

# Just obeying orders?

Ordinary people can commit atrocities simply by following orders, iconic experiments from the 1960s concluded. But this notion of the “banality of evil” is wrong, argue psychologists **Alexander Haslam** and **Stephen Reicher**



PATRICK ZACHMANN/MAGNUM PHOTOS

IF YOU only know about one research programme in psychology, chances are it is Stanley Milgram's "shock experiments". Conducted in the early 1960s at Yale University, the participants were asked by an "Experimenter" to take on the role of "Teacher" and administer an escalating series of electric shocks to a "Learner" in the next room when he chose the wrong answers in a memory test. This was supposedly part of a study into the effect of punishment on learning.

The participants didn't know that the shocks, and the cries they elicited from the Learner, weren't genuine. Nevertheless, many acceded to the Experimenter's requests and proved willing to deliver shocks labelled 450 volts to the powerless Learner (who was in fact a stooge employed by Milgram to play this role).

The power of these studies was that they appeared to provide startling evidence of our capacity for blind obedience – evidence that inhumanity springs not necessarily from deep-seated hatred or pathology, but rather from a much more mundane inclination to obey the orders of those in authority, however unreasonable or brutal these may be. This was the substance of the "agentic state theory" that Milgram developed to explain his findings in his 1974 book *Obedience to Authority*. Importantly, it is an analysis that chimes with political theorist Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil", which she famously developed after observing the trial of the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann (see "Nazis and the banality of evil", above right).

Milgram's studies are influential to this day, but are also some of the most unethical ever conducted in psychology. They could never be carried out in a similar form today due to the extreme stress suffered by the participants (see "Never again", page 31). Ironically, these ethical problems have served only to consolidate the influence of Milgram's agentic state explanation. The impossibility of replication has made it hard for an alternative account to gain traction.

Nevertheless an alternative account is needed. Not only have recent historical studies led researchers to question Arendt's claims that Eichmann and his ilk simply went along thoughtlessly with the orders of their superiors, but reanalysis of Milgram's work has also led social psychologists to cast serious doubt on the claim we are somehow programmed to obey authority.

To start with, Milgram didn't conduct just one "obedience" study. He conducted over 25, varying features of the set-up such as the proximity of the Experimenter and Learner.

## NAZIS AND THE BANALITY OF EVIL

In 1961, Adolf Eichmann, one of the chief architects of the "final solution to the Jewish question", was sentenced to death for the murder of millions of people in Nazi extermination camps.

Prior to his trial he had been portrayed in the media and by psychiatrists as a sadistic and psychopathic monster. But as political theorist Hannah Arendt watched him give his defence at the trial, she found that this picture did not hold true. On the contrary, she was struck by the fact that Eichmann (pictured below) came across as a normal bureaucrat who had simply been following orders – without question, imagination or insight. Famously, she claimed that the

main lesson to be gleaned from his life was one of "the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil".

Yet while this concept of the banality of evil proved highly influential – not least because it gelled closely with Stanley Milgram's account of obedience to authority – in recent years historians have cast doubt on its validity.

A key problem is that Arendt mainly attended those parts of Eichmann's trial at which his defence worked hard to present him as innocuous, precisely to mitigate blame.

The prosecution, however, had presented compelling evidence that Eichmann was no

passive pen-pusher. Rather, he was a committed Nazi who took on organisational challenges with fervour and imagination. If he thought orders were not sufficiently "on message" he would disobey them, and where none had been given, as was often the case, he would still "work towards the Führer" in a creative way.

A crucial point is that he did this because he was convinced that the cause he was advancing was right. The truly frightening thing about Eichmann and his ilk is not that they didn't know what they were doing, but that they knew full well what they were doing and believed their actions to be justified, worthy and noble.

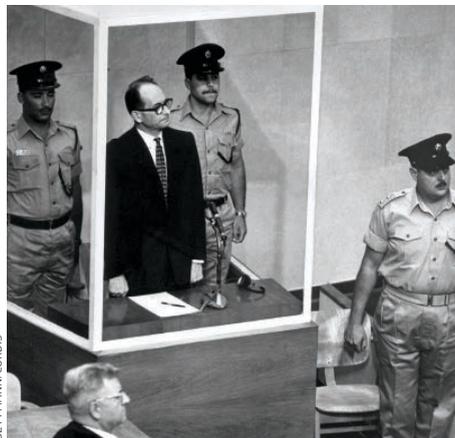
In these, the proportion of participants who kept on shocking to the bitter end varied from 0 to 100 per cent. So it cannot be assumed that people always obey. Indeed, as Milgram himself recognised in the title of an early publication, these are studies of disobedience as well as obedience.

Next, even where there was obedience, it was far from blind. While participant Teachers attended to the demands of the Experimenter, they were well aware of the apparent suffering of the Learner. Consequently, they were torn between these two voices, as film footage of Milgram's experiment shows. What is more,

orders prove to be the least effective means of securing obedience. We see this because Milgram scripted a number of verbal "prods" for the Experimenter to use if participants were reticent about continuing, such as: "You have no other choice, you must continue". Yet almost every time this prod was used, participants refused to go on. So whatever else the studies might show, the one thing they don't show is that we have an inherent tendency to obey orders.

So what do they show? Putting the strands of evidence together, we argue that the balance between obedience and disobedience hinges upon whether participants prioritise the voice of the Experimenter over that of the Learner or vice versa. This, in turn, depends upon whether they identify more with the cause of science or more with the plight of the ordinary citizen. In these terms, the problem with orders is that they undermine identification with the science by positioning the Experimenter above and apart from participants, rather than as a collaborator in a common cause. And what this means is that those who shock do so not because they are unaware of the consequences of their actions, but because they know what they are doing and believe it to be worthy. Rather than being blindly obedient, they are engaged followers.

Moreover, participants are engaged because Milgram expended a great deal of effort to engage them. In particular, he worked hard to persuade them that they



Pathological, or just a workaday bureaucrat? The trial of Nazi chief Adolf Eichmann

## THE PRISON EXPERIMENT

Stanley Milgram's obedience studies appear to provide compelling evidence that normal people might be willing to kill a stranger simply if ordered to do so by someone in authority (see main story). This aligns with conclusions typically drawn from another classic piece of social psychological research: the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). Conducted in 1971 by Philip Zimbardo, this involved randomly assigning students to be either guards or prisoners within a mock prison.

The objective was to observe how social relations within and between the two groups unfolded in the absence of an obviously malevolent authority. As in Milgram's studies, the results proved shocking: within a few days, the guards were subjecting prisoners to a host of degrading and abusive treatments. This led to the study being terminated after just six days.

### DESCENT INTO TYRANNY

Zimbardo concluded that people descend into tyranny because they conform naturally and unthinkingly to the toxic roles and scripts that accompany particular contexts - so that, for example, a brutal prison will inevitably create brutal guards. Like Milgram's work, this analysis is closely aligned with the "banality of evil" thesis devised by political theorist Hannah Arendt.

But there are strong grounds for questioning these conclusions. Although Zimbardo presents his findings as evidence of "blind conformity" to role, it is apparent that he gave his guards clear guidance on how he expected them to behave when briefing them for the study. "You can create in the prisoners feelings of boredom, a sense of fear to some degree, you can create a notion of arbitrariness, that their life is totally controlled by us, by the system, you, me..." On this basis we have argued that the behaviour of those guards was not the result of blind conformity, but the result of engaged followership that flowed from identification with Zimbardo's leadership.

When we revisited Zimbardo's paradigm in our own BBC Prison study in 2002, we found that in the absence of clear direction from us, "guards" showed no natural tendency to be brutal, and in fact failed altogether to identify with their role. However, towards the end of our study we did see that a group of new guards proved willing to try to implement a novel regime founded upon more authoritarian lines. However it was not conformity that brought them to this point. As in the SPE, it was creative leadership by a core of "true believers" that was critical to recruiting some participants to enforce and others to acquiesce in a new, more punitive system.

were contributing to vitally important work which would bring about progress in scientific understanding. In every detail he laboured to give the studies scientific authority, right down to the meticulously designed fake shock generator ("Type ZLB", supposedly made by the Dyson Instrument Company).

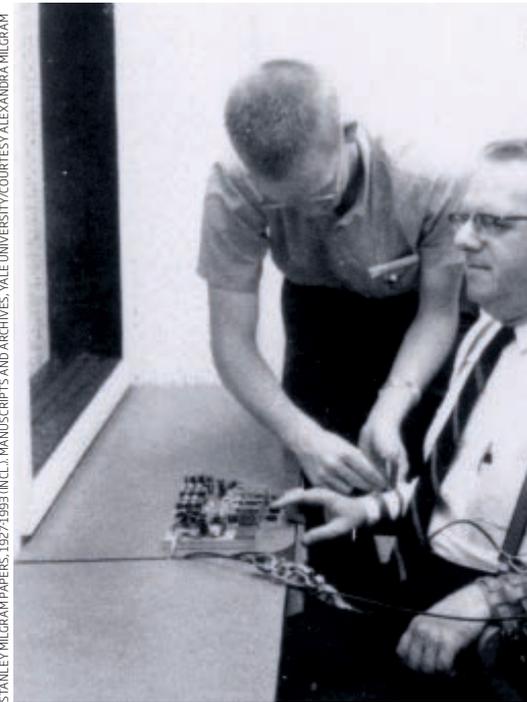
A 2012 paper we published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* provides preliminary

## "Within days, 'guards' were subjecting the 'prisoners' to degrading treatments"

support for this alternative analysis and is again rooted in Milgram's own findings. In this, we asked people to read descriptions of different variants of his study and then to indicate how much they would identify with the Experimenter and the Learner in each. We found that relative identification - the level of identification with the Experimenter minus identification with the Learner - was highly correlated with the levels of shock that Milgram's participants actually delivered.

But while it is one thing to reinterpret old data, it is quite another to produce new data to test alternative explanations. And in Milgram's arena, this intellectual challenge is exacerbated by profound ethical constraints. To overcome these challenges we have been conducting a broad programme of research using multiple methods, none of which would be conclusive on its own. However, they combine to tell a coherent and powerful story.

First, in conjunction with Mel Slater, a specialist in virtual environments at University College London, we have conducted studies using a virtual-reality version of Milgram's set-up which has been shown to



STANLEY MILGRAM PAPERS, 1927-1993 (INCL.) MANUSCRIPTS AND ARCHIVES, YALE UNIVERSITY/COURTESY ALEXANDRA MILGRAM

elicit similar reactions to Milgram's original. Initial findings show how participants orient to both the Learner and the Experimenter, trying to mitigate "harm" to the former even as they continue to obey the latter. For instance, even though they are not aware of it, participants try to help the virtual-reality Learner by saying the correct answers to the memory task more loudly when offering them a choice of answers.

Second, we have developed an online analogue of the paradigm in which people perform an increasingly aversive task, in which they are asked to select pejorative terms to describe progressively more pleasant groups, ranging from the Ku Klux Klan to



LIBRADO ROMERO/NYT/REDUX/EVYVINE

Stanley Milgram (left) devised his "shock experiments" (above) to test our capacity for blind obedience



## NEVER AGAIN

**Milgram's psychological studies are on most lists of the most unethical ever done. Concentration-camp survivor and child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim went so far as to claim that they were "in line with the human experiments of the Nazis". What makes them so notorious?**

### INFORMED CONSENT

A basic principle of research is that participants should know what they are letting themselves in for. In Milgram's case people thought they were taking part in a learning study. The electric shocks came as a complete surprise and people found themselves trapped in a nightmarish dilemma. Contemporary ethics committees do allow some level of necessary deception in studies, but only if an ordinary person is unlikely to be upset when the deception is revealed.

### SHORT-TERM HARM

Participants should not be exposed to undue physical or mental distress during a study. Milgram's own descriptions in this regard provide powerful

ammunition for his critics: "I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck."

### LONG-TERM HARM

Some researchers speculate that the real harm to participants may have been in the long term, but the evidence is mixed. While 7 per cent said they found the experiments upsetting, the great majority said they were "glad" or "very glad" to have participated.

### SOCIAL HARM

Finally, studies should not endorse forms of belief that legitimise discriminatory or harmful acts towards others. The archives show that Milgram put people at ease by telling them that what they had done was noble in helping to advance scientific understanding. In this way, he was promoting a belief system which says it is acceptable to inflict suffering in the name of a good cause (in this case, science). So he might have alleviated individual harm at the cost of doing social harm.

a family walking the park. In a series of studies, we consistently find that increasing identification with science leads people to persist longer at the task. Moreover, the higher-status the science is perceived to be, the greater the obedience: participants prove more obedient if the research is understood to be advancing understanding of "cognitive neuroscience" rather than "social behaviour".

This evidence accords with Milgram's own musings at the time he was conducting his studies. In his unpublished experimental notebook he reflects that "the subjects have come to the laboratory to form a relationship with the experimenter, a specifically submissive relationship in the interest of advancing science. They have not come to form a relationship with the [Learner], and it is this lack of relationship in the one direction and the real relationship in the other that produces the results." This raises uncomfortable questions about the ease with which "scientific progress" can be used to justify noxious ends.

Third, and most ambitiously, we have applied an innovative technique in which professional actors assume a character and are then put in a novel situation – in this case, Milgram's obedience set-up. This method, developed by Kathryn Millard at Macquarie University, Australia, draws on a rich tradition of realist film theory and practice. Our argument is that actors are able to inhabit that character and behave as that character would

in context, but without this having negative consequences for their identity outside of that context. We are thus able to examine behaviour in extreme situations but in an ethical manner.

In December 2013, we ran a series of replications of Milgram's studies using this technique (the results will soon be published in *PLoS One*). We found that the actors behaved almost exactly as Milgram's original participants had. In particular, they went as far as the original participants, employed similar strategies (for example, emphasising the correct answers), and responded in the same way to the Experimenter's prods.

## "Our findings raise uncomfortable questions about misuse of science"

Moreover, when we directly measured identification, we found a clear relationship between relative identification with the science and the level of shock that was given.

There is one further big advantage of this technique. We now not only have the data to support the notion of engaged followership, but also film – film that highlights not just obedience but also disobedience (unlike Milgram's classic 1965 documentary film of his experiments, *Obedience*, which has been shown on television many times and seen by virtually every psychology student). Our

upcoming documentary, *Shock Room*, also explores the factors which determine whether participants go one way or the other. This, we hope, will reveal to audiences overlooked dimensions of Milgram's paradigm and give them a new perspective on the psychology of obedience and tyranny (also see "The prison experiment", opposite).

One thing, however, is certain. Whether you agree with Milgram or not, or accept our "engaged followership" theory, there are few issues in psychology that are of greater social significance. These are not just a matter of the academic understanding of authority, obedience and genocide. "Obedience" has long served as an alibi for those involved in atrocities, and it is routinely articulated in the defence: "It wasn't my fault, I was only obeying orders." In challenging what "we all know" about Milgram, we believe this defence is no longer tenable. Atrocious, we contend, always involves a choice of engagements, and we are always accountable for our choices. **n**

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