Observing Obedience: How Sophisticated are Social Perceivers?

Andrew E. Monroe*
Florida State University

Glenn D. Reeder
Illinois State University

How does the general public understand the behavior of Milgram’s teachers—those participants who ostensibly tortured an innocent stranger? In our social perception analysis, we contrast two research traditions that attempt to answer this question. On one hand, lay dispositionism argues that people make harsh, person-focused judgments of Milgram’s teachers. On the other hand, a mental state account suggests that perceivers integrate information about social situations and agents’ behavior to infer the mental states of others. Mental state inferences then, in turn, drive social judgments of others. We review the theory of lay dispositionism, its application to the Milgram experiments, and several limitations of the theory. We then offer an alternative mental state account and support this view with recent studies on the Milgram experiments, and extensions to everyday behavior explanation. A final section considers the research and policy implications of our analysis.

Humans are capable of tremendous noble sacrifice. We are also capable of tremendous cruelty. Fifty years ago Stanley Milgram (1963) drove this latter point home, demonstrating the capacity of ordinary people to torture an innocent stranger. Milgram’s experiments quickly captured the interest of academics and the general public alike, and are now among the most widely known psychological studies in the world.

Why are Milgram’s experiments so fascinating? One reason for the timeless quality of these studies is that people are surprised to hear that ordinary people

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Andrew E. Monroe, Department of Psychology, Florida State University, 1107 West Call Street, Tallahassee, FL 32036 [e-mail: Monroe@psy.fsu.edu].
could commit such terribly harmful behavior. This surprise highlights a deeper social-cognitive puzzle that perceivers attempt to solve when they first learn about Milgram’s teachers—those participants who, under duress, delivered ostensibly lethal shocks to an innocent learner. In this article, we focus on how people perceive and explain the actions of Milgram’s teachers: Are they wolfish, sadistic torturers; or are they more like mindless sheep led about by an experimenter? In part, the deep appeal of the Milgram experiments is in attempting to tell the wolves from the sheep.

In answering this question, we contrast two theoretical perspectives on how ordinary perceivers interpret the actions of Milgram’s teachers. First, lay dispositionism argues that perceivers are simplistic and therefore explain behavior by referring mainly to an agent’s character (e.g., he delivered a 450 V shock so he must be evil). In contrast, a second perspective—a mental state account—contends that perceivers integrate behavioral and situational information to infer the motives and intentions of agents, and these mental states subsequently drive perceptions of Milgram’s teachers.

Below we review the theory of lay dispositionism and the research that applies this theory to the Milgram experiments. We then examine several limitations of the theory, offer a mental state account as an alternative, and discuss recent research in support of the mental state view. Finally, we apply lessons derived from research on perceptions of Milgram’s teachers to broader theoretical and applied policy issues.

**Simplifying the Explanation of Obedient Behavior: Lay Dispositionism**

In his original article, Milgram (1963) suggested a variety of complex possible explanations for the high level of obedience he reported. A decade later, however, Milgram (1974) settled on an appealingly simplistic explanation—the “agentic state”—where the pressure from the experimenter turns the teachers into automatons focused on fulfilling their duty to him (see Overy, 2014; Reicher, Haslam, & Miller, 2014).

Just as Milgram adopted a simplistic explanation for the behavior of the teachers, so too did researchers studying people’s perceptions of the teachers. Early research portrayed perceivers as having a myopic fixation on the aggressive actions of Milgram’s teachers, overlooking the tremendous pressure acting on them from Milgram’s experimenter. Accordingly, if perceivers focused on the shocks delivered by the teachers, it followed that perceivers viewed the teachers in very negative terms (e.g., the teacher is sadistic, evil, not human). In his famous book, *The Lucifer Effect* (2007), Phil Zimbardo argued that although evil is primarily caused by bad situations (e.g., those in which there is coercion, social or cultural norms, or strong peer influence), people are often incapable of detecting the subtle
influence of situations. Therefore, like Milgram, people fall back on a simplistic mode of explanation: lay dispositionism.

According to lay dispositionism, perceivers explain behavior by referring to either an agent’s dispositional traits or to the effect of a social situation (Ross, 1977; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). These explanatory modes are thought to be hydraulically related. Thus, explaining behavior in terms of one (e.g., a situation explanation) reduces the tendency to offer the other as an explanation for behavior (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1971). For example, to the extent a behavior (e.g., being late to an important meeting) appears caused by external factors (e.g., heavy traffic), dispositional inferences (e.g., laziness) should be limited.

Causes, however, are not equally weighted. Instead, people make a reliable error: They overemphasize dispositional causes for behavior, while ignoring situational causes—what Ross (1977) would later term the “Fundamental Attribution Error.” Other researchers offered refinements of this view (e.g., Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988; Quatrone, 1982; Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Trope, 1986), but each maintained dispositions as the dominant, default means for behavior explanation. Proponents of lay dispositionism presumed that situations were either invisible to perceivers (Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977), or that correcting for situational information was cognitively taxing (Gilbert et al., 1988). Accordingly, situational correction occurs only when time, motivation, and cognitive resources permit it (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

**Early Research on Milgram’s Teachers**

Early work on perceptions of Milgram’s teachers was initially interpreted as supporting lay dispositionism. At that time, the prevailing view was that perceivers failed to appreciate the immense power of Milgram’s experimenter and consequently attributed strong, negative dispositions to the teachers (Bierbrauer, 1979; Miller, Gillen, Schenker, & Radlove, 1974; Ross, 1977; Safer, 1980). However, a closer examination of the data in each of these studies demonstrates an inconsistency between the conclusions and the data.

Bierbrauer (1979) exposed perceivers to a reenactment of the Milgram experiment, instructing some perceivers to attend to either situations or dispositions. Perceivers then made several trait ratings (e.g., obedience and conformity) of a teacher who delivered the 450 V shock to the learner. Results showed that explicit instructions to focus on the situational aspects failed to affect participants’ judgments of the teacher. Bierbrauer (1979) therefore concluded that, “observers who witness a reenactment of the Milgram experiment invariably fail to appreciate the situational forces operating on the teacher in that situation” (p. 81) and implied that judgments about Milgram’s obedient teacher were highly negative.

These conclusions, however, are not directly supported in Bierbrauer’s (1979) data. First, it is possible that perceivers in all conditions paid close attention
Observing Obedience

547

to the (rather obvious) pressures applied by Milgram’s experimenter, preventing the situational focus manipulation from having an impact. Second, although Bierbrauer collected ratings on 10 different trait scales, he combined the scales into a single composite measure of dispositional inference. This composite measure included negative traits such as aggression, but also neutral (e.g., obedience and cooperativeness) and positive traits (e.g., independence). Consequently, there is no way to tell if perceivers specifically attributed high levels of aggression to the teacher, or if the effect was driven by a combination of positive and negative trait inferences.

Safer (1980) was similarly interested in attributions concerning the teachers within the Milgram experiments. Safer compared the perceptions of participants who were “sophisticated” (students who had previously viewed Milgram’s Obedience video) to those who were naïve (students with no prior knowledge of the Milgram experiments). Both were asked to estimate the average shock level chosen by a teacher in a “control condition” who was free to set the level of intensity of the shocks. Results showed that “sophisticated” participants overestimated both the average and maximum shock level delivered by the teacher (relative to the actual findings reported by Milgram, 1963). The naïve participants predicted significantly less severe average and maximum shock levels compared to the “sophisticated” participants. Safer (1980) interprets these findings as indicating that knowledge of the Milgram experiments disposes participants to believe that, “most people are evil rather than decent and if given the opportunity would harm a stranger” (p. 208). However, an equally plausible reading of these data is that the sophisticated participants were highly sensitive to situations. That is, after being exposed to the Milgram procedure, these sophisticated participants recognized the pressures to deliver punishment and, therefore, inferred higher maximum shock levels.

Miller et al. (1974) also reported data that was interpreted as supporting lay dispositionism. In one study, a teacher in the Milgram setting was described as either obedient (delivering the 450 V shock) or disobedient (discontinuing the experiment at the 90 V shock). Participants’ judgments of the teacher were somewhat influenced by his actions. Teachers who defected were viewed as warmer, better adjusted, more self-reliant, and more likeable than obedient teachers. However, it’s unclear whether this difference in ratings is due to participants viewing the obedient teacher as a villain or because people saw the disobedient teacher as a hero.

Supporting the latter possibility, obedient teachers were rated on the positive side of the scale (as relatively nonaggressive and well adjusted). Thus, in absolute terms, there is no evidence that participants made harsh, behavior-consistent judgments. Finally, most participants (55%) explained the teacher’s behavior as being exclusively caused by external factors compared to only 24% of participants who explained the teacher’s behavior as exclusively caused by internal factors (the
remaining 21% referred to a combination of internal and external factors). In other words, the majority of participants (76%) explicitly mentioned situational factors as a driver of the teacher’s behavior, far higher than a lay dispositionism account would predict.

In short, previous authors often portrayed naïve perceivers in overly simplistic terms. Perceivers were described as oblivious to the strong pressures exerted by Milgram’s experimenter. Moreover, despite limited evidence, perceivers were said to view Milgram’s teachers in harsh, condemning terms, even as evil sadists who willingly inflicted harm upon an innocent person. But these interpretations rest on a biased read of the available data that appears heavily influenced by the zeitgeist of the Fundamental Attribution Error (Miller & Darley, 2014). A reexamination of the data shows that people largely refrained from making strong, negative judgments of the teachers. Moreover, each of the studies reviewed here showed strong evidence for people being sensitive to the pressure on the teachers to obey.

**Additional Challenges to Lay Dispositionism**

Our review of lay dispositionism has focused rather narrowly on its application within the Milgram situation. Although that focus is appropriate for this article, the reader may rightly wonder about the broader evidence bearing on the theory. Once again, a historical focus is revealing. Early evidence across a wide spectrum of social psychological research was interpreted as strong support for the theory (Ross & Nisbett, 1991), and today lay dispositionism is enshrined in introductory social psychology textbooks, with entire chapters devoted to the topic (see Gilovich, Keltner, & Nisbett, 2006, for one such example).

Yet, recent studies by both developmental and social cognitive researchers raise a number of critical concerns about the lay dispositionism account. If dispositional inferences are the default means for explaining behavior, then three predictions should follow. First, dispositional inferences should be among the easiest and fastest social inferences people make—“a 10th of a second is often sufficient for people to make specific trait inferences” (Fiske & Taylor, 2008, p. 137). Second, the emergence of dispositional judgments should precede other social inferences in human development. And third, people should prefer dispositional-based explanations of behavior to any other type of explanation (e.g., mental state, situational). As Molden recently claimed “Before forming any kind of definitive inference about others’ goals from their behaviors, it is always necessary to know something more about these individuals’ traits” (2009, p. 38).

Despite the seeming plausibility of the above predictions, and despite their endorsement by current scholars and textbooks, the overall evidence fails to support them. Recent work by Malle and Holbrook (2012) challenges the prediction that dispositional inferences should be easy and fast. Their studies suggest a hierarchy of social inference that sharply differs from lay dispositionism.
Participants were exposed to brief vignettes of everyday behaviors (e.g., “The girl compares tools at the hardware store.”) and asked to respond to one of four probes asking about an agent’s intentionality, desires, beliefs, or personality. Contrary to the predictions of lay dispositionism, trait inferences (the “Personality” probe) were among the slowest and most difficult inferences for people to make. In fact, participants inferred an agent’s disposition in less than 50% of trials and took just over 1700 ms to do so. By contrast, people quickly and easily made mental state inferences—particularly about intentions and desires (both >80% of trials, and <1500 ms).

Evidence also challenges the prediction that trait inferences should emerge early in development. Appreciation of mental state concepts, such as goal-directedness and intentionality, emerges within the first 6 months of life (Woodward, 1998). Understanding other’s desires follows by around 2 years of age, with children reliably predicting the behavior and emotional reactions of agents based on perceived desires (Wellman & Woolley, 1990). For example, children correctly infer that an agent who has a specific desire (to find her puppy) will be happy and stop searching if-and-only-if she finds her puppy, but not if she finds her rabbit (Wellman & Woolley, 1990). Children’s ability to appreciate the beliefs of others (e.g., where does your friend “think” the toy is?) emerges relatively late, around age four (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001), and at this point in development, children have most of the mental state inference tools that adults have. By contrast, understanding and making dispositional (e.g., trait or personality) inferences does not emerge until the sixth or seventh year of life (Kalish & Shiverick, 2004; Snodgrass, 1976).

Finally, recent work challenges the prediction that perceivers have a strong overall preference for dispositional causes, as opposed to situational causes. In a detailed review of the fundamental attribution error, Gawronski (2004) found no overall trend for perceivers to prefer dispositional causes to situational causes. Instead, the evidence pointed to a perceiver who engages in quite sophisticated thinking (incorporating thought about situations) when dispositional inferences are offered. Reeder (2009) echoes this theme, proposing that making dispositional inferences often “requires” people to consider situational information in order to understand an agent’s mental states (e.g., intentions and motives).

More general evidence against the purported dominance of dispositional explanation emerged from a meta-analysis of 173 published behavior explanation studies (Malle, 2006). On average, people were equally likely to explain behavior in terms of situational or dispositional causes (mean effect size, $d < .1$). The predictions of lay dispositionism held only under highly artificial conditions—for example, when an agent’s behavior was described as heavily idiosyncratic, or when behavior was described as hypothetical.
In summary, although it is clear that naïve perceivers often react with dismay upon hearing about Milgram’s obedient teachers, person perception researchers need to move beyond lay dispositionism in order to understand these reactions.

A Mental State Account of Social Perception

In light of the mounting evidence against lay dispositionism, we propose a mental state account of behavior explanation. This view focuses on the central role of desires, motives, and intentions for making judgments of others, and it makes two specific claims that contrast with lay dispositionism. The first claim is that people explain behavior by inferring the mental states of agents, not by making person or situation attributions (Malle, 1999; Monroe, Guglielmo, & Malle, 2012; Reeder, 2009). The second claim is that social situations (e.g., coercion and social norms), together with agents’ behavior, reveal agents’ mental states (Monroe & Reeder, 2011; Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991; Reeder, Monroe, & Pryor, 2008). Below we discuss the empirical support for the mental state model derived from studies of Milgram’s teachers. In the process, we hope to shed light on the general process of how people come to understand aggression as it occurs under coercive circumstances.

Reeder et al. (2008) directly applied the mental state model within the context of the Milgram experiments. Specifically, they tested the dual claims that (1) situations provide mental state information and (2) mental states critically inform dispositional judgments about agents. In Study 1, participants received a written description of a target person who played the role of the teacher in Milgram’s basic study. In one condition the teacher was totally obedient to the experimenter, delivering the 450 V shock to the learner; an alternative condition described a disobedient teacher who refused to continue the experiment after delivering the 210 V shock. Study 2 replicated this design but used video segments from Milgram’s 1965 film Obedience.

In both studies, perceivers were first asked to explain the teacher’s behavior in their own words before making a series of ratings of the teacher. As a mental state account would predict, these open-ended explanations were dominated by motive references, rather than dispositional inferences. Perceivers explained the teacher’s behavior by referring to a desire to help the learner or to obey the experimenter rather than to a desire to hurt the learner. Moreover, these specific mental state inferences significantly predicted perceivers’ moral judgments of the teacher.

Although perceivers rated the obedient teacher as less moral than the disobedient teacher, it is important to note that the obedient teacher was nevertheless rated above the midpoint on the morality scale. Together, results from these studies show that people viewed the obedient teacher as caught between wanting to help the learner and wanting to placate the experimenter (Millard, 2014).
Study 3 in Reeder et al. (2008) directly manipulated both information about situational pressures and mental states. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three narratives describing the teacher’s behavior. In the full information condition, the narrative described (1) the behavior of the teacher (i.e., delivering shocks to the learner), (2) situational information concerning the experimenter’s commands to continue, and (3) mental state information about the teacher (e.g., his concern for the wellbeing of the learner). The other two conditions systematically subtracted information from the narratives—one condition included only information about the teacher’s behavior and the experimenter’s prods to continue, and the final condition included only information about the teacher’s behavior.

In all of the conditions, the teacher’s behavior was identical—he delivered the final 450 V shock. Therefore, if the lay dispositionism account of the Milgram studies is correct, perceivers should show little variation in their judgments of the teacher across the conditions. However, if the mental state account is correct, then additional information about the situation and the teacher’s mental states should significantly improve judgments of the teacher.

The data bore out the latter conclusion: Judgments about the teacher’s motives and dispositions were most positive in the full information condition and became increasingly negative as information about the situation and mental states was subtracted. Thus, these studies show strong support for the two core claims of the mental state model as it applies to perceptions of Milgram’s teachers. First, perceivers paid close attention to the situational cues in order to infer the teacher’s motives. For instance, the coercive prods of the experimenter (e.g., “...the experiment requires that you go on teacher”) implied to perceivers that the obedient teacher was motivated to please the experimenter or to do his duty for science. Second, inferences about the teacher’s motives guided trait judgments about the teacher’s morality.

New Questions in Person Perception Inspired by the Milgram Experiments

The discussion so far has compared lay dispositionism with a mental state account of social perception. In this section, we focus more directly on the mental state account, reviewing two further lines of research that were inspired by the Milgram experiments. First, a series of studies by Monroe and Reeder (2011) examined whether the psychological coercion inherent in the Milgram experiments can influence judgments about whether an agent “intentionality” caused harm to the learner. Second, Monroe, Dillion, Guglielmo, and Malle (in preparation) examined how social norms surrounding immoral behavior can influence mental state judgments as well as judgments of blame. These newer studies indicate the broad applicability of a mental state account for understanding how social perceivers make sense of morally questionable behavior.
Monroe and Reeder (2011) tested whether the psychological coercion in the Milgram experiments would shape judgments of intentionality. According to Aristotle (1985), judgments of intentionality rely on an agent’s “ability to do otherwise.” That is, if an alternate action was possible, then behavior counts as “fully intentional” regardless of conflicting desires or coercion (such as pressures from Milgram’s experimenter). In contrast, we argue that judgments of intentionality are graded depending on the presence and strength of psychological constraints. Acts perceived as being free from such constraints should be perceived as more intentional.

We asked participants to read a short story about one of Milgram’s (1963) obedient teachers and then make judgments about the teacher’s motives and the intentionality of his actions. The obedient behavior was described as occurring under either low or high levels of coercion from the experimenter. For instance, at high levels of psychological coercion, the experimenter threatened to shock the teacher unless orders were obeyed. Similar to Reeder et al. (2008), strong coercive pressure led perceivers to infer more positive motives (e.g., desires to obey the experimenter or help the learner). Importantly, perceivers also judged that the harm to the learner was less intentional under high levels of coercion. A second study replicated these effects by manipulating the teacher’s motives for administering the electric shocks. Participants were led to believe that the teacher’s motive was either helpful (wanting to protect the learner) or harmful (wanting to hurt the learner). Again, inferences of intentionality were a function of severity of coercion, as well as the teacher’s motives. When coercion was light or the teacher had harmful motives, people judged his actions to be highly intentional; by contrast, strong coercion or helpful motives reduced attributions of intentionality.

In a third study, we tested whether these effects generalize beyond studies of the Milgram experiments to perceptions of coerced prosocial behavior. Participants read a short vignette about a wealthy businessman who, under varying degrees of psychological coercion, donated a large sum of money to a school serving underprivileged children. Similar to the previous studies, when the agent was under stronger coercion (e.g., having his life threatened vs. being criticized by his wife), people discounted his desire to help the children and viewed his donation as relatively unintentional (Monroe & Reeder, 2011).

These studies suggest that perceivers based their judgments of intentionality on perceptions of the agent’s mental states—what he wanted to do—and compared those desires with the agent’s actions. When desire and action were incongruent (e.g., the teacher in the Milgram experiment who had helpful motives but delivered painful shocks), perceivers reasoned that the agent was prevented from realizing his original motive and was instead forced to act. A potential counter to our interpretation is that the coercion present in the Milgram experiments is so strong that it is obvious to perceivers. Therefore, a more stringent test of the mental
One of the variations of Milgram’s studies played on exactly this theme of social norms. In this particular study, two confederates, posing as additional teachers, joined the participant for the duration of the experiment. Milgram used the behavior of these confederates to create a social norm (disobeying the experimenter) and pitted this norm against the coercive influence of the experimenter. When the confederates defected, participants’ obedience levels dropped to 10%, compared to 65% observed in the baseline study (Milgram, 1974).

The above study inspired Monroe et al. (in preparation) to examine the influence of social norms on social perception. Milgram showed that obedience dropped precipitously in the presence of conflicting social norms, but what do perceivers think of individuals who conform to or break with social norms? Monroe and colleagues exposed perceivers to an agent (John) who was aware of a social norm to cheat on one’s taxes, and they varied whether John conformed to the norm (i.e., cheating equal to others) or deviated from the norm by either falling below the norm (i.e., cheating less than others) or by exceeding it (i.e., cheating more than others).

Across four studies, we found that people graded the agent’s desire and assigned blame as a function of the magnitude of the norm violation. Actions that exceeded a norm were viewed as more desired by the agent and received more intense blame compared to actions that matched or fell below a social norm. Interestingly, these effects were negated if the agent (but not the perceiver) was ignorant of the norm. In this condition, perceivers blamed the agent identically regardless of his actions and their relationship to the norms. Thus, consistent with the mental state account, social norms change people’s perceptions of an agent’s mind (viz. his desires) and people grade their moral judgments accordingly.

**Implications of a Mental State Account for Perceptions of Milgram’s Teachers**

*Limitations and Concerns about Artificiality*

We have focused on how studies of the Milgram experiments over the last 50 years revealed insights into basic social perception. The emerging message is that perceivers are more sophisticated than originally thought. In particular, we argued that the evidence contradicts the common perception that people parse the social world into person and situation causes. Instead, an appreciation of mental states is at the core of people’s understanding of Milgram’s teachers and of other people in general.

Yet a number of questions remain unanswered: Are so-called naïve perceivers always so sophisticated? Are their impressions of wartime atrocities (such as the
Holocaust or My Lai) and the perpetrators involved (such as Adolf Eichmann) equally complex (See Staub, 2014)? We acknowledge that the Milgram (1974) experiments suffer from concerns about artificiality (Reicher, Haslam, & Miller, 2014) and, therefore, so do the person perception studies based on that paradigm. However, it seems that people’s desire to understand the reasons for action is widespread and fundamental, applying to moral, nonmoral, free, and coerced behavior (Malle & Holbrooke, 2012; Malle, Knobe, Nelson, 2007; Monroe et al., in preparation).

Relevance to Social Issues

In closing, we offer three research and policy prescriptions derived from our social perception analysis. First, apart from its value in understanding social perception, a mental state analysis may also be of value to social scientists seeking to better understand obedience to authority. We do not wish to hold up lay perceivers as paragons of social perception. People routinely overlook important social cues or their explanations may be biased by their group membership (see Iyer, Jetten, & Haslam, 2012). However, social psychologists are still too invested in abstract causal thinking based on the dispositional versus situational distinction when explaining Milgram’s work, and in this area, perceivers can serve as a model for psychologists. Actors (i.e., Milgram’s participants) typically understand their actions in terms of their own reasons and goals (Malle, 1999, 2011). By seeking to better understand these goals and motivations much may be learned (Darley, 1995). For example, research on goal formation (Locke & Latham, 2002) suggests that Milgram’s participants who initially committed to the experimenter’s request (by delivering a 15-volt shock) or who placed value on the experimenter’s goal (of conducting scientific research) were more likely to be obedient.

Second, the findings reported here have implications for how social scientists should communicate with the general public. Rather than viewing the public as “error prone” and in need of basic attributional instruction, social scientists are now freed to communicate the more subtle causes of obedience to authority. In addition, to the extent that scientists adopt the strategy of studying the goals and motivations of Milgram’s participants, scientists can communicate in a language the public readily understands.

Finally, a theoretical analysis of obedience in terms of reasons and goals should not be confused with “exculpation.” Explaining behavior by reasons does not (necessarily) excuse it. Reason explanations come in various flavors—ranging from justifications of action (e.g., “I shocked him for science”) to confessions of mens rea (e.g., “I shocked him because I thought it was fun”)—and people’s judgments reflect the content of those explanations (Miller, Gordon, & Buddie, 1999; Monroe & Malle, under review). Consider, for example, the tragedy of 9/11 or the Boston Marathon bombings. Explaining those events in terms of
the actors’ reasons (e.g., wanting to kill Americans) does not excuse the act. Instead, understanding the reasons makes the acts all the more horrific, and (likely) strengthens the desire for punishment.

Returning to the Milgram experiments, understanding the mental states—the reasons, desires, and intentions—that undergird action is key to solving the puzzle of the teachers’ obedient behavior. Without an appreciation of mental states, people would be unable to distinguish between malicious and benign behavior; between accidents and purposeful actions; and between acts that are likely to be repeated and those that are not. And thus, without mental states, people would be unable to tell the wolves in Milgram’s experiments from the sheep.

References


ANDREW E. MONROE received his PhD in psychology from Brown University in 2013 and is a postdoctoral researcher at Florida State University. His research examines the process by which people make inferences about the minds of others—their intentions, motives, desires, and beliefs—and how these inferences of mind guide moral judgment, ascriptions of free will, social behavior, and expressions of prejudice.

GLENN D. REEDER received his PhD in social psychology from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1977. He has served on the editorial boards of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, and *Social Cognition*. A fellow of the Association for Psychological Science and the American Psychological Association, he is currently Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Illinois State University. In 2009, he wrote a target article for an issue in *Psychological Inquiry* (Mindreading: Judgments about intentionality and motives in dispositional inference). He has had an enduring interest in attribution processes and social stigma, as noted in Reeder, G. D., & Pryor, J. B. (2008). The public stigma of adverse health outcomes: Roles for two psychological processes. In A. R. Singh & S. A. Singh (Eds.), *Medicine, mental health, science, religion, and well-being*, and Reeder, G. D., & Trafimow, D. (2005). Attributing motives to other people. In B. F. Malle and S. D. Hodges (Eds.), *Other minds: How humans bridge the divide between self and others*. 