



CONFORMING

Studying how participants can be influenced by their peers and how this can be affected by assigned roles.

Episode 1: What will people go along with?

There have been a number of studies exploring conformity and the extent, as well as the conditions under which people will go along with a view, even if it is different from the view that they might otherwise have taken.

When people visit a theme park it is a fair assumption that they are anticipating experiences that are unusual, exciting and thrilling. Some of these they are probably expecting and the anticipation is part of the thrill. They know that a rollercoaster will involve rapid acceleration and high speeds. Part of the enjoyment is the shared experience. However, some other rides may be less easy to anticipate and when people react they may be more influenced by people around them.

There are various studies that have explored this, including one by Sherif in 1935 into the autokinetic effect. In this participants were asked to estimate the extent to which they thought a spot of light in a darkened room had moved. In fact, the spot was stationary. What was discovered was that participants, if tested on their own, varied significantly in their estimates. However if they were tested in a group, their estimates converged and if they were then retested on their own, their estimates were closer to that of the group. In other words, once people knew what their peers thought, they were likely to conform to that. This is known as informational social influence.

In an attraction such as Derren Brown's Ghost Train, people experience an unusual event in a group. As it will be innovative for many participants, they won't be prepared for aspects of the experience. Things happen that challenge individuals to decide what is happening and draw conclusions. They will be aware not only of the stimuli, but also of the reaction of people around them. To what extent will this be an instance of informational social influence?

Questions:

1. Sherif's work was carried out under laboratory conditions. Why does this increase the control of the variables?
2. Suggest the extent to which you think the conditions in a theme park attraction can be controlled in the way that laboratory conditions can be.
3. Sherif's investigation has been criticised because it was researching an event which doesn't occur in everyday life. To what extent do you think it will predict the way that participants respond to extraordinary events in an attraction such as Derren Brown's Ghost Train?



Episode 2: Were participants affected by their peers?

If you get chance to visit an attraction such as Derren Brown's Ghost Train, consider the extent to which you think that participants' responses are affected by the behaviour of those around them.

One critical difference is that in Sherif's investigation there was a clear and unambiguous piece of information offered (how far they thought the dot had moved) to which people can clearly compare their own ideas.

Questions:

1. How does the nature of the shared responses in a theme park attraction compare with those in Sherif's investigation?
2. How does the shared nature of the experience affect people's experience of the ride compared with what it would be like to go on it in isolation?
3. To what extent do you think Sherif's investigation gives an insight into a participant's experience of an attraction such as Derren Brown's Ghost Train?

Episode 3: Conformity to a role, or to a specific decision?

Sherif's investigation involved finding out if people can be influenced when making a specific decision. It can be argued that some attractions involve participants adopting a role rather than simply making a decision. In 2006, Reicher and Haslam set up an investigation (in association with the BBC) in which participants were allocated roles of prisoners and wardens in a simulated prison. The investigation showed that roles are flexible because the prisoners became quite a strong group and the wardens were unwilling to exercise authority. If you would like to know more about the study, including watching video clips, go to:

www.bbctrust.org

Questions:

1. Thinking about a shared experience, such as Derren Brown's Ghost Train, to what extent does the experience of a visitor depend upon the nature of the group they happen to be part of on the attraction?
2. In an earlier study (1973) Zimbardo set up the Stanford Prison Experiment; in this some participants acted according to assigned roles more than others. How can an attraction such as Derren Brown's Ghost Train be set up to try to ensure that visitors do adopt a role that makes the overall experience more convincing?



ORGANISING INFORMATION

Reflecting on how people organise things they experience into recognised patterns.

Episode 1: Making sense of what we see

When we look at a situation or event, we don't see all the information as separate new items, even if the situation is one that is new to us.

For example, if we went to a town for the first time, we might very well see people, buildings, transport facilities and activities going on, none of which we'd seen previously, but we would recognise patterns. We know what a person is, what buildings are like and how buses tend to operate. What will stand out is anything new or different, for example, if a ticket for the bus has to be purchased before boarding and we haven't encountered that before.

If we go to a new supermarket, for example:

- We know that the layout may be different to other supermarkets but we still expect certain conventions to be observed, such as food organised into categories meat, dairy etc.
- We know how to go through a checkout. When self-service tills were introduced these stood out as being innovative, but are now accepted and understood.
- If the new supermarket was organised alphabetically, so that bath salts were in between bananas and beer it would take much more getting used to. We'd expect that in the fiction section of a library but not in a supermarket.

These organisations are called schema and there are different types. Event schemas, for example, are useful to know about what happens in a situation, such as going to a cinema. Even in a new cinema, we know we have to select a film, buy a ticket, find the right screen and take a seat.

'Role schema' relates to the characteristics of someone performing a certain function. We expect different characteristics of the cinema manager and the person selling popcorn and if those are not fulfilled, the schema are challenged.

Questions:

1. Schema are useful because they indicate to us how things usually function and enable us to identify exceptions. How might someone performing some sort of illusion use schema to get us to assume certain things?
2. Give an example of the start of a TV programme, computer game or film which uses established schema to set a scene and suggest certain things about characters or situations.



Episode 2: Schema at work in a theme park

If you visit an attraction such as Derren Brown's Ghost Train, think about schema as you approach the attraction, enter it and go through it. Think about how schema are used to get you to think certain things and act in a certain way. This ride is highly innovative; whereas we know what to expect from, say, a rollercoaster; this is different. Aspects of the ride, such as the design of features, may prompt certain schema. Try and identify these.

You may find that schema helps you to make sense of something, but also that they raise expectations that are then challenged.

Try and recall what your experiences were and think through the role that schema might have played in this.

Questions:

1. What role did schema, both event and role, play in this experience – did you feel that you were being manipulated to assume certain things?
2. What do you think someone might make of the attraction if, for example, they had never previously encountered buildings or transport systems such as those referenced in the attraction? Imagine someone who'd only encountered buildings as very small dwellings and never seen a public transport system; in other words, had not had chance to develop those schema. What might they make of it?

Episode 3: Do schema help or hinder us?

It can be argued that schema are very useful in they save us from having to explore every situation from afresh because we recognise patterns and characteristics we've encountered before. They also help to quickly identify the outliers – the features that don't fit the pattern.

However, it can be argued that they can be used to fool us. We think we recognise and can trust a situation, only to then find out it doesn't fit the pattern.

Questions:

1. Think of an example of a TV or cinema advert that uses schema to quickly establish certain ideas – an advert for dental care for example. Are schema useful here – and to whom?
2. How might the designers of Derren Brown's Ghost Train have used schema?



GETTING YOUR ATTENTION

Understanding how we prioritise which needs to give more attention to.

Episode 1: Deciding what is important

As we encounter situations and live our lives, lots of things clamour for our attention. We need to decide what to respond to and how. We might think for example:

- Is it going to rain today?
- Can I get something to eat?
- Might that car run into us?
- Could I get a coat like that one and would I look good in it?
- Does my best friend still like me?

In a situation such as a theme park, lots of things are designed to attract our attention. Some we recognise as being familiar and others are more unusual.

We need to have a way of prioritising these issues. The way we do it isn't simply through rational thought. We know this from experience: if we felt physically threatened, for example, we're unlikely to be able to think about whether our hair is looking good. It's not just that we've decided that surviving is more important than looking smart, but rather that the need for survival has forced its way to the top of the priority list.

Abraham Maslow developed a hierarchy of needs which is traditionally represented as shown on page 3.

What it shows is that different needs are at different levels. In order to try to meet the higher order ones, the lower order ones must first be met. For example, we're unlikely to give much thought to gaining the respect of others if we're really hungry. It has important implications, for example, in raising children. It means that it's unlikely to be successful trying to get them engaged in learning if they feel unsafe or are cold.

Questions:

1. Why might Maslow's hierarchy be useful to a teacher of young children?
2. How might it apply to a group of people on a coach tour?



Episode 2: Engaging people in a theme park

When people are looking to be entertained, they expect their needs at the lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy to be taken care of. For example, at an Art Gallery the managers would try and make sure you weren't thirsty, cold or felt threatened. However, other attractions work in different ways. A theme park ride or a horror film might appeal because they make you feel scared. Some people will pay good money to feel uncomfortable!

If you are able go to an attraction such as Derren Brown's Ghost Train, you are encouraged to feel certain things by the way it is designed and run.

Questions:

1. Think about the attraction and how it appeals to you. Consider various aspects of the experience and try to correlate them with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Does it help to explain the appeal?
2. How do you think the designers of an attraction decide what they can legitimately do in a ride? How scared can people become before it ceases to be entertaining? And what about the effects that are more psychological than physical? Is it acceptable to 'mess with people's minds'?

Episode 3: Does Maslow's hierarchy help to explain people's responses?

Psychology has a real value and a utility if it can explain how people behave and why they do certain things. It tries to identify certain principles which can be used in developing these explanations.

Questions:

1. Does Maslow's hierarchy suggest that everyone going through the same experience will react in the same way? Is it possible to identify general principles that can be broadly applied or will different people respond in completely different ways?
2. To what extent might it be useful to be familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs when designing attractions? Do designers and managers need to pay attention to the ideas it presents?



Self-actualization

morality,
creativity,
spontaneity,
problem solving,
lack of prejudice,
acceptance of facts

Esteem

self-esteem,
confidence, achievement,
respect of others,
respect by others

Love/belonging

friendship, family, sexual intimacy

Safety

security of: body, employment,
resources, morality, the family, health, property

Physiological

breathing, food, water, sex, sleep, homeostasis, excretion