



AGENCY THEORY

The agency theory of obedience as proposed by Milgram (1973, 1974)

In Milgram's studies of obedience, participants who obeyed to the end tended to say that they were only doing what they did because they were being ordered to do so by a member of authority and would not have done it otherwise. They said that they knew what they were doing was wrong. The participants felt **moral strain**, in that they were aware that following the order was immoral, but they felt unable to disobey. Moral strain arises when people become uncomfortable with their behaviour, because they feel that it is wrong and goes against their better values.

Agentic State -

being under the control of someone else and you will obey their orders even if they cause you distress

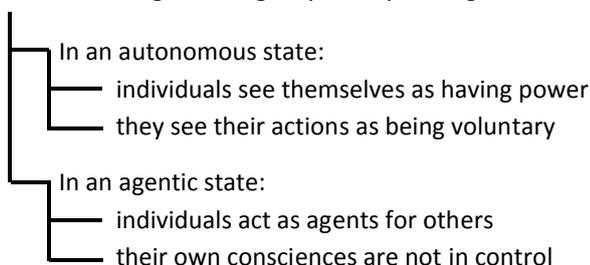
Autonomous State -

being under one's own control and having the power to make your own decisions

In the Milgram study, all the participants obeyed until the shock level reached 300 volts. It was as if, having simply agreed to take part, they were in an **agentic state**. This meant that they were the agents of the experimenter and so obeyed his orders. Being in an agentic state is the opposite of **autonomy**. Being in an **autonomous state** is being under one's own control and having the power to make one's own decisions.

Milgram used the idea of being in an agentic state to put forward his **agency theory**. This is the idea that our social system leads to obedience. If people see themselves as individuals, they will respond as individuals in an autonomous state in a situation.

For example, in a threatening situation, many people avoid aggression and turn away. This is likely to happen because avoiding aggression avoids being hurt and will lead to survival. **Evolution theory** suggests that avoiding aggression leads to survival. Early humans had a better chance of survival if they lived in social groups, with leaders and followers. A tendency to have leaders and followers may also have been passed on genetically. A hierarchical social system, such as the one Milgram's participants were used to, requires a system in which some people act as agents for those above them. According to the agency theory, the agentic state is what led to the participants to obey in Milgram's study.



Milgram suggested that not only was this system of obedience present as a survival strategy, but also because we are taught that it is the correct way from a young age. Obedience is hammered into children by their parents, and also there are very strict hierarchical systems in place in schools – it is clear who has the power, and so children learn exactly the same lessons there.

In the agentic state, people do not feel responsible for their actions. They feel that they have no power so they might as well act against their own moral code, as happened in Milgram's basic study. In the variation in which the victim was nearer to the teacher, and the teacher had hold the victim's hand to the shock plate, there was less obedience. This suggests that the participants had to take greater **responsibility** for what they were doing.

EVALUATION OF THE AGENCY THEORY OF OBEDIENCE

- ✓ The agency theory explains the different levels of obedience found in the variations to the basic study by explaining the relationship between the level of responsibility felt by the participant and the levels of obedience obtained
- ✓ The theory helps (or tries to at least) explain the issue that triggered Milgram's research into obedience, the holocaust. Probably the main officer responsible for the holocaust was Eichmann, who said he was merely obeying orders, and agency theory suggests why he, and so many others, would obey to such a degree
- ✓ The theory offers similar explanations to events such as the **My Lai massacre**

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However, one of the weaknesses of the theory is that there are other possible explanations for obedience, such as social power. **French and Raven** (1959) proposed five different kinds of power:



Legitimate power is held by those in certain roles, usually those of authority; Milgram's role would have had legitimate power

Reward power is held by those with certain resources; Milgram may have had reward power as he was paying the participants

Coercive power is held by those who can punish another; Milgram gave the participants a small shock, so he may have felt he could punish them

Expert power is held by those with knowledge; the participants would have seen Milgram as someone with knowledge

Referent power is held by those who are able to win people over; the participants would not have seen Milgram to hold this type of power

Also, one of the biggest criticisms of Milgram's agency theory is that it is *just a description* and not an explanation. Many people view the theory as more of a description of how society works than an explanation. It suggests that the participants obeyed because they were agents of authority. However, obedience is defined as obeying authority figures, so a theory explaining obedience should offer more detail into *why* it is that people follow orders against their better judgement under given situations.