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Social Influence: Conformity, Social Roles, and Obedience



You are not alone if you recall middle school and high school as hard chapters in your life. It is a time when social influence applies constant peer pressure (Brown, 1982) and popularity depends on knowing and conforming to unwritten rules. Fortunately, as we grow older, our possible social roles expand well beyond the boundaries of high school stereotypes around sports, geekdom, or the arts.

But social roles still influence us; adults at social gatherings tend to ask, “What do you do for a living?” to identify individuals and begin to form impressions. While sometimes we can feel the pressure of too many or conflicting social roles (e.g., for women, Arthur & Lee, 2008), our deeper commitments to certain roles (as parent, employee, lover, or friend) are a form of social influence that stabilizes society—we gradually become the gears that keep societies up and running.

There can be dangers as we negotiate our way into new social roles, especially when those social roles require obedience to an authority. Conforming and obeying authorities appear to be wired into the human experience because they keep society functioning. However, they also are associated with the dark side of social influence.

The most disturbing, early observations about social influence were connected to World War I and then again to World War II and the Holocaust. A common defense for the mass torture and murder of Jews, Communists, homosexuals, the disabled, and others was simply, “I was just following orders” and “I didn’t do anything unique; everyone else did the same thing.” A century of basic research in social psychology has significantly increased our understanding of social influence, but there is still much more to be discovered.

After reading this chapter, you will be able to answer the following questions:

Core Questions

1. What types of social influence exist?
2. Why and when do we choose to conform?
3. How do social roles change our behavior?
4. What can we learn from Milgram’s experiments on authority?

Learning Objectives

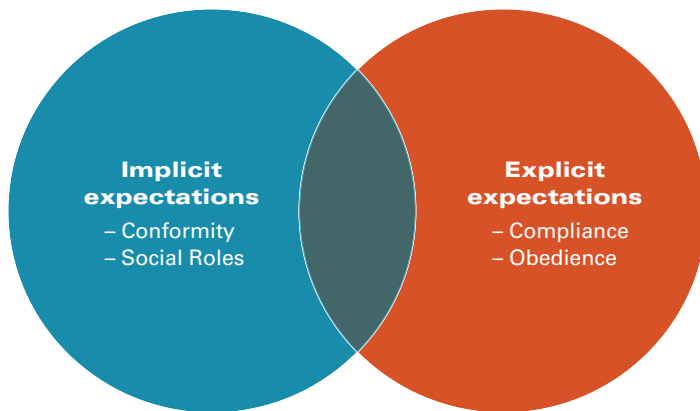
1. Compare and contrast implicit versus explicit social influence.
2. Differentiate between informational and normative social pressures to conform.
3. Analyze how social roles lead us to conform to situational expectations.
4. Explain the person, procedures, and competing interpretations behind the Milgram experiments on authority.

WHAT TYPES OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE EXIST?

Learning Objective 1: Compare and contrast implicit versus explicit social influence.

Social influence describes how our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors respond to our social world, including our tendencies to conform to others, follow social rules, and obey authority figures. Social influence takes two basic forms: implicit expectations and explicit expectations. **Implicit expectations** are unspoken rules. Like the unwritten laws of middle school, implicit expectations are enforced by group norms. For example, no

■ **FIGURE 7.1** Implicit expectations (conformity and social roles) plus explicit expectations (compliance and obedience). Sometimes, these four forms of social influence overlap.



one has to tell you that you will likely be expected to dress differently at formal religious events compared to attending a retro grunge rock concert.

Implicit expectations can be further subdivided into two types. The first is *conformity*, which occurs when you voluntarily change your behavior to imitate the behavior of your peers. Twenty-five years from now, you will probably look at a current picture of yourself and wonder how you could have made such terrible fashion choices way back when. At the time, you were probably wearing what everyone else was wearing.

A second form of implicit social influence comes from *social roles*, or expectations from a group about how certain people are supposed to look and behave. We share stereotypes about how elementary school teachers, rock musicians, clergy,

and presidential candidates publicly engage with others. These expectations are implicit because while everyone knows the “rules,” they aren’t necessarily written down or formalized.

Unlike implicit expectations, *explicit expectations* are clearly and formally stated—not at all subtle. There are also two forms of explicit expectations: compliance and obedience. *Compliance* occurs when you behave in response to a direct or indirect request. When healthy graduate students asked people on a New York City subway to give up their seat, about two thirds of the subway riders complied (Milgram & Sabini, 1983)—just because someone asked. With compliance, there isn’t necessarily any threat of punishment for not doing the behavior—it is a request, not a demand.

In contrast, *obedience* occurs when you behave in a particular way because someone of higher status has ordered you to do so. It might be your boss at work, a parent, or a professor at school; in any case, the expectation is stated clearly and often accompanied by some kind of social punishment if you fail to obey. In general, obedience can be considered a more extreme version of compliance.

August Landmesser defied social pressures to give the Nazi salute, probably because he had fallen in love with a Jewish woman, Irma Eckler. He was banned from the Nazi party after he and Eckler became engaged, and they were later denied a marriage license. If you want to learn more, several websites describe his quiet heroism in fighting against social pressures—and its tragic consequences.



Social Norms and the Herd Mentality

Are you more of an independent thinker or a conformist? Our impulse to conform begins much earlier in life than you might imagine. Infants will imitate others when they are only 2 to 3 weeks old (Meltzoff & Moore, 1977, 1989). Growing infants will automatically clap when others clap; as small children, they will whisper back when others whisper to them, and a little later they will imitate one another's eating habits (Johnston, 2002).

As we grow, we absorb these behaviors as *social norms* (also called *group norms*)—rules that indicate how people are expected to behave in particular social situations. There is an implied payoff for conforming to social norms for humans, as well as many other species. It increases our odds of meeting, mating, and protecting our offspring until they reach their own reproductive maturity (Buss & Kenrick, 1998). Put another way, however, the reverse is also true: If we fail to meet social norms, our chances of being accepted by the group decrease—and our stubborn independence reduces our chances of finding a life partner.

But that's only part of the story behind group norms. Group norms can also create a *herd mentality* (the tendency to blindly follow the direction your group is moving toward). Suddenly you may find yourself proclaiming strange and dangerous beliefs. "Going along to get along" can also lead to authoritarian leaders, and a herd mentality can make small conflicts mushroom into dangerous confrontations. For example, prior to World War I, both sides recruited many thousands of enthusiastic volunteers. Both sides were certain that the conflict would be short and glorious. This war wasn't short and it wasn't glorious. The herd mentality helped recruit and then destroy almost an entire generation.

Conforming Is Contagious

Conforming is contagious. For example, it can be awkward to attend your first holiday meal with new in-laws if no one tells you that Grandpa always sits in a particular chair or that the holiday meal, announced for 2 p.m., is never served until 4:30. Your new family members do not have to say anything to communicate their group norms, however. Instead, you observe that at 2 p.m., the dining room table isn't set, the cooking is just getting started, the teenagers are just getting out of bed, and no one else seems surprised that the meal is so "late."

However, to their way of thinking—your new family's social norm—the meal is right on time. "Dinner is at 2 p.m." really means, "Come on over sometime in the afternoon; we'll start cooking." Your social network (new relatives) will guide you to conform according to the cultural expectations that your new spouse probably forgot to mention (see Gulati & Puranam, 2009). The social norms practiced by your new relatives provide specific but implicit guidance about how you are expected to behave.

Social Contagion. One of social psychology's simplest yet strangest experiments demonstrates the importance of group size in *social contagion*, the spontaneous



In a herd of animals, each has to move in the same direction or they might get trampled. Can this be a metaphor for human tendencies to conform?

I don't want to belong to any club that will accept people like me as a member.

—Groucho Marx (1967)

distribution of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors among larger groups of people. One person on a busy New York City street stopped on the sidewalk and stared up at a sixth-floor window of a building (Milgram, Bickman, & Berkowitz, 1969). That's all it took to start a small social contagion. Make no mistake: There was nothing special in the window—just some distant, difficult-to-see people looking back at them.

After only 60 seconds, the first person stopped staring and moved on. After pauses long enough to allow new sets of participants to enter the scene, groups of 1, 2, 3, 5, 10, or 15 *confederates* (members of the research team pretending to be among the participants) stopped and repeated the procedure while researchers discreetly made a movie of the crowds that formed and dissolved. They discovered that the bigger the initial crowd, the more compelling it was for other people to join it.

Here's the apparent take-home message from this odd experiment: The mere existence of the crowd justified conforming to it. Perhaps people felt pressure to fit in; perhaps they wanted to find out what was so interesting to everyone else. It was a reasonable assumption by the passersby that there must be something up in that window worth looking at. Either way, the experiment demonstrated something that might not be unique to the streets of New York City. When more people engage in a particular behavior, others will feel more pressure to follow along.

Mass Psychogenic Illness. About 15 minutes after arriving at Warren County High School in Tennessee, a teacher noticed a “gasoline-like” smell in her classroom. She was about to trigger a disturbing form of social contagion called *mass psychogenic illness*, socially contagious physical symptoms with no physical cause. The high school teacher soon developed a headache, nausea, shortness of breath, and dizziness. The school was evacuated, and 80 students and 19 staff members went to the emergency room, resulting in 38 hospitalizations (Jones et al., 2000).

The school reopened 5 days later, but the “epidemic” was not over; 71 more people went to the emergency room even though extensive testing could find no physical cause or evidence of toxic compounds. Researchers eventually noticed that the strange symptoms were communicated through “line of sight.” Simply seeing someone whom you believed was ill could trigger hyperventilation. Rashes, none of which suggested exposure to a toxic substance, appeared to be caused by scratching. Despite being caused by purely psychological factors relating to social conformity, the Tennessee “outbreak” involved

- 18,000 person-days of lost labor
- 178 emergency room visits
- Eight ambulance trips
- About \$100,000 in direct medical expenses (in 1998 dollars)
- Thousands of dollars for laboratory tests and field studies
- 12 government agencies
- Eight laboratories
- Seven consulting groups
- Many private consultations

The Tanganyikan Laughter Epidemic. Social contagion also explains why television laugh tracks are effective: We tend to mimic one another when we hear laughter (Provine, 1992) and then conclude that we must find something funny about the situation (Neumann & Strack, 2000). An extreme version of this form of social contagion was the “Tanganyikan Laughter Epidemic.” Three girls attending a small, missionary-run boarding school in what is now Tanzania started laughing. Strangely, the laughter quickly spread to the other students and was accompanied by fainting,

a rash, unexplained pain, and occasional screaming. The teachers never “caught” the laughing disease, but when it eventually affected 95 of the 159 students, the school had to be closed.

Things got worse, but only if you consider more laughter a bad thing. When the students went home, other people in their towns starting laughing and the phenomenon eventually spread to thousands of people in the region. After 18 months, it all stopped, but only after a total of 14 schools had to be shut down and 1,000 people experienced the “symptoms” (Provine, 1996). No medical reason could be found for what had happened. The laughing epidemic suggests that a wide variety of social expectations—even laughter—can be distributed through social contagion.



Laughing in Tanganyika (now Tanzania)

The Main Ideas

1. Social influence can be either implicit (including conformity and behaving according to a social role) or explicit (including compliance and obedience).
2. Informal social norms (also called group norms) are communicated through a process called social contagion and can lead to a herd mentality.
3. One extreme form of social contagion or conformity is mass psychogenic illness.

⚡ CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

- Identify which form of social influence is most likely at work in the following situations: (a) Being robbed at gunpoint, (b) buying a home that you cannot afford, and (c) wearing a costume to a Halloween party even though it makes you uncomfortable.
- Think of two examples when conformity to group norms helps the group but harms the individual. Now, think of two examples of the opposite—when conformity helps the individual but leads to problems for the group.
- How might social contagion be related to driving habits such as speeding, running yellow lights, or rapid lane switching? How could you accurately (and safely) measure whether your hypothesis is supported?

WHY AND WHEN DO WE CHOOSE TO CONFORM?

Learning Objective 2: Differentiate between informational and normative social pressures to conform.

Imagine going to an unfamiliar religious ceremony with a friend. A little nervous, you start looking around to see how other people are acting. If they take off their shoes, you will probably do the same. If they kneel or sit or stand, again, it's likely that you will

follow along. Most of us perform these actions because we both (1) are uncertain about what the correct behavior is and (2) have anxiety about fitting in. These two concerns help explain that the *theory of informational and normative influence* describes two ways that social norms cause conformity: informational conformity and normative conformity (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955, 1972).

Informational Social Influence

This time, imagine you're in a history class and the professor asks if you remember the capital city of Switzerland. Your first thought is "Geneva," but someone else in the class speaks first and answers, "Bern." You then notice that several other students nod and seem to agree. Most people in this situation would start to doubt themselves—was I wrong? What's the correct answer? Would you pull out your phone and double check? The frequency of searching for quick information through phone web browsers highlights how often we are *uncertain* about everyday information.

Muzafer Sherif (1936) wanted to find out how informational *uncertainty* influences people in situations when we can't check somewhere for the answer. His studies pioneered research on *informational social influence*, voluntarily conforming to group standards when we are uncertain about the correct answer or behavior. To study this idea scientifically, Sherif took advantage of a strange optical illusion. The *auto-kinetic effect* occurs when we perceive a stationary object as moving due to natural, intermittent movements of our own eyes (called saccades). In other words, it's an optical illusion. To learn how Sherif studied this phenomenon using the scientific method, see the Spotlight on Research Methods feature.

Why We're Tempted by Informational Social Influence

Our lives are filled with uncertainty. Many non-Europeans are unsure what the capital cities are for that continent. Many of us are still uncertain about which fork to use in a fancy restaurant or how much to tip the bathroom attendant. Even when we have the luxury of high-speed digital connections and a reliable information source, we still often have to rely on conformity to cope with an uncertain social world.

Public and Private Conformity. Admitting to uncertainty can be disturbing, but it doesn't have to be. Instead, it can be helpful to understand the connection between conformity and the uncertainty that we experience in the absence of cultural hints or social norms. Under conditions of uncertainty, we tend to grab at *anything*, any tidbit of information that tells us how to behave. For example, a set of experiments that also used the auto-kinetic effect (described in Spotlight on Research Methods feature) demonstrated a distinction between public and private conformity. Participants came back to Sherif's lab, day after day, to experience the auto-kinetic effect repeatedly and make their estimates of how far the dot of light had moved.

As the days went by, the participants' conformity increased—even when they were tested alone in the room and no immediate peer pressure was involved. Both *public conformity* (conforming thoughts or behaviors shared with others) and *private conformity* (conforming thoughts or behaviors kept to oneself, not shared or observed by others) increased over time, based on the artificial group norm first announced—sometimes days earlier—by the original confederate. The participants weren't simply providing answers to fit in; they had honestly become convinced that the light was moving a certain amount even though the only influences were the group norms. When we

SHERIF AND THE AUTO-KINETIC EFFECT



Spotlight on Research Methods

To study the auto-kinetic effect, Sherif created a *controlled experiment* by first placing participants in a darkened room and then having them look at a dot of light (Sherif, 1935, 1936). Sure enough, the dot of light seemed to dance about in the darkness. Individual people in the *control group* of the experiment—who were tested by themselves without others to influence them—estimated that the light had moved an average of 4 inches; this estimate became the baseline for later comparisons. Of course, the reality was that the dot of light had not moved at all. In the control group, people simply gave their best guess.

Next, Sherif arranged for a *confederate* in the *experimental group* to provide a fake estimate of how far the light had moved. Sherif told the confederate to estimate that the light had moved about 15 inches. The confederate did this out loud, so that others in the room could hear the estimate. Soon, everyone else was conforming around the

confederate's estimate of 15 inches. And when the confederate in a third experimental group started with an estimate of only 2 inches, estimates from the real participants conformed around this much smaller number.

Remember that the idea behind control groups and experimental groups is to provide meaningful comparisons by keeping everything the same except for the variable of interest (the *independent variable*). In this experiment, the *only* thing that changed was the confederate's declaration of how far the dot of light had moved—and the experiment tested how that initial number caused participants' answers to change for their own estimates (the *dependent variable*). Why did the experimental group participants conform around 15 inches and 2 inches? Social psychologists say the answer is informational social influence that occurs when we are uncertain about what is correct.

publicly conform, we might secretly acknowledge that we're just pretending to go along with the group—but private conformity means that we've really become convinced.

Generational Influence on Conformity. Several years later, two researchers at Northwestern University followed the thread of Sherif's auto-kinetic experiments to an additional discovery. This study (Jacobs & Campbell, 1961) demonstrated a *generational influence*, a cultural belief or norm that transcends the replacement of people. Thinking of a generation as the replacement of persons rather than as generations based on birth, life, and death within a family gave Jacobs and Campbell a way to study generational transfer without having to wait for 40 or 50 years.

The initial confederate in Sherif's auto-kinetic experiment had declared that the dot of light had moved about 15 inches; now Jacobs and Campbell (1961) did the same thing in their study. Notice that they started out this new study with a *replication* of an old study—and found the same effect as previous researchers. But the added twist to their new study occurred after everyone in the group had provided an estimate of how much the light moved. That's when a *new* participant replaced the “eldest” member of the group: one generation. The original confederate, the person who had started the “tradition,” was no longer in the room! Nevertheless, when a fresh new round of estimates began, the entire group conformed around what the now-departed confederate had declared: the social norm of 15 inches.

As actual participants were replaced by new “generations” of people, the “eldest” members (people who had been present for more trials or “rounds” of the study) always



Traditions

gave their estimates first and the “new-est” gave their estimates last. It usually required five to eight “generations” of new participants until the average estimate merged with the baseline estimate from the control group. Three conclusions emerged from these auto-kinetic experiments: (a) uncertainty promoted conformity, (b) conformity increased over time, and (c) conformity endured—across five to eight generations—even when the origin of the “tradition” was based on nothing but one person’s incorrect statement about how much a light had moved when it really hadn’t moved at all.

Normative Social Influence

There are two types of norms. *Descriptive norms* refer to what is commonly done, that is, what most people do. *Injunctive norms* refer to what is socially sanctioned, that is, what society says people are *supposed* to do. The distinction between the two types of norms is apparent when you think about littering. You’re not supposed to litter (the injunctive norm), but in certain areas, littering is so common that many people will do it anyway, partly because everyone else is littering (the descriptive norm; see Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991). It’s not easy to resist the power of social norms. We may privately disagree with the group’s decision or behaviors, but we still give in to the publicly expressed social norms. See one way of measuring someone’s tendency to conform in the Applying Social Psychology to Your Life feature.

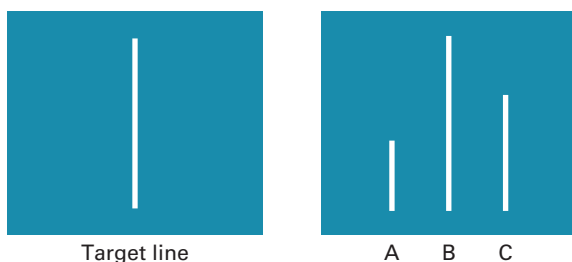
Uncertainty encourages conformity, especially when we feel social pressure to be “correct”; this motivation is the basis for informational social influence. But what if there is no uncertainty—what if we are fairly sure of our answer? Solomon Asch explored this question by asking people to provide an answer as obvious as what you can see in Figure 7.2: “Which line on the right matches the length of the line on the left?”

Asch was one of several energetic social psychologists trying to make sense of what had happened to humanity during World War II. He wrote a textbook that discussed how propaganda could be used in education either to promote (a) “independent thinking and self-reliance” or (b) the kind of conformity created by the Nazis to “indoctrinate blind obedience to state and church” (Asch, 1952, p. 620).

Unlike informational social influence, Asch’s famous experiments explored *normative social influence*, which occurs when we publicly conform, often to gain

social acceptance and avoid rejection. Thus, normative social influence is more likely to lead us to pretend to agree with a group because we want to fit in—our conformity is public but not necessarily private (we don’t actually become convinced that the group’s direction is correct). When Asch started his studies, he believed that few people would ever answer anything other than Line B, the clearly correct answer (see Bond & Smith, 1996; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Friend et al., 1990). Asch (1952, 1956) was about to be surprised by the results of his own experiments.

■ FIGURE 7.2 Can you tell which line on the right matches the one on the left?



MEASURING CONFORMITY



Applying Social Psychology to Your Life

Instructions: Please use the following scale to indicate the degree of your agreement or disagreement with each of the statements below. Record your numerical answer to each statement in the space provided

preceding the statement. Try to describe yourself accurately and generally (that is, the way you are actually in most situations—not the way you would hope to be).

-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4
Very strong disagreement				Neither agree nor disagree				Very strong agreement

- ___ 1. I often rely on, and act upon, the advice of others.
- ___ 2. I would be the last one to change my opinion in a heated argument on a controversial topic.
- ___ 3. Generally, I'd rather give in and go along for the sake of peace than struggle to have my way.
- ___ 4. I tend to follow family tradition in making political decisions.
- ___ 5. Basically, my friends are the ones who decide what we do together.
- ___ 6. A charismatic and eloquent speaker can easily influence and change my ideas.
- ___ 7. I am more independent than conforming in my ways.

- ___ 8. If someone is very persuasive, I tend to change my opinion and go along with them.
- ___ 9. I don't give in to others easily.
- ___ 10. I tend to rely on others when I have to make an important decision quickly.
- ___ 11. I prefer to make my own way in life rather than find a group I can follow.

Scoring: First, reverse-score Items 2, 7, 9, and 11. For this scale, all you have to do is cross off the plus or minus in front of what you wrote and change it to the other sign (so, for example, a -3 becomes a +3). Zeros stay the same. Then, add up all of the numbers to get your composite score, which should be between -44 and +44. Higher numbers mean more of a tendency to conform to others.

Source: Mehrabian and Stefl (1995).

Fitting in Beats Being Right

Asch assembled groups of seven to nine participants for what appeared to be an exceptionally boring study. In successive trials, the group members were to compare the length of a single vertical line with the length of three other vertical lines of varying lengths—one of which was clearly a match for the first line (see Figure 7.2 again). Participants announced their answers aloud according to the order in which they were seated. For the first two trials, everyone was in perfect agreement.

But the experiment very quickly went from boring to disturbing when, on the third trial, unanimous opinion agreed about the *wrong* line! In fact, most of the participants in the study were actually *confederates* in the experiment. Only one person in the



Asch's conformity experiments

group was not in on the *deception*: the real participant in the experiment—and he was almost the last one to voice his opinion.

Asch's research model, or *research paradigm*, was in place: He had created a repeatable set of procedures to collect data. His simple line judgment task thrust naive participants into a situation in which they would have to choose conforming to group pressure or the certain evidence of their eyes. In control studies with no confederates, participants had provided the correct answer 98% of the time.

Asch arranged for the confederates in the experimental condition to give the wrong answers more than 50% of the time, placing the participant in what Roger Brown (1965) called “an epistemological nightmare” (p. 671) that occurs when our lifelong way of knowing suddenly appears to be invalid. The face of the participant (the man in the middle) in the photograph above suggests what that nightmare must feel like as “deeply rooted assumptions—of mutually shared perceptions and expectations—are decisively shattered” (Friend, Rafferty, & Bramel, 1990, p. 42). Social pressure to conform was so powerful that in about 37% of their answers, the participants gave in and said the wrong answer—and 75% of the participants conformed to the wrong answer at least once (Asch, 1951).

To help explain why participants behaved as they did, Asch combined both *quantitative data* (results in numerical form, such as scores on self-report measures or the percentage of people who act in a certain way) and *qualitative data* (results in subjective forms such as the content of essays or interviews) from follow-up interviews (Asch, 1955). Some of those who resisted the pressures to conform reported a sense of obligation to simply tell the truth as they saw it. Surprisingly, among those who did conform, a few people did seem to have done so due to informational social influence. These participants genuinely started to question their sensation and perception abilities. A few other participants stated that they went along with the others because they didn't want to mess up Asch's data, a motivation called the “*good subject bias*,” one form of social desirability.

However, others clearly stated that they knew the answer they had provided was wrong. Why did they say it? Because they felt the peer pressure of fitting in with the group: normative social influence. For example, one participant noted, “I was standing out [like] a sore thumb . . . I didn't want particularly to make a fool of myself . . . I felt I was definitely right [but] they might think I was peculiar” (Asch, 1956, p. 416). This participant privately knew the answer was wrong, but group pressure made him publicly give in.

Many other psychologists started using Asch's research paradigm. In a 1996 publication, Bond and Smith reviewed 133 such studies conducted over four decades and from 17 different countries. One interesting conclusion was that conformity in the United States has declined since the early 1950s. However, the 1996 review also found that conformity increased when

- (a) the size of the majority increased,
- (b) the stimuli being used to test conformity were more ambiguous (the lines were more similar to each other),
- (c) the majority group only included members of one's social ingroup, and
- (d) the proportion of women participants increased.

CONFORMITY IN MEAN GIRLS AND THE DUFF



Social Psychology in Popular Culture



Mean Girls

(2015). In both, a theoretically less attractive girl is thrown into the world of stereotypes and social pressure as she tries to get the attention of a boy.

In *Mean Girls*, the main character, Kady, has to learn how to gain friends quickly as she moves to the United States after being raised in Africa by her scientist parents. She quickly learns that the high school is made up of social cliques such as “Asian nerds,” “band geeks,” and “varsity jocks.” The group of girls in the most popular social group are called “the

Perhaps for many of us, the pressure to conform reached a peak in middle school and high school. Unsure of their identity, teenagers may feel anxiety about fitting into their increasingly complicated social worlds. This pressure and anxiety are highlighted in the comedies *Mean Girls* (2004)

and *The DUFF*

“plastics” by the other groups, because they look like real-life Barbie dolls. The plastics decide to include Kady, but only if she follows certain rules, including the following:

- on Wednesdays you have to wear pink,
- you can’t wear a tank-top 2 days in a row,
- you can only put your hair in a ponytail once a week, and
- jeans or track pants are only allowed on Fridays.

Kady is torn between following the conformity rules so she can be accepted versus defying the rules, because she sees them as arbitrary, superficial, and—as the name of the movie conveys—mean. Eventually, she becomes so caught up in the social expectations of her world that she becomes the leader of the plastics, embodying everything she originally tried to scorn.

In *The DUFF*, protagonist Bianca finds out that she is her social group’s “Designated Ugly, Fat Friend” and decides to embark on a training journey of how to be more popular to avoid this label. Still, she uses her own labels for others in her world, such as “the nice one” and “man whore.” Both movies have several funny parts, often due to social commentary regarding how arbitrary, but often cruel, the world of conformity can be for young people trying to find their identity and place in their social worlds.

Why might the presence of others in your social in-group increase conformity? One explanation is that the risk of rejection is much greater. And for women, they may have been more socialized to conform, to “be nice” and “not make trouble.” Asch started this research paradigm in the 1950s, and the review summarizing all those subsequent experiments was published in the mid-1990s. Social roles for men and women were sharply defined in the 1950s, but the American culture in general and the cultural expectations for women and men both changed dramatically during those intervening years. That’s why the next section explores how culture influences conformity.

Cultural Values and Conformity

What would you have done if you had been a participant in Asch's study? Twenty-four percent of Asch's participants didn't conform on a single trial—not even once (Asch, 1957)! Were these people brave rebels who had so much self-confidence they didn't care if they fit in? At least some research indicates that cultural values—rather than personal courage—may be the most potent force influencing social conformity (Triandis, 1989).

Conformity, Culture, and Eating. Chandra (1973) found high rates of conformity in a replication of the line judgment experiment (about 58%) done in Fiji. The participants in those studies were primary school teachers and teachers-in-training. Fiji is a culture in which social conformity is highly valued. Amir (1984) found approximately the same rates of conformity in a replication done in Kuwait that Asch found in the United States. If culture can change the likelihood of people saying the wrong answer—even when they know it's wrong—can it affect other types of conformity as well?

An interesting example emerged when Berry (1967) compared the Temne people from Sierra Leone (on the west coast of Africa) with Inuits (formerly sometimes called Eskimos) from Baffin Island (in the northernmost section of Canada). Berry discovered that the Temne people demonstrated a strong tendency to go along with the group norm while the Inuits almost entirely disregarded group pressure. Berry came to believe that how a culture accumulates food contributes to these wide cultural differences in conformity.

Does this food accumulation hypothesis sound like a far-fetched explanation for conformity patterns? If so, perhaps you never have been personally threatened by hunger or belonged to a group threatened with hardship (or even starvation) if a crop fails. The Temne are mostly rice farmers who can harvest only one crop per year, so they accumulate a great deal of food at one time and raise their children to be obedient, dependable, and cooperative. They have to be: Conforming contributes to their survival. A Temne participant in the line judgment experiment said, "When Temne people choose a thing, we must all agree with the decision—that is what we call cooperation."

The Inuits of Baffin Island, on the other hand, have no vegetation. Surviving for these people requires independent, adventurous individuals who can fish and hunt independently, rugged individualists who can take care of themselves in harsh conditions. They are lenient with their children, encourage independence, and value self-reliance. When the Inuits from Baffin Island participated in the line judgment experiment, they would usually say nothing at all but "would often display a quiet, knowing smile" as they pointed toward the correct line (Berry, 1967, p. 17).

Berry's experiments are important because the Temne and Inuits are profoundly different cultures. However, this same pattern of cultural differences shows up in less dramatic comparisons. What people in the individualistic-inclined culture in the United States criticize as "conformity" is highly valued in collectivist cultures as "social sensitivity." In a collectivist culture, embarrassing someone by pointing out their errors is not perceived as bravely speaking your mind—it is considered rude. To collectivist-inclined cultures, conforming isn't caving in; it is a virtuous social courtesy that puts the group's needs before your own (Markus & Kitayama, 1994).

Ironic Conformity: Hippies and Goth. For many people in the United States, conformity was viewed as a good thing in the 1950s. But attitudes toward conformity changed during the latter half of the 20th century, especially as college students began to question authority during the Vietnam War. Social conflict promoted independent thinking, and conformity was viewed as "selling out" (see Larsen, 1974, 1982, 1990; Perrin & Spencer, 1981).



Hippie

However, social pressures to conform are subtle as well as powerful. In the midst of the social turmoil of the 1960s, Birney, Burdick, and Teevan (1969) suggested that the cultural revolution of the 1960s was itself an exercise in ironic conformity. It seemed as if everybody was buying bell-bottomed pants, wearing peace medallions, marching against the war in Vietnam, and smoking pot. Nonconforming had become the thing to do; all the “nonconformists” started to look and act the same. It is, of course, an ironic observation about 1960s “hippies.” They were more likely to be cultural rebels if their culture communicated that it was okay to be a rebel.

More recently, young people have chosen other ways to “rebel” as “nonconformists”; for example, some people choose to embrace “Goth” culture by dressing in black and wearing specific types of jewelry. Again, however, while the people participating in this subculture highly value nonconformity, the unwritten rules of how to fit in ironically mean that many “Goth” youths all look alike, profess to enjoying the same types of music, and so on.

The Main Ideas

1. Informational social influence occurs when we conform in order to be correct; it leads to both private and public changes.
2. Normative social influence occurs when we conform in order to gain acceptance and avoid rejection; it leads to public changes but private disagreement.
3. Cultures vary in the degree to which they value conformity.

⚡ CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

- How do you think you would have behaved in the Asch line judgment experiment? Name something you do (or do not do) simply because it imitates how others behave.

- How has your cultural upbringing influenced whether you think of conformity as a good thing or a bad thing? Is nonconformity a way to break up the status quo and to live authentically—or is it simply being selfish and valuing your own needs more than the group’s needs?
- We discussed how culture can influence whether and when people conform. What other variables might predict higher or lower conformity? For example, are there personality traits, childhood experiences, or other ideas that increase or decrease conformity? Do these variables predict rates of informational conformity (desire to be correct), normative conformity (desire to fit in), or both?

HOW DO SOCIAL ROLES CHANGE OUR BEHAVIOR?

Learning Objective 3: Analyze how social roles lead us to conform to situational expectations.

One of our students provided an informal definition of social roles to a student she was tutoring. A social role is “knowing what to do when you wake up in the morning.” It’s a pretty good definition. It hints at how just having a social role helps resolve personal uncertainties by supporting a sense of self. Social roles tell us how to act (think, feel, and behave) in a variety of situations. The studies in this section explore the surprising power of social roles. They demonstrate how profoundly the mere suggestion of a social role can influence our behavior—especially under conditions of uncertainty.

Social roles are a bigger idea than you might imagine. To Kurt Lewin (1948, pp. 43–45), whose Jewish mother disappeared during the Holocaust, social roles helped explain what happened within Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. Hitler had persuaded the Germans there was one unacceptable social role—“decadent inefficient lawlessness,” which referred to Jewish people, homosexuals, the disabled, Communists, and so on—and one acceptable role (following his autocratic, fascist lead).

These disturbing dynamics are not uniquely German or limited to the 1930s and 1940s (see Morrock, 2010); genocide continues to this day—and today we can’t deny that we know about it (see Pinker, 2011). The disappearing sense of self and individuality has to be replaced by something else, and the famous Stanford prison study investigated how quickly the self can disappear into a social role.



Phil Zimbardo

The Setup for the Stanford Prison Study

The prison wasn’t real—but it felt that way to the participants in this controversial demonstration of the power of social roles. The “prison hole” for bad prisoners was a 2 × 2 × 7-foot closet used for solitary confinement. There were a few small rooms for cells that were just big enough to hold a single cot, but not much more. The rooms were located along a 35-foot-long basement hallway of the Stanford University psychology building in California.

It felt like a real prison even though the participants were all volunteers and Stanford students. They had been told that they couldn’t leave, but no one physically restrained them. They all knew that it was only an experiment. Any participant could have walked out of the experiment any time he chose. But psychologically, it started to feel like a real prison when neighbors watched as the young men who had volunteered for the experiment were handcuffed and taken away in squad cars. The experiment had officially begun (see Zimbardo, 1973).

The simulated prison experiment tested whether social roles and situational pressures could overwhelm someone's personality (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). The participants had been screened in advance. The only people allowed in the study were normal, healthy, well-adjusted young men. The next step used *random assignment* to groups; each participant would, purely by chance, be assigned to play the social role of either a prisoner or a guard (thus, assignment of social role was the *independent variable*).

Random assignment to social roles means that the two groups of men started out as equivalent. Therefore, anything that happened later was probably *not* the result of naturally aggressive people becoming guards or all the dependent personalities becoming prisoners. Random assignment to groups was the only thing that determined whether a participant would be a prisoner or a guard. How people acted within each role was the *dependent variable*.

The researchers used clothing and similar symbols to prime participants into their social roles. They wore mock uniforms and symbolic ankle chains. Numbers replaced names. The guards wore official-looking uniforms and carried symbols of their pretend authority. However, unlike the “prisoners,” the guards got to go home at night. In the privacy of their homes, the guards could think over what had happened during the day and why they were doing it.

Unfortunately, that extra time away from the basement in the Stanford Psychology Department did not stop the dangerous psychological process of *deindividuation*. This loss of individuality occurs when self-awareness is replaced by a social role or a group identity—the individual disappears into a social role. Deindividuation led to cruelty in the Stanford prison study. When participants put on a uniform and were given implicit permission to enact certain behaviors, the resulting feeling of anonymity or a substitute identity led them to do things they wouldn't normally consider doing.

In this case, cruelty quickly evolved as a control technique among the people randomly assigned to play the role of guards. For example, the guards forced one prisoner to simulate a sexual act. They placed a second uncooperative prisoner in the isolation hole and then instructed the other prisoners to pound on the door to this tiny closet and loudly criticize their fellow prisoner. Imagine what it was like to be alone in that dark closet while others pounded on the door and blamed you for their problems.

No one had to teach the guards how to act or what the expectations of their social role were; they figured out the mechanics of cruelty and control all by themselves. The prisoners, for their part, also embraced their social roles and identified themselves by their assigned prison numbers rather than by their names. They adopted stereotypical prison roles such as “the rebel” and “the conformist.” No one had to instruct them either; the prisoners submerged their own personalities into their randomly assigned social role. Deindividuation had occurred.

Anonymity, Deindividuation, and Disinhibition

Once in their social role of prison guard, the Stanford students randomly assigned to that condition began acting in ways they probably wouldn't have in other circumstances. Why can situations have such a powerful effect on behavior?

In a simple but telling *field study* using *naturalistic observation*, Diener and colleagues (Diener, Fraser, Beaman, & Kelem, 1976) explored the process of deindividuation; they tested more than 1,300 children approaching 27 different homes in Seattle during Halloween. Researchers hid while trick-or-treaters were given the opportunity to steal candy and money from a home they visited. They found that children were more

likely to steal when (1) they were in a group (and thus might not be individually held responsible), and (2) they had not been asked for their names by the person greeting them at the door. Of course, being in a Halloween costume probably also helped provide a sense of anonymity. Without *random assignment* and a *control group* of children not in costume, this conclusion can only be speculation. Nevertheless, the evidence points to a provocative conclusion: Anonymity encourages deindividuation.

On its face, that may not sound surprising. It is a bit more interesting to recognize that decreasing self-awareness can lead to deindividuation. And it starts to become provocative as you understand that, as we saw in the Stanford prison study, the effect of deindividuation is to disinhibit (or loosen) customary social restraints (see Diener, 1979; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1982). For example, students are less likely to cheat in a room with a mirror facing them, as a reminder of their identity (Vallacher & Solodky, 1979). These findings suggest that one possible path to social disinhibition looks like the chain of outcomes shown in Figure 7.3.

■ **FIGURE 7.3** A possible path to social disinhibition.



The simple observation that anonymity encourages deindividuation gains more importance when you consider social media. The Internet provides many more opportunities for the kind of anonymity that decreases self-awareness and leads to deindividuation. “Trolling” online, for example, allows people to anonymously write unpopular and offensive beliefs without fear of having it reflect badly on themselves (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). Anonymous comments left on blogs allow people to state offensive things when no one can trace the comments back to their author. People are more willing to lie in an email than with pen and paper (Naquin, Kurtzberg, & Belkin, 2010); it seems that simply using a computer helps people feel less personally tied to their actions—something to think about in an age when job applicants, tax returns, and bureaucratic reports are submitted electronically.

But hold on! Is social disinhibition always a bad thing? A temporarily disappearing self might feel like a vacation to some people. For example, do you necessarily start harming others when you cut loose at a concert, yell at the television in the privacy of your home, or loudly complain about a referee within the safety of a crowd of fans at a football or hockey game? Deindividuation on the Internet is not necessarily a bad thing, either. The anonymity of the Internet allows users to practice social skills and experiment with “new behaviors and beliefs without fear of being judged” (Barnett & Coulson, 2010, p. 171; see Sutton-Smith, 1998). This use of the Internet can promote self-discovery and healthy exploration. Anonymity can have both socially positive as well as socially negative consequences.

Clothing Can Facilitate Particular Social Roles

The prisoners and the guards in the Stanford prison study wore uniforms that identified their social roles. The guard role was authoritative. They had the same military-like uniforms, whistles, and symbols of authority. The prisoner role was submissive; they wore smocks with ID numbers and other degrading symbols. No matter which social role a

participant was randomly assigned, his clothing seemed to help him merge his former self into his new role. Like members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) who wear face-hiding hoods, their “costumes” appeared to release people from what Festinger and colleagues (Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952) called “inner restraints.”

Clothes That Prime Positive and Negative Social Roles. What about good social roles? Johnson and Downing (1979) wondered more specifically whether clothing could prime both antisocial behavior and prosocial behavior. They compared groups who saw a photograph of someone dressed either in a nurses’ uniform (priming the stereotype of a prosocial, caring person) or a Klan-like uniform (priming antisocial, aggressive stereotypes). In the experiment, the people in both groups were further subdivided into another two groups: individuated (with a large nametag) or relatively deindividuated (no nametag, a *control group*).

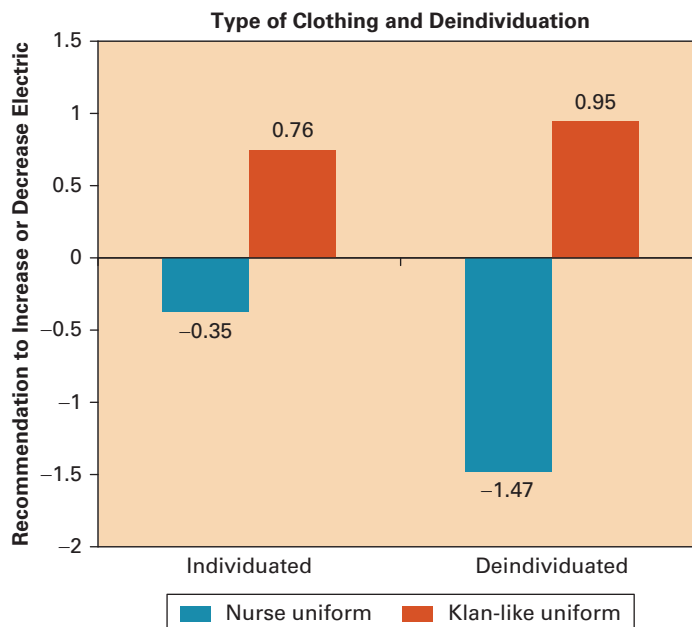
The *experimental design* for this study is represented in Table 7.1. It is called a 2×2 *factorial design* because there are two *independent variables* (type of uniform and the presence or absence of a nametag) and two levels of each variable. If the study had included people wearing some third type of uniform, say that of a soldier, then it would have been known as a 2×3 *factorial design*.

All participants in the Johnson and Downing (1979) study were then allowed to make decisions about whether to increase or decrease the amount of electric shock experienced by another person (the *dependent variable*). Figure 7.4 shows the results

■ **TABLE 7.1** The Experimental Design for Johnson and Downing (1979) Self

	KKK Uniform (Negative Stereotype)	Nurse Uniform (Positive Stereotype)
Large nametag (individuated)	Condition 1	Condition 2
No nametag (deindividuated)	Condition 3	Condition 4

■ **FIGURE 7.4** Type of clothing and deindividuation.



of this experiment. Compared to the individuated group, participants who were deindividuated (did not have a nametag—were more anonymous) showed less inhibition for both *prosocial* and *antisocial* behaviors. Their recommendations for electric shock levels were more extreme in both directions. In other words, deindividuated people seemed to let themselves take on whatever identity was suggested by the clothing: Nurse uniforms led to kinder behaviors; KKK uniforms led to more aggressive behaviors. The study suggests that anonymity/deindividuation disinhibits—both positively and negatively.

Anonymity That Encourages Intimacy. When Gergen, Gergen, and Barton (1973) investigated deindividuation by putting people in a dark room, they noticed that participants did not become more aggressive. Instead, they became, well, more affectionate. The 18- to 25-year-olds were mostly college students who were told that they had volunteered for an experiment about the environment. The researchers admitted into the room only six or seven people at a time, male and female. Participants were asked to remove their shoes, empty their pockets, and bring nothing else into the room with them. The room was about 10 × 12 feet with padded walls and completely dark except for a small red light over the door.

The comparison group for this study received the same instructions—but the lights were on. In other words, the *independent variable* was the lighting conditions: lights on (not anonymous) or lights off (anonymous). They assessed the effects of anonymity in three ways (the *dependent variables*): They (1) tape recorded the conversations to see if people’s conversation topics changed, (2) used infrared cameras to track their movements in the room, and (3) asked them to write down their impressions at the end of the experiment. Judge for yourself whether the instructions from the experimenter accidentally encouraged participants to behave in a particular way:

You will be left in the chamber for no more than an hour with some other people. There are no rules . . . as to what you should do together. At the end of the time period you will each be escorted from the room alone, and will subsequently depart from the experimental site alone. There will be no opportunity to meet the other participants.

The anonymity of darkness led to more touching and caressing compared to the lighted room. About 90% of the participants in the darkened room “touched each other on purpose, while almost none of the light-room subjects did.” Almost 50% in the dark room hugged another person and about 80% reported feeling sexual excitement. One female participant wrote that after initial tension and nervousness, “The darkness no longer bothered me.” By the end of the hour, the group “sat closely together, touching, feeling a sense of friendship and loss as a group member left. I left with a feeling that it had been fun and nice. I felt I had made some friends. In fact, I missed them.”

One male wrote that he “felt joy over the possibility of not having to look at people in clichéd ways. Enjoyed feeling of a self-awareness surrounded by a rich environment.” Touching and caressing just because it is dark still suggests disinhibition. The participants didn’t start caressing strangers in the lighted room. An important variation in this experiment occurred when participants were told that they would meet one another at the end of the experiment. In that condition, participants “were less likely to explore . . . more likely to feel bored, less likely to introduce themselves, less likely to

hug . . . and more likely to feel panicky.” Intimacy declined. Knowing that you’re anonymous and that you’ll never meet people again leads us to do behaviors we might normally censor in ourselves.

The Self Behind the Mask. In the previous experiment, anonymity through darkness encouraged a temporary intimacy. However, this next experiment demonstrates negative behavior associated with anonymity through wearing a mask. In the United States, several regions created antimask laws due to crimes being committed by people wearing Ku Klux Klan hoods. More recently, laws have been passed banning people from wearing “Guy Fawkes” masks in public (named after a famous British political protestor) because the online hacking group known as “Anonymous” has chosen this image as their icon.



Criminals sometimes wear masks

Some of the studies described so far have included only male participants. To test the possibility of a gender difference, Zimbardo (1970) allowed one group of women to become deindividuated by wearing hoods and loose-fitting clothing. The comparison group wore their own clothes and large nametags. When given the opportunity to deliver an electric shock, the *deindividuated* group of women held the lever down twice as long, even “as their victims twisted and moaned right before them” (see Zimbardo, 2007, p. 300). That experiment did not support popularly assumed gender differences that men tend to be more aggressive and that women tend to be “nice.” When relatively anonymous, these women didn’t hesitate to painfully shock a victim.

In another experiment by Lightdale and Prentice (1994), women were just as willing as men to “let go” of their inhibitions and harm others, but only in the deindividuation condition. Given the right circumstances, such as anonymity, women become just as nasty and aggressive as men. Perhaps most of the time, women and men seem more different than they really are, simply because they are both conforming to stereotypical social roles.

The Main Ideas

1. Social roles can become more important than individual personality when predicting behaviors in given situations. The famous Stanford prison study explored social roles and deindividuation by randomly assigning students to pretend to be either a prisoner or a guard.
2. Deindividuation occurs when people’s inhibitions are lowered due to perceived anonymity.
3. Variables such as clothing or darkness can predict increases or decreases in feelings of deindividuation.

CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

- Imagine you were given an opportunity to be a participant in a study like the Stanford prison study. Would you do it, knowing in advance that you wouldn't be able to choose between being assigned the prisoner or guard roles?
- Consider the ethical implications of studies like the Asch conformity study and the Stanford prison study. After the studies were done and the participants were debriefed (told the true purpose of the study), the people had to live with their choices—some of which were not particularly positive. Should studies like this be allowed, given the potential risks to the participants? Would you want to be confronted with the knowledge that you are capable of negative behaviors, given the right circumstances?

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM MILGRAM'S EXPERIMENTS ON AUTHORITY?

Learning Objective 4: Explain the person, procedures, and competing interpretations behind the Milgram experiments on authority.

So far, this chapter has gone in depth to help you understand implicit forms of social influence, focusing on conformity and social roles. What about explicit forms of social influence? When we change our behavior due to explicit influence, we do something because of either compliance (agreeing to someone's request) or obedience (following an order). The scientific study of obedience led to perhaps the most controversial social psychology studies ever done (Griggs & Whitehead, 2015). Many students in psychology know the basics of what happened in Milgram's labs—but not many know the details. We will describe several of the studies as we consider some of the intended and unintended lessons we can learn from Stanley Milgram's studies about social influence created by obedience to an authority.

The Man Behind the Controversy: Stanley Milgram

The genius of psychological science is that it (gradually) provides small answers to big questions. Asking questions, and using experiments to answer them, was the normal way to live for Stanley Milgram (1933–1984). Milgram was the child of hard-working immigrant parents. They lived in the South Bronx section of New York City, a place Milgram described as “not a neighborhood of patsies” (see Blass, 2004, pp. 5–16). Milgram and Zimbardo attended the same high school, knew one another, and pursued similar research interests in social psychology.

To the young Milgram, conducting experiments “was as natural as breathing. I tried to understand how everything worked.” Milgram was still an adolescent in the aftermath of World War II. The world was struggling to accept a brutal insight into human nature: Hitler and Stalin had lots of help. The level of human slaughter required bricklayers, plumbers, middle management, engineers, social coordination, and even creativity to murder so many people so quickly (Cropley, Cropley, Kaufman, & Runco, 2010; Heinzen, 1995). Like Asch and Zimbardo, Milgram (1974) wanted to know why people “who are in everyday life responsible and decent” (p. 125) became knowing contributors to mass murder. So Milgram designed an *experimental paradigm*

that established procedures simulating the phenomenon he was interested in—the psychology of ordinary people behaving in extraordinarily harmful ways, because they were obeying an authority figure.

The Historical Context

By now, you understand that there is much more to social psychology than exploring the dark underbelly of human cruelty and mass murder. But we can't deny the historical context of war that eventually led to Milgram's studies. The World War I German foot soldier Kurt Lewin got us started by trying to explain social influences on his fellow soldiers in the trenches. In the 1930s, before World War II commanded our attention, Sherif created the autokinetic experiments to study how social influences lead to conformity under conditions of uncertainty. Asch created the line judgment studies that explored conformity when everyone knew what was happening, and Zimbardo explored the power of how a social role and uniform lead to deindividuation and cruelty. Milgram's studies add one more possible explanation: the power of obedience.



Holocaust

The Study's Procedure

The basic question Milgram wanted to answer was, “How far will someone go when obeying an authority figure until they refuse to continue?” Milgram had two goals in mind when he designed these experiments: (1) use simple procedures because “complicated procedures only get in the way” (Milgram, 1974, p. 14), and (2) aim for *experimental realism* by designing situations that are realistic, approximate the variables of interest, and are consequential to participants. Make them matter.

To begin, Milgram placed an announcement in the New Haven, Connecticut, newspaper: “Persons Needed for a Study of Memory.” It was a *cover story*, a choice to use strategic *deception* that camouflaged the true nature of the experiment to capture authentic responses to the situation Milgram had created. They would be paid \$4 (an amount with much more buying power at that time) if they agreed to be part of an experiment about memory. When they arrived at prestigious Yale University, they were told that the study was about how receiving a punishment after a mistake might motivate someone to learn more effectively.

When they arrived, the participants met a *confederate* who pretended to be just another person off the street, and the experimenter then pretended to randomly assign one of them to the role of “Teacher” (this role always went to the actual participant) and one to the role of “Learner” (always the confederate). The job of the Teacher was to read word pairs out loud (such as “fast/car” or “white/bird”) to the Learner. The Learner's job was to memorize the word pairs and then take a memory test. The Teacher was to respond to any memory failures by delivering gradually increasing levels of electric shock—15 volts more with each failure—as the punishment. The electric shocks were

■ **TABLE 7.2** The Learner's Scripted Responses in Milgram's Obedience Studies

75 volts	Ugh!
90 volts	Ugh!
105 volts	Ugh! [Louder]
120 volts	Ugh! Hey, this really hurts.
135 volts	Ugh!!
150 volts	Ugh!!! Experimenter! That's all. Get me out of here. I told you I had heart trouble. My heart's starting to bother me now. Get me out of here, please. My heart's starting to bother me. I refuse to go on. Let me out.
165 volts	Ugh! Let me out! [Shouting]
180 volts	Ugh! I can't stand the pain. Let me out of here! [Shouting]
195 volts	Ugh! Let me out of here. Let me out of here. My heart's bothering me. Let me out of here! You have no right to keep me here! Let me out! Let me out of here! Let me out! Let me out of here! My heart's bothering me. Let me out! Let me out!
210 volts	Ugh!! Experimenter! Get me out of here. I've had enough. I won't be in the experiment any more.
225 volts	Ugh!
240 volts	Ugh!
255 volts	Ugh! Get me out of here.
270 volts	[Agonized scream.] Let me out of here. Let me out of here. Let me out of here. Let me out. Do you hear? Let me out of here.
285 volts	[Agonized scream.]
300 volts	[Agonized scream.] I absolutely refuse to answer any more. Get me out of here. You can't hold me here. Get me out. Get me out of here.
315 volts	[Intensely agonized scream.] I told you I refuse to answer. I'm no longer part of this experiment.
330 volts	[Intense and prolonged agonized scream.] Let me out of here. Let me out of here. My heart's bothering me. Let me out, I tell you. [Hysterically.] Let me out of here. Let me out of here. You have no right to hold me here. Let me out! Let me out! Let me out of here! Let me out! Let me out!
345–450 volts	[Silence]



Obedience to authority declined to 30% when the participant had to physically hold the victim or “Learner” down to receive painful shocks.

It's funny how you really begin to forget that there's a guy out there, even though you can hear him. For a long time I just concentrated on pressing the switches and reading the words.

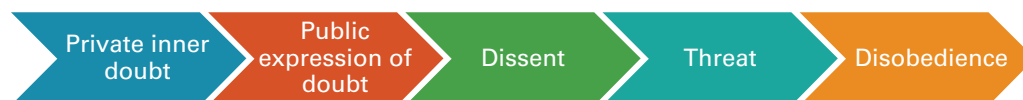
—A participant in Milgram's obedience studies

Across these many replications, sometimes the number of people who obeyed did fluctuate based on the experimental conditions. For example, obedience went down when the participant had to sit in the same room as the Learner (only 40% went all the way to 450 volts). It went down even more when the participant had to force the Learner's hand onto the electric plate in order to receive the shock: only 30%. And when there were two additional confederates pretending to be administering shocks who protested at the orders and said they wouldn't continue, obedience from the participant went down to only 10% going all the way to 450 volts. Note, of course, that there were still 10% of people who were willing to keep going.

The Path to Disobedience

While it's chilling that most of the participants appeared willing to obey an authority when ordered to cause pain to someone else, it's important to keep in mind that at least some of the participants refused to obey. Why? Moral values come to mind, of course, but the series of studies following Milgram's initial paradigm show that many other variables are at play. Milgram outlined five stages along the path to disobedience (see Figure 7.6).

■ FIGURE 7.6 The path to disobedience. Milgram identified five steps along the path to disobedience.



When trying to understand why some people disobeyed, Milgram understood that, “at first, we are inclined to say that they do so because it is immoral to shock the victim” (Milgram, 1974, p. 153). But according to the results, an authority perceived as legitimate (e.g., from a prestigious place like Yale) can overrule personal moral standards (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). However, moral and religious convictions can also encourage *disobedience* to authority (Skitka, Bauman, & Lytle, 2009). So, moral values *can* influence obedience to authority but, on average during these experiments, situations and social expectations appeared to overwhelm moral values.

Three specific participants illustrate reactions to disobedience. One man, a professor of religion, stopped at 150 volts. When the experimenter told him, “You must go on,” he responded, “If this were Russia maybe, but not in America” (Milgram, 1974, p. 48). A second man, an industrial engineer, stopped at 255 volts. When the experimenter said, “It is absolutely essential that you continue. . . . You have no other choice,” this man said,

I *do* have a choice. Why don't have I have choice? I came here on my own free will. I thought I could help in a research project. But if I have to hurt somebody to do that, or if I was in his place, too, I wouldn't stay there. I can't continue. I'm very sorry. I think I've gone too far already, probably. (p. 51)

Finally, one of the women who participated in the study was an immigrant from Germany. She had been witness to what obedience to an authority could do as her country tried to recover from World War I and fell onto the path leading to the Holocaust. She was raised in a culture of Nazi propaganda and participated in the Hitler youth program. When she stopped at 210 volts and was asked why she refused to continue, her answer was, “Perhaps we have seen too much pain” (p. 85).

Ethical Considerations

Thanks to the popularity of Milgram’s grainy black-and-white film of what happened, the obedience studies have become “part of our society’s shared intellectual legacy” (Ross & Nisbett, 1991, p. 55). However, Milgram’s studies prompted negative reactions by many within psychology, primarily over the ethics of his experiments (Baumrind, 1964; Mixon, 1972). In his own defense (also controversial), Milgram asserted that his procedures did not violate any of the research norms of that time period, and his procedures had been preapproved by the National Science Foundation (NSF).

In fact, Milgram’s NSF grant application included a special section about ethical responsibility to the participants (see Blass, 2004). Milgram also reported that he debriefed participants after the experiment and kept in touch with them long after the experiment had ended. That assertion is also controversial in light of recent evidence.

The American Psychological Association’s ethical guidelines for research with human participants are part of the legacy of Milgram’s experiments. There are two practical lessons from these studies. First, use your *institutional review board* (IRB) to protect your study participants (and yourself). They will review the ethics of your procedures *before* you start conducting an experiment. Second, use Morling’s (2015) ethical decision-making matrix to help you evaluate risk as you make ethical decisions. Table 7.3 can help you evaluate the trade-off between the risks and rewards of conducting a particular research project.

Australian journalist Gina Perry deserves significant credit for the 4 years she spent reexamining the archives from this most famous of psychological experiments (Brannigan, 2013). She listened to 140 audio recordings of the original experiments, to hours of debriefings with participants, and to experts and family members of the actors, and she read the mountains of documentation. Her conclusions fundamentally challenge how scholars have interpreted (and presented) Stanley Milgram and his experiment. Brannigan (2013) identified many categories of criticism from this investigation, including

- (1) minimizing or hiding the degree of trauma experienced by many participants,
- (2) providing deliberately misleading reports about those traumas,
- (3) not reporting participants’ skepticism about the various deceptions,
- (4) misrepresenting how the prods were used,
- (5) failing to debrief most participants,
- (6) cherry-picking data, and
- (7) creating a pseudo-documentary film that whitewashed all these shortcomings.

These are serious charges, and we must keep in mind that Milgram’s death means that he cannot explain, modify, or rebut those assertions. However, the archives indicate that, in contrast to what he reported, Milgram did not debrief all participants and minimized negative consequences when he knew about them (see Nicholson, 2011a, 2011b, 2015; Perry, 2013). For example, one participant indicated that he had lost his job “due to an emotional outburst during a discussion about the

■ TABLE 7.3 Morling’s (2015) Ethical Decision-Making Matrix

	Low Risk	High Risk
Low reward		
High reward		The Milgram Obedience Experiments

Note: Milgram’s obedience experiments involved high risk and high reward. Does the potential reward mean that the risk is worthwhile?

experiment . . . another reported that he had suffered a mild heart attack . . . implying that the extreme stress of the study was at least partially responsible” (Brannigan, Nicholson, & Cherry, 2015, p. 554).

Beyond Obedience: Sacrificing for a Higher Cause

The most radical new interpretation of the Milgram shock experiments comes from Haslam, Reicher, and Birney (2015)—and from Milgram’s own notes. Their review of participants’ comments about their experience in these famous experiments led them to propose that participants were more than just obedient—they were engaged followers, proud to commit their time to the noble cause of science.

Sacrificing for a “Noble” Cause. Think of a modern terrorist who, for the sake of a higher cause, sacrifices his or her life in a suicide mission. While each person is unique and some are coerced, there also are volunteers willing and even eager to die for their cause. At one level of understanding, the suicide bomber is not so different from a man in the Milgram studies who could not hide his nervous laughter as he went through the levels on the shock machine. He tried to explain that, despite his conflicted emotions, he continued to deliver shocks because, “in the interest of science, one goes through with it” (Milgram, 1974, p. 54).

The suicide bomber and the conflicted participant in Milgram’s study sacrificed for a higher, “noble” cause—something bigger than themselves. Of course, whether the cause is “noble” is subjective and will be seen in a very different light by the other side, especially the victims. Milgram’s own notes also express initial ambivalence about whether he is observing obedience or cooperation with a cause. Table 7.4 (from the Yale archives of the study) organizes sample quotations of what the participants had to say about their experience according to their level of engagement.

■ **TABLE 7.4** Participants’ Experience in Milgram’s Study

Level (1–7)	Description	Example Illustrative Comments	# of People	%
7	Very highly engaged	<i>I feel I have contributed in some small way toward the development of man and his attitudes towards others. I would be glad to participate in other studies. I thoroughly enjoyed participating in the program and hope I will be call on again.</i>	33	23.6
6	Highly engaged	<i>The experiment was very interesting and worthwhile. I think that studies of this kind are very helpful and should continue.</i>	27	19.3
5	Moderately engaged	<i>Any study with an aim, if properly conducted, can do no harm and might be of some value.</i>	34	24.3
4	Neither	<i>It is good to know that you would not permit me to give the learner the actual shocks under the condition of this experiment.</i>	33	23.6
3	Moderately disengaged	<i>It was only after speaking to you on the phone that I concluded the experiment had been prearranged and in all truthfulness somewhat silly. I would suggest that more experiments are conducted but that they be conducted on the more serious side.</i>	8	5.7
2	Highly disengaged	<i>You might be interested to know that my opinion of Yale is quite low because of this experiment. Kindly furnish me with the name & address so that I can satisfy my own about this experiment.</i>	5	3.6
1	Very highly disengaged	<i>[no comments]</i>	0	0
	Total		140	

Historical Evidence. One of the most famous Nazi officers was Adolf Eichmann, one of the main organizers and supervisors of the concentration camps. Within that organization, Eichmann was a man with both influence and initiative. Late in the war, after it was clear that the Nazis were fighting a losing cause, senior military leaders tried to assassinate Hitler. Nevertheless, Eichmann pressed forward with loyalty to the cause. He organized an extraordinary 144 transports to Auschwitz for approximately 440,000 Hungarians in just 2 months. And he did so with such a strong sense of higher purpose that he defied orders from his Nazi superiors to cut back until the direction of the war effort was more settled.

Grobman and colleagues (Grobman, Landes, & Milton, 1983) report a speech by Himmler given to SS officers exterminating Jews at Poznan, in Poland:

Most of you know what it is like to see 100 corpses lie side by side, or 500 or 1,000. To have stood fast through all this and . . . at the same time to have remained a decent person. . . . This is an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory in our history . . . we have carried out this most difficult of tasks in a spirit of love for our people. (pp. 454–455)

In their own minds, they weren't really murderers and certainly not evil. Instead, they were special people who nobly suffered for the good of others (according to them), doing the unpleasant but necessary work needed to make the world a better place.

This represents a new way to understand Milgram's experiments. If it holds up, then it has far-reaching implications—and not just for our understanding of the past. Understanding how viciousness is experienced as virtue can help us understand not just interpersonal cruelty but also how terrorists privately make sense of and rationalize mass murder.

Two Interpretations of Milgram—and of the Holocaust. During the grant review process, Milgram's obedience studies had been criticized for not having a guiding theory. One reviewer noted that it was “clear that Dr. Milgram neither has nor plans to have an elaborate a priori theory” (see Blass, 2004, p. 71). We don't know if Milgram disagreed with that assessment, but by the time Milgram (1974) issued the book summarizing these experiments, that theoretical framework was firmly in place.

Milgram (1974) began with the assumption that “some system of authority is a requirement for all communal living” (p. 3). Then he reasoned that “a potential for obedience is the prerequisite of such social organization . . . because organization has enormous survival value for any species.” By the end of the obedience studies, Milgram concluded that “we are born with a potential for obedience” (p. 126). In other words, Milgram believed we could all display this kind of behavior, given the right circumstances.

So we now have two interpretations of what happened in the Milgram shock experiments: (1) obedience to authority and (2) engaged followers who believe in a cause. The first explanation recognizes that in every society, some authority will have to decide that all cars will drive either on the right-hand or the left-hand side of the road and that the stop signs will be painted red. People who agree to obey that authority will have a better chance of surviving, getting along with each other, and feeling secure that people in power have the ability to keep the world in running order.

The second interpretation is in some ways scarier. Participants in the Milgram studies were proud to have made a contribution to science, to a higher cause. Other causes perceived to be noble may also lead people to justify behaviors that will be perceived as



Auschwitz workers

immoral from an outsider's point of view. Stanley Milgram and his data from the shock experiments are still speaking—and psychologists are still debating why so many participants continued to shock innocent people up to the maximum of 450 volts. Despite its many flaws, that's still one powerful, provocative experiment.

The Main Ideas

1. Milgram's obedience to authority experiments demonstrate how many people will follow orders from an authority, even when it means engaging in behaviors they might consider immoral.
2. The obedience experiments used simple procedures and included a series of replications with different variations.
3. Some participants disobeyed; the path to disobedience begins by expressing inner doubts.
4. Two possible interpretations of Milgram's results are (1) people have an inner tendency to obey authority figures, and (2) people will sometimes justify "immoral" behavior if they believe in a cause they perceive as noble.

CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

- If you felt that all ethical concerns had been met, then what comparison conditions would you like to add to the Milgram obedience experiments?
- Did Milgram's qualitative observations add significant insights into what happened during the obedience experiments?
- Think back to the Nazi guards in concentration camps during World War II. What kinds of psychological processes did they have when ordered to enact atrocities? Can you think of other historical examples of times or events that illustrate obedience to authority despite it leading to immoral behaviors?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Core Questions

1. What types of social influence exist?
2. Why and when do we choose to conform?
3. How do social roles change our behavior?
4. What can we learn from Milgram's experiments on authority?

What types of social influence exist?

Social influence occurs when our thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors are influenced by other people. Social influence can take two basic forms. Implicit social influence occurs when we follow subtle, unwritten rules communicated nonverbally. One example of implicit social influence is conformity, when we voluntarily change our behavior to follow what others are doing. Another example comes from social roles, our expectations about how certain people are supposed to look or behave (such as police officers vs. librarians). The second basic form of social influence is explicit, which occurs when we follow obvious, direct requests from others (called compliance) or orders from others (called obedience).

Social norms are rules about how people should behave in certain situations, which often lead to conformity. Extreme conformity can lead to a herd mentality, or the tendency to follow the direction of a group without question. In general, conformity seems to be contagious; we feel more pressure to conform when the group is larger. This can sometimes even lead to a phenomenon called mass psychogenic illness, which is when psychological conformity leads to people experiencing physical symptoms of illness when there is no physical cause.

Why and when do we choose to conform?

Informational conformity or social influence occurs when people change their behavior because they want to be correct. Here, people follow along with what others are doing because they believe the behavior is right; thus, conformity is both public and private (meaning we agree with what we are doing). This type of conformity is more likely to occur when we are unsure what the “correct” answer is. Classic research on informational public conformity was started by Sherif when he studied the auto-kinetic effect, an optical illusion in which people’s guesses about how much a stationary light moved were influenced by other people’s answers. This effect has been shown to occur over “generations” of participants.

On the other hand, normative social influence occurs when we go along with group behaviors in order to fit in or be accepted. Here, our public behavior might not reflect private conformity (we secretly know that what we’re doing isn’t “correct”). The most famous example of normative conformity is a series of studies by Asch in which

participants provided what was clearly the wrong answer to a perception task after confederates had provided a wrong answer. Participants indicated that they went along with the wrong answer because they didn’t want to seem strange or not fit in (75% of participants went along with the incorrect group answer at least once). There are individual differences in how likely people are to conform, based on variables such as cultural values.

How do social roles change our behavior?

Social roles guide us in how to think, feel, and act in a variety of situations, like characters in a play. The most famous social psychology study of social roles is the Stanford prison study created by Zimbardo; he turned the basement of the Stanford psychology building into a fake prison, then randomly assigned students to play either the role of prisoner or guard. The students quickly seemed to lose their individual identities and simply played the part, or they went along with their assigned social role.

One factor that increases our conformity to a social role is called deindividuation, which is when we feel more anonymous due to things like wearing a uniform, wearing a mask, or being in the dark. While deindividuation has been tied to several negative social behaviors, such as cruelty or criminal actions, it has also been tied to positive social behaviors, such as kindness.

What can we learn from Milgram's experiments on authority?

Milgram conducted a series of studies regarding whether people are willing to deliver potentially painful and dangerous electric shocks to someone else, simply because they were ordered to do so. In all of his studies, the person supposedly receiving the shocks was a confederate and no shocks were actually delivered (although the participants didn’t know this). Approximately two thirds of the participants in Milgram’s initial conditions went to the maximum shock level available, which they thought might even have killed the other person. Milgram continued with a series of replications of the study with slight changes; for example, when he replicated the study with women participants, about two thirds of them also showed obedience.

Some participants did disobey, and Milgram suggested that the path to disobedience starts with inner doubts, then progresses through public dissent, threat, and finally to disobeying the authority figure. While Milgram defended the ethics of his study, recent examination of the original study materials questions some of his ethical claims. Finally, recent reinterpretations of his findings note that there are two possible explanations for the findings. The first is Milgram’s explanation—that most of us have the capacity to follow orders from an authority, given the right circumstances. An alternative interpretation is that the people involved continued because they believed in the “cause,” which was scientific knowledge in this setting. Either explanation might apply to why Nazi guards did terrible deeds during World War II when obeying orders from a leader.

LIST OF THEORIES IN CHAPTER 7

- Social contagion
- Theory of informational and normative influence
- Social roles
- Deindividuation
- Obedience

COMPREHENSIVE CRITICAL THINKING, ANALYSIS, AND APPLICATION QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 7

- Identify two times in world history when someone stood up against a group (they exhibited nonconformity) and helped change a negative group decision or movement. Then, identify two times in world history where conforming to the values or needs of the larger group helped a community make a good or progressive decision, even if some people in the group disagreed.
- As times change, social roles change as well. For example, the social roles expected of “stereotypical” men and women have changed over the past 100 years. What are positive aspects of this change—and are there any negative aspects of this change?
- This chapter discussed several famous studies that some people consider unethical. Do you think an unethical study is more likely to become famous compared to an ethical one? Why or why not? Provide examples as evidence of your answer.
- The theories and phenomena in this chapter (conformity, social roles, compliance, and obedience) were presented as possible social psychological explanations for the Holocaust (or, at least, contributing factors). What other theories that you’ve learned about in this book so far might also be included as possible explanations for what happened?

PERSONAL REFLECTION [WG]

I was the only girl in a family with four children. While my three brothers all played video games, mowed the lawn, and went on Boy Scout camping trips, my mother wanted me to be her little princess. She put me in old-fashioned, pink, frilly dresses; taught me how to bake pies; and paid for me to take ballet lessons. Through all of this, I felt torn. On one hand, I wanted to fit in with the other girls, have friends, be popular, and obey my mother—which meant acting “like a girl.” On the other hand, I hated all of it. I wanted to play soccer, do karate, and smear my face with mud. This resulted in paradoxical situations. I attended ballet lessons, for instance, but changed into my ballet shoes after arriving in combat boots and was teased for wearing a

black unitard instead of a pink one. I learned very early the price of nonconformity as I didn’t get invited to birthday parties or sleepovers. Even though it took me a long time to gain the self-confidence to be myself despite enormous peer pressure in school and the clear preferences of my mother, eventually I realized that I could only be happy by being authentic—even if it meant also being a bit lonely. Fortunately, I eventually found other people who both accepted me despite being “weird” and who were, in their own ways, also strange. Now, in addition to teaching psychology, I’m a professor of gender studies. Choosing independence can be hard, but being true to yourself is almost always the best path.

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