

Tajfel, H. + Fraser, C. (Eds.) (1978)
Introducing Social Psychology

As a 'scientist', the social psychologist might use evidence derived from *experiments*. Notice, however, that every attempt to study behaviour in a systematic fashion is not an experiment. If we simply make careful observations of how often people crossing main roads make use of zebra crossings, we are not conducting an experiment. Similarly, if we interview one hundred people to find out their attitudes towards unemployment, we are not experimenting. We are using systematic empirical methods; but 'experiments' are not synonymous with 'empirical research', they are only a sub-class of it.

In order to carry out a piece of research which can justifiably be called an experiment, an investigator must be in a position to control what is happening. The traditional account of an experiment is that the experimenter holds constant all potentially relevant features of a situation apart from one, which he systematically varies or manipulates, and he then records the effects of this systematic variation on some likely measure. The feature of the situation which is systematically varied is called the 'independent variable' and the thing measured to detect the effects of the manipulation is called the 'dependent variable'. In fact, experiments on social behaviour can be considerably more complex than this description would suggest. If an experiment is designed in an appropriately systematic fashion, several independent variables can be manipulated in the same experiment and the effects of the different variables, together with the interactions amongst them, can be disentangled by sophisticated statistical analyses. In addition, the effects may be assessed by a number of dependent variables. (A relatively simple introduction to the design of experiments is given in chapter 2 of Crano and Brewer, 1973.)

In many studies the investigator may not wish to exert such control over the phenomena he is observing. Alternatively, for ethical or practical reasons, it may not be possible for him to do so. Thus, we can distinguish between experimental and non-experimental studies in social psychology, the latter often being called 'observational studies'. In doing so, however, it should not be thought that we are distinguishing between extreme control by the investigator in the experiment and no control at all in observational studies. Rather, we should recognize degrees of control. In experiments, independent

variables may be manipulated with varying precision. In observational studies, when such manipulations are not being attempted, the investigator can impose more or less control on what he observes, when he observes, and how he observes it. In fact an array of alternative methods available to the social psychologist can usefully be thought of as lying along a dimension or continuum of control, rather than as falling into two and only two mutually exclusive categories. As is apparent from Figure 1, the high control end may be represented by the fully fledged experiment conducted in a highly controlled laboratory setting, and the low end by relatively unstructured obser-

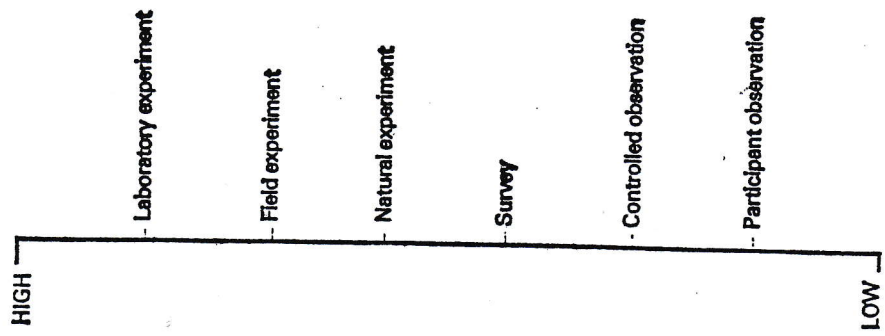


Figure 1 Alternative methods, on a dimension of control exerted by investigator