7.2B: Conformity and Obedience

Conformity is the act of matching attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to group norms.

Learning Objectives

- Differentiate among compliance, identification, and internalization; and between obedience and conformity

Key Points

- Norms are implicit rules shared by a group of individuals, that guide their interactions with others and among society or social group.
- Herbert Kelman identified three major types of conformity: compliance, identification, and internalization.
- Compliance is public conformity, while possibly keeping one’s own original beliefs for oneself. Identification is conforming to someone who is liked and respected. Internalization is accepting the belief or behavior and conforming both publicly and privately, if the source is credible.
- Obedience is a form of social influence in which a person accepts instructions or orders from an authority figure.
- Stanley Milgram created a highly controversial and often replicated study, the Milgram experiment, where he focused on how long participants would listen to and obey orders from the experimenter.
- In the Stanford Prison Experiment, Philip Zimbardo placed college age students into an artificial prison environment in order to study the impact of "social forces" on participants behavior.
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Key Terms

- **identification**: A feeling of support, sympathy, understanding, or belonging towards somebody or something.
- **compliance**: The tendency of conforming with or agreeing to the wishes of others.
- **conformity**: The ideology of adhering to one standard or social uniformity.

Conformity

Social control is established by encouraging individuals to conform and obey social norms, both through formal and informal means. Conformity is the act of matching attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to group norms. The tendency to conform occurs in small groups and in society as a whole, and may result from subtle unconscious influences or direct and overt social pressure. Conformity can occur in the presence of others, or when an individual is alone. For example, people tend to follow social norms when eating or watching television, regardless of whether others are present. As conformity is a group phenomenon, factors such as group size, unanimity, cohesion, status, prior commitment, and public opinion help determine the level of conformity an individual displays.

Harvard psychologist Herbert Kelman identified three major types of conformity: compliance, identification, and internalization. Compliance is public conformity, while possibly keeping one’s own original beliefs independent. It is motivated by the need for approval and the fear of being rejected. Identification is conforming to someone who is liked and respected, such as a celebrity or a favorite uncle. This can be motivated by the attractiveness of the source, and this is a deeper type of conformism than compliance. Internalization is accepting the belief or behavior and conforming both publicly and privately. It is the deepest influence on people, and it will affect them for a long time.

Solomon E. Asch conducted a classic study of conformity. He exposed students in a group to a series of lines, and the participants were asked to match the length of one line with a standard line, a task with a very clear right answer. Only one individual in the group was a true student, however – the rest were confederates, or actors that were pretending to be students, but knew the true aim of the study. The confederates were instructed to unanimously give the wrong answer (matching the standard line with an incorrect line) in 12 of the 18 trials. The results showed a surprisingly high degree of conformity: 76% of the students conformed on at least one trial, giving the wrong answer to match the answer of the confederates (who they perceived as actual students). On average people conformed one-third of the time, even in situations where the correct answer was obvious.

Obedience

In human behavior, obedience is a form of social influence in which a person accepts instructions or orders from an authority figure. Obedience differs from compliance, which is behavior influenced by peers, and from conformity, which is behavior intended to match that of the majority. Obedience can be seen as both a sin and a virtue. For example in a situation when one orders a person to kill another innocent person and he or she does this willingly, it is a sin. However, when one orders a person to kill an enemy who will end a lot of innocent lives and he or she does this willingly, it can be deemed a virtue.

Stanley Milgram created a highly controversial and often replicated study of obedience. In the Milgram experiment,
participants were told they were going to contribute to a study about punishment and learning, but the actual focus was on how long they would listen to and obey orders from the experimenter. The participants were instructed that they had to shock a person in another room for every wrong answer on a learning task, and the shocks increased with intensity for each wrong answer. If participants questioned the procedure, the researcher would encourage them to continue. The Milgram study found that participants would obey orders even when it posed severe harm to others.

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Milgram experiment advertising: In the Milgram experiment, participants were told they were going to contribute to a study about punishment and learning, but the actual focus was on how long they would listen to and obey orders from the experimenter.

The other classical study on obedience was conducted at Stanford University during the 1970’s. Phillip Zimbardo was the principle investigator responsible for the experiment. In the Stanford Prison Experiment, college-age students were put into a pseudo prison environment in order to study the impacts of “social forces” on participants’ behavior. Unlike the Milgram study, in which each participant underwent the same experimental conditions, the Zimbardo study used random assignment so that half the participants were prison guards and the other half were prisoners. The experimental setting was made to physically resemble a prison, while simultaneously inducing “a psychological state of imprisonment.”

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Zimbardo found that the guards in the study obeyed orders so willingly that their behavior turned aggressive. Likewise, prisoners were hostile to and resented their guards, and because of the psychological duress induced in the experiment, it had to be shut down after only 6 days.