

Critique of opinions and social pressure philosophy essay



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How independent are we in our opinions? If we are certain of something, but everyone around us thinks different, do we still keep our opinion? I

remember when I was in fourth grade our teacher took us on a field trip to an aquarium exhibition. As we were looking at a certain crab, she asked us one by one if the crab was a salt-water or a fresh water crab. After a couple of seconds of hesitation, the first student answered fresh water, and everybody else copied her answer, until it was my turn. I knew that the crab was a salt-water crab, but I was too embarrassed to change the answer of the twenty students ahead of me, so I copied them. We were all wrong. It's hard to stand up for your opinion, especially when you face more than one adversary. We tend to stick to our opinion and be more confident when we have only one person to convince, but when we become minority, things change, and we tend to conform to the majority.

In his essay "Opinions and Social Pressure", Solomon Asch, a social psychologist at Rutgers University, presents an experiment he conducted in the 1950's. The purpose of the experiment was to find the answer to the question: "How and to what extent do social forces constrain people's opinions and attitudes?" (Asch 207). In his experiment Asch wanted to prove that every human conforms to a majority and does it because of objective motifs. The experimental situation, which became famous, shows that under certain conditions, individuals are subject to peer pressure, neglecting the obvious possibilities of independence and productive relationship with the environment. It was thus designed, that it could put the individual in conflict with other members of the radical group in which he has been placed. The researcher gathers a group of seven to nine college students for a "

psychological experiment in visual judgment" (Asch 208). They must distinguish between three lines of different lengths equal to a standard line. The subjects can easily perceive the differences. Within each group only one subject is naive. The others, accomplices of the experimenter, are instructed to give incorrect answers seven times in twelve attempts. The result shows that about 33% of naive subjects' responses conform to the view expressed by the group through a wrong response. Remarkable is the fact that 25% of the subjects "were completely independent" (Ash 209), and did not conform. This suggests that participants in these experiments are inclined to behave like everyone else, meaning answering like them. Those who comply (about one quarter of the subjects) do it for two reasons: some because they believe that most group members give truly accurate answers, others do not want to be different than their group members. The subjects are less attentive to the task and are more interested not to stray from the group. They are aware of what they do and know why they do it.

"As long as the subject had anyone on his side, he was almost invariably independent, but as soon as he found himself alone, the tendency to conform to the majority rose abruptly" (Ash 212). Ash observes in his experiment that "two alternatives were open to the subject: he could act independently, repudiating the majority, or he could go along with the majority, repudiating the evidence of his senses" (Ash 209). The rationale that justifies this behavior is either "more pairs of eyes see better than a single pair", or the subject will follow the majority so he won't be considered as rebel. This kind of behavior may seem irrational observing that when left alone, no subject chooses the wrong line. When just one opponent was

present, there was no change in the subjects' answer. When two opponents were present, only a small percentage of change in the answers was present. The level of conformity observed with three or more opponents was far more significant.

Ash was disturbed by these results, saying " that we have found the tendency to conformity in our society so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black is a matter of concern" (Ash 212). At the end of the experiment " Asch reported that most of the participants who yielded to group pressure in his studies did so because they assumed the majority was right and they were wrong (a kind of informational influence), rather than because they wanted to be accepted by the majority (a kind of normative influence)" (Levine, 9). Just like Blakslee says in her article, What other people say may change what you see (2005), " the unpleasantness of standing alone can make a majority opinion seem more appealing than sticking to one's own beliefs".

From this experiment and every day situation we can clearly state some at least three main factors that influence the level of conformity. Group size: besides the real test subject, when there are one or two participants, the test subject usually gives good answers. When the group contains three or more members, the subject tested, most likely, will conform to group opinion. Unanimity: the tendency to adopt the group's view is emphasized in the group if they all have the same opinion, even if it is the wrong one. When one differs in opinion, the real subject level of conformism significantly decreases. Last but not least is age. Teenagers (between 12 and 16 years old) are more likely to comply with the group opinion. This is the age when a <https://assignbuster.com/critique-of-opinions-and-social-pressure-philosophy-essay/>

teenager's personality is forming, and he can easily be influenced in the wrong direction.

“ Although Asch's results have been upheld by many other studies, a common criticism is that it is difficult to generalize his results to real world situations” (Hock, 2005). Ash chooses his subjects all white, college students from Rutgers University, and many thought that this was not a good representation of the majority of the population, making the study somewhat discriminatory. Another criticism is that “ participants may be conforming to the expectations of the experimenter, not the group” (Schulman, 1967). All the tests that were done in a classroom, a place that to many it brings mixed feelings of conformity and peer pressure. “ Critics believe that something as trivial as judging the length of a line in a laboratory does not relate to conformity on important real life issues” (Hock, 2005). It's true that a simple line cannot be compared to a real life situation, but sometimes it's the simple things that can help us change our thinking.

So “ in what ways is independence related to sociological or cultural conditions? (Ash, 212). John Levine finds a good answer to this answer in his article “ Personality and Social Psychology Review”, where he mentions 4 of Asch's concepts that help understand social influence in groups: “(a) Social interaction depends on individuals' ability to represent others' positions, define themselves as members of the same group, and regulate their behavior in terms AN 3181395of the norms and values of the group; (b) independence is critical to effective group functioning; (c) independence and conformity are not simply mirror images that can be explained in terms of a

unitary psychological process; and (d) change of meaning is an important mechanism of social influence”.

In conclusion, social pressure is everywhere around us. The opinion of the group many times change the decision/opinion that a person might have independently. Unfortunately, our tendency towards conformity can easily be exploited and used to inoculate ideas that otherwise we would not have. The complex social aspects, which in principle require detailed analysis, get be treated shallowly and defined as good or bad, desirable or unacceptable, without a filter, without a doubt, based only on the opinion of the majority. Therefore we know that democracy is good and communism is bad, that market economy is good and that directional that bad, etc. All these ideas, taken as their own by many, are the result of saying “ that’s right, I agree!” where we know nothing, and if we will get informed, we will find, perhaps, what is already inoculated.

We might not realize it, but social pressure is a huge force that can cause serious damage if found in the wrong hands. Ash brings up a good point question in his conclusion by asking “ are leaders more independent than other people, or are they adept at following their followers?” (212). The story “ The Emperor’s new Clothes” y Hans Christian Andersen has a a good insight . The story is about an Emperor, who care d very much about his clothes and appearance. He hires two tailors who promise to make him the finest clothes from a fabric invisible to anyone who is unfit for his position or just “ hopelessly stupid”. The Emperor himself could not see the clothes, but he pretends that he can so he won’t appear unfit for his position or stupid; and his ministers did the same. When the clothes were ready, the swindlers

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mimed dressing the Emperor, and asked him to parade in front of his people. Embarrassed, the Emperor marched in procession before his subjects. Everyone marveled at his clothes, and there was even a person holding the train. From the crowd, a child said out loud that the emperor is naked, and the crowd started to talk. Embarrassed, the Emperor is wondering if the allegation is true, but continues his walk proudly. The moral of the story is that, no matter in what position we are, we should question everything before believing it and be able to have an opinion of our own