

Describe and evaluate milgrams agency theory

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Milgram's agency theory basically states that the state of mind you are in determines if you're obedient or not. He argued that normally we operate in the autonomous state, where you assert control over yourself and what we do. An example of this is when faced with danger, most people will turn away to try and avoid conflict. Even if you decide not to walk away, this is still the autonomous state because you're deciding what to do. There is also the agentic state which says you are subconsciously acting as an agent to some authority figure and that you do what they tell you because you feel as if you are an agent of that person.

An example of this would be during the trial of Nazi's Adolf Eichmann said, " I was just following orders to kill Jews". This clearly illustrates that he only did what he did, followed orders, because he was told to and he felt like an agent to Adolf Hitler. Milgram also posed the idea of something called moral strain. This is when you obey an order although it goes against your morals, you feel that what you are doing is wrong but you have no choice. An example of this is in the study of obedience carried out by Milgram.

The participants objected to shocking learners by saying that they wouldn't do it and consistently standing up to avoid it, but still carried on anyway. The first strength to Milgram's study is that his theory has practical application. Practical application means it can be applied to explain real life behaviours. An example of this is during the trial of Nazi's Adolf Eichmann, he said, " I was just following orders to kill Jews". This shows he was in the Agentic State because he saw himself as an agent of Hitler when helping him to complete the Final Solution.

Another advantage is that in Milgram's study of obedience the study had experimental validity. This is when the experiment is carried out so well that the participants believe that it is real. One participant, Fred Pozi, showed physical signs of distress indicating that he thought he was actually harming a man. He stood up multiple times during the experiment, was holding his head in his hands and was nervous laughing throughout the experiment. This indicates moral strain because he did carry out what the researcher asked, but this behaviour clearly shows that he was under stress and unhappy with what he had been asked to do.

There is also evidence to support this theory which serves as a strength. In his theory of obedience Milgram found that 65% of participants went to 450 volts and 100% went to 300 volts. From this he concluded that American men would obey an authority figure even if they harmed a stranger. As the participants obeyed the authority figure it shows that they were acting as agents to help the researcher with his study, this illustrates the agentic state. On the other hand there are disadvantages to Milgram's study as well, for example; Milgram's study lacked ecological validity.

Ecological validity is when the study takes place in an environment that is familiar to the participants. The experiment took place in a lab and Fred Pozi, a plumber, would be more comfortable in a house or bathroom. As he was not in his natural environment his behaviour might have changed because of it. This will therefore reduce validity because he would not be behaving in a natural way. Another disadvantage to Milgram's study is that he deceived his participants. He did not tell them what the study was actually researching and therefore broke ethics.

However he did perform a full debriefing at the end of the study which rectified the problem. There is an alternative theory to the Agency Theory called, The Social Powers theory. The Social Powers theory states that authority figures use reward power to gain obedience. Reward power is when an authority figure uses a reward to get the person to obey. For instance when a parent says if you do your homework you can go to your friends house. The Social Powers theory says it is power and not the mental state of someone that leads to obedience, Milgram's theory is incomplete.