

Social identification, not obedience, might motivate unspeakable acts

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What makes soldiers abuse prisoners? How could Nazi officials condemn thousands of Jews to gas chamber deaths? What's going on when underlings help cover up a financial swindle? For years, researchers have tried to identify the factors that drive people to commit cruel and brutal acts and perhaps no one has contributed more to this knowledge than psychological scientist Stanley Milgram.

Just over 50 years ago, Milgram embarked on what were to become some of the most famous studies in psychology. In these studies, which ostensibly examined the effects of punishment on learning, [participants](#) were assigned the role of "teacher" and were required to administer shocks to a "learner" that increased in intensity each time the learner gave an incorrect answer. As Milgram famously found, participants were willing to deliver supposedly lethal shocks to a stranger, just because they were asked to do so.

Researchers have offered many possible explanations for the participants' behavior and the take-home conclusion that seems to have emerged is that people cannot help but obey the orders of those in authority, even when those orders go to the extremes.

This obedience explanation, however, fails to account for a very important aspect of the studies: why, and under what conditions, people did not obey the experimenter.

In a new article published in [Perspectives on Psychological Science](#), a

journal of the Association for Psychological Science, researchers Stephen Reicher of the University of St. Andrews and Alexander Haslam and Joanne Smith of the University of Exeter propose a new way of looking at Milgram's findings.

The researchers hypothesized that, rather than obedience to authority, the participants' behavior might be better explained by their patterns of social identification. They surmised that conditions that encouraged identification with the experimenter (and, by extension, the scientific community) led participants to follow the experimenters' orders, while conditions that encouraged identification with the learner (and the general community) led participants to defy the experimenters' orders.

As the researchers explain, this suggests that participants' willingness to engage in destructive behavior is "a reflection not of simple obedience, but of active identification with the experimenter and his mission".

Reicher, Haslam, and Smith wanted to examine whether participants' willingness to administer [shocks](#) across variants of the Milgram paradigm could be predicted by the extent to which the variant emphasized identification with the experimenter and identification with the learner.

For their study, the researchers recruited two different groups of participants. The expert group included 32 academic social psychologists from two British universities and one Australian university. The nonexpert group included 96 first-year psychology students who had not yet learned about the Milgram studies.

All participants were read a short description of Milgram's baseline study and they were then given details about 15 variants of the study. For each variant, they were asked to indicate the extent to which that variant would lead participants to identify with the experimenter and the

scientific community and the extent to which it would lead them to identify with the learner and the general community.

The results of the study confirmed the researchers' hypotheses. Identification with the experimenter was a very strong positive predictor of the level of obedience displayed in each variant. On the other hand, identification with the learner was a strong negative predictor of the level of obedience. The relative identification score (identification with experimenter minus identification with learner) was also a very strong predictor of the level of obedience.

According to the authors, these new findings suggest that we need to rethink obedience as the standard explanation for why people engage in cruel and brutal behavior. This new research "moves us away from a dominant viewpoint that has prevailed within and beyond the academic world for nearly half a century – a viewpoint suggesting that people engage in barbaric acts because they have little insight into what they are doing and conform slavishly to the will of authority," they write.

These new findings suggest that social identification provides participants with a moral compass and motivates them to act as followers. This followership, as the authors point out, is not thoughtless – "it is the endeavor of committed subjects."

Looking at the findings this way has several advantages, Reicher, Haslam, and Smith argue. First, it mirrors recent historical assessments suggesting that functionaries in brutalizing regimes – like the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann – do much more than merely follow orders. And it simultaneously accounts for why participants are more likely to follow orders under certain conditions than others.

The researchers acknowledge that the methodology used in this research is somewhat unorthodox – the most direct way to examine the question

of social identification would involve recreating the Milgram paradigm and varying different aspects of the paradigm to manipulate social identification with both experimenter and learner. But this kind of research involves considerable ethical challenges. The purpose of the article, the authors say, is to provide a strong theoretical case for such research, "so that work to address the critical question of why (and not just whether) people still prove willing to participate in brutalizing acts can move forward."

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