Dispositional factors is any explanation of behaviour that highlights the importance of the individual’s personality (i.e. their disposition). Such explanations are often contrasted with situational explanations.

Authoritarian personality is a type of personality that Adorno argued was especially susceptible to obeying people in authority. Such individuals are also thought to be submissive to those of higher status and dismissive of inferiors.

Adorno (1950) created the F-scale (fascism scale) to do an obedient personality study on more than 2000 middle-class, white Americans and their unconscious attitudes towards other racial groups. Two examples of items from the F-scale are ‘Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn’ and ‘There is hardly anything lower than a person who does not feel a great love, gratitude and respect for his parents’.

People with authoritarian leanings (those who scored highly) identified with ‘strong’ people and were generally contemptuous of the ‘weak’. Very conscious of their own and others’ status, showing excessive respect deference and servility to those of a higher status. Authoritarian people had a cognitive style where there was no ‘fuzziness’ between groups of people, with fixed stereotypes about other groups. There was a strong positive correlation between authoritarianism and prejudice.

People with authoritarian personalities tend to be obedient to authority. Have respect for authority and are submissive to it. Show contempt to people they perceive as inferior, and have high conventional attitudes towards sex, race and gender. Think we need strong, powerful leaders to enforce traditional values. Inflexible in their outlook. They concluded this type of personality is formed in childhood, as result of harsh parenting where there is strict discipline, expectations of absolute loyalty, impossibly high standards, and severe criticism of perceived failings.

Research by Milgram (1966) interviewed fully obedient participants after the experiment, who scored highly on the F-scale, believing their might be a link between obedience and authoritarian personality. This link is merely a correlation between two variables, only shows the relationship, not the reason/cause. This makes it impossible to draw conclusions that authoritarian personality causes obedience. Maybe there is third factor involved. Perhaps both obedience and authoritarian personality are linked with a lower level of education, for instance, and are not directly linked with each other at all (Hyman and Sheatsley 1954).

Limited explanation: Any explanation of obedience in terms of an individual’s behaviour will find it hard to explain the obedience in the majority of a country’s population. For example, it doesn’t explain Germany being obedient to Hitler and the Nazi’s. It is clear that another explanation is a lot more realistic – social identity explains obedience. The majority of Germany identified with the anti-Semitic Nazi state, and scapegoated the Jews.

Political bias: Measures the tendency towards an extreme right-winged ideology. Christie and Jahoda (1954) argued that this is a politically biased interpretation of authoritarian personality. Extreme right-wing and left-wing ideologies have a lot in common. They both emphasize the importance of complete obedience to legitimate political authority.

Methodological problems: Flawed methodology. Every one of it’s items is worded in the same ‘direction’. It is possible to get a high score for authoritarianism just by ticking the same line of boxes down one side of the page. People that agree to the items are not necessarily authoritarian but ‘acquiescers’ and the score is just measuring the tendency to agree with everything (acquiescence bias). Researchers knew test scores when interviewing participants.