

What social influences affect the choices we make in society?

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A recent experiment was carried out that showed how 9 out of 12 people would give an electric shock of 450 volts, a life threatening amount, to a stranger if instructed to by a non-violent authority figure. Would you? Now picture this: a girl has begun her first day at high school, and whilst in maths class, realises that an answer suggested by one of her fellow pupils is incorrect. All others in her class agree to the wrong answer and therefore, she stays quiet. Would you? These situations both demonstrate examples of social influences which exist in today's society, and which affect the choices we make.

Social influences can be summarised as different circumstances where our opinions and choices are being affected by those around us. These may involve a range of influences, whether one consciously obeys a figure of authority or unintentionally conforms to surrounding opinion. In our everyday lives, we are confronted with pressure to obey authority. This leads us to trust and obey certain figures because of their position or occupation. Scenarios that many will relate to are agreeing to the plans of a medical advisor, or trusting a parent's judgement. An extreme example in history of this social influence is the Nazi regime in Germany.

In the years of World War II the Nazis were responsible for the horrific killing of approximately 6 million Jews. What has become known as the Holocaust showed how the most innocent of people, under particular conditions of obedience to the authority could become vulnerable to criminality. The frighteningly common phrase of those convicted at the Nuremburg Trials following World War II was that they were simply "following orders". In 1963, Scientist Stanley Milgram completed the first experiment that would test our <https://assignbuster.com/what-social-influences-affect-the-choices-we-make-in-society/>

'obedience to authority', even if it meant harming another human being in the process. Those who had volunteered for the experiment were told that the investigation was in order to determine how punishment affects learning.

There would be a 'scientist' (the figure of authority) who would give instructions, someone to behave as the 'teacher' in one room, who would ask the questions and a 'student' in another, who would attempt to answer. Those unaware of the real intentions would play the part of the teacher and would bear the job of administering electric shocks to the student if they gave an incorrect answer, raising the voltage each time. The scientist and student were in fact actors and would know of the real experiment. The 'student' in reality would not receive any shocks. The machine responsible for the 'electric shocks' would display the different voltages and give warnings at points of particular danger, e.

g. very intense, extreme danger and so on and if the teacher ever questioned the scientist on the safety of the 'student' or on whether to continue, the scientist would reply, "the experiment requires that you continue." Results demonstrated that 65% went to the full 450 volts. In 2008, the experiment was repeated and as previously mentioned, this time 9 out of 12 went to the full voltage. This worrying result shows that we have become more influenced by figures of authority.

Why we have become more inclined to buckle to this social influence, since 1963, is another question altogether, when many would argue that nowadays we are less likely to respect authority. Some suggest that we were inclined to obey the figure of authority in Milgram's experiment due to the <https://assignbuster.com/what-social-influences-affect-the-choices-we-make-in-society/>

fact that it was done in the name of science and so may, in the future, go towards a greater good. Others propound that, because lower shocks were administered initially, it was hard to back down from a gradual process. A third explanation might be that, as the participant was unable to see the 'student' receiving shocks, it was easier to be coerced into cooperating. In general, social conformity means that we look to our neighbours in order to come to a conclusion ourselves about a certain decision that we have to make. A few common examples, which demonstrate social adaptation, may be viewing other tables at a stylish restaurant, to decide on which fork to use, or, in other situations, such as at school, you wearing a particular design of bracelet because others in the class own one.

Conformity in its ugliest form appears in a well-known extract from the Bible, whereupon Pontius Pilate is pressured by the crowds to crucify Jesus. Pilate is unaware of what crime Jesus has committed and attempts to convince the people of Jerusalem of his innocence: " He went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in him no fault at all." However he bows to the pressure of their demands and orders for Christ to be crucified. In 1951, Scientist Solomon Asch conducted a conformity experiment in which the participants were led to believe they were testing quality of vision. He sampled groups of people who knew about the real intentions of the experiment, alongside individuals who was oblivious of its true object. For each round, questions based on the length of lines shown on a diagram had to be answered.

Initially the groups were insinuating the correct answers, then gradually to give wrong answers. Under pressure to conform to the majority vote, 75% of all "blind" participants gave an incorrect answer to at least one question, even if they believed that a different answer was correct. In some circumstances, we submit to conforming because we are afraid of rejection in our society. In other cases, we genuinely believe the answer given by others to be right, or we are ignorant ourselves, and so this is our only source of information. Those who have studied the matter have additionally discovered that we tend to conform when rapid action is essential.

Through experiments in past years, and my own personal experience, it has been proven that social influences do, in fact, affect our choices. Although, in everyday examples, conforming with or obeying figures of authority appears harmless, these influences can be used negatively to reinforce evil ambition. The exploitation of social influence can be as extreme as the crucifixion of Christ or the Holocaust. However, even the influence of the school bully can highlight all that is wrong with society. From the actions of one dictator, many bad happenings can emanate.

Equally concerning conformity removes the marvel of diversity, and leads to decisions being taken for all of the wrong reasons. Bibliography

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