1.2 Explanations for Obedience: Agentic State and Legitimacy of Authority

AQA 7182 · about 55 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions.

1 State one way in which legitimate authority can become 'destructive', leading to immoral orders being obeyed.

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

2 Outline the main finding of Kilham and Mann's 1974 replication of obedience research in Australia, and state briefly how it affects the legitimacy of authority explanation.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

3 Outline the procedure and main implication of Meeus and Raaijmakers' 1986 administrative obedience study for the agentic state explanation.

(Total for Question 3 is 2 marks)

4 Hofling et al.'s study took place on real hospital wards, and the nurses did not know they were taking part in a study. Explain one strength of using this method to investigate obedience.

(Total for Question 4 is 2 marks)

5 Amira, a junior analyst, is told by the managing director to change some figures in a report. Amira thinks this is wrong. Her hands shake as she types, but she thinks: 'If I say no there will be an awkward argument and my boss will think I am disloyal, so it is easier to carry on.' Identify one binding factor and one sign of moral strain in this scenario, and explain how the binding factor keeps Amira obeying.

(Total for Question 5 is 3 marks)

6 Outline what is meant by the 'autonomous state' in explanations of obedience, referring to responsibility and conscience.

(Total for Question 6 is 1 mark)

7 Outline the concept of 'legitimacy of authority' as an explanation for obedience, naming the role of socially agreed hierarchies.

(Total for Question 7 is 2 marks)

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8 Using the evidence of Kilham and Mann (1974) and Meeus and Raaijmakers (1986), evaluate briefly whether cultural or situational variation undermines the generalisability of the legitimacy of authority and agentic state explanations. Give two evaluative points.

(Total for Question 8 is 4 marks)

9 Discuss explanations for obedience, focusing on the agentic state (including agentic shift, moral strain and binding factors) and legitimacy of authority. In your answer, consider cross-cultural evidence and research such as Kilham and Mann (1974) and Meeus and Raaijmakers (1986).

(Total for Question 9 is 12 marks)

10 In a study by Hofling et al. (1966), an unknown 'doctor' telephoned nurses on hospital wards and told each to give a patient a drug at twice the stated maximum dose, which also broke hospital rules. Of the 22 nurses, 21 began to prepare the drug. Explain how this finding supports the legitimacy of authority explanation of obedience.

(Total for Question 10 is 2 marks)

11 In Milgram's original study, about a third of the participants did not continue to the highest shock level. Explain one limitation of the agentic state as an explanation of obedience that this finding raises.

(Total for Question 11 is 2 marks)

12 Explain what is meant by 'moral strain' in the agentic state and give one reason why it occurs, with brief explanation.

(Total for Question 12 is 3 marks)

13 Outline two 'binding factors' that can keep a person in the agentic state, briefly explaining how each reduces resistance to authority in an ordered setting.

(Total for Question 13 is 3 marks)

14 Explain briefly how legitimacy of authority and the agentic state offer different accounts of why someone follows an immoral order, giving one distinct point for each explanation.

(Total for Question 14 is 3 marks)

Mark scheme · 1.2 Explanations for Obedience: Agentic State and Legitimacy of Authority

Question 1

states that authority can be destructive when a legitimate figure uses their power to order harmful or immoral acts, and followers obey because of that perceived legitimacy oe — **B1**

Answer: Legitimate authority becomes destructive when an authority figure uses their recognised power to order harmful or immoral acts, and people obey because they accept the figure's right to command.

Question 2

states Kilham and Mann found lower levels of obedience to authority than Milgram did in his original US study oe — **M1**

explains implication: suggests legitimacy of authority effects may vary by culture or social context oe — **A1**

Answer: Kilham and Mann found lower obedience levels in their Australian replication than reported in Milgram's US work. This suggests that legitimacy of authority may not produce the same levels of obedience in all cultures and that social context can affect how authority is perceived.

Question 3

outlines key procedural point: participants were instructed by an experimenter to harass a job applicant by giving stressful interview questions in the presence of an authority figure, with confederate responses scripted oe — **M1**

explains implication: high rates of compliance under an authority indicate people can act as agents under orders, supporting agentic state ideas about shifted responsibility oe — **A1**

Answer: Meeus and Raaijmakers had participants, under instruction, harass a job applicant with stressful questions; many followed the instructions. The finding supports the agentic state idea that people can carry out harmful acts when acting as agents under authority, transferring responsibility to the authority.

Question 4

identifies a strength, e.g. the setting was real and the nurses did not know they were being studied, so their behaviour was natural oe — **M1**

explains the benefit, e.g. this gives high ecological validity and reduces demand characteristics, so the findings are more likely to generalise to real-world obedience oe — **A1**

Answer: Because the nurses were on their real wards and did not know about the study, they behaved naturally, so the study has high ecological validity and the findings are more likely to apply to real obedience.

Question 5

identifies a binding factor from the scenario, e.g. the awkwardness of arguing or being seen as disloyal (the cost of disobeying) oe — **B1**

identifies a sign of moral strain from the scenario, e.g. her hands shaking, or her belief that the act is wrong oe — **B1**

explains how the binding factor keeps her in the agentic state, e.g. it makes refusing seem more uncomfortable than obeying, so she continues oe — **B1**

Answer: Binding factor: she wants to avoid an awkward argument and being seen as disloyal, so refusing feels costly. Sign of moral strain: her hands shake while she types (she believes the act is wrong). The binding factor keeps her obeying because disobeying feels more uncomfortable than carrying on.

Question 6

states that the autonomous state is when an individual acts according to their own conscience and feels personal responsibility for their actions oe — **B1**

Answer: The autonomous state is when an individual acts according to their own conscience and takes personal responsibility for their actions.

Question 7

states that legitimacy of authority means people obey those seen as having the right to give orders because their authority is socially agreed oe — **M1**

states that socially agreed hierarchies (e.g. police, teachers) give those people power to demand obedience oe — **A1**

Answer: Legitimacy of authority is the idea that people obey those who are perceived as having the right to give orders because society accepts certain hierarchies, for example police and teachers are given power that makes people more likely to follow their instructions.

Question 8

points out that Kilham and Mann's lower obedience suggests legitimacy of authority effects vary between cultures, challenging universality oe	**M1**
explains why this matters, e.g. if legitimacy depends on culturally specific acceptance of hierarchies then the explanation lacks cross-cultural generalisability oe	**A1**
points out Meeus and Raaijmakers show situational factors and the presence of an authority can produce high compliance even without extreme physical harm, supporting agentic state mechanisms oe	**M1**
explains implication, e.g. situational details and procedures influence whether agency occurs, so explanations must allow for situational moderators rather than claiming simple universality oe	**A1**

Answer: Kilham and Mann's lower obedience suggests legitimacy of authority may be weaker in some cultures, reducing generalisability. Meeus and Raaijmakers show that situational procedures and authoritative instruction can produce high compliance, supporting agentic mechanisms but indicating that situational details matter. Together they imply the explanations need to account for cultural and procedural moderators.

Question 9

Level 4 Knowledge of explanations for obedience is accurate, relevant and well detailed. Evaluation is thorough and balanced, considering methodological issues, supporting and challenging evidence, and cross-cultural implications. Argument is well developed and applied to research such as Kilham and Mann and Meeus and Raaijmakers. Specialist terminology is used effectively.	**10-12**
Level 3 Knowledge of the agentic state and legitimacy of authority is mostly accurate with reasonable detail. Evaluation is present and reasonably developed, with some reference to supporting and opposing evidence including cross-cultural points. Application to named studies is present but may be less detailed.	**7-9**
Level 2 Basic knowledge of the explanations is present but may be incomplete or partially inaccurate. Evaluation is limited or one-sided, and consideration of cross-cultural evidence is superficial. Answer lacks depth and organisation in places.	**4-6**
Level 1 Very limited knowledge and understanding. Little or no appropriate evaluation. Answer may be mostly descriptive or disorganised with little use of evidence.	**1-3**
Level 0 No creditable content.	**0**

Indicative content:

- AO1: Agentic state: definition, agentic shift from autonomous to agentic state, moral strain experienced when orders conflict with conscience, and binding factors that reduce disobedience such as denying responsibility, focusing on the task, or incremental commitment.
- AO1: Legitimacy of authority: definition, socially agreed hierarchies give certain figures the perceived right to issue orders, and how this can lead to obedience even when orders are immoral; destructive authority where legitimate power is misused.
- AO1: Clear distinction between explanations: agentic state focuses on cognitive shift and perceived responsibility, legitimacy focuses on social structure and perceived right to command.
- AO3: Supportive evidence: research showing high obedience where legitimate authority or clear authority figures are present, including administrative obedience studies such as Meeus and Raaijmakers (1986) supporting agentic processes in an applied setting.
- AO3: Cross-cultural and replication evidence: Kilham and Mann (1974) found lower obedience in Australia than Milgram in the USA, suggesting cultural variation in acceptance of authority and challenging claims of universality; discuss implications for both explanations.
- AO3: Methodological evaluation: many supporting studies use artificial tasks or lab settings, which may affect ecological validity; Meeus and Raaijmakers used an administrative procedure closer to real-life, increasing ecological validity but raising ethical concerns.
- AO3: Alternative explanations and individual differences: dispositional factors such as authoritarian personality or moral reasoning may moderate obedience, and personality can explain why some resist; discuss interactionist views where both situational legitimacy and personal factors matter.
- AO3: Practical implications and ethical considerations: understanding these explanations helps design systems to reduce destructive obedience, e.g. emphasising individual responsibility and checks on authority; ethical critique that some research methods involved distress or deception.
- AO3: Overall evaluation: weigh strengths and limits, argue that both explanations capture important facets of obedience but must be seen as complementary and moderated by culture, context and individual differences.

Question 10

identifies that a doctor holds a position of legitimate authority in the hospital hierarchy, and nurses are expected to follow doctors' instructions oe	**M1**
explains that the nurses obeyed even though the caller was unknown and the order broke the rules, because the role of doctor was accepted as giving the right to command oe	**A1**

Answer: A doctor holds a position at the top of the hospital hierarchy that nurses accept as having the right to give instructions; the nurses therefore began to follow an order from an unknown caller even though it broke the rules.

Question 11

identifies that the finding shows a number of people did not obey (about 35% stopped before the highest level) even though they received the same orders, so the agentic state cannot be the whole explanation oe — **M1**

explains the limitation, e.g. it cannot account for individual differences in who obeys and who resists, so it is an incomplete explanation and other factors such as personality must be considered oe — **A1**

Answer: If obedience were only a shift into the agentic state, everyone given the same orders would obey; because some resisted, the explanation cannot account for individual differences and is incomplete.

Question 12

defines moral strain as the discomfort or tension felt when actions ordered by authority conflict with personal morals oe — **M1**

offers a reason, e.g. the person still recognises the action as wrong but feels unable to refuse because responsibility is perceived as belonging to the authority oe — **A1**

explains why this matters, e.g. moral strain shows obedience can involve internal conflict rather than absence of conscience oe — **A1**

Answer: Moral strain is the tension experienced when someone obeys an authority to do something they recognise as wrong. It occurs because the person still has moral awareness but feels unable to refuse and believes responsibility lies with the authority, showing obedience can coexist with internal conflict.

Question 13

identifies one binding factor, e.g. denying personal responsibility or shifting blame to the authority figure oe — **M1**

explains how this factor reduces resistance, e.g. reducing feelings of guilt so the person is less likely to disobey oe — **A1**

identifies a second binding factor, e.g. focusing on the task or using gradual increases in demands (gradual commitment) oe — **M1**

Answer: Examples: (1) Shifting or denying personal responsibility to the authority, which reduces guilt and makes refusal less likely. (2) Focusing on the immediate task or accepting small incremental demands, which makes larger harmful acts seem acceptable over time.

Question 14

explains legitimacy of authority: obedience occurs because the person perceives the authority as having the right to give orders within a social hierarchy oe — **M1**

explains agentic state: obedience occurs because the person sees themselves as an agent, shifting responsibility to the authority and therefore feeling able to follow orders oe — **M1**

gives a contrast or implication, e.g. legitimacy focuses on social structure while agentic state focuses on cognitive shift in responsibility oe — **A1**

Answer: Legitimacy of authority says people obey because society grants certain figures the right to command. The agentic state says people obey because they psychologically see themselves as an agent and shift responsibility to that authority. The contrast is that legitimacy points to social structure, whereas agentic state emphasises an internal cognitive shift.