

## AGENTIC STATE – GAPPED HANDOUT

handout number

1.14

Activity type      Evaluation

This gapped handout covers the description and evaluation of the agentic shift. The answers are provided on the sheet.

### Practical use

Individual homework

### Additional notes

When completed this handout provides a good description and evaluation of the agentic shift.

### Answers

#### Description

**Milgram** (1973) proposed the concept of an agentic state to explain why people are prepared to go against their **conscience** and do as they are told even if it causes them considerable distress. He suggested that there are two distinct modes of social consciousness. One is the **autonomous** state in which we act according to our own conscience and we feel **responsible** for our actions. In this state, the vast majority of people behave decently towards others. The second is the **agentic** state in which we are no longer independent but act according to instructions from someone else. When in this state people justify their behaviour by saying that they acted that way because they were **instructed** to do so.

People move from the **autonomous** state into the **agentic** state when confronted with an **authority** figure. This shift from autonomy to 'agency' is called the **agentic shift**.

If we obey an order that goes against our conscience, we are likely to experience **moral strain**, which results when we have to do something we believe to be immoral in order to function as an agent of authority. Although people in such a situation may want to stop, they feel unable to do so due to **binding factors** – aspects of the situation that allow a person to minimise the damaging effect of their behaviour.

#### Evaluation

The theory is supported by several studies. Milgram's own research demonstrated how the majority of ordinary people will follow **instructions** even when they are acting against conscience. **Blass** and Schmitt (2001) found that people who saw Milgram's study blamed the **experimenter**, indicating that they believed the participants were agents of **authority**. The explanation is also supported by many historical events which demonstrate that as a result of **social pressure** normal people can act in a callous and inhumane way.

On the negative side, there are alternative reasons why people obey an authority figure. It could be due to **personality** rather than the situation. In addition, agency theory cannot explain why some people **disobey** as was shown by about a third of the participants in the original Milgram study.



## EXPLAINING OBEDIENCE

handout number

1.15

Activity type    Application

This activity is simply to get students applying the explanations of legitimate authority and agentic state for why people obey. Students need to read the scenario

and decide which might be a good explanation and finally outline a simple explanation.

### Practical use

Individual or paired class activity

### Additional notes

Further discussion might focus on, for example, whether the recruit might obey the instructor outside of the barracks.

### Answers

Answers will depend on which explanations students choose.

An example of how this might be done:

**Scenario:** A new recruit to the Army drops to the floor and completes fifty press ups having been ordered to do so by the Physical Training Sergeant.

**Application of legitimate authority** – the recruit recognises that the PT Sergeant holds a position of authority over them and therefore obeys.