

Critical evaluation of social psychology essay sample

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This essay will explore the concept of situated knowledges, and assess the importance of this concept to the critical evaluation of social psychological topics. The concept of situated knowledges is used as an interrogative theme to assist in evaluating knowledge produced in research. All knowledge produced, is situated historically (the time/era), the culture, social and political views, and the geographic location the research was conducted. Consequently when that knowledge was produced and in that situational context, it is not specifically relevant elsewhere. “ Knowledge is always situated somewhere and in some time, and what something means in that place and that time differs from what it means somewhere else” Stanton-Roger (2012) video clips 1. To clarify this, this essay will utilize the concept of situated knowledges, to examine the advantage and importance of this concept to the critical evaluation of two pieces of social psychological research. The two pieces of research chosen to illustrate this “ Crowds”, the focus of which will be the Stanford prison experiment by Zimbardo (1971) and Professors Haslam and Reicher’s (2002) Prison experiment. Dixon and Mahendran (2012).

The second piece of research “ Bystander intervention” focusing on Darley and Latane’s experimental study on the Kitty Genovese murder and Cherry’s feminist critique. Burr (2012) This essay will begin by giving an edited version of Kitty Genovese murder, and why this unfortunate incident that she was a part of directed research into “ bystander intervention”. Kitty Genovese was murdered by a complete stranger as she walked home from work in an area of New York in 1964. The man Winston Mosely attacked Kitty stabbed and raped her as she was dying. The research resulted from public

outrage at the incident, which had been reported in the media stating that thirty-eight individuals had witnessed some part of the attack, having heard Kitty's cries and screams, but did nothing to come to her aid or even report the incident. Burr (2012) Darley and Latane (1964) conducted an experimental study in an attempt to answer why the thirty-eight individuals did not come to Kitty's aid. By utilizing the concept of situated knowledges this essay will develop a critical evaluation of Darley and Latane's (1964) study and demonstrate the importance of this concept to a social psychological topic.

Darley and Latane's (1964) study conducted in the cognitive social perspective, the dominant perspective for conducting social psychological research at that time. This experimental approach was set up to conduct experiments to explain cause and effect; the study demonstrated the socio-political climate of this era. In America at this time the political climate was troubled by the migration of many individuals to urban communities and how living in close proximity to one another would affect social life, society in this era did not recognize violence towards women. This ultimately led to how Darley and Latane conducted their studies, comprised of samples of college students predominately white middle class males and set up to investigate how they responded to emergency situations in crisis conditions . Aspects such as epileptic seizures, people falling, smoke indicating fire somewhere or someone crying for help. Group sizes the independent variable were manipulated in the various situations, and in some cases the participants were not aware they were the only participant and were being measured by their responses (or lack of) the dependent variable.

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The main suggestion offered by Darley and Latane was that the more people who witness an attack the less likely they were to respond. They offered the “diffusion of responsibility” theory, and set up their experiments to explain this. Their explanation was the more individuals present the less likely anyone was to offer assistance; this explanation was supported by the research findings. Burr (2012) By applying the concept of situated knowledges to Darley and Latane’s research, it will be possible to critically evaluate their research and show the importance of utilizing this concept. Darley and Latane’s research was situated historically in the mid twentieth century, the main approach the cognitive social perspective; social psychology at this time was a “predictive” science. The cognitive social perspective’s ontology viewed participants as processing units in a social context; the methodology was to conduct experiments on individual behaviour in an experimental and controlled environment. The focus of analysis was how the participants would behave in the constructed social conditions.

Holloway (2012) p63. By adopting this framework the research had deviated from society’s view at the time that “apathy and indifference of the New Yorker was the cause” Burr (2012) p183, and what had happened to Kitty Genovese was the effect. This was the cause and effect that an experimental framework sets out to explain. However this framework was the official line in social psychology and society at this time, it was assumed that all phenomena could be explained in this way. Conversely this experimental approach took the research away from the sociocultural views displayed at the time. This was also a time when society did nothing to assist in violence

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perpetrated upon women, which was not recognized in this era; therefore was also not a consideration at the design process of the research. None of the experiments conducted included the main relevant factors, namely violence towards women and why the witnesses to the attack had failed to intervene or call Police. Scientific research in this era was highly regarded; by conducting a study of a highly sensitive social issue of the time also gave the research credence.

Burr (2012) Cherry (1995) feminist viewpoint sought to critique Darley and Latane's research on Bystander intervention, Cherry queries the framework and design of the research. Cherry was herself a student of the experimental approach and had only seen this research on bystander intervention. It was not until the early 1970's when the social climate changed, and society itself began to recognize more violent acts towards women, that new questions and theories could be adopted did Cherry seek to embrace a new perspective. Through this new feminist approach and a shift to a more "interpretive" science, Cherry's thinking changed on the research previously conducted by Darley and Latane on the experimental explanation of Kitty Genovese's murder. Through her critique Cherry noted that the previous research by being situated in the experimental paradigm of the 1960's had focused their research on dispositional factors to explain why no-one had come to Kitty's aid, rather than any sociocultural factors.

There had been substantial migration to the cities and there were public concerns regarding this. People viewed others with indifference, apathy, a surge in violence and most violence towards women was not documented.

One of the original witnesses even stated “ that he did not want to intervene in what he construed as a “ lovers quarrel” Rosenthal cited in Burr (2012) p198. Cherry also pondered the objectivity of the research which by construction had narrowed the focus to what was measurable, instead of other pertinent factors such as race, class and poverty all prevalent issues in 1960’s America. Cherry also notes that over a decade and other research into bystander intervention Borofsky et al (1971) which consisted of male and female dyads in role playing attack scenarios. The results displayed male observers alone did not intervene but in the mixed dyads the males did intervene. It was noted that none of the females intervened in any of the role playing dyads, which was left unexplained.

A second study more in line with the Genovese incident by Shotland and Straw (1973) study consisted of attacks on women; their findings indicated that if the attack was viewed as a stranger attack intervention was “ more likely to happen” than if an intimate relationship was viewed. These two studies had shown that in the course of a decade bystander research had changed from individuals falling to intervene, to a social problem of violence towards women, which had taken into account sociocultural factors omitted in original study. Burr (2012) The emphasis will now turn to the topic of “ Crowds” and focus on two Prison experiments. The concept of situated knowledges will be employed to both pieces of research to critically evaluate and demonstrate the importance of this concept of interest in social psychology. The Stanford Prison experiment was conducted by Zimbardo in America in 1971, to investigate the theory of “ diffusion of responsibility”, similar to Darley and Latane. However this time to explain individual

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behaviour in groups and the connection between aggression and anonymity. The experiment was a mock prison at Stanford University; the students were either guards or prisoners.

The students in either role were established quickly and aggression by the guards was endemic, the study was concluded early as a graduate of Zimbardo complained to him of the suffering of the prisoners should not be able to continue. The line between action and experiment had become blurred. The experiment was concluded after only five days of a two weeks experiment! Cited in Dixon and Mahendran (2012). The experiment is historically situated in the cognitive social paradigm of the 1970's, as a predictive science of the time the findings did support the prediction of diffusion of responsibility. Ordinary people will and can do terrible things to others in groups, they will conform blindly to roles and abuse power given to them, the consequences of their actions will be taken as a group. However this form of diffusion of responsibility is still seen as relevant today as displayed by some soldier's abuse of prisoners in Iraq as obedience to authority Gibson podcast (2011).

At the time of Zimbardo's experiment the ethics in place at the time were totally inadequate to the level of study the experiment required, there was no external monitoring. Zimbardo had total control; conversely his judgement was impaired as he had taken a role in the study himself. DD307 video clips one. By contrast the experiment conducted by Haslam and Reicher (2002) had a different outcome, similarly based on Zimbardo's 1971 experiment, and to test Zimbardo's findings. Since Zimbardo's study there

had been no further investigation into this area of negative behaviour. However ethics by the early twenty-first century had been rigorously increased. Before conducting their experiment Haslam and Reicher had to obtain ethical approval before commencing, there were also ethical procedures in place to protect the participants. The panel had the ability to discontinue the experiment at any time. The roles here were randomly selected. The guards here showed reluctance to take up the roles of enforcers if they did the prisoners protested, here there was more communal spirit and goodwill a shift to a more social group.

Zimbardo's findings of ordinary people blindly conforming to a role and abusing power if put in a group situation is extreme, conformity to brutal roles is not natural or blind people do think about the implications of their actions. Haslam (2002). At the time of Zimbardo's study in 1970's America the socio-political climate was totally different to when Haslam and Reicher conducted their experiment. This is an important aspect in using situated knowledges in critical evaluation. Dixon and Mahendran (2012) This essay has explored the concept of situated knowledges, and how this interrogative theme is important to the critical evaluation of social psychological topics; this essay has employed this concept to two pieces of psychological research Crowds focusing on two prison experiments and Bystander intervention the Kitty Genovese " incident". By employing this concept to Zimbardo's famous experiment, it is possible to see that the findings did address the " diffusion of responsibility" Zimbardo set out to research.

However they are an example of being situated historically in the experimental approach of the time. As the experiment by Haslam and Reicher demonstrate Zimbardo's results are not significant in today's socio-political climate. Darley and Latane's results also did not stand the test of time and are also historically situated and only relevant at the time the knowledge was produced. Once the socio-political climate had changed, and with social psychology taking a more interpretive stance more pertinent question could be adopted in just a decade, as Cherry's feminist critique displayed. This essay has presented the concept of situated knowledges is an important tool in the critical evaluation of social psychological topics.

WORD COUNT: 2024

PART TWO REFLEXIVE COMMENT:

I have enjoyed studying this module and found the chapters very interesting and the perspectives covered will help in my Counselling module D171 that I will be studying after DD307. I have found the module material and the assignments hard going at times however I have gained a good insight into the complexities of the social world the material has been very interesting and thought provoking. I was very anxious regarding my ability to carry out the Project but once started I found the process fascinating and I did enjoy it once I got over my anxiety. I have found the topics covered in the module very relevant to the social world and they have offered great insight into themes you would expect such as family and close relationships and how research has evolved to bring into focus the changing dynamics in these relationships I particularly enjoyed the chapter on Self as this has been covered in other modules and my understanding has been developed

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further. I think Social psychology is how the module is presented as a perspective on critical self and others with a full explanation of this.

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