



Being innovative and ethical about research

Mark McDermott reflects on the importance of the Stanford Prison Experiment and the BBC Prison Study

When I started studying psychology back in 1978, a revelation for me was how important the surrounding environment and context is for determining our behaviour. This might appear to you to be a self-evident truth, but for me as a youngster growing up in the 1960s and 1970s it wasn't. My childhood was still informed by post-Second World War austerity, and I was raised in a society where we were taught to take individual responsibility for ourselves, to see the origins of our actions as located in our thoughts, in our individual values, in our 'character'. It was a welcome surprise when I discovered, at university, that behaviour was not purely self-determined.

Signposts



ethics, ethics committee, situational influences, Stanford Prison Experiment, depression

Two studies

Two studies in particular struck me at the time as revelatory in this respect.

The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE)

The first was Professor Philip Zimbardo's pioneering SPE (Haney, Banks and Zimbardo 1973), in which ordinary students played the roles of guards and prisoners. At the start of this 'demonstration', as Zimbardo calls it, both of these groups were largely similar. However, soon they adopted their respective roles with fairly minimal guidance and steerage. This demonstration illustrated to me that the everyday situations we find ourselves in orchestrate our behaviour to a very significant degree. Likewise the extent to which we have individual agency, to choose moment to moment what we do and how we do it, is not as pervasive as we might like to think.

Of course this does not mean we are like metaphorical wooden balls on the snooker table of life, being pushed around helplessly

by situational forces, but it does mean that we have to take such considerations into account when seeking to explain our behaviour and that of others. Such an orientation has been developed in the last decade by social policy-makers as they seek to 'nudge' our behaviours in prosocial directions.

A study of depression

The second study which had a great impact on me in this way was not from social psychology but rather fell within the sub-disciplinary area of mental health or rather mental ill health. This was the study by Professor George Brown and Dr Tirril Harris (1978) which investigated the causes of depression in women living in London. They found that episodes of depression were almost always preceded by a major life event such as the death of one's partner, marital separation,

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losing one's job, death of a close relative or friend, or being jailed.

Like Zimbardo's prison study, their account of the causes of this mental health outcome was not in terms of intrapsychic processes or character traits but rather was in terms of contextual factors, specifically severely stressful life events which involve loss (the loss of someone, a cherished idea or something precious, or of one's freedom). Such adversity has the potential to lead to depression when combined with vulnerability factors such as the absence of close, confiding, supportive relationships.

Nurture not nature

These explanations were therefore exogenous rather than endogenous, were outside rather than inside the individual, were invoking nurture rather than nature. The appeal of such an explanatory approach is that the external world arguably is more malleable and open to change than the internal 'wetware' environment of neurology, physiology and genetics. Of course such an environmental focus is found elsewhere in psychology, in particular in the work of the behaviourists. Burrhus Skinner, specifically, has clearly demonstrated that the future probability of behaviour is influenced by rewards.

A key problem with the SPE

With this background in mind, in the early 1990s I interviewed Zimbardo about his work (McDermott 1993). He made it very clear that if he had the opportunity to run the SPE again he would have done one thing very differently, and critically so: he would have de-coupled the two roles he played in that demonstration, namely the role of prison superintendent and the role of principal investigator in charge of the experiment. By his own admission having both of these roles enshrined in one individual, i.e. in himself, was a mistake since it necessarily meant that there could arise a conflict of interest between the two. The role of the prison superintendent was to keep the prison going (and encourage oppressive behaviours in the guards), while the role of the principal investigator was to impartially observe those happenings and if necessary stop the experiment when needed.

In the end Zimbardo's partner, Christina Maslach (an emeritus professor at Berkeley University), was instrumental in stopping the study on day six, well in advance of when it was due to end. She was seriously alarmed by the guards' over-enthusiasm for their roles and the decreasing wellbeing of the prisoners. Indeed, Professor Zimbardo refers to Professor Maslach today as the heroine of the SPE, given her courage as an external observer in speaking out to him about what she saw happening. Much was written about the ethics of the SPE subsequently. With hindsight Zimbardo saw clearly how he could have set up his involvement in the demonstration differently. But as a pioneer he did not have the benefit of hindsight.

Effects on the design of the BBC Prison Study (BBC-PS)

Later in the 1990s I heard that Professor Alex Haslam (at that time at Exeter University) and Professor Steve Reicher (of St Andrews University) were to undertake a new version of the prison study. It was to be funded and filmed by the BBC on the George Lucas soundstage at Borehamwood Studios in north London. I was interested to explore with them both, given my interview with Zimbardo, what was in place in terms of the two roles that had been occupied so problematically by one person in the SPE.

I got in touch with them and found that they had subjected their study proposal to the intense scrutiny of the University of Exeter ethics panel and had been scrupulous about setting up the roles of the guards and the prisoners in such a way as to protect their wellbeing while on set. For example, they had arranged for clinical psychologists to observe them during filming and for other medical assistance to be on hand.

Best practice in terms of ethics

At the point I contacted them, however, they had not clearly separated the two roles of principal investigator from the role of being in charge of the prison. Thereby I proposed that what the BBC-PS needed was an independent ethics panel that would have oversight on a day-to-day basis of life in the prison. Much to Haslam's and Reicher's credit and foresight, they agreed to such a panel. They further agreed that if, during the study, the collective view of that panel (in relation to pre-agreed criteria) was that a line had been crossed in terms of participant wellbeing or other activity in the prison, then the panel was fully empowered to stop the study and to do so even if the principal investigators thought to the contrary.

The BBC-PS investigators set about populating the panel. It was chaired by a then member of parliament, Lembit Opik, with other members being myself, Andrea Wills (chief adviser editorial policy for the BBC), Steve Taylor (a member of the Howard League for Penal Reform) and Dr Stephen Smith MBE (co-founder of Beth Shalom, the Holocaust Memorial organisation). Collectively, we were well qualified and experienced to take



A photograph of all the participants in the BBC Prison Study and the academic supervisors



Unlike the Stanford Prison Experiment, in the BBC study the prisoners overcame the guards

References



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up such a position of oversight and would be hard to ignore. The very existence of the independent ethics panel meant that we were (if you'll pardon the canine metaphor) a dog with real teeth. Potentially we could make a real impact on the study, should the need arise — just in the way that Christina Maslach had impacted on the running of the SPE.

This was a brave move by Haslam and Reicher. After all, having spent so long setting up the study, with the BBC contributing significant funding for it to take place, to then hand over a significant element of control of the whole enterprise to a panel of five individuals was a big risk. But it was a risk worth taking since it represented 'best practice' in terms of ethics.

The main legacy of the BBC-PS

Unlike the SPE, in the BBC-PS the prisoners overcame the guards. This came about as a result of the injection of new leadership from a prisoner introduced part way through the study who was formerly a very effective trade union negotiator. However, for me this outcome is not the main legacy of the BBC-PS. Rather the lasting impact is methodological, in that Haslam and Reicher showed how it is possible to carry out such demonstrations

while meeting ethical requirements comprehensively.

The BBC-PS, I think, is as much a demonstration of a method as it is one of psychological principles and processes. In the wake of Milgram and Zimbardo's controversial studies, psychologists felt that such work could never take place again. The BBC-PS re-opened a door and offered a possibility for social psychology going forward (Haslam, Reicher and McDermott 2015).

Methodology and explanation

Arguably this methodological legacy is as important as the psychological explanations, i.e. whether the role conformity explanation offered by Zimbardo for what happened in the SPE is a better or worse one than the identity leadership explanation offered by Haslam and Reicher for what took place in the BBC-PS.

As is often the case, I expect both explanations are part of a full account and are not mutually exclusive. Both recognise that social influence and context are extremely important in the origins of human behaviour, in contrast to the often erroneous belief that our behaviour is entirely under individual

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agentic control. Doubtless criticisms of both the SPE and the BBC-PS will continue to ebb and flow in the coming years — such is the way of our reflective, self-critical subject. Irrespective of the explanation you favour, what is certain is that the methods used and the ethical safeguards that were devised during these studies have the capacity to take forward social psychology.

A new era

I hope what lies ahead now is a new era for social psychology in which the setting up of similar situations from everyday life can be used to examine our ideas about the origins and development of human behaviour and experience. These important lessons from the SPE and BBC-PS can help inspire future generations of psychologists who are similarly earnest about studying social influence and eager to carry out ethical and ecologically valid research.

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