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Modern Law Enforcement Training based on Four Classic Psychological Experiments

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Spotlight: Psychology in Action**Modern Law Enforcement Training based on Four Classic Psychological Experiments**

Psychology is so much more than asking someone “How does that make you feel?” or reading boring rat research from decades in the past. Psychology is alive and well and can provide a scientific foundation for most areas of life. There is no more noble purpose for scientific psychological research than to apply it within the real world. This scientific research can provide data for evidence-informed and evidence-based programs that can make a difference in human lives.

One noteworthy example of Psychology in Action is the Active Bystandership in Law Enforcement (ABLE) Project. This new movement is a comprehensive program that includes law enforcement (LE) training and agency commitments to reduce harm and to improve the national LE culture (ABLE, 2021). The overall goal is to help law enforcement officers and citizens through the development and implementation of a LE training program that is based on psychological science. The training curriculum utilizes four classic psychological experiments as the foundation for its educational program. The ABLE Project is a standardized national program that applies psychological concepts to decrease harmful behaviors and increase helping behaviors within the law enforcement environment.

This inaugural *Spotlight: Psychology in Action* article revisits these four classic psychological experiments that are a foundation within the ABLE curriculum. In order to relate psychological research to relevant application in the modern world, this *Spotlight* article provides a succinct review of these experiments and how they are incorporated within the current ABLE training program. For the purposes of this *Spotlight* article, the emphasis is on the application of psychology and not on the ABLE program itself. For more detailed information regarding the ABLE Project, please visit the ABLE (2021) website provided in the Reference list.

Four Classic Psychological Experiments

The following four experiments are classics within psychological science. Variations and derivations have been conducted for decades. Necessary adjustments have been made as human subject research rules have evolved. But, understanding the classics and how they can be applied within the modern world is critical to maintaining the value and relevance of psychological science. (Note: For this article, the four classic experiments are not presented in chronological order or alphabetical order. They are presented as they are taught in the ABLE training program.)

1. Darley and Latane' (1968) and Diffusion of Responsibility

As with most of these experimental researchers, Darley and Latane' conducted a series of studies. The enormity of their research projects prevented the ABLE curriculum from including multiple experiments or all of the conditions within one experiment. Therefore, the core factors of this experiment were used.

The Darley and Latane' research focused on the possible impact of the number of bystanders who were present on whether the bystanders helped others who were in need. They designed a scenario in which a participant (subject) had agreed to join an experiment in which the participants would discuss the difficulties of college life in an urban setting. Each participant was placed in a room alone and told to speak into the intercom system. The participants were informed that only one person could speak at a time on the intercom system. They were told that the other participants were in similar rooms and were also alone. They were told that the researchers would not be listening so the participants could say anything they wanted and they would remain anonymous. Depending on the experimental situation, the participants were told that there would be (a) one other participant listening, (b) two other participants listening, or (c) five other participants listening. However, in all of the experimental conditions, there was only one actual subject. All other "participants" were conspirators (actors) of the researchers but the actual subject did not know this. The actual subject thought everyone else was a subject also. In

every condition, one of the conspirators would state that they had a seizure disorder and at some point would start to choke, struggle, and ask for help. Darley and Latane' wanted to know what the subjects would do. They wanted to know whether the subjects would seek help. And, they wanted to know if it mattered if the subjects believed that there were other participants who could possibly help.

In the first condition, two people were involved: the subject and one conspirator who had the seizure. In the second condition, there were three people involved: the subject, the conspirator who had the seizure, and another conspirator who the subject believed was another subject. And, in the third condition, there were six people: the subject, the conspirator who had the seizure, and four additional conspirators who the subject believed were additional subjects.

Based on these experimental parameters, did the number of people in the different conditions have an impact on whether the actual subject intervened and helped the person with the seizure? The answer is yes. Simplistically, the greater the number of participants, the less likely the subject would intervene and go seek help. The decrease in assistance was usually substantial.

Darley and Latane' suggested their results illustrated two different concepts – pluralistic ignorance and diffusion of responsibility. With pluralistic ignorance, people try to hide their emotions as they look around to see what everyone else is doing. If no one is doing anything, people believe they must have misunderstood the situation and the individual must not need help. They depend on the actions of others to inform them on what to do.

With diffusion of responsibility, the greater the number of people that are nearby, the less one person thinks that they should help. Each person thinks that someone else should get involved. The responsibility of helping is diluted or defused by the number of people nearby. Darley and Latane' postulated that, cognitively, the individual has difficulty in determining who has the responsibility to help. Therefore, fewer people will actually help.

2. Darley and Batson (1973) and the Seminary Experiment

Psychological research into helping behaviors continued to be prolific. The Darley and Batson experiment in 1973 was titled *From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior* but it is more easily remembered as the Seminary Experiment. In this study, Darley and Batson wanted to determine if there were specific characteristics that influenced whether someone would help others in an emergency situation. Up to that time, studies on helping behaviors in emergency situations had been disappointing. Therefore, they decided to investigate helping behavior from a Biblical perspective in hopes that results would be more promising. They used the parable of the Good Samaritan to guide their study parameters and as a story within the experiment itself.

Loosely paraphrasing, the parable of the Good Samaritan is a Biblical story in which Jesus is speaking about helping others. The focus is on helping people especially if they are not liked or are considered lessor in the eyes of the world. According to the scripture, an expert in the law was questioning Jesus. In response, Jesus answered with this parable: Two religious leaders are traveling separately from Jerusalem to Jericho. As they travel, they each encounter someone who desperately needs help. Neither of them help the individual despite the fact that they are religious leaders and should help others by nature of their profession and love of God. Also traveling on the road is a Samaritan. In Biblical times, Samaritans were despised as a people. They were considered at the bottom of the acceptable strata and viewed as terrible and unworthy. Despite this fact, the Samaritan is the one who helps the person in distress through extensive efforts and some monetary expense. Thusly, the title of the parable emphasizes that the Samaritan is the good neighbor and the religious leaders are not. After finishing the parable, Jesus specifically stated for the expert in the law to go and do like the Good Samaritan (i.e. go and help others). (Please see Luke 10:25-37, New International Version of the Holy Bible for a thorough presentation of this parable.)

Using this parable as a guide, Darley and Batson designed an experiment in which seminary students were recruited to be subjects. Seminary students are in a religious program in college specifically to learn to be religious leaders, preachers, or other types of clergy. The seminary students began an individual experimental session alone and were given a task which involved going to another building and providing a talk. The talk would either be about religious jobs or about the parable of the Good Samaritan. In addition to this, there were more experimental conditions but only two of them are relevant herein. In one condition, subjects were told that they were late, people were waiting on them, and they must hurry to a separate building. In another condition, subjects were told that they had plenty of time to get to the separate building. They were told that if they left immediately, they would probably have to wait when they arrived at the separate building before they were able to speak. Therefore, they were told that they did not need to hurry. In both of these conditions, only one subject traveled to the other building at a time. They did not travel in groups. On the way to the other building, the subject encountered someone in distress.

One of the questions that Darley and Batson wanted to answer was whether the situational condition of hurry or no hurry would have an impact on whether the subject would help the person in distress. They also wanted to investigate whether the type of talk, religious jobs or the Good Samaritan, influenced helping behaviors. The overall results indicated that subjects in the hurry condition provided significantly less help to the person in distress than the subjects in the no hurry condition. Interestingly, the type of the talk did not have a significant impact on whether the subjects helped or not. Darley and Batson discussed other characteristics and postulated explanations but overall determined that people who are in a hurry are less likely to help someone in distress. They suggested that tunnel vision (sensory exclusion) may be a contributing factor but that further research was warranted.

3. Milgram (1963) and Obedience to Authority

This next experiment deviates from the two previous experiments on helping behaviors and instead investigated behaviors related to inflicting harm. The infamous Milgram studies on obedience are most commonly remembered as the Shock Studies. Milgram's idea for the initial study began after following the Nuremberg Trials in 1961. During the war trials, Adolf Eichmann excused his violent treatment of the Jews by stating that he was just following orders and therefore his inhumane behavior was not his fault or responsibility. Milgram was baffled by these justifications and wanted to conduct research on human nature to determine if such behavior was possible: Will people inflict harm on others in order to obey an authority?

Milgram designed a study with an experimenter, a subject (in modern terminology they would be referred to as a participant), and an associate (or actor) of the experimenter who was pretending to be another subject. The premise of the experiment was to study the effect of punishment, through shock, on learning and memory. The experiment used a shock generator that simulated shocks but, unknown to participants, the generator was a fake. No shocks were actually administered to the actor. The experimenter would be official and stern. Two "subjects" would be brought into a room. They were told that the study was about the effect of punishment on learning and that one of them would have a learning task (the learner) and every time they got an answer wrong they would be shocked by the other subject (the teacher). As the learner provided each wrong answer, the teacher was instructed that they must increase the intensity level of the shock. To make it appear fair, the potential subjects would draw a slip of paper from a hat to determine who would be the learner and who would be the teacher. But, the experiment was always designed for the true subject to be the teacher and the actor to be the learner. The true subject would be in control of the shock and would administer it when the learner (the actor) gave an incorrect answer. During the preparations, the teacher was strongly instructed to increase the level of shock after each wrong answer.

In the experiment, the learner was strapped into a chair that looked like an electric chair. The teacher observed this process before being taken into an adjoining room. Then, the teacher was placed in front of the shock generator where there were 30 switches of increasing intensity to administer the shocks. The shock switches began at 15 volts which was labeled *Slight Shock*, continued through 300 volts which was labeled *Intense Shock* and 375 volts which was labeled *Danger: Severe Shock*, and ended with 450 volts simply labeled with *XXX*. The teacher would receive a sample shock at the third intensity level to help convince them that the shock was real. In reality, this shock was provided by a hidden connection to a 45 volt battery because the generator was not functional. The learner (actor) followed a standardized script and would purposely provide some incorrect answers so that the teacher (subject) would be expected to administer a shock. During the shock portion of the experiment, the teacher and the learner could not see each other but the teacher could hear the learner. The teacher could see the stern experimenter throughout the process.

Toward the beginning of the scenario, the learner would provide a wrong answer. At that point, the teacher would be expected to provide the first level of shock. With each incorrect answer, the teacher was instructed to provide an increasing amount of shock. In the first iteration of the experiment, the learner would not provide a response until the shock reached 300 volts at which time they would pound on the wall. After this, they no longer provided answers to the questions. Typically the teacher would look to the experimenter for guidance. The experimenter would inform them to consider a non-response as a wrong answer and shock them. With the next increase in shock intensity, the learner would pound on the wall again. After that, the learner did not respond again.

On a side note, Milgram, in conjunction with this experiment, conducted an ancillary experiment in which psychology college students were asked to predict the results of the shock experiment. The most pessimistic of these students stated that they believed that only 3% of the subjects would go all the way

to the highest intensity and administer 450 volts to the learner. The other students believed that the percentage administering the highest level of shock would be less than 3% with a mean average of 1.2%.

Now to Milgram's primary experimental question: How high of a shock (what intensity level) would the teacher administer to the learner before the teacher would stop administering shocks? In other words, how much harm would a naïve subject inflict on another human within the confines of obedience to authority? The results astounded Milgram.

Milgram documented that all subjects completed 19 levels of shock before anyone stopped. The 20th level represented 300 volts and 5 subjects stopped at this point. For the next 5 levels, a few additional subjects stopped administering shocks. However, 26 of the 40 subjects continued all the way to the highest intensity labelled "XXX". The implications for the impact of authority on obedience is profound.

Milgram identified many factors that needed to be studied following this experiment. He wanted to investigate the impact of the reputation of the authority, the voluntary nature of the study, the feelings of obligation to the experimenter, and the conflicting demands when obeying authorities. He also noted that most subjects, regardless of where they stopped, displayed extreme stress and tension during and after the experiment. Of some interest in Milgram's study was the fact that the experimental subjects were recruited from the surrounding communities and were not college students. There was some variety in occupation and age but all were men.

The classic Milgram experiment is rather complex and is beyond the scope of this article to cover all of the salient factors that helped spawn the depth and diversity of research into obedience to authority. Readers are strongly encouraged to obtain Milgram's original research article from 1963 and review the full scope of detail and richness of experimental rigor.

4. Staub (1974) and the Power of the Bystander

This classic article by Staub included a thorough discussion of the current state of research into helping behaviors around 1974. Staub clearly conveyed that helping others is a moral imperative. He

believed that, without this ideal, the consequences would be fatal for individuals and society. Staub's interest was not new. The concepts of helping others and kindness have been considered by philosophers and psychologists over many centuries. Staub's life's work for over 50 years has revolved around peace and violence and the differences that individuals can make.

Staub's 1974 article discussed several experiments. The most important one for ABLE training focused on interpersonal influences. In this experiment, all participants (subjects) were female as was the active experimenter and the conspirator (actor). All of the participants believed that the conspirator was another subject and did not know that she was part of the experiment. (Note: All participants were initially given different personality tests. These tests are not part of the ABLE training so they are not discussed herein.)

As presented in the ABLE curriculum, a participant comes into a room to complete a written task. Another individual is present in the room and the participant assumes the other person is also a participant. In reality, the second individual is a conspirator or actor. From behind a door, both individuals hear someone in distress. It sounds like the person in distress fell and needs help. There are three different experimental conditions used in the ABLE curriculum. In Condition 1, the conspirator stated "That sounds bad. Maybe we should do something" (p. 317) but does nothing. In Condition 2, the conspirator said that the noise sounded like a tape recording and suggested the experimenters were trying to test them but did not move to help and instead continued to read. In Condition 3, the conspirator stated that she would try to find the experimenter and directed the subject to go check on the person in distress and see if they could help. Part of Staub's experimental question was under which of these conditions was a subject most likely to render assistance.

In the condition in which the conspirator did nothing, the subject was less likely to do something to help. In the condition in which the conspirator said help was needed but did not help, more of the subjects helped than in the first condition but many still did not try to help. And, finally, when the

conspirator said that someone needed help, gave instructions, and then actually helped, 100% of the subjects helped. This finding was profound. The research conclusion was that when someone enlists an ally and provides directions, more people are likely to provide active help.

Helping behavior is multi-faceted and complex. One simple experiment cannot explain the complexities of human behavior. These four classic psychological experiments are only a small portion of the extensive research over the years regarding helping behaviors. Each of these studies should be investigated by reading the original articles in their entirety. There is an enormous amount of information within these psychological classics. It is not possible to provide all of the valuable points of each experiment in this brief review.

Real World Application

These four classic psychological experiments are foundational within the ABLE training program. The ABLE Project is housed within the Center for Innovations in Community Safety (CICS), formerly the Innovative Policing Program, at Georgetown Law (<https://www.law.georgetown.edu/cics/able/>). Unfortunately, within the ABLE curriculum, all aspects of these classic experiments could not be included because of time constraints on training. The curriculum also had to be written so no prior psychological knowledge was required because all students are experienced law enforcement officers and are not necessarily psychology majors. Therefore, several of the conditions and intricacies of the original research experiments had to be truncated when included in the ABLE training program.

Within the ABLE program, the Darley and Latane' (1968) experiment is the first one presented to the LE officers. This experiment is used to illustrate the concept of diffusion of responsibility and pluralistic ignorance. The instructors guide the LE officers through an in-depth discussion of why Darley and Latane' may have obtained the results that they documented. Through interactive questions, the LE officers discover the connections from this psychological experiment as applied to the environment and the work they do in law enforcement.

The second experiment that is presented in the ABLE training is the Darley and Batson (1973) Seminary Study. This experiment is provided to highlight how cognitive and sensory exclusion may naturally and unconsciously occur. On a side note, the ABLE program does not emphasize the Good Samaritan parable and, in fact, suggests that the story be presented as an addendum, if at all. The emphasis in the law enforcement training is on the hurry/no hurry situational factors and their potential impact on cognitive and sensory exclusion in the course of their work.

The Milgram (1963) experiment is the most famous of all of these experiments and the one that is most likely to be recognized by the LE officers. It should not be shocking that it is used to illustrate the concept of obedience to authority within law enforcement parameters. As with the psychology college students that were questioned in 1963, even somewhat cynical law enforcement officers in 2021 do not predict the high level of obedience to authority that Milgram documented. The ABLE program uses this experiment to illustrate the strength of implicit expectations to obey superiors which can inhibit interventions even when it would be appropriate to do so. It is also used to emphasize that if someone in authority is permitting harm or producing harm, subordinates are less likely to intervene. Being aware of the force of obedience within human nature can help address this inhibitor that is interfering with active interventions to stop harm. This Milgram experiment is particularly good at documenting for the LE officers the impact of authority figures on human actions.

Finally, within the ABLE curriculum, the Staub (1974) experiment is used to emphasize the power of the bystander and the importance of enlisting allies, giving directions, and actively helping during intervention efforts. This emphasis is a critical gateway to the remainder of the ABLE training program which utilizes interactive learning throughout to teach the tactical options for active bystandership in law enforcement.

ABLE Implementation and Impact

The first ABLE National Train the Trainer (T3) course was offered in September 2020 (ABLE, 2021). As with many programs, there had been some delays with implementation due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Adjustments were made and by the end of September 2021, over 40 of the T3 courses had been completed. At that point, there were 1000 LE officers who were certified to teach the ABLE training program at a local level. The ABLE Core Standards require 100% participation within an agency so the total impact of these local certified trainers will be 111,800 law enforcement officers who can now be trained. These local certified trainers represent a total of 169 ABLE Certified Law Enforcement Agencies and these agencies represent 38 states in the U.S. and 3 provinces in Canada. This is a tremendous accomplishment in only one year for the ABLE National Team as they have implemented the training program. At this time, the T3 courses continue, both virtual and face-to-face, and there is a waitlist to attend.

Conclusions

There have been a multitude of replications and variations of these classic psychological studies that are beyond the scope of what could be incorporated into the ABLE Training Program or this brief review. It is also important to mention that the human subject research rules have been developed and expanded over the last 50 years making many experiments conducted in the 1960s and 1970s unethical by today's standards. To continue this line of research, adjustments have been made over time. But, the ABLE Program emphasizes the importance of basic human nature as they apply these classic psychological experiments within their contemporary training curriculum.

These historical experiments are only a small portion of the 8 hour ABLE training program. But, this training curriculum is an exceptional example of the utilization of psychological experiments to inform educational endeavors and make a difference in contemporary, real-world training programs. These

classic psychological experiments may be 50 years old but they continue to impact individuals in the 21st century.

Further Reading

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