Theories of authority and conformity

People are social beings, who like to play by the rules, therefore Social Influence, Social Power, Obedience to Authority and Conformity is one of the most effective ways of changing a person’s behaviour. However, studying this topic empirically leads to ethical problems. Discuss.

Over the years, many studies have been carried out by social psychologists whose primary aim is to understand behaviour in a social context and to further look at the ways in which this can influence a person’s behaviour. There are many effective ways of changing a person’s behaviour, such as Social Influence, Social Power, Obedience to Authority and Conformity. All of which, have been studied and successfully used, in demonstrating how other people can influence our behaviour. This area of study, however, does not come without its criticisms. Ethical principles such as informed consent and the use of deception have been discussed and debated over the years. This essay will look at the different ways of changing a person’s behaviour and discuss some of the ethical problems which may arise.

Social facilitation is one such effective way of changing a person’s behaviour. This is an activity which is increased (or facilitated) when being observed by other people. The earliest known published research into this area of study was conducted by Norman Triplett in 1898. Triplett noted that when in the presence of other cyclists, bicycle racers tended to increase their performance, leading to faster race times. This type of social facilitation is often referred to as audience effects. Studies show that when we perform well known tasks in the presence of others, we perform better. There is, however, a negative side to audience effects. Pessin (1935) conducted a study which required a group of students to learn a list of nonsense syllables

under two conditions. The first condition of learning was alone and the second was whilst in the presence of others. Pessin’s results showed that the students who learnt the words alone needed an average of 9. 85 trials whereas the students who learnt the list in the presence of others needed an average of 11. 25 trials. It was also discovered that the number of errors made was much higher for the group who learnt in the presence of others. From these results, we can conclude that completion of a well known task is increased when being observed by others but, on the negative side, the learning of a completely new task is impaired when in the presence of others.

The second type of social facilitation to consider is co-action effects. This is the effect on an individual’s task performance when in the presence of other individuals completing the same activity. Once again as with audience effects, depending on the nature of the task, the effect on performance may be positive or negative. Research into this area began in the 1920’s when social scientists studied animals to see the effects of co-action. Chen (1937) conducted an experiment which involved observing ants building a nest. The results showed that when there was more than one ant involved in the building of the nest, each individual ant’s working capacity doubled. When the extra ants were removed, the working capacity of the original ant returned to normal and there was no lasting effect. This experiment confirms that being with co-workers facilitates the working in the same way as seen with the audience effects. In addition, it was also thought that, as co-action produces the same results as with audience effects, then co-actions effects would also inhibit the learning of new skills when in the presences of others.

In everyday life we often conform by altering our actions or opinions so that they fit in with those of other people in a group. This is known as conformity and can be defined as ‘ changing one’s beliefs or behaviour because of real or imagined group pressure’. One of the earliest studies into conformity was conducted by Sherif (1935). His experiment consisted of a visual illusion in which a stationery dot of light would appear to move when shown in a very dark room. Participants were asked how far they thought the light moved and those who observed it whilst on their own gave estimates between 2 and 25cm. Then the participants observed the light again with two others and over a series of trials, estimated in public how far they thought the light moved. The estimates became closer and a group norm emerged. Sherif’s research did receive some criticism. Firstly, it was said that the participants could not be classed as a group because they had no interaction with each other and, in addition, several participants reported afterwards that they did not feel influenced by the other participants estimates and that they were simply trying to work out the actual correct answer. Soloman Asch stated that they conformed to a group norm simply because they did not know the correct answer.

Asch (1951) followed on by conducting further experiments into conformity. He wanted to know whether an individual would conform to the group even when they knew that the answer they were giving was wrong. His experiment consisted of 6 to 9 people in a group. All but one of the group was pretending to be part of the experiment. Asch told them he was testing visual perception and showed the group members lines of different lengths. Each person had to answer which line they believed was the same length as

the test line. The one participant was the last person to answer in the experiment. Asch found that when part of the group 25% of the actual participants conformed to the rest of the group whereas in the control trials when they were tested alone, very few wrong answers were given. Overall, during the experiments, 75% of participants conformed to the wrong answer at least once. When interviewed after the experiment, most participants said that they knew they were giving the wrong answer but did not wish to stand out from the group. This method of experimentation has been criticised for a number of reasons. Not only was it costly and a slow process but, more importantly, it contravenes ethical guidelines by deceiving the participants and also causing them some distress through embarrassment and confusion.

Crutchfield (1954) went on to conduct further experiments into conformity. His experiment was conducted with participants in private so as to avoid any distress from embarrassment. Participants sat in a booth with a row of lights in front of them. Each of the lights was intended to show the answers others had given to the same question. Participants gave answers by pressing a button. This method of experimentation was much faster and cheaper than that conducted by Asch. Crutchfield found similar results to that of Asch and he also noticed that whilst some participants were very conforming, others could also be very independent. As a follow up he gave his participants personality and IQ tests and from this he found that those who conformed more were also more likely to be open to influence of others and less intellectually competent. The individual differences found may help to explain the differences in levels of conformity which both Asch and Crutchfield found.

Research into conformity has met much criticism. The environment, for example, in which the experiments have been conducted, is artificial and the groups were also artificially created. Real-life conformity is about fitting in with others, and the groups to which we belong consist of people we know. This was not the case in any of the mentioned laboratory experiments and, so, these cannot be related to everyday cases of conformity. The participants were also deceived as to what type of experiment they were taking part in and, in the case of Asch's research some experienced distress through embarrassment and confusion.

In contrast to conformity, obedience is the following of a command, order or an instruction which is given by an authority figure. Obedience is an extremely important factor in everyday life; we obey orders because they benefit us or because they seem fair, but would we consider obeying an order that was illegal, unjustified or immoral? A well known psychological study to investigate this question was carried out by Stanley Milgram and, with it, came much criticism. Milgram wanted to investigate whether Germans were particularly obedient to authority figures. He planned to first test this in an American setting before conducting further research in Germany and, so, advertised for males between the age of 20 and 50 years to take part in a study of learning at Yale University. The procedure for the experiment was that the participant was partnered with another person and ' drew straws' to decide who would play the role of ' teacher' and who would be ' learner'. It was, in fact, already set up so that the participant would be playing the role of ' teacher' but this was not disclosed to the participant. The ' learner' was strapped into a chair with electrodes attached to his arms

and the experimenter briefed the participant that he should read out word pairs which the ‘ learner’ must remember. If a wrong answer was given by the ‘ learner’ then the participant or ‘ teacher’ must issue them with an electric shock. There was no real electric shocking and the ‘ learner’ would simply be acting for the benefit of the participant. The more wrong answers given, the higher the electric shock would be issued. Before the experiment began, Milgram showed a description of his study to psychiatrists and it was predicted that only 2% of participants would issue the highest level electric shock. However, following the experiment, it was determined that a total of 65% participants did in fact issue the highest level of shocking. Participants showed severe distress during the experiment. Three had seizures; several challenged the experimenter and asked if the’ learner’ could be checked. At the end of the experiment, all participants were debriefed. An explanation of the real reason for the study was given, they were properly introduced to the ‘ learner’ so that they could see there was no harm really done to them and they were also assured that their behaviour during the experiment was perfectly normal. Milgram argued that this experiment was a powerful example of the human tendency to obey an authority figure even when they did not feel that what they were doing was correct. His studies created huge amounts of interest as well as concern. From an ethical point of view, he received a great deal of criticism. The participants in the experiment were put under a great deal of distress, some even suffering health risks. Milgram retaliated to this by stating that he had no idea how any one participant would react. However, he did still continue with the experiment even after he did become aware of the potential distress caused. Although, it has been clearly stated that participants were able to withdraw from the experiment at

any time, they were not reminded of this fact when they protested and were told that they ‘ had no choice but to continue’. Lastly, it is fair to say that there was a huge amount of deception in the study. After being given a debrief, the majority of participants did state that they were glad they had took part and Milgram argued that this showed that the procedure was in fact acceptable.

Studies, such as those discussed in this essay, have been met with many ethical criticisms, as to the way in which participants have been deceived and/or distressed when taking part. Certainly, all of those studies considered herewith would not have been successful had the participants been aware of the actual experiment taking place. The idea behind all of these studies was to investigate behaviour and this could not have been done, had the participant been aware of the ‘ real reason’ for the experiment. In addition, the experiments were conducted ‘ to find out how behaviour is affected’ and an experimenter would have no way of knowing beforehand that a participant may experience distress as a result. We should also consider that the studies discussed in this essay were designed during a period of time when ethical constraints were not so restrictive and it is due to studies such as Milgram’s, that psychologists have been able to establish ethical guidelines to protect participants in future experiements.

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