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We Shouldn't Be Surprised: a management educator's perspective on allegations at Immigration New Zealand

Abstract

The urgent independent review, launched in mid-August 2023, of the accredited employer work visa system by Immigration New Zealand followed accusations that staff concerns were ignored by managers, leading to exploitation of migrants. Based on my experience as a management educator, and my research into what we teach (and do not teach) students about management, I argue that we should not be surprised by the allegations, but we should be concerned.

Keywords management education, ethics, obedience, authority, Milgram

The management of Immigration New Zealand is under scrutiny following accusations that staff concerns about the administration of the accredited employer work visa (AEWV) were ignored by managers, leading to migrant exploitation.¹ In August 2023 it was reported that 115 Indian and Bangladeshi migrants who arrived in New Zealand through the AEWV scheme were

crammed into six houses. They had paid up to \$30,000 each to accredited employers on the promise of employment that had, in most cases, failed to materialise (Kilgallon, 2023a; Newshub, 2023). Immigration Minister Andrew Little ordered an urgent independent review by the Public Service Commission into whether the scheme was working as supposed after an internal whistleblower informed him that checks on employers were not being properly carried out (Dexter, 2023; Neilson, 2023).

In the media, unnamed Immigration New Zealand staff reported being told to ignore criminal convictions, including an employer with a criminal record involving sexual assault. Staff reported being overruled by senior managers when they tried to decline applications over concerns about migrant exploitation. In one incident, staff concocted an application and attached photos of household pets instead of supporting documents. It is alleged the application was approved. An immigration officer said staff would back down when pressured by managers to approve applications. Some staff left the organisation because the way the scheme was managed did not sit well with their conscience, while others were emotionally affected (Kilgallon, 2023b).

The review is expected to be completed by mid-December (Te Kawa Mataaho

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Public Service Commission, 2023a). Whatever the outcome, the call for the review illuminates important issues around the management of public sector organisations, and the pressures employees experience to follow instructions from managers when employees have concerns about aspects of the organisation's conduct.

My perspective on this is as a management educator. I have taught management to more than 7,000 students at Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka since 2006 across a range of programmes – undergraduate students doing a Bachelor of Commerce degree, postgraduate students in the Master of Business Administration and Master of Public Management programmes, and in management and leadership programmes for practitioners.

I conduct research into what students are taught when they study management at university. Managing is a practical activity, obviously, and much of the training and development of managerial skills takes place on the job, as people embark on and develop their careers. However, what students learn about management in their courses, including through their textbooks, is also important, because these books reflect taken-for-granted understandings about what good managing involves. Many students who complete management courses at university will become managers at some point in their careers. But in those courses they also learn about how they can expect to be managed, as employees. In effect, their management education performs a socialisation role for their future employers.

My particular interest, in this regard, is management textbooks. I have long been concerned about what students are taught about management (and what they are not taught) in best-selling management textbooks, many of which originate in the United States and are used around the world, including here in New Zealand. For the past 15 years I have been researching the origins of foundational theories of management, and how they are represented in these textbooks. The theories concern how to motivate and lead people, organise work, develop culture and transform organisations. They shape how we manage staff and are managed by our bosses.

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Management studies is a young field; it is not a long-established academic discipline like economics, psychology or philosophy. To gain academic credibility, management studies has created a history filled with famous names from other disciplines, such as Abraham Maslow, Adam Smith, Max Weber and Kurt Lewin. Their ideas are written about in management textbooks, they feature in workplace management and leadership development programmes, and they are reflected in popular books written for practitioners. While influential, these ideas often bear little resemblance to what their originators wrote. I argue that these myths of management serve us poorly, contributing to dysfunction and damage in our organisations (Bridgman and Cummings, 2021; Cummings et al., 2017).

I am also interested in ideas that are relevant to our experience at work yet do not get included in management textbooks, and that is the focus of this article. In the next section I outline one such exclusion: Stanley Milgram's famous experiments on obedience to authority conducted in the United States in the 1960s. I explore why Milgram's findings on the dangers of inappropriate obedience to authority are typically not taught to management students. The issues at Immigration New Zealand illustrate why Milgram should be included in the curriculum. I conclude by suggesting we can do a better job of teaching management, in ways that affirm the

university's mission to cultivate critical, independent thinkers who will serve their future employers well throughout their careers, along with being responsible citizens.

Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments

I learnt about Stanley Milgram's classic obedience experiments studying social psychology as an undergraduate. Participants in Milgram's experiments, conducted at Yale University in the 1960s, thought they were taking part in a study on the effects of punishment on learning. They were given the role of 'teacher' and ordered by a man in a white lab coat to administer electric shocks to a 'learner' strapped to a chair, beginning at 15 volts, and increasing after each incorrect answer to 450 volts. The studies were designed to see how far participants would go before refusing to obey. The results surprised Milgram, with 65% continuing all the way to 450 volts. How could such extreme levels of cruelty by otherwise decent people be explained? Milgram theorised it as obedience to authority. In the debrief at the conclusion of the experiment, participants said they were not responsible: 'The man in the white lab coat was to blame. I was just doing what I was told.' In his 1974 book *Obedience to Authority*, Milgram described participants as being in an 'agentic state' – when a person sees themselves as no longer acting in accordance with their own desires, but 'as an agent for carrying out another person's wishes' (Milgram, 1974, p.132). This obedience to authority overrode their ethics, sympathy and moral conduct.

Social psychology was pioneered by a group of Jewish scholars, including Milgram, who all lost friends and family in the Holocaust. They wanted to understand the social conditions that enabled it to happen and what could be done to prevent it from happening again. The finding that a significant majority of people will administer a potentially lethal electric shock just because a person in authority asks them to provided an explanation for the atrocities committed by the Nazis.

The lesson from Milgram's experiments is that disobeying those in positions of authority over us is hard to do, and harder than most of us expect. We learn the importance of obedience to authority from birth. Throughout childhood, adolescence

and into adulthood, in the home, at school, at university and at work, we are encouraged to respect authority figures. We are told that when they ask us to do something, we should do it.

Obedience to authority undoubtedly has a functional side to it. Most organisations we work for (in the public, private and third sectors) are bureaucracies. There is a division of labour, formal authority resides in positions and there is a chain of command, represented in the organisational chart. Carrying out instructions given to us by our managers creates order and predictability and contributes to the smooth functioning of organisations.

It is also important to note that we generally get rewarded for obedience to authority, from treats given by our parents to us as children for good behaviour, to high grades at school and university for following our teachers' instructions, through to positive appraisals from our managers at work which can gain us promotion up the organisational ladder. Obedience to authority pays dividends.

However, obedience to authority can also have a dysfunctional aspect that has negative consequences for individuals and organisations. What if we are asked to do something by our manager that is not ethical, or that will be damaging for the organisation. Should we obey? Should we refuse, and risk being labelled a problem employee? If we do speak up, would it actually make a difference? Maybe we would be better to keep quiet, and start looking for somewhere better to work?

These are all rational thoughts because we know that not following orders given to us by managers, and sharing our concerns with others, is risky. Whistleblowers often speak out about injustice from a weak position of power; some are ignored, and others experience retaliation and public blacklisting (Kenny and Bushnell, 2020). This can create a 'chilling effect' that discourages others from speaking up (Devine and Maasarani, 2011).

An extreme example of these dynamics was the high-profile case involving the staggering deception staged by Elizabeth Holmes, chief of executive of health technology company Theranos. Holmes claimed to have developed a revolutionary blood testing technology using tiny volumes

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of blood, an innovation inspired by her own fear of needles. By 2015 Holmes topped Forbes' list of richest self-made women, her wealth estimated at \$4.5 billion. However, it subsequently emerged that the technology could not do what was claimed and that Holmes was involved in the cover-up. She and the company were charged with massive fraud and the company was forced to close. Holmes, recently jailed for 11 years, created a cult of personality at Theranos. It was a company where employees who believed in the fantasy were rewarded and those who raised concerns were ostracised. Thankfully, some within Theranos did speak up and the fraud was revealed, with the assistance of a *Wall Street Journal* reporter.

The lesson is that obedience to authority can be both beneficial and costly, to employees and organisations. There are times when the right response is to obey our managers, and there are times when the right response is to say 'no' and to share our concerns with others.

The ideological commitments of management textbooks

We are particularly susceptible to the dangers of excessive obedience to authority at work. But there is more to it than just authority relations, as Milgram discovered by modifying his experiment so that the 'teacher' had only to ask the questions, while another person, who was in on the deception, delivered the shock. In this

version, 92.5% of participants continued to the maximum voltage. The division of labour is a feature of most organisations we work in. The further those who make decisions are from the consequences of those decisions, the greater the risk of inappropriate, unethical behaviour.

Curiously, the management textbook I studied with as an undergraduate student was full of social psychologists like Abraham Maslow and Kurt Lewin, but it did not include Milgram. Why not? After all, Milgram's experiments are regarded as the most famous social psychological research of all time (Blass, 2004), and, as I have argued, are highly relevant to understanding behaviour at work.

Research I published earlier in 2023 with colleague Stephen Cummings (Bridgman and Cummings, 2023) compares the coverage of Milgram's experiments in psychology and management textbooks. Robert Baron has had a distinguished career in two fields: psychology and management. He led departments of psychology and management at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and has written best-selling textbooks in both fields: 14 editions of *Social Psychology* (starting with Baron, Byrne and Griffitt, 1974) and nine editions of a management textbook, *Behavior in Organizations*, starting in 1983. Baron's social psychology textbook devotes many pages to Milgram, as do other textbooks in the field. The message to students is that when authority is being used inappropriately, it is their duty to resist, to prevent the destructive effects of blind obedience. But this is difficult, especially at work because managers wield significant power over employees. A notable feature of the coverage is a personal anecdote shared by Baron from the eighth edition onwards which shows how meaningful the Milgram experiments were for him:

I (Bob Baron) went to high school with Milgram's niece, and I can remember the shock with which students in my class reacted when she told us about her uncle's findings, several years before they were published. Yet I was dismayed again when as a college student, I read the actual report of this study. (Baron and Byrne, 1997, p.346)

The coverage of Milgram's experiments in the first edition of Baron's *Behaviour in Organizations* in 1984 was largely a copy and paste from his social psychology textbook, yet in the second edition Milgram was gone, and he was not mentioned in any subsequent edition; that is, despite Baron's personal connection with Milgram's niece, his dismay at the findings of the experiments, and their relevance to work organisations. I contacted Baron to ask why. He explained that reviewers of the first edition said that Milgram was 'off target' for management – that it didn't fit within the field of management – so he followed their and the publisher's advice and removed it.

This crystallised everything I had experienced as an undergraduate student and learnt from my research over the last 15 years into management textbooks. Stephen Robbins, author of my undergraduate management textbook and the world's best-selling author of management textbooks, gave a revealing interview where he was asked, 'do you see your textbooks as propaganda. Do you see them as ideology?' Here is his response:

I see my books as supporting an ideology. But, of course, all textbooks sell an ideology. Organizational Behaviour books ... for the most part, support a managerial perspective. This reflects the market – business schools. We need to genuflect to the Gods of productivity, efficiency, goals, etc. We reflect business school values. (Robbins, quoted in Cameron et al., 2003, p.714)

As an undergraduate student, I struggled with this. Before I went to university I trained and worked as a journalist. One of the reasons I became a journalist was that I loved the idea of the media as the fourth estate, holding those in authority to account. Here I was at university and had an authority, my course textbook, telling me what I should think. I did not believe a university education should be about socialising students into a particular worldview. As I discovered some years later, neither does the state.

Section 268(2)(d)(i) of the New Zealand Education and Training Act 2020 lays out the distinctive characteristics of universities – what makes them different from other

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providers in the tertiary sector. It states that the principal aim of universities is 'to develop intellectual independence': that is, to be exposed to a wide range of perspectives, to use these perspectives to generate different ways of understanding the world, to think critically about the strengths and limitations of all perspectives, and, ultimately, to form our own judgements. To get an education means to learn how to think, not be told *what* to think.

Section 268 also states that universities in New Zealand – and we are unique in the world for this – have a legislated requirement to 'accept a role as critic and conscience of society'. That means to do research and develop expertise, and to use our relative independence as an institution within society to hold those in power to account, in our teaching, and research, and participation in the public arena. It is a similar idea to the fourth estate role of the media that attracted me to journalism.

Conclusion

So, what has all this got to do with the allegations about the administration of the accredited employer work visa at Immigration New Zealand? From my management educator's perspective, we should not be surprised by the allegations. I say that without any knowledge of the organisation, or any particular expertise in

managing public sector organisations. My conclusion is based on years of teaching management at university, and researching what management textbooks teach, and do not teach, students about management.

What is published in textbooks matters because they shape our understanding of what management is and they shape, therefore, our expectations of how we will be managed and how we will manage others. Academic fields have ideological commitments. Social psychology has an ideological commitment to self-determination and resistance to authority, which originated from the desire by Kurt Lewin, Solomon Asch, Serge Moscovici, Henry Tajfel, Milgram and other Jewish scholars to prevent another Holocaust. Milgram's experiments validate these commitments, but they do not fit with the ideological commitments of management studies. To put it bluntly, management textbooks want students to obey their bosses, not disobey them. Management textbooks say they want to teach students to think like a manager. But by excluding Milgram, I argue, they are really wanting to socialise students to be compliant employees.

I teach Milgram's experiments to all my students. But it is not enough to make students aware of the dangers of obedience to authority. We also need to teach them strategies for resisting authority, such as intelligent disobedience. Drawing on Milgram's studies, Chaleff (2015) argues that disobedience is 'intelligent' when it is in the interests of the leader (to stop them from acting unethically, for example) and the organisation. Chaleff draws on the analogy of guide dog training. The core value for guide dogs is keeping the human in its care safe. They are first socialised to obey rules and commands, but they are also taught the skills of intelligent disobedience. So, for instance, if a vision-impaired handler commands the dog to cross a busy street and doing so will put the handler in danger of being hit by oncoming traffic, the dog must disobey the command.

The idea is to balance the powerful forces of obedience, to create awareness of the need to resist unthinking obedience and to instil the values and practice of personal accountability. Chaleff says intelligent disobedience should not be seen as a threat to existing structures, but as a

protection against the misuses of authority in those structures. It protects both the individual and the organisation.

Our organisations need employees who are prepared to challenge people in authority. It is understandable that employees would want to leave organisations that require them to do things they feel are wrong or unethical. But while that might relieve employees' conscience, it most likely does not stop the inappropriate behaviour. Staying, and speaking up, is hard to do, so organisations must create cultures that encourage and reward this behaviour.

This is particularly important in New Zealand's public sector, which embodies a 'spirit of service' to the community, identified by the Public Service Act 2020 as the fundamental characteristic of the sector. The spirit of service includes opening our hearts to the needs of others and being motivated by something bigger than ourselves. The Act requires public service

leaders to preserve, protect and nurture the spirit of service within their organisations (Scott and Hughes, 2023).

The Public Service Commission lists speaking up as one of its model standards on integrity and conduct. The model standards outline the minimum expectations for public sector organisations to support staff who speak up on wrongdoing that could damage the integrity of the public sector. This includes taking concerns seriously when they are raised, and keeping those who raise concerns safe (Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission, 2023b).

In due course a clearer picture will emerge of what happened at Immigration New Zealand. Based on what has been reported so far, there is evidence that employees felt pressured to obey instructions which they feared would result in migrants being exploited. While obviously concerning, it is reassuring to see some have spoken out about their

experiences, including in the media. It is also pleasing that the minister has requested an urgent independent review.

The Immigration New Zealand case prompted me to reflect on my own field of management studies, and what we teach (and do not teach) our students. We need to teach management differently than we have in the past and include Milgram's experiments in our textbooks. We need to educate students on why it is important, as employees, to challenge authority, and why it is important, as managers, to encourage employees to question our commands. By doing that, students will take that knowledge with them into their careers, both as employees and as managers. And, hopefully, we might see fewer controversies such as that surrounding Immigration New Zealand.

¹ This article draws heavily on the author's inaugural professional lecture at Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka on 27 July 2023. The lecture can be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIAMcog3dYw>.

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