

Milgram's it is a valid
essay



**ASSIGN
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Obedience is taught from childhood through a process of socialisation.

Individuals are constantly facing authority figures and taking orders, often without even being aware they are doing so.

Parents, teachers, bosses are just a few authority figures almost every individual will have come across throughout their life. Most orders given on a day-to-day basis will be harmless, but what happens when they are not? What happens when a person is asked to harm another with no seemingly legitimate reason? Milgram's famous studies focusing on obedience to authority look at just that, and his agency theory tries to form reasons as to why people obey. Milgram (1963) suggests that the mind works on two levels of consciousness and individuals will shift between the two (the agentic shift) when confronted with authority due to the process of socialisation. The autonomous state is where an individual assumes responsibility for their own actions and the consequences of their behaviour. However the agentic state is where an individual believes themselves to be acting only as an agent of another.

Individuals renounce themselves of all personal responsibility while acting under this state, sometimes even believing their actions to be morally wrong, yet giving up their free will unconsciously making the decision to yield to explicit authoritative orders. While doing so they place any sense of responsibility on the authority figure. A majority of men were willing to electrocute another man up to maximum given voltage (450v) when told to do so by an experimenter (Milgram, 1963). Hofling (1966, reported by Hogg and Vaughan 2011) found that twenty-one out of twenty-two real night-nurses administered a lethal dose of medication when an unknown doctor

asked them to by telephone. This shows that individuals are unlikely to question authority even when having good reason to do so, but the question is why? Milgram's agency theory suggests that if an individual sees themselves as an individual then they will respond in an autonomous state towards a situation.

This happens due to basic survival instincts. For example, humans are more likely to avoid aggressive situations when alone to avoid harm. Living within social groups promotes for better survival, but with social groups comes a hierarchical system. A requirement of this is to have some individuals viewed as having more power or a higher status than others in the group. Through socialisation, the majority of society has learned to conform to this societal system, respecting some individuals and recognising those who have more power over the rest. The agentic shift happens when an individual feels they have no power, and surrender to the authority because this is what they are accustomed to.

There are however several situational determinants that also contribute to levels of obedience and illustrate the agentic shift. Milgram (1963) demonstrates this through the variations of his study. Legitimacy of authority is one determinant. In variations of his study where the legitimacy of authority was compromised; for example, when the experiment was run from an office building, or where there were two experimenters contradicting the others authority, obedience levels fell.

These findings were also confirmed by a later study by Bickman (1974) who discovered that individuals were far more likely to carry out inconvenient

tasks when asked to by someone dressed in a suit and tie, or official uniform such as a guard over somebody dressed in casual clothing. Other deterministic factors include proximity of authority, demonstrating that subjects' morals were being compromised as obedience fell if the experimenter was not in the room. Proximity of the victim also contributed, when the subject was required to place the learner's hand on the plate, thus having to accept more responsibility for their actions, obedience levels also fell. Although the agency theory provides some valid concepts especially when explaining the importance of the relationship between a feeling of personal responsibility and levels of obedience displayed by subjects, it is often criticised as not providing enough of an explanation. It is viewed more of a description of the social system and how it works rather than an explanation of obedience.

Social power is one alternative explanation of obedience. French and Raven (1959) identified five different types of social power; reward, coercive, referent, legitimate and expert. Figures deemed to hold authority within any society hold at least one of these forms of social power. Depending on which form of power they hold, individuals are likely to obey for different reasons. Reward power results in positive reinforcement, Milgram's participants may have felt compelled to obey him because they were being paid to do so.

Coercive power is the opposite, fear of negative reinforcement. Due to the fact the Milgram was asking for electric shocks to be administered, participants may have felt an element of fear for him. Milgram may have also been seen to hold both legitimate and expert power, as he was seen as an expert in his scientific field and would have been dressed in such a way that

illustrated this reinforcing his legitimacy. Adorno (1950) argues that personality plays a factor in obedience and suggests that if an individual has an "authoritarian personality" they are more likely to respect hierarchical systems and obey authority.

Adorno proposes that individuals with this personality type would have been less likely to be aggressive towards parents and other authority roles, making them far more likely to express their anger toward individuals of a lower rank or status than them. Similarly Rotter (1954) proposed locus of control as a personality type. Individuals with an internal locus of control hold themselves accountable for their own actions and the consequences of their behaviour. They are also far more likely to feel able to succeed in a stressful situation and therefore more likely to disobey an authority figure. Blass (1991) found that individual's were more likely to resist obedience if they felt they were being manipulated or coerced by the experimenter. Tajfel (1979) suggested that individuals use the groups they belong to, to build on their self-esteem and increase ones self image.

This is achieved by discriminating against groups that an individual is not a part of. This process of discrimination against the "out" group is called the social identity theory. Social categorization is how members of which groups are determined. In regards to Milgram's experiment, categorization was pre-determined when the subject was separated from the "learner" and placed in the experimenter's group by receiving the role of "teacher" (Reicher and Haslam, 2011). The social identity theory would see categorization as the reason for obedience levels falling in the variation of Milgram's study where

the location was changed. Milgram would have been categorized into the field of science, therefore would have been seen to exert expert power.

Yale as an institute would also fit the category for this scientific schema, thus participants would have trusted Milgram's judgement more readily than when he was portrayed with no "white coat" in an office type building.

Burger (2009) replicated Milgram's study, and found that when uttering the fourth prompt "You have no choice, you must go on" no participant continued to co-operate with the experiment. This seems to provide evidence to state that when social identification with the experimenter was broken obedience rates ceased. In conclusion, although Milgram's does find some supporting evidence for his agency theory within his study, other explanations for obedience have been put forward using the same evidence. For example Milgram would argue that the agentic shift along with other situational determinants would have caused obedience levels to rise during his studies. When obedience was at it's highest levels among participants, Milgram looked the part, was in a legitimate location, therefore providing the argument that social power was influential in participants decisions to obey authority.

Participants would have deemed Milgram as holding, expert, legitimate, coercive and reward power therefore making him appear a very powerful authority figure indeed. The "learner" was also out of sight, therefore providing the argument for the social identification theory. Participants would have seen the "learner" as the outside group, identifying with the experimenter. When social identity was broken between the two,

participants were far less likely to obey orders. Although there isn't much empirical evidence for personality affecting obedience in Milgram's study.

It has been found to be a deterministic feature for decision making and resisting social pressures in other studies (Blass, 1991), therefore making it impossible to rule it out as a factor affecting obedience. As Milgram's agency theory is seen more as a definition rather than an explanation of obedience it would be more plausible to use other theories such as the social identification theory to draw conclusions as to why people obey. Milgram has however provided valuable insight into understanding of obedience and much more recent research would not have been possible without his original findings. His studies into obedience to authority still remain the most recognised and talked about obedience studies world wide.