

## Obedience as “Engaged Followership”

Birney, Megan E.; Reicher, Stephen D.; Haslam, S. Alexander

DOI:  
[10.4000/11ptx](https://doi.org/10.4000/11ptx)

License:  
Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND)

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*  
Birney, ME, Reicher, SD & Haslam, SA 2024, 'Obedience as “Engaged Followership”: A Review and Research Agenda', *Philosophia Scientiae*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 91-105. <https://doi.org/10.4000/11ptx>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

### General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.



**Philosophia Scientiæ**

Travaux d'histoire et de philosophie des sciences

28-2 | 2024

Revisiting Stanley Milgram's Experiment

---

## Obedience as “Engaged Followership”: A Review and Research Agenda

Megan E. Birney, Stephen D. Reicher and S. Alexander Haslam

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/philosophiascientiae/4297>

DOI: 10.4000/11ptx

ISSN: 1775-4283

**Publisher**

Éditions Kimé

**Printed version**

Date of publication: June 2, 2024

Number of pages: 91-105

ISBN: 978-2-38072-141-6

ISSN: 1281-2463

**Electronic reference**

Megan E. Birney, Stephen D. Reicher and S. Alexander Haslam, “Obedience as “Engaged Followership”: A Review and Research Agenda”, *Philosophia Scientiæ* [Online], 28-2 | 2024, Online since 24 May 2024, connection on 04 June 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/philosophiascientiae/4297> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/11ptx>

---



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are “All rights reserved”, unless otherwise stated.

# Obedience as “Engaged Followership”: A Review and Research Agenda

*Megan E. Birney*

School of Education,  
University of Birmingham (UK)

*Stephen D. Reicher*

School of Psychology and Neuroscience,  
University of St Andrews (UK)

*S. Alexander Haslam*

School of Psychology,  
University of Queensland (Australia)

**Résumé:** Les études sur l’Obéissance à l’Autorité (OtA) de Milgram ont depuis longtemps été comprises comme démontrant que les gens ont une tendance à suivre aveuglément les ordres de l’autorité. Plus récemment, nous avons proposé un modèle d’obéissance basé sur le suivisme engagé (*engaged followership*), qui suggère que la décision d’une personne d’accepter les requêtes d’une figure d’autorité est basée sur son identification avec cette personne et/ou la cause qu’elle représente. Dans cet article, nous présentons nos raisons de soutenir cette perspective et faisons le point sur les éléments empiriques dont nous disposons actuellement pour la soutenir. Nous indiquons également quelles questions restent posées, et posons ainsi les bases d’un programme pour des recherches futures.

**Abstract:** Milgram’s Obedience to Authority (OtA) studies have long been understood as demonstrating that people are prone to blindly follow the orders of authority. More recently, we have proposed an engaged followership model of obedience, which suggests that a person’s willingness to go along with the requests of an authority figure is predicated on their identification with that person and/or the cause they represent. In this paper, we present a review

of our rationale for this perspective and take stock of the current evidence we have to support it. We also highlight gaps in this evidence, and set out an agenda for future research.

## 1 Milgram's Obedience to Authority studies and the *agentic state*

In the decades following World War II, the world was attempting to comprehend the atrocities of the Holocaust. How could people participate in a genocidal project that led to the murder of over 6 million people? At first, the focus was on what made perpetrators different from the rest of us. What sort of experiences and personality made someone into a perpetrator? But the work of Stanley Milgram decisively changed the questions that researchers asked, and, as a result, our understanding of perpetrator psychology. In particular, this is because his "Obedience to Authority" (OtA) experiments led researchers to ask what conditions would lead ordinary people—people like us—to act with such extraordinary inhumanity.

Milgram started running his OtA studies, arguably the most influential and certainly the most notorious in the history of psychology, in July 1961. In the most famous of these, the "revised baseline study", he invited participants to his laboratory, ostensibly to take part in a study of human memory. They arrived at the same time as someone who appeared to be another participant and was assigned to the role of Teacher while the other participant (who was in fact a confederate of Milgram's) was assigned to the role of Learner. This assignment appeared to be random but had in fact been rigged so that the real participant was always in the role of Teacher. As the Teacher, they were placed in front of a shock machine in a room with the Experimenter. Then, every time the Learner made an error on a word-recall task, they were instructed to give them an electric shock. Supposedly this was so that the researchers could discover more about the effects of punishment on memory and learning. In reality, though, the Learner did not receive any shocks because the machine was not designed to deliver them. This was because it was the Teacher's behaviour—not the Learner's—that was the real focus of Milgram's investigation.

At first, the shock voltage was low (15 volts) but on each subsequent error it increased by a further 15 volts up to a maximum of an apparently lethal 450 volts, ominously labelled as "XXX" on the shock machine. Despite the cries of the "Learner" (which started at the 150 v mark), all 40 participants were willing to administer shocks of at least 300 volts, and 26 of them (65%) went all the way to the 450 volt maximum [Milgram 1963, 1974].

To explain his results, Milgram proposed what he called the *agentic state* model of obedience. According to this, when people are in the presence of an authority figure they become focussed solely on doing that person’s bidding. That is, they cede their own agency to the person in authority [Milgram 1974]. And although many researchers, including some of Milgram’s most enthusiastic supporters [e.g., Blass 2004] have questioned this explanation, until recently it was the one that was most commonly reproduced in psychology textbooks. Indeed, analysis shows that, until at least 2015, the majority of these characterised Milgram’s studies as showing that people are naturally inclined to follow the orders of those in authority [Griggs & Whitehead 2015]. Moreover, this explanation proved to be very influential outside psychology, and has shaped thinking about human behaviour across a range of academic disciplines—from law and business to theology and the humanities. It has also been the focus of numerous popular films and documentaries [Gibson 2018], [Haslam & Reicher 2017].

## 2 Deficiencies of the agentic state explanation

But while the simplicity of the agentic state explanation might be appealing, it has many weaknesses. Not the least of these is that it is not supported by Milgram’s own data. For this shows that rather than reflecting a natural inclination to obey, people’s obedience is context-specific. Across over 25 versions of his paradigm in which different aspects of the experimental set up were varied, there was considerable variation in the observed levels of obedience [Milgram 1974]. For instance, when the Experimenter gave his instructions over the phone (rather than face-to-face) obedience dropped to 23%. When two other Teachers (also confederates) were present and refused to shock the Learner, obedience fell to just 10%. Other studies that Milgram referred to as the “Proximity Series” varied how physically close participants were to the “Learner” and how well they could hear his protests. What these showed was that the closer the Learner was to the Teacher and the clearer his cries, the less obedient the Learner became. Across all of the studies, obedience thus ranged from 0 to 100% [Reicher & Haslam 2011]. Moreover, across all variants, fewer than half of participants (42%, [Haslam, Loughnan *et al.* 2014]) went all the way to 450 v. To be accurate, then, these should be called the Obedience and Disobedience to Authority studies (ODtA), and whatever else they may show it is not that people blindly follow the orders of authority.

A second problem is that, in suggesting that people are focussed entirely on the authority figure (the Experimenter) and pay no heed to the suffering of the victim (the Learner), the agentic state explanation is plainly at odds with the reality of the (dis)obedience studies. Milgram famously filmed one variant

of his studies and in the best-known sequence the Teacher is seen agonising over whether to continue, constantly questioning the Experimenter about the wellbeing of the Learner every time he cried out in protest or pain. It is self-evident that attention is focused as much on this Learner as the Experimenter, even if the demands of the latter prevail over the protestation of the former. This observation is complemented by a systematic analyses showing that the points at which people refused to continue tended to be when the Learner shouted out in pain or else demanded to be released from the study [Packer 2008]. Again, then, the idea that people only pay attention to people in authority does not stack up.

Finally, if all that is not enough, an analysis of how participants reacted to the Experimenter's instructions drives another nail into the agentic state coffin. In particular, whenever anyone expressed reservations about continuing, the Experimenter responded with one of an escalating series of scripted prods, delivered in a pre-determined sequence. First, they were told "*Please continue*" or "*Please go on*" (Prod 1). If this failed to have the desired effect, they were then told that "*The experiment requires that you continue*" (Prod 2). This was followed by the Experimenter urging that "*It is absolutely essential that you continue*" (Prod 3). Finally, if these all failed they were told "*You have no other choice, you must go on*" (Prod 4; [Milgram 1974]). Of these, Prod 4 was the only one resembling an order, and yet it also proved to be the least effective. Indeed, evidence from the Yale archives suggests that Prod 4 was far more likely to engender *disobedience* than obedience [Gibson 2013] and the same pattern also emerges from a replication of the baseline condition [Burger 2009, Burger, Girgis *et al.* 2011]. Once more, then, what the studies definitely don't show is that people automatically follow the orders of an authority [Haslam, Reicher *et al.* 2014].

Given all these points, and the fact that Milgram himself countenanced multiple alternative explanations for his findings [Haslam, Reicher *et al.* 2015], it may seem surprising that he ultimately settled on the agentic state account. But to understand why he did, it may help to look more at what was going on in the world outside of Milgram's laboratory than what was going on inside. For at almost exactly the same time as the OtA studies were being conducted, Adolf Eichmann was on trial in Jerusalem. Eichmann was the bureaucrat responsible for devising the Nazi's "final solution to the Jewish problem" and deporting people to the death camps [see Cesarani 2005]. Accordingly, the event attracted the attention of the world. Amongst those in the courtroom was Hannah Arendt, who was covering the trial in a series of dispatches for the *New Yorker*, later expanded into her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* [Arendt 1963]. Ultimately, though, Arendt's book became known more for its subtitle: *The banality of evil*. This captured Arendt's sense that Eichmann did not act out of passionate hatred but out of more mundane motives. In the introduction to his 1974 book Milgram asserted that this conception "comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine" [1974, 6]. In hitching his arguments to Arendt's (even though there are substantial differences between

them), Milgram thus ensured that his work would have an impact that it might otherwise have lacked. Indeed, despite its manifold limitations, for the last 60 years, the combined Milgram-Arendt narrative has dominated understanding of the Holocaust and of the continuing human capacity for inhumanity [Novick 2000].

### 3 From the agentic state to engaged followership

We noted above that one of the key deficiencies of the agentic state account is that it fails to explain the variability in obedience observed across different versions of Milgram’s paradigm (a failure that is hidden by the fact that Milgram—and subsequent textbooks—typically focused on just one variant, the revised baseline study; [Russell 2011]). It follows then, that we may gain more insight into the basis of obedience by paying attention to the precise details of Milgram’s various studies, what they have in common, and how they differ [Russell 2011], [Millard 2014].

In the baseline study, Milgram first placed the Experimenter and Teacher together in a room that was separate from that in which the Learner sat—thus binding the former two together and separating them from the latter [Milgram 1965], [see Reicher & Haslam 2011]. Second, when participants arrived at the laboratory, the Experimenter’s briefing underscored the importance of the scientific enterprise in which they were engaged by stating that scientists “know very little about the effect of punishment on learning, because almost no truly scientific studies have been made of it in human beings” [Milgram 1963, 373]. Third, Milgram meticulously coached the confederate playing his Experimenter to express scientific credibility both in his appearance (e.g. wearing a white lab coat) and demeanor [Blass 2004], [Russell 2014]. Fourth, he devoted similar care to the design of the shock machine in order to enhance this scientific credibility [Russell 2011]. Speaking to the importance of these elements, when the study was run in commercial premises in Bridgeport or by an ordinary man without academic affiliation, obedience dropped to 48% and 20% respectively [Milgram 1974].

What all these elements point to is the way that key features of Milgram’s studies served to create a bond between the Experimenter and the participant while limiting the possibility of them developing a bond with the Learner. The importance of this was also something that Milgram himself reflected on in his laboratory notebook:

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. [Haslam, Reicher *et al.* 2016, 60]

At the same time, though, different variants had features which served to strengthen or weaken these bonds. To put it slightly differently, while participants remained aware of their relationship with (and obligations to) both parties—and while Milgram himself acknowledged that the contradictions between these obligations “created extreme levels of nervous tension in some Ss” [Milgram 1963]—the balance between their bonds to Experimenter and Learner varied between studies. And it was this balance that was critical not only to the findings but also to the drama of the paradigm [Millard 2014]. Accordingly, the above extract from Milgram’s notebook concludes “[...] and it is this lack of relationship in the one direction and the real relationship in the other that produces the results” [Haslam, Reicher *et al.* 2016, 60].

It is this insight that is at the root of our own explanation of obedience in the Milgram paradigm—the *engaged followership* account. Derived from social identity theorising [Reicher, Spears *et al.* 2010], [Tajfel & Turner 1979], [Turner, Hogg *et al.* 1987], this suggests that people’s willingness to harm others is a function of their relative identification with the science and the scientist in the study over and above the Learner as a fellow citizen [Reicher, Haslam *et al.* 2012], [see also Haslam & Reicher 2017, Reicher & Haslam 2011, Reicher, Haslam *et al.* 2012]. Increasing identification with the former increases obedience. Increasing identification with the latter decreases obedience. So, when people apply the shocks it is not because they don’t notice that the Learner is suffering. It is not that they don’t care. It is rather that, ultimately, they believe that making the study run smoothly—and supposedly thereby increasing science’s understanding of human learning—is a greater good. In short, they don’t shock because they are unaware of doing wrong but out of a conviction that they are doing good [see Haslam & Reicher 2017].

The *engaged followership* model offers a parsimonious yet convincing explanation of the same patterns in Milgram’s data that undermine the *agentic state* account. Importantly, for a start, it can account for the variations in obedience observed across Milgram’s paradigms. By considering obedience as a function of identity, it proposes that the factors that increase identification with the Experimenter (e.g., the Yale setting, the absence of dissenters, distance from the Learner) will increase obedience, while the factors that serve to increase identification with the Learner (e.g., close proximity to him, the presence of dissenters) will reduce obedience [Haslam & Reicher 2012]. In this way, the fact that the baseline study produced just the right levels of obedience to be compelling was due to the way its design encouraged (most) participants to prioritise their identification with the Experimenter over their identification with the Learner (e.g., the meticulous detail of the shock machine, the emphasis on the importance of the study’s science, the presentation of the Experimenter as a prototypical scientist). From this perspective, when these various aspects of the design were changed, so too was participants’ relative strength of identification with the Experimenter (and the scientific community he represented) or the Learner (and the general community that he represented). And, as Reicher, Haslam *et al.* [2012] show,



this degree of *relative identification* is an extremely good predictor of levels of obedience in any given variant of the paradigm ( $r = .81$ ).

The engaged followership model also helps us to understand participants’ responses to the Experimenter’s prods. Here, as Burger [2009] observed, one particularly significant finding is that no Teacher continued administering shocks after receiving the fourth order-like prod (i.e., “*You have no other choice, you must go on*”; [Milgram 1974]). To confirm this finding while unconfounding the content of the prods from the order in which they were delivered, Haslam, Reicher *et al.* [2014] tested how far participants would go in an online analogue of Milgram’s paradigm where the task became more noxious the more participants progressed. In this, though, participants were randomly assigned to receive one of Milgram’s four prods and their obedience was measured by their willingness to continue in the study (rather than dropping out; see also [Birney, Reicher *et al.* 2023]). Again, it was the fourth, order-like prod that proved to be least effective in convincing participants to continue. This result accords with an engaged followership model of obedience which argues that orders are counterproductive because they position the Experimenter as an outsider who is acting against the participant, rather than as an insider working with them [Reicher, Haslam *et al.* 2012]. So when the Experimenter is perceived as undermining the identity that he shares with the participant (by barking orders rather than acting as a partner in the goal of advancing science), participants’ willingness to honour their obligations to him drops dramatically.

Further supporting this model, this study also found that it was those participants who were given the prod that spoke most directly to the study’s scientific purpose (Prod 2; “*The experiment requires that you continue*”) who went furthest in the paradigm and were most likely to go all the way to the end [Haslam, Reicher *et al.* 2014]. Again, then it was not orders that motivated them, but an appeal to a shared cause and a shared identity.

From an *engaged followership* perspective, the stress experienced by participants during the study can also be understood as the consequence of having to negotiate between these competing identities. This explains why, when trying to fulfill their obligations to both, Teachers are concerned about the Learner (both as a fellow participant and as a human being) even while going along with the Experimenter’s instructions (in the interests of helping to advance science; [Reicher & Haslam 2011]). Presumably to help resolve this tension, Milgram reported that there were times when participants tried to make the shocks as short as possible [Blass 2004] or to emphasise the correct word during the task [Millard 2014]. This was something that Gonzalez-Franco, Slater *et al.* [2018] investigated experimentally using Virtual Reality to replicate Milgram’s paradigm. In line with these earlier observations, these researchers showed that participants who had to administer electric shocks to an avatar put significantly more emphasis on the correct word (over the incorrect words) than those who were in a control group. Thus, even while participants are following the requests of the

Experimenter, it appears they are still attentive to the needs of the Learner [Gonzalez-Franco, Slater *et al.* 2018].

Finally, just as psychologists have questioned the plausibility of Milgram's agentic state explanation, so too historians have been critical of the idea that Eichmann was simply a bureaucrat who was so obsessed with the details of his job that he failed to notice that he was murdering millions of innocent people. In particular, Cesarani [2005] has pointed out that Eichmann was proactive in murdering Jews and would *disobey* orders if he thought that they did not advance the Nazi's anti-semitic goals [see also Stangneth 2014]. For example, in 1944, Eichmann openly challenged his superiors' plans to allow Jews to leave Germany in exchange for military equipment. Eichmann was unhappy with this because it seemed to be at odds with the genocidal goals at the heart of the Nazi project. Eichmann, then, did not kill Jews because he was following orders; rather he defied orders because he believed in killing Jews [Reicher, Haslam *et al.* 2014].

This enthusiasm for exterminating Jews was not limited to Eichmann. While the complexities of the Holocaust go far beyond what can possibly be captured in a lab-based study [Brannigan, Nicholson *et al.* 2015], it is worth noting that the notion of blind obedience (of a form anticipated by the agentic state account) is poorly suited to the task of explaining people's engagement with authorities in Nazi Germany [Fenigstein 2015]. Here, in the years before their forced deportation to concentration camps, Hitler worked hard to create a culture in which Jews were othered and treated as second-class citizens in ways that set the stage for more extreme behaviour to seem acceptable. In this context, the guidance given to subordinates in the party was vague, and it was precisely this that required them to be *creative* when it came to working out how best to "work towards the Führer" [Kershaw 1993]. Moreover, it was variation in people's level of identification with the Nazi party and its cause that led some to engage with zealous enthusiasm while others withdrew or actively resisted [Boyd & Patel 2022].

The contrast between agentic state and engaged followership models is important for a number of reasons, but one of more important of these is that it has implications for the level of responsibility we ascribe to perpetrators. As Mandel [1998] points out, the idea that someone was "just following orders" is more of an alibi than a plausible explanation [see also Haslam & Reicher 2017]. If one believes that all human beings have a natural inclination to do as they are told, then it follows that they cannot be held accountable if they do. However, from an engaged followership perspective, obedience is predicated on identity, and on what this leads people to see as either right or wrong. Accordingly, just as Milgram's participants had to make decisions while being pulled in competing directions, so too in a range of situations we face dilemmas because our different identities create internal conflict. Ultimately, though, it is the identities we hold most dear—or that are (made) most salient in the moment of decision—that dictate how we resolve these conflicts.

## 4 An agenda for future research

Since the “*engaged followership*” model of obedience was first proposed by Haslam & Reicher [2007], scholars have made progress investigating its plausibility using a wide variety of methods (given the ethical impossibility of replicating the original Milgram paradigm). This includes archival work on Milgram’s papers at Yale which reveals that the Experimenter often deviated from the four scripted prods in ways that stopped participants questioning him [Gibson 2013, 2014] and created the impression that the two were teammates working together to complete the study. Correlational research (referenced above) has also shown that willingness to continue in different variants of the OtA paradigm is predicted by the degree to which these encouraged participants to identify with the Experimenter rather than the Learner [Reicher, Haslam *et al.* 2012], see also [Haslam, Reicher *et al.* 2015]. Finally, experimental evidence, including the use of Virtual Reality [Gonzalez-Franco, Slater *et al.* 2018], “immersive realism” using actors [Haslam, Reicher *et al.* 2015], as well as a noxious online task [Birney, Reicher *et al.* 2023], [Haslam, Reicher *et al.* 2014] has supported the idea that whether a person goes along with the requests of an authority figure depends on their perceptions of that person and the cause that they are seen to advance. But there is still a lot more to do. In what follows, we highlight four key areas for further investigation.

### 4.1 Antecedents of identification

To date, there is only one study that speaks to the idea that the various aspects of the OtA paradigm leads to (dis)obedience (i.e., the Prods study; [Haslam, Reicher *et al.* 2014]). However, given the differences in the design of Milgram’s variants [Russell 2011] and the way these might serve to increase or decrease willingness to follow the Experimenter’s instructions [Reicher & Haslam 2011], there is still much to flesh out here. For example, while we have hypothesized that it was the physical closeness to the Experimenter in the baseline study that encouraged participants to identify with him and hence prioritize his requests over the Learner’s protests, we have yet to test this experimentally. The same goes for many of the factors which Milgram varied in his studies—with consequent variations in obedience. This includes the prestige of the setting where their experiments were conducted, the scientific status of the Experimenter, the presence of dissenting confederates and much more besides. Furthermore, there is scope to consider how participants’ perceptions of various factors related to the task (e.g., their views about universities, ethics, and the importance of science generally) might affect their identification with the different parties and, by extension their willingness to go along with the Experimenter’s demands.

## 4.2 Mediators of engaged followership

Alongside studies that explain how identification is developed in the OtA paradigm, there is a need for research that more clearly identifies the processes that mediate the relationship between identification and engaged followership. One study that provides some insight into this issue investigated the impact of the perceived prototypicality of the science behind the research on participants' willingness to engaged in a noxious online task [Birney, Reicher *et al.* 2023]. This found that the more participants agreed that the science was prototypical, the less dislike they felt for the researchers, the more they thought the study was worthwhile, the happier they were to take part, the more important they felt their contribution was, and the greater their trust in the study's researchers—all of which resulted in them displaying greater followership (i.e., going further in the study). Likewise, the more participants saw the study's researchers as prototypical, the less dislike they felt for the task, the happier they were to take part, and the more trust they reported in those researchers. Again, all of these relationships indirectly resulted in participants progressing further in the study [Birney, Reicher *et al.* 2023].

Building on such work, it is important to understand how various aspects of the OtA paradigm might impact differentially on participants' identification with the Experimenter and with the Learner. Here we would hypothesize that the relationship between identification with the Experimenter and subsequent willingness to do what they say might hinge on factors such as trust in them, willingness to give up one's personal responsibility, and belief in the study's importance. In other words, Milgram may well be right that obedience in his studies may depend upon the Learner handing over responsibility to the Experimenter for the consequences of his own actions. But, this is not inevitable but a function of identifying with and trusting in the Experimenter. By contrast, increased identification with the Learner (and hence increased disobedience) might be expected to derive from somewhat different factors such as feelings of empathy, perceptions of the harm they are experiencing, and blame for their predicament. There are many rich possibilities here, all of which remain to be explored.

## 5 Identification with the Learner

Thus far, all the evidence we have presented has focused on the degree to which participants identify with the Experimenter and the cause they are seen to advance (i.e., science). Yet identification with the Learner is equally critical to the "engaged follower" account in that increased identification with this person is hypothesised to decrease identification. There is some indirect evidence in support of this hypothesis. Thus, in one unpublished variant of his studies, Milgram asked participants to bring a friend to the laboratory who was then assigned to the role of Learner—resulting in considerably lower levels

of shock being administered [Rochat & Blass 2014]. Thus one's relationship to the victim is clearly important—though it remains to be shown whether the importance of inter-personal relations extends to social identification with someone who may be a stranger.

Additionally, we do have evidence that observers' estimates of how much participants would have identified with the Learner in different Milgram variants correlate negatively with actual levels of obedience [Reicher, Haslam *et al.* 2012]. However we have yet to conduct studies which directly manipulate identification with the Learner and measure levels of identification. Nor do we have studies of the antecedents and mediators of identification effects. This is an obvious gap that needs to be filled.

## 6 Real-world studies

Just as Milgram's research aimed to understand the psychological processes that led to the horrors of the Holocaust, so too the research that we conduct today should shed light on the toxic behaviour that we continue to see in so many areas of our lives. Our belief is that research into engaged followership has the capacity to do this and hence should have importance well beyond its laboratory setting. For example, we would argue that the toxic behaviour that has been witnessed in high-profile business scandals (e.g., at Enron, News Corp, Volkswagen, and BP) can be understood to have arisen, at least in part, from employees' belief that their actions were advancing the greater good.

Likewise in sport, toxic actions by a player (such as hacking down an opponent) that result in them receiving a penalty can often be celebrated as a noble act of personal sacrifice for the good of the collective (“taking one for the team”; [James 2018]). The engaged followership model does not excuse any of these behaviours (doing something for the benefit of one's group certainly does not make it right), but it does help to explain them. Nevertheless, to really drive this point home, we need to complement laboratory studies that provide insight into causal process with field studies that explore the fine-grained richness of these processes as they manifest in the world at large. To date, such studies are conspicuous by their absence.

## 7 Conclusion

Despite the engaged followership model's capacity to explain the shortcomings of the agentic state account, there is still a limited empirical basis from which to draw definitive conclusions about the merits of the alternative engaged followership model that we have outlined in this paper. While some progress has been made in this regard and while convergent findings from diverse methodologies provide initial support, much remains to be done. To direct

further these efforts, we have identified four key priorities for future research: the antecedents of identification, the mediators of engaged followership, the basis of identification with the Learner, and the dynamics of real-world instances of toxicity. Such research will help us to continue to refine our understanding of what was going on in Milgram's studies. And by this means we can hope one day to properly understand what Milgram correctly described as a "phenomenon of great consequence" [see Russell 2011].

## Bibliography

- ARENDDT, Hannah [1963], *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*, London: Faber and Faber.
- BIRNEY, Megan E., REICHER, Stephen D., *et al.* [2023], Engaged followership and toxic science: Exploring the effect of prototypicality on willingness to follow harmful experimental instructions, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 62(2), 866–882, doi: 10.1111/bjso.12603.
- BLASS, Thomas [2004], *The Man Who Shocked the World: The life and legacy of Stanley Milgram*, New York: Basic Books.
- BOYD, Julia & PATEL, Angelika [2022], *A Village in the Third Reich: How ordinary lives were transformed by the rise of Fascism*, London: Elliot & Thompson.
- BRANNIGAN, Augustine, NICHOLSON, Ian, *et al.* [2015], Introduction to the special issue: Unplugging the Milgram machine, *Theory & Psychology*, 25(5), 551–563, doi: 10.1177/0959354315604408.
- BURGER, Jerry M. [2009], Replicating Milgram: Would people still obey today, *American Psychologist*, 64(1), 1–11, doi: 10.1037/a0010932.
- BURGER, Jerry M., GIRGIS, Zackary M., *et al.* [2011], In their own words: Explaining obedience to authority through an examination of participants' comments, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2(5), 460–466, doi: 10.1177/1948550610397632.
- CESARANI, David [2005], *Eichmann: His life and crimes*, London: Vintage.
- FENIGSTEIN, Allan [2015], Milgram's shock experiments and the Nazi perpetrators: A contrarian perspective on the role of obedience pressures during the Holocaust, *Theory & Psychology*, 25(5), 581–598, doi: 10.1177/0959354315601904.
- GIBSON, Stephen [2013], Milgram's obedience experiments: A rhetorical analysis, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 52(2), 290–309, doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8309.2011.02070.x.

- [2014], Discourse, defiance, and rationality: “Knowledge Work” in the “Obedience” Experiments, *Journal of Social Issues*, 70(3), 424–438, doi: 10.1111/josi.12069.
- [2018], Obedience without orders: Expanding social psychology’s conception of “obedience”, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 58(1), 241–259, doi: 10.1111/bjso.12272.
- GONZALEZ-FRANCO, Mar, SLATER, Mel, *et al.* [2018], Participant concerns for the Learner in a Virtual Reality replication of the Milgram obedience study, *PLOS ONE*, 13(12), e0209704, doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0209704.
- GRIGGS, Richard A. & WHITEHEAD, George I. [2015], Coverage of Milgram’s obedience experiments in social psychology textbooks: Where have all the criticisms gone?, *Teaching of Psychology*, 42(4), 315–322, doi: 10.1177/0098628315603065.
- HASLAM, Nick, LOUGHNAN, Steve, *et al.* [2014], Meta-Milgram: An empirical synthesis of the obedience experiments, *PLoS ONE*, 9(4), e93927, doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0093927.
- HASLAM, S. Alexander & REICHER, Stephen [2007], Beyond the banality of evil: Three dynamics of an interactionist social psychology of tyranny, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 33(5), 615–622, doi: 10.1177/0146167206298570.
- HASLAM, S. Alexander & REICHER, Stephen D. [2012], Contesting the “nature” of conformity: What Milgram and Zimbardo’s studies really show, *PLoS Biology*, 10(11), e1001426, doi: 10.1371/journal.pbio.1001426.
- HASLAM, S. Alexander & REICHER, Stephen D. [2017], 50 years of *Obedience to Authority*: From blind conformity to engaged followership, *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 13(1), 59–78, doi: 10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-110316-113710.
- HASLAM, S. Alexander, REICHER, Stephen D., *et al.* [2014], Nothing by mere authority: Evidence that in an experimental analogue of the Milgram paradigm participants are motivated not by orders but by appeals to science, *Journal of Social Issues*, 70(3), 473–488, doi: 10.1111/josi.12072.
- [2015], Shock treatment: Using immersive digital realism to restage and re-examine Milgram’s “obedience to authority” research, *PLoS ONE*, 10(3), e109015, doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0109015.
- HASLAM, S Alexander, REICHER, Stephen D, *et al.* [2016], Questioning authority: New perspectives on Milgram’s “obedience” research and its implications for intergroup relations, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 11, 6–9, doi: 10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.03.007.

JAMES, Stuart [2018], There is a cloud hanging over this World Cup and Fifa must not ignore it, *The Guardian*, July 4, URL <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/jul/04/cloud-hanging-world-cup-fifa-england-colombia>.

KERSHAW, Ian [1993], "Working towards the Führer." Reflections on the nature of the Hitler dictatorship, *Contemporary European History*, 2(2), 103–118, doi: 10.1017/s0960777300000382.

MANDEL, David R. [1998], The obedience alibi: Milgram's account of the Holocaust reconsidered, *Analyse & Kritik*, 20(1), 74–94, doi: 10.1515/auk-1998-0105.

MILGRAM, Stanley [1963], Behavioral study of obedience, *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67(4), 371–378, doi: 10.1037/h0040525.

— [1965], Some conditions of obedience and disobedience to authority, *Human Relations*, 18(1), 57–76, doi: 10.1177/001872676501800105.

— [1974], *Obedience to Authority: An experimental view*, New York: Harper and Row.

MILLARD, Kathryn [2014], Revisioning obedience: Exploring the role of Milgram's skills as a filmmaker in bringing his shocking narrative to life, *Journal of Social Issues*, 70(3), 439–455, doi: 10.1111/josi.12070.

NOVICK, Peter [2000], *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, London: Bloomsbury.

PACKER, Dominic J. [2008], Identifying systematic disobedience in Milgram's obedience experiments: A meta-analytic review, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(4), 301–304, doi: 10.1111/j.1745-6924.2008.00080.x.

REICHER, Stephen & HASLAM, S. Alexander [2011], After shock? Towards a social identity explanation of the Milgram "obedience" studies, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50(1), 163–169, doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8309.2010.02015.x.

REICHER, Stephen D., HASLAM, S. Alexander, *et al.* [2012], Working toward the experimenter: Reconceptualizing obedience within the Milgram paradigm as identification-based followership, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 7(4), 315–324, doi: 10.1177/1745691612448482.

— [2014], What makes a person a perpetrator? The intellectual, moral, and methodological arguments for revisiting Milgram's research on the influence of authority, *Journal of Social Issues*, 70(3), 393–408, doi: 10.1111/josi.12067.



- REICHER, Stephen D., SPEARS, Russell, *et al.* [2010], The social identity approach in social psychology, in: *The SAGE Handbook of Identities*, edited by M. Wetherell & C. Mohanty, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 45–62, doi: 10.4135/9781446200889.
- ROCHAT, François & BLASS, Thomas [2014], Milgram’s unpublished obedience variation and its historical relevance, *Journal of Social Issues*, 70(3), 456–472, doi: 10.1111/josi.12071.
- RUSSELL, Nestar [2011], Milgram’s obedience to authority experiments: Origins and early evolution, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50(1), 140–162, doi: 10.1348/014466610x492205.
- [2014], Stanley Milgram’s obedience to authority “Relationship” Condition: Some methodological and theoretical implications, *Social Sciences*, 3(2), 194–214, doi: 10.3390/socsci3020194.
- STANGNETH, Bettina [2014], *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The unexamined life of a mass murderer*, New York: Random House.
- TAJFEL, Henri & TURNER, John [1979], An integrative theory of intergroup conflict, in: *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by W. G. Austin & S. Worchel, Monterey: Brooks; Cole, 33–37.
- TURNER, John C., HOGG, Michael A., *et al.* [1987], *Rediscovering the Social Group: A self-categorization Theory*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

