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# 7

## Obedience

### Revisiting Milgram's shock experiments

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## BACKGROUND

In 1961 our understanding of the human capacity for evil was utterly transformed by two events. One took place in the Jerusalem District Court, the other in a Psychology Laboratory at Yale University. Although very different, over time, researchers' understandings of these two events were fused into a unified model of evil that dominated popular and scientific thinking for half a century.

### HANNAH ARENDT ON ADOLF EICHMANN

First, in early April, Adolf Eichmann walked into a courtroom in Jerusalem. Eichmann had been Head of the Reich Main Security Office Sub-Department IV-B4 during the Second World War. This was the department that dealt with Jewish Affairs and 'evacuation'. In other words, Eichmann was the person who arranged the deportation of Jews to the Nazi death camps. He was the chief bureaucrat of the Holocaust (see Cesarani, 2005, for a detailed biography).

After the war, Eichmann fled to Argentina where he lived under the name of Ricardo Klement. But in 1959 the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad, learned of his whereabouts. On 11 May 1960 he was kidnapped and smuggled to Israel in the uniform of an El Al flight attendant. After an intensive interrogation, Eichmann was indicted on 15 charges, notably crimes against humanity, crimes against the Jewish people, and war crimes. On 11 April 1961, the date the trial began, he was seen in public for the first time.

For those sitting and waiting in the courtroom, Eichmann's appearance was a shock. They had expected to see a strutting, arrogant Nazi officer. For surely someone who had committed such monstrous acts would be a monster himself – someone quite extraordinary and clearly different from ordinary decent folk. But what they saw instead was a rather non-descript character. Eichmann was slightly hunched, balding, insignificant. He sat in his bulletproof booth fastidiously taking notes. He looked to all the world like an unexceptional bureaucrat.

One of those sitting in the audience on that day was Hannah Arendt, a famous German-Jewish historian and philosopher who had previously written several important texts on totalitarianism. But these were to be eclipsed by the reports she wrote of the trial for *The New Yorker* – later to be published in book form as *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt, 1963/1991). More specifically, her impact was concentrated into a three-word phrase that she employed in the sub-title of the book, but only once in the book itself, to encapsulate the lesson that she learned from Eichmann at his trial: 'the lesson of the word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*' (1963/1994: 252, emphasis added).

What Arendt meant by the 'banality of evil' was not that the acts of Nazis like Eichmann were banal, but rather that the perpetrators *themselves* were – and that they were acting on the basis of banal motives. Eichmann and his ilk, she suggested, were moved less by great hatreds than by the petty desire to do a task well and to please their superiors. Indeed, they concentrated so much on these tasks that they forgot about their consequences. As Arendt put it, Eichmann 'had no motives at all. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing' (1963/1994: 287).

This idea – that ordinary people can commit extraordinary acts of evil through sheer thoughtlessness and inattention – was profoundly shocking and deeply controversial. But it gained credibility through support from an altogether different form of evidence.

## STANLEY MILGRAM ON OBEDIENCE

The Eichmann trial closed on 14 August 1961. Exactly a week before, on 7 August, Stanley Milgram began his famous obedience experiments at Yale University. Milgram was born in 1933, the year Hitler came to power, to Jewish parents of East European origins (see Blass, 2004, for a rich and detailed biography). The Holocaust loomed large throughout his youth, and during the war the family followed events in Europe closely. In a speech at his Bar-Mitzvah (the traditional Jewish coming-of-age ceremony) in 1946, the young Stanley declared: 'As I come of age and find happiness in joining the ranks of Israel, the knowledge of the tragic suffering of my fellow Jews throughout war-torn Europe makes this also a solemn event and an occasion to reflect upon the heritage of my people – which now becomes mine' (cited in Blass, 2004: 8).

This heritage and the questions it raised were evident in Milgram's academic work. He started his research career by looking at the phenomenon of conformity. He was particularly interested in whether different nations – Germans in particular – differed in their degree of conformity. But he was dissatisfied with the traditional way that such research was conducted. It tended to address fairly trivial instances of conformity. Most notably, Solomon Asch (1956) had conducted studies to see if people would change their judgments of physical stimuli (such as the length of lines) in order to fit in with the views of a majority (see Chapter 5). As Milgram himself put it:

I was dissatisfied that the test of conformity was judgment about *lines*. I wondered whether groups could pressure a person into performing an act whose human import was readily apparent, perhaps behaving aggressively toward another person. (cited in Blass, 2004: 62)

But then, Milgram asked, what might happen even if there was no group but only instructions from an experimenter: ‘Just how far would a person go under the experimenter’s orders?’ As Milgram later remarked, ‘It was an incandescent moment’ (Blass, 2004: 62). The reason for this was that it was at this point that he conceived of the design for his studies of obedience to authority.

As described in more detail below, the basic set-up for these studies involved a learning experiment in which the participant found himself in the role of a ‘teacher’ who had to administer ever-increasing levels of electric shock to a ‘learner’ each time the learner gave a wrong answer. In fact, the learner was a confederate who had been carefully trained to play the role, and the impressive shock machine that appeared to deliver shocks of increasing magnitude was also bogus – but the teacher (the only true participant in the study) did not know this. For him (and all participants in the early study were male) the situation was very real indeed.

Milgram initially intended to examine national differences in the level of shock that people would be prepared to inflict. He would start out in America, but then examine the phenomenon in other countries. The United States would form a baseline. After all, who could seriously expect ordinary Americans to inflict great harm on someone simply because an experimenter told them to? Indeed, to confirm this point, Milgram asked 110 respondents – groups of psychiatrists, college students and middle-class adults – to predict what they would do under these circumstances. You may want to ask yourself the same question. How far would you go? Would you be prepared to administer a ‘strong shock’ of 135 volts? What about an ‘intense shock’ of 225 volts? Or would you go as far as ‘danger severe shock’ at 375 volts?

Among Milgram’s respondents, most said that they would break off before the shock level became particularly painful or harmful. As Milgram noted in his 1974 book *Obedience to Authority* (his classic account of the studies), not a single person said they would go up to the maximum level of 450 volts.

Yet when Milgram conducted pilot studies with Yale University students this was not what happened. Most of the participants in what became known as the baseline condition proved willing to obey the experimenter all the way to the bitter end. Indeed, in the very first pilot study that he ran, *all* the students went up to 450 volts. As Stanley’s wife Alexandra recalls, at first Milgram simply dismissed this as something to do with ‘Yalies’ (A. Milgram, 2000). However, when the study was repeated with ordinary Americans a sizeable proportion of them also proved willing to administer shocks right up to the 450-volt level. Milgram sat up and took note. For he realized he had discovered the ‘phenomenon of great consequence’ of which he had always dreamed (Blass, 2004: 62). And now he proceeded to ‘worry it to death’ – that is, to investigate the precise circumstances that would

(and would not) produce such obedience. He never did get round to looking at national differences in obedience. It was enough that he had demonstrated in the laboratory what Arendt claimed to have observed in the courtroom: that ordinary people can inflict extraordinary harm on their fellow human beings. What is more, like Arendt (by whom he was heavily influenced), he concluded that this comes about because people pay more attention to the task of carrying out instructions than to the actual consequences of that task. In other words, they are concerned only to follow – not to ask where they are being led.

## THE JOINT IMPACT OF ARENDT AND MILGRAM

Both Arendt's historical study and Milgram's psychological studies have had tremendous impact on their own. For example, in 2011 *The Guardian* newspaper in Britain included *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in their 100 greatest non-fiction books of all time. And according to Muzafer Sherif (whose own classic studies are discussed in Chapters 4 and 9), 'Milgram's obedience experiment is the single greatest contribution to human knowledge ever made by the field of social psychology, perhaps psychology in general' (cited in Takooshian, 2000: 10). The studies were extensively covered in the *New York Times*, they have been featured in television documentaries in several countries, and they have even been made into a television play with William Shatner – Captain Kirk from the original *Star Trek* – as the Milgram-like lead. In 2015 they were also the basis for the film *Experimenter* (with Peter Sarsgaard in the role of Milgram and Winona Ryder as his wife), which was premiered to critical acclaim at the Sundance Film Festival.

But although each of these contributions has been influential on their own, it is the combination of Arendt and Milgram's ideas that has been most powerful. Arendt's history of Eichmann and the Holocaust provides social relevance for Milgram's studies. Milgram's studies provide scientific credibility for Arendt's specific claims. The two strands weave together to make what has often appeared to be an uncontestable model of the psychology of human atrocities. This suggests that all of us are capable of becoming perpetrators of evil because this results more from inattention than from intention. As Peter Novick puts it in his analysis of *The Holocaust in American Life*:

From the sixties on, a kind of synergy developed between the symbol of Arendt's Eichmann and the symbol of Milgram's subjects, invoked in discussing everything from the Vietnam War to the tobacco industry, and, of course, reflecting back on discussions of the Holocaust. (2000: 137)

## THE OBEDIENCE STUDIES

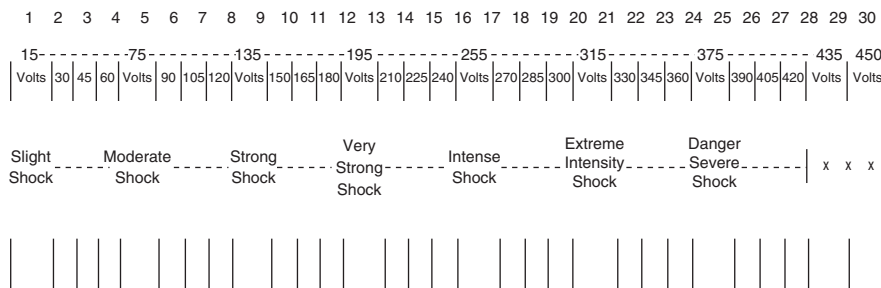
Milgram's obedience studies are great drama as well as great science (Reicher and Haslam, 2011a). Anyone who watches Milgram's famous film of the studies – itself entitled *Obedience* – will be gripped as they see participants agonizing over what

to do, remonstrating and arguing with the experimenter, torn between their obligations to him and their awareness of what they are doing to the learner. This is not accidental. For as well as being a brilliant psychologist, Milgram was an accomplished artist. He wrote children’s stories, he composed musicals, and he was a keen film-maker (Millard, 2011, 2014). Moreover, Milgram very carefully calibrated the obedience studies through a series of pilots in order to create just the right amount of dramatic tension. For instance, he carefully selected confederates who would act as the ‘experimenter’ and the ‘learner’ in the studies so that the former was stern and intellectual, the latter ‘mild and submissive [and] not at all academic’ – indeed ‘perfect as a victim’ (cited in Russell, 2011: 159). This combination, he believed, would make it more likely that people would be willing to inflict shocks.

At the same time, Milgram did not want to make obedience too straightforward. In the pilot study that we mentioned above, participants inflicted shocks without ever seeing the ‘learner’ or ever getting any form of feedback from them — simply pressing the switches on the shock generator without seeing or hearing the consequences. In this study, almost every participant went ‘blithely’ up to the maximum shock level (Milgram, 1965a). But the lack of any force countervailing *against* the pressure to deliver shocks removed any tension in the studies and made them uninteresting to Milgram.

Equally, Milgram was deeply concerned with the *look* of the studies. In particular, he designed the shock generator very carefully. It was very important that it looked imposing and professional. An early version with only 12 switches, and a 30-volt gap between each, was replaced with the model containing 30 switches and 15-volt gap between them. The idea was that this would make it easier for people to progress through the sequence. Tellingly, the labels associated with the different shock levels were also modified. Originally, the 450-volt switch was labelled ‘Lethal’. But this was felt to be too stark and too off-putting, so it was later replaced by the ominous, but more ambiguous ‘XXX’ (Russell, 2011).

After all these careful modifications, Milgram had a credible and compelling paradigm. But it is important to recognize that this was the outcome of a long and careful process of balancing the forces that make it easier to obey the experimenter with those that make it easier to heed the learner. The dramatic brilliance of the studies lies precisely in the fact that both elements were addressed and neither was allowed to dominate the other.



**Figure 7.1** Diagram of the control panel on the shock generator (from Milgram, 1974: 28)

## METHOD AND RESULTS

In addition to all the pilot studies, 18 different studies are listed in *Obedience to Authority* (Milgram, 1974), but there were also a number of other variants that he did not report there, and which have come to light more recently as researchers have gained access to the rich Milgram archive in the Sterling Library at Yale which contains, amongst other things, audio recordings of the experiment, Milgram's notebooks, and the post-experimental responses of participants (e.g., see Rochat and Blass, 2014). The different variants of the paradigm vary in a number of ways, including how many experimenters there were, whether the participant was alone or delivered shocks in the company of others, whether the learner was shocked against his will or actually demanded to be shocked. We will return to some of the variants later. However, it is probably clearest to start by outlining the best known or 'new baseline' condition (Milgram, 1974, Study 5). Then we can consider some of the most significant variants.

### THE 'BASELINE' CONDITION

Participants for all studies were recruited through an advertisement in the local paper. It read: 'We will pay five hundred New Haven men to help us complete a scientific study of memory and learning.' Of those who volunteered 40% were blue-collar workers, 40% were white-collar workers, and 20% were professionals. They were invited to come to the elegant Interaction Laboratory of Yale University (although in some subsequent conditions, the study took part in shabby offices in the nearby industrial city of Bridgeport). When they arrived, two other people were present. One was the 'experimenter', who was dressed in a grey technician's coat. The other was supposedly another volunteer (although actually he was a confederate). The experimenter explained that the study was concerned with the effect of punishment – electric shocks – on learning. Accordingly, one of the participants would serve as a 'teacher' and the other as a 'learner'. A draw was then made to decide who would take which role – but this was rigged to ensure that the volunteer was always the teacher and the confederate was always the learner. Next, the teacher and learner were taken to another room and the learner was strapped into a chair and electrodes were attached to his body. The experimenter declared that 'although the shocks can be extremely painful, they cause no permanent tissue damage' (Milgram, 1974: 19).

The learning task involved word pairs. First, the teacher read out a series of such pairs (e.g., blue–box). Then, in the 'testing phase' he read a target word from one of the pairs (in this example, blue) along with four other words (e.g., sky, ink, box, lamp). The learner then had to say which of these four words was originally paired with the target (in this instance, box). If the learner gave a wrong answer, the teacher had to deliver an electric shock by depressing one of the switches on the shock generator, moving one level higher with every error. There were 30 switches, increasing 15 volts at a time up to a maximum of 450 volts. If participants continued all the way to the maximum level, they were instructed to continue at this level of shock for subsequent errors. After two more trials, the experiment was terminated.

This basic structure is just the start. Both the learner and the experimenter had carefully devised scripts to follow during the experiment. In the baseline condition, as the learner was being strapped into the electric chair, he mentioned that he had a slight heart condition. Then, during the task itself, he made specific responses at different shock levels. Despite the learner being in another room, these responses could be heard clearly by the teacher. They start at 75 volts with an expression of pain. At 150 volts the learner first demands to leave the study. He exclaims 'Get me out of here, please! My heart's starting to bother me. I refuse to go on. Let me out.' He intensifies his protestations over time and refers to his heart condition again at 195 and 330 volts. At 300 volts the learner screams 'I absolutely refuse to answer any more!' and repeats three times 'Get me out of here.' After 330 volts he stops responding or making any sound (for full details see Milgram, 1974: 56–7).

The script for the experimenter had to be somewhat more flexible since his urgings depended on the way that the teacher responded to his task. If the teacher hesitated and showed concern about going on, the experimenter responded using a predetermined set of prods. These were as follows:

Prod 1: Please continue [or Please go on].

Prod 2: The experiment requires that you continue.

Prod 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.

Prod 4: You have no other choice, you *must* go on.

These were given in an escalating series, so that a higher-level prod was only given after a lower-level one had failed to persuade the teacher to continue. In addition, there were two special prods in response to specific objections by the teacher. If he asked about physical danger to the learner, the experimenter replied: 'Although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent tissue damage, so please go on.' If the teacher objected that the learner did not want to continue, the experimenter replied: 'Whether the learner likes it or not, you must go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly. So please go on.'

When the sessions were finished, Milgram devised an extensive post-experimental procedure that involved telling participants that the shocks were not real and that the learner had not been harmed in any way. They then had a friendly meeting with the learner who told them that they were a good person. If they had defied the experimenter they were told that this was the right thing to do. If they had not, they were told that this was perfectly normal. Later they received a full written report about the studies and also a follow-up questionnaire that assessed their thoughts and feelings about participating in the studies.

In this baseline condition 26 out of 40 participants (65%) went all the way to the maximum level and never defied the experimenter – this was despite the screams, the demands to be released, the invocations of heart disease and,





**Figure 7.2** A participant in one of Milgram's obedience experiments (from the film *Obedience*)

Source: Yale University archive

ultimately, the learner's ominous silence. Of those 14 who did refuse to go on, the largest number (six) did so at the 150-volt level. No more than two people broke off at any other single level.

### MAIN VARIANTS

Perhaps the best-known set of variants addresses the physical proximity of the learner to the experimenter. In the first of these (the 'remote' experiment), the learner is in a separate room and his voice cannot be heard by the teacher. The only feedback comes at 300 volts when there is banging on the wall. In the second (voice-feedback) study, the set-up is almost identical to the 'baseline' variant except that there is no mention of a heart condition at any point. The third variant (proximity) is like the second, except that it involves the teacher and learner being in the same room so there is visual as well as auditory feedback. Finally, in the fourth (touch proximity), the teacher has to press the learner's hand onto a metal shock plate. The number (out of 40 participants) and percentage of people who obey to the end in these studies is respectively 26 (65%), 25 (62.5%), 16 (40%) and 12 (30%). Again, apart from the remote condition (where the first point that people break off – as well as the point where most people break off – is at 300 volts when banging on the wall is heard), more people break off at 150 volts than at any other point.

Another set of variants deals with the various roles involved in the study. Thus, in one study, it is the learner who demands that the shocks are delivered. At 150 volts

the experimenter calls a halt to the study but the learner indicates a willingness to continue. No-one heeds the learner. At the 150-volt mark, all 20 participants in this condition stop, and none (0%) continue to the end. In another study, the person demanding that shocks be delivered is not a scientist in a lab coat, but just an ordinary man, ostensibly a volunteer for the study, just like the participant. In this situation only 4 out of 20 people (20%) obey to the end. In yet another study, there are two scientist experimenters who argue with each other as to whether shocks should be delivered. Here again, not one of the 20 participants (0%) is fully obedient and 18 of them stop at the 150-volt mark. In a fourth study, not only is the person making demands an ordinary man, but also the learner who receives shocks is the scientist. Once more, not one of the 20 participants (0%) is fully obedient and all of them stop at the 150-volt mark. In a fifth and final study of this series, both the person demanding the shocks and the person receiving the shocks is a lab-coated scientist. This time, obedience rises to the same level as the baseline condition (13 out of 20 participants go to 450 volts, 65%) and six of the seven participants who break off do so at 150 volts.

There are also two variants dealing with what Milgram terms 'group effects'. In the first of these, there are three teachers – two are actors and one is the real participant. At 150 volts one of the actors refuses to continue. At 210 volts the second does likewise. Here only 4 of the 40 (10%) participants continue obeying the experimenter to the end. Of those who don't, the largest number break off, along with the second dissenting actor, at 210 volts. In the other variant, there are two experimenters (one an actor, the other the real participant). The actor actually administers the shocks; the participant only assists. This time, 37 of the 40 participants (92.5%) are prepared to administer the full set of shocks.

Finally, of the many other variants, three are notable. When women are used instead of men, there is no difference in obedience levels. Out of 40 participants, 26 are fully obedient (65%). When the study was conducted in Bridgeport, full obedience was displayed by 19 out of 40 participants (47.5%). When the learner made the experimenter agree, prior to the shocks starting, that the study would be ended when the learner demanded it, obedience fell further to 16 out of 40 participants (40%). It is worth commenting, once again, that in all these conditions more people dropped out at 150 volts than any other level.

To summarize, then, three points are worth noting (for further discussion see Reicher, Haslam and Smith, 2012). First, the levels of obedience in these studies vary massively from over 90% to 0%. Milgram's studies thus demonstrate *disobedience* as well as obedience. The critical questions, thus, have to do with *when* people obey as much as *why* people obey. Second, participants do not obey just anyone: their obedience seems to be contingent upon a legitimate authority providing clear guidance. Third, people are highly responsive to other voices in the study. They are most likely to break off the first time the learner demands to quit (150 volts in most studies, 300 volts in the remote condition; Packer, 2008). Equally, in the first 'group variant', they are most likely to stop when there is a consensus amongst others to do so (at 210 volts).

The Milgram paradigm, then, is one in which the participant is assailed on all sides by different voices demanding different things. The participants seem to be attentive to all these voices and their dilemma is which to prioritize over the others.

### EXPLAINING THE FINDINGS

In his early papers on the 'Obedience to Authority' studies (which, as we have just seen, might better be termed the 'Obedience and Disobedience to Authority' studies) and in the notes that he took while he was conducting the studies, Milgram places considerable emphasis on the tension that arises in the studies as participants are torn between 'the competing demands of two persons: the experimenter and the victim' (Milgram, 1963: 378), and he considers a wealth of factors that pull them towards the one or the other. Thus, for instance, the importance and prestige of the research (ostensibly to advance knowledge about learning and memory) is a factor that pulls participants towards the experimenter (and hence obedience reduces when the research is associated with a commercial enterprise rather than Yale University). The status and prestige of the researcher (as a legitimate scientist) is equally important in this regard (and hence obedience reduces and even disappears when the researcher is just an ordinary person).

But obedience does not just rely on who the experimenter is, but on the *relationship* between the participant and the experimenter. Thus, Milgram uses the notion of 'incipient group formation' as an important element in explaining the effects of proximity on obedience (Milgram, 1965: 64). In the remote and voice-feedback variants, experimenter and teacher are alone together in the same room and this helps them bond. But in the proximity and touch proximity conditions, the teacher and learner no longer have a wall between them. They don't face the experimenter alone. 'They have an ally who is close at hand and eager to collaborate in a revolt against the experimenter' (Milgram, 1965a: 64). In another paper, Milgram (1965b) makes a similar point about the relationship between the real participant and his fellow actor-teachers in the first group condition: 'there is identification with the disobedient confederates and the possibility of falling back on them for social support when defying the experimenter' (1965b: 133). In other words, the way that the physical environment impacts on the configuration of social relationships in the studies plays an important part in determining which voice the participant will heed and which he will ignore. As Milgram observed in his notebook:

The 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, or marriage, etc. could reverse the results. (Milgram, Box 46, Yale archive; cited in Haslam, Reicher, Millard and MacDonald, 2015: 60)

Attention to such factors dominated Milgram's early accounts of his findings, and they are still referred to in his 1974 book. However, over time, they became overshadowed by an alternative explanation, which he outlines in the Introduction to *Obedience to Authority*:

After witnessing hundreds of ordinary people submit to the authority in our own experiments, I must conclude that Arendt's conception of the banality of evil comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine. The ordinary person who shocked the victim did so out of a sense of obligation – a conception of his duties as a subject – and not from any peculiarly aggressive tendencies. (1974: 6)

Milgram refers to this state of immersion in one's role as the 'agentic state', and the shift from acting in terms of one's own purposes to acting as an agent for someone else's is termed the 'agentic shift' (1974: 132–4).

Even Milgram's most ardent admirers are highly sceptical about the 'agentic state' explanation (e.g., Blass, 2004). If nothing else, this is because there is no evidence that the different levels of obedience witnessed across the study variants relate to differences in the extent to which participants enter into this state (Mantell and Panzarella, 1976). This is unsurprising, given two aspects of the explanation. The first is that the agentic state is conceptualized mechanically as an all-or-nothing affair: one is either completely in or completely out of it. Such a stark view does not allow for different degrees of involvement and hence of obedience. Indeed, it is this aspect of the account that drew some of the fiercest criticism. Thus, John Darley wrote that:

The first time I read this, I was startled and appalled by ... the odd and pseudoscientific/pseudophysiological concept of the agentic state, by the notion of the 'trigger' that switches an individual between normal and agentic functioning, and by the dichotomous and all-or-nothing character of being in one state or another. And I continue to be. (1992: 207)

However, the second aspect of the agentic state explanation is, perhaps, even more problematic. This concerns the way in which it conceptualizes one of the several relationships in the study – that between participant and experimenter. For here it loses sight of the fact that a key feature of the studies concerns the way in which participants are torn between different relationships and different obligations. It therefore fails to address the ways in which the balance of relationships varies between the different studies or to answer the key question of why participants heed one of the voices that is appealing to them rather than the others. In short, the agentic state explanation reduces a multi-vocal reality to a uni-vocal account. This not only makes the account unconvincing, but also obscures the many other rich insights that Milgram provided in the course of his research.

Although it is now nearly a quarter of a century old, Ross (1988) thus provides the best summary of the prevailing view when he states that we really have no firm understanding of why people behaved as they did in the studies (see also Miller, 2016; Reicher, Haslam and Miller, 2014). Milgram undoubtedly supplied us with a

compelling phenomenon, but we still await a satisfactory explanation. What is clear, however, is that any account must be inadequate if it suggests that there is something inherent in the human psyche which compels us to obey. A convincing explanation must be one that is rich enough to explain the complex patterning of obedience and disobedience that Milgram discovered in the process of worrying the phenomenon to death.

## BEYOND THE OBEDIENCE STUDIES

There have been two major obstacles that have prevented progress in understanding the underpinnings of obedience and disobedience. The first is ethical, the second is conceptual.

### OVERCOMING ETHICAL OBSTACLES

Milgram's studies are nearly as famous for the ethical storm that they provoked as for their demonstration that ordinary men can commit acts of extraordinary harm. From the moment the studies were first reported, many observers noted that participants who had obeyed the experimenter would be deeply disturbed when confronted with what they had done – notwithstanding Milgram's attempts to reassure them that they had done nothing wrong. For his critics (of whom there have been many; for recent discussion see Brannigan, Nicholson and Cherry, 2015), Milgram had himself committed acts of inhumanity in the guise of studying inhumanity. In an influential commentary that appeared in *American Psychologist*, Diana Baumrind (1964) accused Milgram of failing to treat his participants with the respect they deserved and of undermining their self-esteem and dignity. Shortly after the research was first publicized in the *New York Times* of 26 October 1963, an editorial in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* described Milgram's work as 'open-eyed torture' (cited in Blass, 2004: 121). Bruno Bettelheim, a famous psychoanalyst who himself had written about behaviour in the concentration camps and who had positively reviewed Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the *New Republic* (15 June 1963), went even further. He declared the studies to be 'vile' and 'in line with the human experiments of the Nazis' (cited in Blass, 2004: 123). Milgram even became the subject of attacks by fictional characters. In Dannie Abse's play *The Dogs of Pavlov*, the protagonist Kurt calls the obedience studies 'bullshit', 'fraudulent' and 'a cheat' (see Milgram, 1974: 198).

Milgram (1964) responded to such criticism by claiming that 'no-one who took part in the obedience study suffered damage, and most subjects found the experience to be instructive and enriching' (Blass, 2004: 124). He backed up his claims with evidence taken from post-experimental questionnaires. These showed that, of the 656 people who participated in the studies, 83.7% were 'glad' or 'very glad' to have participated, 15.1% were neutral, and 1.3% were 'sorry' or 'very sorry' to have taken part. In terms of distress, more than half the participants said that they had suffered some level of discomfort during the studies; roughly a third said they

had been bothered since; and 7% said that they had been bothered quite a bit. So while the figures bear out Milgram's contention that once the nature of the studies had been explained to participants 'most' 'responded positively' and felt 'it was an hour well-spent' (Milgram, 1974: 198), it is an over-statement to say that 'no-one' suffered any damage.

But even if we accept that very few participants were harmed by their experience, this does not mean that the studies are ethically unproblematic. Indeed, it is clear from examination of post-experimental responses in the Yale archive that one key reason why participants were not distressed – and in fact were rather happy – is that Milgram encouraged them to think that they had not done anything wrong (in being prepared to harm the learner) but instead had actually done something virtuous (in being prepared to stick to their difficult task in order to advance scientific understanding). Faced with this evidence, one might reasonably ask whether it is ethically acceptable for participants to be led to feel happy about having been prepared to administer ostensibly lethal punishments to a total stranger in the interests of science (Haslam et al., 2014).

Whatever one's position on these issues, what is not in doubt is that ethical considerations have rendered the obedience studies, in their original form, impossible to replicate to this day. However, researchers have developed a number of strategies in order to surmount this considerable obstacle. One is to use alternative and less harmful behaviours in order to investigate obedience. These include giving negative feedback to job applicants in order to make them more nervous (Meeus and Raaijmakers, 1986, 1995), crushing bugs (Martens et al., 2007), performing an on-line analogue task which involves applying negative labels to increasingly positive groups (Haslam, Reicher and Birney, 2014), or simply persisting at a long and tedious task (Navarick, 2009). These are all ingenious solutions, but the problem is that they lack the one thing that gave Milgram's studies their impact – the fact that the behaviour he was investigating in his laboratory (doing serious physical harm to others) was akin to the phenomena that concerned him outside the laboratory.

A second strategy has been to revisit and re-analyse Milgram's own studies for new insights. Thus, for instance, Steven Gilbert (1981) shows the importance of the gradual increase in shock intensity which deprives participants of a qualitative breakpoint that would allow them to justify breaking off and becoming disobedient. Dominic Packer (2008), by contrast, highlights how the reactions of the learner can provide such a justification. This relates to the fact (noted above) that the point at which most people break off is 150 volts, where the learner first asks to be released from the study. Likewise, Nick Haslam and colleagues conduct statistical analysis to identify the various features of Milgram's paradigm that induced participants to continue all the way to 450 volts when they did (Haslam, Loughnan and Perry, 2014). They conclude that eight factors were important: the experimenter's directiveness, legitimacy, and consistency; group pressure to disobey; the indirectness, proximity, and intimacy of the relation between teacher and learner; and the distance between the teacher and the experimenter. These studies are valuable, but there is only so far one can go with the existing data since

one is limited to the constructs that Milgram considered important (and hence examined). As a result, researchers cannot examine the importance of alternative constructs that might help us understand the findings.

A third strategy, then, has been to study historical examples of obedience and disobedience from a psychological perspective. A notable example of this is François Rochat and Andre Modigliani's (1995) analysis of resistance to the official oppression of minorities by the villagers of Le Chambon in Southern France during the Second World War (see also Rochat and Modigliani, 2000). The researchers use this to examine the conditions that made Le Chambon such a shining example – and such an exception to what happened elsewhere. We shall return to these conditions presently. For now, it is worth noting that Rochat and Modigliani's work is not only an important contribution to the obedience literature, but also an excellent example of how psychologists can use historical case studies to formulate questions, address hypotheses, and validate theories (see Chapter 11). This should not be seen as opposed to, but rather as complementing, experimental studies that can systematically disentangle the relevance and contribution of different factors.

Recently, though, three new approaches to the experimental study of obedience have been developed that allow us to address real harm-doing without harming participants in the process. The first employs virtual reality simulations of the Milgram paradigm. In these it has been shown that behaviour in these simulations corresponds closely to that which is observed in the original paradigm (Slater et al., 2006). The second involves using a technique called Immersive Digital Realism to train actors to play the role of normal participants in the Milgram paradigm (Haslam, Reicher and Millard, 2015). Like regular participants, these actors are not told about the paradigm in advance, and it transpires that their behaviour – in particular, their responses to different prods and different experimental variants – closely mirrors that of Milgram's own participants. The third is based on the observation that what people do at 150 volts is a very accurate predictor of whether they will obey up to 450 volts. So why not stop the studies at the 150-volt mark where one can see if people will obey without getting them to actually do something harmful? This was the strategy adopted by Jerry Burger (2009a) in his replication of the Milgram paradigm. Following an extensive debate on Burger's studies in *American Psychologist*, the general consensus seems to be that, after half a century, we are in a position to re-open meaningful research on obedience. To quote Alan Elms, who assisted Milgram in his original studies, 'Burger and other social psychologists should be able to come up with many additional situational variables that have remained untouched during the Dark Age of obedience research proscription' (2009: 35).

## FROM REPLICATION TO EXPLANATION

Let us turn, now, from how people have sought to study obedience since Milgram, to what they have had to say. Here we immediately encounter a second obstacle to progress in understanding the phenomena. For the question that dominates much of the subsequent research is whether or not people will still obey to the

extent that they did in the original studies (e.g., Blass, 1999; Burger, 2009b; Meeus and Raaijmakers, 1986; Twenge, 2009). The problem with this question is that it tends to focus on the (high) level of obedience in one of the experimental variants (generally the 'baseline' study) rather than addressing the huge differences in obedience across studies. Once one addresses these differences, the question no longer makes sense. There is no set level of obedience to be explained. Instead, as we have already noted, the key question is what explains the *variability* in obedience. The issue – as we have previously suggested – becomes not *whether* but *why* people obey and disobey. The priority is to explain obedience, not just describe it.

But it is important not to overstate the case: there may be a *tendency* to focus on whether people are obedient, but equally there have been important insights into when and why people obey. First of all, several authors point to the need to consider the importance of disobedience as well as obedience (Bocchiaro and Zimbardo, 2010; Dimow, 2004; Jetten and Mols, 2014; Passini and Morselli, 2009; Rochat and Modigliani, 1995). Second, a number of analyses point to features of the various relationships in the obedience paradigm that might help explain whether people obey or disobey authority. Wim Meeus and Quinten Raaijmakers (1995), for instance, argue that obedience does not result from an inability to resist scientific authority but rather from a cultural tendency to identify with the social system, combined with a tendency not to identify with our fellow citizens but to see them in terms of specific role positions – an analysis which suggests that in the Milgram studies participants relate to the learner in terms of the different roles that the two of them occupy rather than in terms of their common citizenship.

However, it is perhaps Rochat and Modigliani (1995) who provide the richest analysis of the way in which the quality of social relationships influences the way people position themselves in relation to a destructive authority and its victims. They note that the villagers of Chambon were descendants of the persecuted Protestant minority in France (the Huguenots) and this meant that they likened the collaborationist Vichy Government to their own persecutors, and saw commonality between themselves and those who were persecuted. What is more, they show that the villagers had a strong norm of resisting violence to the extent that even those who disapproved of the help given to minorities kept silent. Their analysis concludes that once the persecutors became 'them' and the persecuted became 'us', the choice of whom to side with – of whether to obey or defy authority – became easy.

## IDENTIFICATION AND INFLUENCE

We began this chapter by describing the hunched and balding figure of Adolf Eichmann and noted how, through the eyes of Hannah Arendt, his appearance gave rise to the notion of the banality of evil. We then saw how Arendt's analysis fused with the figure of Milgram's obedient participants to provide a compelling new analysis of human evil. Yet over the ensuing pages we have questioned this analysis



by reconsidering Milgram's own explanation of his findings. This led us to conclude that people do not helplessly slip into a state where they can do nothing else but obey authority. Instead, to understand obedience, it is clear that we need to address the different relationships that people form with authorities, with victims, and indeed with their peers. But where does that leave us with Arendt? Whatever the psychological evidence might say, is there not sound historical evidence to support the view that harm is perpetrated through inattention?

Not really. In fact, over time, Arendt's analysis has been more thoroughly questioned than Milgram's. Vetlesen (2005), for instance, argues that Eichmann deliberately put on an act to convince the judges and jury that he was no monster. Vetlesen acerbically comments that 'in suggesting that he [Eichmann] was "merely thoughtless", [Arendt] in fact adopts the very self-presentation he cultivated' (2005: 5). Had she stayed on at the trial for more than just the first few days, and listened to evidence from his victims, she would have discovered a very different Eichmann. This is the Eichmann described in David Cesarani's biography (2004), which presents evidence that Eichmann was a committed Nazi and anti-Semite who perfected new ways of deporting Jews from their homes (see also Stangneth, 2014). In 1944 he went to Hungary to send the Jewish populations to the death camps. Far from simply obeying orders, he argued with his superior, Himmler, who wanted to do a deal with the allies by trading Jewish lives for war materials. Eichmann fervently believed in the extermination of all Jewish people. He was not inattentive to what he was doing; he celebrated what he was doing. And after the war, he expressed satisfaction with the murders he had organized, regretting only that he hadn't been even more successful. What Cesarani says of Eichmann, Lozowick (2002) says of 'Hitler's bureaucrats' in general. These were people who were 'true believers', who worked hard and showed considerable ingenuity in killing people. They identified fully with Hitler and the Nazi system. For them, Jews were simply the enemy.

Daniel Goldhagen (1996) underlines this last point with graphic intensity. He refers to an infamous picture of a Nazi officer leading a small girl to a pit where she would be shot and killed. He makes the obvious point that the officer was fully aware of what he was about to do, and he asks what prevented him from showing the compassion and protection that would normally be accorded to a young child. Goldhagen's answer hinges on the point that the officer presumably did not see a young child but a Jew, 'a young one, but a Jew nonetheless' (1996: 217). Here, then, one is reminded of Roach and Modigliani's (1995) analysis, but in reverse: active identification with authority as 'us', combined with fervent disidentification with the Jewish victim as 'them', made the choice to oppress straightforward.

In sum, the historical evidence, like the psychological evidence, is at odds with the 'inattentiveness' hypothesis (Haslam and Reicher, 2007; Overy, 2014). Instead, evidence from both sources points to an alternative approach. We harm others to the extent that we listen to the appeals of malicious authorities above those of its victims. At the same time, there is now converging evidence that this has something to do with the extent to which we identify with one over the other (Haslam et al., 2014, 2015; Reicher and Haslam, 2011a; Reicher et al., 2012). In our present

state of knowledge, as we are just emerging from what Elms, quoted above, called 'the Dark Age of obedience research proscription', this is more a working hypothesis than a firm conclusion. However, like any good hypothesis, the aim is less to mark where we have got to than to signpost where we should be going.

There are three areas in particular that need to be addressed in the future – although in each case they also represent a return to suggestions made by Milgram before his theory of the 'agentic state' took centre stage.

First, we need to investigate the way in which different situational arrangements affect group formation and identification between the participant and the different parties within the obedience paradigm (Reicher and Haslam, 2011a, 2011b). Can we show, for instance, by directly measuring identification, that the different proximity conditions affect obedience by influencing the extent to which they lead to identification with the experimenter over the learner (or vice versa)? Moreover, can we show that such an explanation can make sense of variation in obedience across studies (Haslam et al., 2015; Reicher et al., 2012)? Finally, can we show that further socially relevant variations will affect obedience via relative identification? Most obviously, what happens when the learner (or the experimenter) is a member of an outgroup, a despised outgroup, or a feared enemy outgroup as Jewish people were perceived in Nazi Germany?

Second, we need to understand what sort of appeals make people side with the experimenter rather than with the learner, as well as the impact that participants' own discourse has on their ability to disengage from these parties. Milgram (1965b) himself notes that one of reasons why participants may continue to obey is that they lack the rhetorical resources to challenge the legitimacy of the experimenter's requests and hence to relinquish their obligations to him (see also Hollander and Maynard, 2016; Rochat and Modigliani, 1995). It follows that a focus on the negotiation of identities and obligations is of both theoretical and practical importance. For one way to mitigate against 'crimes of obedience' may involve training people to contest demands from authorities that they feel violate shared norms of propriety.

Third and last, there is one specific aspect of the language used in the obedience studies that is particularly important and particularly ironic in light of the way that the studies are popularly represented. When people are asked to sum up the studies in a single sentence, they generally say something like 'People blindly obey orders' (Reicher and Haslam, 2011a). However, if you look closely at the exhortations, prods and prompts used by the experimenter in the studies, it is clear that some are simple requests (e.g., prod 1: 'Please go on'), some are justifications on the basis of scientific value (e.g., prod 2: 'The experiment requires that you continue'), but only one is a direct order (prod 4: 'You have no other choice, you must go on'). Moreover, all the evidence points to the fact that, when this order is given, people react badly. In his 1974 book Milgram gives just one illustration of this. When the participant – a Professor of Old Testament liturgy – is given this fourth prod, he responds 'If this were Russia, maybe, but not in America. (*The experiment is terminated.*)' (Milgram, 1974: 48). In their replication

study Burger and colleagues found that every time the experimenter gave this final prod, participants refused to continue (Burger, Girgis and Manning, 2011), and in controlled studies of our own we observe that prod 4 is singularly ineffective in securing compliance (Haslam et al., 2014, 2015).

This is powerful evidence against the notion that participants in Milgram's studies are simply following orders. It suggests instead that people are seeking out justifications for acting one way rather than another, from people they trust and identify with. Indeed, the problem with orders is precisely that they are generally given by people who we don't identify with and who can't otherwise justify what they ask us to do (see Haslam et al., 2011). Indeed, as the British historian Ian Kershaw (1993) has noted, one thing that made the Nazi state so efficient was precisely the fact that its leaders did not have to issue orders to their followers. Instead, those followers did what they did because they thought it was the right thing to do. The same would seem to be true of the obedient participants in Milgram's studies (see Haslam et al., 2014). This point, however, remains to be confirmed by further research in the process of establishing the impact of various forms of invitations, requests and orders to harm others.

## CONCLUSION

So, at the end of this long journey, where precisely have we got to? First and foremost, it is clear that Milgram provided us with evidence of probably the most compelling phenomenon ever uncovered by a social psychologist. Indeed, although it was first reported half a century ago, it is so important and (sadly) still so relevant that there can be no more pressing area for social psychologists to study.

Yet despite this, the phenomenon that Milgram so carefully described still lacks a compelling explanation. Nevertheless, recent methodological innovations, alongside forensic historical analysis, provide us with methods that are allowing us to recommence investigation. Moreover, we also have some clear pointers about how to proceed. There are exciting prospects ahead.

## FURTHER READING

Milgram, S. (1974) *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

As the classic account of Milgram's studies, this provides a rich description of most of the studies. More controversially, it introduces the 'agentic state' explanation of the findings. The book concludes with two very informative appendices, one on ethical issues in the research and the other on individual differences in obedience.

Blass, T. (2004) *The Man who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram*. New York: Basic Books.

For a wider perspective on Milgram, the man, and his work, Blass's authoritative biography is a highly enjoyable and informative read.

Russell, N.J.C. (2011) 'Milgram's obedience to authority experiments: Origins and early evolution', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50: 140–62.

A fascinating account of the background to the obedience studies is also provided in this recent paper by Nestar Russell.

Finally, for a range of resources, visit the website [www.stanleymilgram.com](http://www.stanleymilgram.com).

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