



An Introduction to Social Psychology

Lab Experiments

Narrator (vo):

One of the most important methods used to study behaviour in cognitive social psychology is the laboratory experiment.

Prof. Jetten:

You can observe people's behaviour, but you still don't really know what the causes are of their behaviour. What attracts me to experimentation is that you can, in a very controlled environment, disentangle cause and effect. So you can rule out alternative explanations for something.

Prof Haslam:

I think experiments are a critical tool, an essential tool really for social cognitive research. Primarily because social cognition as a field or ... is characterised by different theoretical perspectives. And within those different theoretical perspectives researchers make statements about the causal role of particular variables. So I might say that social identification causes a particular outcome like conformity say, okay. Now what I need to do to, from this perspective, in order to establish the validity of that statement, is to isolate the relevant theoretical variables and show that by manipulating them that actually that is indeed having the impact on the outcome variable that you're interested in demonstrating. And fundamentally, and within the kind of empirical tradition of the science, that the ability to differentiate between theories as a function of their ability to account for outcomes in that way is really critical in the way that they evolve.

So we've got to do some experiments to look at this because we've got ... cos again, if you just ask people what do you think about, they'll say ...

One example of a social psychological experiment is this work that I'm currently doing with a PhD student of mine, actually a former OU student, he came to us, he said he was interested in the issues of the psychology of space. I said well that's really interesting cos I think this is a classic medium in which kind of identity processes play themselves out.

It's often done in a laboratory because of the types of outcome measures that you're interested in might not just be responses on a scale, they might be your physiological response or they might be some other thing like, that you need to monitor very much more closely. Like for example, if you're interested in my behaviour at the moment, it might have been useful to do this in a controlled setting because you can film it and then afterwards you can go back over and say well did he do this, did he do the other?

Whereas if you were just sitting in a train or in a field or doing an interview, it might be harder to code for those things. The two critical issues are control and measurement, and I think you can get that everywhere, it's just that actually laboratories are places in which it's relatively easy to do those two things.

Craig Knight:

There are four conditions in the experiment which we're running at the moment. In the first one, somebody will walk in to a bare room and there will be no plants on the desk, there'll be no pictures on the wall and they'll be asked to do two tasks, both of which are timed, and there will be a questionnaire after those two tasks. The two tasks and the questionnaire common across all the conditions.

In the second condition, the participant will walk in to a completely decorated room. So we will put lots of pictures on the wall, lots of plants on the desk, the participants have no say

over how those are arranged, they get on with the tasks. The third condition, the participant comes in they're told they can decorate the room as they wish. Plants wherever they want, pictures wherever like, then they do the tasks. And the fourth condition is again just like the third, they come in, we tell them they can decorate the room, they do decorate the room, and then I come back in after a while and I rearrange the room to suit me overriding their own designs.

We have two tasks that the participants do that are timed. The first one of those is a card sorting task. And the reason for that, if we have cards spread all over a work surface, the eye naturally sort of flicks from one card to another and will take in quite a lot of what's going on around the desk. The second task is where they're asked to count the lower case letters B on a single A4 sheet of paper.

Prof Haslam:

What we've done across those conditions is manipulate the extent to which the participant has an opportunity to impose their identity on the environment. And what we predict is those last two conditions would be very different from the control condition, the baseline condition, that when they can create an environment that suits them, their performances and their orientation to the space is much more positive; but when they can't ... when the use of that space is violated, the outcomes are much more negative. The first thing to note is that you get a really big affect for the manipulation of that independent variable.

The opportunities for the individual to impose their identity on the environment or to have that identity challenged, are really having a massive impact on their behaviour. In fact, if you look at the ... just the time taken to perform this task, there's a 27 percent variation in the time taken, so when they're slowest is where the identity is violated. Where they're fastest is where they can impose their identity on the environment, they can decorate the room as they see fit. So not only have you got a very significant difference between the conditions, you've also got a really big one. The critical thing though is again that participants are blind to the manipulations. So clearly we don't say to them: well you're in this condition, but in a minute we're gonna have someone else in a different condition. When the experiment's completed then actually as part of the debriefing we explain to them why we've done what we've done, if you like, why we've concealed from them that design.

There's a slight kind of ethical issue because obviously the people who are in the condition where they got to decorate the room and then the experimenter has come in and just, and taken it down, they might be quite alarmed by what's going on there, and they might have felt quite uncomfortable. Well I think it's important, the ethical issue there is to debrief them and explain why that was necessary.

Experiment

Craig Knight:

We're looking to see what happens ... what's productivity and (INAUDIBLE) questionnaire. When we start messing about with people ... okay, we want to know what happens when people have freedom and when they don't. And there are four conditions.

Participant:

When Craig came in and changed the environment around, I found it very disconcerting and it was quite confusing, especially in the tasks that I was performing. I felt that it did hamper my performance slightly.

Craig Knight:

You were in the awkward condition, the fourth redecorated condition.

Craig Knight:

There is very little deception involved in the current experiment. There's a little, because in the fourth condition we asked them to design their own space and then I come in and mess it all about for them, and that has a necessary antagonistic effect. And we had to ask ethical approval for that. It's interesting with ethics, we have to be very careful, we went through ethics committee to get clearance and we had to put in a fairly extensive debrief which they could see beforehand, so they knew precisely what kind of ethical implication are involved.

Prof Haslam:

I think what's distinctive perhaps about experimental research, if you're talking about experimental social psychology, I think one of the ... historically, the particular issue I think that that raises are the issues of deception.

Often that when you do experiments it's necessary to deceive someone, by telling them something that isn't correct and looking at the effects of that on their behaviour. Most experimental social psychologists think that it is valid to deceive participants where there is a strong scientific case for that and where the deception is not likely to cause any enduring harm for the participant in any way.