

# Conformity and obedience essay sample



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Task: outline and evaluate findings from conformity and obedience research and consider explanations for conformity (and non-conformity), as well as evaluating Milgram's studies of obedience (including ethical issues).

The following essay will be about understanding what is meant by and distinguishing the differences between the terms conformity and obedience. It will show the evaluation of two key psychological studies which seek to explain why people do and do not conform, also with explanations of minority influence. Whilst seeking to understand the reasons why people obey authority, it will show an evaluation of Milgram's study of obedience, discussing the ethical issues raised from the research and assessing whether the knowledge gained about human behaviour justifies Milgram's experiments.

Most people like to feel that they make their own decisions, but in reality they are often just 'conforming' by adjusting their actions, attitudes or opinions so that they fit in with those of other people, or just simply to 'go with the flow'. This happens as a result of real or imagined group pressure (Myers) in (Cardwell 2001), and may result in a change in beliefs or behaviour. Nobody tells you to conform, and you may not even realise you are doing it as it is implied or implicit. Throughout the course of our lives we become associated with or attached to groups which will each have its own responses expected of it. As a bus passenger you are expected to behave in a certain way, although your attitude may not be as important. As a football fan your attitude towards your team is important where as your behaviour may not be as important. As a parent the attitudes towards your children are supposed to include encouragement and you expected to demonstrate

protective and helpful behaviour. It can be found to say that recognising and acting within the pro-social norms of a group may be seen as a desirable act, whereas unthinking conformity to a deviant group opinion might be considered less attractive and more of a trait. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) distinguished between informational social influence (I. S. I) and normative social influence (N. S. I).

I. S. I - To feel in charge of our lives we all have a basic need for certainty. We need to know our beliefs and ideas are correct and acceptable. If we don't know how to behave in a situation such as first day at college/work, we look for information to tell us the correct way to act. When we're unsure about something we seek for others opinion. In this way we can use that information to evaluate and form our own opinion; although this happens more in situations we're not familiar with. There is also novel or ambiguous situations, such as when a fire alarm goes off accidentally, people may look to others for guidance. If they appear to know the answer people will probably go along with or conform to their behaviour. If we conform because of I. S. I it's highly likely that we internally believe the opinions we adopt. At first we're unsure what to believe, which is why we compare our ideas with others, and become converted to share their views. ISI is based on the need to be right. When people are unsure of their own judgement they often accept the judgement of others as a guide. N. S. I - we conform in order to belong, to be liked and to be approved by others as people are more likely to accept us if we agree with them.

All social groups have norms which define appropriate behaviour for its members. Conforming to a group's norms brings acceptance and approval

while non-conforming can bring disapproval and even rejection. According to Kelman (1958) there are three forms of N. S. I. They are compliance, internalisation and identification. You may publically go along with a group's ideas or norms to be accepted. People act in accordance with the majority but don't agree or change their own beliefs or ideas privately. This is called Compliance. Internalisation is where the person comes to accept and eventually believes the group view. If we consider a person to be both trustworthy and a good judge of character then we are more likely to accept their opinions and values, merging them with our own. Over time these thought become part of our own cognitive world. When a person wants to be associated with a group accepting and believing the groups view this is called identification. A person may desire to be like another person, which may involve adopting the characters of the person (or group). This may not necessarily be to bring us rewards but because we find it satisfying to be like those, who we are identifying with.

According to Cardwell (1996) obedience is a type of social influence whereby somebody acts in response to a direct order from another person. There is an implication the actor is made to respond in a way that they wouldn't have otherwise done without the order. You are in no doubt when you are obeying an order (explicit). It is obvious when you are following an order and you won't change your attitudes as you are behaving as instructed. We will always find ourselves in situations in which we are told to do things by other people, for example boss or supervisor at work. Within society we work in a hierarchy. We may disagree or resent the orders we are given even when they are legitimate. It is unlikely we will be given an order or instruction that

goes against our conscience or involves us inflicting serious harm on another person.

So why do we conform? Gross, R, et al (2000) in '2nd edition psychology a new introduction for A-levels' says whenever we change our behaviours or views to the real or imagined presence of others we are conforming. It is pretty much impossible to live amongst people and not become influenced by them in some way. Sometimes people's attempts to change our behaviour are very obvious. On other occasions social influence is less direct and may not involve any explicit requests or demands, for example, when your choice of clothes or taste of music is influenced by what your friends wear or listen to, you are showing conformity. Your peers exert pressure on you to behave (and think) in certain ways, a case of the majority influencing on the individual. Asch (1951) devised a simple perceptual task where the solution was clear and obvious to see. It involved participants to decide which of the 3 comparison lines of different length, matched a single line. The experiment consisted of 123 male students from Swarthmore College in USA. There was an obvious answer and the participants would be sat amongst 4 to 6 confederates and would be sat in either seat 5 or 6 around a table.

The participants would give the correct answer but as the experiment went on, the confederates began to start choosing the wrong answers to see if the participants would conform to the majority. The results showed on average 32% of people conformed in critical trials, 75% of people conformed at least once and just 25% of people failed to conform at all. After the experiment the participants were asked why they conformed. To which they all said to be

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right or because they doubted their answers. Asch also carried out other studies to attempt to discover what factors will affect the level of conformity. He believed the size of the group affected the level of conformity and it tended to increase when the group the group size did. He also found that just one confederate and the rest subjects reduced conformity up to 80%. The status of the majority in the group was also another factor. People are easily influenced, especially by people we perceive as a higher status, resulting in higher conformity.

Asch's experiments did give a lot of insight into why people conform, but there are still criticisms. As the tests were done in a lab it lacks ecological validity. People may have just been conforming due to the setting and atmosphere. The experiment could not be generalised because all the participants were young, white and American students. They would have all been from similar I. Q groups. The issue of ethics was also questioned as Asch deceived his subjects. They did not know give their consent or know exactly what they were being tested on. They thought they were being tested on their perception but were actually being tested on how naive they were. Asch did however debrief all his participants after the experiment. One of the earliest criticisms of Asch's work was that it was time consuming and uneconomical in sense one person at a time. Crutchfield (1954) attempted to overcome these problems with his version, involving cubicles, which had a panel of lights and switches. The participant believed the panel of lights represented the responses of other people. The cubicle took away the need for confederates and also allowed for several participants to be tested at one time.

There were quite a few replications of Asch's experiment. Perrin and Spencer (1980) replicated the experiment in England during the 1970's, finding only one person conformed. There is a clear cultural and timing difference also with the participants being mostly science students, who would have been confident enough to not conform. Lalancette and Standing (1980) replicate the experiment and found no conformity at all. Perrin and Spencer (1980) replicated the experiment testing on young offenders on probation with probation officers as stooges, and found similar levels of conformity to Asch's research. Moscovici et al (1969) believed differently to Asch's studies. They set up a stooge minority of 2 to consistently describe a blue- green colour as green. The majorities view had changed to that of the minority, and this effect persisted even when further colour judgements were asked for after the stooges left the experiment. 32% of participants conformed at least once. This shows that the majority can be influenced by the minority. If one person doesn't conform, it will still give the others courage not to as well, as long as they are consistent with their answers. This is called minority influence.

Another popular experiment in psychology is Zimbardo et al.'s (1973) prison experiment. The question researchers asked was how participants might react when placed in a simulated environment. A mock prison was set up in the basement of Stanford University psychology building, and then selected 24 undergraduates' students to play the roles of both prisoners and guards. Participants were each selected from a larger group of 70 because they had no criminal background, lacked psychological issues and had no major medical issues. The volunteers agreed to participate for a 1 to 2 week period

in exchange for \$15 a day. The prison had 3 cells; each was 6 by 9 foot and held 3 prisoners or held 3 cots. Other rooms were for the guards and prison officers. One very small place was designated as the solitary confinement room. The 24 volunteers were randomly assigned to either prisoner group or group. Prisoners were to remain in the mock prison 24 hours a day, while guards were assigned to work in 3 man teams for 8 hour shifts. After each shift the guards were allowed to return home until their next shift.

Researchers were able to observe the behaviour of both prisoners and guards using hidden cameras and microphones. While the experiment was suppose to last for 14 days it had to be cut short after just 6 days due to what was happening to the prisoner participants. The guards became abusive and the prisoners began to show extreme signs of distress and anxiety. The guards were allowed to act as they wanted, and were generally hostile, while the prisoners became passive and depressed. Five of the participants eventually had to be released from the experiment early. Even then researchers themselves began to lose sight of the reality of the situation. Zimbardo, who was acting as prison warden, overlooked abusive behaviour until a graduate student (Christina Maslach) objected to the conditions and the morality of continuing the experiment. ' Only a few people were able to resist the situational temptations to yield to power and dominance while maintaining some semblance of morality and decency; obviously I was not among that noble class' Zimbardo in his book ' The Lucifer Effect'.

The Stanford Prison experiment is often cited as an example of unethical research. It could not be replicated by researchers today because it fails to

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meet many of the ethical codes. Zimbardo even said ' although we ended the experiment a week earlier than planned, we did not end it soon enough.' Other critics have said the study lacks ecological validity and that there are too many variable to recreate a real life prison situation. Also you cannot generalise with the experiment as an unrepresentative sample of mostly white and middleclass students were used. Despite a lot of criticism, the Stanford Prison experiment is still an important area of study in the understanding of how the situation can influence human behaviour. Another recent is the reports of the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuses in Iraq brought attention to the study. Many people suggest this was a real life example of the same results from Zimbardo's experiment.

The most famous experiments in this area were carried out by Stanley Milgram in the 1960's. Milgram found that if instructed to people could deliver potentially fatal electric shocks to another person as part of a psychological experiment. Volunteers took the role of a teacher who would be delivering shocks to a student, each time he was asked a question and produced an incorrect answer. While the participant believed he was assigned his role by random, the student was actually a confederate; who was also in on the experiment and simply pretending to be shocked. During the experiments many of the participants showed signs of distress and attempted to withdraw, but 65% showed total obedience to the orders of the experimenter, that they should continue to the end.

The aim of Milgram's research was to gain an explanation to the war crimes of World War 2, but what it actually showed was the tendency to obey an authority figure, even if that means taking the life of another, can be found

in all of us. Darling (1997) says taking part in Milgram's experiment could change them for the worse. As a result of concerns about the amount of anxiety experienced by many of the participants, all subjects were debriefed at the end of the experiments to explain the procedures and use of deception. Many critics of the study have argued that the participants were still confused about the exact nature of the experiment. Milgram later surveyed the participants and found that 84% were glad to have participated, while 1% regretted any involvement.

Milgram's studies have been criticized for its ethics. Although this would have seriously affected the results of the experiment, by failing to reveal his true intentions Milgram was deceiving his participants, whilst also failing to ask for informed consent. He made it difficult for them to withdraw from the experiment and whenever Milgram's participants would show any reluctance to administer the shocks, the experimenter gave a series of verbal prods or cues, which were basically orders that the participant should continue with the experiment. Many of the participants were observed to '...sweat, stutter, tremble, groan, bite their lips and dig their nails into their flesh. Full blown uncontrollable seizures were observed for three (participants)'. Milgram (1974).

Orne and Holland (1968) say that Milgram's experiments lack experimental validity and that participant's might not had believed they were actually delivering the electric shocks. However, in another study with students, participants were found to obey 75% of the time when asked to deliver electric shocks to a puppy, Sheridan and King (1972) puppy experiment, this possibility seems to be excluded. Orne and Holland (1968) say that

Milgram's experiments lack ecological validity or realism. They say ' the results do not extend beyond the particular laboratory setting in which they were collected'. Also adding that the cues in the experimental setting influenced the participant's perception. On the other hand, Hoffling et al.'s (1966) naturalistic study of nurses, would dispute this claim. They found that out of 22 nurses, who were before asked if they would administer a drug without written authorisation and twice the recommended daily dose, that they all said they would not, however 21 out of 22 participants, when asked by a ' real' doctor, complied without hesitation. 50% claimed not to have noticed the dosage discrepancy.

Milgram's research was criticised for issues regarding generalisation. Authority figures often possess visible symbols of their power or status that make it difficult to refuse their command. In Milgram's experiments the experimenter always wore a grey coat. Altogether Milgram studied 636 which represented a cross-section of the population of New Haven (the location of Yale University). This was said to be a small, white American town. Milgram himself also admitted that those who continued to give the shocks up to the maximum of 450 volts were more likely to see the learner as responsible, opposed to themselves. These participants were said to have a stronger authoritarian character, which includes respect for authority and a lower level of moral development (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1996). He used mainly male participants for the experiments, and of the 40 females that were used as participants, 65% went up to the 450 volts, comparable with the results of males.

So did the knowledge gained justify Milgram's experiments? Well Milgram found that the German's did not have a more sadistic nature, which refuted the original hypothesis. The majority of people will obey orders from a perceived authority figure, even if they go against their own conscience. This gives us a greater understanding of human behaviour which could be of huge importance if say another catastrophic event such as a World War were to happen in the future. Obedience can be taught in dangerous situations, where our natural state may cause us to find the situation distressing (eg. Army, Nurse). Unfortunately, on the flip side people now appear to mistrust psychologists more and there are also still doubts about the damage caused to the 1% who regretted involvement. This did however lead to raising the issue of stress and harm, and the need for ethics in psychology. Milgram's study on obedience was one of the first studies in this area. This comes from the observation of physical and mental stress and harm in previous research that has been deemed to be inexcusable in recent times. His study made use of deception in having participants think they were shocking a real person, also failing to reveal experiment was actually to measure obedience to authority. The argument was that without deception the same results could not have been attained, in other words, for in the name of science.

To conclude on this, people will conform to be liked or to be right. Whether that is to fit in or because that is all they know and they believe that is the way they must act. They will conform to the roles they believe are socially acceptable for example the guards in the prison experiment conformed to the roles they believed they should act. The same could be said about the prisoners. On the other hand people will obey orders from an authority figure

occasionally even if it means going against their own moral beliefs. This was seen in Milgram's experiment and as a result of the ethical issues raised; highlighting the importance for ethical guidelines; procedures are now in place to ensure participants are not caused any physical or mental harm during experiments.