



Obedience to authority: agency theory

This activity will help you to...

- Understand Milgram's agency theory of obedience
- Understand and recall additional studies of obedience
- Use research evidence to assess psychological theories

Why do people obey an authority figure?

Milgram explained the behaviour of his participants by suggesting that people actually have two states of behaviour when they are in a social situation:

- The **autonomous** state – people direct their own actions, and they take responsibility for the results of those actions.
- The **agentic** state – people allow others to direct their actions, and they pass off the responsibility for the consequences to the person giving the orders. In other words, they act as agents for another person's will.

Milgram suggested that two things must be in place in order for a person to enter the agentic state:

- The person giving the orders is perceived as being qualified to direct other people's behaviour. That is, they are seen as legitimate.
- The person being ordered about is able to believe that the authority will accept responsibility for what happens.

The point about perceiving the authority as legitimate is that this is usually an assumption that people make, based on evidence that may or may not be relevant. For example, people in uniforms are often perceived to be legitimate authorities, as are people that claim to have a particular status. We may even assume that a person is authorized to order us about simply because they give us orders.

Using Evidence to Discuss a Theory

An important AO2 skill you need to develop is using evidence from research studies to assess whether a theory is correct or incorrect. This means you have to highlight aspects of the evidence that either support (fit in with) or challenge (go against) the things the theory says about why people behave in certain ways. Here is an example of a student doing this:

The student states which aspect of the theory they are examining.

Agency theory says that people will obey an authority when they believe that the authority will take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This is supported by some aspects of Milgram's evidence. For example, when PPs were reminded that they had responsibility for their own actions, almost none of them were prepared to obey. In contrast, many participants who were refusing to go on did so if the experimenter said that he would take responsibility.

They state whether the evidence supports or challenges it.

They use 2 pieces of evidence to illustrate.

What You Need To Do...

Use some evidence to discuss other aspects of Agency Theory. The first example requires you to use other evidence from Milgram's research studies. The next two require you to use some additional evidence from other studies. The examples get progressively more difficult as you go along. By the time you have completed all of them, you will be writing this type of commentary unsupported.

Agency theory says that people will obey orders if they perceive the authority to be legitimate. This is [supported or challenged?] by Milgram's study. He found that [outline the relevant finding], which [supports or challenges] the theory because [explain how the finding relates to the theory].

Hint: use the 'downtown location' variation to complete this one.

Hofling et al (1966)

Hofling et al (1966) conducted a study of obedience in a natural setting. Their participants were 22 nurses who were unaware that a study was taking place. The nurses received a phone call whilst they were working from a 'Dr Smith', who instructed them to give 20mg of Astrofen (a drug) to a patient on the ward. This was twice the maximum dose stated on the bottle, and could have been very harmful to the patient. However, 21 out of the 22 nurses attempted to give the medication. When 22 other nurses were asked what they would do, 21 of them said they would not give the medication if it was them.

Write a paragraph based on your first, this time using the evidence from Hofling et al (1966).

Bickman (1974)

Bickman (1974) carried out a field study where an experimenter approached passers by on a city street and asked them to carry out small, inconvenient tasks. The experimenter was dressed either in a jacket and tie or a guard's uniform. Bickman found that PPs were twice as likely to obey the orders when the experimenter was dressed in a uniform.

Use this evidence to write a paragraph discussing one or more aspects of agency theory. Follow the format you have been using above.

A Real-Life Example – The My Lai Massacre

On March 16, 1968 the angry and frustrated men of Charlie Company, 11th Brigade, American Division entered the Vietnamese village of My Lai. "This is what you've been waiting for -- search and destroy -- and you've got it," said their superior officers. A short time later the killing began. As the "search and destroy" mission unfolded, it soon degenerated into the massacre of over 300 apparently unarmed civilians including women, children, and the elderly. Calley ordered his men to enter the village firing, though there had been no report of opposing fire. According to eyewitness reports offered after the event, several old men were bayoneted, praying women and children were shot in the back of the head, and at least one girl was raped and then killed. For his part, Calley was said to have rounded up a group of the villagers, ordered them into a ditch, and mowed them down in a fury of machine gun fire.

Source: American Experience - Vietnam Online (PBS). http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/trenches/my_lai.html

Use this evidence to discuss one or more aspects of agency theory. Remember, this is not a research study.