AQA A-level Psychology
Unit 1
(7182/1)

SOCIAL INFLUENCE

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INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Social influence research analyses the way in which individuals and groups affect each other’s attitudes and behaviour.

Conformity (or majority influence) involves changing our attitudes and behaviours to fit in with a larger group, and is related to our need to (i) be accepted by others in our social group or (ii) seek guidance about how we should think/behave in ambiguous (unclear) or novel (new) situations.

Obedience simply involves obeying commands from authority figures who hold social power. We are socialised to be obedient from childhood onwards (parents, teachers, police, etc.) and disobedience usually results in punishment of some sort.

Independent behaviour examines factors associated with people not giving in to pressures to conform or obey (i.e. being non-conformist or disobedient).

Minority influence has explored how individuals/small groups can challenge the established views and behaviours of the majority to cause social change: for example, Emmeline Pankhurst and the suffragettes (a minority) challenging mainstream (the majority) sexist views in the UK and eventually won the right for women to vote.

Much influential research in his field is based in real life events in Nazi Germany where conformity to racist beliefs and blind obedience to authority figures were key psychological factors leading to the scapegoating and mass killing of Jews and other groups. Similarly, during the 20th C. a great deal of social change occurred as a result of independent behaviour and minority influence (e.g. feminism, independence movements in ex-British colonies such as India, black civil rights in the USA, the gay rights movement, etc.)
CONFORMITY

A DEFINITION OF CONFORMITY

Conformity (or majority influence) can be defined as a change in beliefs or behaviours by an individual or small group to fit in with a majority (larger) group as a result of real or imagined pressure from the majority group. Examples could be minor (young people conforming to the drinking/drug taking behaviour of their peers) or major (a society conforming to racist beliefs).

TYPES OF CONFORMITY

Compliance

The shallowest type of conformity where the individual publicly conforms to the attitudes or behaviors of the majority group whilst privately disagreeing with them. For example, agreeing with friends that a film was good whilst secretly not enjoying it. Compliance is associated with seeking group approval and membership and avoiding disapproval. Compliance is usually temporary/impermanent.

Identification

A deeper type of conformity where an individual publicly and privately changes their attitudes and behaviour to conform to the group but only because they want to identify with and feel a sense of membership with the group. This change may be temporary – when they leave the group they revert to their original attitudes and behaviour. For example, joining the army and conforming to colleagues’ beliefs/behaviours but abandoning these once you leave the army.

Internalisation

The deepest and most permanent type of conformity when one publicly and privately changes one’s attitudes and behaviour to fit in with a group because one believes the group’s attitudes and behaviours to be correct and right. For example, becoming a life-long vegetarian after sharing a house with vegetarians at university.
RESEARCH INTO CONFORMITY

ASCH (‘56)

Procedures

- Asch aimed to assess whether individuals would conform to the obviously wrong response given by a majority in a perceptual-judgement task.
- Asch asked 123 student participants to take part in a ‘vision test’. Participants sat with between 6-8 other ‘participants’. In fact, the visual task was about conformity and the other participants were confederates. Participants were shown a line on one card and 3 lines on another card. They were then asked which of the 3 lines they thought was the same length as the line on the first card. (It was obvious what the correct answer was).

A  B  C

This was repeated 18 times with different lines each time.

In 12 out of the 18 trials, the confederates deliberately gave incorrect answers to test whether the one genuine participant conformed to their (majority) answer. (The real participant always answered last or 2nd to last in the group.)

Findings

- On the 12 trials where the confederates deliberately gave the incorrect answer 36.8% of the responses made by the (genuine) participants were incorrect: i.e. they conformed to an obviously incorrect answer.
- 25% of participants did not conform at all. 5% conformed on every trial.
- Participants showed increasing anxiety and self-consciousness as the study went on.
- After the study, Asch asked participants why they had conformed. Some said they doubted the accuracy of their judgment so yielded (gave in) to the majority view: i.e. they thought their vision/judgement was incorrect (informational social influence). Others said they trusted their own judgments privately but wanted to avoid disapproval and embarrassment (normative social influence).

EVALUATION

- The task was insignificant and did not have any moral importance – therefore, there were few costs attached to conforming. It was not a type of task that we confront in everyday life, meaning that it has low ecological validity. This limits the extent we can generalise results to conformity in everyday life. For example, in a more ecologically valid real life task involving moral consequences such as asking
someone to conform to stealing we may find that levels of conformity are much lower.

• Perrin and Spencer ('80) claimed the study was a ‘child of its time’ – that the climate of 50’s America was particularly conformist and that social change since the 50’s has meant that people are now far more non-conformist and independent. When they repeated Asch’s study in the UK in the 70’s using science and engineering student they found only 1 conformist response out of 396 trials.

• Asch’s sample were male American students – hence low population validity and ethnocentric bias – we cannot tell whether women or other cultures would conform in a similar way.

• The study raises ethical issues – participants were deceived and might have felt humiliated (no protection of participants from psychological harm).

• Lucas ('06) conducted an experiment similar to Asch using maths problems. High self-efficacy participants (those who were confident in their own abilities) were more independent than low self-efficacy participants, even when the problems got more difficult. This shows that situational differences (task difficulty) and individual differences (self-efficacy) are both important in determining levels of conformity.

VARIABLES AFFECTING CONFORMITY

Asch conducted variations of the experiment to assess factors which increased or decreased conformity.

• Task difficulty – making the lines in the task more similar to each other and therefore the answer less obvious produced higher rates of conformity. Rosander asked 1000 social media users’ questions about logic and general knowledge. Half the sample were provided with false answers by confederates. Conformity to false answers positively correlated with question difficulty. This suggests that when the correct way to think or behave is more complex or less clear we are more likely to trust others judgment and conform.

• Group size of the majority – using a majority of 1 or 2 confederates with 1 real participant produced low rates of conformity – 3% with 1 confederate and 13% with 2 confederates. However, with a majority of 3 conformity rose to 33% and conformity effects rose little above this level despite the increased size of the majority.

The effect of group size may depend on the conformity task, however. Campbell found that if the task related to personal preferences (e.g. whether a film was good) increasing group size did lead to increasing conformity, whereas if the answer was clearly right/wrong increasing majority group size beyond 3 has little effect.

• Unanimity - if another confederate gave the right answer and did not conform (i.e. there was not a unanimous majority) participants’ levels of conformity dropped to 5.5%. Thus, social support from other dissenters strengthens individuals’ independent behaviour to go against the majority and increases their confidence.
that they are right. Asch found that even when a dissenter gave a different but wrong answer to the majority, participants were more likely to go against the group and show independent behaviour.
EXPLANATIONS OF WHY PEOPLE CONFORM

The dual process dependency model identifies 2 reasons for conformity: the desire to be liked and the desire to be right.

NORMATIVE SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Normative social influence states that people conform in order to be liked and accepted, and to gain and retain group membership. Humans are a social species and have an innate, fundamental need for social companionship and a fear of rejection or punishment by the social group. Although they may personally and privately disagree with the group they outwardly conform (compliance) or temporarily conform to retain group membership (identification). Thus, this type of conformity is relatively shallow and usually short-term.

INFORMATIONAL SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Informational social influence suggests that people conform to others beliefs and behaviours in order to be ‘right’. In ambiguous (unclear) or novel (new) situations people are often unsure how to behave, so they conform to others beliefs and behaviours, partly out of a desire to avoid embarrassment, partly because they believe that others are more knowledgeable about the correct way to act and behave. This sort of social influence is most likely when:

- The situation is ambiguous and the right way to act/respond is unclear
- The situation is a crisis and we are required to respond quickly.
- We believe others are ‘experts’ and thus trust their judgement

This type of conformity tends to have more permanent effects on behaviour and often results, therefore, in internalisation.

EVALUATION

Asch’s study provides evidence for this model.

- Some said they doubted the accuracy of their judgment so yielded to the majority view: i.e. they thought their vision/judgement was incorrect (informational social influence).
- Others said they trusted their own judgments privately but wanted to avoid disapproval and embarrassment (normative social influence).

NORMATIVE SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Further evidence to support normative influence comes from research studies. Schultz (’08) analysed data from 794 rooms in 132 hotels where doors displayed a sign informing guests either that (i) reusing their towels was environmentally friendly, or (ii) 75% of guests choose to reuse their towels. Those guests who saw the 2\textsuperscript{nd} sign were significantly more likely to re-use their towels. The normative social influence caused by the 2\textsuperscript{nd} sign
reduced hotel replacement of towels by 25%: i.e. guests thought this was what others were doing so wanted to fit in with the group and avoid disapproval/embarrassment.

Marketing campaigns about what is normative (normal/usual) for young people have successfully reduced alcohol abuse and smoking in teenagers. In a campaign aimed at 12-17 year olds in the US only 10% of participants took up smoking after exposure to a campaign saying that most children in their age range did not smoke. Control groups who did not receive this message were significantly more likely to take up smoking. This change can be attributed (blamed on or caused by) to normative social influence.

Therefore, psychological research into normative social influence has real-life applications in that advertisers and governments can manipulate or persuade the public into conforming to certain attitudes or behaviours: for example, anti-smoking campaigns, etc.

INFORMATIONAL SOCIAL INFLUENCE
Further evidence to support informational influence comes from research studies.

Fein (‘07). Participants watched presidential candidates in debates and were then asked for their judgment on how they had performed. They were then exposed to other people’s opinions on screen. When questioned later about the candidates, many participants showed large shifts away from their original opinions. This supports informational social influence – they had altered their original opinions to fit in with the majority as they believed the majority was more ‘correct’ in their opinions than they were.

CRITICISMS – the role of group membership
Critics of the dual-dependency model argue that it does not recognize the importance of individuals’ sense of group belonging. Hogg (‘87) carried out experiments similar to Asch’s but used either friends or strangers as confederates. Participants were in booths so that they could hear but not see confederates’ responses. He found that conformity to obviously wrong answers only occurred when confederates were friends. This underlines the importance of group belonging, loyalty and identity in the process of conformity, and that we are much more likely to conform to those whom we define as our ‘in-group’.
CONFORMITY TO SOCIAL ROLES – ZIMBARDO’S RESEARCH

Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment (71) investigated identification with and conformity to social roles of guard and prisoner in prisons, and the process of deindividuation (where an individual’s identity is stripped away, in this case though uniforms and identification with a prisoner or guard role) and increased aggression.

- 24 psychologically normal volunteer male students were randomly divided to take on the role of either guard or prisoner in a ‘mock’ prison. After a fake ‘arrest’ prisoners were taken to the prison, had personal possessions removed, were dressed as prisoners and assigned ID numbers. Guards were told to keep the prisoners under control but use no violence. Guards referred to the prisoners only by their number and were given uniforms, clubs and reflective sunglasses (to prevent eye contact). Zimbardo played the role of the prison superintendent.

- Within a few days the guards became psychologically and physically abusive to the prisoners. The prisoners ‘rebelled’ against the guards’ authority by taking off their ID badges. The guards locked the prisoners in their cells. Rapidly, the guards seem to begin to enjoy sadistically (taking pleasure in others suffering) exercising power over the prisoners, making them perform humiliating tasks, depriving them of sleep and force-feeding those who went on hunger strike. Increasingly, participants behaved as if the situation they were in was real. Over the course of a few days prisoners became passive, depressed and stressed – 5 prisoners had to be released early due to crying, rage, extreme anxiety, etc. The study was planned to run for 2 weeks but was called off after 6 days due to the guards’ brutal behaviour and the prisoners’ reactions.

EVALUATION

- Ethics. Zimbardo’s study has become well-known as an example of an ethically questionable psychological study. Although participants gave informed consent they were not told they would be arrested at home. They were not deceived and were given the right to withdraw, but they were subjected to fairly severe physical and psychological harm, and it is argued that Zimbardo had a moral responsibility to stop the study as soon as the guards showed any signs of brutality. It has also been argued that Zimbardo might have anticipated the distress which the prisoners were subjected to, and that participants could not give fully informed consent as the outcome of the study was unpredictable: i.e. no-one expected the guards to behave so abusively.

Zimbardo answered critics by stating that he counselled (advised and helped) participants afterwards to cope with their experiences and that the study illustrated such an important aspect of human behaviour that the temporary suffering experienced by some participants was justified.
• **Ecological Validity.** Clearly, the prison was not real and the participants (guards and prisoners) were engaged in a role play rather than a real-life situation, knew they could leave the experiment when they wished, and were only confined for a short period of time. To what extent we can generalise findings to real institutions and real abuse of power by guards against prisoners is, therefore, debatable. Even though the study lacked ecological validity, the social roles given to the guard and prisoner of powerful and powerless do seem associated in the real world with sadistic violence.

• Zimbardo’s interpretation of his participants’ behaviour was that when put in a social role with absolute power even psychologically normal individuals are at increased likelihood of behaving abusively to those with no social power. The deindividuating effect of the prison and the uniforms seemed to encourage brutality and violence.

• **Demand Characteristics.** Critics argue that Zimbardo encouraged the guards’ brutality and that the guards simply acted up to the stereotypical role they were being asked to play, therefore, they were not really behaving as themselves.

• The behaviour of the guards in the study has been witnessed countless times in total institutions (e.g. prisons, concentration camps, mental institutions and the army): e.g. Abu Graib prison in Iraq where a number of American soldiers were found to have sadistically abused Iraqi prisoners.
OBEDIENCE

A DEFINITION OF OBEDIENCE

Obedience can be defined as following the commands of authority figures who hold social power/status: e.g. parents, teachers, police, bosses, etc. Some form of punishment (ranging from mild disapproval through to physical violence) usually results from disobedience. Milgram was interested in the phenomena of German officers and soldiers being blindly obedient to the commands of superiors who ordered them to kill innocent people during World War 2.

RESEARCH INTO OBEDIENCE - MILGRAM’S OBEDIENCE STUDY (’63)

Aim

- Milgram’s experiment assessed to what extent ordinary men will blindly obey an authority figure’s commands to harm an innocent man.

Procedures

- Participants met the experimenter and were introduced to ‘Mr Wallace’ (a confederate) who would be the participant’s partner in the study. Mr Wallace was strapped into a chair designed to give electric shocks. In an adjacent room where he could hear but not see Mr Wallace, participants read out word-pairs which Mr Wallace was later required to remember. Each time Mr Wallace failed the task (which he deliberately did), Milgram instructed the participant to deliver increasingly large electric shocks. As the study progressed Mr Wallace pretended to be in increasing amounts of pain. At 270 V he began screaming and from 330 V + there was silence (he was presumably unconscious/dead). Participants showed great signs of stress and repeatedly said that they wouldn’t continue. However, Milgram insisted they continue and commanded them to obey.

Findings

- 26 out of the 40 participants (65%) gave shocks up to the maximum value of 450V. All participants delivered shocks up to 300V. In between 300-450 V 35% of participants defied Milgram at some point and refused to obey.

Conclusions

- Milgram’s study implies that an average American male will be willing to inflict potentially fatal harm on an innocent individual simply because they have been ordered to do so – that the social power of obedience and authority is greater than one’s own moral conscience. Milgram’s findings have relevance for understanding the murder of innocent civilians by soldiers under command of their officers.
EVALUATION

ETHICAL CRITICISMS

- Milgram gained consent from participants but not informed consent: i.e. they knew they were in a psychological study but did not know what the true nature of the study was. It is likely they would not have given consent had they known the true aim.
- Milgram deceived participants about the aim of the study (he told them it was about the effects of punishment on learning), the identity of Mr Wallace, and the fact that the shock-equipment and Mr Wallace’s screams were not real.
- Participants were pressurised to continue in the study even though they asked to withdraw. Nearly all participants expressed anxiety and a desire to not shock Mr Wallace. Although at the start of the study Milgram told them they could stop at any point they wanted, once the study was in progress if they expressed a desire to stop he responded with statements such as ‘It is absolutely essential that you continue’, ‘you have no other choice, you must go on’.
- Participants were exposed to high levels of psychological stress. It could be argued that the study caused long-lasting damage to self-esteem.

METHODOLOGICAL CRITICISMS OF MILGRAM’S STUDY

Orne argued

- The study lacked ecological validity – findings could not be generalised beyond the laboratory setting and could not be applied to obedience in the real world. The obedience task that Milgram’s participants performed was artificial and had no social ‘context’: for example, participants did not fear punishment if they disobeyed as soldiers would. There was also no moral or political context to the obedience task whereas in real-life obedience situations such as wars soldiers may feel a duty to obey or that violence is justified.
- Participants showed demand characteristics – they didn’t believe the shocks were real and play-acted along. Although post-experimental interviews seem to indicate that participants did take the study seriously, a research assistant of Milgram’s claimed that quite a number of participants believed the shocks to be fake, and it was these participants who gave the highest intensity shocks.

A FIELD EXPERIMENT INTO OBEDIENCE

Hofling conducted a field experiment in a psychiatric hospital. Boxes of placebos labeled ‘5mg Astrofen, maximum dose 10mg daily’ were placed in the pharmacy. A confederate doctor telephoned the nurse on duty saying he needed the nurse to give 20mg of Astrofen to a patient as he was in a hurry, and that he’d sign the drug authorisation document later. To obey the doctor’s orders the nurse would be breaking 3 procedural rules: (i) the dose was above the daily limit, (ii) drugs should only be given after written authorisation from a doctor,
(iii) the nurse must be sure the doctor is genuine. Despite these important rules 21 out of 22 nurses immediately obeyed. Thus, this more ecologically valid study supports Milgram’s original findings.

**VARIABLES AFFECTING OBEDIENCE**

In variations of the original study Milgram identified features which raised or lowered obedience levels.

- **Proximity** (how close participants were to the Mr Wallace, and how close they were to the experimenter)
  - When the experimenter gave instructions by telephone, obedience dropped with only 20% going to full 450V. The participant felt less pressure to obey the experimenter when they were distanced from him.
  - When the teacher was in the same room as the learner increased empathy resulted in obedience rates falling, and the same effect was found when the teacher was instructed to force the learner’s hand onto the shock plate. However, even in this last condition where one might expect empathy and direct responsibility to lower obedience rates, 30% of participants still continued to 450V.

- **Uniform**
  - Milgram’s lab coat may also have conveyed that he was an authority figure (e.g. professor). Later research by Bickman confirmed the effect of uniforms on obedience. In a field experiment, members of the public were instructed to either pick up a piece of litter or lend money to a stranger. When the researcher was dressed as a security guard 92% of participants obeyed compared to only 58% when he was dressed in normal clothing. Thus, uniforms can act as powerful symbols which we are socialised to recognise as indicators of legitimate authority figures who we should and must obey.

- **Location**
  - Milgram believed that the prestigious (high status) location of Yale University gave an air of authority which influenced participants’ obedience. When the location of the study was moved to a run-down office block obedience rates dropped to 48%.
EXPLANATIONS OF WHY PEOPLE OBEY

Milgram’s research highlights how situational factors caused by the presence of a powerful authority figure may cause people/groups to act against their personal moral conscience. Milgram proposed various factors which might explain why blind obedience occurs.

LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY

- Milgram argued that in many situations people hold a shared belief that there will be a socially controlling figure. It is the perception of this figure as holding legitimate authority that makes us think it is appropriate to obey. For example, in the Milgram study, participants held an expectation that Milgram was a legitimate authority figure, that his authority should not be questioned and that it was appropriate to obey him.

- Early childhood socialisation in the family and in school normalises obeying legitimate (those we see as legal or lawful) authority figures: e.g. parents, teachers, police, etc. We are more likely to obey if the authority figure giving instructions has more social power. We may also obey because we trust the authority figure or because they have the power to punish us if we don’t obey.

- Obedience to requests to cause harm are more likely to be followed if they occur within a legitimate institution (e.g. the military or a university). However, Milgram still found high levels of obedience when the location of the study was moved from Yale (prestigious) to a run-down office block. It may be that the situation being presented as a scientific study (highly legitimate) outweighed the importance of its location.

- A study by Bickman revealed how participants were more likely to obey the demands of a uniformed guard than a milkman, suggesting that uniforms give their wearers an aura (an air or atmosphere) of legitimate authority. Similarly, the nurses in Hofling’s field experiment were willing to obey someone who called himself ‘doctor’.

AGENTIC SHIFT

Milgram distinguished between 2 psychological states.

- In the autonomous state we see ourselves as acting according to our own decision-making and are, therefore, morally responsible for our actions.

- In the agentic state we see ourselves as an agent carrying out another person’s wishes/commands, therefore, moral responsibility is passed onto to the authority figure and we lessen our own moral responsibility for our acts.

- In Milgram’s study participants underwent an agentic shift: when they refused to continue and the experimenter said that he would be responsible for any harm
caused, participants handed over moral responsibility to the experimenter and nearly always continued shocking the participant.

- In post-experimental interviews, Milgram’s participants frequently stated that they wouldn’t have shocked Mr Wallace by themselves but that they were ‘just doing what they were told’. This suggests that individuals feel a sense of responsibility to the authority figure commanding them but not for the actions they carry out as a result of these commands – responsibility for these actions has been handed over to the figure commanding them.

THE ROLE OF BUFFERS (psychological barriers)

- Physical and psychological barriers may lessen the impact of committing immoral acts and individuals considering the moral consequences of their actions.
- In variations of the original Milgram study, when participants could not hear Mr Wallace’s screams levels of obedience rose; when participants could see as well as hear Mr Wallace levels of obedience fell.

GRADUAL COMMITMENT

- Having agreed to give low level, non-harmful shocks progression to the ‘next small step up’ of higher shocks is psychologically less difficult. Having committed to giving shocks in the first place it becomes more difficult for participants to subsequently change their mind. This is the ‘foot-in-the-door’ method of persuasion as people become locked into obedience in small stages.

Many Holocaust (mass killing of Jews in WW2) historians have questioned Milgram’s emphasis on the power of blind obedience to authority figures. Using obedience explanations of the holocaust in some ways justifies or explains away the personal moral responsibility criminals should and must face for their crimes by blaming their obedience on environmental/social/psychological factors.
DISPOSITIONAL EXPLANATION FOR OBEDIENCE – THE AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY

Adorno argued that certain personality types (dispositions) were prone to high levels of obedience as a result of negative early childhood experiences. This ‘authoritarian personality’ is characterised by:

- High levels of obedience and respect for authority
- Support for corporal (bodily) and capital (death penalty) punishment
- Racial/outgroup (those we perceive as different to ourselves) prejudice

In the 50’s, Adorno interviewed over 2000 US students about their political beliefs and early childhood experiences and used projective tests (a way of analysing unconscious thoughts) to assess whether they were racially prejudiced. Adorno found that strict parents who used harsh physical punishment tended to produce children with high levels of obedience and respect for authority. Adorno drew on Freud’s view that a harsh upbringing leads to feelings of hostility and anger to parents which is then displaced (diverted) onto weaker, minority groups: i.e. the minority becomes an outlet for the individual’s repressed unconscious hostility.

Adorno developed a number of questionnaires/scales which measured:

- Fascism (Nazi political beliefs). The F scale questionnaire asked questions such as ‘obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn’, and ‘rules are there for people to follow, not change’.
- Ethnocentrism (the preference for one’s own ethnic group)
- Anti-Semitism (anti-Jewish)

In the 80’s Altemeyer refined the concept of the Authoritarian Personality by identifying a group of 3 personality variables he referred to as right-wing (politically conservative) authoritarianism (RWA) characterised by:

- Conventionalism – believing in traditional/conservative norms and values
- Authoritarian aggression – aggressive urges towards people who go against traditional norms and values (e.g. homosexuals)
- Authoritarian submission – uncritical obedience to traditional authorities

When conducting a research study similar to Milgram’s which involved participants shocking