Questioning authority: New perspectives on Milgram's 'obedience' research and its

implications for intergroup relations

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Abstract

Traditionally, Milgram's 'obedience' studies have been used to propose that 'ordinary people' are capable of inflicting great harm on outgroup members because they are predisposed to follow orders. According to this account, people focus so much on being good followers that they become unaware of the consequences of their actions. Atrocity is thus seen to derive from inattention. However recent work in psychology, together with historical reassessments of Nazi perpetrators, questions this analysis. In particular, forensic re-examination of Milgram's own findings, allied to new psychological and historical research, supports an "engaged follower" analysis in which the behavior of perpetrators is understood to derive from identification with, and commitment to, an ingroup cause that is believed to be noble and worthwhile.

Highlights

1. Milgram's work has been seen to show atrocity springs from ignorance and obedience

2. Yet Milgram's participants showed engaged followership rather than blind obedience

3. This reassessment aligns with historians' reassessment of Nazi perpetrators

4. People harm outgroups when they identify with a virtuous ingroup cause

5. Perpetrators are not unaware of doing wrong but believe they are doing right

Stanley Milgram's 'obedience to authority' studies are among the best known in psychology. These centre on variants of a paradigm in which participants are given the role of 'Teacher' in a learning experiment and are asked by an Experimenter to administer electric shocks of increasing magnitude to a 'Learner' when he makes an error on a memory task [1]. Unknown to the Teacher, the Learner is a confederate, the shocks are not real, and the study is not an investigation of learning but rather of people's willingness to inflict harm on a stranger simply because they are asked to by someone in authority.

In the 'baseline' version of the paradigm 65% of people were willing to administer the maximum level of shock (450v). Milgram [2] saw this as clear support for Arendt's [3] 'banality of evil' thesis, arguing that tyranny and other forms of toxic intergroup relations are perpetuated by followers—such as the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann—who submit thoughtlessly to the command of those in authority.

As a recent review [4] confirms, this analysis has been widely reproduced in psychology textbooks. It has also influenced the wider culture through television re-enactments [5] and also a feature film [6] which remain largely faithful to Milgram's narrative [7].

Milgram under the microscope

Interest in Milgram's work has never been greater, as gauged by citations [8] and also by recent special issues of *American Psychologist* [5], *The Psychologist* [9], the *Journal of Social Issues* [10], and *Theory and Psychology* [11]. This has led to increased scrutiny of Milgram's own findings (through access to the archive at Yale University; see [12]) and also to the development of new, ethically acceptable, variants of the Milgram paradigm (e.g. [5]) that have yielded new findings.

Questioning Milgram's findings

As a result of recent scrutiny researchers have become increasingly uneasy about the received representation of Milgram's research. Some reject his work in its entirety, either on grounds that it is akin to torture [13] [14] or else on grounds that he fundamentally misrepresented his findings [15]. Perry [16], in particular, argues that Milgram failed to report various ways in which participants were 'steered' to obey and that he also suppressed certain variants of his study in which participants failed to obey (see also [17,18]). Others have also shown how a variety of factors that were not reported in the methods sections of Milgram's papers, were critical to the outcomes. These include the rhetoric of the Experimenter who used unscripted language to reassure ambivalent participants [19], the institutional apparatus of Yale University [20], and even the design of the shock machine [21,22]. When it came to representing his findings in the film *Obedience*, Milgram clearly also used selective editing to foreground conformity and downplay resistance [23,24,25].

These various contributions make it clear that uncritical reproduction of Milgram's studies is no longer warranted. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that they undermine his contribution entirely. First, much of the criticism comes from re-analyses of material in the Milgram archive [e.g., 26]—the very existence of which suggests Milgram's primary concern was not to conceal or deceive. Second, while recent research has identified new factors of relevance to the question of why (and when) people obey toxic instructions, it does not fundamentally challenge the idea that the effects Milgram uncovered were real. This is particularly true in the case of multiple conceptual replications that adapt his paradigm to make it compliant with contemporary ethical standards but which use the same basic structure of escalating harmful acts towards a victim [27,28,29,30,31]. All of these studies reproduce obedience-like effects. At the same time, though, they raise important questions: first about the extent to which people obey or disobey instructions to harm victims; second, about the reasons why people do (and do not) obey.

Questioning Milgram's analysis

Even amongst those who most admire Milgram for his demonstration that ordinary people can harm outgroup members under the instruction of authority, there has long been doubt concerning his explanation as to why this happens (e.g. [12]). Not least, this is because the drama of the studies — which plays a major part in their impact [24] — lies precisely in the fact that participants do not ignore the Learner's screams and calmly go along with the Experimenter. Instead they are clearly torn between two incompatible appeals.

Moreover, even when participants do ultimately decide to heed the Experimenter, it is questionable whether it is accurate to characterise such behavior as 'obedience' [32]. If participants' primary motivation were indeed to follow orders (i.e., to obey), then clearer orders would increase their willingness to administer shocks. Yet when one looks at participant behavior what one sees is the very opposite. This is evidenced most clearly in responses to the prods that the Experimenter gives in the face of non-compliance. These start with a polite request (Prod 1: "Please continue") and become increasingly forceful and order-like (culminating in Prod 4: "You have no choice, you must continue"). Yet, both Milgram's own studies and conceptual replications [27,33] show that the more the prod resembles an order, the *less* likely participants are to comply.

Instead, compliance is highest when the Experimenter enjoins participants to continue for the sake of the experiment—that is, when people are invited to cooperate in a joint enterprise rather than succumb to the will of the experimenter. Indeed, in his unpublished experimental notebooks, Milgram himself muses as to whether 'cooperation' is a better term than 'obedience' to characterise participants' behavior in the studies [26]. Certainly, it appears that participants' continuation revolves around a positive and symmetrical relationship with the Experimenter [34,35] that involves loyalty, trust, helpfulness, and the fulfilment of obligation [32]. Accordingly, it is specifically when this relationship is violated by the

Experimenter's use of Prod 4—in which he asserts himself over and against the participant—that acquiescence gives way to resistance [36].

Questioning the historical relevance of Milgram's analysis

At the same time as psychologists have questioned Milgram's theoretical analysis, historians have questioned the relevance of this analysis to intergroup atrocities in history—notably the Holocaust [37,38,39]. In the case of Eichmann, forensic biographical examination [40,41] suggests he was motivated by passion for the Nazi cause and applied himself with zeal and initiative to the task of devising and implementing 'the Final Solution to the Jewish problem'. So when his superior, Himmler, vacillated on the question of deporting Jews in Hungary, Eichmann actually challenged (rather than obeyed) him [38].

More generally, Kershaw [42] argues that the dynamism of the Nazi state resulted precisely from the fact that its agents were not following orders, but were "working towards the Führer" by acting creatively in ways they thought their leaders would want. Other analyses also suggest that perpetrators' claims that "I was only following orders" do not withstand scrutiny of what they said and did at the time [43]. In sum, then, the idea that unthinking 'obedience to authority' was a defining feature of either the Nazi state or its supporters seems highly problematic [44]. Rather, it seems that perpetrators acted knowingly and even proudly on the basis that they were defending a noble—even virtuous—cause against insidious enemies [45,46]. More generally, it seems clear that toxic intergroup relations of this form are fuelled not by passive conformity but rather by active *engagement* [27,38].

Making sense of Milgram: From blind obedience to engaged followership

Convergent evidence from both psychological and historical research shows that intergroup atrocities stem from an active and symmetrical (rather than a passive and subservient) relationship between perpetrators and authority. This speaks to an alternative

account of toxic compliance—particularly within the Milgram studies—in which perpetrators are understood to display *engaged followership* [34,35]. Derived from social identity theorizing [47,48], this analysis argues that the willingness of participants to respond to the bidding of Milgram's Experimenter resulted from their identification with—and associated desire to support—his scientific leadership and goals as well as a *lack* of identification with the Learner. In other words, the effect is predicated upon an intergroup dynamic in which participants understand the Experimenter (but not the Learner) to be a prototypical ingroup member and hence to be a meaningful source of *leadership* [36].

 In line with this account, our experimental study of the effectiveness of various prods [27] found that it was the prod that appealed most directly to these goals (Prod 2: "The experiment requires that you continue") that was most successful in convincing participants to continue. This analysis is also supported by archival and experimental evidence that the degree to which a given experimental variant encourages identification with the Experimenter and his goals (rather than with the Learner) is an extremely good predictor of participants' willingness to continue to 450v [28,33] (see also [49]). For example, relative identification with the Experimenter is low when he is absent from the laboratory or when the Learner is in the same room, or when the Learner is a relative or friend of the Teacher [17,18]. Hence participants prove far less willing to inflict harm in these conditions.

The notion that Milgram's participants were engaged followers is further confirmed—and extended—by analysis of materials in the Yale archive. These point to the lengths that Milgram went to (before, during and after the study) to induce identification with his scientific goals [21]. Furthermore, once Milgram explained the nobility of the enterprise (in terms of progressing human understanding), participants became reconciled to, and even enthusiastic about, the role they had played [26]. In the context of intergroup relations more broadly, this supports the argument that the more the ingroup cause is seen as virtuous, the

easier it becomes to inflict harm on the outgroup in its name [50,51]—and to feel positive about doing so.

Conclusions

According to traditional accounts, psychological and historical research converges in showing perpetrators of intergroup atrocities to be akin to mindless bureaucrats who blindly follow orders without thinking about what they are doing. Recent research confirms that there is indeed convergence between psychological and historical evidence—but around a very different story. This suggests that the real power of Milgram's studies was to show how leaders, followers, and the institutions in which they are enmeshed can create worlds in which acts of cruelty against outgroups come to be seen as virtuous rather than vicious, and where those who perpetrate them understand themselves to be heroes rather than villains. Critically, this occurs not because perpetrators are unaware that they are doing harm, but rather because they are convinced they are doing good.

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