

Psychological studies on conformity and obedience



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This essay begins by distinguishing conformity and obedience and their terms. Evaluating two psychological studies conducted by Salomon Asch (1956) and Crutchfield (1962), seeking to explain why people conform; identifying ethical and psychological issues, and some controversial arguments for the studies validity. Evaluating Moscovici's (1969) explanation about minority influence. Evaluating Milgram's (1974) studies of obedience. Assessing whether knowledge gained about human behaviour justifies Milgram's (1974) experiments.

People often change their attitudes to match others for so many reasons; one reason for this conformity is the concern about what other people may think and by the influence that society has on individuals. Conformity refers to an individual's tendency to follow the unspoken rules or behaviours of a social group of which the individual belongs to; either from peer pressure or fear of rejection. (Hill, G. 2009, p. 48) Cites as simplified by Crutchfield (1962) as 'yielding to group pressure'.

Obedience, however, relates to the social power which leads an individual to act in response from a direct order usually by an authority figure, resulted from the fear of punishment. (McLeod, S. A. 2007b) Cites obedience involves a hierarchy of power. Conformity, Obedience and their aspects were studied aiming to identify how individuals would react under pressure, identifying the types of social powers surrounding society.

(Cardwell, M. and Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 148) Cites Asch (1956) conducted a study aiming to discover the social pressure or the social norm that could potentially impact the effect that leads individuals to conform. Asch's (1956)

original study, called the 'line study', had many variations which sought to find which of those variables could have a major impact with the levels of conformity within individuals. (McLeod, S. A. 2008) Cites study participants who answered in private had a decrease on conformity levels as the group pressure decreased, and normative influence was not as powerful. (McLeod, S. A. 2008) Cites Asch (1956), in a variation of the original experiment, introduced one participant to go against the majority, which showed a reduction on conformity levels. (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C 2008, p. 149) Cites Asch (1956) studied the effects of the size of majority and found that there was an increase in conformity levels when the majority consisted of just one, two or three individuals. However, increasing the size of the majority group beyond that did not affect the conformity levels; concluding that the size of the group is important but to a certain point. (Hill, G. 2009, p. 48) Cites Asch (1956) concluded there were many factors which contributed to the levels of conformity; by distortion of perception, distortion of judgement and distortion of action; therefore, breaking the group's consensus.

(McLeod, S. A. 2016) Cites Kelman (1958) suggested conformity can be identified through as compliance (change in behaviour without a change in opinion), as internalisation (change of behaviour and opinion) and identification (change of behaviour and opinion to identify with a certain group). (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C 2008, p. 149) Cites a recent researcher, Lucas et al. (2006), highlighted that when individuals are facing a difficult task such as math's problems, the self-efficacy of the individual's moderates the level of conformity. These researchers concluded that, in an Asch type task, participants with more confidence in their abilities remained more

independent than low-self-efficacy participants. Another research compiled information confirming why this was possible; Berns et al. (2005) conducted a scan of a working brain. (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 149) Cites the findings confirmed that conformity showed up as activity in regions of the brain that were entirely devoted to perception, whereas independence of judgement showed up as activity in brain areas involving emotion; demonstrating the changes within the brain by the exposure to attitudes or beliefs from an individual, leader or powerful majority.

(Hill, G. 2009, p. 49) Cites Crutchfield (1954) also conducted a study about conformity but without physical presence; individuals were allocated in individual cubicles with electronic display boards. Crutchfield (1954) supposedly told individuals the answers from the other participants. (Hill, G. 2009, p. 49) Cites Crutchfield (1954) after tested his subjects for conformity; participants completed a test for personality and I. Q type tests. (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 150) Cites findings reflect that individuals who conformed the most were typically less intellectual, had less ego strength, had less leadership ability and were narrower minded.

(Hill, G. 2009, p. 49) Cites McGuire (1968a) found inconsistency of conformity across different situations; referred to as social theories of conformity. (Hill, G. 2009, p. 49) Cites as referred to by Deutsch and Gerard (1955) Informational Social Influence (which reflects the need that everyone has for certainty) and Normative Social Influence (which reflects the need for social acceptance and approval from others from potentially embarrassing situations such as disagreeing with the groups or faced with a conflict).

Individuals are more likely to refer to another person's perspective. (Hill, G. <https://assignbuster.com/psychological-studies-on-conformity-and-obedience/>

2009, p. 49) Cites Turner (1991) referred to as Referent Social influence as people tend to conform to the norms of the group they belong.

Nevertheless, Asch's (1956) experiment received many criticisms. (McLeod, S. A. 2008) Cites the lack of informed consent and deception felt by individuals (as the real purpose of the research was not clear), and the fact that the other subjects were not actual participants. Therefore, (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 150) Cites this led into many potential questions into the validity of the experiment as findings could potentially only explain conformity in certain circumstances. (McLeod, S. A. 2008) Cites the lack of population validity concern and that results could not be generalised, due to the lack of female gender participants and the lack of a variety of age groups. (McLeod, S. A. 2008) Cites as tests were conducted under laboratory conditions and not into real-life situations, they could not be used to determine the conformity levels from the broader world population. (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 151) Cites the possibility of these findings to be unique to one culture. (McLeod, S. A. 2008) Cites critics suggested the levels of conformity conducted in the 1950s, with participants being all American males, bearing the same age group, reflected only the American culture. (McLeod, S. A. 2008) Cites that Back et al. (1963) criticised the ethical issues involving the experiments, suggesting participants were highly emotional and not protected by the psychological stress that could potentially happen if possibly disagreeing with the majority.

(Hill, G. 2009) Cites Perrin and Spencer (1980) tried to replicate Asch's experiment in England in the late 1970s using science and engineering students. (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 151) Cites findings showed <https://assignbuster.com/psychological-studies-on-conformity-and-obedience/>

their initial investigation obtained only one conforming response out of 396 trials. (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 151) Cites Perrin and Spencer (1980) argued that a cultural change took place for the levels of conformity and obedience. (Cardwell, M. and Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 151) Cites Smith and Bond (1998) conducted cultural-specific conformity classifying some countries as individualist and others as collectives. (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 151) Cites findings reflected that collectivist countries had potentially higher levels of conformity than individualist countries.

(Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 152) Cites Moscovici et al. (1969) aimed to investigate if social influence could occur not only by compliance with the view of the majority but also by a change to previously held opinions or internalisation. (Cardwell, M. Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 152) Cites Moscovici et al. (1969) proposed that the minority must be consistent because only through consistency it could potentially create a conflict for the rest of the group; leading individuals to possibly changing their views. (Hill, G. 2009, p. 54) Cites Minority groups can influence majority groups in a society to create a social change; (Hill, G. 2009, p. 54) Cites as demonstrated throughout history change in religion, women's and black rights. (McLeod, S. A. 2007a) Cites this change is described through the Suffragette Movement which successfully achieved the right's for women to vote. (Hill, G. 2009, p. 54) Cites Maass and Clark (1983) as publicly expressing views on gay rights following the majority, although privately expressing views shifted towards the minority. (Hill, G. 2009, p. 54) Cites minorities can cause private opinions to change before it changes it publicly and minorities are essential to motivate a change on individual's views to lead into innovation into society.

(Hill, G. 2009, p54) Cites the conformity into majority would stagnate the progress of society. (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 152) Cites that Wood et al. (1994) confirmed that where minorities were exceptionally consistent in their positions, they were particularly influential; and that majority group members tend to avoid being involved with a different minority group because individuals don't like to be compared deviant themselves.

Similarly to Asch's experiment, Moscovici's (1969) experiment also deceived participants. (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 152) Cites participants were told the real purpose of the experiment at the end and the level of deception suffered by participants were harmless and did not involve undue stress, therefore judged ethically acceptable. On the other hand, (Cardwell, M. Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 153) Cites Mackie (1987) challenged Moscovici's explanation, arguing the majority are who promotes a more significant message and individuals generally believe they share similar views; leading the individuals to carefully process the majority's signal to understand why there is a difference in their opinion. (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 153) Cites Mackie argues that the opposite happens for minorities as people are more unlikely to waste time trying to understand why a minority's view is different to theirs. (Cardwell, M., Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 153) Cites the effect of minority influence in the real-life situation is also questioned by Mackie (2006), through her 'unchanging minds hypothesis' suggesting although many discussions are frequently observed in democratic politics, change (what Moscovici call conversion) rarely occurs. (McLeod, S. A. 2007a) Cites a criticism due to the fact Moscovici's experiment only used females' students,

being unable to generalise results. (McLeod, S. A. 2007a) Cites the fact that only four people were used on this experiment, not justified to be classified as a majority. (McLeod, S. 2007a) cites Edward Sampson (1991) challenged the laboratories experiments as they are rarely 'real groups', referring to findings as being artificial tasks, suggesting they are different from minority groups in society; who seek to change the majority views and opinions.

(Cardwell, M. Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 156) Cites Milgram's obedience study was published six months after the execution of Adolph Eichmann for the murders of European Jews during the Holocaust. (McLeod, S. A. 2017) Cites Adolph Eichmann claimed he was 'only obeying orders'. (McLeod, S. A. 2017) Cites Milgram (1963) aimed to investigate the reaction of ordinary people in obeying an instruction, even if the process involves harming another individual and how easily individuals could be led into committing similar atrocities. (Hill, G. 2008, p. 50) Cites Milgram (1974) asked psychiatrists, college students and colleagues to predict these results.

(Cardwell, M. Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 156) Cites findings were contrary to their expectations; reflecting ordinary people are astonishingly obedient and, in some cases, people went to extremes by simply following an order.

(Cardwell, M. Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 157) Cites in total, Milgram (1974) conducted 18 variations for the testing, manipulating the situation and observing the effects into the participant's levels of obedience. (McLeod, S. A. 2017) Cites Milgram's (1974) concluded the existence of two states of behaviour demonstrated by individuals. The autonomous state which reflects individuals accepting the responsibilities of their actions, and the agentic state which reflects an individual's decision to allow someone to direct their

actions, passing the responsibility to the authority giving the orders.

(McLeod, S. A. 2017) Cites variations played a considerable part in the levels of obedience; the use of lab coats saw obedience levels decrease compared to tests that were conducted by an ordinary person; the change of location influenced results, experiments performed in offices saw levels decrease compared to tests conducted at the Yale University; two teacher condition, participants allowed to use an assistant increased obedience levels as it was less personal; touch proximity saw the levels decreasing as individuals felt no longer buffered; social support conditions reduced the obedience level as individuals had an ally; Absent Experimenter Condition saw obedience levels decreasing as individuals are more likely to disobey when an authority figure is not around.

Similarly, Milgram's (1974) experiment used deception. (Cardwell, M. Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 158) Cites Milgram (1974) deceived the participants as the real purpose of the study was not explained. However, Milgram (1954) justifies that deception gave real meaning to the process. Despite the issue, many participants felt they learned something personal through participating. (Cardwell, M. Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 158) Cites Milgram's (1974) study's participants were not given the informed consent, many felt they had no right to leave; and the prob's used from the experimenter persuade individuals in believing they had no choice - "The experiment requires that you continue, you have no choice, please continue". (Cardwell, M. Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 159) Cites Baumrind (1964) attacked Milgram's study claiming participants were under great emotional strain. (McLeod, S. A. 2017) Cites likewise, participants were exposed to high levels of stress potentially

causing psychological harm, as examples seen of trembling and sweating until uncontrollable seizures. (McLeod, S. A. 2017) Cites the high levels of stress were felt during Milgram's (1974) experiments. Milgram (1974) disclosed with participants after the experiment the real purpose and followed up participants a year later and found no signs for psychological harm suffered by the individuals. (McLeod, S. A. 2017) Cites the study not be valid as it was conducted under laboratory conditions. (McLeod, S. A. 2017) Cites Orne & Holland (1968) argued Milgram's study lacked 'experimental realism', participants might not have believed into the experiment set-up. (McLeod, S. A. 2017) Cites Milgram's study was biased as the participants were males and chosen carefully through an advertisement they responded to, not representing the broader American population.

However, (Cardwell, M. Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 160) Cites Milgram's explanation is relevant and does not only explains the acts during the World War II, but it also explains more contemporary atrocities such as the abuse of Iraqi prisoners. (Hill, G. 2008, p. 52) Cites Zimbardo's (1973) prison experiment, which aimed to demonstrate if the effects of such atrocities were possible by situational rather than dispositional. Therefore, (Cardwell, M. Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 147) Cites Zimbardo (1973) explanation is the same as Milgram's (1974), as ordinary people could potentially be turned into tyrannical individuals by the power of the situation to influence and shape their behaviour. (McLeod, S. A. 2018) Cites Zimbardo's (1973) findings concludes the situational behaviour had majorly affected participants.

Despite the findings in these research's reflecting the factors, situations and the pressure that may lead individuals to conform or to obey, the ethical <https://assignbuster.com/psychological-studies-on-conformity-and-obedience/>

issues had a more controversial effect than the actual findings explored by the experimenters. (Cardwell, M. Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 147) Cites research in social influence is important to help understand the complex social and psychological forces behind horrific incidents. (Hill, G. 2008, p. 26) Cites by using the understanding gained to predict and control the behaviour.

However, findings were achieved by going against the ethical guidelines in human research. Humans have the rights of protection and privacy and not only experience pain and anxiety, and individuals could be potentially affected mentally by suffering embarrassment or loss of self-esteem. (Hill, G. 2008, p. 26) Cites these rights are informed consent, not be misled, debriefing, ability to withdraw, confidentiality, protection, observational research; which led many researchers going against the findings obtained by the conformity and obedience studies.

In conclusion, these studies demonstrated the reasons why individuals conform or obey, highlighting the effect caused by circumstances or by the level of exposure they were being submitted to. Findings successfully justified that some individuals are more likely to conform depending on their emotional state whereas other individuals are unlikely to conform depending on their abilities to show an independent behaviour. As results were achieved by questionable ethics approaches and by the inability of protecting individuals, it was clear that going forward any research methods needed improvements to widen the variety of participants and the validity of the tests. The importance of Minority influence within society has been proven through history, leading to many changes and the progress of humanity. Understanding human behaviour in conformity and obedience

could enable us to reduce the social influence effects; (Cardwell, M. Flanagan, C. 2008, p. 147) Cites evil acts could be better prevented in the future just by understanding situational forces that cause people to act this way.

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