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50 Years of “Obedience to
Authority”: From Blind
Conformity to Engaged
Followership

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Abstract

Despite being conducted half a century ago, Stanley Milgram’s studies of obedience to authority remain the most well-known, most controversial, and most important in social psychology. Yet in recent years, increased scrutiny has served to question the integrity of Milgram’s research reports, the validity of his explanation of the phenomena he reported, and the broader relevance of his research to processes of collective harm-doing. We review these debates and argue that the main problem with received understandings of Milgram’s work arises from seeing it as an exploration of obedience. Instead, we argue that it is better understood as providing insight into processes of engaged followership, in which people are prepared to harm others because they identify with their leaders’ cause and believe their actions to be virtuous. We review evidence that supports this analysis and shows that it explains the behavior not only of Milgram’s participants but also of his research assistants and of the textbook writers and teachers who continue to reproduce misleading accounts of his work.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT WE THOUGHT WE KNEW ABOUT “OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY”

In early 1961, residents of New Haven, Connecticut, were targeted via newspaper advertisements to take part in a psychology experiment at Yale University. Having been recruited, they arrived at a laboratory where they were asked by an experimenter to administer shocks to a learner whenever he made errors on a word-recall task. These shocks were administered via a shock generator and increased from 0 to 450 volts in 15-V intervals. The study was introduced as an investigation of the effects of punishment on learning, but in fact the researchers were interested in how far participants would be willing to follow their instructions. Would they be willing to give any shocks at all? Or would they stop at 150 V when the learner cried out, “Get me out of here, please. My heart’s starting to bother me. I refuse to go on. Let me out”? Or at 300 V when he let out an agonized scream and shouted, “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”? Or would they continue to a maximum of 450 V (long after the learner had stopped responding)—a point labeled XXX on the generator?

The answer was that of 40 participants, only 7 (17.5%) stopped at 150 V or lower, whereas 26 (65%) went all the way to 450 V. This finding suggested that most normal, well-adjusted people would be prepared to kill an innocent stranger if they were asked to do so by a person in authority. And in this finding the results appeared to bear testimony to the destructive and ineluctable power of blind obedience (e.g., Benjamin & Simpson 2009, Lutsky 1995).

If someone who is not a social psychologist knows anything about social psychology, it is most likely through acquaintance with the above details of its most famous classic study: Stanley Milgram’s research into obedience to authority (OtA) (Milgram 1963, 1974). These findings, then, are part of the canon of a wide range of disciplines, from law (e.g., Hanson 2012, Tyler 2006) and criminology (e.g., Neubacher 2006) to history (e.g., Browning 1992) and political science (e.g., Bositis & Steinel 1987). Moreover, as well as having some familiarity with these findings, it is likely that the nonspecialist will have some awareness of the theorizing that Milgram proposed to account for his findings—understanding them to show that inflicting harm on innocent others can be a natural consequence of humans’ basic motivation to obey and conform. This was something Milgram (1974) understood to be the consequence of participants’ entry into an “agentic state,” in which they define themselves simply “as an instrument for carrying out the wishes of others” and for whom the “evaluative mechanism is wholly absent” (pp. 151, 164). Many readers will also be aware that Milgram’s analysis is widely understood to be aligned with Hannah Arendt’s writings about the banality of evil (Arendt 1963; but see L.S. Newman, unpublished manuscript). But even if they are not, they are likely to be familiar with the depressing conclusion to which discussion of Milgram’s work typically leads (Jetten & Mols 2014): that where it is mandated by authority the propensity to inflict harm on others is rendered almost inevitable by our basic psychological makeup—a makeup in which the desire to do good is invariably trumped by the desire to fall in line.

Familiarity with these various aspects of Milgram’s work has multiple bases. The most obvious is that his findings were both striking and memorable (Smith & Haslam 2012). This in turn has led his findings to become a staple component of the student psychology curriculum around the world. Dovetailing with this, a series of exhaustive reviews by Griggs & Whitehead (2015a,b) confirm that Milgram’s narrative is assiduously reproduced in almost every social psychology textbook, and almost every psychology textbook too.

But familiarity with Milgram’s work also owes much to the fact that retellings of the OtA story are not confined to textbooks or academic tracts. Indeed, Milgram’s (1965a,b) own film on his studies, *Obedience*, is one of the most influential social scientific documentaries ever made (Millard 2014). And this fascination continues to the present day. On television, key elements

of the Milgram paradigm were replicated in a 2007 ABC program titled “The Science of Evil” (Burger 2009, see also Borge 2007) and in a 2009 reenactment by the BBC (Stott 2011). More controversially, they were the inspiration for the controversial 2010 French documentary *Le Jeu de la Mort* (*Game of Death*), in which participants were asked to administer increasing shocks to another person in what they believed was a pilot for a game show (Christophe et al. 2010, see also Chazan 2010). And most recently, the studies provided the subject matter for the 2015 biographical drama film *Experimenter* (Almeryda 2015; see Reicher & Haslam 2015) and for the documentary film *Shock Room* (Millard 2015), which restaged various versions of Milgram’s paradigm using the method of immersive digital realism (IDR) (Millard 2012), in which actors are trained to take on the character of naïve participants.

The upshot of this huge and multifaceted impact is that Milgram’s work is now a central plank—perhaps the central plank—of societal understandings of the psychology of evil (Miller 2004, 2016; Newman & Erber 2002; Reicher et al. 2014). Yet, as Griggs & Whitehead (2015a,b; see also Griggs 2017) note, there is one key problem with all this: The story that has been handed down from Milgram’s work is deeply flawed. In particular, over the past two decades a number of different lines of enquiry have pointed to major deficiencies in the way that Milgram reported his findings and in the conclusions that he drew from them. We document the nature of these deficiencies in more detail below and present what we believe to be a more plausible alternative analysis of the studies and their implications.

More fundamentally, though, like Griggs & Whitehead (2015b), we also want to reflect on why Milgram’s narrative has survived the many assaults that have been mounted both on its integrity and on the lessons it is understood to hold about the psychology of harm-doing more generally. In line with a thorough critique of Milgram’s conformity narrative, the answer, we suggest, is not that teachers and textbook writers are mindless zombies who cannot help but slavishly follow a party line (attractive as it might be for us to imagine this to be the case). On the contrary, we believe that embrace of the standard Milgram story results from followership in which the reproduction and elaboration of received wisdom reflect identification with the institutions and leaders who represent and advance that cause.

In order for the field to move on, then, we argue that it is necessary not simply to review the theory and data that make a strong case for such progress, but also to interrogate and challenge the deeper assumptions on which Milgram’s core narrative—and the cause that his work advances—is predicated. When we do, our key conclusion is that Milgram’s studies are not really about obedience to authority at all, but are better construed as studies of group-based leadership and followership in which parties are energized to do wrong not because they are ignorant, thoughtless, or blind, but rather because they believe what they are doing to be virtuous and even noble. Importantly, too, we suggest that this analysis applies not only to the behavior of Milgram’s participants but also to that of his research assistants and to that of the many writers and teachers who remain true to his obedience narrative.

REASSESSING “OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY”

The range of recent treatments of Milgram’s work in television and film has ensured that his work remains alive and well in the contemporary imagination of students, teachers, and members of the general public. Within the scientific community, too, interest in this body of work has never been greater. For example, citations to Milgram’s (1963) original publication have increased fourfold in the past 20 years (Reicher et al. 2014) and no fewer than four special issues on this work have appeared in recent years (Burger 2009 in *American Psychologist*, Haslam et al. 2011b in *The Psychologist*, Haslam et al. 2015c in *Journal of Social Issues*, and Brannigan et al. 2015b in *Theory and Psychology*).

This upsurge of interest can be attributed to four key factors. First, 2013 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Milgram's original work (i.e., Milgram 1963), and this was an occasion for a range of celebratory and reflective events (including a major conference at Yale Law School). Second, the development of new (more ethical) variants to Milgram's original paradigm (after Burger 2009) has meant that researchers are now able to place his ideas under increasing empirical scrutiny. Third, it is now possible for researchers (after Blass 2004) to access the comprehensive Milgram archive at Yale, which contains a veritable treasure trove of material—including notebooks, data records, and audio recordings of original experimental sessions—that provide detailed insight into both the mechanics of the studies and Milgram's own thinking. And finally, fourth, the recent upsurge of terrorism, together with the associated War on Terror, has meant that Milgram's analysis of harm-doing—and the question of why people do such things—has renewed social relevance (e.g., see Reicher & Haslam 2016).

Importantly, though, rather than reinforce Milgram's key conclusions, this recent scrutiny has served largely to cast them, and the empirical facts on which they are based, into doubt (Brannigan et al. 2015b; Griggs & Whitehead 2015a,b; Haslam & Reicher 2012a). The concerns that have been raised have had three key foci (Haslam et al. 2016b): (a) the integrity of Milgram's reports of the phenomena he studied, (b) the validity of the explanation he offered for these phenomena, and (c) the broader relevance of his studies to the important social issues that he wanted his research to address—notably the psychological underpinnings of tyranny and oppression, especially of the form witnessed in the Holocaust (Milgram 1974; see also Miller 2004, 2016).

Reassessing the Integrity of Milgram's Reports

Perry (2013) has mounted the most full-on assault on the integrity of Milgram's work in her book *Behind the Shock Machine*. Based on interviews with participants and examination of both their postexperimental comments and audio recordings of experimental sessions in the Yale archive, her core claim is that Milgram seriously misrepresented key aspects of his research in his formal scientific writings. In the first instance, she notes that many participants' comments revealed suspicion about the authenticity of the shocks they were giving and that many others expressed extreme discomfort about delays in debriefing. Indeed, contrary to the impression created by Milgram (1964) that comprehensive debriefing occurred one-on-one at the end of every experimental session (e.g., as indicated in his reply to Baumrind 1964), it is clear from archive material that many participants had to wait many months before being provided with full details of the study's purpose and that this was then done only by means of a short report that they received in the mail.

Significantly, too, one version of the experiment (Experiment 27, in which participants were asked to bring along a friend or relative who then became the learner; Rochat & Blass 2014, Russell 2014a) went unreported by Milgram. It is reasonable to assume that this was because it raised questions about his moral probity in making this person complicit in the experiment's deception. In particular, when participants had advanced all the way to 450 V, one imagines that this might have led learners to reappraise the quality of their relationship. Perry also notes that, contrary to claims that experimental sessions were rigorously controlled, the reality is that interactions were much more dynamic and contained a host of unscripted (and unreported) steers on the part of the experimenter. This was particularly apparent in departures from predefined prods that were given to the learner in the event that he proved unwilling to continue (see below).

A number of other researchers have also used this same evidence to make a range of more nuanced points about Milgram's procedures. Gibson (2013a,b; 2014), for example, provides a

retorical analysis that observes that the experimenter was skilled at responding to participants' various efforts to extract more information about the study (or to try to withdraw from it) in ways that encouraged them to continue, but that this also forced him to depart from scripted statements. In particular, on multiple occasions this involved the experimenter leaving the room apparently to check on the health of the learner (Gibson 2013b). Rather than being unsolicited, effortless, and natural, where it occurred, compliance with experimental instructions was a joint achievement of both the learner and the experimenter (and, through him, of Milgram). Along related lines, Hollander (2015) notes that participants' progression through the study was the result of a series of often subtle conversational negotiations (e.g., involving meaningful silences, laughter, and imprecations) that enabled or constrained particular outcomes.

Such analyses build on Darley's (1995) earlier observation that "the Experimenter did not follow . . . instruction [to always use particular prods], and instead directly responded to what he took to be the implied question raised by the Teacher" (p. 130). Darley notes too that "given the Experimenter's understanding of linguistic pragmatics, he could not have responded in any other way." Critically, though, he also concludes that examination of these same pragmatics indicates that "*the Experimenter had defined his role as doing whatever was necessary to get the Teacher to continue giving the shocks*" (Darley 1995, p. 131; italics in the original). Rather than the experimenter being a neutral and detached force in the studies (in the way that Milgram's scientific account implies), he was an active follower who worked hard to secure the outcomes that he believed Milgram wanted (i.e., obedience). Speaking to this point, Russell (2014a; 2014b, p. 419) concludes that the experimenter "frequently displayed great feats of bottom-up innovation in the invention of progressively more coercive . . . prods in trying to bring about what he sensed his employer, top-down, desired."

Archival analysis also suggests that Milgram took a series of other important steps to ensure that he got the results he wanted. In particular, forensic analysis by Russell and colleagues (Russell 2011; 2014a,b; Russell & Gregory 2011) documents the various unreported ways in which Milgram carefully manipulated a range of factors that reduced opportunities for resistance and defiance (see also Harré 1979). For example, he iteratively calibrated the design of the shock machine (*a*) to make it a more imposing piece of scientific machinery (Oppenheimer 2015); (*b*) to increase the number of switches from 12 to 30 so that the increments between adjacent shocks were smaller (15 V rather than 60 V), thereby making the escalation less oppositional (Burger 2014, Gilbert 1981); and (*c*) to change the labeling of the final point (from lethal to XXX), thereby making its meaning simultaneously more ambiguous and less alarming. In these various ways, as Oppenheimer (2015, p. 618) concludes, "Milgram made strategic use of the control panel, machine operations, and display features to design an instrument that invited users to pursue an escalating, reinforced technical procedure."

The goal of privileging obedience and deemphasizing resistance was also achieved through Milgram's careful honing of experimental protocols and his strategic selection of the condition in which 65% of participants administered 450-V shocks to be the baseline condition—because this produced levels of obedience that, Goldilocks-like, were high but not too high (Russell 2011). As Millard (2011, 2014; see also Perry 2016) notes, this objective was also furthered significantly in the film *Obedience* by highly selective editing that foregrounded displays of conformity and cemented them as emblematic of the paradigm in the eyes of its many viewers. Yet in the condition that was filmed to make this documentary (Condition 25), only 35% of participants actually went all the way to 450 V, but again this detail went unreported by Milgram (Millard 2014).

These various concerns indicate that, when it came to documenting his work, Milgram's accounts were nontrivially incomplete at best and seriously misleading at worst. Accordingly, there are serious problems with received understandings of what actually happened in the studies. Nevertheless, as noted above, it is apparent that, far from exposing these shortcomings, textbook accounts

of the studies are almost universally mute on these matters. Seeking to explain this anomaly, Griggs & Whitehead (2015a,b) argue that Milgram's work has become so emblematic of social psychology's status as a science that writers and instructors who are seeking to promote the discipline (especially to an in-group audience) find the various criticisms of his work too identity-threatening to acknowledge and reproduce (see also Stam et al. 1998). At the same time, though, precisely because we need to take seriously the science—and our identity as scientists—these various issues need to be properly engaged with, not ignored.

Reassessing the Validity of Milgram's Theory

Although the foregoing discussion makes clear that received representations of Milgram's studies are imperfect, this does not necessarily mean that the phenomena that were exposed by his research were not real. Indeed, a host of conceptual replications of the original studies show that, under certain conditions, ordinary people are willing to perpetrate acts that they would otherwise think unconscionable. The stress that most participants experience in the process also suggests that the experience is very real indeed (Haslam et al. 2015a). Moreover, although ethical challenges have necessitated modifications to the original paradigms [e.g., lowering the maximum shock that participants are asked to deliver to 150 V (Burger 2009, Doliński et al. 2017) or developing a range of experimental analogues (S.A. Haslam et al. 2014, Haslam et al. 2015a, Martens et al. 2007, Navarick 2009, Slater et al. 2006)], none of these studies has raised serious doubts about the authenticity of the outcomes that Milgram observed (Blass 2004). To take just two examples, Burger (2009), in his direct replication of Milgram's paradigm, found that only 30% of participants stopped at 150 V (a figure reasonably similar to the 17.5% reported by Milgram), and in a study that replicated a number of variants to Milgram's paradigm using Millard's IDR methodology, Haslam et al. (2015a) obtained a pattern of results that were highly correlated ($r = 0.59$) with those reported by Milgram (1974).

However, accepting that the phenomena Milgram uncovered are real does not require us to accept his own explanation of those phenomena, not least because, when this explanation is subjected to close scrutiny, it is apparent that multiple grounds exist for questioning whether it is appropriate to characterize the behavior of Milgram's participants as blind obedience or conformity (Haslam & Reicher 2012a). Moreover, as Lutsky (1995) observes, even if one accepts that it is appropriate to describe participants' behavior as obedience (because they did as they were told), this does not actually explain what they did.

One of the most obvious problems with an account that suggests participants obey the experimenter because they see only him and are oblivious to the learner is that film footage and audio recordings of experimental sessions show that participants are painfully aware of his plight. Indeed, it is the tension between participants' evident loyalties to the experimenter and to the learner that makes the paradigm so psychologically intense, and from which it derives most of its drama (Millard 2014). In a range of variants to the paradigm the salience of these loyalties to the learner results in significantly reduced levels of compliance (Reicher et al. 2012).

Yet perhaps the most telling problem with an analysis that seeks to explain participants' behavior as a consequence of obedience to authority arises when one looks closely at what happens when the experimenter delivers prods in an effort to encourage reluctant teachers to continue. These start with a polite request ("Please continue," Prod 1) and become increasingly forceful ("The experiment requires that you continue," Prod 2; "It is absolutely essential that you continue," Prod 3) before culminating in a direct order ("You have no choice, you must continue," Prod 4). Here, one might imagine that if participants' primary motivation were to follow orders (i.e., to obey), then the more closely these prods resemble an order the more the response should be

aligned with the experimenter's wishes. Yet when one looks at what participants do, one sees the very opposite. Thus, both in Milgram's own studies and in Burger's replication (Burger et al. 2011), whenever Prod 4 was given it resulted in noncompliance, and this was true on eight of the nine occasions that Prod 4 was used in Haslam et al.'s (2015a) IDR study. Moreover, in a study that provided a more controlled examination of this issue by manipulating the prods independently across conditions in an experimental analog of Milgram's paradigm (S.A. Haslam et al. 2014), it was still the case that participants who were given Prod 4 broke off earlier than those given any of the other three prods.

Contrary to the widespread claim that people obey orders from authorities—which is routinely taken as the key message to be gleaned from Milgram's research (Reicher & Haslam 2011)—there is thus compelling evidence that giving people an order is one of the least effective ways of securing their compliance. What one sees instead (notably in Haslam et al.'s 2014 data) is that participants are most compliant when the experimenter encourages them to continue for the sake of the experiment (i.e., in response to Prod 2)—that is, when they are invited to cooperate in a joint enterprise. Indeed, at the time that he was conducting the studies, Milgram himself made similar observations, writing in his experimental notes,

Cooperation implies a certain willingness to perform the action or help out, a certain internal desire to assist, while obedience implies an action that is totally in response to a command, with no motivational support from inner sources Even in this experiment we must disguise the character of obedience so that it appears to serve a productive end. Therefore we are not dealing with "blind obedience." . . . For every command is justified as serving some productive end. (Milgram, Box 46, Yale archive; cited in Haslam et al. 2015b, pp. 57–58)

Reassessing the Relevance of Milgram's Studies

Importantly, criticism of the deficiencies of the obedience account has not been confined to the analysis of Milgram's participants but has also been echoed in recent historical scholarship. Indeed, this is one of the main points on which the relevance of Milgram's research has been widely questioned (Miller 1995). For example, Burger (2014, p. 498) describes "the connection between Milgram's research and the Holocaust" as a "red herring," and Brannigan et al. (2015a, p. 556) argue that "Milgram's research was a world away from the 'real life' scenarios of unlawful killing that he claimed to be investigating."

In large part, this is because, as Fenigstein (2015) observes, "pressures to obey authority had little role in the Holocaust" (see also Goldhagen 1996, Helm & Morelli 1979, Mastroianni 2002, Miller 2004, Overy 2014, Rees 1997). Indeed, Kershaw (1993, p. 103) argues that the dynamism of the Nazi regime resulted precisely from the fact that its adherents were not following orders. Instead, in the face of nonspecific guidance, they were "working towards the Führer" and acting creatively in ways that they thought the regime's leadership would want. And, as a corollary, there is plenty of evidence that, far from being compelled to go along with their leaders, those who did not identify with the Nazi cause (for whatever reason) were willing and able to disengage from, and often actively resist, its barbarous urgings (Browning 1992; Hansen 2014; Oliner & Oliner 1988; Rochat & Modigliani 1995, 1997; see also Haslam & Reicher 2012b).

Other analyses have suggested that Nazi perpetrators' claims that "I was only following orders" do not withstand scrutiny of what they said and did at the time (Browning 1992, Neitzel & Welzer 2012) and are better understood as an alibi than as an explanation (Mandel 1998). The same also appears to be true of the perpetrators of abuse in more recent times (e.g., at Abu Ghraib; Sontag 2004). And importantly, this is true not just of frontline soldiers (e.g., Sofsky 1993) but also of the

functionaries whose behavior Milgram was particularly keen to explain (Lozowick 2002, Vetlesen 2005). Indeed, forensic biographical studies suggest that, in contrast to their claims that they had little insight into the implications of their actions, even mid-level Nazi bureaucrats were motivated by a level of enthusiasm for the Nazi cause and an underlying confidence in the worthiness of its core ideology (Koonz 2003). They therefore applied themselves with zeal and initiative to the various challenges they faced and in ways that were anything but perfunctory (Fulbrook 2012).

Importantly, too, this analysis seems particularly pertinent in the case of Adolf Eichmann—the subject of Arendt’s (1963) analysis and a touchstone both for Milgram (1974; see Lunt 2009) and for textbook treatments of his work (Griggs & Whitehead 2015b). Based partly on a misreading of Arendt’s (1963) *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (L.S. Newman, unpublished manuscript), a common suggestion is that Eichmann was merely an inattentive cog in the Nazi machine—“the classic ‘go with the flow’ bureaucrat forced to keep his head down and not ‘rock the boat’” (McDonough 2008, p. 133). Yet Eichmann was far from simply a passive cipher of others’ views. For example, when his superior Heinrich Himmler proposed a deal to trade Jews for much-needed military supplies, Eichmann defied his instructions because he saw them to be at odds with the ideology to which he was committed (Arendt 1963, Cesarani 2004). More generally, it is apparent that Eichmann displayed extraordinary creativity and resourcefulness in devising and implementing what he referred to as “the Final Solution to the Jewish question” (Cesarani 2004, Stangneth 2014; see also Haslam & Reicher 2007, Reicher & Haslam 2013).

In sum, then, just as it is problematic to conclude that conformity was the defining orientation of those who proved willing to harm the learner in Milgram’s studies, so too it is problematic to regard this as the psychological hallmark of agents of tyranny in the world at large. In these terms, it is not the Holocaust (or other instances of abhorrent mass harm-doing) that is the red herring in Milgram’s research, but rather the construct of obedience around which he built his core analytic narrative.

BEYOND “OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY”

So if Milgram’s studies were not about obedience, what were they about? As a starting point for answers, we suggest, it is instructive to observe that rather than being based on the hierarchical imposition of orders on unwilling subordinates, participants’ willingness to continue to administer shocks appears to have reflected a sense of cooperation and collaboration (something that Milgram noted when he was conducting the studies; S.A. Haslam et al. 2014). In this sense, their relationship with the experimenter was active and symmetrical rather than passive and subservient. Accordingly, it appears that, when they followed instructions, participants had a sense that they were bound together with the experiment in a collective enterprise. Moreover, this was an enterprise whose worth had been underlined in the study’s introduction (as an inquiry into an important subject on which “almost no truly scientific studies had been conducted”; Milgram 1963, p. 373) and was reinforced by the prestige of the context in which it was embedded (e.g., as signaled by the Yale environment, the experimenter’s apparel and demeanor, and the impressive shock generator; e.g., Russell 2011). As Milgram (1974, pp. 159–60) himself observed, “Within this situation, the idea of science as a legitimate social enterprise provides the overarching ideological justification for the experiment. . . . [and so here] the person complies with a strong sense of doing the right thing.”

More particularly, we have argued that participants respond to the bidding of the experimenter as a consequence of their identification with his scientific goals and an associated desire to play their part in supporting and advancing them (Haslam & Reicher 2012a; Reicher et al. 2012). At the same time, too, experimental outcomes are contingent on a lack of identification with the learner. These outcomes can thus be seen to reflect a group process in which teachers are engaged

followers who understand the experimenter (but not the learner) to be representative of a valued in-group and hence to be a meaningful source of leadership (Haslam et al. 2011a).

The Social Identity Perspective

The theoretical underpinnings of this alternative account are provided by research in the social identity tradition, encompassing both social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner 1979) and self-categorization theory (SCT) (Turner et al. 1987). Work informed by SIT focuses mainly on the psychology of social relations and social conflict and, as such, has shed light on the capacity for a sense of shared social identity—an internalized sense of “us”—to motivate people to cooperate with members of their in-group and compete with members of other groups (after Tajfel et al. 1971; e.g., see Ellemers & Haslam 2012). Work inspired by SCT has attended more broadly to the role of social categorization processes in group formation and coordinated action, being concerned primarily with understanding the processes that lead people to believe they share (or do not share) group membership, and with the ways in which this belief then affects their understanding of the world and their behavior within it (Haslam 2004, Reicher et al. 2010, Turner et al. 1994).

A number of important insights that emerge from the body of work informed by these theories are relevant to our present concerns. First, to the extent that people define themselves in terms of a given social identity (manifested in the form of social identification), it follows (*a*) that they attach value to the group because their sense of self is implicated in it and (*b*) that the group is a source of meaning because it and its characteristics (e.g., its norms, values, goals) are self-defining. Indeed, more fundamentally, it can be argued that it is this internalized sense of shared identity that makes group behavior possible (Turner 1982, p. 21). In other words, it is only when, and because, people are able to understand themselves and others as “us” that they are able to act as “us.” More particularly, this is a basis for them (*a*) to like and feel connected to people who might otherwise be strangers (Hogg & Turner 1985), (*b*) to communicate effectively (Greenaway et al. 2015), (*c*) to help and support each other (Levine et al. 2005), (*d*) to feel secure and comfortable in each other’s company (Alnabulsi & Drury 2014, Novelli et al. 2010, Reicher et al. 2016), (*e*) to trust and respect each other (Foddy et al. 2009, Tyler & Blader 2000), (*f*) to work together toward shared goals (Ellemers et al. 2004, Millward & Postmes 2010), and (*g*) to have a sense of common purpose (Cruwys et al. 2014).

More critically still, for present purposes, social identity is also the basis for social influence (Turner 1991). This is because when people define themselves as group members (i.e., in terms of a specific social identity), they seek both to discover what being a member of that group means and then to act in ways that accord with this. However, in an array of social contexts it is unclear what sense we should make of the information that assails us and how we should react to it, and so we look to others to provide us with guidance. But when there are multiple voices providing multiple responses, which do we attend to and which do we ignore? The obvious answer is that we turn to fellow in-group members—those others with whom we socially identify—because (unlike out-group members) they are perceived to be qualified to inform us about self-relevant features of social reality (Haslam et al. 2011a, McGarty et al. 1994, Mackie et al. 1990). Moreover, we not only expect to agree with other in-group members on matters relevant to our shared identity but also are motivated to strive actively to reach agreement with them and to coordinate our behavior in relation to those matters—for example, by filling in missing knowledge, clarifying points of disagreement, and giving each other the benefit of any doubt.

Given the choice, however, we do not turn to any in-group member for guidance of this form. Instead, we turn to those who are most knowledgeable about the group and who best embody its identity in the context at hand. Accordingly, it follows that a person’s capacity to exert

influence—particularly in the form of leadership—is dependent on their capacity to represent (or, more formally, to be seen as prototypical of) a shared in-group identity in a given social setting (Hogg 2001, Turner 1991, Turner & Haslam 2001). Consistent with this analysis, a large body of evidence attests to the fact that (a) group members perceive individuals to be better leaders (and also as having more leader-like qualities, such as charisma) the more representative they are seen to be of the perceivers’ social identity (Cicero et al. 2007, Platow et al. 2006, Steffens et al. 2014), (b) followers’ support for leaders is contingent on their perceived in-group prototypicality (Platow et al. 1997, van Knippenberg et al. 1994), and (c) followers are more likely to work hard on behalf of a leader when that leader is seen to be representative of a shared social identity (Haslam & Platow 2001, Platow et al. 2000).

Precisely because being perceived as in-group prototypical is so important for a person’s leadership prospects, it is also apparent that leaders routinely go to great lengths to build a sense of shared identity with followers through acts of identity entrepreneurship and identity impresarioship (Reicher & Hopkins 1996, 2001; Reicher et al. 2005; for a review, see Haslam et al. 2011a). Would-be American presidents, for example, work to position themselves as prototypical of what it means to be American and strive to secure the followership of citizens by building and invoking a sense of shared identity (e.g., through references to “we” and actions that privilege definitions of we-ness that align with their own position; Reicher & Haslam 2017, Steffens & Haslam 2013). Likewise, although science is often characterized as an objective activity that is independent of such concerns (e.g., Dawkins 2009), scientific leaders routinely work hard to establish their credentials as in-group representatives (e.g., through strategic networking; Howe 2002, Waller 2001), and it is apparent that this proves to be an important determinant both of their success and of their charismatic appeal (Morton et al. 2006, Steffens et al. 2017).

A Social Identity Analysis of Milgram’s Findings

The social identity perspective outlined above provides a basis for understanding the behavior of Milgram’s participants as deriving primarily from their identification with his scientific mission and from their sense of the experimenter as emblematic of that mission (Reicher & Haslam 2011). Critically, these two interrelated elements were essential both for the experimenter’s leadership of participants and for teachers’ followership. These in turn meant that, on the one hand, the experimenter was able to shape participants’ interpretation of the experimental context (e.g., regarding the harmfulness of the shocks) and to direct their attention and energies, while, on the other hand, teachers worked hard (at some personal discomfort) to help realize his scientific objectives.

Importantly, although followership was contingent on social identification with the experimenter, this identification was far from natural or inevitable. First, this is because, as we have seen, this was something that Milgram had to cultivate through his own identity entrepreneurship—for example, through (a) the design of the imposing shock generator (Oppenheimer 2015, Russell 2011), (b) the careful recruitment of a plausible experimenter (Russell 2014a,b), (c) the crafting of the experimental briefing and debriefing (Haslam et al. 2015b, Navarick 2009, Nissani 1990), and (d) the management of space (e.g., so that in the baseline condition the experimenter, but not the learner, was proximal). Second, much of the dramatic power of Milgram’s paradigm derived from the fact that, within it, identification with the experimenter and his science was always pitted against an alternative locus of identification—namely, the learner and the general community beyond the laboratory of which he was representative (N. Haslam et al. 2014, Reicher et al. 2012).

Speaking to the importance of these points, factors that served to undermine participants’ identification with the science tended to diminish their willingness to proceed. This is something we have already commented on in noting that participants were most responsive to the prod that

appealed to the experiment's scientific objectives (i.e., Prod 2; S.A. Haslam et al. 2014). More obviously, though, this factor appears to explain variation in followership across different versions of the paradigm (Reicher et al. 2012). For example, it accounts for the fact that, relative to the baseline experiment, fewer teachers were prepared to go all the way to 450 V if the study was conducted in offices in downtown Bridgeport rather than in the Yale laboratory (Experiment 10; Milgram 1974), or if the experimenter was absent from the laboratory (Experiment 7), or if the experimenter was another ordinary participant rather than a scientist (Experiment 13), or if two experimenters disagreed with each other (Experiment 15). By the same token, it explains why compliance dropped to the extent that features of the study's design encouraged identification with the learner [as was true, for example, when he was heard crying out in pain (Experiment 5; Packer 2008) rather than being both unseen and unheard as in Milgram's initial pilot], when he was in the same room as the experimenter (Experiment 3) or touching him (Experiment 4), or when he was a friend or relative of the teacher (as in the unreported Experiment 27; Rochat & Blass 2014, Russell 2014a).

The social identity analysis aligns with Milgram's (1965a) own early emphasis on group formation as a key psychological process that bound participants to the experimenter. More directly still, it aligns with his private observation that

[T]he 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 subject, and it is this lack of relationship in the one direction and the real relationship in the other that produces the results . . . Only a genuine relationship between the Victim and the Subject, based on identification . . . could reverse the results. (Milgram, Box 46, Yale archive; cited in Haslam et al. 2015b, pp. 60–61)

Indeed, Milgram was so taken by this hypothesis that he went on to sketch out plans for a range of experiments that might test it directly. In these he envisaged that "it would be possible to vary the characteristics of experimenter, subjects and victim in such a way as to study the importance of identification in the obedience act" (Milgram, Box 46, Yale archive; cited in Haslam et al. 2015b, p. 61). Of course, Milgram never conducted these studies, and he ultimately turned away from rich theorizing of this form. The reasons for this are unclear, but as a number of commentators have noted, his decision to do so (and to develop the agentic state model instead) ultimately proved detrimental to his credibility as a theorist (Blass 2004, Cesarani 2004, Miller 2016, Ross 1988).

Empirical Support for a Social Identity Analysis of Milgram's Findings

Milgram never tested hypotheses about the importance of identification for the behavior of the teachers in his studies, yet in recent years they have been the focus of a growing body of research (after Reicher & Haslam 2011). These hypotheses have sought to test the engaged followership model in studies that have varying degrees of resemblance to Milgram's own paradigm and that use a mixture of correlational, experimental, and archival methods. Although none of these has involved a direct replication of Milgram's paradigm, primarily for ethical reasons, this strategy has been informed by a desire to zero in on the behaviors he investigated through a process of methodological triangulation.

In a pair of initial studies, participants (expert social psychologists in Study 1; naïve students in Study 2) were provided with Milgram's own descriptions of different versions of his experimental paradigm (as set out in Milgram 1974) and asked to estimate the extent to which the features of each version would lead them (*a*) to identify with the experimenter as a scientist and with the

perspective of the scientific community that he represents and *(b)* to identify with the learner as a member of the general public and with the perspective of the general community that he represents (Reicher et al. 2012). As predicted, there was a strong positive correlation between estimated identification with the experimenter (iE) and the level of followership observed in a particular variant ($r_{\text{Study 1}} = 0.75$, $r_{\text{Study 2}} = 0.78$), as well as a strong negative correlation between identification with the learner (iL) and followership ($r_{\text{Study 1}} = -0.51$, $r_{\text{Study 2}} = -0.58$), and a strong positive correlation between relative identification (iE – iL) and followership ($r_{\text{Study 1}} = 0.75$, $r_{\text{Study 2}} = 0.79$; for related evidence, see N. Haslam et al. 2014).

Retrospective reinterpretations of archival data can do little to clarify the causal status of identification as a determinant of participants' behavior. This, however, has been achieved in a series of studies involving experimental manipulations of relevant variables. The first of these (elements of which we have already discussed) centered around an analog of the Milgram paradigm in which participants were required to describe groups that became increasingly pleasant over 30 trials using a limited selection of negative attributes. This design meant that, as in Milgram's paradigm, the participants' task became increasingly aversive as they progressed through the study (S.A. Haslam et al. 2014). At the end of each trial, in four independent conditions, participants were then given one of Milgram's four prods. As predicted, participants who were given the prod that appealed most to their identity as scientific collaborators (i.e., Prod 2) continued the furthest (M termination trial = 26.9), whereas those given the prod that violated this sense of shared identity (i.e., Prod 4) discontinued the soonest (M termination trial = 19.5).

More recently, this same paradigm has been used to directly test the role of identification in motivating participants' followership. In particular, S.D. Reicher, M. Birney, and S.A. Haslam (unpublished manuscript; Study 1) used an established procedure (after Haslam et al. 1999) to manipulate participants' identification with science and then observe the effects of this on their willingness to continue in the aversive experimental task. This involved asking participants, at the start of the study, *(a)* to list three things that are important about science, that they liked about science, and that they had in common with scientists; *(b)* to list three things that are problematic about science, that they disliked about science, and that differentiated them from scientists; or *(c)*, in a control condition, to perform neither of these listing tasks. Consistent with social identity theorizing, those in the high-identification and control conditions were willing to proceed significantly further in the study (M termination trials = 23.6 and 22.8, respectively) than those in the low-identification condition (M termination trial = 17.5).

Although such studies allow us to establish the causal role of identification and identity-relevant factors in encouraging followership, the form of followership they examine is far less dramatic than that produced by Milgram. However, one method that much more closely resembles Milgram's in this respect is IDR (Millard 2012, as described above). Haslam et al. (2015a) were therefore able to use this as a means not only to restage various versions of Milgram's paradigm and observe whether the method captured the same patterns that he reported (Millard 2015), but also to establish whether participants' willingness to continue was predicted by their relative identification with the experimenter and the learner in those different versions. Again, in line with the predictions of the engaged followership model, it was. More specifically, the study revealed a strong positive correlation between relative identification with the experimenter (versus the learner) and the highest level of shock that participants administered ($r = 0.56$).

There are clearly limits to how much IDR or any other analog study can provide insight into the psychology of those who proved willing to administer 450-V shocks in Milgram's original research. Moreover, contemporary ethical sensibilities mean that such evidence is impossible for academic psychologists to obtain (Stott 2011). Nevertheless, as noted above, improved access to the Milgram archive in recent years has meant that researchers are able to perform much more

systematic analysis of participants' orientation to their task in his studies, and of the factors that shaped this, than was previously possible (e.g., Gibson 2013a,b; 2014; N. Haslam et al. 2014; Hollander 2015).

One study that has attempted to do this with a view to testing the plausibility of the engaged followership involved systematic qualitative and quantitative analyses of participants' responses to Milgram's postexperimental survey (as contained in Box 44 of the archive; S.A. Haslam et al. 2014). In line with this model, thematic analysis of these data identified three core themes in participants' responses: support for Milgram's project, support for behavioral investigation, and support for Yale. Moreover, all three of these themes were underpinned by the participants' sense that they were partners in the study's scientific enterprise, as exemplified by the following comments:

I am very delighted to be a part of this project. I have often thought I was the subject but I could not be any happier. I've been waiting very anxiously for this report to really put my mind at rest and curiosity satisfied.[. . .]We wish you continue[d] success in the future. Last but not least I sure hope my efforts, and cooperation have been somewhat useful for your project. [Participant 1817; S.A. Haslam et al. 2015b, p. 66]

More generally, too, participants' postexperimental responses provide little evidence that they were stressed or angry at having been forced to go along with the experimenter against their own wishes or at having had to subjugate their will to his (see also Mantell & Panzarella 1976). Indeed, on the contrary, S.A. Haslam et al.'s (2014) data indicate that just over two-thirds reported being moderately, highly, or extremely engaged in his scientific project, whereas less than 10% could be characterized as disengaged.

Rather than arising from intellectual and emotional disengagement—as the agentic state account suggests—it appears that the behavior of Milgram's participants was underpinned by active commitment to his endeavor and an associated desire to prove themselves as worthy subjects. Indeed, it was this commitment and desire that appear to have steeled them to persist in the face of the significant stressors that the task exposed them to. Furthermore, the fact that they were able to persevere (beyond the point where one might expect people to withdraw) meant that the signature emotion of participants—of whom the following response is emblematic—was ultimately one of happiness at having been of service (see also Baumrind 2015, p. 695).

After leaving, while driving home, I came to the conclusion that, for purposeful reasons, I had been hoaxed. Interesting concern enveloped me as to why. Later at the Yale Med School I found out why. Partial satisfaction. With your report, almost complete satisfaction. . . . Briefly, I was happy to have been of service. . . . Continue your experiments by all means as long as good can come of them. In this crazy mixed up world of ours, every bit of goodness is needed. [Participant 2205; S.A. Haslam et al. 2015b, p. 66]

CONCLUSION: FROM OBEDIENCE TO ENGAGED FOLLOWERSHIP

The above comment from Participant 2205 provides one further important insight into the psychology of those who took part in Milgram's studies and reveals it to be different from the account that is traditionally handed down in textbooks. This insight relates to participants' sense that their actions, and the study as a whole, were not so much about tyranny and evil as they were about citizenship and goodness. A similar insight is also provided by the experiences of one of Milgram's participants who, as reported by Perry (2013), was invited along to speak to a class of psychology students after their teacher had met the man by chance some years after the studies had concluded.

When he arrived at the class, the man was shocked to discover that the students were appalled by his behavior. This was because, following Milgram's debriefing, he had always considered himself not so much a villain as a hero. After all, like any other hero, was he not someone who had been willing to compromise his own well-being in order to advance a noble cause?

More generally, these experiences of the participants underline the fact that the commentators' perspective on the behavior of Milgram's participants is generally that of outsiders who know the real purpose of his studies and hence do not share those participants' enthusiasm for the specific project to which they were contributing. This is all the more true because commentators have not been encouraged by Milgram to share this enthusiasm as members of a common in-group. Accordingly, they sit outside the sphere of the experimenter's (and Milgram's) identity-based influence and fail to be positioned (or, more pertinently, to imagine how they might be positioned) as engaged followers. From this perspective, too, they are far more inclined to see the actions of those who follow as passive and mindless rather than active and considered (for relevant evidence, see Steffens et al. 2016).

Nevertheless, there is one important sense in which many commentators do (or at least have come to) share identity with Milgram and see him as a source of influence and leadership. This relates to his status as a prototypical social psychologist—someone whose research embodies what is best about the discipline as a science of social interaction that is supremely relevant to the most significant issues of our times (Reicher et al. 2014, Takooshian 2000). Moreover, it is this identification, we suggest, that underpins the willingness of textbook writers to reproduce the agentic state account despite its manifold limitations and detractors (Griggs & Whitehead 2015a,b; Reicher & Haslam 2012). And, as a corollary, it is the lack of such identification that also explains why those who do not identify as social psychologists (especially of the North American and experimental variety; e.g., Cesarani 2004, Nicholson 2011, Perry 2013, Brannigan et al. 2015a) are more willing to put Milgram to the sword. Again, though, when textbook writers do behave in this way, it is not because they are passive dupes who have been blinded to the truth and cannot help but follow publishers' instructions. Indeed, on the contrary, their actions (we submit, based on our conversations with them) are mindful, creative, and informed by a fervent desire to do good both for the discipline and for the world.

Importantly, too, this final point brings us back to a last piece of unfinished business—namely, consideration of the relevance of Milgram's work to the analysis of tyranny in the world at large (and most notably in the Holocaust; Miller 2004). In standard textbook accounts, Milgram's research and historical studies of Nazi perpetrators (after Arendt 1963) are understood to converge in showing that perpetrators of collective atrocity are mindless automatons who follow orders without attention to what they are doing (see also Reicher et al. 2008). As we have seen, there are many grounds for understanding these accounts to be highly problematic. Nevertheless, the research we have reviewed confirms that there is in fact an alignment of psychological and historical evidence in this case, but that this alignment is around a different narrative. This suggests that those who prove willing to harm others are not so much passive ciphers as motivated instruments of a collective cause. Moreover, this is a cause in whose name they perceive themselves to be acting virtuously and to be doing good.

Accordingly, it is only when—and if—perpetrators are brought into the orbit of, and come to internalize, alternative identities that they discover the limitations of their worldview. This in turn means that the path to enlightenment is not a question simply of coming to terms with empirical facts. Rather it is a matter of developing alternative identities (Kuhn 1962) and of coming to see one identity from the perspective of others that one holds. In this sense, then, it is about escaping the world of totalizing identities that Milgram so successfully created in his laboratory. For researchers seeking to progress our understanding of the issues in which Milgram was interested, the task ahead

is thus not only to continue to map out the contours of alternative identities and their associated perspectives but also to provide the leadership that will embed them in the minds and actions of those who follow us.

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