

Applying Social Influence Research to Ethical Issues

Deception and Informed Consent

Milgram's research

- Milgram deceived his participants. The original ad stated that the study was concerned with learning and memory. Only after volunteers were already in the experimental situation did the experimenter mention punishment and electric shocks.
- The more serious deception was that it was actually about obedience.
- Participants also believed that Mr Wallace was another participant; in fact he was an actor playing the role of the participant.
- They were also told that Mr Wallace was receiving electric shock, when in actual fact he wasn't.
- This all means that participants couldn't give their informed consent. Had they known the full extent of the experiment the perhaps they would not have agreed to take part.

Zimbardo's research

- The prison experiment was advertised as a study of prison life. This was true. In fact, Zimbardo produced an informed consent contract. This told participants everything about what would happen to them (as far as it could be predicted). They gave their permission for invasion of privacy, loss of civil rights and harassment.
- They were only deceived about one thing; they weren't told that the prisoners would be arrested at home by the local police force. This was partly because the police force didn't give their approval until the last minute.

Asch's research

- Asch told his participants that the experiment was concerned with perception. It was actually about conformity.
- Participants therefore couldn't give their informed consent.
- Asch also didn't tell participants that all of the other participants were in fact confederates.



Is deception ever justified?



Most of Asch's participants were very enthusiastic. In post-experimental interviews, they said how they admired the significance and the elegance of the experimental procedure. Therefore...



Milgram (1974) defended himself by reporting that he thoroughly debriefed his participants. He had a lengthy discussion with each participant individually soon after the experiment. He then sent them a detailed account of the procedure and results of all the experiments. He also sent them a follow up questionnaire. Results from the questionnaire suggested that participants were glad or very glad to have taken part.



Many said that they had learned something important about themselves. Milgram took this to be the ultimate justification; if the participants didn't mind, why should anyone else?



Participants had to believe that they were delivering real shocks, otherwise we couldn't generalise the results to real-life situations.

Protecting participants from psychological harm

Milgram's research

- Baumrind (1964) accused Milgram of abusing his participants' rights and feelings. She argued that Milgram failed to protect them adequately from stress and emotional conflict
- Milgram accepted that they did experience stress and conflict. But he argued that Baumrind's criticism assumes that the experimental outcome was expected. In fact, Milgram was as surprised as anyone by the high obedience rate. The most distressed participants tended to be those who were the most obedient. So, if Milgram expected very low obedience rates, he certainly didn't expect participants to experience high levels of conflict.
- But, shouldn't he have stopped his research as soon as he saw how distressed participants became? Also, the whole set up was designed to make it difficult for participants to disobey. The experimenter's prods pressurised the participants into obeying. This made withdrawal from the experiment very difficult.

Zimbardo's research

- Zimbardo believes that ethical concerns are more of an issue in his research than in Milgram's.
- Participants received physical and psychological abuse over several days
- Even though participants signed consent forms, they could not have been prepared for what happened
- It took them 6 days to stop the experiment.
- According to Savin (1973) the practical benefits of the prison study didn't justify the distress, mistreatment and degradation suffered by the participants. The ends didn't justify the means.

Asch's research

- Many of Asch's participants said they only conformed because they didn't want to be laughed at or ridiculed. When Asch ran the experiment using several naïve participants and a single stooge, they ridiculed him on the critical trials. Other studies have shown that participants' physiological stress levels increase on critical trials.



Is Psychological harm ever justified?



At whatever point the participant stopped giving the shocks, they were reunited with Mr Wallace. The participant could see that he was unharmed; they were also informed that they shocks were false. Therefore...



Milgram had an extended discussion with all participants and assured them that their behaviour was normal. Therefore...



The experimenter didn't make the participant shock Mr Wallace (as Baumrind claimed). Milgram believed that all people have free will and so choose to obey or disobey. Therefore...