ABSTRACT
Recently, several authors have examined the presentation of the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) in introductory psychology textbooks (Bartels & Hernandez, 2013; Griggs, 2014). The general conclusion of this work is that the study is often presented in an uncritical manner. Recently, Griggs and Whitehead (2014) conducted an analysis of social psychology textbooks finding similar results. The present content analysis further examined the frequency with which controversial aspects of the Stanford Prison Experiment were represented in social psychology textbooks. Our results were consistent with prior content analyses in that references to controversial aspects of the landmark study were infrequent.

INTRODUCTION

The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) is one of the most controversial studies in the history of psychology. Since its publication in 1973 numerous authors have challenged the study on methodological, theoretical, and ethical grounds. These criticisms are summarized in Figure 1.

• Zimbardo held a guard orientation in which suggestions to create fear among prisoners may have been taken as sanctions for abuse.
• The possibility that SPE participants were aware of the purpose of the experiment was suggested by results of a survey by Haney, Shelton, and Geer (1973) in which, Boston area students, presented with information comparable to that which the SPE participants had prior to entering “prison,” demonstrated impressive insights as to the purpose of the study.
• Carnahan & McFarland (2007) found higher dispositional aggression among those volunteering for a study of prison life relative to those volunteering for a nonscript psychological study.
• While a few SPE guards embraced the role of “bad guard,” others seemed unwilling to adopt such roles. Zimbardo describes guard behavior as fitting into one of three categories: “good,” “by the book,” and “bad.”
• Lastly, one of the most salient ethical issues of the study is the dual role occupied by Zimbardo, namely, principal investigator and prison superintendent.

The present study aimed at to examine the representation of these issues in social psychology textbooks.

METHOD

The categories included in the present analysis emerged from the post-SPE theoretical and empirical literature as well as issues raised by Zimbardo himself. Textbooks were located via CourseSmart software using the search parameters “social psychology” for book titles within the field of psychology. This search produced 65 textbooks, however, this list included previous additions of texts, duplicate authors and international editions. Therefore, from this initial list we eliminated books that were Canadian editions, multiple titles by the same author, and titles that would likely not be used as an introductory social psychology textbook due to its’ more narrow focus (e.g., the social psychology of gender). This left us with 21 textbooks. We then searched each book with the following search terms: Zimbardo, Haney, Stanford Prison, social roles, deindividuation, and demand characteristics. Eight of the 21 textbooks contained no content as revealed by our search criteria and, thus, thirteen texts were included in the content analysis.

Prior to evaluating the texts, the rater was trained on each of the categories using textbooks that were not included in the present analysis. The raters then independently evaluated the selected content, indicating whether or not the aforementioned categories were represented. We elected to take a conservative approach in assessing interrater reliability, and therefore calculated kappa (Hsu & Field, 2003) which adjusts for chance agreement among raters. Our level of agreement was 90.77% and our interrater reliability was, kappa = 88.46%, exceeding even the most stringent minimally appropriate level (Neuendorf, 2011). Discrepancies between the raters were discussed until a consensus was reached.

RESULTS

Results, presented in Figure 2, indicated that one of the thirteen texts noted the guard orientation, two of the texts acknowledged the potential role of demand characteristics, three noted the role of personality in self-selection, seven acknowledged variance in guard behavior, and three textbooks alluded to the dual role Zimbardo adopted. As noted earlier, there were 8 textbooks selected for inclusion in the analysis that contained no coverage of the study.

CONCLUSIONS

• While the SPE has been subject to significant critiques, results of the present study suggest that these are largely absent in social psychology textbooks. Perhaps the SPE has outlived its’ relevance with more methodologically sound and theoretically robust studies having been conducted in recent years. However, rather than disregard the study or present a caricatured version of it, a comprehensive presentation of the study and the subsequent analysis, research, and discussion may allow students to develop a greater appreciation for the complex interaction among a number of causal forces, including situational ones.

REFERENCES


Presented at the 2015 International Convention of Psychological Science, Amsterdam, The Netherlands