

Topic 1: Social Influence

Research into Conformity

Example Essay

Outline and Evaluate research into conformity. (16 Marks)

In 1973, Zimbardo carried out the Stanford Prison Experiment, the aim of the study was to determine whether or not individuals conform to social roles. Zimbardo tested this by creating a hyper-realistic mock prison in the basement of Stanford University. **AO1**

The experiment involved 24 'psychologically stable' male volunteers selected from a number of candidates. They were randomly assigned either the role of prisoner or guard, with the 'prisoners' even being arrested at home to add to the realism of the study. Zimbardo himself, had controversially taken on the dual role of both prison superintendent and experimenter.

AO1

Good concise description highlighting the key details of the SPE.

The first day of the study passed uneventfully, leasing one guard nicknamed 'John Wayne', to conduct 'his own experiment'. This led to increased hostility between the guards and prisoners, resulting in a rebellion led by prisoner 8612. **AO1** Later, 8612 asked to be released from the study, but Zimbardo, as superintendent gave a vague answer. This presents an ethical issue with the study - Zimbardo's dual role prevented him from remaining objective, so much so he was seemingly blind to the wellbeing of his participants and not making their right to withdraw known to them. **AO3**

8612 was eventually released, after it became clear that he was psychologically disturbed, highlighting yet another ethical issue with Zimbardo's methodology- there was seemingly no protection from psychological harm. **AO3** Prisoner 8612 was replaced by prisoner 416.

As 416 hadn't been part of the study since its start, he felt as if he was in a 'madhouse' as result, he challenged the guards and ended up in 'the hole'. The other prisoners were given a choice- give up their blankets and he would be let out of the hole, they kept their blankets and 416 remained in the hole, showing a lack of solidarity amongst the prisoners. After the study, 416 noted that this, along with continually being called a number instead of a name really made him feel as if he was a prisoner- supporting Zimbardo's conformity claim.

AO1/AO3

However, the fact that 'John Wayne' took it upon himself to conduct 'his own experiment', discredits Zimbardo's conformity claim- he later revealed that he has based his guard persona on John Wayne's titular character from the film 'Cool Hand Luke'. This shows that some of participants may not have confirmed, but were rather playing the role according to how they believed it should have been. **AO3**

The study was stopped 6 days into the intended 14, after a visit from a colleague of Zimbardo's who was disgusted by the proceedings. Zimbardo himself received criticism for undertaking the role of prison superintendent - he failed to remain objective, even going as

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far as relocating the prison to prevent a feared 'breakout'. That being said, him undertaking that dual role, allowed him to have a high degree of control over the study, which means that the results observed can be thought of as being more reliable. **AO3**

In addition to this, the study has very relevant real-world application. In 2003, the events in the Abu Ghraib prison saw American soldiers partake in the torture and even murder of prisoners. This provides evidence for Zimbardo's claim that good people can do bad things when assigned a role seemingly calling for these things to be done. **AO3**

Teachers Comment:

Well written. This essay is just the right length for 16 marks.

AO1- This is an eloquent and detailed coverage of the SPE

AO3- Methodological and ethical discussion points form part of a coherent argument.

Level 4

14

