

The Social Experiment Expedition: A Documentary Dive

Welcome, Aria! Get ready to put on your detective hat and explore the fascinating world of social experiment documentaries. We'll be looking at how these films try to understand human behavior and how we, as viewers, can become smart critics of what we see.

Phase 1: What's the Big Idea? (20 minutes)

Let's start by figuring out what we're talking about:

- **Discussion Hook:** If you could design an experiment to secretly observe how people behave in a specific situation (like if they'd help someone who dropped their books, or how they react to a strange street performance), what would you want to find out? Why?
- **Defining Terms:** What is a 'social experiment'? (*Hint: It's a type of research where a situation is created or manipulated to see how people respond.*) What makes a documentary about it a 'social experiment documentary'? (*Hint: It's a film that shows and tells the story of such an experiment.*)
- **Why Do Them?:** Why do you think researchers and filmmakers create these? What can we learn from them about ourselves and society?
- **Brainstorm:** Can you think of any examples you might have heard of, even simple ones? (e.g., the 'bystander effect' experiments, conformity tests).

Phase 2: Gearing Up for the Doc (20 minutes)

Before we dive into watching, let's prepare ourselves to be thoughtful viewers:

- **Ethical Check-in:** Social experiments involve real people. What are some important rules or 'ethics' researchers should follow? Think about:
 - **Informed Consent:** Should people know they're in an experiment? Always? Sometimes?
 - **Potential Harm:** How can researchers protect participants from feeling bad, stressed, or embarrassed?
 - **Deception:** Is it ever okay to trick people for an experiment? If so, when and how?
 - **Debriefing:** What should happen after the experiment is over for the participants?
- **Choosing Your Documentary:** With your parent, select a social experiment documentary to watch. (*Parental guidance is advised to ensure age-appropriateness and content alignment. Examples could include 'The Push,' segments from 'Brain Games,' or specific episodes of documentary series focusing on social psychology, ensuring they are suitable for a 13-year-old.*) Read the synopsis together.
- **Predict & Question:** Based on the title and synopsis:
 - What do you think the main question of the experiment will be?
 - What do you predict will happen?
 - What are two questions you have before you start watching? Write them down!
- **Your Viewing Toolkit (Mental Notes or Jot Them Down!):** As you watch, keep these questions in mind:
 - What is the experiment trying to discover?
 - Who are the participants? How were they chosen? Do they seem like a diverse group?
 - What exactly happens in the experiment? What are the steps or procedures?
 - What are the most surprising or important moments/observations?
 - Do you notice any ethical red flags or things that make you feel uncomfortable for the participants?
 - What does the documentary say are the main results or conclusions?

Phase 3: Lights, Camera, Experiment! (Duration of Documentary + Pauses)

Time to watch! Settle in with your chosen documentary. Remember to:

- Pause if you want to write down a thought or an answer to one of your 'Viewing Toolkit' questions.
- Think critically! Not everything presented is the only way to see things.

Phase 4: The Debrief - Unpacking What You Saw (30-45 minutes)

Once the credits roll, let's talk about it!

- **Initial Reactions:** What's your first gut feeling? What surprised you, shocked you, or made you think the most?
- **Deep Dive with Your Toolkit Questions:**
 - **The Big Question:** Was the experiment's main question clear? Do you think it was an important question to ask?
 - **The 'How-To':** How was the experiment designed and carried out? Did you see any potential problems or biases in how it was set up (e.g., were the participants all very similar, was the situation realistic)?
 - **Ethics On Screen:** How were the ethical issues we talked about handled in this specific experiment and its documentary? Were there any moments where you thought the ethics were questionable? How did the film address (or not address) these?
 - **The Findings:** What were the main results shown? Did the documentary convince you that these conclusions were correct and based on good evidence? Why or why not?
 - **Real-World Link:** How do the findings of this experiment connect to real life, school, friendships, or bigger issues in society?
 - **Other Explanations?:** Could there be other reasons why people behaved the way they did, besides what the experiment concluded?

Phase 5: Thinking Like a Media Critic (20 minutes)

Remember, a documentary is also a film, crafted by filmmakers. Let's analyze that aspect:

- **The Filmmaker's Lens:** How did the way the documentary was made (e.g., music used, camera angles, which scenes were shown or cut, the narrator's tone) influence how you felt or what you thought about the experiment and its participants?
- **Edu-tainment:** Do you think the main goal of this documentary was to educate, to entertain, or both? How did that affect things?
- **How Reliable?:** How trustworthy do you think social experiment documentaries are as a source of information about human behavior? What makes them more or less reliable?

Phase 6: Your Turn to Explore! (Choose ONE activity - 30 minutes for planning/starting, can be extended)

Now, let's apply what you've learned in a fun way!

- **Option A: The Ethical Experiment Designer!**
 - Brainstorm a simple, *completely ethical* mini-social observation or question you're curious about (e.g., 'Do more people say thank you if you hold the door with a smile vs. no smile?', 'How many people will pick up a 'lost' (but not valuable) item you 'accidentally' drop in a safe public place?').
 - **Crucially:** How would you design this to be totally ethical? (No deception, no stress, full respect for anyone observed, no recording individuals without consent).
 - What would you be looking for? How would you (safely and respectfully) observe and note what happens?
 - *Discuss your idea and ethical plan with your parent before doing anything! This is mostly a thinking and planning exercise.*
- **Option B: Documentary Face-Off!**
 - If there's time and interest, watch a clip from another, different social experiment

documentary (or read a summary).

- Compare its methods, ethics, and findings to the one you watched in detail. What was similar? What was different? Which did you find more convincing or ethically sound, and why?
- **Option C: Critic's Corner!**
 - Write a review (2-3 paragraphs) of the documentary you watched. Include: a brief summary of the experiment, what you thought were its strengths and weaknesses, your opinion on its ethical handling, and whether you would recommend it to another student your age (and why).
- **Option D: The Big Debate!**
 - Consider the statement: 'Social experiment documentaries are more useful for understanding people than they are potentially harmful.'
 - Jot down 3 points for why this might be true, and 3 points for why it might be false, using examples from the documentary you watched. Be ready to discuss!

Phase 7: Wrapping It Up (10 minutes)

- **Key Takeaway:** What's the most interesting or important thing you learned today about social experiments, documentaries, or how people behave?
- **Shifting Perspectives:** Has this lesson changed how you'll watch documentaries or think about 'proof' of human behavior in the future? How so?
- **Lingering Questions:** Any experiments you wish someone would do (ethically, of course!)? Any questions still on your mind?

Great job exploring today, Aria! You've taken a big step in becoming a more critical and informed media consumer and a thoughtful observer of the world around you!