

# Social Psychology

## Lecture 6: Conformity and Obedience Part 1

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This topic is organized into two sections: Lessons 6 and 7. Over the course of our discussion, we will explore the fundamental ambivalence of conformity and obedience. While these behaviors act as the "social glue" necessary for order and functionality, they also possess a darker side, driving individuals toward extreme and often immoral forms of human social behavior. The part 1 discussion will cover the following topics: conformity and its types, Muzafer Sherif's studies of norm formation, Solomon Asch's study of group pressure, reasons for conforming, factors that influence conformity and strategies for resisting conformity.

At the end of this lecture, you will be able to:

1. Identify the landmark experiments in conformity and provide a breakdown of the methodologies used.
2. Identify the factors that affect and promote conformity.
3. Differentiate the two major reasons for conforming.
4. Explain the mechanisms on how we can resist conformity.

### CONFORMITY

- A change in behavior or belief as the result of real or imagined group pressure.
- adjusting one's behavior or thinking to coincide with a group standard.
- Do we really need to conform? Not really, but then, people often choose to conform to society rather than to pursue personal desires – because it is often easier to follow the path others have made already, rather than forging a new one.
- Conformity is at times good, at times bad, at times inconsequential.
  - **At times good:** For instance, adherence to traffic laws is a positive form of conformity. By following these established rules, society ensures public safety and maintains order on the road.

- ***At times bad:*** Example of negative conformity is when individuals mirror the harmful behaviors of a peer group, often resulting in destructive consequences for their personal lives and well-being.
- ***At times inconsequential:*** Following a sports dress code is a harmless form of conformity; wearing the uniform or choosing not to has no significant positive or negative effect on the individual.

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

### ***Western:***

- In Western individualistic cultures, where submitting to peer pressure is discouraged, the word “conformity” carries a negative connotation.
- Conformity is seen as a form of:
  - Submission
  - compliance)

### ***Eastern:***

- In Eastern culture, conformity is seen as a form of:
  - Communal sensitivity
  - Responsiveness
  - Cooperative team play)
- In Japan, going along with others is a sign not of weakness but of tolerance, self-control, and maturity (Markus & Kitayama, 1994).

## TYPES OF CONFORMITY

There are two varieties of conformity: acceptance and compliance.

### **A. Acceptance**

- involves both acting and believing in accord with social pressure.
- Examples: You exercise, as millions do, because you accept that exercise is healthy.  
You stop at red lights because you accept that not doing so is dangerous.

### **B. Compliance**

- Involves outwardly going along with the group while inwardly disagreeing.

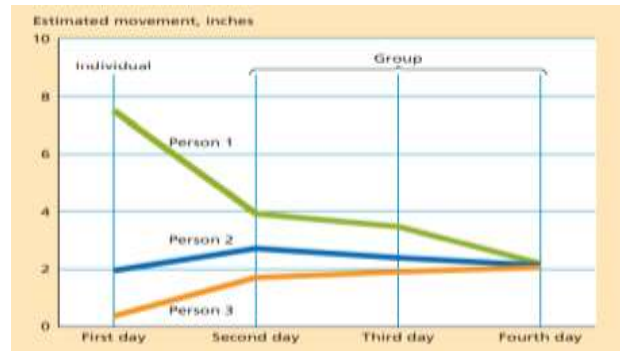
- Examples: You put on the necktie or the dress, although you dislike doing so.  
You say you like your friends' favorite band even though you don't.  
You followed your school dress code even though you thought it was dumb, because that was better than detention.
- **Obedience**, or compliance with commands given by an authority figure, is a variation of compliance. Example: If your mother tells you to clean up your room and you do.

## CLASSIC CONFORMITY AND OBEDIENCE STUDIES

### A. MUZAFER SHERIF'S STUDIES OF NORM FORMATION

- **Social norms** – patterns of behaviors that are accepted as normal, and to which an individual is expected to conform in a particular group or culture. They guide behavior but without the force of laws.
- **Key functions of norms:**
  1. They help reduce uncertainty about how to behave properly.
  2. Norms help to coordinate individual behavior.
  3. Norms help with the distribution of outcome.
- Norms include an evaluative component. Merely complying with a norm (e.g., waiting in line) will rarely earn you praise but violating it often generates negative response.
- **Experiment:** Muzafer Sherif (1935, 1937) wondered whether it was possible to observe the emergence of a social norm in the laboratory. He conducted an experiment to see if this is possible.
- **Aim:** To demonstrate that people conform to group norms when they are put in an ambiguous situation.
- He used an optical illusion called the **autokinetic phenomenon**
- Autokinetic phenomenon (auto – self; kinetic – motion) – the apparent movement of a stationary point of light in the dark.
- **Procedure:**
  - o **Day 1:** Participants were alone. Their estimates varied wildly (e.g., 2 inches vs. 8 inches).

- **Days 2 – 4:** Participants were put in a group. They heard others' estimates and subconsciously adjusted their own.
- **Result:** A social norm took hold as the participants' estimates aligned, resulting in a single, shared consensus by the end of the study.



Source: Sherif, 1935, as cited in Myers & Tewenge, 2016

- **Re-testing result:** A year later, Sherif retested the participants alone again. Participants continued to give the "group" answer rather than returning to their original individual estimates.
- **Lesson of the Experiment:** *"Our views of reality are not ours alone."*
- **Limitations of Sherif's Experiment:**
  1. The study involved extreme ambiguity
  2. The study was conducted in an artificial laboratory setting
  3. The study involved limited and homogeneous sample
  4. The task involves no social consequence
  5. Lack of proper debriefing

In our everyday lives, we subconsciously copy or follow others. Because we are wired to fit in, we often mimic the people around us without even realizing it.

- **Chameleon effect**

- Coined by Tanya Chartrand & John Bargh (1999)
- The tendency to nonconsciously mimic the behaviors (postures, mannerisms, facial expressions, and others) of someone with whom one is interacting.

- **Experiment:** Chartrand and Bargh (1999) demonstrated this effect in three experiments.
  - o **Experiment 1:** Researchers had students interact for 10 minutes with a confederate while apparently discussing photographs. The students interacted with two different confederates in two separate sessions. During the interactions, the confederates varied their mannerisms, smiling, shaking their feet, or rubbing their faces; the second confederate would exhibit mannerisms that the first hadn't.

**Result:** Students smiled more times per minute when partnered with a smiling confederate, and shook their feet or rubbed their faces more often when that behavior was exhibited by the confederate. At the end of each session, researchers asked the students if anything had stood out about the other participant. Not one student pointed out the target mannerisms, demonstrating that the chameleon effect is not conscious.
  - o **Experiment 2:** Participants were divided into two groups and they interacted with a confederate, but this time, the confederate was the one doing the mimicking.
    - **Group A:** The confederate subtly mimicked the participant's posture and gestures.
    - **Group B:** The confederate remained neutral and did not mimic.

**Result:** Participants who were mimicked rated the confederate as more likable and reported that the interaction felt smoother and more natural.
  - o **Experiment 3:** The researchers gave participants a personality test to measure their empathy, then had them participate in a mimicry task similar to Experiment 1.

**Result:** Empathic individuals exhibit the chameleon effect to a greater extent than do other people.
- Another example of the chameleon effect is **Yawn effect and Werther effect.**
  - o **Yawn effect**
    - "We yawn when others yawn".

- Robert Provine (2005, as cited in Duff, 2012) conducted an experiment on yawn effect. He exposed people to a five-minute video of a man yawning repeatedly and a man smiling repeatedly.

**Result:** 55% of people watching a video of a man yawning yawned while only 21% of people watching a video of a man smiling yawned. He determined that seeing a yawning face stimulates “mirror neurons” in the brain. These neurons are responsible for our as mimicking witnessed actions. Provine also found that even "thinking" about yawning triggers it at almost the same rate (approx. 55%) as actually seeing one.

- **Werther effect**

- an imitative suicidal behavior
- It is named after the protagonist of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s 1774 novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, in which the lead character dies by suicide. Following the book's release, there were reports of a rash of copycat suicides across Europe, leading several countries to ban the book.
- **Meta-analysis:** A total of 293 findings from 42 studies on the impact of publicized suicide stories in the media on the incidence of suicide in the real world were analyzed by Stack (2003) using logistic regression analysis. He found that:
  - Entertainment or political celebrity suicide stories were 14.3 times more likely to find a copycat effect than studies that did not.
  - Real stories were 4.03 times more likely to uncover a copycat effect as opposed to fictional story.
  - Research based on televised stories was 82% less likely to report a copycat effect than research based on newspapers.

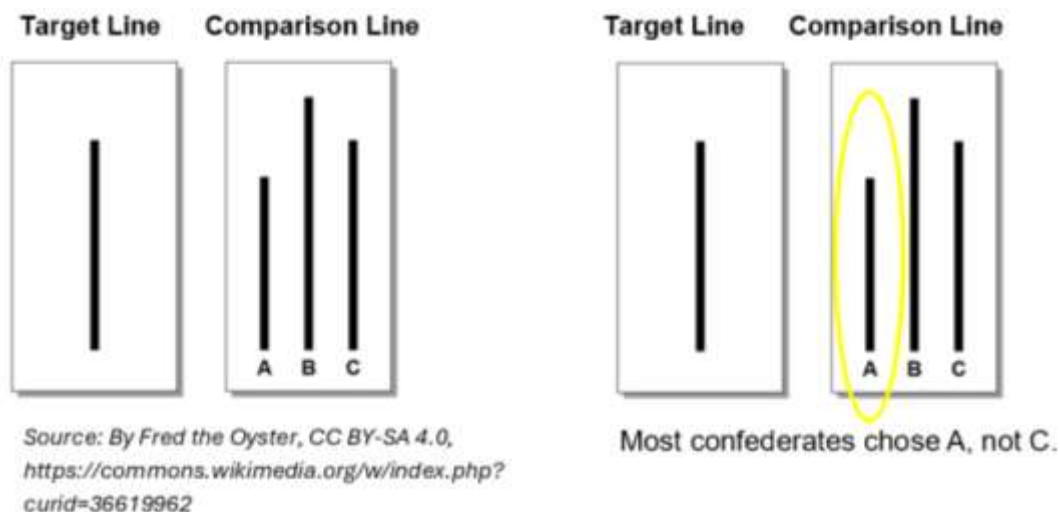
People tend to accept social norms out of the desire to be accepted. What happens when each individual in a group engages in outward acceptance and private rejection, believing that everyone else accepts the norm? It leads to pluralistic ignorance.

- **Pluralistic Ignorance**

- Type of norm misconception that occurs when each individual in a group privately rejects the norms of the group, but believes that others accept them.
- Example: After a teacher finishes explaining a difficult concept during a discussion, he ask if anyone has questions. While the majority of the students may feel completely lost, they look around and see their peers sitting quietly or nodding. Each student privately assumes that everyone else has mastered the material and that they are the only ones struggling. Fearing social stigma or appearing "unintelligent," every student remains silent to protect their image. In reality, the entire group shares the same internal experience of confusion, yet they collectively create a false impression of total comprehension.

## **B. ASCH'S STUDY OF GROUP PRESSURE**

- Subjects were shown two cards: one with a single "Target Line" and another with three "Comparison Lines" (A, B, and C).
- The point of this experiment was to measure the extent to which group pressure could affect an individual to conform.
- A participant was placed in a room with seven other people who were actually actors, or "confederates".
- Each person had to say aloud which comparison line matched the target line. The real participant always answered last or second-to-last. In saying their answers,



- The "correct" answer was always obvious, but confederates deliberately chose incorrect answers.
- Result:
  - When alone, 95% of the participants got the correct answer.
  - When in group, subjects were most likely to follow confederates and choose wrong answer (74%)
- Asch found that people were willing to ignore reality and give an incorrect answer in order to conform to the rest of the group.

### **Limitations of Asch's experiment:**

- Use of a biased sample (participants were all male of the same age group)
- The task at hand was artificial, unrelated to real life situations
- Experiment results reflected the specific socio-cultural conditions of 1950s America
- The deliberate deception of participants was an ethical issue

## **REASONS FOR CONFORMING**

- **Normative conformity**
  - Results from a person's desire to gain approval, to fit with the group or to avoid rejection
  - There may be a severe price to pay if normative behavior is not respected
  - Caused by concern for social image
  - This kind of influence was demonstrated in Asch's line experiment. Despite the participants' feelings that the group was wrong, participants were still highly likely to give the group's answers as their own.
  
- **Informational conformity**
  - Occurs when situation is ambiguous and you're not sure what to do
  - Occurs when immediate action is necessary during a crisis
  - Example: If an alarm goes off in a building but you don't smell smoke, you might look at the people around you. If they stay seated, you might assume it's just a drill

and stay seated too. Conversely, if everyone begins to run, you will likely run as well, trusting their assessment of the danger.

- Heightened when unsure of opinions or abilities
- Caused by the desire to be correct
- This kind of influence was demonstrated in Sherif's moving light experiment where participants continued to give the group's agreed-upon answer, even when they later encountered the situation alone.

### **FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CONFORMITY**

1. The group is at least three members
2. The group is unanimous
3. The person admires the group
4. The person feels incompetent
5. Responses are public, not anonymous
6. One had made no prior commitment
7. Demographic variables – age, gender and culture

### **HOW TO RESIST CONFORMITY**

#### **1. Finding an ally**

- Ally is anyone who provides social support by not going along with the crowd.
- Having just one other person agree with you (or even just disagree with the majority) undermines the unanimity.

#### **2. Motivation**

- People who are motivated to maintain their integrity or autonomy are the ones who are likely to resist to conformity or group pressure.
- People who are primarily motivated to gain social approval are likely the ones who easily conform and give in to group pressure.

### **3. Minority influence**

- At times, one person or a small group actually flips the script and convinces the majority to change their minds.
- Seen in the 1986 People Power Revolution (EDSA Revolution)

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