



Case Study : 'We let those with more power keep it'



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Article

Is it morally right that someone with a stronger negotiating position should get a better deal on a house, or a holiday, or a loan? Most people would probably answer, 'Of course not!' But a **study** on a total of more than 3,000 people in the US suggests that, in practice, we tend to believe the opposite. In this work, in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, the researchers argue that in the real world, this bias could help to create and perpetuate inequality.

Arthur Le Pargneux at the University of Warwick and Fiery Cushman at Harvard University created seven scenarios involving two people faced with a situation in which one of them has to do something unpleasant that will benefit them both. In each case, one character also has more at stake — and so less bargaining power. For example: 'Frank accidentally dropped his wedding ring down the well. Sam accidentally dropped a cheap watch down the well. To get their items back, one of them has to go down the well and get muddy while the other holds the rope.' In this case, Frank has less bargaining power and is in a weaker negotiating position.

In the first of a series of experiments, participants decided how morally appropriate it would be for one of the characters to ask the other to do the job. So, for example, how morally acceptable it would be for Frank to ask Sam to go down the well — or vice versa. In a second experiment, the researchers took a slightly different tack, and asked how morally inappropriate it would be for each of the characters to refuse to do the unpleasant task.

Le Pargneux and Cushman found that asking the other person to perform the action or explicitly refusing to do it were both seen as being more morally appropriate for the character with greater bargaining power.

In the third experiment, which featured the same scenarios, the team found that the degree of the power imbalance between two characters mattered much less than the fact that an imbalance existed. For example, whether Frank was described as having dropped "his bracelet", or a "gold chain given to him by his wife" or "his wedding ring" down the well didn't affect how morally inappropriate participants thought it would be for him to ask Sam, who'd dropped a cheap watch, to be the one to grab the rope.

Le Pargneux and Cushman then tried out some different scenarios in which one character had more bargaining power because if the pair of them failed to agree on who would do the unpleasant task, they had better alternatives. For example, Brian and George were described as businessmen who wanted to finalise an important deal. To do this, one had to spend an entire day driving to the other's office. The reader was told that if George didn't do it, his business would be at risk, while if Brian didn't do it, he'd just do a similar deal with someone else. In this case, Brian had more bargaining power. And Le Pargneux and Cushman found that the participants felt it was more morally appropriate for George to make the long journey.

Overall, the findings from these studies are broadly consistent with what are known as 'contractualist' views of moral thinking. According to this view, our ideas about what an actual discussion about the relative merits of various options would conclude guide our tacit agreements about what should happen — and, it seems, our views about the moral appropriateness of a particular course of action.

But, as the researchers note, this could lead to some decidedly undesirable outcomes. "If at least some of our moral judgements are contractualist, and we have a tendency to be more lenient towards people in better bargaining positions (who are already likely to be better off) and morally stricter with people in worse positions (who are likely to already be already worse off) then this could make for unfair outcomes." Their work could therefore have implications for understanding how inequalities in society develop and are maintained.

To take the business scenario as an example, people felt that it was morally appropriate that Brian, who had more business partners (and so who was better off than George) should exert less effort to reap the same benefits from the deal. In the real world, the researchers write, this attitude would further exacerbate the initial inequality, in a 'rich get richer' dynamic.

And this leads them to their final conclusion from the work overall: "Combating inequality may require going against some of our moral intuitions and a natural inertia that favours those who are already better off."

To access the full paper, please visit the article and follow the link at the very bottom: <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001678>

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Links to Specification

1.1 Content

- 1.1.1 Theories of obedience, including agency theory and social impact theory.

1.6 Issues and debates

- Reductionism
- Nature-Nurture
- Issues of social control
- The use of psychological knowledge within society
- Issues related to socially sensitive research

2.2 Methods

- 2.2.1 Designing and conducting experiments, including field and laboratory experiments.
- 2.2.2 Independent and dependent variables.
- 2.2.3 Experimental and null hypotheses.
- 2.2.4 Directional (one-tailed) and non-directional (two-tailed) tests and hypotheses.
- 2.2.5 Experimental and research designs: repeated measures, independent groups and matched pairs.
- 2.2.6 Operationalisation of variables, extraneous variables and confounding variables
- 2.2.9 Objectivity, reliability and validity (internal, predictive and ecological).
- 2.2.10 Experimenter effects, demand characteristics and control issues

9.3 Issues and debates

- Reductionism
- Nature-Nurture
- Issues of social control
- The use of psychological knowledge within society
- Issues related to socially sensitive research

Recommended revision and research activities:

1. "Should people in stronger bargaining positions be *morally permitted* to demand better deals or avoid burdens—even if that perpetuates inequality?" *Use the findings from this article to support your argument.*

2. Role-play two characters in a scenario with a power imbalance (e.g. well or business), act out requests and refusals, and write a short reflection linking who "felt justified" and fairness judgments to the study's finding: greater moral leeway for the stronger party. For example:
Well-scenario: Person A dropped an expensive heirloom and Person B dropped a cheap watch. One must go down a muddy well.
Business-scenario: Person A can walk away and make a deal with someone else; Person B can't.

3. Challenge task: Write two paired hypothetical scenarios (Modelled after the research's five preregistered experiments) in which:

- Both characters face a beneficial but unpleasant task.
- One character has stronger bargaining power (more at stake or better alternatives).
- Develop **moral-appropriateness questions**, such as:
 - "Is it morally acceptable for the stronger party to ask the other to do it?"
 - "Is it morally inappropriate for the weaker party to refuse?"
 - Use a rating scale (e.g., 1 = Very inappropriate to 7 = Very appropriate).
- **Administer your survey** to classmates or online peers (target ~20 respondents).
- Write a short report (with graphs/tables) summarizing findings and reflecting on similarities or differences with the published study's results.

Exam style questions

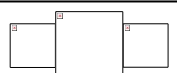
1. Explain how this study supports agency theory. (2)
2. Explain one weakness of the use of experiments in this study. (2)
3. Explain one weakness of this study. (2)

[\(Click here to view Model Response sections\)](#)

Additional questions for which the content of the article can be used as part of a response

1. Assess how research in Social Psychology can be used for social control. (8)
2. Evaluate Social psychology in terms of reductionism. (8)

*Exam style questions are not necessarily the exact format of those that will appear in the qualification examination papers but are written to elicit student responses that meet the assessment criteria, which are exemplified by the answers provided. The length of response in the answers is not indicative of expected student responses, and are provided to support centre teaching, student practice and self-assessment.





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Model Response - [Click here to return to question page](#)

Exam style questions:

1. Explain how this study supports agency theory.

(2)

The study supports the role of legitimate authority figures in obedience. For example, Le Pargneux and Cushman found that asking the other person to perform the action or explicitly refusing to do it were both seen as being more morally appropriate for the character with greater bargaining power. This supports agency theory since people comply because they feel they are agents for legitimate authority. In the power-imbalance scenarios, people judge it moral for stronger agents to shift burdens onto weaker agents—even if that perpetuates unfairness.

2. Explain one weakness of the use of experiments in this study.

(2)

One weakness of using experiments in this study is that the tasks lack mundane realism. For example, ppts were given scenarios of power imbalances and making a moral judgment. This may cause the ppts not to respond as they would in real life because they were given scenarios rather than being involved as part of the actual power imbalance in real life. The lack of mundane realism is a weakness because it means that the study on power imbalances lacks task validity.

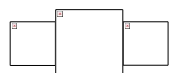
3. Explain one weakness of this study.

(2)

One weakness of the study is that the sample is ethnocentric. This is because 3,000 people in the US took part in the study. This makes the study less representative because the US is considered an individualistic culture meaning it is not representative of collectivist cultures. This means that the results that it is morally acceptable for someone in a stronger bargaining position—such as having less at stake or better alternatives—to get a better deal or avoid burdens are not generalisable to other cultures such as collectivist cultures.

Marks awarded and commentary

1. This response would achieve full marks: identifying how it supports the concept of legitimate authority figures by using a result from the study(1) and justifying with how the result supports the theory.
2. This response would achieve full marks: identifying the weakness of mundane realism (1) and justifying with the artificial nature of the task affecting the task validity(1).
3. This response would achieve full marks: identifying the sample being ethnocentric(1) and justifying how the sample is not representative of collectivist cultures therefore lowering the generalisability of the results. (1).





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Model Responses - ([Click here to return to question page](#))

Additional questions for which the content of the article can be used as part of a response

1. Assess how research in Social Psychology can be used for social control. (8)

The following paragraphs could form part of the answer to this question:

(AO1) Le Pargneux and Cushman created seven scenarios involving two people faced with a situation in which one of them has to do something unpleasant that will benefit them both. In each case, one character also has more at stake — and so less bargaining power. To take the business scenario as an example, people felt that it was morally appropriate that Brian, who had more business partners (and so who was better off than George) should exert less effort to reap the same benefits from the deal. Le Pargneux and Cushman found that asking the other person to perform the action or explicitly refusing to do it were both seen as being more morally appropriate for the character with greater bargaining power.

(AO3) The results could be used as social control as those in power as legitimate authority figures in business could use this to their advantage to become wealthier by taking advantage of those seen to have less bargaining power. Suggesting that the research can be used as negative social control. The implication is that inequality in the real world as the rich will continue to get richer by using their power as a legitimate authority figure to their advantage.

2. Evaluate Social psychology in terms of reductionism. (8)

The following paragraphs could form part of the answer to this question:

(AO1) Social psychology can be reductionist because it explains that obedience is the result of legitimate authority figures. According to Agency theory people who have evolved to obey an authority figure, such as a person in uniform from a superior institution, as it gives them a survival advantage when organised in groups. When a legitimate authority figure gives a destructive order, most people will feel obliged to obey due to their upbringing and instinct to follow orders as we are also socialised to be obedient to people when we are growing up.

(AO3) This is reductionist because Agency theory simplifies obedience to be the result of a legitimate authority figure due to evolution. This is supported by , Le Pargneux and Cushman found that asking the other person to perform the action or explicitly refusing to do it where both seen as being more morally appropriate for the character with greater bargaining power. This supports agency theory because people comply because they feel they are agents for legitimate authority. In the power-imbalance scenarios, people judge it moral for stronger agents to give orders onto weaker agents—even if that perpetuates unfairness. Making it reductionist as it suggests those with more power are able to shift burdens onto those with less power as an explanation for obedience . This is a weakness because agency theory does not take into account at other factors such an authoritarian personality may be an explanation for obedience. Meaning that agency theory is an oversimplified explanation of obedience.

Level awarded and commentary

1. Assess how research in Social Psychology can be used for social control. (8)

The first paragraph (AO1) demonstrates accurate and thorough knowledge and understanding of a piece of research in Social Psychology. It explains the aims, the sample and the results. Paragraph two (AO3) identifies how the research could be used as social control in business. Judgement is made and an implication of the research being negative social control is included. With the inclusion of a competing argument and similarly structured paragraphs including other pieces of research from Social Psychology this would be a level 4 response overall.

2. Evaluate Social psychology in terms of reductionism. (8)

The first paragraph (AO1) demonstrates accurate and thorough knowledge and understanding of agency theory. Paragraph two (AO3) identifies how agency theory is reductionist. Followed by supporting research and a judgement. The paragraph concludes with an evaluation point to link back to the question. With the inclusion of competing arguments and similarly structured paragraphs from Social Psychology this would be a level 4 response overall.

