

58 Social Influence

23.1 Introduction

Imagine living all by yourself, in total isolation. Will you be as careful with how you dress or eat? Our manners, attitudes and actions are strongly affected by other persons. The process through which others affect us is known as Social Influence. How can one persuade another individual or a group of individuals to change their beliefs, opinions and attitudes? Why do the members of a social group, subculture, a society tend to hold similar beliefs and act in similar ways? These are some of the issues related to social influence.

In this lesson you are going to learn several key aspects of social influence - first we will focus on conformity i.e. when an individual changes one's behaviour so as to follow the existing social norms. Norms are the widely accepted ideas or rules indicating how people should behave in certain situations. We will also read about the factors affecting conformity. Another form of social influence that will be dealt with in this lesson is obedience.

23.2 Objectives

After reading this lesson you should be able to state :

- what is conformity;
- factors influencing conformity;
- what is obedience.

23.3 Conformity

Have you ever moved to a new locality or changed your residence ?

Was it not strange to find that no one in the new neighbourhood knows you. You miss your old friends, and your group where you knew how to behave. This feeling of wanting to become a part of this new group is pressure towards conformity. *In many situations, spoken and unspoken rules tell us how we ought to behave. These are known as **social norms**.*

Social norms can be detailed and explicit, as they are for traffic regulation. Norms can also be unspoken or implicit. For example to point a finger towards someone or not to stand up when the national anthem is sung is not considered good in the society. Regardless of personal political beliefs these are two behaviours which we normally conform to, even though they are not told to us so obviously.

This strong tendency towards conformity may at times discourage people from doing their own things. But without it we would be living in the midst of social chaos. For instance consider the danger to both drivers and pedestrians if the traffic rules were not widely followed. This does not mean that social conformity is always advantageous. When one goes for a formal dinner party, normally one does not take a second helping till the hostess offers or asks one to do so. This refers to the unspoken, implicit norms. If the hostess misses you while serving the second helping you may return with an empty stomach.

23.4 Factors Affecting Conformity

It is clear that powerful pressures towards conformity exist in many of the life settings. What factors determine the extent to which people yield to conformity pressure? Many variable are active in this process. Let us discuss some important ones :-

Cohesiveness and Conformity : Accepting influence from those we like.

Consider the following situation :

While sitting with a group of family and relatives, your mother reprimands you if you use 'slangs' while talking. So while slangs are a common feature in your vocabulary, you perhaps will try not to use them in front of this group. At other times, when you are travelling in a bus with your friends, you use the slangs freely. Why do you behave so differently in two different contexts ?

Partly because these two groups mean two different things to you. While you look to your parents and relatives and seek their approval by conforming with their expectations, you would change your behaviour in the company of your friends so, that you are accepted in that group. Such attraction towards a particular group or its individual members is usually described by the term cohesiveness. Generally, when cohesiveness is high, pressures towards conformity is more. This is one reason why most persons are much more willing to accept social influence from friends or persons they than admire from others. Research in this area has shown that pressures toward conformity can affect critically any aspect of behaviour.

Intext Questions 23.1

1. What is social influence?

2. Is conformity good or bad for the individual ?

Think and write

While your very close friends approve of long hair, your classmates think short hair look better. How will you keep your hair and why?

23.5 Conformity and Group Size

Size of the influencing group also affects the tendency to conform strongly. It has been found that to a limit - about three or four members - conformity does increase with increase rising group size. Beyond this however, further increment in group-size produces less effect. Why is it so?

One reason could be that as the group size increases beyond three or four members, persons exposed to social pressure begin to suspect that pressure is being put on them in a pre-planned way. They conclude that the persons in the group are not expressing individual views, nor are they behaving according to individual preferences. Rather, the group as a whole is exerting influence. This conclusion makes a lot of common sense. People around us are very rarely unanimous in their views points. More often than not, they hold different opinions.

When a group exerts influence, it is not exerted on a single individual. Conformity pressure might be exerted on several individuals at any given time. When this happens, the total influence exerted is divided among an increased number of people, and so the actual social influence shows very gradual or no increase. This is known as the social influence model and is given by two psychologist, Tranford and Penrod in 1984.

When an individual is the target on whom the conformity pressure is exerted, the social influence is seen to be a lot in the beginning, and then it is gradual. When the target persons are five, the same number

of influence sources bring lesser social influence than seen in the first case, and it is the least when target persons are ten. So, as the target persons increase, the curve becomes flatter, because the influence exerted is divided among an increasing number of persons, and so the conformity also decreases.

23.6 Social Support and Conformity

Suppose you are in a group, where everyone else has a view point different from yours. Most likely, after a while you will yield to the social pressure and conform with the group's view. Now imagine that in a similar situation, you have atleast one individual, who is supporting you.

Research has shown, that when this happens, conformity decreases. Conformity pressure will reduce even when the same person may not feel as you do, but feels differently from the remaining group. Suppose in your class all the students decide to bunk one period, while you want to attend it. If all are against you, may be after a while you relent and give in to the pressure. But, if another classmate also feels the way you do, the pressure for conforming will definitely diminish. Almost all forms of social support help in reducing the pressure to conform, but certain forces of social support are more powerful than others. Studies show that support received early i.e., before the pressures toward conformity have really mounted is more effective in reducing conformity than if support is received after pressure towards conformity has built up. Also, knowing that you have someone supporting your view, your ability to resist conformity pressure will go up. So, going back to the earlier example about class bunking, if you oppose the idea, express it in the beginning, for that is when you can sway others to your side, which in turn can strengthen your position.

23.7 Conformity and Gender

In the past, research had shown clear gender differences and it was indicated that women were more conforming than men. However, recent research has yielded mixed results. In the Indian set up, traditionally society has approved of conformity on the part of women. Hence Indian women experience pressure to follow the norms and thus exhibit greater conformity. With the changing social scenario, which includes urbanisation, higher education for women and women's employment, this tendency is changing, and perhaps, then, difference between the genders with respect to any aspect of social influences are not real.

Intext Questions 23.2

1. What is the effect of group size on conformity ?

2. What is the role of social support in conformity ?

23.8 The why of conformity

Why do we conform ?

What makes us conform with the social norms ? Why do we accept conformity pressures, sometimes even against our individual preferences?

The answer to these questions are not easy One can give many reasons for explaining conformity behaviour. Two important human needs which are involved in conformity appear very pertinent.

The first need deals with the desire to be liked. This is a common aspect of our daily life. For example you dress according to the accepted code in your peer group. You try to be as similar to your friends as you can, for then you are accepted and you are liked. The desire to be liked by others, 'makes you follow the norms and increases conformity.

The second need is related to desire to be right. How do you decide which hair style is in fashion or which dress will make you look up-to-date ? While it is easier to get information about other concrete things like temperature, dimensions of any room etc., to obtain information about issues like hair and dress you have to rely upon others opinions. You behave according to the information you get from others. This is called informational social influence which encourages you to conform.

You do not want to go wrong, and so you rely on others actions as guidelines for you own behaviours.

23.9 Obedience and Conformity

The most direct technique for changing a person's behaviour is to order that person to behave in a particular manner. For example your teacher orders the class to be quiet and the students obey. Sometimes the authoritarian figure may be able to punish resistance towards conformity. Also, at times, obedience is brought about in the absence of punishment; when the person ordering is much loved or respected, then also, one conforms through obeying.

Sometimes the tendency to obey is so strong what persons obey even wrong or unjust orders are given. The Jalianwala Bag incident is an example of this tendency. Then the Britishers were ruling India. What made their soldiers obey the authority's command and kill thousands of men, women and children? What makes individuals behave so blindly in the real life settings? Many factors play a role in this. Some of them are :-

First, the authority figure takes all the responsibility for the act that he commands. Thus, the actual doer is relieved from its responsibility

as he or she merely obeys orders which they use to justify their actions.

Second, the person who is commanding has obvious signs to show who is in-charge, a uniform, a cap, a designation or something similar. This makes it difficult for others to resist pressure.

A third reason for obedience could be the gradual increase in the orders. In the beginning the targetted individual is asked to do something small. Thus when police personnel are ordered to question or threaten the potential victims, gradually the intensity is increased and they may be ordered to physically harrass or even kill the victims.

So, many factors work in the process of obedience. These factors are powerful ones and unfortunately the consequence of this compelling form of social influence can be disastrous and tragic for many innocent victims.

How to resist destructive obedience ?

Some strategies to reduce conformity in face of direct order have been found to be effective :

First, tell the targetted individuals, that they themselves and not the authorities are responsible for the consequences. This may make them think about their actions and reconsider them.

Second, the targets may be given an indication that unquestioning submission to destructive command is not right. This may also reduce conformity.

Questioning the expertise and motive of the authority figure may make targetted individual rethink about obeying and reducing conformity. So, though the pressures exerted by an authority figure are great, they are not irresistible. Under appropriate conditions, its effect can be moderated.

Intext Questions 23.3

1. Why do people conform?
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What You Have Learnt

- * The feeling of wanting to become a part of the new group is pressure towards conformity.
- * The spoken and unspoken rules which tell us how to behave are known as social norms.
- * Conformity is affected by many factors. Such as :
 - Cohensiveness
 - group size
 - social support
 - gender
 - obedience
- * We conform because of two important human needs :-
 - the desire to be liked
 - the desire to be right

Terminal Exercise

1. How can one persuade another individual or a group of individuals to change their beliefs, opinions and attitudes?
 2. What are the factors affecting conformity ?
Answer in one sentence :
 - a) What are norms ?
 - b) What do you mean by cohesiveness ?
 - c) What do you understand by destructive obedience ?
 3. How is conformity affected by Social support ?
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Key to Intext Questions

23.1

1. Social influence is that influence or society's expectations from an individual or a group of individual which changes the persons beliefs, opinions and attitudes to suit those expectations.
2. Conformity can be both good and bad for an individual, depending upon the situation. For example, it defines certain rules explicitly which helps check the confusion proneness of the situation. Thus if the traffic rules were not clearly described, roads will become very chaotic.

23.2

1. It has been found that till the group has about 3 to 4 members, conformity increases. Beyond this however, further increase in the group size produces less effect.
2. Social support plays an important role in conformity. Having even one person on your side while the rest of the group is against what you think, can decrease conformity.

23.3

1. The reasons behind conformity behaviour are
 - (i) The desire to be liked and the desire to be right.
 - (ii) The desire to be right :

Hints to Terminal Exercise

1. Refer section 23.3 and 23.4
 2. Refer section 23.4
 3. (a) Refer section 23.3
(b) Refer section 23.4
(c) Refer section 23.9
 4. Refer section 23.6
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