



Conformity and Obedience

Instructor Manual

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This module, *Conformity and Obedience*, provides an overview of two of the seminal studies in psychology (the Asch and Milgram studies) and discusses the psychological principles explaining why humans conform and obey, even when it is the wrong thing to do.

Learning Objectives

- Relevant APA Learning Objectives (Version 2.0)
 - Describe key concepts, principles, and overarching themes in psychology (1.1)
 - Develop a working knowledge of psychology's content domains (1.2)
 - Describe applications of psychology (1.3)
 - Engage in innovative and integrative thinking and problem solving (2.3)
 - Build and enhance interpersonal relationships (3.3)
 - Interact effectively with others (4.3)
 - Apply psychological content and skills to career goals (5.1)
 - Exhibit self-efficacy and self-regulation (5.2)
 - Enhance teamwork capacity (5.3)
- Content Specific Learning Objectives: Conformity and Obedience
 - Become aware of how widespread conformity is in our lives and some of the ways each of us changes our attitudes and behavior to match the norm.

- Understand the two primary reasons why people often conform to perceived norms.
- Appreciate how obedience to authority has been examined in laboratory studies and some of the implications of the findings from these investigations.
- Consider some of the remaining issues and sources of controversy surrounding Milgram's obedience studies.

Abstract

We often change our attitudes and behaviors to match the attitudes and behaviors of the people around us. One reason for this conformity is a concern about what other people think of us. This process was demonstrated in a classic study in which college students deliberately gave wrong answers to a simple visual judgment task rather than go against the group. Another reason we conform to the norm is because other people often have information we do not, and relying on norms can be a reasonable strategy when we are uncertain about how we are supposed to act. Unfortunately, we frequently misperceive how the typical person acts, which can contribute to problems such as the excessive binge drinking often seen in college students. Obeying orders from an authority figure can sometimes lead to disturbing behavior. This danger was illustrated in a famous study in which participants were instructed to administer painful electric shocks to another person in what they believed to be a learning experiment. Despite vehement protests from the person receiving the shocks, most participants continued the procedure when instructed to do so by the experimenter. The findings raise questions about the power of blind obedience in deplorable situations such as atrocities and genocide. They also raise concerns about the ethical treatment of participants in psychology experiments.

Class Design Recommendations

This module of social can be taught in a single class period or less, with the unit as a whole taking 2-3 class periods. Please also refer to the Noba PowerPoint slides that compliment this outline.

1st class period (20 min – 30 min):

- Conformity

- Defining Conformity
- Asch's Conformity study
 - Describe Asch's seminal study (show video of original or updated)
 - Findings: increase in conformity with more confederates (up to about five), teenagers are more prone to conforming than are adults, people conform significantly less often when they believe the confederates will not hear their responses, and conformity is more likely in collectivist countries than in individualistic countries
- Why do people conform?
 - Informational influence
 - Normative Influence
- Obedience
 - Defining obedience
 - Milgram's obedience study
 - Describe seminal study (show original footage or clip from updated)
 - Findings: An alarming percent of people conform to authority

Module Outline

Conformity

- Conformity is the tendency to act and think like the people around us.
- What causes this conformity?
 - To start, humans may possess an inherent tendency to imitate the actions of others.

Although we usually are not aware of it, we often mimic gestures, body posture, language, talking speed, and many other behaviors.

- Normative Influence. When normative influence is operating, people go along with the crowd because they are concerned about what others think of them (we want to avoid criticism or experience rewards such as compliments or camaraderie). This is demonstrated by Asch's seminal study on conformity, which also provided some influences on conformity (e.g., an increase in conformity with more confederates (up to about five), that teenagers are more prone to conforming than are adults, people conform significantly less often when they believe the confederates will not hear their responses, and conformity is more likely in collectivist countries than in individualistic countries).
- Informational influence (we go along with the crowd because people are often a source of information). When the situation is unclear, we use descriptive norms to guide our behaviors. However, it's not always easy to obtain good descriptive norm information, which means we sometimes rely on a flawed notion of the norm when deciding how we should behave.

Obedience

- Obedience refers to how people react when given an order or command from someone in a position of authority. In many situations, obedience is a good thing. But, there is also a dark side to obedience. In the name of "following orders" or "just doing my job," people can violate ethical principles and break laws. This was demonstrated by Milgram's seminal study on participant obedience to authority.

Conclusion

- Social psychologists are fond of saying that we are all influenced by the people around us more than we recognize. Of course, each person is unique, and ultimately each of us makes choices about how we will and will not act. But decades of research on conformity and obedience make it clear that we live in a social world and that—for better or worse—much of what we do is a reflection of the people we encounter.

Difficult Terms

Conformity

Descriptive Norms

Informational Influence

Normative Influence

Lecture Frameworks

Overview

Conformity and obedience are represented by two of the most well-known studies in psychology: the Asch & Milgram studies. So incorporating these studies into the lecture is important for a survey course like Introductory Psychology.

First Class Period

Conformity

- Optional Activity: Standing in the Hallway
 - This activity should be done right before class starts. This activity is designed to elicit conformity from students (based off Lawson, Haubner, & Bodle, 2013). See Activities/ Demonstrations (below) for instructions.
- Discussion/Warm-Up
 - Starting off any unit (especially the social psych topics) with a few questions is always a fun way to get students thinking about the material and reflecting on their own behaviors. Questions you might ask your students – Do you buy name brand products even if there is a cheaper store brand? Would you be willing to stop and help someone, even if no one else was willing to help them? If you were assigned to a group project, would you speak up if you thought your group members were wrong? Would you change your answer on an assignment if everyone else had a different answer?
 - As you probably suspect, most people (including students) tend to underestimate how often they conform – their answers to these questions typically reflect as much. That's

what makes this an interesting starting point – people conform, but often have no idea that they are conforming (even when it's pointed out!).

- Lecture – Refer to slides for the following:
 - To explain Conformity. In particular, you can focus on definitions, the role of normative influence and the consequences of conformity (eg. Acceptance by others)
- Activity – Asch's Conformity Study
 - Once you've got their first impressions about conformity and formally defined the concept for them, you can walk them through the Asch experiment(s). You can do this via explanation or video (there are some updated videos that are higher quality than the original experiment, but that is up to you). One video you might consider showing is this one: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYIh4MkcfJA&index=32&list=PL281D8BB116DEFEDC>.
 - It's an old clip, so the quality is pretty low compared to new replications, but this video has a few good points: 1) It demonstrates the essence of conformity, 2) It discusses conditions under which conformity is more likely (unanimity, group size, anonymity, etc.), 3) It illustrates examples of normative and informational influence, and 4) It captures the idea that most people do not recognize the role that other people play in our decision making process (it shows that when just one other confederate disagrees with the group, conformity drops dramatically. Yet participants claim that the other person had absolutely zero impact on their decision to conform).

Obedience

- Discussion/Warm-Up
 - As with conformity, you can start talking about obedience by taking a quick poll of your students (Would you be willing to hurt a puppy if told to do so? How likely are you to harm a human if told to do so? How likely are you to follow orders, even if you don't agree with them?). The vast majority of students believe that they could never hurt anyone or anything just from being told to do so. Which makes this unit extra special: You get to explain how normal, generally compassionate people are capable of doing things they would never do on their own, simply due to the power of obedience.
 - You might use examples like Pol Pot and Hitler – under their leadership, they committed

heinous acts of genocide. The thing is, they didn't do it single-handedly; they figured out how to use *other* people to do their bidding (even when those same people did not agree with it). THAT is the essence of this topic – why do normal people commit atrocious acts?

- Lecture – Refer to slides for the following:
 - To explain Obedience. Now that you've set the (slightly dramatic) stage, walk students through the (in)famous Milgram study, one step at a time. You might show them clips of the classic study or an updated version (e.g., Derren Brown: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6GxIuljT3w>).
 - Once they know what the experiment was about, you can talk about the implications of obedience (e.g., the prank caller who convinced managers at fast food restaurants that he was the police and “forced” the managers to engage in despicable acts; or when two special education students were wrongfully delivered dozens of punishing electrical shocks based on a prank phone call from a former student posing as a supervisor).
- Activity: Build a Study
 - This can be completed in or outside of class, individually, or in small groups (whatever works for your classroom). This activity is designed to help students understand concepts from the module, as well as reinforce concepts from the research methods unit (based on Bleske-Rechek, 2001). See Activities/Demonstrations (below) for instruction.

Activities & Demonstrations

Standing in the Hallway: In-Class Activity

This activity should be done right before class starts. This activity is designed to elicit conformity from students (based off Lawson, Haubner, & Bodle, 2013). *Note:* This activity may not work if there are multiple doors to your classroom. Please consider such factors carefully before using this activity.

- Time: 2 minutes (plus any discussion)

- Materials: None, though this demonstration should be done BEFORE you talk about conformity (otherwise students might catch on)
- Directions:
 - Several minutes before class (10-12), ask a few students (at least three or four) who show up early to class to stand outside in the hallway without going into the classroom (these students are your confederates).
 - Leave the lights on in the classroom, close the door, and instruct the confederate students to talk with one another (to prevent the other students from asking questions), and go back to your office (or at least remain out of sight). If you want to make sure that students conform, have your confederates sit or stand very close to the doors or to lean on them (effectively blocking them; other students will be less likely to try and open the doors themselves).
 - Wait until approximately 2 min prior to class time to return to the classroom. When you finally arrive at the room, you will likely see all of the students standing in the hallway.
 - You can then ask why they were all standing out in the hallway when they could have been sitting comfortably in their seats in the classroom. Ask them to explain their behavior – did they try to open the door? Why or why not? How did they make the decision to wait outside?
- Bonus Application
 - Later in class (once you have formally talked about conformity), ask the students to write down two examples of how they have conformed recently. If they share their responses with the class and nobody mentioned their conformity in the hallway, go ahead and point it out.
 - After defining and giving examples of normative social influence (e.g., conforming in order to be accepted by others) and informational social influence (e.g., conforming because others provide information about the correct behavior), ask the students which type of social influence their behavior in the hallway illustrated.

Design a Study: In or out of class activity

This can be complete in or outside of class, individually, or in small groups (whatever works for your classroom). This activity is designed to help students understand concepts from the module, as well as reinforce concepts from the research methods unit (based on Bleske-

Rechek, 2001)

- Time: 15-20 minutes
- Materials: Students will need paper
- Directions:
 - After discussing conformity and obedience, divide the class in half (half are assigned obedience, half are assigned conformity).
 - Then give students the following instructions: It's been 50 years since these studies on conformity/obedience. Imagine that you a researcher who wants to know if the results would be the same today as they were 50 years ago. In your group, pick a context where you might test conformity/obedience (e.g., criminal behavior, texting while driving, drunk driving, college student alcohol use, cheating on exams, hazing, gang related behavior, work behavior, being on an athletic team, police officers, etc.). Using your selected context, design a study that tests whether obedience/conformity has an influence on behavior.

Additional Activities

Snyder, C. R. (2003). "Me Conform? No Way": Classroom demonstrations for sensitizing students to their conformity. *Teaching of Psychology*, 30, 59-61.

- This article provides 9 quick demonstrations that illustrate students own vulnerability to conformity. The activities range from elucidating Milgram's classic obedience study to Jane Elliot's Blue Eye/Brown Eye demonstration as well as the self-fulfilling prophecy. This is a great start to actively teach students about the power of social influence.

Outside Resources

Student Video: Christine N. Winston and Hemali Maher's 'The Milgram Experiment' gives an excellent 3-minute overview of one of the most famous experiments in the history of

psychology. It was one of the winning entries in the 2015 Noba Student Video Award.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVIUZwkM_G0

Video: An example of information influence in a field setting

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yFeaS60nWk>

Video: Scenes from a recent partial replication of Milgram's obedience studies

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwqNP9HRy7Y>

Video: Scenes from a recent replication of Asch's conformity experiment

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgDx5g9ql1g>

Web: Website devoted to scholarship and research related to Milgram's obedience studies

<http://www.stanleymilgram.com>

Evidence-Based Teaching

LoSchiavo, F. M., Buckingham, J. T., & Yurak, T. J. (2002). First-day demonstration for social psychology courses. *Teaching of Psychology*, 29(3), 216-219.

Describes an obedience demonstration for the 1st day of social psychology courses that introduces social psychology. On the 1st day of an undergraduate psychology course (N=29), a 27-yr-old male graduate student confederate with whom students were unfamiliar entered the room and requested that students fill out a "Student Information Sheet" listing personal data. The confederate collected the forms, asked all students to stand and face the back of the room, then left the room. After about 3 min, the professor entered the room and asked students about their behavior. The demonstration shows that when students came to believe that a confederate was the course instructor, they complied with his request to provide him with personal information. Subsequent lecture introduced students to several key concepts, including obedience, stereotyping, conformity, mindlessness, deception, and research ethics. Students indicated they found the demonstration enjoyable, interesting, informative, and a worthwhile use of class time. Furthermore, students agreed that because of the demonstration, they looked forward to taking the course. Although the demonstration employed deception, students indicated that it was justified and that they were treated in an ethical manner.

Suggestions from the Society for Teaching's Introductory Psychology Primer

Afful, S.E. (2013). Social. In S.E. Afful, J. J. Good, J. Keeley, S. Leder, & J. J. Stiegler-Balfour (Eds.). Introductory Psychology teaching primer: A guide for new teachers of Psych 101. Retrieved from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology web site: <http://teachpsych.org/ebooks/intro2013/index.php>

POSSIBLE ASSESSMENTS (Out of Class)

Mini-Research Project:

- Ask students to develop a hypothesis regarding human interaction based on theories of social influence (e.g., If students in a group express the same opinion, then the last student to speak will conform to fit in). Second, gather empirical data from observations of people in naturalistic environments (e.g., classroom, sporting event, mall). Write a mini-research report with methods, results and discussion sections.

ACTIVITIES & TECHNIQUES (In Class)

Original Footage

- Students often enjoy watching original footage from the classic social influence studies and many students report remembering these studies in future courses.
- Quiet Rage discusses Stanford Prison study: a brief clip can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=760lwYmpXbc>
 - The video in entirety is 29 minutes but you can show the first 5-7 mins).
- Footage from the Milgram study can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W147ybOdgpE> (9 min).
 - Before showing this clip, ask students by show of hands how many would go all the way to 450 volts. Rarely one or two students may bravely raise their hand.
 - In the set-up to this video, it is also important to emphasize that Milgram himself thought only 1% would go all the way. This can also lead to a discussion of research ethics and the IRBs.

Links to ToPIX Materials

Activities, demonstrations, handouts, etc.:

<http://topix.teachpsych.org/w/page/19981041/Social%20in%20the%20Classroom>

Current events/ news:

<http://topix.teachpsych.org/w/page/23142325/Social%20in%20the%20News>

Video/audio:

<http://topix.teachpsych.org/w/page/19981040/Social%20Video>

Teaching Topics

Teaching The Most Important Course

https://nobaproject.com/documents/1_Teaching_The_Most_Important_Course.pdf

Content Coverage

https://nobaproject.com/documents/2_Content_Coverage.pdf

Motivating Students

https://nobaproject.com/documents/3_Motivating_Students_Tips.pdf

Engaging Large Classes

https://nobaproject.com/documents/4_Engaging_Large_Classes.pdf

Assessment Learning

https://nobaproject.com/documents/5_Assessment_Learning.pdf

Teaching Biological Psychology

https://nobaproject.com/documents/6_Teaching_Bio_Psych.pdf

PowerPoint Presentation

This module has an associated PowerPoint presentation. Download it at https://nobaproject.com//images/shared/supplement_editions/000/000/288/Conformity%20and%20Obedience.ppt?1475876873.

About Noba

The Diener Education Fund (DEF) is a non-profit organization founded with the mission of re-inventing higher education to serve the changing needs of students and professors. The initial focus of the DEF is on making information, especially of the type found in textbooks, widely available to people of all backgrounds. This mission is embodied in the Noba project.

Noba is an open and free online platform that provides high-quality, flexibly structured textbooks and educational materials. The goals of Noba are three-fold:

- To reduce financial burden on students by providing access to free educational content
- To provide instructors with a platform to customize educational content to better suit their curriculum
- To present material written by a collection of experts and authorities in the field

The Diener Education Fund is co-founded by Drs. Ed and Carol Diener. Ed is the Joseph Smiley Distinguished Professor of Psychology (Emeritus) at the University of Illinois. Carol Diener is the former director of the Mental Health Worker and the Juvenile Justice Programs at the University of Illinois. Both Ed and Carol are award-winning university teachers.

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