

Engaged Followership and Organisational Misconduct

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Despite social and legal pressure on corporations to act in socially responsible ways (Crane et al., 2019; UK Companies Act, 2006), organisational misconduct remains a major problem (Mishra et al., 2022). Further analysis of these incidents is needed to better understand the social psychological processes involved, how to discourage misconduct, and how to encourage preventative behaviours (e.g. whistle-blowing, Anvari et al., 2019).

One recent high-profile example is Volkswagen's (VW) 2015 "Dieselgate" scandal. Eleven million cars were fitted with a device which lowered NO₂ during laboratory testing, but which led to toxic emissions up to 40 times the US limit when the cars were driven on roads (Ewing, 2017). Once the US Environmental Protection Agency uncovered the deceit, they issued a violation of the Clean Air Act which ultimately led to resignations and suspensions at VW, imprisonment of some staff, and fines of more than \$49bn (Wahlquist, 2019). While these vehicles emitted excessive levels of NO₂, they produced low levels of carbon dioxide. This was a trade-off which led some VW employees to believe they were developing environmentally virtuous "green diesel" cars (Ewing, 2017) in line with the company's reputation for efficiency and sustainability (Tomé, 2017).

Organisations accused of misconduct often blame such actions on "bad apples" (Trevino & Youngblood, 1990) who are working without the knowledge of the wider organisation and certainly not senior management. Indeed, VW's Chief Executive Martine Winterkorn initially attempted to attribute "Dieselgate" to "the terrible mistakes of a few people" (Fleming, 2015). However, reminiscent of the surprisingly unremarkable nature of Milgram's participants in his classic "electric shock" studies (1974), most corrupt employees turn out to be ordinary people with normal moral standards (Brief et al., 2001; Moore & Gino, 2013). Reflecting the "banality of evil" (Arendt, 1963) of Milgram's Agentic State account, some scholars have argued for a "banality of corruption" such that corrupt employees disengage from the ethical consequences of their actions (Anand et al., 2004; Ashforth & Anand, 2003).

However, Milgram's analysis upon which these corruption models are premised has been reinterpreted in recent years. Instead of participants being unaware of their actions as they obeyed the orders of an authority, an alternative explanation is that they performed harmful acts as a form of virtuous engaged followership. More specifically, participants may have given the electric shocks to further a cause with which they identified (science) on the instructions of a leader they identified with (the Experimenter) (Haslam et al., 2015; 2016). Experimental allegories of Milgram's classic work have provided support for the engaged followership explanation, such that identification with a study's apparent purpose and leader predict willingness to engage in and persevere with toxic behaviours (Birney et al., 2023; Gonzalez-Franco et al., 2018; Haslam & Reicher, 2017). The engaged followership account is based on the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), which argues that cognition, emotion, and behaviour are framed by salient group memberships. Given the importance of organisational identities to working life, it is plausible that some forms of organisational misconduct may be the consequence of highly identified group members seeking to realise the goals of their organisation. In intergroup organisational contexts, an antagonistic relationship with monitoring agencies responsible for policing organisational behaviour may also lead to an increased likelihood of approval and performance of corrupt behaviours, and a disinclination to whistleblowing (Anvari et al., 2019).

The notion that organisational identification can have a "dark side" is not new; a growing literature on Unethical Pro-Social Behaviour (UPB) demonstrates that individuals who identify highly with their organisation may be more likely to perform unethical behaviours which benefit the organisation or other stakeholders, most often for financial gain (Mishra et al., 2022; Mo et al., 2023; Umphress & Bingham, 2011). The UPB literature argues that highly identified employees are able to perform unethical behaviours because they *disengage* from moral norms (e.g. Chen et al., 2016) such that the moral content of unethical actions is ignored (Umphress & Bingham, 2011).

Instead of moral disengagement (reminiscent Milgram's [1974] contention that participants were unaware of the harm they were causing), an engaged followership account of toxic organisational behaviour argues for a *moral shift* to reflect the specific goals and behaviours consistent with one's salient (organisational) social identity and associated social norms. Behaviours which might be considered "unethical" and antinormative by wider society (e.g., designing and fitting an emissions cheating device) may come to be seen as "ethical" and normative by highly identified employees if they contribute to the achievement of a moral organisational goal (e.g., lowering carbon output).

Further work is needed to test whether – and under what conditions – organisational members perform harmful behaviours due to a disengagement or a shift in moral norms contingent upon salient social identification, the interaction with individual factors (e.g., expected reciprocity of benefits for the employee [Umphress et al., 2010]), and the moderators and mediations of these processes. Moreover, as argued by Mo and colleagues (2021), experimental work is needed in this area to supplement the correlational designs which have characterised the literature to date. This research agenda would help to test causal claims about the processes through which employees engage in morally and legally questionable pro-group behaviours (including, but not restricted to, actions in the pursuit of financial goals), and inform strategies of how they can be discouraged.

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