

Dispositional Explanation for Obedience:

The Authoritarian Personality

Definition

An authoritarian personality is a psychological profile characterised by extreme respect for authority, uncritical submission to powerful figures, and harsh behaviour towards those perceived as lower social status. This dispositional personality is seen in people who value authority and believe that failure to follow the rules should be punished.

Key features

- **Submissiveness:** Showing total obedience to people in power.
- **Aggression:** Directing hostility toward minority groups or those who break social rules.
- **Conventionalism:** Adhering strictly to traditional values and customs.
- **Rigid Thinking:** Viewing the world in strict black-and-white terms with no room for grey areas.

Proposed by Adorno and colleagues in 1950, the concept helps explain why some people easily obey oppressive orders or hold rigid, prejudiced views. Some believe that harsh parenting was to blame; growing up with strict, controlling parents who demand compliance and have very high standards.

Adorno et al (1950) developed a questionnaire called the 'California F scale', to measure levels of authoritarian personality, where 'F' stands for 'fascist' to measure the degree to which respondents display authoritarianism. In Milgram's original research, psychologists questioned whether the obedience occurred due to situational factors, for example, uniform and location, or dispositional factors, such as a particular personality characteristic. In order to answer this question, Milgram conducted a follow-up study, using participants from his original research.

Elms and Milgram (1966) wanted to see if the obedient participants in Milgram's research were more likely to display authoritarian personality traits, in comparison to disobedient participants. Their sample consisted of 20 obedient participants, who administered the full 450 volts and 20 disobedient participants, who refused to continue. Each participant completed several personality questionnaires, including Adorno's F scale, to measure their level of authoritarian personality. In addition, participants were also asked open-ended questions about their relationship with their parents and their relationship with the experimenter and learner, during Milgram's experiment.

Elms and Milgram found that the obedient participants scored higher on the F scale, in comparison to disobedient participants. In addition, the results also revealed that obedient participants were less likely to have a close relationship with their fathers during their childhood, which was the opposite for disobedient participants. Elms and Milgram concluded that the obedient participants in his original research displayed higher levels of the authoritarian personality, in comparison to disobedient participants.

Copy of the original F-scale as designed by Adorno (1950)

California F-Scale (Adorno 1950)

Instructions: Answer each question with numbers ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. These numbers may be -3, -2, -1, 1, 2, or 3.

1. Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.
2. No weakness or difficulty can hold us back if we have enough willpower.
3. Science has its place, but there are many important things that can never possibly be understood by the human mind.
4. Human nature being what it is, there will always be war and conflict.
5. Every person should have complete faith in some supernatural power whose decisions he obeys without question.
6. When a person has a problem or a worry, it is best for him not to think about it, but to keep busy with more cheerful things.
7. A person who has bad manners, habits, and breeding can hardly expect to get along with decent people.
8. What the youth need most is strict discipline, rugged determination, and the will to work and fight for family and country.
9. Some people are born with an urge to jump from high places.
10. Nowadays when so many different kinds of people move around and mix together so much, a person has to protect himself especially carefully against catching an infection or disease from them.
11. An insult to our honor should always be punished.
12. Young people sometimes get rebellious ideas but as they grow up they ought to get over them and settle down.
13. It is best to use some prewar authorities in Germany to keep order and prevent chaos.
14. What this country needs most, more than laws and political programs, is a few courageous, tireless, devoted leaders in whom the people can put their faith.
15. Sex crimes, such as rape and attacks on children, deserve more than mere imprisonment; such a criminals ought to be publicly whipped, or worse.
16. People can be divided into two distinct classes: the weak and the strong.

Therefore, scoring highly on the F-scale suggests individuals hold a strong authoritarian view. In conclusion, having an authoritarian personality suggests that an individual possesses psychological traits that predispose them to favour strong authority figures and rigid social structures.

