

Explanations for Obedience

Agentic State

Legitimacy of Authority

Agentic State

An agentic state is when an individual carries out the orders of an authority figure and acts as their agent, with little personal responsibility. This idea was coined by Milgram (1977) following a series of experiments to test obedience to authority.

Milgram argued that people operate in one of two ways when faced with social situations. Individuals can act autonomously and choose their behaviour, or they can enter an agentic state, where they carry out orders of an authority figure and do not feel responsible for their actions. When a person changes from an autonomous state to an agentic state, they are said to have undergone an agentic shift. People experiencing this shift may also have feelings of moral strain, as they fight for the need to stay in control of their own behaviour.

In Milgram's original experiment 65% of participants administered the full 450 volts and were arguably in an agentic state. However, in one variation of Milgram's experiment, an additional confederate administered the electric shocks on behalf of the teacher. In this variation the percentage of participants who administered the full 450 volts rose dramatically, from 65% to 92.5%. This variation highlights the power of shifting responsibility (agentic shift), as these participants were able to shift their responsibility onto the person administering the electric shocks and continued obeying orders because they felt less responsible. Therefore, when entering into an agentic state, the level of obedience increases, as the level of personal responsibility decreases.

Legitimacy of Authority

For obedience to authority to be effective the person in the position of authority must be viewed as legitimate in that role. For example, society dictates that individuals in the police or military have more authority than the common person, giving them a higher social status. This perceived authority is often illustrated by visual cues like uniform, or appropriate context or location.

In Milgram's original experiment at Yale University, the experimenter greeted the participant in a grey lab coat, which gave the perception of authority. This may explain why 65% of the participants went to the maximum 450 volts. Milgram's variation experiments investigating factors such as uniform and location highlight legitimate authority as an important factor in obedience to authority. Therefore, for a person to obey an order they need to believe that the authority is legitimate.

