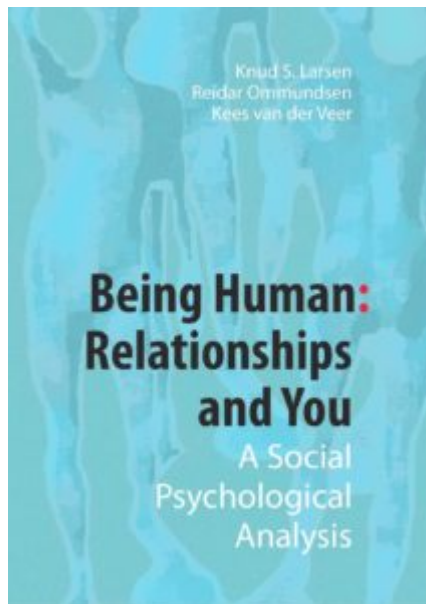


# Being Human. Chapter 7: Processes Of Social Influence: Conformity, Compliance And Obedience



Now imagine the following graduation exercises at a typical North American university. They were designed to create a memorable occasion with the aid of majestic music, ritual words of graduation, and students being uniformed in their academic regalia. It is also, to the social psychologist, an opportunity to observe the forces of social influence up close. Somehow, some 4,500 students from the Oregon state University in Corvallis, Oregon, manage to have their individual degrees delivered with an almost factory like efficiency that perhaps represents best U.S. society. At the same time, the faculty are

dressed in their medieval academic regalia, and are without doubt authority figures to many. Students obey directions, even standing up to two hours in line. The students line up in a particular order and conform to the requests, which determines the sequence in which they receive their prized document. Then they follow in majestic formation the Scottish band that precedes the parade through the university campus. When all are seated in the university stadium, with the president, deans, and honored guests on the podium, the ceremonies begins. There are places for the audience to participate. Standing up for the national anthem produces universal conformity. The students and faculty also know that women may keep their hats on, while men, with one exception, bare their heads. There is also time to graduate military officers with a holy oath to defend the country from all enemies, foreign or domestic. This is followed by a roaring display of approval from the tens of thousands of family and friends. The applause from students and faculty is nearly universal. However, the individual who does not bare his head during the anthem evidently does not approve of the military and may be observed sitting with his hands folded. Several of his neighbors now

apparently feel the same way, as they also refrain from clapping. A minority of one seems to have influenced the behavior of those who can observe his nonconformist behavior. Then the alma mater is sung where the audience pretends to be in love with a non-personal entity, the university. Here the president and deans outdo themselves in demonstrating their fidelity to the institution even though many are relatively new to the university and must quickly have adopted these new feelings.

Could you imagine such a ceremony in for example a random Norwegian or Dutch university?

The above-sketched picture illustrates some of the processes of social influence, the subject of this chapter. In described situation we can observe people comply with the requests of authority figures, being persuaded by the audience to stand at various times, take their hats on and off, yell their approval of the military. The experience reflected informational conformity, for example responding to the need to know where to stand in the line. It also reflected normative conformity as in the universal rising for the anthem. Not one person refused to do that so the national anthem must have exerted a great deal of social pressure. The graduation ceremony also demonstrated obedience to authority, reinforced by the status of those leading the events, and academic gowns with symbols of status, authority, and expertise.

None were hurt by the conformity on display. Everyone obtained his/her degree in an efficient manner. Of course they all would anyway whether they participated or not, since they had completed the requirements for graduation before the ceremony. Still, other than the mindlessness it promoted, there was no real harm done. Some might even have benefited in participating. To have public recognition of achievement is experienced as very rewarding by many.

Not all conformity has such beneficial results, as we shall see. Were those who participated in the massacre at My Lai (Vietnam) only following orders? Or were the war criminals at Nuremberg excused by their obedience, in particular Adolf Eichman? The past century has been marked as a time of cruel and repeated genocides. We saw this cruel obedience in Cambodia, we saw it in Bosnia, and we saw it again in Rwanda. And now the same cruelty is being played out in the Darfur region of Sudan in Africa, and countless other places. Are people really that cruel? Is it in human nature to behave in such manifest barbaric ways?

In the US they say, “you have to go along to get along” indicating that conformity is essential to successful social functioning. Often conformity is of the type manifested at the graduation ceremony where people are told in indirect or more or less subtle ways as to what is appropriate behavior. At other times people are commanded to obey by those who have the appearance of legitimate authority. In fact all genocides appeal to and are sanctioned by the authority and ideology of the prevailing society. Usually there is preparatory indoctrination that allows the participant to feel that the genocide is justified and the right thing to do.

In this chapter we shall examine the whole range of social influence, from that which is an expression of social solidarity to those behaviors that reflect destructive ideology and obedience to evil demands. Are people who participate in evil just evil people? Or is it within the capacity of most people to behave in cruel ways? Is obedience to inhuman demands a consequence of unleashing the evil in all of us, a consequence of being human and therefore normal? To what extent does the power of the situation define whether we follow or not the slippery slope to participation. Social psychology has some answers.

### *1. Social influence: how we change attitudes, beliefs, and feelings*

Social influence is the umbrella term that refers to how our speech, nonverbal behavior and actions change others, or reinforce their existing beliefs. We meet with this phenomenon every day. Some bank wants you to use their credit card. Fashions also change and clothing manufactures spend considerable money to convince you that the new fashions are cool, and you should buy. Your boss at work wants you to perform better, and you yield in hopes of promotion or in fear of your job. If you are in the military your options are few, you are given an order, and must obey. These examples demonstrate the presence of the three major types of social influence.

Conformity is where the individual changes his behavior as a result of pressure from others. Sometimes the pressure is obvious and explicit. At other times we have internalized such pressure that few would risk social disapproval although not many can produce good reasons for the behavior. Students become social drinkers as a result of peer pressure, in order to fit in. At times the pressure is toward binge drinking with very unfortunate consequences on health or accidents. Conformity is the tendency to change beliefs or behaviors in order to match that of others (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Most Americans hear conflicting messages from our society about conformity. In a society that prizes

individual ruggedness it seems somewhat effete to conform. The Marlboro man who sold cigarettes to millions exemplified the ruggedness of the American male while he rode his horse across the US movie and TV screens. Many yielded to this image and conformed by smoking and it has cost millions their lives. The rugged individuality that appealed to so many was employed to create addicts who did not have any individuality. Eventually the Marlboro man who acted in these commercials died himself of lung cancer.

This episode shows however, the ambivalence of American and perhaps other societies. Conforming is essential to some achieve some degree of social harmony whether in the US, the Netherlands, Norway, or other countries. At the same time we do not want our children to become binge drinkers just because everyone else is doing it. The struggle over involuntary prayer in school in the US has to do with this debate over conformity influences. Are children in other countries exposed to similar pressures to conform? When children are small, adults in charge produce many subtle pressures, in particular a child's teachers. Is prayer in school a good practice that encourages moral behavior, or is it compelling children to conform in religious beliefs. Does the absence of prayer infringe on religious freedom if the majority wants prayer, or do we have a responsibility to protect the minority from such coercive influences?

Compliance on the other hand is when an individual responds to a specific demand or request from others. Compliance is usually associated with unequal power relationships. You might comply with a request from your parents to study harder and get good grades. If you do not comply there is the implicit possibility of withdrawal of parental approval or financial support. Often in life we are faced with explicit demands that require some change in behavior. However, it is possible to change your behavior while not necessarily your attitudes and feelings. You may work harder at schoolwork and improve your grades while feeling you are still wasting your time in college. At the moment complying seems the best option, until something better comes along.

Obedience is a form of social influence where the individual yields because an individual with power commands you to perform in a particular way. The boss may say, "I am telling you to improve, I am not asking you". In the direst circumstances we see obedience at work in all genocidal behavior. Usually genocidal acts are carried out with the support of legitimate authority, by group cohesion, and the perception that the victims are different in a significant way. In Rwanda it was the Tutsi's, in Darfur it is the non-Arab population, during the cold

war it was the communists or anti-communists depending on where you lived. Being able to categorize people as different allowed some to participate in horrible behaviors that destroyed communities, and the souls of the participants. One has to wonder to what extent the delayed stress syndrome, particularly manifest among veterans of the US war on Vietnam, was a consequence of participating, following orders, in the horrible destruction of human life.

As we have also noted sometimes conformity can be beneficial. At times we just do not have sufficient information, we are unsure, or find ourselves in new or unsettling circumstances. We then look to others for some idea of what to do (see also section 7.3). If we did not live with some inhibitions what kind of world would we inherit? When people became angry they would just lash out, in theaters the boorish people would talk loudly, and everyone would push to be in front of the line. Conformity has civilizing effects and helps produce social harmony. As the saying goes: "When in Rome, do as the Romans". Conformity can also kill the soul through mindless behavior. At the end of the day we make the decision whether to cooperate or participate without reflection (Henrich & Boyd, 1998).

We shall see in this chapter that people would commit acts in a web of social influence that they would never do by themselves as an independent human being. We have seen extreme human behavior such as mass suicides under certain conditions (Ferris, 1997). The so-called Heavens Gate cult committed mass suicide together in 1997. Years before a religious cult led by a reverend Jim Jones committed collective suicide in Jonestown, Guiana. At that time several thousand adults lined up with their children to receive a cool aid drink spiced with cyanide, all under the direction of their leader who took a similar route having a follower shoot him. How can we explain the efficient machinery that produced the holocaust, the atrocities in former Yugoslavia, the massacres in Vietnam? The army company that murdered the civilians at My Lai were not sadists, but normal American draftees who responded to an order to systematically murder everyone in the village (Hersh, 1970).

These are of course extreme examples, but would we have behaved differently? In other words does conformity come from social pressures that are overwhelming to all of us in the same circumstances? Would we all, given the same strong social pressures from other group members, and the power of charismatic leadership, have conformed in the similar circumstances? Is conformity normal?

On the other hand we can also observe from history the good that comes from

conformity under very different circumstances. For example India freed itself from the British Empire in that a substantial minority practiced nonviolent protests. Using the same ideals we saw the civil rights era arrive in United States as a result of thousands of Blacks conforming to the principles of nonviolent protests. Many were beaten some were killed, but at the end of the day Black people had more rights and fairness in their lives.

## *2. The ideomotor effect: William James*

Psychologists were from the beginning interested in conformity as the early work of William James (1890) demonstrates. The famous psychologist noted that behavior was often subconscious, and that just thinking about something made it more likely that a person would engage in that behavior. Have you ever sat with your family and someone yawned, and you also felt compelled to join in yawning? Some behaviors are literally copycat behaviors where we unconsciously mimic the behavior of someone else. James called this the ideomotor effect.

This unconscious mimicry of postures, mannerisms, and facial expressions was studied by Chartrand & Bargh (1999). In their study they observed participants mimic simple behaviors like rubbing feet or face initiated by a confederate. They called this mimicking behavior the chameleon effect. They wanted also to understand why we develop this tendency to subconsciously mimic others. The experimenters thought that perhaps those who had a high need for others, a desire for approval, were more likely to conform. This hypothesis was confirmed in several studies (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Lakin & Chartrand, 2003). In fact the behavior is reinforcing the person being mimicked, and we like more those who mimic us than those who do not. These positive feelings also spill over into other behaviors as investigators found that when people are mimicked they are also more likely to engage in pro social behaviors like donating money to a good social cause or leaving a large tip for a waitress (Van Baaren, Holland, Kawakami, & Van Knippenberg, 2004) At some level we find it flattering when someone copies our behavior, and we find great enjoyment in seeing a young child speak like his father, or otherwise adopt the mannerisms of an adult.

## *3. The classical studies in social influence*

Conformity was among the earliest social phenomenon studied by social psychologists. The first and most influential study in his day was the study on the auto kinetic illusion performed by Sherif (1936). The effect was demonstrated in a laboratory with small groups of people. The participants would enter a dark room

in which a steady light was displayed on a dark wall. Although the light in fact never moved people experienced the light as moving after gazing for a period of time. How do groups influence this illusion of light movement where in fact no light is moving? In reality the light appears to move because there is no stimuli to fix or anchor the light as a reference. Sherif wondered whether other people would serve as a reference and establish some norms for estimated movement. Initially the participants were asked to estimate the length of this illusionary movement. Individuals varied in their estimates, some saying a few inches others more. Sherif then moved the participants together in a room and asked them to call out their estimated (but illusionary) light movements. The question was to see if the estimates of movement would tend to converge in the presence of others, and therefore we might observe how group norms develop. This in fact happened. The varying individual judgments very quickly formed into a group estimate or norm. This is called the auto kinetic effect. Further this experimental norm had apparently long term effects. When the participants were called back a year later, their individual judgments still reflected the previously established norm (Rohrer, Baron, Hoffman, & Swander, 1954).

#### *4. Informational conformity*

Why would the participants move toward a group norm? In the dark room they saw the illusion under very ambiguous circumstances. Having nothing to rely on other than the judgments of others they began to form a more or less collective judgment. We are social animals and our ability to get along with others is reflected in our behavior. At times conformity is a form of information seeking, particularly when the conditions create uncertainty and provide no direct answers. Other people can be a source of what is correct, or might be proper behavior when we ourselves are uncertain (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). The influence of others on our behavior has been demonstrated in many other studies (Baron, Vandello, & Brunsman, 1996; Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000). Often this is not just mindless conformity, and people come to believe that the group estimate is correct. Not knowing what is correct, participants come to an acceptance of the correctness of the group norm that developed over time. Informational conformity may serve many useful functions in providing some framework for decisions in ambiguous situations.

There are occasions that are more complex in which we do not know what is a correct response. Some situations are much more serious than establishing the

norm for the auto kinetic effect. Killing in drug gangs is a form of conformity. After hurricane Katrina the murderers living in New Orleans were distributed all over the country and for a time did not have their customary network to determine “correct” killing behavior. They were like the participants in the Sherif study, without any guiding norms. The murder rates dropped significantly even though those likely to commit murders were still alive. However, after a period of time the violent men reconstituted their violent gangs and their norms, and the killings resumed. In violence people also look to others for what is proper behavior. Once the shooting had started during the My Lai massacre the other soldiers found it easier to participate. Many soldiers had powerful reservations about the morality of their behavior. In most cases however, the issue was decided in favor of conformity. In ambiguous situations where people lack information they will look to peers and leaders to see what is appropriate. Lt. Calley and the first soldier who obeyed provided that information.

In recent years informational conformity has been demonstrated in other ways. In law enforcement the accurate identification of suspects is extremely important. Unfortunately our ability to identify is often less than accurate as we shall see in chapter 12. When this process is carried out in small groups of three or four where confederates of the experimenter unanimously gave the wrong answer, participants responded with the wrong identification 35 percent of the time. If the issue was perceived as being very important the conformity to the false group identification rose to 51 percent. When the task was difficult and involved recognition memory the groups answer converged as in the Sherif study (Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000). The direction of the conformity depended on the frame established by the experimenter. When the frame in the instructions was “risky” the judgment norm became more risky, but when cautious the judgments became more cautious.

This finding has of course important implications for our social world. For example the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba by the US evolved out of misinformation which had been adopted as a norm by the decision making group. Essentially this norm said, “all you have to do is send 1500 soldiers and the Cuban government will collapse” (see also the discussion of groupthink in chapter 6). Similar miscalculations were made by Hitler and his cronies in the attack on the Soviet Union during World War 2, and more recently by the Bush government decision makers in the war on Iraq. In the case of the space shuttle “the Challenger”



informational conformity also led to disaster. Despite warnings that there might be equipment failure the decision makers looked to each other, and under pressure to perform made a disastrous decision that led to the loss of the spacecraft and all on board (Schwartz, 2003; Schwartz & Wald, 2003).

#### *4.1 Mass hysteria and informational conformity*

When people are in crisis during natural disasters or war they will look to others for how to behave. Often in these situations people have no idea what is going on or how to respond (Killian, 1964). In crisis the need for accurate information is very high, we look to others to find some consensus upon which to base our judgment. In 1938 a curious expression of mass hysteria occurred in the US when the famous actor Orson Welles performed a play based on the science fiction book *War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells on the radio. It was performed on Halloween night a time when people's fantasies were at a peak, and Wells was a very accomplished and convincing actor. The play depicted the invasion of the world by inhabitants of Mars, and the fictional drama was so effective that at least a million listeners were convinced that the earth was under attack by extraterrestrial beings. Several thousands actually got in their cars in an attempt to flee, although it was not clear where they would go (Cantril, 1940). In following up on the mass hysteria Cantril learned that many of those affected had listened to the program with other family members and friends. They then turned to each other to determine what to make of the situation, and being worried and seeing others worried added to the feelings of panic. Many thought they were about to die.

There were of course others who were better prepared. Some had listened to the whole program and knew from the disclaimer at the beginning that it was only a play. Yet others decided to call public services like the police department and learned in this way that there was no danger. Yet others looked at the internal evidence of the play and found reasons to doubt. Nevertheless in this simulated crisis where many did not know what to believe they began to believe they were in the throes of a real disaster, the end of the world. Rather than look for some evidence to disconfirm which was after all a very unusual situation, they tried to interpret the events to fit the image that had formed in their minds. They engaged in mass hysteria, and thereby also reinforced this hysterical view in family, friends, and others.

Such emotions can pass rapidly through a crowd. Le Bon (1896) spoke of a

contagion effect. People by themselves may behave in rational and civilized ways, but in crowds they become barbarians. We have seen so many examples from history from national crowds getting all whipped up with fervor in times of war, to the behavior of lynch mobs hanging innocent victims. Populations support with passion their national governments until the reality of grievous losses begin to affect the collective mind. This was what happened in the US during the war on Vietnam. During the world cup football we can see similar, although more innocuous behaviors, where spectators get caught up in national passion, even though it is after all just a game. Even when other people are not well informed we, in our ignorance, will often adopt this behavior with tragic consequences in some cases, and mindlessness in others.

A similar phenomenon is the so-called mass psychogenic illness. Here people begin to manifest similar physical symptoms even though subsequently it is shown that there are no physical causes for the illness (Bartholomew & Wessely, 2002). In one school a teacher began to experience headaches and nausea after smelling gasoline. Soon students experienced similar symptoms, and ambulances were called and the school was shut down. Subsequent investigations showed that there was absolutely no cause for the symptoms or the alarm. This example also manifested a form of informational conformity in the presence of crisis and ambiguity (Altman, 2000). Today we have the additional problem of speed of communication in our global community. In the ancient times populations were limited in travel and means of communication, so hysteria had a lower effect on the rest of the world. Today hysteria can be spread in seconds through mobile telephones, television, and computers, while our populations have not grown in healthy skepticism.

#### *4.2 Ignorance and informational conformity*

In any country governed by a rigid set of values and enforced by punitive power one might observe other forms of mass hysteria. In the US during the cold war we experienced a time known as the McCarthyite period, a time of mass hysteria and conformity. Conformity to the norms of the day allowed for the witch hunting which followed and could only have been brought about in an atmosphere of manufactured crisis and political ignorance. Thousands of people were accused of unorthodox political beliefs and behaviors. Anyone who had opinions that were in favor of social justice was smeared a communists, this was particularly true of people like Martin Luther King who led the struggle for civil rights. Many

thousands lost their jobs, and writers and performers were black listed in Hollywood. An atmosphere of suspicion and modern day witch hunting dominated the political and cultural life of the U.S.

This mass hysteria was in many ways similar to that observed in other situations of crisis. We have taken note of the violent responses to the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed published initially in Denmark in 2006. The sectarian genocide in the Middle East and indeed other parts of the world partake of similar ignorance and manipulated hysteria. In any society where large numbers of people are ignorant of fundamental information about history, geography, and political knowledge, there exists the possibility of conformity to informational norms produced by mass hysteria. Any crisis can be misused to produce genocidal behavior toward political, religious, and ethnic minorities.

#### *4.3 What conditions produce informational conformity?*

From the preceding examples we can observe some conditions that are likely to facilitate informational conformity. The more uncertain one is in a given situation, the more he/she will look to others for correct responses (Allen, 1965; Baron, Albright, & Malloy, 1995). The young soldiers at My Lai and the child soldiers in the Army of the Lord found themselves in crisis situations and both perpetrated terrible atrocities in their respective zones of combat. In Sierra Leone, Africa, child soldiers would routinely cut off arms and legs of totally innocent civilians. How could children do that? Do you think it is in the nature of these children to do that? Or did they have adults who demanded and modeled that behavior in a situation of crisis where the child soldiers' life was in danger?

Ambiguous situations in crisis are ideal for creating informational conformity, as the participants have no information other than that which is provided by the handlers. In Srebrenica (Bosnia), 1995, thousands of young Muslim men were summarily executed by their Serbian enemies in one of the significant genocidal acts of the war. The perpetrators were in civilian life ordinary people who would not normally commit aggression. In crisis situations people do not have time to sufficiently reflect on the morality of behavior and too often look to others to define what is proper behavior.

In general, people who have status, expertness and power are more likely to be role models for others. When at an accident we look to emergency experts to guide us, or at least those among the spectators who seem to know something

about first aid and emergency procedures (Allison, 1992; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Sadly too often so-called experts have turned out to be misleaders, and have led us down the garden path to disasters. In any decision there is so much that is unknowable, and dogmatic reactions seldom serve any group of people. Despite the insanity of mutually assured destruction we are still on the edge of nuclear catastrophes. What if the experts are not right and someone really thinks that an advantage may be gained by a preemptive strike. The losers in all wars have time to regret that they followed leaders who were supposed to know how to make good decisions, but in the end brought ruin.

In informational conformity we go along with demands or behaviors because we want in some way to be right. The more we are connected to the group providing the information the more likely we are to trust and to follow the directives of the leaders. If we trust our religious leaders and prize our membership in a religious society we may accept information that in other circumstances would seem absurd. We have already noted the cults that committed suicide, and each country will have similar examples of conformity. In informational conformity we usually accept the influence extended and change not only our behavior, but also our minds (Griffin & Buehler, 1993). Informational conformity is therefore a rational process where we conform in order to behave in ways that reflect the group's views of a situation.

#### *5. Normative influence: The Asch studies on group pressure*

In the Sherif auto kinetic experiment the participants were faced with a very ambiguous situation. They found themselves in a completely darkened room with a fixed light that appeared to move. In this situation it is then only natural to look to others, and as we saw eventually the participants came up with a group estimate or norm. What would people do in another experiment where the stimuli were not ambiguous? An attempt to create an unambiguous situation to study conformity was carried out by Asch (1951, 1956, 1957).

In his studies participants gathered by arrangement in the psychological laboratory and were told that they were participating in a study on perception. It was a relatively simple task. They had to choose from a card with three lines of differing lengths the one which corresponded to a line on a second card. Perceptually the experiment contained no ambiguity, and participants nearly always made the correct choice as individuals. However, in the experiment with seven participants, all unknown to the actual subject, six were confederates of the

experimenter. After the first two trials passed where everyone made the correct choice, on the third trial all six confederates, one after another made an incorrect choice. It was always arranged that the subject would be last to make a selection after listening to the unanimous incorrect choices.

After this first very incongruent experience the confederates and participant went through 11 more trials with the experimental collaborators each time calling out an obviously incorrect choice. There was no ambiguity here. The line on the comparison card clearly matched one of the lines on the card with three lines. What would you do, would you start to think that something was wrong with your eyes, or would you report what you actually saw? In this classical experiment participants conformed on some of the trials about 75 percent of the time, and overall about 37 percent of the critical trials. It is generally believed that Asch studied normative conformity in his experiment, based on the participants' desire to avoid disapproval and being liked. Normative conformity also includes the desire to avoid harsher sanctions such as being ostracized from the group.

This level of conformity thinking surprised Asch since it raised questions about our education and national values. Why would people choose a line that was obviously not the correct response? Crutchfield (1955) automated the experiment in order to avoid problems of consistency among experimental confederates and obtained equally astounding rates of conformity, about 46 percent among military officers tested. Despite being in leadership where accuracy is of great importance a significant minority yielded to a unanimous majority. In this experiment, where there was no direct contact between participants and confederates, it is difficult to imagine any approval or sanctions arising from participating in the experiment. The results would suggest that we are socialized to behave in conformist ways.

What is startling about these responses is that there was nothing at stake in these experiments for the participants. There were no rewards for going along. How do these high rates of conformity square with the predominant notion of rugged individualism in U.S. society? In the Asch experiment we have a situation where people yield even when their eyes tell them otherwise. If people yield with such minimal pressure, what would happen when significant demands are made, and the pressure is significant?

#### *6. We can resist conformity*

At times, of course the majority is right, and we would be right to go along.

However, all too often we go along with the social norm because we are mindless, do not understand the issue, or are under great pressure to conform. It behooves us to remember that history is filled with examples of those who resisted conformity even at great cost. Those who refused to go along with the norms of corrupt social systems started the liberation struggles in many oppressed countries. This would be true of the war of independence in the United States from Great Britain, as well as of the struggle for independence in Vietnam from the US, and in Norway from Sweden, and in similar struggles in many other countries.

We should remember that even in the midst of genocide there are those who refuse to go along. At My Lai not all participated in the atrocity. Some simply refused to follow orders, one soldier shot himself in the foot in order to be evacuated away from the massacre, one helicopter pilot seeing what was happening sat down his copter and picked up 15 children and ferried these to safety. Remember in the "War of The World" radio play there were those who did not panic, who sought to behave in rational ways and sought information to disconfirm what they had heard.

We can also resist by adopting an attitude of skepticism that lies at the base of all scientific and social progress. Remember that once the vast majority of people and scientists believed the Earth was flat. It cost a great deal to resist that dogma and social norm, but it was resisted and eventually we moved away from parochialism toward a view of the universe that is still evolving. We can resist by asking questions. We should all remember that conformity affects the very reality of the world (Bless, Strack, & Walther, 2001; Hoffman, Granberg, See, & Loftus, 2001).

### *7. We want to be liked: normative conformity*

Some years ago there were a number of fatalities on the ferries going from Norway to Denmark as young people engaged in a dangerous game of hanging with their finger tips from the ferry railings. Why would anyone engage in such suicidal behavior? We were also told that in Brazil approximately 150 teens died from a similar game surfing the roof of electric trains, and that hundreds more were injured. It raises the obvious question as to why these teens continue to conform to peer pressure under conditions that cause great harm or even death? These behaviors are extreme examples of normative conformity, behaviors carried out for reasons of social acceptance. We often conform to group rules or what we

call social norms, by following the lead of others in our effort to find acceptance and respect (Miller & Prentice, 1996).

To be deviant in these extreme conditions is to be rejected by other group members (Kruglanski & Webster, 1991; Levine, 1989; 1999). Rejection by peers can for some have very tragic consequences. In Japan students subjected to group rejection are known to have committed suicide (Jordan, 1996). We are a social species, and we therefore need to be liked. We will often comply with norms even if we disagree with the behavior. What we do in front of others, however, may be different than our private opinions. Research has shown that we will conform in public while maintaining our private opinions (Levine, 1999). The desire for social approval is called normative influence, we want to be accepted and not rejected, the common human experience (Janes & Olson, 2000). At times we just conform outwardly in order to get along. The boss at work may express political opinions with which we disagree, but we pretend to agree in order to keep our jobs or perhaps we see a promotion in the future. We may manifest our agreement in various ways while we think he is a fool for thinking the way he does.

For those who doubt the power of social rejection studies have shown that being deprived of human contact is experienced as very traumatic (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Curtiss, 1977). Perhaps that is why prisoners kept in isolation consider this the worst form of punishment.

Most people want to be liked by their peers, family, and others. We often seek their approval, and are motivated to conform (Larsen, Martin, Ettinger, & Nelson, 1976). Perhaps much of the behavior we see as aggressive or even genocidal is motivated by a desire for approval and to avoid rejection by significant others. Among all living organisms humans have the longest dependency period, and learn early to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. In other words, in a nonverbal way we early on learn the norms of the group. If the group has hostile norms like the Ku Klux Klan in the US, or gangs in the inner cities of Europe, members will display such behavior. There are even some gangs that require the killing of an innocent human being in order to become a member, it is called "making your bones", and probably originated with gangs that ran various criminal enterprises.

However, if we behave long in a certain way our behavior may eventually change our opinions. As already discussed in chapter 5 cognitive dissonance theory suggests that we need to experience a state of consistency between behaviors and

beliefs; i.e., our attitudes, or we will feel uncomfortable. Perhaps the employee after outwardly supporting the opinions of the boss may start a process of reconsidering his initial views. In this process the individual tries to empathize with the boss's perspective, and develops a new interpretation more in line with the conforming behavior. This post-conformity change in beliefs is supported in research (e.g. Buehler & Griffin, 1994). We have seen that even when there is little risk people will still conform in order to be liked. In the Asch experiment there was little informational conformity involved since it is not an ambiguous task. The choice was obvious, and still many of the participants went along with the unanimous majority (Janes & Olson, 2000; Kruglanski & Webster, 1991; Schachter, 1951).

### *8. Factors that support conformity*

Research has demonstrated that some situations are more likely than others to create conformity. Among these are group size, unanimity of group opinion, and the level of commitment to the group (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). The size of the group can only be considered a minimal effect. Experiments show some group size effect up until the group reaches a size of four. Group size after four has little effect where this has been tested (Asch, 1955).

#### *8.1 Unanimity of group opinion*

The initial studies were carried out with unanimous group opinion favoring the wrong choice. As we have seen that produces powerful conformity effects. What would happen if the group did not express unanimous opinions? Of course it takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to friends as well as enemies, to be a minority of one. In the Asch experiments the confederates were unknown and should logically have produced little pressure. However, research shows that if the subject in the Asch paradigm has just one ally who refuses to go along with the majority opinion, the conformity rate dropped to 5 percent. Just one ally weakens the normative influence in the Asch paradigm and participants may start to think "there is obviously one more sane person in the group" (Morris & Miller, 1975).

This result should give us all pause for thought. If just one person can produce resistance to conformity pressures should we not safeguard free speech as being essential to accurate decision making? Should we not do all that is possible to retain a "devils advocate" whose role is to consistently take the opposite on all questions or issues before the group? Only in this way can we protect free thought so essential to any progress whether scientific or cultural. The lone



dissenter decreases the confidence of the participants in the majority. As the story goes “perhaps the emperor really does not have any clothes on” despite pretensions. The dissent indicates that there is room for some skepticism, that the issue is not closed but needs further evaluation, and hence encourages less reliance on the correctness of the majority opinion. This will work, of course, primarily when the conforming individuals already have private doubts about the majority opinion, but have been afraid to utter these in public. We can only guess, but governments that do not rely on true consensus probably have more to fear from dissenters, and therefore seek to suppress such dissent as we saw in e.g. in Hitler’s Germany, in Stalin’s Soviet Union, in the Burma of the junta, and everywhere where brutality is the norm in suppressing dissenting opinion.

### *8.2 Is the group important?*

Some groups to which we belong are not important to our lives or happiness. Perhaps the university psychology class is of this type. Sure you want to get along with teachers and fellow students, but in a short time you will be into other things in your life. Perhaps you belong to a group that plays some type of game, and while you enjoy the interaction the group is not crucial to your self-esteem or your worldview. Most people have the experience of membership in groups that are desirable for some reason, but you would not be crushed if you no longer associated with the group or its members.

On the other hand there are groups that are central to our lives and sense of well-being. Such groups often include the family, but may also include groups based on religious or political philosophy. In these groups you find expression for what you consider being the meaning of life, and perhaps prescriptions for how to have a happy life, in some cases eternal life. These groups are obviously of great meaning to the individual, and therefore elicit greater commitment and willingness to sacrifice for the welfare of the group. The bond between the group and its members affects the level of conformity. The stronger the bond the more likely the individual will conform to group opinions and norms.

Certain positive forces keep group commitment at high levels. These include liking other group members, feeling that important goals are being reached, and the positive gains obtained by group membership. These positive forces lead also to higher levels of conformity. There are also negative forces that keep the person involved in the group and they have similar conformity effects. These include having few other alternatives. For example, you are a middle-aged man and have

not trained for any work except that which you are now performing. At the same time your investment in the company is very large, perhaps you hope to eventually obtain a generous retirement. These conditions are equally likely to produce more commitment and conformity.

### *8.3 Do we differ in our need to get along?*

People are different. There have always been individuals in any society who had the courage to be different, and thereby embolden others. Some people simply like to be different, to stand out from the crowd in a distinctive way. The willingness to be different is called desire for individuation, and has been demonstrated in a number of studies (Maslach, Stapp, & Santee, 1985; Whitney, Sagrestano, & Maslach, 1994). People who are willing to stand apart from the majority help others to resist conformity pressures by showing that there might be different opinions than those summarized in the group norm. They also serve as a source of allies and confederates for those who want to resist.

### *8.4 Low self-esteem and conformity*

In addition to approval seeking other personality variables may play a role in conformity as well. From our personal experiences we probably know people who seem more conformist than others. People with low self-esteem may not have the personal confidence necessary to resist group pressures. One reason may be that the low self-esteem person fears rejection to a greater extent and is therefore more likely to conform (Asch, 1951). In later research Crutchfield (1955) found support for this contention. In related studies those who perceived themselves as having a need for social approval were also more likely to display normative conformity (Snyder & Ickes, 1985). Personality plays a role, but can be overridden by the more powerful influence of the situation. People may appear inconsistent in conformity primarily because the demands of the situation differ. Behavior is a consequence of both personality and the situation (McGuire, 1968). Of the two the situation tends to be more powerful (Larsen, Coleman, Forbes, & Johnson, 1972).

## *9. Gender differences*

In most societies males and females are socialized in different ways. Socialization is related to the different social roles played by the two genders, although these roles are being redefined in modern society. Still there are both biological as well as social differences between boys and girls. It should therefore not be surprising that social psychologists have shown an interest in gender differences. Traditionally it is thought that females are socialized to value relationships and

interdependence more than males. Since social relationships are seen as somewhat more important to females, we might expect a greater desire in them to get along and to conform (Eagly, 1987). Given these sex role differences, conformity behavior is in the expected direction. In the meta-analysis of 145 studies men were less prone to accept influence, but the overall difference was small (Eagly & Carli, 1981). The critical variable for conformity was found in situations that produced direct group pressures. When an audience can directly observe behavior, females conform more. Do women conform because they are more conforming by nature or do they conform because of political correctness? Despite political correctness the core of conformity is responding to group pressure. What one's private opinion is might not have many consequences for the person or society, what matters is what we do in the social setting. Responding to direct pressure is really the critical variable in conformity, and where that occurs, for example in the Asch type study, females conform at somewhat higher rates (Becker, 1986; Eagly, 1987). With growing emphasis on women emancipation we might expect the difference to reduce. But will they go away? It is interesting that the genders conform more when the issue is gender related. Thus females conform more on what is commonly considered male issues such as geography or mathematics, whereas males conform more on female issues where women are supposedly the experts like child raising (Sistrunk & McDavid, 1971).

#### *10. The influence of culture*

Some cultures prize individuality, yet other cultures put value on the welfare of family and society. Nowadays in most western societies a person lists his given name first and his family name second, particularly in informal social settings. In East Asian countries the reverse is true, people list family name first as the primary identification, then the individual name. Perhaps this is an illustration of the differences between what might be called collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Milgram (1961) replicated an adaptation of the Asch experiment in Norway and France and found significant differences between the countries with the Norwegians conforming more than the French. He explained these differences by concluding that Norwegian society is a highly cohesive, whereas the French were less cohesive and more individualistic.

Many other cross-cultural studies have been completed on normative conformity utilizing the Asch paradigm. Whittaker & Meade (1967) found similar levels of

conformity in Lebanon, Hong Kong, and Brazil to that among American respondents, whereas respondents from Bantu tribe in Zimbabwe conformed to a higher degree. It seems that culture matters. The composition of the group is however also important. If the group is largely anonymous as in the Asch experiment, then otherwise more conformist cultures may produce lower levels of conformity (Frager, 1970; Williams & Sogon, 1984). Similar results emphasizing the importance of the nature of the group were also found in Britain and Germany (Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990). Conformity to strangers is less powerful than to a well-established and valued group (Moghaddam, Taylor, & Wright, 1993).

Overall conclusions from a meta-analysis of some 133 studies of varying cultures show that collectivistic cultures produce more conformity than those with more individualistic socialization (Bond & Smith, 1996). Perhaps one reason is that conformity is not seen in the same light or viewed the same way in the two types of cultures. In the western world conformity is a negatively laden term indicating personal weakness. In other cultures, however, sensitivity toward others is valued as part of the culture of courtesy (Smith & Bond, 1999). In general collectivistic cultures value normative conformity as a means of creating social harmony and supportive relationships (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994; Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996).

Perhaps there are also deeper values related to human survival. In some of the more collectivist cultures people share less space, and social harmony is therefore of greater importance. In others conformity may be related to physical survival. Developing societies that rely on hunting or fishing may value independence more than societies that are agricultural. Hunting and fishing require traits of assertiveness and independence whereas agricultural societies value conformity. In developing societies conformity and cooperation are essential where survival depends on interdependence and close living situations.

In modern Netherlands the lack of space produces opposite effects through the application of a norm of tolerance for differences. Tolerance overcomes the lack of space. In Norway there is lots of space but also a strong influence of traditional values. Obviously the history and development of society makes a difference in the relationship of values to conformity.

### *11. Transhistorical changes in normative conformity*

Today many textbooks indicate that rates of conformity are changing in the

United States. They cite studies from 25 to 40 years after the original Asch experiments which show decreasing rates. (Bond & Smith, 1996; Lalancette & Standing, 1990; Nicholson, Cole, & Rocklin, 1985; Perrin & Spencer, 1991). However, these apparent changes may reflect different conformity processes not less conforming. During this time we saw protection of human subjects as a hot issue that likely produced more skepticism and resistance by students participating in psychological experiments. Furthermore, a new type of conformity called "political correctness" replaced the old incentive of dependence on authority figures. Nevertheless, the aforementioned results at least have the merit of calling to attention that changes do occur over time in the history of social psychology.

Often our research is presented as if representing the immutable truth established with transhistorical validity. In fact, Larsen and his co-workers have shown a remarkable correspondence between conformity in the Asch experiment and conformity in society (Larsen, 1974d; Larsen, Triplet, Brant, & Langenberg, 1979; Larsen, 1982; and Larsen, 1990). Initially Asch showed that conformity was high in both society and the laboratory during the 1950s, a time dominated socially by the conformity pressures of McCarthyism. Later during the war on Vietnam students began to question authority, and we saw a counter conformity movement expressed by free speech and anti-war student organizations. During this period of the 1960s we also saw conformity rates decrease in the laboratory. However, in the 1980s there was little left of the ideals that motivated young people in the preceding period. During this period students were primarily concerned about grades and careers. This social apathy corresponded to increases in conformity in the Asch experiment. The Larsen et al. experiments were valuable not only for pointing out the rates of conformity, but also for indicating that experimental behavior is correlated with the happenings in the larger society and reflect to some degree that society. Therefore the social psychologist's work is never done, we can never assume that our research has validity, at least as far as rates are concerned, except for the generation in which the research was completed.

## *12. The influence of conformity in our daily life*

The importance of research on conformity is established by how the findings translate to real life. One does not have to be an astute observer to see conformity pressures everywhere. Everyone rising for the national anthem is but one of many

occasions when pressure to conform is acute. The elaborate rituals of courtesy that we observe in many cultures, including bowing or hand gestures, are also examples of conformity, but so deeply ingrained in the socialization process that few give them any thought. Changing fashions and fads is but another way to show that most people go along with the crowd. In fact one way to show individuation is to not wear the common garb of society. Most people want to be liked and accepted, want to be seen as “cool”, and therefore have a keen interest in what peers are wearing.

In the late 1960s when so many changes were occurring in society, we saw corresponding changes in social garb. We can remember this as a time of movements against the war, but also a time for the liberation of defined minorities, particularly Blacks, and others who were discriminated against, like women. Did these movements make women less interested in fashion? We think the evidence shows the opposite, only now the fashions reflected the new times with women wearing what was formerly thought to be men’s clothing, and in the spirit of the times the hemlines rose to the level of mini skirts.

Young women were sometimes faced with conflicting norms, the norms of society and religious bodies that viewed the length of skirts as a moral issue, and peer groups that encouraged conformity toward the short apparel. This conflict was in the U.S. especially present in college students who attended religious universities. There were two conflicting norms that young women were trying to address at these universities: pressures from the peer group and from the religious body who sponsored the university. How could the issue of hem length be resolved? Do you think by a compromise between the societal norm and the peer group norm? That is exactly what researchers found (Hardy & Larsen, 1971). Women’s skirts at a religious university were shorter than the ideal announced by the university, but longer than the mini skirts then in fashion. It seemed a rational situation which can be applied elsewhere, the individual in the presence of conflicting norms will seek a compromise between the two prescriptions which is not totally satisfactory to meeting either norm, but allows for feelings of belonging to the competing reference groups. How do Muslim women handle conflicting dress codes?

### *12.1 The changing ideal body images*

All who have visited other countries are aware that not all cultures hold the same view of the ideal human form, nor what constitutes ideal female proportions.

Many societies consider plumpness as very attractive as it connotes fertility, prosperity and health. In our culture however, extreme thinness has been promoted for a long time as ideal womanhood (Anderson, Crawford, Nadeau, & Lindberg, 1999; Fouts & Burggraf, 1999; Jackson, 1992; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). Anderson and her colleagues studied varying female ideals across cultures. They thought that the ideal form would depend on the presence or absence of food. In those societies where food was scarce plumpness would be considered attractive and that was exactly what they found. Only in societies similar to the U.S. where food supplies are plentiful are skinny women considered attractive.

At the same time what is considered the ideal female form has also changed within our society. For example Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson & Kelly (1986) examined the photos of models in two prominent women's magazines, *Vogue* and *Ladies Home Journal* from 1901 to 1986. Using new techniques they were able to measure women's busts and waists, thus creating a ratio between these two measurements. The results showed dramatic changes over time. At the beginning of the 20th century attractive women were voluptuous, but by the 1920s thin and flat chested women were considered most attractive. In the 1940s the social norm for female attractiveness again returned to curvaceous women like Marilyn Monroe. However, since the 1960s extreme thinness has been the norm to the great detriment of women's mental and physical health (Barber, 1998; Wiseman, Gray, Mosmann, & Ahrens, 1992).

Similar findings have been demonstrated for the appeal of thinness in Japanese culture (Mukai, Kambara, & Sasaki, 1998). There are obviously individual differences in how women respond to these social norms. Those who have high needs for approval are more likely to conform in different arenas (Larsen, Martin, Ettinger & Nelson, 1976). In Japan need for approval also predicted eating disorders as Japanese women responded to the demands of the social norm for thinness.

We all learn what is the ideal form, whether male or female via informational influences from the media, Internet, advertisements in magazines, model shows on television. In response to these demands women have joined health clubs in what is for many is a lifelong quest to shed weight. While we can applaud the health giving effects of exercise we must also be aware that when cultural standards are approaching absurdness they can only be met through efforts that may be very damaging to women's health. The routine of losing and then

regaining weight is very damaging to the person's self-esteem. There are also direct impacts on physical health (Thompson, 2004; Levine & Smolak, 1996; Cohn & Adler, 1992).

### *12.2 Eating disorders and normative conformity*

It should come as no surprise that women take drastic measures to achieve a more acceptable body image. In recent years we have seen many negative outcomes of thinness as a social norm reflected in anorexia nervosa, and bulimia (Gimlin, 1994; Sands & Wardle, 2003; Ellin, 2000). The norm of thinness is reaching even very young girls who try to stay thin by dieting, self-imposed vomiting and the use of laxatives. The pressure to conform is primarily responsible for bulimia and anorexia. In anorexia the victim often sees herself as heavy even when she has reached a stage of morbid thinness. In bulimia there is often a pattern of binge eating followed by purging through various means. Crandall (1988) found that bulimia was primarily a disease initiated by the women's desire to conform to the eating patterns of their friends. Again both informational conformity through various media and normative conformity in seeking the approval of peers, play important roles. In the Ellin (2000) study almost one third of 12 and 13-year-old girls were actively trying to shed weight by means of dieting and purging. Society must have built in devastating low self-esteem to encourage such drastic body modification in what are after all children.

### *12.3 Do men escape self-critical body images?*

For men too we see similar unhealthy conformity processes at work. For example, in examining the changes that have occurred in boy's fantasy toys one can see a pronounced move toward more muscularity. The G.I. Joe, a militarist toy depicting a warrior type male figure has changed from its inception in 1964. Initially G.I. Joe had normal male proportions, but it changed gradually over time to the latest incarnation of absurd muscularity called G.I. Joe extreme (Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999). At the same time the weapons associated with the figure have also taken on increased lethal proportions as expressions of aggression and hostility. Little boys are getting early training in militarist socialization.

Have boys and men also come under corresponding pressures to conform to an ideal body image through informational and normative conformity? There is much that points in that direction (Morry & Staska, 2001). In research by Pope, Gruber, Mangweth, Bureau, Jouvent, & Hudson (2000) men were asked in United States,



France, and Austria to indicate their preference for an ideal muscular male body. The participants believed that the ideal body was on the average 28 pounds heavier than their own bodies. As part of the liberalizations that occurred in connection with the women's liberation movement, men also have been objectified as sex objects in female magazines. Over the years a larger proportion of males are shown in a state of undress, with 35 percent of male models being in various states of undress (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000). Although men think women prefer more muscular bodies, when asked women prefer more normal male proportions. Clearly men are submitting to the propaganda of informational conformity.

#### *12.4 Normative conformity to promote health?*

A major problem in western societies is binge drinking among high school (Netherlands) and college age (U.S.) students. Those who participate often use normative influences to justify their behavior. They engage in binge drinking they contend, because it is common among their peers. In actual fact most students overestimate the amount of drinking among peers, and the true norm is much lower than commonly believed. Since students often misperceive the true frequency for drinking, some universities in the U.S. are using informational and normative conformity to encourage more rational behavior. We know that those who promote drinking use attractive peer groups to encourage consumption in their advertisements. Could the same approach be used to decrease drinking? For example what would happen if universities announced in the student paper, "most university students have four or fewer drinks when they party". Would that help change the norm toward more responsible drinking? What if appeals about safe sex practices included information that indicated that most of their peers do so or refrain from sex? These approaches have been used at a number of universities (Campo, Brossard, Frazer, Marchell, Lewis, & Talbot, 2003; Perkins, 2004). Normative influence however, is most likely to have effect if the pressure comes from the student's smaller reference group. Some of these campaigns may also have a downside. For example, heavy drinkers might reduce their binging, but those who never or rarely drink may be influenced to increase their consumption.

#### *12.5 Resisting pressures to conform*

People do not always give in to social pressure. Given the right conditions people will act opposite to the demands of conformity. This is called reactance theory. When people feel their freedom of action threatened or their ability to behave as

they want, they may react by doing the proscribed behavior (Brehm, 1956). This so-called boomerang effect has been demonstrated in some experiments (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). During prohibition many drank heavily. When parents prohibited short skirts girls found ways to make them shorter. A clear example of reactance is the terrible “two’s”, when a small child first asserts his independence and when the word “no” comes into frequent use. Sometimes parents will elicit the desired behavior by asking for the opposite, “no, you can not have the green beans with your dinner”. If we have an ally as we saw in the Asch experiments we may at times be able to withstand social pressures. Do these strategies work in all situations? We shall take up this theme when we discuss the experiments on obedience and situational conformity.

### *12.6 With a minority we can resist informative and normative influence*

The silent majority of the world has been endured in quiet desperation our destructive history. It has always been the strong and principled minority that has produced progress and achievements. In the face of impossible odds, and against the mores, customs, and norms of society, the minority has progressively changed the world. Individuals and minorities have created all the innovations that have produced material and social culture. In the Middle Ages it was against scientific, and especially religious norms, to believe the Earth was anything but flat. The cosmos was viewed from the Earth, and all stars and planets rotated around our little space ship. It took much courage and fidelity to truth to change these views to those that have allowed us to explore the planets and develop modern physical science. The development of secular societies based on reason has likewise been the consequence of great human struggles against superstitions, and those who would enforce dogma on the human family. Indeed the minority cannot only resist, but can change the opinions of the majority over time (DeDreu & DeVries, 2001).

We have already seen in the Asch paradigm that having even one confederate reduces conformity significantly. Later the work of Moscovici (1985) showed how a minority of confederates could change the opinions of the majority in a perceptual, experiment where participants were asked to rate the color of slides. When there were no confederates all the participants rated the blue slides as blue. However, when two confederates consistently rated these same slides as green, about a third of the participants reported at least one green slide, and 8 percent rated all the “blue” slides as green (Moscovici, Lage, Naffrechoux, 1969).

The minority, it would appear, had a significant effect on the majority who were the true subjects.

As already mentioned in chapter 6 it matters how opinions are presented. The minority must have the style that represents conviction being both forceful and consistent (Wood, Lundgren, Quелlette, Buscame, & Blackstone, 1994). If they display principled opposition they are more likely to be seen as competent as well as honest (Bassili & Provencal, 1988). This is also the process by which a minority eventually turns into a new majority as they convince others of the correctness of their position. Other factors that influence the majority are the logical soundness of minority arguments, and when changing your mind is not of great consequence for the majority (Clark, 2001; Mackie & Hunter, 1999; Trost, Maas, & Kenrick, 1992).

Generally minorities are also more successful in persuasion when there are ties that bind the minority and majority. In other words those who are perceived as in-group minorities will usually have more influence on the majority than those minorities who are seen as belonging to a different category or an unrelated out-group. Hence, a Bulgarian will be more successful in changing the opinions of other Bulgarians as compared to the effectiveness of a person from Turkey or Greece (Volpato, Maass, Mucchi-Fiana, & Vitti, 1990).

Social psychology is debating whether the process of influence is similar for majorities and minorities. The dual-process hypothesis suggests that cognition is very different for both groups. The minority influence leads majority group members to think seriously about the issue, leading to changed attitudes. On the other hand the majority influence is seen as more conformist leading perhaps to changes in behavior, but not in privately held attitudes (Forgas & Williams, 2001). The benefits of minority influence are especially useful on tasks which require creative and novel thinking, where people have to think “out of the box”, where there is a need for many perspectives (Nemeth, Mosier, & Chiles, 1992). There are scholars with a different view. They think that both minority and majority influence can be expressed in attitude change as well as public compliance (David & Turner, 2001) (see also discussion of how to prevent group think in chapter 6). However, the usefulness of minorities should indicate that all social units should treasure opposition and value minorities as a means of correcting errors and challenging “all knowable” majorities. On the other hand majorities typically elicit more conformity as they have the means of enforcing compliance, but that does

not necessarily change private opinions. Minorities may influence fewer people, but the change is more significant and lasting (Maass & Clark, 1983).

There are those who would argue that minority influence is primarily of the informational type. Outside the Asch paradigm or similar experiments are people in the majority concerned about minority opinion? However, by providing contrary information in a consistent and courageous way the minority may eventually become the new majority. The silent majority complies to prevailing norms, but may be provoked to reconsider their beliefs by a minority with principle and daring (Moscovici, 1985; Nemeth, 1986; Wood, Lungren, Quelleette, Busceme, & Blackstone, 1994).

### *13. Compliance: explicit requests to conform*

We have seen conformity as the mimicking of the behavior of others, or as a consequence of the pressure of unanimous majorities. We have observed the influence of both informational and normative conformity as operating together in many behaviors. In compliance people are, however, responding to an explicit request from another person with some degree of power. When complying we respond not from desire, feelings, beliefs or attitudes, but because of our relationship to the person making the request. In employment the boss may make a request for you to work overtime. You really have other plans, but since the boss can both reward you and punish you, you would probably go along. There are some cases where people go along with a request for no good reasons as perhaps agreeing is just a part of that person's personality (Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978). Through socialization we have learned to go along with any request, even if it is totally mindless. In the above study the confederate of the experimenter asked people to be allowed to go to the front of a waiting line at a photocopy machine because "I have to make copies". Surprisingly a number of people yield their place in the waiting line for such a mindless reason. Mindless because the people waiting also "just had to make copies".

#### *13.1 Compliance and power*

Often compliance is in response to power. French & Raven (1959) and Raven (1992) outlined six bases of power that included both coercive and rewarding power to which we referred to above. Coercion can range from very severe physical force to milder signs of disapproval that in turn may be backed up with actions in the future. If you refuse to work overtime the boss may respond with something like "those who do not will not have a future with the company". You

might rightly think that you will be fired at the pleasure of the company. If you do work overtime, in particular if you do so without overtime pay (the standard in the western world is now 1 1/2 times normal pay for working over 7.6 hours in a 38 hour week), you will be seen as a “company man” who identifies with the company and its goals. Privately you may curse the boss, but publicly you go along because of his power.

French & Raven also referred to other forms of power. The boss may also be seen to have legitimate power, i.e., his position gives him the right to make the request. The police also have legitimate power. Society that has given the police its power, generally accepts their right to enforce the laws of the land.

In case there might be confusion about the legitimacy of the person making the request we also dress these authorities in sanctioned uniforms, like uniforms for police and armed forces, the white coat of a physician, and the black robes of a judge. Those who dress appropriately are more likely to obtain compliance than those who do not (Sedikides & Jackson, 1990). Legitimate power is related to the social consensus we have regarding social roles like the boss, police officer, teacher, and parent. We accept that they have a legitimate right to make requests and ask for compliance.

We are also more likely to comply if the person making the request is perceived as having some form of expertise. We comply with teachers because they should know more than we do. We defer to scientists who have spent many years in hard labor trying to understand their field of study. We are also likely to follow the advice of doctors as their expertise is critical to our health. Sometimes having information may be persuasive. Today we are in a heat wave of more than 34 degrees Celsius. We can give this information to a friend who plans to visit, and he may choose to delay his visit, or alternatively pack very light summer clothes. Information can be a source of social influence. Furthermore, we are also more likely to listen to those with whom we identify (Orina, Wood, & Simpson, 2001). If we like the teacher and want to develop a closer relationship we are more likely to listen to lectures and instructions (Richmond & McCroskey, 1992). If we like our spouse and want to maintain a good relationship we may be more likely to agree with his or her political and religious beliefs.

Finally, to some degree compliance is affected by the mood of the individual (Forgas, 2001). In general people are more likely to comply when they are happy. You can imagine that yourself. If you are very happy, perhaps in love, you are

more likely to agree to any request. You may be so happy you will agree to even absurd demands like carrying your spouse on your back if requested. Think of times when you were happy, did those times lead to more willingness to go along with requests from family or friends? For those who want to influence another person it would help to get the targeted person in a good mood. Children and spouses practice that by waiting with requests until the “right time”. We examine the mood of the boss, “is this the right time to ask for a raise, is he/she in the right mood”?

### *13.2 Getting compliance through manipulation*

Sales people have learned that certain techniques are more likely to result in sales, charity workers have learned the same techniques in order to obtain donations. One study by Freedman & Fraser (1966) demonstrated the “foot in the door” technique that we also discussed briefly in chapter 5. In this approach one increases compliance by making an initial small request, and once compliance is secured, we come back with a larger request. If we agree to do something not terribly challenging, we are more likely to comply with the larger request that follows. If you agree to sign a petition in favor of some political action you may be more likely to also make a monetary contribution. Some think that in responding to the initial request we are somehow changing our self-image (Burger, 1999). For example, in signing the petition we have begun to perceive ourselves to be somewhat politically active. Others believe that we have in western cultures a strong motivation to appear consistent (Guadagno, Asher, Demaine, & Cialdini, 2001). If we sign the petition it would be consistent to follow up with other political activities. Finally some researchers (Gorassini & Olson, 1995) believe that we change our perception of the situation that frames the request. If we sign the petition we have already made one significant step. To volunteer for other activities are not different from this request, it belongs to the same situation.

The “door in the face” manipulation involves asking for a very large effort, then when refused following that with a request that seems reasonable given the initial outrageous demand. One of us has recently been involved in the purchase of a vehicle. The car was marked with the manufactures “suggested retail price”, which in car sales in the US is meaningless. Only the naive or mentally challenged would pay this amount for a car. Car dealers then put a “sales price” on the car to indicate to you what a good deal you are getting, and you may even think it is reasonable. That price is of course from where the real bargaining proceeds. If

you know the invoice price you can make a bid closer to the cost to the dealer, and if he still makes a profit he may agree.

Perhaps you are asked to volunteer for a minor service assignment in your community, which because it seems minor you agree to do. Later, you learn that much more time is required, but since you have agreed you continue to serve. Finally, sales people are often successful in making sales by presenting the product in the best possible light, and assuring the customer of what a great deal it is. When the customer hesitates the sales person will say “and that is not all” (Burger, 1986), and offers additional products at no additional cost. For example, the car sales person may say “if you buy the car we will in addition also pay the gas you consume the first year”. The above manipulations are all ways of altering the perceptions of people and thereby increase compliance.

When oil was discovered at the bottom of the North Sea in the late sixties the public debate was framed by Norwegian spin doctors as a choice between two alternatives: To take out huge quantities of oil per year or much fewer barrels. Framing the question as a choice between the two alternatives silenced a possible alternative debate: To take out no oil at all.

### *13.3 Convincing people to comply with morally bankrupt behavior*

Too many times in human history the demand for compliance has not been the innocuous demands of parents, teachers or sales people, but demands which resulted in genocide and evil. Few people would be prepared to commit evil upon demand, but history shows that the ground can be prepared. At times the ground is so well prepared that entire nations may follow the demands for compliance to the total destruction of people and nations. We can observe that with the Nazi regime in the 1930s and 1940s. They organized a special propaganda office led by Goebbels, a close and slavish follower of Hitler, to prepare the German people for the coming catastrophe. Hitler was of course aware of the power of propaganda as discussed in his book *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle). In his Nazi bible Hitler showed his disregard for truth and fairness, the objective of propaganda was always to serve the Nazi cause and the decisions of its leadership. The Nazi's along with other totalitarian regimes were more interested in shaping perceptions, than in education. The objective is to manipulate behavior in the desired direction of the propaganda (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1999).

In propaganda the Nazi's excelled in the manipulation of grievances and emotions

(Zeman, 1995). Since they controlled all means of communication they had what really was a “captured audience”, who had few or no alternative sources of information. If you repeat something often enough people may eventually come to believe even the absurd. The Nazi propaganda machine advocated constantly two political ideas. One was the idea that there was not sufficient space within Germany proper for the Germans. As a great people they had a right to more space they were told, even if it inconveniently belonged to others. We can see similar ideas in Zionism in its attitudes toward the land of the Palestinians. The second idea of Nazi propaganda was racial purity, the great phobia that associating with, and especially marrying foreigners would dilute the bloodlines of the master race. The first idea led to World War II with an estimated 50 million dead. The second idea led to the holocaust in which tens of millions of Soviet war prisoners, those of other nationalities, and those deemed undesirable like Jews, communists, homosexuals and Gypsies, were physically destroyed.

That a people needed more space was not a new idea to Germany, nor were the ideas that led to the holocaust. They had a cultural foundation of perhaps centuries and were accepted by many Germans even before the Nazi’s came to power. Propaganda is more likely to persuade when there is such a base of preexisting beliefs. Eventually all enemies of the state, defined as both ideologically and racially misfits, were described as nothing more than pests which ought to be destroyed (Staub, 1989).

Of course what the Nazi’s did in propaganda is essentially no different than the propaganda of other nations in wartime. During World War II the U.S. propaganda against the Japanese contained similar dehumanizing descriptions as we saw in Nazi propaganda. During the war on Vietnam the US media described the Vietnamese in similar unflattering terms among which the mildest was calling the liberation organizations “terrorists”. All governments prefer little or no opposition to their cherished policies. The one difference is that when allowed freedom of expression not all media goes along with the official lines. In some societies there are limited opportunities for people, if educated, to read the truth between the lines.

#### *13.4 How could people go along with evil: the studies on obedience*

In the aftermath of World War II many social psychologists pondered over the collective holocaust that cost almost 50 million lives. How could people go along with that, why had there not been more resistance? In remembering genocidal



obedience we wish to pay high tribute to those who sacrificed all in resisting the evil of their day. One line of thought was that it was exceptionally sadistic people who committed these cruel acts. Others thought that all people could potentially participate in similar crimes given the powerful forces that induced obedience.

Part of the reason for accepting genocidal behavior may be found in our socialization. Most children are told to obey their teachers and others who are recognized to have legitimate authority. Much of obedience in society is internalized, and we don't give these behaviors much thought (Blass, 2000), we stop at red lights automatically for example. However, people likewise socialized to obey orders to hurt or even kill others? Were the participants in the genocides just brutal thugs who enjoyed hurting others? Or, is it possible (a more frightening thought) that they are just ordinary people who found themselves in situations that appeared legitimate, and which can, sadly enough be seen in any war?

Arendt (1965) was an observer at the trial of Adolf Eichman in Jerusalem. Eichman was the person directly responsible for the efficient transportation of the Jews and the killing machine that murdered millions of people. He was not an extraordinary person, but gave in every way the appearance of a normal and ordinary citizen (Miller, 1995). When he stood on the gallows he said "I did it for my country and flag", in his mind he evidently still believed he had just done his duty and obeyed legal commands. Of course there are rules of war that essentially tells the soldier that he cannot use commands as an excuse to commit genocide, but finding themselves in a situation of war most people do not stand up against their superiors.

Is evil that is as great as genocide committed by sadists or by ordinary citizens following the instructions of leaders and government? This was the question that greatly interested Stanley Milgram (1963, 1974, 1976). Milgram having worked with Asch wondered whether people would conform at any price. After all the conformity expressed in the Asch experiment was rather innocuous, nobody was actually hurt. What would happen if an individual found himself in an experiment where a real conflict existed between personal norms of not hurting others, and demands from the experimenter to do just that? How would an ordinary person resolve that conflict? Would they hurt others in obeying the commands of the experimenter, or would they refuse to participate?

In his experiments the Milgram experimenter solicited people to participate in a

teacher-learner experiment. The participant was told that the experiment investigated the effect of punishment on learning by utilizing a shock apparatus. Each time the learner made an error he was to be shocked with ever increasing levels of shock. In fact the teacher in the experiment was the true participant and the learner was a confederate of the experimenter. The real purpose of the experiment was to investigate people's willingness to administer potentially dangerous shocks to an innocent victim. Although strapped into an electric chair, and responding with varying degrees of protest and hurt, the confederate did not actually receive any shock. He was trained to respond with varying degrees of protest to the constantly increasing levels of shock administered by the actual participant. The real experiment was to see, given the situation as presented, if the actual participant would continue to obey the experimenter. Would the real participant continue to shock at ever increasing levels and against the protests of the "learner"?

The shock apparatus varied from 15 to 450 volts, which was verbally described as ranging from "Slight shock" to "Danger severe shock". In order to gain an appreciation of the pain administered, the "teacher" was given a small shock of 45 volts. Although at the lower end of the scale, this shock was still painful, and was meant to provide a frame of understanding and empathy for the "learner" as the experiment continued. The participant then watched what he thought was another participant being strapped into the electrical chair and the experiment began. The confederate began to make mistakes and each time he was to be shocked with 15 volts increments. The "learner" began to react with a painful cry at 75 volts, and with increasing protests thereafter. At 270 volts the protests of the "learner" became screams of agony. At 300 volts he refused to answer, was he still conscious? The experimenter had a set of prepared responses to all hesitation by the "learner". They ranged from "please continue " to "you have no choice, you must go on". The protests reached a level where the "learner screamed "let me out of here...I have had enough. I won't be in the experiment anymore" (Milgram, 1974, p. 56). When the participant hesitated he was just told "you must continue" or "although the shocks are extremely painful, they do not cause permanent tissue damage".

With direct reference to how dangerous the experiment is (450 volts, "danger: severe shock"), how many do you think would continue to shock at the highest levels? When a sample of psychology majors, psychiatrists, and other adults were asked they estimated that only 1 percent would continue to 450 volts. The

psychiatrist sub sample estimated that only one in a thousand would shock to the highest level. In fact the average shock administered was 360 volts. A total of 62.5 percent continued to shock at the maximum 450 volts, and 80 percent continued even when the “learner” cried out that he had a heart condition and asked to be let out of the experiment.

How can we understand these results? The obedience was not due to sadism or personal evil since the demands of the experimenter caused great anxiety and discomfort to the participants. Rather, as Milgram explained his results, it appears that the average person will obey the command of the experimenter even when this may cause harm or death. Could the participant have refused? Obviously yes, all he had to do was saying, “I am not participating” and to withdraw from the experiment. It is hard to conceive that the experimenter had any special powers to enforce these commands. Perhaps there were conformity processes at work?

It seems difficult for the average person not to obey in the presence of an authority figure (Blass, 2000, 2003; Hamilton, Sanders, & McKearney, 1995; Miller, 1986). The situation in the Milgram studies was about the effect of obedience on otherwise normal people. The situation contained powerful influences, both normative and informational. The participant wanted to be liked by the authority figure, or at least not disappoint him. Being liked under conditions of genocide also brought approval, perhaps even promotions and medals. There were also informational pressures. The situation was very ambiguous. In the experiment there was, on the one hand a believable and apparently legitimate experiment with specific demands. On the other hand, there are also norms in society that we should not hurt others. What to do? In such a conflicting situation we look to others, the experimenter, for guidance, and he was quite unperturbed. He responded to the participants anxiety by saying, “you must continue to shock the learner, and yes it must be at ever increasing levels”. In the face of specific commands, but also of conformity pressures, the large majority followed orders (Krakow & Blass, 1995; Miller, Collins, & Brief, 1995).

Varying the conditions of the experiment Milgram observed decreases and increases in the level of obedience. Situations that made the individual conscious of his responsibility, which emphasized the sufferings of the victim, or which brought the victim in close proximity, all reduced obedience. At the same time increasing the physical distance between “teacher” and “learner” increased the

levels of obedience, and made the teacher more willing to shock at higher levels.

### *13.5 Obedience or conformity to situational demands: The Larsen experiments*

The results of Milgram's studies showed that nearly all obeyed the commands of the experimenter. It seems most of us are socialized to respond to teachers and other authority figures in a similar way. Eichman was, for example, by and large a very willing and otherwise an ordinary human being. Does that mean that people just get caught up in situations with a variety of conformity pressures? Could this be investigated using a paradigm similar to that of Milgram? Milgram (1974) stated that he was certain there were personality factors underlying the willingness to shock an innocent victim, but he had not found them. Snyder & Ickes (1985) suggested that those in need of social approval were more likely to conform. If the situation was powerful enough we might then see compliance to the situation, and orders would not be necessary to obtain willingness to participate and continue.

Larsen and his collaborators (Larsen, Coleman, Forbes & Johnson, 1972) investigated these issues in the early 1970s. They carried out a series of experiments to examine the relative importance of the situation versus the personality of the participant in a Milgram type experiment. However, rather than ordering the teacher to continue the experiment they allowed the situation to create demands on the participant. Therefore we can say that they studied situational conformity rather than the obedience paradigm of Milgram. The results that followed were an even more devastating statement of the ordinary person's lack of independence. As we shall see the participants in the Larsen et al. experiments did not require commands to shock an innocent victim. Rather the apparent pressure of the situation was sufficient in producing results very similar to those discovered by Milgram. To further reduce the pressure, the participant in Larsen et al. could choose any level of shock as they could for example go back to lower levels if they felt that that might be more useful.

Prior to the experiment the participants completed five measures of aggression and hostility in the guise of another study, and with a time delay to allow it to become an independent testing in the minds of the participants. Subsequently these personality measures were used as predictors of behavior in the experiment. The results showed no relationship whatsoever between personality traits and laboratory aggression. This finding lends further support to the contention that it is the situation that is exerting influence and not personality.

Alternatively, it indicates that the behavior in the experiment had little to do with aggression, and more to do with conformity.

Four other conditions were explored to examine varying social learning and conformity situations. If personality is less a factor would the social learning that would occur by watching another person shock an innocent victim, be sufficient to produce higher levels of shock as compared to a control condition? The participants arrived at the laboratory and were told, "we are a little behind in the experiment. To save time explaining the apparatus you can come in and watch the current teacher operate the equipment." The participant was then shown a confederate of the experimenter who was operating the apparatus at very high levels of shock whenever the "learner" made a mistake. Would the mere fact that someone else models this behavior be sufficient to encourage the actual participant to also shock at high levels?

Another condition was called the "high model" condition. In that condition the subject had the experiment explained in front of the apparatus and was then told to proceed as in the control condition. The apparatus was left with the dial at 350 volts leading to the possible interpretation that the last participant was shocking at these high levels.

Finally in the conformity condition we asked the participant to make joint decisions about what level of shock to deliver with two confederates of the experimenter. Of course unknown to the participant these confederates were instructed to shock at increasing levels in response to each "learner" error. The actual participant was manipulated to sit in the center and was the one to deliver the actual shock. Would the mere fact that two other confederates increased shock levels induce the actual subject to follow suit?

In the control conditions the experiment was only explained as a teacher- learner experiment, and the participant was left to his own devices as to how to proceed, whether at low levels or high levels of shock. He was not told to go either up or down in shock levels, it was entirely his choice, and there was no pressure from the experimenter as he left the room.

### *13.6 Situational conformity and normative pressures*

As can be seen the above situations contained relatively mild pressures, and in no case did we have to encourage compliance. The experimental conditions yielded significantly higher levels of shock as compared to the control conditions. These

findings lend support to the social learning underpinnings of the experiment. Despite these mild pressures the participants delivered shock levels at increasingly high levels, even levels that might injure the participant or otherwise be dangerous to his health. The participants could have stopped the experiment at any time. Unlike Milgram the researchers did not demand that the experiment continue. None of the participants refused to continue once the experiment was started.

To repeat, we think these results contain a more devastating statement about the ease by which we can manipulate cruel behavior in the ordinary person. In the Larsen et al. experiments there were no requirements or need to command and still the participants went along. That fact is also observed by the willing participation of ordinary people in many of the real world's genocides. Most participants in these grisly events do not require the commands of others, just the modeling of "legitimate authority" is sufficient. Out of the 213 participants in the initial study only 3 refused to participate after which the experiment was explained and they were thanked.

The results showed that all three experimental conditions created higher levels of shock as compared to the control conditions. The average level for control was 157; for the model it was 172; for the high model (where the apparatus was left at 350 volts) the average shock level was 237; and for conformity 293. Overall the experiment demonstrated similar results compared to the Milgram experiment, but without instructions to go ever higher in levels administered or using compelling commands to continue. Again, the results show how easy it is to manipulate cruel behaviors from otherwise ordinary participants.

In other experiments participants were shown to be willing to shock even a small dog. After being introduced to the small dog strapped into the electrical chair the experiment was explained as one on learning, in this case learning by the dog to discriminate in paired comparisons trials. If real shocks would have been administered the dog would not only have died, but would have been tortured in the process at the shock levels administered (Larsen, 1974a). Another study demonstrated the willingness to shock a member of a racial minority (Larsen, 1974b). These experiments lend further support to the implicit pressure that the situation exerted on the participant.

Were these pressures normative? Did the participants comply for reasons having

to do with a desire for approval? Another experiment was conducted (Larsen, Martin, Ettinger, & Nelson, 1976) which demonstrated that those high in approval seeking motivation shocked at significantly higher levels when compared to those with lower needs for approval. It is less likely that informational conformity played a role as the experiment was completed in solitary conditions with only the initial explanations used in the control condition of the previous studies. These studies argue for the powerful role of situational pressures expressed through both normative and informational conformity. In the model conditions the participant looked to those modeling the behavior, or for clues in the experiment. In the control and approval seeking conditions it was primarily normative pressures of pleasing the experimenter that played a role, as there was no direct or indirect informational pressures or models.

### *13.7 Why do we obey or conform?*

There are obviously normative pressures in the experiments within the obedience paradigm of Milgram, or as in the situational conformity studies of the Larsen et al. When people are in an apparent position of authority like the experimenter, it is difficult for most people to decline participation (Blass, 2003; Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1995). When in addition there are peer pressures as well, as we saw in the Larsen et al. experiment, participants in the study shocked at higher levels. The normative pressures are rooted in the desire to be a good participant and to please the experimenter. There are also informational pressures at work. The experimental situation is ambiguous, and the participants needed information about how to behave. If the “learner” cries out in pain, what is the appropriate response? The participants looked to the experimenter for this information, he was after all the expert.

There were also other reasons why the participants continued. The step-by-step increase in shock levels made the process very seductive. After all if you shock a person at 15 volts, why not 30 volts and if you are at 350 volts why not 355 volts? This gradual increase was seductive to most participants who could not clearly discern where the line was located between conformity to the experiment and harm to the “learner”. Once the participant had justified a level of shock, it provided the justification to go to the next level. If a participant wanted to break off participation he did it against large normative pressures to continue (Darley, 1992; Gilbert, 1981; Modigliani & Rochat, 1995).

In Nazi Germany we saw a similar procedure. Laws were gradually changed

allowing for discrimination and groups were selectively persecuted. First the Nazi's went after the communists, then other groups followed. Having not objected to the initial persecutions the German citizens found no easy way to resist what followed. Fascists use similar step- wise procedures to train those who torture political prisoners. Initially they were ordered to deliver blows in the course of causal contact with the prisoners. This would be followed by watching torture committed by others (social learning). Next they participated in group sessions with fellow torturers that included floggings or other forms of collective torture. Only after all these steps was the candidate considered ready to be in charge of his own torture session (Haritos-Fatouros, 1988; Staub, 1989).

In the experiment most participants found themselves between opposing demands.

Milgram found that when empathy was created for the "learner", participants decreased the levels of shock administered (Blass, 2003). If the experimenter "tuned" in the "learner", for example by having the participant sitting next to the "learner", or having him force the arm of the "learner" to receive the shock, then obedience decreased. So by creating "proximity", empathy for the suffering of the victim increased. Is this not what makes modern warfare so cruel and lethal? Modern armies kill their enemies by missiles, smart bombs, and even drones that unleash missiles in another part of the world. During the American war on Vietnam millions perished from high altitude bombing by B 52's where the perpetrators never saw the carnage on the ground. A former pilot explained his mission as follows. They would leave from a base in a nearby country. After a few hours of flying time they were over the target. They had an oven on board and would cook a pie, dump the bombs at the assigned target, and then return to base. Never did they have to confront the reality of the death and destruction unleashed on the ground. Thus increasing emotional distance decreases empathy with suffering and makes genocidal behavior more common and likely.

### *13.8 What would you have done in these experiments?*

The high levels of collaboration in these experiments were not anticipated by anyone. Although we saw these experiments as the laboratory equivalent of genocidal behavior, the experimental situations did not seem compelling. It should not have been difficult to resist and refuse to participate. This is what most people think whenever they are presented with the results. Having asked many we would inevitably get a "no" response when we asked "would you participate"?



From all walks of life people who have never been in these experiments would claim that they would not have behaved in the way these participants did. Is that really so?

The real value of these experiments is that they lend support to the normalist position on genocide. Given compelling situations most people would in fact follow the directives of evil from apparently legitimate authority and commit crimes of varying dimensions. Given the right circumstances the capacity for destructive conformity lies in all of us. These participants were not exceptional in any way, nor were they who committed all the horrors of world history. Most were very ordinary citizens.

The actions of reserve police battalion 101 in the massacre in occupied Poland in 1944, illustrates the point (Browning, 1992). These reserve police officers were all peaceful citizens of Hamburg who volunteered to serve in this unit, probably to avoid war. So when they were asked to round up Jews from a little Polish village Jozefow and told they were to shoot them, it must have come as a shock. However, their resistance was feeble. Some tried to leave the area, some stood in the back of the execution squads, or tried to miss when they fired. However, none stood up and said they would not obey the criminal command. There was no easy way to disobey.

In a similar way the Milgram and the Larsen et al. participants found themselves in a compelling situation and complied with orders or conformed to the situation. People who have good intentions, but lack the moral fiber to resist an evil situation pave the road to hell? Milgram offered the opinion that, were death camps to be created in United States similar to what we saw in Nazi Germany, sufficient personnel to man these camps could be found in any mid sized American city (Blass, 2003; 2004).

It is important to realize that these experiments were not about aggression. According to Milgram even Eichman was sickened by what took place in the concentration camps, but he did not have to face it on a daily basis. Instead he was a bureaucrat who gave orders that allowed the death dealing machinery to perform efficiently to the highest German standards (Milgram, 1976). Since the ground had been prepared for a long time, generations really, it was easy for participants to feel that they was doing the right thing, they were after all only following orders.

Like Eichman, the participants in the aforementioned experiments felt released from any feelings of responsibility. The experimenter was an apparent legitimate authority that took responsibility for all that happened. The experimenter provided cover for the participant as legitimate authorities do in genocides. Whenever we see genocide in the world it is always supported by an ideology and authority that legitimizes the behavior (Zajonc, 2002). Cruel behaviors are transformed into acceptable, even laudable actions that deserve praise and medals, and not condemnation.

The behavior in these experiments also shows that people will often act contrary to their moral values when the situation provides sufficient pressure. Although torn between the desires not to harm the “learner”, the pressure of command or conformity overcame any hesitation. Although compliance was explicitly commanded in the Milgram experiments, it is important to remember that that was not the case in the Larsen et al. studies. Yet in both cases participants were able to rationalize their behaviors and comply with the demands made. Again it was the ordinary person in Nazi Germany that made evil possible. German civil servants cooperated willingly with the holocaust by doing the paper work necessary. They did not directly kill anyone, but they did the work necessary for the machinery of death to work (Silver & Geller, 1978).

### *13.9 Underestimating the power of the situation: the fundamental attribution error*

Typically, as noted above, people told about these experiments have negative views of the participants, and view the behavior as some type of moral failing. In our individualistic society it is common to overestimate the power of the individual dispositions and underestimate the influence of the situation. The aforementioned experiments, especially those that emphasize situational conformity show again that the power of the situation should not be underestimated. We must be on guard for the fundamental attribution error if we want to understand the social processes that produce both good and evil in society (Bierbrauer, 1979). While most people are still inclined to believe in the responsibility of the individual, social psychologists show repeatedly the power of the situation will overcome any personal inhibitions. Even the commanders of the concentration camps were not outwardly different from ordinary people. They would relax after a hard day’s work of killing thousands by listening to Beethoven or Schubert, and carried out their deathly work without any apparent personal

hostility (Milgram, 1974).

#### *14. Do cultures differ in conformity?*

It follows from the fundamental attribution error that cultures vary in their expression of conformity. Although conformity and obedience may be found in most societies, they may vary in frequency (Bond, 1988). Children in collectivist cultures describe themselves as being more compliant and less likely to defy adult expectations compared to children in western societies (Garbarino & Brofenbrenner, 1976). However, as we have seen participants in the Milgram-Larsen experiments came from individualistic societies and yet complied and obeyed at high levels. Perhaps there is something even more basic than culture: human nature and dependency. The need for social approval is universal and seems to override any cultural differences. Otherwise compliance to evil demands and commands is universal, and can, given the right conditions, overcome any good or generous impulse of the individual.

#### *15. Ethics and political correctness: the search for the truth of the human condition*

As mentioned in chapter 1 the above studies by Milgram caused a political storm in psychology that had many consequences. A psychologist (Baumrind, 1964) unleashed a barrage of criticisms of Milgram that included the notion that the experiments produced potential psychological harm through psychological stress and subsequent lower self-esteem. She found the deception used in these studies to be unethical, and the debriefing that followed the experiment to be inadequate. Milgram (1964) however strongly defended his work. He noted that no harm came to the subjects, and that the participants were all given a satisfactory explanation at the end of their participation, and expressed positive feelings about participating.

Some think today that psychology has weathered the political storm that ensued, and has learned from this critique (Miller, 1986). However, one of the consequences has been the establishment of strict guidelines for the protection of human subjects in psychological experiments. These guidelines have now been interpreted to the point of absurdity on university campuses that fear loss of funding if they do not comply. The result is mindless preoccupation over studies that have absolutely no effect on participants, such as responding anonymously to simple paper and pencil surveys. Not only has a whole new bureaucracy been created, but also studies have to be approved at multiple levels including campus

wide committees that have no expertise in the field being investigated. It used to be that in social psychology we used deception to get at the truth, now we use informed consent (tell the subjects all about the study), and encourage dishonest behavior. If the participants in the Milgram and Larsen studies had been told that we were really investigating the potential of the normal average person's willingness to shock innocent victims would we have obtained the same results? Baumrind's victory diverted psychology from its principal task of describing the human condition, even the unpleasant parts of what it means to be human.

In other words there is now a new conformity in social psychology that is also represented in other parts of society. The conformity can be called "political correctness" as the behavior generated is primarily surface compliance with government rules and regulations with little other meaning. Milgram, however, was right in his contention that no harm was done. A year after his initial research a psychiatrist interviewed the participants and found no psychological harm. There is all reason to argue for similar consequences in the Larsen et al. studies. The researchers obeyed the ethics of that time in providing total debriefing after the experiment was completed, and were of course available for any follow up discussions. Without any exception the participants left satisfied after these explanations.

Further it could be argued that these studies provided the participants with a social inoculation effect. Just like inoculating against physical disease, we think that these experiments inoculated the participants against mindless obedience and compliance. The Milgram studies today are discussed by students in social science everywhere, and are part of the history of our science. Many thousands of students have learned of the ease by which they can be manipulated or are willing to obey commands to hurt potential victims. One of the important outcomes is therefore found in the determination of these direct or vicarious participants in not allowing themselves to be found in similar circumstances. We have no way to know, but might that have had a restraining effect on some battlefield of the numerous and continuous wars of the United States and Europe? We can believe that they have added to well-justified skepticism of authority, of orders and of situations demanding compliance with unethical behavior. In that regard one must conclude that the benefits far outweighed any imagined harm to participants. The outcome, however, changed the history of social psychology in a permanent way, and will make it more difficult to study social behavior in

countries where political correctness is the norm of the day.

### *Summary*

This chapter discussed the important roles of social influence. Social psychologists recognize three forms producing changes in behavior. Conformity is behavior resulting from the pressure of others. Students engage in binge drinking because this is behavior favored by their peers. Compliance is where people respond to specific requests or demands. Typically compliance involves people in unequal power relationships, where the more powerful have means to encourage or enforce compliance. Obedience is where the individual yields to influence because the person with power commands performance of certain behaviors. Obedience is basic to all the genocides of the world, along with the apparent legitimacy of the authority that issues the order.

Although we think of conformity in pejorative terms as manifestation of mindless behaviors, going along with others may also be wise. In many cultures it is essential for social harmony and the effective functioning of society. In history we have seen societies liberate themselves through conformity to the norms of nonviolence as in the case of India, and also in the case of the civil rights movement of Black people in the United States.

Some conformity is so fundamental that we are unaware of its presence. The ideomotor effect of James refers to the unconscious mimicking of others. Various studies show that mimicry is experienced as flattering, and perhaps became part of the human repertory because it served to advance the individual.

The classical studies were discussed because they have an effect on thinking in social psychology even today, and changed the history of our discipline. Sherif in 1936 studied how group norms evolved in the auto kinetic situation where participants stare at a stationary light in a dark room and experience the illusion of movement. Individually they experienced varying lengths of movement, but when making estimates in groups pretty soon a group norm emerged to which all members eventually agreed. The auto kinetic effect was demonstrated in a situation of ambiguity. Informational conformity occurs when people are in uncertain situations where they have to look to others to decide the appropriate course of action. Research has shown that informational conformity may lead to errors in identifying criminal suspects, which is why such identification must occur in private and without any clues or pressures from the situation or law enforcement.

Mass hysteria is a consequence of informational conformity. In times of crisis and war the need for information is high, and as we have seen it can produce hysteria of a scale that includes millions of people. Historical examples of mass hysteria include the invasion from Mars scare, and persecution of those with minority opinions during the times of McCarthyism. In other cases we see that informational conformity also plays a role in mass psychogenic illness. People may become ill, feel the same symptoms, be taken to hospitals, but without any physical cause. Ignorance can produce informational conformity. McCarthyism dominated the political and cultural life of the US for decades, and those who did not conform faced severe sanctions including loss of jobs and prison.

Sherif's study was carried out in an ambiguous experimental situation. Asch, a former student of Sherif, wanted to observe if conformity would also occur in a situation where there was no ambiguity. In his study of perception there was no doubt about the correct response, yet he found astonishing high levels of conformity, where 75 percent of the participants conformed some of the time, and 37 percent on all the critical trials. Since the conformity did not derive from the need for information, the only factor left was the desire to please others, the experimenter and fellow group members. Normative conformity occurs when we change our beliefs, perceptions, and views in order to be liked, and to avoid disapproval or punishment.

We can resist these influences. Even in crisis or under conditions of genocide there are those who resist and refuse to comply. At the base of all dissent is a healthy attitude of skepticism. Think where the world would be today if there had not been among us those who refused to go along with scientific dogma like the Earth is flat. Fundamental to all social progress is this attitude of skepticism.

It is however, a common human desire to be liked. Rejection is experienced as extremely painful feelings, and may even cause self-destructive-behavior. That is why solitary imprisonment is the worst form of social rejection. One reason we need social contact is perhaps the very long human dependency period, longer than for any other living organism. We will go to great lengths to be accepted by groups of people we value.

Among the major factors supporting normative conformity are group size, the unanimity of group opinion, and the level of commitment to the reference group. The research on unanimity, however, shows that people find it easier to resist if they have even just one ally. These findings suggest that we should always

include a “devil’s advocate” to argue the opposite point of view in all organizations in order to avoid the errors that derive from informational conformity. Not all groups are of equal importance; those groups that are central to a person’s life, family, and those political and religious organizations that are central to individual values exert the greatest conformity effects. When a person is strongly bonded to such organizations he is more likely to conform.

Resistance is also more likely if people observe models of individuation, people who have a desire to be different and stand alone, apart from the group. Where culture does not permit individuation we would observe more normative conformity.

More conformity may also be a consequence of personality. Those who have low self-esteem may lack the confidence to resist pressures. The idea goes along with the need for acceptance as essential for normative conformity. Some effects have also been found for gender, with females being socialized to nurture relationships and to be slightly more conformist. Female conformity is especially higher in situations of direct observance by others. These situations that exert group pressure, get pretty close to what is the definition of conformity.

Culture may also play a role. Collectivist cultures may exert more pressure to conform when compared to cultures that value individuality. Perhaps these higher levels of perceived conformity are due to our misunderstanding of the dynamics in collectivist cultures. In these societies conformity may be more in the nature of courtesy and respect, and valued for reasons of social harmony. In these societies population density requires an emphasis on courtesy and conformity.

Much of social psychology is a-historical. Our research is reported as if it has historical validity for all time. Yet, recent investigators have reported decreasing rates of conformity using the Asch paradigm. This chapter raises the question what decreasing rates in Asch conformity experiments means in terms of conformity for the rest of society. In recent years the conformity experiments have been discussed widely and the decrease in conformity may simply reflect more information. Also societal norms have changed, and we now see more conformity from norms of political correctness. These norms derived from the social movements of the 60’s provide surface compliance as they frequently come with the power of enforcement and sanctions by government. There is also strong evidence from the Larsen et al. studies that conformity in the Asch paradigm changes with conformity levels in the broader society, that we can observe

transhistorical changes in conformity rates. This finding should be a caution that the work of social psychology never ceases because as norms change our understanding may also need correction.

The forces of conformity can be observed everywhere in our daily lives. People rise for the national anthem, move through courtesy rituals, or obey fashions or fads without great consideration or evaluation. Most people will go along with the crowd. Often there are conflicting norms within the same society, and how is that resolved? In the Hardy and Larsen study of women's hemlines at a religious university, the resolution was a compromise between peer and institutional norms.

Preferred body images also demonstrate the powerful role of conformity, both normative and informational. There are cultural differences that determine the preferred female form. Where there is plentiful food a preference for thinness prevails, in societies that struggle for survival plumpness may signify fertility and well-being. Within our own society we can also observe how preferences have changed over time, with currently a preference toward an unhealthy extreme thinness as promoted by fashion magazines. These extreme norms are primarily responsible for eating disorders among young women and girls as they seek to conform to anorexic images. For men there is now also an obsession with images that reflects increased muscularity in western societies. The GI Joe figure popular among boys shows how the image has changed over time, along with increased aggressive militarist accessories. Boys are indoctrinated early on into militarism.

Research has shown the powerful role of minorities in overcoming mindless conformity. Strong and principled minorities are basic to social progress. Minorities have not only the ability to resist, but can also change the opinions of the majority. The style of the minority matters as the nonconformist presentation must be both forceful and consistent. If that is the case the majority may reevaluate its viewpoints and change. Minority views are especially beneficial for tasks that require novel solutions. The dual process theory suggests influences are different for the minority and majority. The minority influence causes a reevaluation and produces pressures to reconsider. The majority has the power to produce surface compliance without necessarily private acceptance.

Compliance requires among other things power. We have observed in human interaction many sources of power including coercion and rewards. Sources of



legitimate authority and expertness, and the ability to alter the environment are other ways of encouraging compliance. Mood may also play a role since when you are in a good mood you are more likely to comply. There are also a number of ways to manipulate people to comply with a variety of requests. The purpose of these manipulations is to alter people's perceptions of what is being asked and thereby increase the likelihood of the desired behavior.

We have also much evidence from both history and the laboratory of morally bankrupt behavior. Few people (except psychopaths) are prepared to commit evil upon demand. But when the group or national mind is prepared by propaganda the results may be destructive of an unimaginable scale. Propaganda shapes the perceptions that allow for evil whether among the Nazi's of the past or in contemporary society.

The genocidal behavior of the Nazi's did not end an era of human cruelty; it was but a chapter in the continuous brutality of the world. The dimensions of the cruelty of the holocaust led to the debate as to whether those participating were exceptional (being sadists or psychopaths), or average normal persons. The latter is considered the more frightening "normalist" position explaining that ordinary people perform evil on the scale of genocidal behavior. Milgram addressed this issue in his teacher-learner experiment. What he discovered was that the average person obeyed the experimenter's command to shock an innocent victim even when it could cause great harm or possible death. This obedience paradigm was followed by the Larsen et al. experiments on situational conformity, where the researchers showed that they could obtain comparative compliance by the mere influence of the situation. In no case did the experimenter in the Larsen experiments command or encourage compliance, and the results can be considered an even more devastating statement on people's ability to maintain their independence. It is important to remember that genocides rarely require direct commands. Most are carried out through the willing participation of otherwise normal people. In the Larsen et al. experiments only the presence of an apparently legitimate situation had the required influence. In situational conformity we could observe both informational and normative pressures. The situation was somewhat ambiguous and created a situation of conflict between socialized norms to not hurt others, and the demands of the situation to complete the experiment. Informational conformity was reflected in the responses to models that served a social learning function in the experiments. Normative pressures were also present in the desire to please the experimenter and peers.

The Larsen et al. experiments returned to the issue of personality, raised but not answered by Milgram. The results showed no relationships between measures of aggression and hostility on the one hand and compliance on the other hand. However, a separate study did produce higher levels of shock administration by those participants high in need for approval. In these experiments as in real life the participant was seduced by the step-by-step procedure. These step-by-step procedures are also used to train those who use torture to extract information. Creating empathy with the victim on the other hand decreased the level of shock in Milgram's studies. Sadly that has little effect in modern warfare, as there is little proximity to victims who are killed by bombs or missiles. The important question is what you would have done in these experiments. Despite protestations to the contrary nearly everyone who started the experiment completed it. The results lend support to the normalist position, that ordinary people can and do behave in ways harmful to others, and will often act contrary to their personal morals and values. We do not understand this in our society due to the fundamental attribution error, where we overestimate individual dispositions in behavior, and do not recognize the power of the situation to seduce compliance. While there are some cultural differences it should be remembered that the shock experiments were carried out in so-called individualistic societies and not in collectivist cultures. There is however, something more basic than culture, the universal human need for approval and acceptance.

As we now know the Milgram experiments produced a storm of criticism within psychology. The issues raised concerned the protection of the participants from self-discovery that in the critique's mind impacted self-esteem. In fact follow up results showed that there was no harm done to the participants, and they might even have had the benefit of being inoculated against blind obedience or mindless conformity. Sadly the controversy has also resulted in directing research away from crucial issues like genocidal behavior toward more innocuous issues of little relevance to the human condition. The name of the new conformity is "political correctness" that produces mindless conformity to the point of absurdity in academia. However, laboratory aggression studies are classic as they possess lasting value. In the long distance future students can still learn of the ease of manipulation, and the potential willingness of ordinary people to participate in harmful behavior.