a single set of processes to explain not only when people follow authority but also when they resist it. Indeed, one of the most telling critiques of Milgram's agentic state analysis is that it fails not only to explain the forms of resistance that are found in the world at large, but also to address or account for the forms of resistance that occur in his own studies (Haslam & Reicher, 2012). An analysis in terms of the relative social identification overcomes such problems by being concerned as much with situations in which identification with nonauthorities outweighs identification with authorities as with situations in which identification with authorities outweighs identification with nonauthorities.

The evidence we have presented seeks to establish whether participants' willingness to play their part in the destructive acts envisioned by Milgram's experimenter could be predicted by the degree to which they would be likely to identify with him and the scientific community that he represents (as opposed to the learner and the general community that he represents) across different variants of the studies that Milgram (1974) describes. As we have seen, judgments of identification with these two parties were very good predictors of these different outcomes. The fact that relevant data were obtained from both expert social psychologists and nonexpert students also appears to rule out the possibility that judgments of identification were predicated upon knowledge of the outcomes that these were being used to predict.

It is important to add that, although identifying with the experimenter over the learner may tip participants toward obedience (or what we prefer to term *followership*), this does not suggest that the decision is ever easy. In most experimental variants, there is some degree of identification with both

parties. So even when participants follow the experimenter, there is still a pull toward the learner—a concern with his fate. Our approach does justice to the tensions and the ambivalence of participants in the obedience studies because it is rooted in the multivocal reality of Milgram's paradigm. To some extent at least, participants attend to both voices. Identification determines which is accorded most weight.

It remains the case, however, that the methodology used in this research—like that of other recent studies (e.g., Slater et al., 2006)—is rather unorthodox and provides a circuitous approach to the challenge of establishing whether what Milgram termed *obedience* is a consequence of participants' social identifications. Obviously the direct way of testing this idea would involve recreating the Milgram paradigm and directly manipulating factors that affect participants' social identification with the experimenter and with the learner to establish whether these play a causal role in determining participants' willingness to deliver shocks to the learner. However, because such research involves considerable ethical challenges, it is clear that a strong theoretical case needs to be made before it could be countenanced. The purpose of this article is to provide precisely this case, so that work to address the critical question of why (and not just whether) people still prove willing to participate in brutalizing acts can move forward (Reicher & Haslam, 2011a).

There are a number of reasons why we think developments of this form are timely. The most obvious is that the issues that let Milgram conduct his studies remain all too common in the world today. Whether the referent is the oppression of civilians in Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Syria or Yemen (and many other countries besides), the abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, the neglect of old people in care homes, or the immoral actions of journalists in news rooms, cruelty and brutality remain all too topical. Yet after a long hiatus, during which ethical concerns made the systematic study of such phenomena impossible, new methods (e.g., restricted to low-level apparent shocks; Burger, 2009b) and new technologies (e.g., virtual reality simulations; Slater et al., 2006) have allowed experimental researchers to return afresh to the all-important questions that Milgram's work raises.

Accordingly, we are now in a position to renew theoretical debate in a field of research that was opened up by Milgram. Here, we provide grounds for one particular form of renewal. This moves us away from a dominant viewpoint that has prevailed within and beyond the academic world for nearly half a century—a viewpoint suggesting that people engage in barbaric acts because they have little insight into what they are doing and conform slavishly to the will of those in authority. Against this, and together with a growing body of historical and social psychological evidence, the present data move us toward the conclusion that agents of brutality act as they do under the influence of a leadership with which they are socially identified. To the extent that this identity is salient (and competing identities are not), this provides them with their moral compass. It also motivates them to act as followers, willing to do what it takes to work toward the collective goals that the leader sets out. Followership of this form is not thoughtless. It is the conscious endeavor of committed subjects.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. Although Milgram himself never referred to such obedience as "blind," this is how it is commonly represented (for relevant discussion, see Lutsky, 2005; Miller, 1995).
2. Materials that allow this study to be replicated (or run as a class exercise) are available at http://www.bbcprisonstudy.org/activities.php?p=134
3. The correlation between identification with the experimenter and identification with the learner was marginally significant and negative (for experts, $r = -.47$, $p < .10$; for nonexperts, $r = -.52$, $p < .05$).

References

Arendt, H. (1963). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Blass, T. (2004). *The man who shocked the world: The life and legacy of Stanley Milgram*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Brehm, J. W. (1966). *A theory of psychological reactance*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Burger, J. (2009a, October 15–17). *In their own words: Explaining obedience through an examination of participants' comments*. Paper presented at the Meeting of the Society of Experimental Social Psychology, Portland, ME.

Burger, J. (2009b). Replicating Milgram: Would people still obey today? *American Psychologist, 64*, 1–11.

Castano, E. (2008). On the perils of glorifying the ingroup: Intergroup violence, in-group glorification and moral disengagement. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 2*, 154–170.

Cesarani, D. (2004). *Eichmann: His life and crimes*. London, England: Heinemann.

Darley, J. M. (1992). Social organization and the production of evil. *Psychological Enquiry, 2*, 199–218.

Gilbert, S. J. (1981). Another look at the Milgram obedience studies: The role of a graduated series of shocks. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 7*, 690–695.

Haslam, S. A., & Platow, M. J. (2001). The link between leadership and followership: How affirming social identity translates vision into action. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 27*, 1469–1479.

Haslam, S. A., & Reicher, S. D. (2007a). Beyond the banality of evil: Three dynamics of an interactionist social psychology of tyranny. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 33*, 615–622.

Haslam, S. A., & Reicher, S. D. (2007b). Identity entrepreneurship and the consequences of identity failure: The dynamics of leadership in the BBC Prison Study. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 70*, 125–147.

Haslam, S. A., & Reicher, S. D. (2012). When prisoners take over the prison: A social psychology of resistance. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 16*, 154–179.

Haslam, S. A., Reicher, S. D., & Platow, M. J. (2011). *The new psychology of leadership: Identity, influence and power*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Hilberg, R. (1985). *The destruction of the European Jews*. New York, NY: Holmes & Meier.

Hogg, M. A. (2001). A social identity theory of leadership. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 5*, 184–200.

Kershaw, I. (1993). Working towards the Führer: Reflections on the nature of the Hitler dictatorship. *Contemporary European History, 2*, 103–108.

Lozowick, Y. (2002). *Hitler's bureaucrats: The Nazi security police and the banality of evil* (H. Watzman, Trans.). London, England: Continuum.

Lutsky, N. (2005). When is "obedience" obedience? Conceptual and historical commentary. *Journal of Social Issues, 51*, 55–65.

Mantell, D. M., & Panzarella, R. (1976). Obedience and responsibility. *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 15*, 239–245.

Meeus, H. J. W., & Raaijmakers, Q. A. W. (1986). Administrative obedience: Carrying out orders to use psychological-administrative violence. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 16*, 311–324.

Meeus, H. J. W., & Raaijmakers, Q. A. W. (1995). Obedience in modern society: The Utrecht studies. *Journal of Social Issues, 51*, 155–175.

Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioral study of obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 67*, 371–378.

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

Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to authority: An experimental view*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Miller, A. (1995). Constructions of the obedience experiments: A focus upon domains of relevance. *Journal of Social Issues, 51*, 33–53.

Miller, A. (2004). What can the Milgram obedience experiments tell us about the Holocaust? Generalizing from the social psychology laboratory. In A. Miller (Ed.), *The social psychology of good and evil* (pp. 193–239). New York, NY: Guilford.

Millward, K. (2011). The window in the laboratory: Stanley Milgram as filmmaker. *The Psychologist, 24*, 658–661.

Navarick, D. J. (2009). Reviving the Milgram obedience paradigm in the era of informed consent. *The Psychological Record, 59*, 155–170.

Novick, P. (2000). *The Holocaust and collective memory*. London, England: Bloomsbury.

Packer, D. J. (2008). Identifying systematic disobedience in Milgram's obedience experiments: A meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 3*, 301–304.

Passini, S., & Morselli, D. (2009). Authority relationships between obedience and disobedience. *New Ideas in Psychology, 27*, 96–106.

Reicher, S. D., & Haslam, S. A. (2006). Rethinking the psychology of tyranny: The BBC Prison Study. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 45*, 1–40.

Reicher, S. D., & Haslam, S. A. (2011a). After shock? Towards a social identity explanation of the Milgram 'obedience' studies. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 50*, 163–169.

Reicher, S. D., & Haslam, S. A. (2011b). Culture of shock: A fresh look at Milgram's obedience studies. *Scientific American Mind, 22*(6), 30–35.

Reicher, S. D., Haslam, S. A., & Rath, R. (2008). Making a virtue of evil: A five-step social identity model of the development of collective hate. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 2*, 1313–1344.

Roccas, S., Klar, Y., & Liviatan, I. (2006). The paradox of group-based guilt: Modes of national identification, conflict vehemence, and reactions to the ingroup's moral violations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 91*, 698–711.

Rochat, F., & Modigliani, A. (1995). The ordinary quality of resistance: From Milgram's laboratory to the village of Le Chambon. *Journal of Social Issues, 51*, 195–210.

Rochat, F., & Modigliani, A. (1997). Authority: Obedience, defiance, and identification in experimental and historical contexts. In M. Gold (Ed.), *A new outline of social psychology* (pp. 235–246). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Russell, N. J. C. (2010). The making of an (in)famous experiment. *The Psychologist, 23*, 780–783.

Russell, N. J. C. (2011). Milgram's obedience to authority experiments: Origins and early evolution. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 50*, 146–162.

Slater, M., Antley, A., Davison, A., Swapp, D., Guger, C., Barker, C., . . . Sachez-Vives, M. V. (2006). A virtual reprise of the Stanley Milgram obedience experiments. *PLoS ONE, 1*, e39. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0000039

Turner, J. C. (1991). *Social influence*. Milton Keynes, England: Open University Press.

Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.

Turner, J. C., Oakes, P. J., Haslam, S. A., & McGarty, C. A. (1994). Self and collective: Cognition and social context. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 20*, 454–463.

Vetlesen, A. J. (2005). *Evil and human agency: Understanding collective evildoing*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Zimbardo, P. (1989). *Quiet rage: The Stanford prison study* [video]. Stanford, CA: Stanford University.

Zimbardo, P. (2004). A situationist perspective on the psychology of evil: Understanding how good people are transformed into perpetrators. In A. Miller (Ed.), *The social psychology of good and evil* (pp. 21–50). New York, NY: Guilford.