Dispositional Explanations of Obedience: The Authoritarian Personality

Dispositional Explanation - any explanation of behaviour that highlights the importance of the individual’s personality. Such explanations are often contrasted with situational explanations.

Authoritarian Personality - 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 inferiors.

Theodor Adorno wanted to understand the anti-semitism of the Holocaust. They came to believe that high risks of obedience were a psychological disorder and tried to locate the cause in personality.

Authoritarian Characteristics - Adorno concluded that people with authoritarian personalities tended to be obedient to authority. They have extreme respect for authority and are submissive to it. They show contempt for those perceived to be inferior and have highly conventional attitudes towards sex, race and gender. They believe we need a strong authority to enforce traditional values such as love of country, religion and family. Everything is either right or wrong - there are no grey areas and they are uncomfortable with uncertainty.

Origin of the Authoritarian Personality:
- They concluded that this personality was formed in childhood and was a result of harsh parenting.
- Typically, the parenting style identified included features of: strict discipline, expectation of loyalty, impossible high standards and severe criticisms of failure - also characterised by conditional love.
- These experiences create resentment and hostility in a child. They can’t express these feelings to parents for fear of reprisals and so the fears are displaced upon to others who are perceived as weaker - process known as scapegoating.
- Explains the central trait of obedience to authority which is dislike for the social inferior.

Evaluation
One strength into the research of the authoritarian personality is that it is reliable. This is because of the use of a standardised procedure. For example, during the experiment an F-scale questionnaire, with the same questions (such as homosexuals are hardly better than criminals and ought to be severely punished), was used to measure authoritarian personality.

Therefore, as this was used for all participants it shows it is reliable. One weakness of the authoritarian personality as a dispositional explanation that is it culturally biased. This is because the study had only white Americans taking part. For example other countries/cultures may have different behaviours and attitudes to Americans. Therefore this is not a representative sample because it cannot be generalised.

One strength of the research into dispositional explanations for authority is the usefulness. This is because we can use this research to explain why some people are more likely to listen to people with higher social authority than their own. For example why many of the soldiers listened to Hitler during the Holocaust in WW2. Therefore we can apply this research to real-life explanations.