8.2 Applying Issues and Debates to Conformity and Obedience Research

AQA 7182 · about 60 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

At least six answers must be written in full sentences. Total time suggested 60 minutes. The final 16-mark question must be answered in full sentences and structured paragraphs.

1 Explain one way Zimbardo's dual role as researcher and prison superintendent could be seen as an ethical problem in the context of the Stanford Prison Experiment.

(Total for Question 1 is 2 marks)

2 A university plans to repeat a Zimbardo-style study to investigate obedience to role demands. Identify one practical safeguard the ethics committee should require, and explain how it reduces risk in the simulated prison context.

(Total for Question 2 is 3 marks)

3 A policy maker quotes conformity research as showing 'people always obey authority'. Evaluate briefly whether this claim supports a deterministic view, using one psychological argument for and one against strong determinism in the context of conformity research.

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

4 Explain how findings from conformity and obedience research can be applied ethically to reduce harm in real institutions, giving one concrete example in a prison or military context.

(Total for Question 4 is 3 marks)

5 An investigator argues that publishing dramatic examples of obedience research risks social harm by normalising abuse. Analyse two ways researchers might present results to reduce this risk while still informing policy, referring to the publication context.

(Total for Question 5 is 6 marks)

6 Discuss the extent to which research into conformity and obedience can be explained in terms of determinism. In your answer, consider both situational and dispositional explanations, the implications for individual responsibility, and how ethical concerns about applying such explanations impact research communication. Use relevant research evidence where appropriate.

(Total for Question 6 is 16 marks)

7 A newspaper links real-world abuse at a prison to findings from Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment, claiming 'ordinary people became monsters because of the situation'. Evaluate briefly one strength and one limitation of using Zimbardo's findings to explain such real-world events, referring to the issue of determinism versus individual responsibility.

(Total for Question 7 is 4 marks)

8 Explain how research into obedience, such as Milgram-style studies, raises issues of social sensitivity when findings are used to attribute blame in historical events. Refer to the context of obedience research being applied to events like wartime abuses.

(Total for Question 8 is 3 marks)

9 A manager uses an obedience-style argument to defend staff who followed orders that led to harm. Using the determinism debate, analyse one ethical implication of accepting a deterministic, authority-based explanation in this workplace context.

(Total for Question 9 is 6 marks)

Mark scheme · 8.2 Applying Issues and Debates to Conformity and Obedience Research

Question 1

states the problem: conflict of interest or loss of objectivity when the researcher also acts as superintendent **M1**

explains consequence, e.g. delayed intervention to stop harm because the researcher became absorbed in the role rather than protecting participants **A1**

Answer: Zimbardo's dual role created a conflict of interest, reducing his objectivity and delaying intervention to stop harmful behaviour because he acted as superintendent rather than safeguarding participants.

Question 2

identifies a practical safeguard, e.g. independent observer with power to stop the study, clear stop signals, regular welfare checks, or full informed consent with withdrawal procedure **M1**

explains how it reduces risk, e.g. an independent observer can intervene when harmful behaviour appears, preventing prolonged distress **A1**

links to the simulated prison context, e.g. guards acting abusively would be checked and stopped promptly **A1**

Answer: Require an independent observer with the authority to stop the study; this reduces risk by allowing prompt intervention if guards become abusive, preventing prolonged psychological harm to prisoners.

Question 3

argument for determinism: situational findings, e.g. Asch and obedience studies show strong situational pressures that heavily influence behaviour **M1**

explains how this supports deterministic claim, e.g. behaviour appears caused by external factors rather than free choice **A1**

argument against strong determinism: evidence of individual differences and agency, e.g. some participants resist and do not conform or obey **M1**

explains why this challenges the claim, e.g. shows behaviour is not always determined and individuals can exercise moral choice **A1**

Answer: For determinism: situational research demonstrates that external pressures can strongly shape behaviour, supporting the idea that people are driven by situations. Against: individual differences and documented resistance show people do not always obey or conform, undermining the absolute claim that people always obey and supporting a role for agency.

Question 4

identifies an application, e.g. staff training, clear chains of accountability, rotating roles, or supervising authority in prisons or the military **M1**

explains how this reduces harm, e.g. training reduces blind obedience and rotating roles prevents role depersonalisation **A1**

gives a concrete example, e.g. in prisons require independent welfare officers and mandatory empathy training to reduce abusive role enactment **A1**

Answer: Apply findings by introducing staff training on ethical decision making, clear accountability structures and rotating roles. For example, prisons could mandate independent welfare officers and ethics training so staff are less likely to follow harmful orders and more likely to intervene to protect inmates.

Question 5

first way identified, e.g. contextualising findings with clear limitations about sample and setting **M1**

analysis of effect, e.g. prevents overgeneralisation and reduces risk of normalising extreme behaviours as inevitable **A1**

second way identified, e.g. emphasising actionable recommendations for policy and safeguards rather than deterministic headlines **M1**

analysis of effect, e.g. focuses attention on prevention and responsibility, guiding policy to reduce harm **A1**

development, e.g. use careful language, avoid sensationalist framing, and include voices of affected groups **M1**

analysis of overall benefit, e.g. this maintains informative value for policymakers while reducing social sensitivity and potential misuse **A1**

Answer: Researchers can contextualise findings with clear limits on sample and setting to avoid implying inevitability, and emphasise practical safeguards and policy recommendations rather than sensationalist conclusions. Using careful, non-sensational language and including stakeholder perspectives helps inform policy while reducing the risk of normalising abuse.

Question 6

Level 4 Knowledge of research into conformity and obedience is accurate and detailed. Discussion of determinism is thorough and well balanced, integrating situational and dispositional explanations and evaluating implications for responsibility. Ethical implications for communicating research are considered and linked to the argument. Evidence is used effectively and the answer is coherent and well structured. **13-16**

Level 3 Knowledge is generally accurate with some detail. Discussion addresses situational and dispositional views and includes consideration of individual responsibility and ethical communication, but may be less developed or slightly one-sided. Some relevant evidence and evaluation are present and the answer is mostly well organised. **9-12**

Level 2 Knowledge is present but limited or partially inaccurate. Discussion of determinism is basic and may miss links to responsibility or ethics. Little evidence is used. The answer may be fragmented and show limited critical evaluation. **5-8**

Level 1 Very limited knowledge and understanding. Discussion is minimal, largely descriptive or irrelevant. No effective evaluation or consideration of ethical implications. The answer lacks structure. **1-4**

Level 0 No creditable content. **0**

Indicative content:

- AO1: Situational determinism perspective: classic research (e.g. conformity and obedience paradigms) shows environmental and social pressures such as unanimous majorities, assigned social roles or authority figures can strongly influence behaviour, suggesting external causes determine actions.
- AO1: Dispositional perspective: individual differences, personality, moral reasoning and prior values can explain why some resist conformity or refuse to obey, indicating non-deterministic elements and preserving individual agency.
- AO1: Interactionist accounts: behaviour arises from interplay between person and situation, so neither pure determinism nor absolute free will fully explains social influence.
- AO3: Implications for individual responsibility: a deterministic reading may reduce perceived blame and affect justice systems and organisational accountability, whereas emphasising dispositional agency supports individual moral responsibility and sanctions.
- AO3: Evidence-based nuance: cite that many participants in conformity studies did not conform on all trials and some in obedience studies refused to continue, which challenges strong determinism; yet robust situational effects point to powerful constraints on choice in certain contexts.
- AO3: Ethical and communication implications: researchers must avoid deterministic headlines that normalise harmful acts; careful reporting, discussion of limitations and policy-relevant recommendations are ethically important to prevent misuse of findings.
- AO3: Practical consequences: accepting some determinism can drive institutional reforms (training, checks, accountability) to reduce situational pressures that lead to harm, showing a constructive role for situational explanations without absolving individuals.
- AO3: Evaluation: consider methodological limits of lab studies for generalisation, cultural and temporal variations that qualify deterministic claims, and the possibility that emphasising agency supports moral development interventions.

Question 7

strength: situational explanation is supported, e.g. Zimbardo shows situational factors can strongly influence behaviour so it helps explain how normal people may act abusively under certain roles **M1**

explains why this matters for understanding events, e.g. highlights systemic rather than only individual causes and informs institutional remedies **A1**

limitation: overgeneralisation or ecological validity problem, e.g. the simulated prison and real prisons differ in scale, context and oversight **M1**

explains consequence for responsibility, e.g. relying solely on situational determinism risks excusing individuals and neglecting dispositional differences and accountability **A1**

Answer: Strength: Zimbardo supports situational determinism, showing how roles and environment can push ordinary people to abusive behaviour, which helps identify systemic solutions. Limitation: the simulated prison differs from real prisons, so applying the findings directly risks overgeneralisation and might underplay individual responsibility and dispositional differences.

Question 8

states the sensitivity: findings may be used to argue perpetrators were compelled by authority rather than morally responsible **M1**

explains social consequences, e.g. victims or the public may see responsibility shifted away from individuals to circumstances or leaders **M1**

links to policy or ethical concern, e.g. this can influence legal judgments, collective memory and survivors' sense of justice **A1**

Answer: Obedience research can be socially sensitive because it may be used to argue that perpetrators of wartime abuses were compelled by authority rather than fully responsible; this shifts blame from individuals to situations and can affect legal judgments and survivors' perceptions of justice.

Question 9

identifies the ethical implication, e.g. reduced accountability or risk of moral disengagement if determinism is accepted	**M1**
explains immediate consequence, e.g. managers and staff might avoid responsibility by blaming situational pressures or orders	**M1**
develops analysis with an example, e.g. acceptance of deterministic explanations could lead to fewer sanctions and weaker deterrence, potentially allowing harmful practices to continue	**A1**
considers counterpoint, e.g. recognising situational causes can improve systems and reduce harm by changing policies or training	**M1**
explains how this matters ethically, e.g. balancing institutional reform with individual accountability protects victims while preventing future harm	**A1**
evaluates overall implication, e.g. an uncritical acceptance of determinism risks injustice, whereas a nuanced approach can inform fair blame and constructive change	**A1**

Answer: Accepting a deterministic, authority-based explanation risks reducing individual accountability and enabling moral disengagement, as staff and managers may blame situational pressures for harmful actions. This could lead to fewer sanctions and weaker deterrence, allowing harmful practices to continue. However, recognising situational causes can prompt systemic reforms, such as policy change and training, which reduce future harm. Ethically, therefore, a nuanced stance is required that balances institutional reform with appropriate individual responsibility to protect victims and uphold justice.