

Running head: THE DYNAMICS OF ENGAGED FOLLOWERSHIP

A truth that does not always speak its name: How Hollander and Turowetz's findings confirm and extend the engaged followership analysis of harm-doing in the Milgram paradigm

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Abstract

Hollander and Turowetz (2017) present important data from post-experimental interviews with participants in Milgram's 'obedience' research. In these, participants responded to various questions about their perceptions of the study and their behaviour by indicating that they trusted the Experimenter not to let them inflict serious harm. Relatively few participants indicated that they acted as they did because they were committed to the Experimenter or to science. We argue, however, that there are two key reasons why this evidence is not inconsistent with claims that harm-doing is a product of engaged followership. The first is that (in contrast to the data obtained from later post-experimental surveys) the conversational logic of the interviews does not topicalise a discussion or valorisation of science, but instead requires participants to defend themselves against an accusation of improper behaviour. The second is that participants' accounts of their behaviour nevertheless revolved around expressions of trust in the Experimenter which can themselves be seen as manifestations of shared identity and engaged followership. Nevertheless, we argue that H&T's analysis points to significant ways in which the engaged followership account and its broader implications for understanding perpetrator behaviour can be embellished.

(191 words)

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Hollander and Turowetz (2017; hereafter H&T) present important and intriguing data from hitherto unexamined post-experimental interviews with participants in Milgram's (1963, 1974) 'obedience' research. These interviews were conducted immediately after participants had completed the study and involved them responding to various questions about their perceptions of the study and their behaviour within it. One of the key features of the resulting accounts is that participants' most common explanation of why they had acted as they did — being prepared to administer seemingly lethal shocks to an innocent co-participant (in fact a confederate) — was that they believed that the 'victim' was not being harmed. Some 72% of participants (33 out of 46) voiced such an account. By contrast, relatively few (11 out of 46; 24%) argued that they administered shocks because of the importance of the experiment. H&T use these findings to articulate dissatisfaction with our 'engaged followership' explanation of Milgram's findings (Haslam & Reicher, 2017; Haslam, Reicher, Millard, & McDonald, 2015; Reicher & Haslam, 2011; Reicher, Haslam & Smith, 2011). They suggest that we have over-stated the extent to which Milgram's participants acted as they did out of an identification with, and a commitment to, science.

We welcome H&T's paper. We welcome debate around the processes that explain Milgram's powerful findings. We also welcome the opportunity to participate in that debate. In proposing the 'engaged followership' account our intention was never to try to replace one monolithic orthodoxy with another and to try to have the final word. We entirely endorse H&T's argument that it would be both futile and wrong to posit a single process to account for what Milgram found – and still more so to posit a unidimensional account of toxic obedience in the Holocaust and elsewhere. Finally, we welcome H&T's discovery and analysis of the immediate post-experimental interviews in the Stanley Milgram archive at Yale University. Given the ethical problems involved in obedience research, the archive has proved an invaluable resource in shedding new light on Milgram's findings (e.g., Gibson,

2013). H&T have brought to light a part of this archive which has not previously been analysed. The material is fascinating. It certainly advances our understanding of why Milgram's participants acted as they did. However, our reading of the material as presented in H&T (2017) is less that it marginalises or provides alternatives to the 'engaged followership' analysis and more that it helps develop and enrich that perspective.

We make our case in three stages. First, we flesh out our engaged followership analysis. Second, we address the things participants *did not say* in their immediate post-experimental interviews and why these do not undermine the engaged followership analysis. Third, we address the things participants *did say* in these interviews and how these contribute to this analysis.

1. Engaged followership

H&T (2017) characterise engaged followership as the idea that people are able to inflict harm on others to the extent that they see it as advancing a noble cause with which they identify. In Milgram's studies, that 'noble cause' is the cause of science and 'participants are motivated to overcome the difficulties of compliance by E's appeals to science' (2017, p. 657). There is nothing in their account which is inaccurate, but it may be helpful to flesh out this account both in terms of its critique of Milgram's own' approach and in terms of how it applies to the specifics of the Milgram obedience paradigm.

As is well known, Milgram's (1974) 'agentic state' account suggests that people inflict harm out of inattention. They are so focused on their responsibilities towards authority and on being a good follower that they lose sight of what they are doing to their victims. There are many critiques of this idea (for reviews, see Haslam & Reicher, 2017; Haslam, Reicher & Birney, 2016; Reicher, Haslam & Miller, 2014), however, for present purposes, the most relevant is the way that it reduces a multi-vocal context to a uni-vocal one.

More specifically, as we see it, the power of Milgram's paradigm lies precisely in the way the participant is placed between different voices placing different demands on him (Reicher et al., 2012). The Experimenter insists that the experiment is valuable, that no harm is being done, and that the participant (in the role of Teacher) should continue administering shocks. The Learner exclaims that he is being hurt, that he wants to leave the study, and that the Teacher should desist. The 'agentic state' account suggests that the participants only hears the Experimenter. But this is implausible, not least because Milgram's own film shows how participants repeatedly respond to the Learner's screams and entreaties and refer these back to the Experimenter. Indeed, what makes the paradigm so gripping and so famous (or infamous) is precisely the tension that derives from the way the participant is torn between two voices (Millard, 2014).

So what determines whose voice is listened to, whether participants accept the experimenter's version of reality or that of the participant, and hence whether they continue or stop? We argue that this is dependent upon the *epistemic capital* of the Experimenter (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2017, Chapter 2) which in turn is underpinned by an identification with science and acceptance of the Experimenter as a legitimate scientist. That is, if we believe that science is a progressive enterprise dedicated to human welfare, then we will be more likely to believe a bona fide scientist when he (or, in other research, she) assures us that all is fine and that good rather than harm is being done. If we either disidentify with science or doubt the credentials of the Experimenter (as when Milgram ran the study in non-descript commercial premises in downtown Bridgeport) then his epistemic capital is reduced, his ability to convince us that nothing harmful is being done likewise diminishes, and fewer people continue to do his bidding.

To put the argument more technically, identification with science may be the distal antecedent of obedience, but it is mediated through trust in the Experimenter. Indeed, this is

precisely what we find in a series of experimental studies currently being written up for publication (Birney, Reicher, Haslam, & Steffens, 2018). Correspondingly, then, we would summarise the engaged followership explanation of Milgram's findings in the following terms: participants are induced to co-operate because they accept the Experimenter's assurances about the study which in turn is because they accept the credibility of his statements as a scientist.

2. What participants *did not say* in the immediate post-experimental interviews

In order to understand the answers given by participants, we need to start by looking at the questions that were asked in the post-experimental interviews examined by H&T, as detailed in Table 1 of their paper (p. 661). Three things are worth stressing about these. The first is that most of the questions come before participants are told that the Learner was not really being shocked. Second, none of the questions directly ask participants why they took part in the study or why they continued to do the Experimenter's bidding. Third, a number of the questions do raise issues concerning the legitimacy of the participant's actions. Questions 4 and 5 allude to the pain inflicted. Question 7 alludes to the fact that shocks were being administered against the participant's will and that there is a need to identify who is responsible for this.

Altogether, then, the conversational logic of these interviews (Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Benson & Hughes, 1983; Grice, 1975) topicalises the fact that participants behaved in a way that was morally and possibly even legally problematic at the same time that it does not topicalise a discussion (far less a valorisation) of science. The interviews also make salient that this was a violation of the learner's rights and (possibly) his physical well-being. These implicit accusations are what participants need to deal with in their responses and they are critical in understanding the nature of these responses. We suggest that, both on functional

and epistemic grounds, it is this accusatory context which explains why participants allude less to the science of the study and more to their belief that no harm was being done. We would note too that this is a very different context to that of responses to the post-experimental survey that Milgram sent out some time later (as examined by Haslam et al., 2015), which generally served to valorise participants' contribution to what were framed as important scientific outcomes and thereby had largely positive identity affordances (see also Hollander & Turowetz in press).

In their analysis H&T ask whether the participant responses they report should be seen as 'candid or self-exculpatory' (p. 659). They conclude that these accounts should not simply be dismissed as defensive or evasive but rather as a sincere attempt to make sense of what happened in the studies. We accept this argument, but at the same time we are less inclined to counterpose the two alternatives. Accounts can be *both* epistemic attempts to understand events and functional attempts to manage blame (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

On the epistemic level, then, the distal account in terms of identification with science is simply a poorer explanation than the proximal account in terms of believing no harm is being done. The former is more abstract, less vivid and also less sufficient. That is, to advance a distal account does not in itself explain the outcome without invoking mediational explanations. More concretely, to say 'I imposed painful shocks against the learner's will because I think science is a good thing' seems contradictory unless one goes on to explain that because one believes in science one also trusts that a legitimate scientific experiment will not harm people. By contrast, to advance a proximal account is to provide a sufficient explanation of the outcome and does not necessarily invite or require further elaboration.

On the functional level, the 'science' account is simply a less effective excuse than the 'no harm' account. That is, when the experiment ends and the Experimenter suddenly turns on the participant, implying that what they have done is profoundly wrong, it is less

powerful for the participant to argue ‘I harmed the learner in the name of science’ than to argue ‘I didn’t harm the learner’. The former accepts the charge of doing harm but argues in mitigation. Even if accepted, it lays one open to being held accountable. The latter denies the charge of doing harm. If accepted, it means the participant has nothing to answer for.

This has significance not only in the case of Milgram’s studies but also for the broader real-world phenomena that Milgram was seeking to explain (Miller, 2004). Fulbrook (2012), for example, makes the point that although the actions of Nazi bureaucrats were undoubtedly underpinned by high identification with the Nazi cause (Mann, 2000), after the war was over and there was universal condemnation of these actions, this was something that most then actively disowned (see Lozowick, 2002; Mandel, 1998). She remarks of one such functionary, Udo Klausa, that ‘his uneasy hovering could be quelled only by a concomitant downplaying of his own awareness of what was going on all around, and what the consequences of his own actions really were’ (Fulbrook, 2012, p. 332). Moreover, she argues that Klausa was far from atypical: ‘[His] post-war stories about his time under Nazism betray many features that are typical among former Nazis in West Germany. He managed, like so many others, to massage the indisputable contours of his former life, bringing them into line with the morals and values of post-war society’ (Fullbrook, 2012, p. 13).

In sum, the fact that participants tend not to refer to science or scientific values in their immediate post-experimental interviews can be explained by the fact that these interviews do not invite talk of science and that a scientific account would not be satisfactory either in explaining harm-doing or in managing blame for harm doing. In short, whatever the truth of such an account, it is an irrelevant truth, a truth that cannot speak its name. In such an unfavourable context perhaps what is really noteworthy is not how rarely *but how often* participants do still make reference to science. It might not be asked for, it might not persuade people and it might not advance their cause, but some participants still feel impelled to

invoke the importance of science and scientific values in accounting for their conduct. That, we suggest, is in itself pretty strong evidence for an engaged follower analysis. But, as we argue in the next section, there is much more supportive evidence when we turn to an analysis of what participants focus on in their accounts.

3. What participants *did say* in the immediate post-experimental interviews

In the previous section we argued that the fact most participants do not invoke the scientific value of Milgram's study to explain their behaviour in his research is not evidence against their engaged followership. In this section we argue that the fact most participants do invoke their belief that no harm was done is actually evidence *for* their engaged followership.

The crux of our argument comes from looking a little more closely at what people are saying in those instances which H&T place in the 'learner not being harmed' category. Take the principal illustrations: Extracts 2 and 3 (H&T, p. 663). In Extract 2 the participant reasons that what he was doing was probably alright (a) because many others were doing the same thing, and (b) because the Experimenter was asking him to continue and 'I didn't take ya to be an inhuman monster'. In Extract 3 the participant is asked why he assigns equal responsibility to himself and the Experimenter for the learner receiving shocks against his will. He replies that he continued because the Experimenter told him to do so, that 'if it was that serious you woulda stopped me'.

In other words, these accounts don't just assert that no harm was done, rather participants explain that they believed the Experimenter would not to allow any harm to be done and hence it was fine for them to apply the shocks. What we have here is not an account of the private mental world of the participant. It is an account of a relationship of trust between the participant and the Experimenter which led participants to accept the Experimenters' benign account of reality.

As will be obvious by now, these accounts of trust coincide precisely with our discussion of epistemic capital as critical to the outcome in Milgram's studies. And, as with epistemic capital, the critical question is where such trust comes from. Our argument is that trust between Experimenter and Teacher can be understood as an aspect of a shared scientific identification rather than as something that is independent of, or orthogonal to, it. This is a point that has been demonstrated empirically in a large body of research which shows that trust flows from perceptions (and expectations) of shared identity, such that people are inclined to trust others — in particular, leaders and experts — to the extent that they perceive them to be people with whom they share social identity (i.e., ingroup members; Foddy, Platow, & Yamagishi, 2009; Giessner and van Knippenberg, 2008; Platow, McClintock, & Liebrand, 1990; for reviews see Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011; Turner, 1991). As we have argued elsewhere, the relevance of this point for behaviour within the Milgram paradigm is that:

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. ... Certainly, it appears that participants' continuation revolves around a positive and symmetrical relationship with the Experimenter that involves loyalty, trust, helpfulness, and the fulfilment of obligation. (Haslam et al., 2016, p. 67)

Conversely, it is where shared identity is breached that trust breaks down and participants turn against the Experimenter. This happens at various points in the study itself. In particular, it occurs when the Experimenter goes from gently enjoining the participant to continue and from justifying this in terms of their shared scientific enterprise to issuing the order that 'You have no other choice, you *must* continue' (the infamous 'Prod 4'). This sets the Experimenter against and over the participant and, in every case of its usage, leads to disobedience (Burger, Girgis & Manning, 2011; Haslam, Reicher & Birney, 2014).

As we have intimated above, these post-experimental interviews themselves also constitute a potential breach. For here the Experimenter suddenly turns from encouragement to accusation and points to the participant as having done wrong. Participants respond in multiple ways but generally they seek to repair the breach and insist that, no, we did this together. The experiment, they insist, was not my doing, it was *ours*. In other words, they orient to the fact that their ‘obedience’ was a co-production (which indeed, it really was; see Darley, 1994; Gibson, 2013; Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011).

We take this as yet further evidence of the importance of shared identity in the Milgram paradigm. As Abrams and colleagues show in the context of phenomena from a series of classic studies (e.g., Sherif’s autokinetic experiment, Asch’s line-judgement studies), people have no inherent need to agree with others. Where there is disagreement and discord, attempts at repair only occur where there is a sense of shared identity amongst those involved (Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990). Likewise, a focus on points of agreement rather than of disagreement — something that is critical to the formation of consensus — is equally dependent upon shared identity (Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty & Reynolds, 1998). Whatever we make of the veracity of participants’ immediate post-experimental accounts concerning what happened in Milgram’s studies, the consensus-building nature of these accounts itself points to the way in which participants see themselves and the Experimenter as sharing a common identity.

Conclusion

Before concluding, let us make a brief aside. This concerns not what H&T themselves report, but the way their findings have been reported elsewhere — notably in the British Psychological Society’s *Research Digest*, where the headline announced ‘New analysis suggests most Milgram participants realised the “obedience experiments” were not

really dangerous' (Jarrett, 2018; for similar conclusions see Perry, 2013). Whatever else we might agree and disagree about, we would argue that this is most definitely *not* what H&T's analysis shows nor what they claim it to show. Indeed, such a reading of their data is profoundly inconsistent with the nuanced and reflexive treatment of participant accounts that H&T encourage, and which we endorse. This, we should stress, is an uncharacteristic slip. For the *Research Digest* has generally provided excellent coverage of the ongoing debate about Milgram's findings and is to be applauded for doing so (not least, because this is rare; see Griggs & Whitehead, 2015a, 2015b).

How, then, might we summarise what is going on in these immediate post-experimental interviews? The first point to note is that participants have just been through an intense and confusing experience in which an Experimenter encouraged them to apply shocks in the name of a benign science even as the recipient of those shocks screamed in pain and demanded to be released. Now, the very Experimenter who urged them on, appears to be accusing them of doing wrong. They have simultaneously to make sense of what is going on and to avoid a serious charge of impropriety. H&T argue that their accounts say little about proceeding for the sake of science and much about believing no real harm was being done – both arguments that militate against an engaged followership position. We respond that the logic of the interview militates against mention of science, and yet many participants did still do so anyway. Moreover, when they articulated a belief that no serious harm was being done they rooted this in their trust that the Experimenter would not sanction an egregious wrong. Why? Well, because they were invested in an understanding of science as a progressive enterprise and saw themselves and the Experimenter as involved in a co-production in which serious harm-doing had no place. So the relative scarcity of 'science' talk does not undermine the engaged followership analysis and the relative abundance of 'no harm' talk actually supports it.

But we should not finish on a note of discord. After all, we do not see H&T as opponents or rivals but as colleagues involved in the co-production of knowledge about important social processes. When H&T express their scepticism towards the engaged followership analysis they qualify this by referring to dissatisfaction with it in its current formulation (p. 670). We can accept that. As we stated at the start, we do not see our extant work as the final word on this subject. Scientific understanding is always provisional, open to development and improvement and we must therefore always regard it with a degree of dissatisfaction. In particular, while we do see identification with a cause — the cause of science in Milgram's case — as an important starting point for explaining toxic cooperation, there is still a need to flesh out the paths from identification to harm-doing. Certainly, trust in the Experimenter — a willingness to accept his definition of reality and his assurances that good rather than harm is being done — is an important element in this. We suspect that there are other similar mediators involved, such as the willingness to cede responsibility to the Experimenter (something that Milgram, 1974, sees as an inherent product of the authority relationship but that we see as a contingent outcome of identity processes).

Our view, then, is that H&T's analysis is not fundamentally at odds with an analysis couched in terms of engaged followership. Rather, in keeping with social identity meta-theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987; Reicher, Spears & Haslam, 2010) it speaks to the fact that social identities don't mechanically determine thoughts, feelings and actions. Instead, they frame the context-sensitive, interactive and interpretative processes through which these are produced. H&T's work inspires us to develop and elaborate the engaged followership analysis to make this explicit.

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