

Identify one example of behaviour of current interest, either from the press/media or from your experience or professional practice. Choose two theoretical perspectives from psychology and suggest ways in which each would explain and investigate the behaviour.

Critically compare the two approaches in terms of their ability to explain and investigate the behaviour.

In January 2005 the celebrity edition of the reality television programme *Big Brother* featured in the news as Germaine Greer, one of the participating celebrities, left the programme early as she did not “want to be part of their [other contestants’] undoing” (Greer 2005:7). *Private Eye* (issue 1124 January 2005:5) and several Internet discussion fora¹ reported that before the *Big Brother* phenomenon was launched in 2000, the production company, Endemol, studied Zimbardo’s 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE), and it is impossible not to see the immediate parallels to a prison in *Big Brother* where the contestants are “completely cut off the from the outside world” (BBC 2000:1). The producers are put in a position of authority from which they dictate rules twenty-four hours a day, much as Zimbardo’s guards who “were free to do whatever they thought was necessary to maintain law and order in the prison [... they] made up their own set of rules, which they then carried into effect” (Zimbardo 1999: slide 12)

The role of the Stanford guards and the *Big Brother* producers becomes that of bully; indeed, the very name of the reality television programme alludes to George Orwell’s novel *1984* in which the power of the state, or “Big Brother”, dominates the lives of individuals by controlling their behaviour and through cultural conditioning. Ultimately, Orwell’s protagonist not just believes in the party line, but comes to love Big Brother. In neither the SPE nor *Big Brother* is the reaction of the prisoners, or contestants, to authority so straightforward, and it is the response of the housemates to the unseen authority figures that will be considered here.

In Greer’s article there are three explicit examples of the reactions of individuals and the group to authority which can be examined. The first is a personal description of adopting a role within the group,

¹ when performing a search on www.google.com for the keywords endemol and zimbardo

and her reaction to the idea of having to interact with the unseen authority figures that constitute Big

Brother:

Although the janitorial role quickly became mine by default, I was damned if I was going to ask for everything we needed. Part of the strategy is to induce each housemate to believe that Big Brother is his or her sole confidant and friend. My instinctive response was to withhold as much as humanly possible. (2005:4)

The second is concerned with an incident where a house rule was broken, and Big Brother used another contestant to correct it leading to a confrontation between housemates:

John fought a heroic battle against being forced to breathe recycled air all night and illegally placed his bag between the one exterior door and the jamb to let a little fresh air in. This Big Brother would not allow; when Kenzie obeyed the order to remove the bag, John insulted him in unforgivable terms. Kenzie quite properly went ballistic and Big Brother had what he wanted. (2005:5)

The final example shows Big Brother's bullying nature, and the victimisation of an individual at the hands of the group as a result of Big Brother's influence:

The housemates have a choice as to whether to replicate and amplify [Big Brother's] unreasonable and sadistic behaviour. Take the incident of the Diet Coke. When John said he could not function without it, Big Brother chose to torment him by denying it to him while offering it to all the other housemates. Not only did they all drink it but they taunted John, as children might taunt an unpopular child in the playground. [...] Did viewers notice that I didn't join in? (2005:7)

These three incidents will be considered from both the behaviourist and cognitive perspectives in an attempt to explain the housemates' behaviour, and to see which approach is able to offer the best means of investigating and interpreting the behaviour.

As a psychological approach, behaviourism grew in the United States from around 1912 in response to accusations that psychology was "subjective and unscientific" (Eysenck 1998:7ff). It emphasised the need for scientific observation and measurement of behaviour, and led to a theory of behaviour which states that "behaviour can be described and explained without making reference to mental events or to internal psychological processes", and that the "sources of behaviour are external, not internal" (Graham 2002:1). This is saying that "human behaviour is learned, [or] developed through experience with and feedback from [the] environment" (Coolican 2004:295), rather than as a result of scientifically unquantifiable mental processes. In behaviourism's simplest form, an external stimulus determines a conditioned behavioural response.

In contrast to behaviourism, the cognitive approach focuses on the internal processes that behaviourists dismiss which occur between the stimulus and the response. The shift towards the cognitive approach was led by Albert Bandura investigating social learning theories in the 1960s (Coolican 2004:298). Social learning theories acknowledged that behaviourism was unable to explain complex human behaviour fully, and the fact that there are other aspects which should be considered, including modelling, vicarious learning, and reinforcement (McCormack Brown 1999:2). Another important cognitive theory is that of information processing in which information presented by the environment is understood to be processed by internal systems, which then leads to a decision which in turn results in the behavioural response (Eysenck 1993:3); in short, the cognitive view is that human behaviour is determined by actively seeking information rather than just passively responding to a stimulus.

On the surface, Greer's assumption of the "janitorial role" appears to conform to the stereotypical motherly image of the older female, and it could be argued to be the expected behaviour of someone her age and gender within the group. Indeed when it is considered that she accepts the role regardless of her militant feminist views, the idea of the behaviour having been learned and therefore inherent, rather than being a result of a considered decision, is convincing. However, as she felt excluded from the female company in the group, her acceptance of the role could be seen to have been a conscious decision to try and increase her status within the group in accordance with Homan's Social Exchange Theory in which "status is viewed as part of an exchange process" (Janssen 2004:1). By providing a service which would be valued by the other members of the group, there is the expectation that the individual will be ranked highly within the group.

Her decision to "withhold as much as humanly possible" from Big Brother may just seem to be a rebellious action and not out of character of someone who has fought against sexist societal norms throughout her life. However within this controlled environment it could be the result of a behaviourist learned helplessness response. In Seligman's experiments on dogs in 1975 the researchers gave a negative

reinforcer (an electric shock) at random in response to the same behaviour exhibited by the dog at different times; the dogs learnt that “nothing they could do allowed them to control the reinforcer” (Eysenck 1998:94). The studies showed that it was not the absence of reinforcers that changed the behaviour, but the lack of control over them. In humans the learned helplessness theory is often used to explain depression, as a person that is subjected to uncontrollable outcomes will come to expect all the desired future outcomes to be uncontrollable; in turn this can lead to a motivational and emotional deficit (Abrahamson *et al* 1978). Based purely on observation this explanation of her behaviour could be considered to be complete, however in an interview after walking out of the house, Greer said that before the programme started she had told Big Brother that she was “going to find it really hard to involve myself in the conspiracy with Big Brother, the Stockholm effect² [...], and that I hope I could make a revolution” (BBC 2005:2). This indicates that she had considered her role and relationship with Big Brother and the inference must be that it was her free will which made her adopt the rebellious stance: something for which the behaviourist approach does not allow.

The idea of a rebellious action is also suggested in Greer’s reporting of John’s “heroic battle” with Big Brother by breaking the rule that the dormitory door must be closed, but the motivation behind his actions does not appear to be for the sole purpose of confounding Big Brother. Rather in this case, the idea of allowing fresh air to circulate is a simple human response to the stifling conditions of the environment. Much research has been done into thermal comfort and the productivity of individuals subjected to different environmental conditions, and a comfortable physical environment is fundamentally important to humans’ wellbeing. Big Brother’s justification for the rule is that the room needed to be in total darkness for their infra-red cameras to work, but the ethical balance between maintaining a suitable environment for the contestants to live in, and providing images for a voyeuristic public is questionable.

² The Stockholm Effect is where an individual under the power of another, such as a prisoner or hijack victim, form a bond with their captors (Florida State University <http://www.fsu.edu/~trauma/v6i4/v6i4a6.html>)

In this example of behaviour it is also Kenzie's obedience to Big Brother's order that needs to be explored, and his apparent unquestioning response to authority to the detriment of a fellow contestant. A behaviourist interpretation could easily be that humans have an inherent conditioning to obey authority that has come about as a result of generations of both positive and negative reinforcements on a macro scale. This example of obedience fits in with Milgram's classic authority experiment in 1974 in which 65% of the subjects followed instructions from an authority figure despite believing that they were inflicting levels of pain which caused people to scream audibly (Eysenck 1998:386). This experiment demonstrates the effect of authority on an individual in that that they were willing to injure another human with no regard for their own personal feelings, thoughts, or even their moral principles – especially when they administered punishments that could kill, in the form of electric shocks of 440 volts, to complete strangers (Kremer *et al* 2003:4). For an individual's actions to be executed without the apparent use of internal processes clearly supports a behaviourist interpretation of his actions.

In contrast to the simplistic behavioural terms, Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory (1957) could be employed to explain Kenzie's behaviour. Festinger's theory is based on the fact that humans have a preference for consistency, or consonance, and therefore an implicit aversion to inconsistency, or dissonance; the theory defines dissonance as the existence of at least two contradictory ideas. In order to reduce the discomfort brought about by the dissonance, behaviour is changed (Eysenck 1998:372ff). The inconsistency in this situation has been brought about by John's refusal to adhere to Big Brother's rules: he wants the door open which is contrary to Big Brother's strict regimen. The conflicting ideas are illustrated by Big Brother's order to close the door. In obeying the order Kenzie is restoring the harmony in the house because Big Brother "had what he wanted" (Greer 2005:5). It is interesting to note that it is not only Big Brother who has what he wanted, but the other housemates also have what they at least prefer, if not want, through Kenzie's actions: consonance. The risk of ignoring the order and perpetrating the dissonance was unknown, but it could be assumed to be unpleasant. All of the contestants had received an ominous "expect the unexpected" (Greer 2005:3) warning, and in a situation where they were wholly at the whim of Big Brother their lives could easily be made uncomfortable. In the comparable SPE

the guards went to trouble to assert their authority by waking the prisoners up during the night, making them do physical exercises (Zimbardo 1999:slide 14ff), and harassing them by increasing their humiliation for having pretended a prison break was planned (*ibid* slide 28).

The third example of behaviour to consider relates to the actions of the entire group, rather than the individuals within it, and it also demonstrates the cruelty that can be inspired by Big Brother. By accepting the Diet Coke, the housemates could be responding to the fact that provisions were in short supply (Greer reports that “we had been without milk, tea and sugar for 18 hours” (2005:4)), or it could be seen as a similar response to authority as discussed above. Even though they were not ordered to drink the Coke, its very provision by the established authority figure suggests that is what was expected of them.

By denying John the Coke, but offering it to everyone else, Big Brother was set up as the leader of a group which excluded John. The very act of excluding an individual is a form of bullying in itself, but it could also be seen as a method by which Big Brother was attempting to bring John into a state in which he would conform to the house rules. Setting a group against the individual can also be seen in the SPE where a prisoner, who was due to be released prematurely due to illness, asked to be returned to the experiment when he heard the other prisoners chanting “819 is a bad prisoner” (Zimbardo 1973).

The behaviour of a group can depend on the way in which the group members are influenced, and the two types of influence are behavioural compliance, where individuals act as expected by others regardless of whether the behaviour is consistent with their personal beliefs, and internalisation, where the behaviour is a result of changing personal beliefs to be consistent with those proposed (Eysenck 1998:369). Both of these types of influences can result in the same behaviour, but the question of whether it involves any internal processing is the difference between viewing the behaviour from a behaviourist or cognitive perspective.

The potential effect of pressure asserted on an individual by a group is quite dramatic. Asch's 1951 study of conformity showed that over a third of individuals chose to give the wrong answer to a simple question, in which they had to state which of three markedly different lines was most similar to a fourth, because the other group members had given the obviously incorrect answer in their hearing (Huffman *et al* 1997:567ff). A later study by Nicholson *et al* in 1985 also showed that the majority of "people who do not conform [...] feel very uncomfortable" (Coolican 2004:229). This interpretation of the behaviour is clearly a more cognitive interpretation as the individuals' mental processes and feelings are considered in reaching their decision to give the wrong answer.

A purely behaviourist approach to the idea of group conformity is difficult to identify, but it must focus around the idea of normative social influence, as conforming to group norms is "comfortable and we receive support from others" (Coolican 2004:229); establishing any degree of "comfort" would be important in the unfamiliar environment of the Big Brother house, and it could be argued that the unpleasantness of their surroundings is being exemplified in the housemates' behaviour. The idea of behaviour being solely for the sake of conforming to the group regardless of whether it is against an individual's personal beliefs is embodied in the phenomenon of 'groupthink' which was first identified by Janis in 1972 (*ibid* 240). DuBrin summarises groupthink as an "extreme form of consensus" (1994:305), and it means that more radical decisions are likely to be reached as a group, than if each member of the group had to provide a solution individually. In this example, the contestants on their own would probably not choose to taunt John, but as a group it is an acceptable behaviour.

While it is possible to consider the three examples of behaviour from a behaviourist perspective, it seems to fall shortest in explaining the combined group behaviour, and explaining John and Germaine's rebellious behaviour. It is notable that both John and Germaine were the older contestants, and the age difference should be borne in mind when looking at their behaviour in comparison to the other

contestants. It is as if they have a stronger belief in their free will and refuse to subject themselves to another's authority and the strangeness of the situation, while the younger participants have a different regard for authority. The behaviourist analysis could also be seen to be lacking as it is based on people's reaction to the environment, and the Big Brother house is a totally unfamiliar and false environment for them all. In contrast to this, the cognitive approach offers a fully explanation of their behaviour and it certainly allows for the rebellious behaviour through the individuals' personal decision making. The cognitive explanations of the behaviour also seem fuller and more satisfactorily detailed, and the question of why the behaviour occurred is answered, rather than just stating what behaviour occurred.

If *Big Brother* is considered to be a psychology experiment the falseness of the environment is a very striking variable which should be taken in to account. In doing so, it is easy to see similarities with laboratory based experiments, and having looked at behaviour in the controlled laboratory-like environment of the Big Brother house, the validity of any experiments conducted in a false environment should be questioned.

It must be remembered that the primary objective of *Big Brother* is to create an addictive television programme that will attract a large audience, which in turn allows advertising during it to be sold at a high price; it is fundamentally a commercial exercise. Dr McVey, a senior psychology lecturer at Glasgow Caledonian University, writes that:

We [the viewers] have become desensitised to reality shows, so programme makers must devise new ways to keep our attention. (BBC 2005:2)

This certainly goes a long way to explain Big Brother's motivation for creating ill will and difficult situations for the contestants, but it also raises the question of the ethical correctness of the programme. In much the same way as Zimbardo realised "how far into my prison role I was [...] I was thinking like a prison superintendent rather than a research psychologist" (Zimbardo 1999:slide 27), Big Brother's role within the house and programme appears to be very hazily defined.

(3079 words)

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Appendix I

'Filth' by Germaine Greer
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available online at
<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/printFriendly/0,,1-525-1441708-525,00.html> [25/01/2005]
