Conformity and Obedience

Conformity is changing behavior or beliefs to match those of other group members, due to unspoken group pressure, real or imagined.
Obedience involves agreeing to an explicit demand.

Behavior is influenced by both personality and social factors. However, many of us underestimate the social and environmental factors on our behavior, and overestimate individual factors—the fundamental attributional error.

Solomon Asch wanted to illustrate that social pressure to conform to a group of strangers is powerful even in the presence of an objectively incorrect judgment, suggesting that the pressure to conformity would even be greater when judgment is more subjective.

In the Asch line experiment, you came into a room of five people. You were the sixth person. You were to judge which comparison line was the same length as the standard line. For example,

On random trials, the first five people provided a clearly incorrect answer, such as line A.

Results

People conformed on at least one incorrect trial 76% of the time.
On all incorrect trials, people conformed 37% percent of the time (this also means 63% did not conform).
A control group with no other members, only subjects had an error rate of 1%.

What would happen to your attitude (belief about the line) if you didn't recognize the influence of social forces?

Most people tend to make a dispositional attribution, rather than a situational attribution. They underestimate the power of the situation. In addition, the following apply to the Asch line experiment:

(1) There is no direct pressure to conform.
(2) There is no explicit incentive offered to conform.
(3) The other people are strangers.
(4) There is an objectively correct answer.

Quite often these factors are not present in real situations.

(1) There is direct pressure to conform.
(2) There is explicit incentive offered to conform.
(3) The other members of the group are known.
(4) There is not an objectively correct answer.

The presence of these factors should increase the rate of conformity.

Other individual differences such as gender, religious affiliation, education, or occupation do not predict rates of conformity.

After a series of experiments that had some slight changes from the original Asch line experiment, several factors that affect conformity were identified.

Table 12.2: Factors that promote conformity

You're more likely to conform to group norms when:

- You are facing a unanimous majority of four or five people.
- You must give your response in front of a group.
- You have not already expressed commitment to a different idea or opinion.
- You find the task ambiguous or difficult.
- You doubt your abilities or knowledge in the situation. (just like when you start a new job, or when you have low self-efficacy)
- You are strongly attracted to a group and want to be a member of it.

Where can conformity affect “real world” decisions?

Obedience: The Milgram Experiment

Obedience involves agreeing to an explicit demand. Conformity is changing behavior or beliefs to match those of other group members, due to unspoken group pressure, real or imagined.

In this experiment, the test subject came into the room where he met a second person—which unknown to him was an accomplice of the experimenter. In this experiment, one of them became the teacher and one of them became the learner of a list of words. The two of them drew names to see who would become the teacher and the learner—the accomplice always became the learner.

The teacher would read a list of words and the learner would repeat them back to the teacher. The teacher would administer electric shocks to the learner when he got an answer wrong. Each subsequent shock would be increased 15 volts. A sample shock was delivered to the teacher just in case there was any doubts about that the generator could produce electric shocks.

If the teacher protested and pleaded with the experimenter to stop the experiment, the experimenter said that you should treat no answer as a wrong answer and deliver an electric shock to the learner. The experimenter would prod the teacher with four verbal prods:

Please continue (or please go on).
The experiment requires that you continue.
It is absolutely essential that you continue.
You have no other choice, you must go on.

Only when the teachers refused to obey the experiment, or they reached 450 volts, the experimenter would stop the experiment.

For those of you who have not read about this experiment,

(1) What percentage of test subjects would deliver electric shocks beyond 300 volts?

(2) What percentage of test subjects would deliver shocks all the way to 450 volts?

(3) At what voltage would half the test subjects stop delivering an electric shock?

Remember, a house outlet is 120 volts.

0
50
100
120: household voltage
150
200
250
300
350
400
450

Milgram asked psychiatrists, college students and middle-class adults to predict how the subjects would behave.

(1) What percentage of test subjects would deliver electric shocks beyond 300 volts?

Answer: very few
Actual results:

(2) What percentage of test subjects would deliver shocks all the way to 450 volts?

Answer: no one—maybe one in 1000.
Actual results:

(3) At what voltage would half the test subjects stop delivering an electric shock?

Answer: 150 volts
Actual results:

The first thought was that these were sadistic people. After all, who would deliver electric shocks that were painful to a stranger—the fundamental attributional error?

What does the Milgram experiments reflect about the nature of people? Are there good aspects (like the humanists focus on), or is it more destructive, as Freud believed?

(1) When the teachers were allowed to act as their own authority, 95% did not go beyond 150 volts (the first point the learner protested). They were not influenced as much (although some) by the authority figure.
(2) Milgram saw that people were more likely to muster the courage to defy an authority when they saw someone else do so—see conditions that affect conformity.
(3) When the directions were given over the phone, conformity decreased. People lied about the electric shocks given (they only delivered 15 volts).
(4) People truly felt bad about following orders. The teachers of the experiment did not behave in a cold-blooded, unfeeling way.

Why is understanding the Milgram Experiment important? What behaviors does this experiment help explain?

Interest in the concepts of obedience and conformity increased after 5 to 6 millions of Jews were killed in World War II concentration camps. Their military executioners denied responsibility by saying that they were merely obeying orders. Could a person be pressured by others to commit an immoral act, such as hurt a stranger? How could mild mannered and "normal" people send Jews to the gas chamber? Can situation factors affect behavior?

Soldiers should disobey inappropriate orders, however, soldiers are not trained to recognize illegal or immoral orders. The commanding officer directed the unprovoked slaughter of hundreds of Vietnamese at My Lai. One participant in My Lai massacre recalled the following:

> *Lieutenant Calley told me to start shooting. So I started shooting. I poured about four clips into the group... They were begging and saying, "No, No." And the mothers were hugging their children and... Well, we kept right on firing. They were waving their arms and begging...*

From Milgram's other experiments:

> It's always easier to drop bombs on people from an airplane or fire missiles off shore or thousands of miles away…your victim is so impersonal and distant.

Whether obedience is good or bad is not a scientific question. In some circumstances it is important for people to obey certain rules and procedures (eg. safety protocols, stopping at a stop sign, nurses obeying doctors, who seem legitimately an authority… that is the difficult part, establishing who is a legitimate authority.), while challenging and disobeying certain rules and commands (eg. those that require you to harm others).

Deciding when to obey and when to challenge is difficult. Most of us aren't aware of the pressure, use dissonance reduction techniques, factors that influence our perception of "reality", and don't think about the consequence and monitor our own behavior.

Should we have training on understanding who the are legitimate authorities and how our perception of their legitimacy is influenced by others?

What factors affected the willingness for the teachers to continue to obey the experimenter's orders?

A previous well-established mental framework to obey. They volunteered to participate in a psychological study and follow the experimenter's instructions, and they were paid in advance (rule of commitment).
The situation or context, in which the obedience occurred. It took place in a scientific lab at Yale University with the context of doing scientific research. Even the experimenter was polite, making it difficult to refuse (rule of reciprocity).
The gradual, repetitive escalation of the task. The escalation of the voltage was in small steps which made it easier to deliver a much larger electric shock.
The experimenter's behavior and reassurances. The experimenter reassured the teacher that the experimenter was responsible for the well-being of the learner, thus reducing their perception of responsibility.
The physical and psychological separation from the learner. The learner was in a different room and not visible to the teacher.
No specific personality trait consistently predicts conformity or obedience in experimental situations.

Ways anti-social behavior develop:

Social learning (Ch 5)—observe someone hurting, killing, abusing another.
Reinforcements (Ch 5)—Being reinforced for hurting, killing, abusing another
Social forces (Milgram experiment)
Deindividuation
Foot-in-the-door technique
Dehumanize the victim
Brain damage
Low levels of serotonin
Traits

What are other instances where we ignore the power of the situation (the fundamental attributional error)?

The rise of Hitler and the Nazi party
The internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII
The development of the atomic bomb
The DOE exposed pregnant women to radiation and their unborn fetus without their knowledge
The inappropriate use of intelligence tests to screen immigrants

Deindividation

The reduction of self-awareness and inhibitions that can occur when a person is part of a group whose members feel anonymous. The feeling of anonymity can arise from being masked, dim lighting or large groups.

What behaviors does this help explain:

- Hooded Klu Klux Klan members
- Parties at night
- Large groups
- Masquerade parties
- Riots

What are the negative effects of deindividuation?
What are the positive effects of deindividuation?

How do you reduce effects due to deindividuation (for the negative effects)?

Why do people hurt one another? What concepts in social psychology (or psychology in general) can help you understand how average people can hurt and murder other innocent people?

When the Greeks trained people to torture prisoners, they did it in small increments (the foot-in-the-door technique).

guard a prisoner,
participate in arrest squads,
ordered to occasionally hit the prisoner,
observe a torture, and finally
practice it

When studying the psychology of personality, many students believe that by understanding an individual's personality, they can see what kind of person they will be (Hitler versus Mother Teresa). Implicitly, they were focusing on the individual, and not the social situation that influences behavior.

Many students say in Chapter 11: Personality that by understanding leaders, we can see what kind of people they will be (eg. Saddam Hussein, Adolf Hitler, etc.). Implicity, they were focusing on the personality and not the social situation.